

# St. Albert student brings passion for Church history and theology to journalism internship

A St. Albert teenager is putting pen on paper to share the richness of her faith across Canada.

Katherine Szojka, 17, is one of 11 students hired to write a column and stories of Catholic people, places and events for *The Catholic Register* – the national newspaper based in Toronto.



Katherine Szojka Matthew Bodnarek, Grandin Media

Every year, the Youth Speak News internship program teaches high school and university-aged students the principles of journalism and how to apply them to stories and columns published in the *Register*.

They are also invited to Toronto for a weekend of workshops in photojournalism, newspaper production, broadcast journalism and – new this year – podcast production.

“I think it’s really exciting,” said Szojka, a Grade 12 student at St. Gabriel Online School. “I think people my age are just into adventuring and learning a lot about the world. I’m kind of doing the same thing in the Catholic world.”

For the *Register*, the Youth Speak News program is a way to bridge the generation gap.

“Our older readership really likes the YSN pages because it makes them feel connected to what the new generation is thinking and feeling about their faith. I think it helps them understand how young people are relating to God and the Church and I think it brings them hope for the future,” said Jean Ko Din, the editor of the Youth Speak News program, which started 18 years ago.

“Having a dedicated page on youth ministry also signals for our readers that the Register acknowledges the voice of young people as equally important as the national and international issues we cover.”

Szojka, whose home parish is Holy Family in St. Albert, responded to an ad for Youth Speak News in the spring. It’s an unpaid internship, but Szojka said “it looked like a great learning opportunity because I do enjoy reading a lot. And I guess you enjoy writing a lot after reading a lot.”

Szojka was unsure of her writing experience, but her editors say it’s not the principal criterion.

“What attracted me to Katherine’s application was how well-read she was,” Din said.

“She is passionate about reading theology and church history which I think is a really cool thing for her to bring to her peers who will be reading her work in the Register. I’m hoping her passion for this stuff encourages other people her age to start picking up these resources in the Church and feel that these things can be accessible to them too. “

Szojka’s first column is due in November. Szojka is still deciding what the topic will be, but she does enjoy exploring her faith. She recently visited the crypt at the Mission Hill site in St. Albert where the early leaders of the Church in Alberta – Father Albert Lacombe, Bishop Vital Grandin and Father Hippolyte Leduc – are buried.

“I really enjoy the history of the Church in Western Canada and reading about that and kind of exploring places. You kind of have to look past what’s happening to why it’s happening. I like to see them all as Easter egg hunts, like finding the crypt was an ‘Easter egg’ that I found.”

At age 10, Szojka attended her first Our of Lady of Victory youth camp at Gull Lake, near Red Deer, and she’s been back ever since. At 14 though, she reached crossroads.

“I was at a point where I didn’t see a lot of good things around me, but I would read about what the perfect optimum was like: the good, true and the beautiful and I just fell in love with that,” she explained. “It just kind of kept going. I enjoy the intellectual aspects of the Church.”

So Szojka took courses at Newman Theological College in Edmonton. She also spends a lot of time at Foyer Lacombe, the retirement home for priests of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, in St. Albert.

"I just kind of show up, watch movies, have dinner once in a while," she said.

One priest in particular, 93-year-old Father Louis-Philippe Roy, made a particular impression.

"He'll just kind of question me on random things while we're watching a movie. We were watching the new Jumanji and he's like 'Is this reincarnation? Do you believe in reincarnation?'" Szojka joked.

"I was making a rosary and he said 'How many beads?' and I go, 53? ... 55?' He said 'Just checking!'"

Szojka said the Youth Speak News internship may lead to a career in journalism or theology. For now, does it seem unusual for a teenager to be a writer for a Catholic newspaper?

"A little bit," Szojka admitted. "I know a lot of really great young adults who are very into it and excited that I can show them things. I think the biggest benefit is just the learning experience and making myself better with writing and communications in general. Hopefully in the future it will set me up for something else."

Given the scandals in Church, particularly in the U.S., critics may wonder why she's writing about her faith for a national newspaper or why she's Catholic at all.

To them, she says: "Why are you here? Are you a part of it for the priests in the church or are you a part of it because you love God and Jesus and you believe this is the one, true church?"