

ACU students prepare for virtual meeting with Pope Francis

Australian Catholic University (ACU) students will hear from Pope Francis in a rare virtual meeting with fellow university students from the Asia-Pacific region this week.

The Holy Father will host a video call on June 20 for the fourth instalment of the Building Bridges Initiative, a unique forum that since 2022 has invited young people from large geographic regions to share honestly with each other and the Pope on issues affecting youth.

Organised by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, and Loyola University Chicago, the Building Bridges Initiative has partnered with six universities in the Asia-Pacific region to support students on a month-long “synodal encounter” leading up to a meeting with the Pope. ACU was selected to oversee the involvement of university students from across Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea.

Twelve students from the region have been selected to speak to Pope Francis about an issue that concerned the smaller group during the virtual meeting.

Elizabeth Fernandez, who is studying business admin and law at Macquarie University in Sydney, and Seamus Lohrey, a law and public relations student from the University of Waikato, will represent young people from Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

Elizabeth, who comes from a strong Catholic family of 11, said her group agreed that loneliness and isolation, and a lack of faith formation, were big issues facing young Catholics today.

“When I first started university, I was very lonely because I’d come from a very Catholic high school, but all my friends had gone to different unis,” she said.

“I think it’s really built my courage to say something and to also really educate myself on my faith and how and what I stand for.”

During her dialogue with Pope Francis, Elizabeth also hopes to ask the Holy Father for a special blessing for her mum.

“A couple of days after I found out about the project, mum was diagnosed with cancer,” Elizabeth said, noting her entire family, including her grandfather from New Zealand, will be beside her during the virtual meeting with the Pope.

“But she’s also very excited about (me meeting the Pope). This has been a good moment of joy in the journey.”

Seamus, who is originally from a small town in the North Canterbury region of the South Island, New Zealand, hopes to talk to the Pope about human dignity.

“I think a prominent issue is the Catholic Church not treating vulnerable people in our societies with the respect and dignity they deserve,” he said.

“It’s a bit of a controversial one with some people, but rocking the boat is the only way to go I think with things like this. I’m not out here to criticise for the sake of it, but because I think that positive change could be made, and I think Pope Francis is an incredibly attentive and a respectful listener and I think he’d be very open to what I have to talk about.”

As a baptised Catholic, Seamus admits to battling with his faith at different times in his life.

“I felt my faith being strongest later in life during high school, when I found myself in positions of leadership, and I think that was God trying to make sure there’s a solid character of faith talking to people,” he said.

Ahead of the meeting with Pope Francis, Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, Prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, sent a brief greeting to the participating university students.

In his letter, he reminded the students that as well as being called to build bridges, “with this meeting, you have now been called to become bridges”.

“Being a bridge is practicing the commandment of love, which Jesus taught us, at any time and in any place, even know that, many times, some will use our service or charity without mentioning us,” Cardinal Tolentino de Mendonça said.

Thursday’s virtual meeting will be livestreamed on YouTube at 2pm Rome time/10pm AEST/June 21 12am NZST. The university students will also be given a brief opportunity to meet and take a virtual photo with Pope Francis at the end of the livestream.

ACU’s Associate Director of Mission and Ministry, Mark Doyle, said the dialogue between the university students had been “robust, thoughtful, and insightful”.

“The students spoke extremely passionately about various complex issues, and it was clear that they are committed to making the world a better place,” Mr Doyle said.

“Both Seamus and Elizabeth are excited to present their ideas to the Pope and to hear his insight about their concerns.”

The virtual dialogue with students from the Asia-Pacific comes months out from Pope Francis’ expectant visit to the region in September. The Vatican announced in April that Pope Francis would make an Apostolic Journey to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore in early September.

The Building Bridges Initiative has facilitated encounters between Pope Francis and students from the Americas, Africa, and South Asia.

For more information, visit the [Building Bridges Initiative website](#), or watch the livestream on July 20 10pm AEST [here](#).

Elizabeth Fernandez and Seamus Lohrey are available for interviews.

Background on the Building Bridges Initiative for media:

Inspired by the call of Pope Francis to synodality, Loyola University Chicago launched the Building Bridges Initiative to be a student-centred and university-organised series of events.

The initial event in February 2022, Building Bridges North-South, emerged organically from a collaboration between Loyola and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America.

The initiative aims to facilitate the student groups across large geographic regions, and with support from university partners, accompany students as they engage in listening, dialogue, and discernment around shared social concerns. Student representatives of those groups are invited to a livestreamed dialogue with Pope Francis where they are encouraged to share their group’s experiences and hopes.

Participants of the Building Bridges Initiative from Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea includes students at ACU, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT, Victoria University, the Catholic Theological College, University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales, University of Technology Sydney, Macquarie University, the University of Waikato in Hamilton, NZ, University of Auckland, NZ, and Divine Word University, PNG.

As well as ACU, other partner universities include Ateneo de Manila University, Manila, Philippines, Universitas Sanata Dharma, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, Taiwan Sogang University, Seoul, South Korea, and Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan.

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