

Theologian and missionary Dr Maeve Heaney taking preaching school around Australia

Theologian and consecrated missionary Dr Maeve Heaney is so passionate about good Catholic preaching that she's started a school to equip Australians in the faith-filled art.

The Director of Australian Catholic University's Xavier Centre for Theological Formation launched the Xavier School of Preaching last month in partnership with the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn and other individuals enthusiastic about the project, such as Robert Falzon from Brisbane and ACU La Salle Academy dean, Professor David Hall.

The school aims to support lay people through practical intensive weekends and online learning modules but is also for clergy and ministers "that want to come and relearn or grow further".

For Dr Heaney, a consecrated missionary with Institute of Consecrated Life, Verbum Dei, the Xavier School of Preaching is a life-long passion project that answers a deep need within the Catholic Church.

"There's so much need for preaching, and it's intrinsic to our baptism," Dr Heaney said.

"When I talk about preaching, I'm talking about the Word spoken, I'm talking about how faith comes through – 'How will they believe if they don't hear?'"

"The best definition of preaching I've ever heard is by Mary Catherine Hilbert, a Dominican Sister, who said preaching was the art of naming grace neither too soon nor too late."

Dr Heaney said there was a tendency within the Catholic Church for lay people to be passive participants.

"We see these men and women with deep faith, a real journey, who don't dare to say anything or who feel tentative about expressing their faith," Dr Heaney said.

"I think it's part of the Catholic culture, in that we have been very used to a Church of active leaders, and a passive congregation: 'bums on seats'.

"There's a rich experience of faith among people, but they need to be given the confidence and the means to make that an expression of faith for others."

Dr Heaney said there were "hundreds of different spaces" where lay people are allowed to preach.

"And there is a need for lay people to be able to preach, whether it be personal conversations, in mission and evangelisation, in formation or RCIA, marriage preparation, accompanying people, or youth ministers and campus pastoral associates," Dr Heaney said.

More formally, the newly instituted ministries of Catechists, Lectors and Acolytes calls for an increasing number of quality-trained preachers.

"The Pope is now inviting us to be Lectors, Catechists, so people need training for that, so we're trying to equip people so that they can be prepared to take on those roles and feel confident in them," Dr Heaney said.

After a successful first intensive weekend in Canberra, Dr Heaney and the team are now planning to take the Xavier School of Preaching to her home Archdiocese of Brisbane late next year.

The Xavier School of Preaching will collaborate with dioceses around Australia to bring the program to Catholics nationwide.

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