

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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# **Symposium marks fruitful year of research into lay governance of Catholic ministries**

Preliminary research into governance in the Catholic Church has found more than 100 religious institutes worldwide have transferred their ministries to canonical bodies overseen predominantly by the laity.

Research led by Australian Catholic University theologians Dr Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF and Dr Jamie Calder SJ, research officer Lawrence Hallinan and scholars from Durham University is looking at the successful emergence of canonically distinct bodies in English-speaking countries that are mainly led by Catholic lay faithful. This is not new, in canonical terms, since religious, unless ordained ministers, are also lay.

The most common forms of lay governance across the English-speaking world are the Ministerial Public Juridic Persons (MPJP) or an Association of Christ's Faithful (ACF).

Since commencing the research last year, the study has identified 58 lay-led canonical bodies established over 34 years in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Singapore and Malaysia, sponsoring mostly education, health ministries, and social services.

In Australia there are 14 Ministerial PJPs responsible for ministries which were previously under the stewardship of Religious Institutes, including entities such as Catholic Healthcare, Edmund Rice Education Australia, and Mercy Partners.

The initial research findings were shared at a Symposium held at the ACU Rome Campus days after the funeral of Pope Francis, who consistently discussed lay leadership throughout his pontificate, particularly during the Synod of Synodality.

Australian Ambassador-designate to the Holy See, the Honourable Keith Pitt formally welcomed the Symposium participants on 29 April.

Co-Chief investigator, Dr Calder said Ministerial PJPs and ACFs were in many cases a natural example of synodality, in which synodal expression occurred through diverse lay Church leaders working together as a small Christian community to steward the mission of large ministries in Catholic health care, education, aged care and social services.

“Our research has found more than 478 Ministerial PJP trustees or canonical sponsors exist in English-speaking countries, with 56% of those being women, predominately lay, with some religious and a few clergy.

“These Trustees or sponsors come with qualifications and experience in church and professional fields and are well equipped to oversee the work in our Catholic schools and health institutions.”

Dr Heaney said Ministerial PJPs could be seen as a bright light of the post-Conciliar church.

“We are 60 years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and its reception is an ongoing process. The vision of a People of God, co-responsible and entrusted to each other in communion in Christ allows us to imagine and develop as a Church in which all vocations emerging from our shared Baptism are important. The diverse roles and services we offer the

world are essential to the mission of Church in the world - what that looks like and how it might develop is the quest here.” Dr Heaney said.

“We believe the Spirit is breathing new life into the canonical possibilities here, and that we need theological and canonical reflection and collaboration in this space. Ministerial PJPs are an expression of Church that allows all the Christian faithful to exercise governance in co-responsible and reciprocal ways, that is, lay men and women with religious and clergy.”

A leader in theological formation throughout Australia, Dr Heaney said the Symposium in Rome, attended by canon lawyers, theologians, and leaders of Ministerial PJPs, raised significant questions around the participation of all the faithful in discernment processes and the diverse way in which vocations are emerging in and for the work the Church’s continuation of Jesus’ healing and teaching ministry.

“Interestingly, in the Synod on Synodality there was a move away from the language of ‘lay’ and ‘clergy’ to instead refer to ourselves as one of Christ’s faithful with different callings and roles,” Dr Heaney said.

Project Lead Adjunct Professor Susan Pascoe said the research, due to be completed in 2026, would continue to address issues of lay leadership, a theme which surfaced frequently at the Synod of Synodality.

While the death of Pope Francis was a shock to the entire Church, Dr Pascoe said, the researchers hoped to continue the former pontiff’s work of Synodality in the Church.

“At our Symposium it was clear that we are a part of reminding the Church that Synodality is an ancient Tradition in the Church, to which we are returning and which we are developing, rather than a new phenomenon or invention of Pope Francis,” Adjunct Professor Pascoe said.

“The issues taken up by the research emerged strongly during the Synod on Synodality and Australia’s Plenary Council, including increased participation for laypeople in the Church, improvements to governance including transparency and accountability, expanded roles for women in leadership and the need for formation.

“The second year of the project will create a consortium of research universities and individuals, to further explore these themes, and particularly look at formation to support laypeople in decision-taking roles in the Church.

The initial findings from the Inclusive Governance in a Synodal Church project will be made publicly available in mid-2025.

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