

Susan Pascoe accepts Honorary Doctorate from ACU

Prominent Australian governance and Church leader Susan Pascoe AM has accepted an Honorary Doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

The distinguished educator and former Commissioner, originally from Casterton in Victoria's southwestern region, received a Doctor of the University (Honoris Causa) before 207 ACU graduates at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre on 15 April.

The honorary degree was conferred in recognition of Ms Pascoe's years of service in Australia and overseas in the fields of education, public administration, charity, religion, and community.

Ms Pascoe had an unconventional evolution from teacher to award-winning Commissioner. Her career has seen her take on varied roles, including becoming the first lay woman director of Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and the only female Commissioner on the Royal Commission investigating the devastating 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

She was also Inaugural Commissioner for the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) between 2012 and 2017, and Commissioner for the State Services Authority from 2006 to 2008.

Her most recent appointment is to the Vatican, as a member of two groups supporting the planning and preparation of the global Synod on Synodality.

"Most of the jobs later in my career were reputational, where I was invited to apply." Ms Pascoe said.

"The appointment to the Vatican came out of nowhere, as an email arriving in the inbox, and I phoned a friend who is a priest who's had association with the Vatican.

"I said, 'It's not April Fools' Day, so where did this come from?'

"He said, 'No, it's the real deal' and strongly encouraged me to take it up. I'm very pleased I did."

In congratulating Ms Pascoe, ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said her service to Australia and the Church was admirable, rare, and deserved to be honoured.

"Susan has devoted much of her life to the pursuit of knowledge and the common good, and we applaud the commitment, passion and integrity that she continues to display," Professor Skrbis said.

"Among her many contributions over the years, Susan has also served as a director on a number of boards, including on the Senate of Australian Catholic University from 2001 until 2009, serving our university with the same spirit and energy with which she has undertaken all of her endeavours."

Family first

The second of eight children to a Lebanese migrant father and mother of Celtic and Swedish ancestry, family has always been integral to Ms Pascoe's life.

She was almost pre-destined to become a teacher as her mother advised her four daughters "to go to school with our kids and come home with them".

"My mum had this idea, which was I think was fairly progressive at the time, that we girls could combine parenting and work by becoming teachers," Ms Pascoe said.

"In the eyes of some, (being working mothers) was regarded as quite a radical thing to do in the seventies."

While all four daughters took their mothers' advice to heart, three eventually ventured into different career paths.

"What became clear to me along the way is that a first degree does not weld you to a single linear pathway," Ms Pascoe said.

“The original degree you do can have tremendous breadth of scope and you don't want to feel constricted by it in any way.”

Tips for working families

When Ms Pascoe and her husband had their own two children, they adopted three “rules” to maintain a balanced life while juggling full-time work.

“Every Sunday evening, we would get out our diaries and we would work out who was where. We had a rule that one of us would be home every weeknight with the kids, so they would always have a parent at home during the week,” she said.

“Another was that we consciously didn't debrief with each other until the kids were in bed, so we were focused on them and their day and how it had gone.

“And then partly to do with my body clock and how I work, I never worked in the evenings.”

Being a woman in a predominantly male-centric environment such as governance came with its own challenges. Ms Pascoe almost turned down an opportunity from the Office of Prime Minister Paul Keating because she doubted her contribution as a woman could live up to standards of the day.

“For many of the women of my generation, there was a self-deprecating self-concept, a kind of ‘impostor syndrome’ because so many roles were taken by men that it didn't quite compute that a woman might be suitable for the role,” Ms Pascoe said.

A listening Church

In October this year the second session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will meet, tasked with continuing the work of the Synod on Synodality.

As one of the Australians who has been intimately involved in the planning and preparation of the historic Synod, Ms Pascoe sees a challenge in finding unity within a global Church.

“There's a range of perspectives particularly coming from the synthesis report, where we can see that there are some completely opposing views. What I take from that is the challenge in a global Church of achieving a measure of unity in diversity, clarifying what it means for the expression of faith within local churches,” Ms Pascoe said.

“But I also take from these differences, as the Second Vatican Council noted, that culture is an incredibly important dimension of our how we mediate our faith.

“For example, if you look at the response of the African Bishops since the release of *Fiducia Supplicans*, in December 2023, they are basically saying this is not suitable for us in our continent because of our culture.

“The role of culture in our expression of faith is something we need to come to terms with; an issue likely to be addressed at the second Synod Assembly in October.”

Susan Pascoe AM is available for interview.

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