

## **President of international federation of Catholic universities receives honorary doctorate from ACU**

One of the most distinguished women in Catholic higher education globally, Professor Isabel Capeloa Gil, has received an honorary doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

Professor Isabel Capeloa Gil of Portugal was conferred a Doctor of the University (honoris causa) in Melbourne on August 30.

Professor Capeloa Gil is the sixth Rector and Professor of Culture Studies at the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP), where Pope Francis gave his first address to young people during his apostolic journey to Lisbon for the 2023 World Youth Day. She is also the first female to be elected president of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU), an organisation of more than 200 Catholic universities worldwide, including ACU.

A trailblazing leader in Catholic higher education, and an inspiration to lay female leaders, Professor Capeloa Gil said she was surprised and humbled to receive the honorary doctorate from ACU.

“Although institutionally my university and ACU have a longstanding relationship as founding members of the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities, this is an individual honour that came as a good surprise,” Professor Capeloa Gil said.

As a woman who wears two hats in Catholic higher education, primarily a scholar and researcher but more recently a leader and administrator, Professor Capeloa Gil said her career highlight was being named president of the IFCU.

“When I was elected as the first woman President in 2018, this truly brought about a paradigm change in the way leadership in Catholic higher education was perceived worldwide,” she said.

“IFCU is celebrating its 100th anniversary next year and I am proud to preside over the anniversary events, due to begin in Rome in January.”

Her advice to women seeking leadership roles in the Church was to “be bold and be ready to accept the challenge when it comes”.

“Leadership comes with risk and women are both solid caretakers and creative disruptors. These are qualities in high demand in top leadership roles,” Professor Capeloa Gil said.

Having recently welcomed the most important leader in the Catholic Church to her university, Professor Capeloa Gil praised Pope Francis for being extremely supportive of female leaders within Church institutions. She said the Holy Father reiterated his support during his World Youth Day gathering with thousands of UCP students.

“Pope Francis gave his first address to the youth at the Catholic University of Portugal on August 3 and naturally I was very much involved as host in organising the event,” Professor Capeloa Gil said.

“He clearly highlighted the role of women in His address to students, saying ‘the female contribution is indispensable. In the Bible, we see how the economy of the family is entrusted largely to women. They are the real heads of the household, possessed of a wisdom aimed not merely at profit, but also at care, coexistence, and the physical and spiritual wellbeing of all’.”

Professor Capeloa Gil said the Pope’s visit to Portugal was “a healing moment” for many Catholics globally but especially “for the very ailing European Church”.

“For a whole week the chant ‘We are the Pope’s Youth’ resonated on all corners,” Professor Capeloa Gil said.

“This was remarkably a gathering of believers and non-believers summoned by the Pope’s appeal to heal our wounded society, to assist the fragile, to defend our common home, to change and transform.

“The city was overwhelmed with joy and happiness.”

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said Professor Capeloa Gil exemplified the highest level of international and national leadership in Catholic university education and was highly deserving to be a Doctor of the University.

Australian Catholic University has specialists who can comment on news matters relating to their area of expertise. Please direct requests to ACU’s [Media Team](mailto:media@acu.edu.au) at [acu.edu.au/media-enquiries](http://acu.edu.au/media-enquiries).

## MEDIA RELEASE

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“There could not be a more worthy recipient of an ACU honorary doctorate than Professor Capeloa Gil, who as the first female and lay President of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, and the second female Rector of the Catholic University of Portugal, has been a leading advocate for women’s leadership in higher education,” Professor Skrbis said.

“In February, in addition to previous Holy See engagements, she was appointed by Pope Francis as a consultant to the Dicastery for Culture and Education, a recognition of her expertise and commitment to Catholic higher education and the Church.

“Among her many achievements in this area, she can be credited for her leadership in the founding of SACRU, the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities, an alliance which I am honoured to currently lead as its president.

“Here at ACU, we share the belief that universities play a key role in promoting the cause of social justice, consistent with our commitment to the common good, the dignity of the human person, and the pursuit of knowledge in the Catholic intellectual tradition.”

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