

MEDIA RELEASE

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ACU awards honorary doctorate to US Catholic higher education leader Fr Dennis Holtschneider CM

Vincentian priest and respected Catholic higher education leader Fr Dennis Holtschneider CM has accepted an Honorary Doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU).

The immediate past president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, and former president of DePaul University, the largest Catholic university in the United States of America, accepted an honorary degree of Doctor of the University (Honoris Causa) in North Sydney last week. Fr Holtschneider was in Australia for the 30th ASEACCU Conference, hosted by ACU for the first time.

The honorary degree from ACU recognises Fr Holtschneider’s leadership in contemporary Catholic higher education in North America and beyond, as well as his academic reputation in the field of higher education. This is Fr Holtschneider’s twelfth honorary doctorate.

Fr Holtschneider played a pivotal role in the merging of seven colleges to establish ACU in 1991. He continues to be a mentor to the university’s leadership, demonstrating his dedication to the advancement of Catholic education in Australia.

During the official awarding ceremony in North Sydney, attended by more than 200 students and university leaders from across Asia and Australia, Fr Holtschneider acknowledged the work of Catholic higher education in the Asia-Pacific region, saying he was humbled by the gathering.

“My many colleagues and friends and especially the students who are here today, it’s a great honour to associate myself even further with Australian Catholic University,” Fr Holtschneider said.

“I’ve been coming here for many years, since its earliest formation from the seven institute colleges to today.

“It’s been my great pleasure to be supportive of any of the work that’s done here. It’s a special honour to do it here in the context of this gathering of Asian Catholic

universities. The work that your institutions do across this part of the world is spectacular and important and noble. To be with you in this moment is a little bit humbling I must say.”

Speaking on the gift of a Christian education, Fr Holtschneider said St Augustine, in his autobiographical work *Confessions*, admitted to having regrets about his own education.

While studying the canon of classical literature, particularly great stories of Roman and Greek gods, Augustine realised that he had also absorbed their ethics – much of which touted violence, power, and using people for selfish gains.

“He told the story in *The Confessions* of having to re-educate himself for a new ethic, one that he picked up from his Christianity, as he learned his Christianity from his mother and then from others,” Fr Holtschneider said.

“And eventually he adopted Christianity for himself, for he began to find an ethic of caring for the poorest, caring for those who had no power in society, whether it was women in his time or those from other cultures, and he learned to follow an ethic of Jesus and the way Jesus lived his own life and it changed his life.”

This ethic of Jesus is what distinguishes a Catholic university, Fr Holtschneider said, and was the “north star” for those who commit to the mission of Catholic higher education.

“You want an education for yourself and for a world to follow after you that deeply cares about good deeds of the world, that has the heart of Jesus Christ at the heart of it, guiding it and guiding all of us as our north star,” he said.

“I’m honoured to be here and to be celebrating Catholic education in all its many forms with all of you because I admire your commitments. I admire what you want for the world and for the difference you want to make in that world in whatever field you will prepare yourself for.”

In congratulating Fr Holtschneider, ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said the university’s newest honorary doctorate recipient set a high benchmark for servant leadership.

“His humility, generosity, and servant leadership distinguish him as a role model in the Catholic education sector,” Professor Skrbis said.

“We congratulate Fr Dennis and celebrate his contribution to Catholic education and his part in the ACU community. We are pleased to welcome Fr Dennis into our circle of

honorary degree recipients, commemorating his legacy and influence in Catholic higher education.”

Fr Holtschneider is ACU’s 195th recipient of an honorary degree. Honorary degrees have been a tradition at ACU since 1992.

Fr Holtschneider last visited Australia as the keynote speaker for the annual Saint John Henry Newman Symposium in Perth, jointly hosted by the University of Notre Dame and ACU last year.

Originally from Detroit in America’s Midwest, Fr Holtschneider earned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Niagara University in 1985. He later entered the priesthood at Mary Immaculate Seminary before being ordained in 1989.

In 1997 he received a doctorate in administration, planning and social policy from Harvard University.

During his time as president of DePaul University, Fr Holtschneider co-founded the Institute for Global Homelessness, which advises the UN on homelessness strategies, and continues to serve on the Institute’s board.

Group photo caption (L-R): ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis, Honorary Doctorate recipient Fr Dennis Holtschneider CM, Chancellor Martin Daubney AM KC and Provost Professor Julie Cogin.

Media Contact: Emilie Ng, 0475 963 606, emilie.ng@acu.edu.au

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