

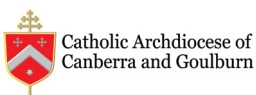


# The School of Preaching for the Church of the 21st Century

Report on feedback from  
course participants



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# The School of Preaching for the Church of the Twenty-first Century: Report on feedback from course participants

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## PROJECT ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

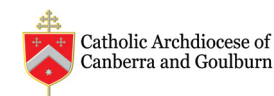
This report is a product of a partnership between the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn and Australian Catholic University (ACU). The project team extends its sincere thanks to all who contributed to this project, in particular Archbishop Christopher Prose, the Archbishop of Canberra, Fr Tony Percy, Mr Tim Kirk and Mr Huw Warmehoven of the Archdiocese of Canberra, Mr Robert Falzon of MenALIVE, Professor Br David Hall FMS, Dean, La Salle Academy, Associate Professor Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF of the Xavier Centre at ACU, and Vivien Cinque and Jillian Cox at ACU. We are also grateful to course participants who engaged in the Xavier School of Preaching and gave their feedback. This project was activated through the Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU), which was established to provide an avenue through which ACU can address issues of social, cultural, economic and religious importance as identified by communities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

In recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' spiritual and cultural connection to Country and in continuing ACU's commitment to Reconciliation, the authors acknowledge the First Peoples and the Traditional Owners and custodians of the Country where ACU campuses are located.

We respectfully acknowledge Elders past and present and remember that they have passed on their wisdom to us in various ways. Let us hold this in trust as we work and serve our communities.

In partnership with





# 1. Background

This is the final report for the ‘School of Preaching for the Church of the Twenty-first Century’ project undertaken in partnership between the Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn and the Xavier School of Preaching and Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU) at Australian Catholic University. This report will map its reflections against the expressed aim of the project in relation to the Ministry of Preaching in the Catholic church.

While some rich, written resources on the theology of preaching are available, it is clearly an area of expertise that cannot be learnt solely through participation in standard units of study. Instead, it requires further research and innovative thinking to create a learning resource that participants from the Archdiocese, and across the country, can engage with and can be resourced accordingly.

In light of this need, the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn created an up-to-date pilot course that sought to increase theological and communicative expertise in those called to preach and teach the Word across a variety of vocations and ministries. The course intended to provide

greater theological foundations, content and skills in the preaching of those participants for the various contexts in which they work, as well as greater enthusiasm and confidence in the area of mission and faith transmission in participants and mentors.

This project sought to explore the effectiveness of a combined innovative way of working that was piloted in the course to all course participants:

- On the one hand, a structured and tailored Professional Learning Workshop delivered on site in Canberra with the potential to expand after its first iteration; and
- On the other, this formal face-to-face learning was supplemented by an asynchronous learning opportunity that was established in ACU’s OpenLearning platform.

This report draws from the feedback of participants, reflected in an online anonymous and voluntary survey some of the participants completed, informed by a phenomenological qualitative research method. This approach seeks to make sense of people’s lived experience of phenomena in their lives (every day or extraordinary events; in this case, participation in this pilot course), and emphasises the meanings that people give these phenomena. As the survey was delivered to understand the experience of participants within the course, a phenomenological approach was considered the most appropriate for the evaluation of the work completed.





## 2. Limitations of the survey feedback

The 'School of Preaching for the Church of the Twenty-first Century' SESU project took place during the most intense period of COVID-19, affecting both the planning of the Professional Learning Workshop and the accompaniment of the asynchronous learning opportunity that was established in the OpenLearning platform. This resulted in the timing of the former being changed twice – due to state lockdowns – which affected the numbers involved and their capacity to complete the second section of the initiative in a timely manner and with appropriate accompaniment. The disruptive effect that the COVID-19 lockdowns had on course participants' learning may have also contributed to the lower survey response rate, where four responses were collected out of a total of 26 course participants. This being said, the team feels that there is sufficient feedback on both aspects of the School to present a report reflective of the experience and achievements.

As a general comment on the feedback, while there were young people in the School, people over 40 seem to have interacted more with the survey.





### 3. Feedback from course participants

#### 1. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING WORKSHOP

The aspects that received more unqualified positive feedback were the welcome, the food and the liturgical celebrations. The quality and contribution of the speakers was also highly appreciated.

Feedback on the workshop itself was very good, with all submissions rating the School as good or extremely good, expressing a positive response to repeating the experience and even more so to recommending it to others.

The elements that were named as take-away points of learning were: the power of testimony, the discovery that there are varied ways and forms of preaching, the planning necessary for preaching to be effective, and the invitation to never hesitate in proclaiming the Good News to others, for the hope that it brings them.

In terms of aspects to improve, it was suggested that areas of the timetable could be adjusted, so as to have a better alignment to the participants 'by balancing the contribution and questioning by the participants'. One aspect of this would be to help them develop 'a sense of ownership of the teachings' so as to 'empower them to lead teaching'. This aspect did not happen as it could. Others would have appreciated more praise and worship during the event, as well as the participation of more women and lay people.

#### 2. ONLINE LEARNING IN OPENLEARNING PLATFORM

The challenges of COVID-19 also affected the development and delivery of the online modules. While these were offered before and after the intensive Professional Learning Workshop, participants were stretched and did not interact with them as much as initially thought. However, within those limitations, below is some of the feedback provided.

There was some interaction with the earlier modules, which were well received, and a growing awareness of the full potential of the materials was expressed by those who journeyed through the full suite of modules:

*Like many of the participants, I am involved in so many church commitments that I did not do the follow up work required - and I'm sorry about that. I was not sufficiently appreciative of the full body of the course. I'm sorry about that also. There is so much more from this course I could have drawn on.*

The readings were appreciated, as was the content in helping rekindle participants' motivation and passion for preaching. However, there were also many who only interacted with the first modules and therefore did not take advantage of all of the modules on offer. While this makes it difficult to fully assess the extent to which the interactive learning space provided can meaningfully support the ministry of preaching, the feedback on the early modules is promising. Suggestions for improvement included:

- 1 That the course leaders make contact with participants to offer more support and feedback: perhaps setting up 'a WhatsApp or social group with the intention to work together and share experiences and motivate each other'; and
- 2 That the modules be broken down into smaller modules for easier assimilation for those who are not involved with academic formation (currently or for some time).

There was also an increase in consciousness of the challenges:

*HOWEVER - what's the point? The priests just won't let you near a microphone unless you are promoting a parish money making opportunity.*

*Yes [my theological understanding of the meaning of preaching and teaching has improved], but I have not had many opportunities to practice.*



Image provided by Unsplash/ Babak Habibi.

## 4. General conclusions and next steps

Some of the comments relating to the course in general reveal the potential of the course into the future. There are aspects to be improved, but the overall appreciation of the value of the School is beyond question.

*I have stepped up in Church RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults + PPC (Parish Pastoral Council) involvement last year. This week I will present out to the team as well. The motivation has largely come from my short, wonderful experience at Canberra!!*

The majority of respondents felt their communication skills and confidence had improved as a result of the course, meeting the course objectives to increase theological and communicative expertise in those called to preach and teach the Word across a variety of vocations and ministries and provide greater enthusiasm and confidence in the area of mission and faith transmission in participants and mentors.

Overall, participant feedback suggests that the course is indeed valuable in supporting the ongoing training of ministers and priests for the task of preaching and teaching in parishes, communities and schools. In addition to theological formation and development of practical skills, the course provided participants an experience of having effective preaching modelled to them from a diverse range of practitioners: men and women, clerical and lay.

The expansion of the Xavier School of Preaching program to other dioceses in 2023 is currently underway, with the first planned in the Archdiocese of Brisbane in August. The feedback from participants of this pilot course will help inform and improve these future iterations of the course, through which a contemporary theology of preaching that can support the current challenges and opportunities will be further curated and presented to participants.

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP UNIT (SESU)

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