

Isabel Capeloa Gil

Address to ACU (on the occasion of the bestowing of an Honorary Doctorate)
August 30, 2023.

Excellencies,
Chancellor of the Australian Catholic University, the Honorable Martin Daubney
Vice-Chancellor and President of the Australian Catholic University, Prof. Zlatko Skrbis,

Distinguished members of ACU Executive and members of staff,
Ladies and gentlemen

Standing before you today, I am humbled to accept this very prestigious Honorary Doctorate bestowed by ACU, a beacon of excellence in service to society and the Church. It is a distinction that I truly cherish and I wholeheartedly thank you. Allow me, as I begin these remarks as a guest in this country, to acknowledge the traditional custodians who have cared for this land and pay my respects to their Elders past and present and those who shall come after.

On this occasion, humility is of the essence. French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir gave Jean Paul Sartre a very relevant piece of advice as he pondered the acceptance of a *Honoris Causa* degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The quick-witted Beauvoir warned Sartre that his politically motivated hesitation was the sign of presumptuousness rather than self discernment. Catholic educated and a brilliant *alumna* of the Institut Catholique de Paris, Beauvoir had a pragmatic mind and a clear sense of what circumstances required. She warned Sartre that ‘honorary’ was an appeal to modesty not a title of egotistical infatuation and that it was given in recognition of his work not himself, that is, it recognized a pathway and circumstances deriving from interactions and exchanges with many individuals which along the years had effectively shaped his philosophical thought. With this in mind, he should unquestionably accept the honor. *Mutatis mutandis*, I humbly accept this recognition of my work, not of myself, and I am grateful for the many twists and turns in the path, the rich conversations and the collaborations that have contributed to bring me to Melbourne in this Winter of 2023.

There is tremendous wisdom in the Australian aboriginal creation myth that tells how the ancestors, the *Wandjina* walked the surface of the earth and created the landscape as they went. Creation entails movement, dislocation. As we go, we too transform and are transformed. For me, the movement has quite frankly been global. Perhaps honoring the risk taking mentality of my seafaring ancestors, it stretches from the small seaside town of Mira, in Northern Portugal, through Lisbon, Macao, Munich and Chicago, Kalamazoo, Rio de Janeiro, Berlin, Palo Alto, Copenhagen, São Paulo, Rome and Paris, to name a representative sample. Many places and even more encounters with colleagues, mentors and personalities that have shaped me as researcher, academic, administrator. Clearly, my work results from

this walking and from the extraordinary encounters along the way. And in this journey the encounter with ACU has been both impressive and impactful. The relation between ACU and the The Catholic University of Portugal began as we became founding partners of what is now a widely recognized network of Catholic research universities – SACRU, currently chaired by Prof. Zlatko Skrbis. The affinities between our two institutions draw not simply from the fact that we are Catholic, but that we are Catholic research universities. That is, they bridge strategy, research and a commitment to innovation illuminated by the specific value proposition of Catholic higher education, the compromise to do good, through strong science and solid academics advancing a societal model inspired by the primer that the Gospel truly is. It is thus for me a great honor to receive a recognition from such an admirable university and strong partner in the pursuit of science for the common good.

Earlier this month, during WYD in Lisbon, Pope Francis in his speech at the Catholic University of Portugal, challenged university students to ‘become teachers of humanity, teachers of compassion, teachers of new opportunities for the planet’. And he presented a clear vision of what a university should be, a place to seek discovery and take risks. A place for a responsible and challenging journey. “A university would have little use if it were simply to train the next generation to perpetuate the present global system of elitism and inequality, in which higher education is the privilege of a happy few. Unless knowledge is embraced as a responsibility, it bears little fruit.” (Pope Francis, WYD 2023, Address to Catholic University of Portugal).

Responsibility entails the courage to transform, it means being there where change is happening. Rise up and act, as the motto of WYD went. In one of her considerations, Saint Theresa of Avila describes a beautiful strawberry garden. And she ponders, how should one better worship God, by contemplating the strawberries or by eating them? The answer is left for the reader to discern. But if I could dare an academic answer to Saint Theresa’s dilemma, I would say, that Catholic higher education worships God both by contemplating and also eating the strawberries. The scholar is not enclosed in an ivory tower, s/he articulates contemplation with application. Contemplating the strawberries, s/he learns what they are, how they grow, and by eating them, s/he tastes their wonderful qualities and learns of a different beauty. This means in fact taking up the three fundamental questions of any scientific inquiry: What is it? How does it function? What does it mean?

However, Saint Theresa’s question also taps into a different concern, the relation of the spiritual to the practical, and of faith and reason. Czech writer, Franz Kafka, an uncommon bedfellow to Saint Theresa, provides an enlightening insight into the conversation. Kafka often used animals as characters in his stories and afforded them with a wisdom that he saw lacking in his contemporaries. In “Investigations of a Dog’ (*Forschungen eines Hundes*), the dog-scholar is captured between two worlds: animal nature and the desire to be a learned and reasoning human being. Through the dog’s investigations, Kafka articulates the relation of faith and reason and denounces the false option between living a contemplative life enmeshed in ritual ‘forgetting the ground’ and the raw scientific reasoning with a fixation on the measurable and the statistical that disregards the ‘upward gaze’,

towards spirituality. Through the untruth of fiction, Kafka suggests the necessary articulation between spiritual truth and the murky entanglements of material reality.

In our day and age, the role of universities is played out in the orientation towards reasoned choice and truth, in the belief that although there is much that humanity does not know, there is a basic knowability that allows individuals to make choices grounded on evidence and illuminated by common values. The agenda of knowledge for the common good includes for instance the protection of biodiversity and the divestment of pollutants that destroy the planet, economic growth focussed on closing the obscene inequality gap in our societies, the defense of the rule of law and the right of individuals to have basic human rights as Hannah Arendt claimed, cultural dialogue and the protection of those cultures set in fragile ecosystems, as Pope Francis referred in *Querida Amazonia*. The recent Joint Statement from the Vatican's Dicasteries of Human Development and Culture and Education, in defense of the rights of indigenous peoples and cultures and rejecting the so-called 'Doctrine of Discovery' as unbecoming to the Church's teaching, thereby denouncing any colonizing mentalities is of particular relevance, especially in a world in dire need of cultural reconciliation.

The American writer Toni Morrison told the students at a Commencement speech that, "The world is interesting and difficult." And I would add, this is precisely why we have been put in this place. Our task as educators is not to live as fine examples of the Moronic Inferno of self-perpetuation, to use Wyndham Lewis' words, but to dare to risk change.

In sum, I receive this honorary doctorate with humility, and as a token of the recognition of the leadership of women in academia. Despite all the breakthroughs, there is still a lot of ground to be covered. Women are still underrepresented worldwide as Presidents, Vice-Chancellors and Rectors. Within Catholic Higher Education, I contend that owing more to legacy than out of simple bias, there are only 8% of women in the top position of institutions, according to a recent survey by the International Federation of Catholic Universities. Change is ongoing but it must happen within our lifetime, not beyond, it must happen now. I owe it to my daughters, to my younger colleagues, to my students, to those who came before me and did not have the same chance, to the lay and consecrated women, to show that change may, can and will happen. In Lisbon, Pope Francis spoke against seeing women 'as second best, as reservists, not appearing in the starting run up.' It is high time for all those who can make a difference to recognize the great example of female leadership in academia and by so doing to promote a future where all women and men shall have equal opportunity.

Allow me to conclude. It is a privilege to join the prestigious league of those who have been admitted to this honorary degree before. ACU, and Melbourne, are now part of my journey and, I look forward to walking with you to create, as we go, new landscapes for higher education, places where as Samuel Taylor Coleridge contended we may "work by love and so generate love." (Lecture on Education at the Royal Institution, 1813)