

Two ‘quiet’ champions for a better Australia receive honorary doctorates from ACU

The former leader of Australia’s first homegrown religious order and one of Australia’s most distinguished public servants have been awarded an honorary doctorate from Australian Catholic University.

Sister Clare Condon, who led the Congregation of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St Benedict for 12 years, and retired public servant Stephen Sedgwick, received honorary doctorates from ACU at graduation ceremonies in Sydney on 26 May 2022. Both recipients are based in Canberra.

Although “dumbfounded” by the honour, Sr Condon dedicated her honorary degree of Doctor of the University, given for her contribution to social justice and the Australian Catholic Church, on behalf of all women religious in Australia serving the poor, marginalised and elderly.

Sr Condon herself is celebrating 50 years since her first profession of vows.

Originally from Wollongong, NSW, she entered the convent of the Good Samaritans at the age of 20, spending the first three years as an aspirant.

The witness of her teachers, all Good Samaritan Sisters, inspired her own vocation.

“They were young women at that stage and they had a real zest for life,” Sr Condon said.

“The mystery of their life fascinated me, and I felt called to it. I didn't want to go, but in the end I thought, ‘I've got to go and test this, to get it out of my system’ to see whether it’s right.

“I’m still here 53 years later and I know it was the right decision.”

Sr Condon’s journey in the Good Samaritans includes being leader of the Congregation from 2005 to 2017.

During her 12 years in leadership, she supported the Sisters’ important humanitarian work in Australia, the Pacific and South-East Asia. She was also president of Catholic Religious Australia, the national body representing thousands of men and women religious, between 2008 and 2010.

Her efforts earned Sr Condon the Australian Human Rights Commission’s 2013 Human Rights Medal, which was presented to her by swimming legend Ian Thorpe, the previous year’s winner.

Sr Condon said all humanitarian work was “the gospel imperative” and the most important lesson from the parable of the Good Samaritan, her congregation’s namesake.

“I think the parable of the Good Samaritan at times can be dumbed down to the point that people think it’s about only being kind to someone else, but if you look more deeply at it, the Samaritan was the enemy, the Samaritan was the outcast,” Sr Condon said.

“It calls for a real shift in values to reach out to the other who are might not understand or appreciate you, but to acknowledge our common humanity.

“I think it's really important and I think that parable is what's sustained me.”

Fellow honorary doctorate recipient, esteemed public servant Stephen Sedgwick, said it was “an honour” to be recognised for his commitment to the Australian public service and to the Church, especially in respect of its Mission in education.

During his career of more than 40 years in public service, which included time as the Secretary to several Commonwealth Departments and as the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Mr Sedgwick also had the “privilege” of serving as an “accidental staffer” when appointed senior economic advisor to Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1985.

Mr Sedgwick said he was given one hour to consult his wife, Pauline, before taking the job. What was meant to be a three-month appointment turned into three years.

“It was extraordinary, and subsequent to that I went on, did some other quite senior jobs where we did some quite major change of one kind or another,” he said.

After retiring from the public service in 2014, Mr Sedgwick became a consultant. In this role he took on assignments for the Australian Banking Association, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and the NSW

Catholic Education Commission that became Catholic Schools NSW on the recommendation of a task force of which Mr Sedgwick was a member. He now chairs the board of Catholic Schools NSW.

Mr Sedgwick said it was always an interesting time to be involved in public service and politics.

“It's always an interesting time to be in government and the reason is the world is never static,” Mr Sedgwick said.

“There are always issues that are emerging or approaches that need to be re-examined. They may or may not need to be refreshed, but you have to continually go through that process of checking to make sure that the established structures, established policy frameworks, the established ways of doing things, are the right ones for contemporary times.

“If you approach public policy and public service with an open and inquiring mind, trying to work out what you reckon is actually in the best interest of the country, then to engage the government of the day in a dialogue around those issues and over time to build constituencies for change, it is an extraordinary privilege.”

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis congratulated both Sr Condon and Mr Sedgwick on being awarded an honorary doctorate.

“Sr Clare Condon and Mr Stephen Sedgwick have in their own right contributed to ensuring the common good and social justice for Australia as a nation and Australians as citizens,” Professor Skrbis said.

“Sr Clare has spent the majority of her life committed to out the values of the Gospel in the footsteps of the Good Samaritan, reflecting ACU's own commitment to the dignity of the human person.

“At the same time, Mr Sedgwick has dedicated his working life to advocating for changes in government and public policy and now the Church that puts the common good above politics and self-interest.

“ACU is proud to reward the efforts of Sr Clare and Mr Sedgwick with honorary doctorates.”

Sr Clare Condon sgs and Stephen Sedgwick are available for separate interviews.

Photographs available on request. Please credit photographs to ‘GFP Graduations’.

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