

MEDIA RELEASE

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ACU bestows honorary doctorate on influential Vatican figure Sr Nathalie Becquart

One of the most senior women in the Vatican has accepted an Honorary Doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

Sr Nathalie Becquart received a Doctor of the University (Honoris Causa) at the ACU Rome Campus on 28 May.

The honorary degree recognises the French religious Sister's contributions to youth ministry and synodality, and for her significant leadership in advancing women and the laity in the Church.

Sr Becquart said she was “deeply moved and grateful” to receive ACU's highest honour, and dedicated the honorary degree to “all those who work for a Church that listens”.

“I receive it on behalf of all those who work for a Church that listens, that walks together, that places the peripheries at the centre,” Sr Becquart said.

“It is also a beautiful expression of communion between the universal Church and the Church in Australia, whose Plenary Council has been a fruitful, significant synodal experience of recent years.

“Having been particularly touched by my different visits to Australia — my last one in August, which also gave me the opportunity to visit the ACU Brisbane campus — I receive this doctorate as a sign of the special and deep bond I feel with Australia, which has given me and taught me so much.”

Sr Becquart has been a member of the Congregation of Xavières, founded by Claire Monestès in France, since 1995.

Her calling to religious life came after she spent a year volunteering at a school in Lebanon run by the Sisters of Nazareth.

“What drew me to the Xavières was precisely the radicality of their commitment to following Christ, combined with their engagement in the contemporary world to live out mission within it,” Sr Becquart said.

“I particularly love our motto, which expresses this beautifully: ‘Passionate for Christ, passionate for the world’ - to which I would add: ‘Passionate for the Church’.”

Sr Becquart dedicated 32 years to youth ministry work, specifically serving the French Catholic scouting movement, campus ministry and the National Service for the Evangelization of Youth and Vocations (SNEJV) of the French Bishops' Conference. Her youth ministry work brought her to Sydney for the first time in 2008 for the World Youth Day.

In 2021 Sr Becquart became an internationally-recognised name when Pope Francis appointed her Under Secretary of the General Secretariat of Synod, becoming the highest-ranking woman in the Vatican at that time.

The BBC named her one of the 100 most influential and inspiring women of 2022, and she featured in Forbes 50 over 50 for Europe, Middle East and Africa in 2023.

But the fame and glory is far from what she wants to be her legacy.

“I must say from the outset that the titles — ‘most influential woman’, ‘first woman to vote at the Synod’ — always make me uncomfortable as I don’t think I deserve it,” Sr Becquart said.

“What matters to me is the question that Pope Francis, and now Pope Leo, puts to the whole Church: how do we walk together men and women to better serve the mission of the Church?”

“How do we make the Church a space where every baptised person — man or woman, ordained or lay, from the Global North or the Global South — is recognised in their dignity and their responsibility?”

“That is the legacy I hope to leave: not a glass ceiling shattered, but a Church more faithful to itself by being a more participatory and missionary Church.”

One year into Pope Leo XIV’s pontificate, Sr Becquart is confident that the Holy Father will remain faithful to the synodal path opened by Pope Francis.

“What strikes me in the first months of his pontificate is his commitment to synodality and his ability to hold together two dimensions that some have set in opposition: the missionary impulse and the institutional dimension of the Church,” Sr Becquart said.

“He is taking forward the task of reshaping structures so that they more truly serve the mission — what Francis called a Church ‘in outreach’, a ‘field hospital’ Church.

“But above all, as his many encounters, his travels, and above all his manner of being make clear, he embodies this missionary style of proximity, dialogue, and listening. His leadership style, oriented towards seeking and building peace, is profoundly synodal.

“All who meet him are struck by his inner peace, his deep attentiveness, and the quality of his words — rooted in prayer and in his Augustinian spirituality.”

Having dedicated more than three decades to youth ministry, Sr Becquart’s advice to ACU’s 2026 graduating cohort was: “Do not be afraid of the real world”.

“Go and be with the people where they are to face the situations and challenges concretely not in theory,” Sr Becquart said.

“University has given you tools, a formation of the mind and of judgement. But the “real world” — as you call it — cannot be resolved by algorithms or business plans, it is a world of people and encounters.”

Speaking from her own personal experience of discerning religious life after completing a business degree, Sr Becquart said selflessness and service was the key to a meaningful life.

“This is what I discovered when I was finishing my own studies and asking myself about the meaning of my life: life has no meaning if we want to keep for ourselves what we have received,” she said.

“The meaning of life is to recognise that life is a gift of God, that everything we are has been received, and that we are invited to give back all that we have received — in love and service to others, even to the gift of ourselves.

“Ask yourselves, at every stage of your professional lives: does what I do contribute to the dignity of those around me? Does it help others grow and serve the common good? Do I leave the world a little better than I found it?”

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