

## **Pathbreaking conference aims to reimagine disability in the Church**

Disability advocates and theologians from the Catholic Church including a Jesuit canon lawyer born legally blind will lead an historic conference to rethink practical Christian understandings of disability and limitation and what they might tell us about being human.

Australian Catholic University's [Institute of Religion and Critical Inquiry](#) together with [The Loyola Institute](#) will host *Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God: Disability, the Imago Dei and Practical Consequences* next month.

The conference, being held at ACU Melbourne Campus on 22 – 23 May, follows the presentation of [An Unlimited Joy](#) to the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops in 2022, a document containing the contributions of more than 30 faithful with disabilities from five continents.

One of the document's contributors, Fr Justin Glyn SJ, General Counsel to the Jesuits' Australian Province, is an architect of the *Idol Talk* conference in May.

A priest, civil lawyer, and canon lawyer who “sees the world as a fuzzy blur”, Fr Glyn has written and consulted extensively on disability, the Image of God, and the Incarnation.

Born with nystagmus, a condition that causes rapid involuntary movement of his eyes, Fr Glyn said the upcoming conference would invite deeper theological reflection on God's design of the human person where all people, not simply those with disabilities, were considered as being limited.

Fr Glyn said the conference would also honour the legacy of Pope Francis, who died on Easter Monday and was laid to rest on 26 April at the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major, and his [instrumental encouragement](#) recognising the dignity of all people.

“Up until Pope Francis' pontificate, a lot of the discussions in the Catholic Church veered eccentrically, on the one hand, to seeing disability as a terrible mistake and residue from original sin, that God would clean it all up in the end,” Fr Glyn said.

“On the other end of the spectrum, some in the Church perceived people with disabilities as being blessed to suffer.

“Neither of these arguments makes sense in terms of Catholic theology, because God created us as fundamentally good.

“All of humanity comes as a package, we are made in the image of God but also limited. We all have limitations of one sort or another, and that's part of the deal. This was what Pope Francis meant in his championing of the [Magisterium of Fragility](#) – the idea that human limitation teaches all of us essential truths about who we are in relation to God.”

Institute researcher Associate Professor Kylie Crabbe is one of the conference organisers and is [leading an Australian Research Council funded project](#) studying the early Christian context of biblical treatments of ability and disability.

Assoc. Prof. Crabbe said the conference would be a landmark opportunity for deepening the Christian understanding of disability.

“We are missing out on the richness of Christian tradition when we presume narrow accounts of the nature of human experience,” Assoc. Prof. Crabbe said.

“This includes the experiences found within the Bible, where limitation and disability is prevalent and Jesus himself embraces infirmity.”

Assoc. Prof Crabbe said the conference would be a chance to explore theology that pushes past idle claims about the value of people of all abilities into robust affirmation of differences among all people.

“We can achieve this by recognising not only our shared experience of limitation but our common creation in the image of God.”

Dr Philip McCosker, director of the IRCI’s Religion and Theology research program, said the conference would reflect one of the key arguments of the Second Vatican Council.

“The Second Vatican Council, which closed 60 years ago but whose texts we are still putting in action, argued that Jesus Christ reveals our humanity to ourselves. This key conference will help us explore what difference Christ makes to how we conceive the humanity we all share and how we live it out,” Dr McCosker said.

“As we navigate major transitions within the church and beyond, we will try to build on Pope Francis’ critical legacy of rethinking church and life from the outside in, from the bottom up, putting peripheries at the center.

“At a time when we are bombarded with idealised, and false, images of perfect humanity it is time to foreground our shared vulnerability and need for each other: how we treat those who are different and vulnerable defines our humanity. This is how we might answer Pope Francis’ prophetic reminder of a church (and world) which is for ‘*todos, todos, todos*’ (all).”

Other keynote speakers across the two-day conference include Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli, who explores theology and intellectual disability in his book, *In God’s Image: Recognizing the profoundly impaired as persons*; leading American Catholic theologian and commentator Daniel Horan; and Vittorio Scelzo, an official of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life.

Guest presenters will include autistic Catholic speaker Daniel Giles OAM from Bendigo; national leader of the L’Arche community Claire Lawler with active members; Auslan interpreters from the John Pierce Centre; disability rights activist Samantha Connor AM; and ACU scholars who focus on disability and human dignity including Dr Zachariah Duke, Dr Sandie Cornish, Dr Kylie Crabbe, Dr Debra Phillips and Dr Melissa Cain, among other notable speakers.

With the approval for a next phase of the Synod of Bishops on synodality, concluding in an ecclesial assembly at the Vatican in 2028, Fr Glyn called on the church to foster true inclusion of disabled people in its life and ministry.

“The final document of the Synod of Synodality recommended, for the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, a body to research the status of disabled people, to see everybody as equals in the Church, as ‘us’ rather than ‘them’,” Fr Glyn said.

“Together we have an opportunity to advance this historic work of the Church, and I hope the upcoming conference in Melbourne will enable academics, thought leaders and advocates to maintain momentum in Australia by bridging the gap that still exists between the so-called ‘abled’ and disabled in our nation and beyond.”

The [Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry](#) aims to refresh contemporary religious thinking through the lens of Christian traditions. [The Loyola Institute](#) is a research collaboration between the Australian Province of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and ACU.

Registrations for *Idol Talk? In the Image of the Disabled God: Disability, the Imago Dei and Practical Consequences* 22 – 23 May in Melbourne are now open. Visit the [official conference website](#) to register.

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