

MEDIA RELEASE

20 October 2025



ACU re-launches Fethullah Gülen Chair in Muslim-Catholic studies

Australian Catholic University (ACU) has reestablished the Fethullah Gülen Chair in the Study of Islam and Muslim–Catholic Relations to mark the 60th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's *Nostra Aetate*.

Named after Turkish Muslim scholar and social advocate Fethullah Gülen, who died in October last year, the Chair continues the Hizmet movement founder's teachings on interfaith dialogue.

The reestablishment of the Fethullah Gülen Chair, in partnership with the Australian Intercultural Society (AIS), also sees Professor Ismail Albayrak, the inaugural Chair between 2007 and 2014, reappointed to the esteemed professorial role.

An expert in Quranic studies, interfaith dialogue and the Hizmet movement, Professor Albayrak has written extensively on Fethullah Gülen's pioneering scholarly work on interpreting Islamic sources for the modern world.

As the previous Gülen Chair, Professor Albayrak supported a new generation of researchers and scholars of Islam, with a unique focus on theology, spirituality, exegesis and inter-religious dialogue.

Many of Professor Albayrak's doctoral students have gone on to significant roles at Australian and international universities, including establishing the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University.

In 2024 Professor Albayrak released his memoir, *A Contemporary Turkish Prison Diary: Reflections on the Writings of Said Nursi and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn*, recounting his imprisonment in the aftermath of the failed 2016 Turkish coup.

"During my imprisonment, as a victim of political persecution in Turkey, ACU continued to support me personally while ensuring the continuity of the Chair by appointing a new director, Associate Professor Salih Yücel," Professor Albayrak said.

"As someone who has observed and actively participated in Muslim-Catholic relations since the inauguration of the Chair, the second opening holds at least equal, if not greater, significance for me.

"When the Chair was first established, the Hizmet movement was at the height of its influence and enjoyed widespread support. Unfortunately, at the time of the second opening, the movement faced considerable political pressure and the imprisonment of many of its supporters in its country of origin. In this context, ACU's steadfast commitment is truly commendable."

When the Fethullah Gülen Chair was launched in 2007, it was the first in the world to focus on the studies of Catholic-Muslim relations and Islamic theology. It remains the first and only Gülen chair today.

"The Gülen Chair, revitalized through the collaboration between ACU and the Gülen movement, represents a contemporary manifestation of this global responsibility and shared spiritual heritage," Professor Albayrak said.

“The initiative underscores that interfaith dialogue is not merely theoretical but constitutes a practical process of peacebuilding, opening pathways toward a more just and hopeful future through education and mutual understanding.”

The Fethullah Gülen Chair is sponsored by AIS, which has operated in Australia since 2000.

AIS Executive Director Ahmet Keskin said the Fethullah Gülen Chair aimed to build bridges between the Muslim and Catholic faith communities.

“This Chair, which is established in honour of Fethullah Gülen at ACU, is symbolic of the relations between our respective faith traditions and will hopefully contribute to greater understanding of Islam and enhance Catholic–Muslim relations in a time when we’re challenged about unity and inclusion like no other,” Mr Keskin said.

“It is timely for this re-launch to coincide with the anniversary of the passing of Mr Fethullah Gülen and the 60th anniversary of the Nostra Aetate, which serves as a medium for engagement and collaboration.

“This Chair is the fruit of this dialogue and trust we’ve developed throughout the years.”

In the declaration, Pope Paul VI addressed the relationship between Catholics and Muslims, saying the Church regarded the Islamic faithful “with esteem”.

“Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom,” Pope Paul VI wrote.

ACU’s National Head of the School of Theology, Associate Professor Joel Hodge, said reinstating the Fethullah Gülen Chair was a “step forward in building bridges between faiths, cultures and communities”.

“In a time when division and misunderstanding often dominate public discourse, this Chair stands as a symbol of unity and intellectual collaboration,” Associate Professor Hodge said.

“It invites us to listen deeply, learn humbly, and work, study and pray together toward a common spiritual and transcendent vision through relationship with an all-loving and all-merciful God.”

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