

# Cree student will represent Canada at Vatican meeting

Jacob Jason Genaille-Dustyhorn isn't Catholic, but his spiritual roots with the Indigenous community has qualified him as one of only two young people selected by Canadian bishops to represent the country in Rome.

The 21-year-old Cree student will join Emilie Callan, 28, who works for Salt + Light Media Foundation, at the pre-synodal youth meeting March 19-24 that will help set an agenda for this fall's General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on youth.

"Two people in the whole country is really not very easy but finally we got these two names," said Bishop Lionel Gendron, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB).

"When we were in Rome in December, they told us no more than two persons. So we finally looked for having a man and a woman, English and French, Indigenous and so on."

Gendron said it was a priority for the CCCB executive council to select at least one young person who represented the native community.

"He's not a Catholic, but as the Pope mentioned, he wants to speak to Catholic and non-Catholic, believers and non-believers and so on, so his name was accepted also in Rome," said Gendron.



Jacob Genaille-Dustyhorn

Genaille-Dustyhorn is a second-year student in the Indian Teacher Education program at University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.

Genaille-Dustyhorn said he is approaching the pre-synod from a bit of an outside perspective. His mother is Christian and he said he has “grown up with that faith.”

He also attends regular youth nights at The Bridge Fellowship Centre, a Christian-based community centre in Saskatoon, and is involved with the Youth for Christ local hockey league.

Still, he identifies more with his Cree spirituality.

“Every religion, they all have a Great Spirit that they look up to, so it’s kind of hard not to believe,” said Genaille-Dustyhorn.

Genaille-Dustyhorn said he does feel connected to the Christian faith through the friends he’s made in youth group.

“Believing is the greatest challenge for young people today,” he said. “There’s a lot of material stuff nowadays that are becoming more important than spirituality. They put their faith in something that can make them happy for maybe a year, instead of putting their faith in something that can make them happy their whole life.”

Genaille-Dustyhorn doesn’t know what to expect for the pre-synod, but he’s already doing his research.

Callan grew up in a French-speaking family in Cornwall, Ont., and works in Toronto as a writer and producer for Salt + Light Media Foundation. CEO Father Thomas Rosica recommended her as a candidate for her work as co-host for a national youth forum broadcast in October last year.



Emilie Callan

Callan said her work on that broadcast was a great starting point for her pre-synod preparation, but there is still more to learn.

“Recently, I’ve been doing a couple of streeter-style, quick interviews with young people on the street,” she said.

“A lot of these young people had similar answers.... They had a lot of fears about the future, about finding jobs, and good jobs, and enough money to support themselves.”

Although many of the young people she has interviewed do not necessarily belong to a faith, she said that they have the same life concerns as Catholics. As a youth delegate, Callan said she sees the pre-synod as an opportunity to have open discussions on hard topics that concern young people.

“I have friends in the medical field and are facing really tough decisions in regards to listening to their conscience on life issues,” said Callan. “Listening to their conscience and maybe risking losing their jobs is a concern, I’ve heard.”

Issues about love, relationships and sexuality are also a recurring topic of discussion among her peers, said Callan.

Callan and Genaille-Dustyhorn say they are looking forward to working together alongside 300 delegates from around the world to discuss challenges young people face today.