

MEDIA RELEASE

18 November 2024

Workshop raises awareness of sexual and spiritual abuse of Catholic Religious women

Religious and their colleagues have gathered to explore the dynamics of harm and need for safety within communities of Catholic Religious women in a two-day workshop, a joint project of the University of Newcastle and the University of Regensburg (Germany), Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) and the Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

Leading the workshop were five international experts who presented their theological and social research on the characteristics of sexual and spiritual harm, historical evidence supporting a long history of sexual abuse of Catholic nuns, successful educational work with African women Religious communities and findings from the [International Survey of Catholic Women](#) (2023) that support global evidence of abuse.

Anne Walker, National Executive Director of CRA, commented on the groundbreaking nature of the workshop in Australia. “Gendered harm committed against women Religious is a painful subject for the Catholic community and can all too easily be swept under the carpet. Research and dialogue in such a constructive forum as this workshop is a healthy step forward for Church and society”, she said.

German researchers, Prof Ute Leimgruber and Dr Magdalena Huerten, were joined by Peruvian theologian, Dr Rocio Figueroa, and Australian researchers, Dr Kathleen McPhillips and Dr Tracy McEwan.

Observed Prof Ute Leimgruber, University of Regensburg, “Findings of abuse highlight an urgent need to understand why women Religious report high levels of violence in parish and work settings, especially given the understanding and extent of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions globally.”

The Catholic Church is the largest world religion and has substantial social and economic capital. Globally, Catholic women religious play a critical role in the provision of health, education and social services, transferring faith-based values and shaping modern institutions for the future. Yet, in research studies and public inquiries, this cohort reports historical and current experiences of gendered harm including sexual assault, sexual harassment, financial control and spiritual abuse.

Dr Kathleen McPhillips, University of Newcastle, commented, “In Australia, there is little research or discussion of gendered harm amongst female Religious communities and in the Catholic Church more broadly. There is a need to open up conversations on what gendered harm looks like, how it can be prevented and how appropriate processes of safeguarding and safety across Catholic communities can be prioritised.”

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