

Rome scholarship honours Aboriginal student

Calle Nicholls is the recipient of the 2019 Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship which will assist her to undertake study at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) Rome Campus.

ACU and the Australian Embassy to the Holy See will host a ceremony in Rome on 8 July during NAIDOC Week to present Calle with this prestigious award.

The Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship enables an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student to undertake study at the ACU Rome Campus as part of their core curriculum requirements.

The Scholarship was established in recognition of an Aboriginal student, Francis Xavier Conaci, who travelled to Rome in 1849 from New Norcia in Western Australia to study in a Benedictine monastery. Conaci died in Rome and is understood to be buried with other Benedictine community members in a grave in the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls.

A second year Bachelor of Social Work student at ACU's Canberra Campus, Calle is an Aboriginal student and proud woman of the Wiradjuri tribe, who says she finds herself not just connected with her tribe but to her culture as a whole.

Calle aims to work in rural Australia after graduation and would like the opportunity to work with Indigenous populations, in particular youth and those who have been incarcerated.

Director of the First Peoples and Equity Pathways Directorate at ACU, Jane Ceolin, said she was pleased the award was being presented during NAIDOC Week, with the 2019 theme Voice.Treaty.Truth. Let's work together for a shared future.

"ACU is pleased to provide this wonderful opportunity for Calle, as the third recipient of the Francis Xavier Scholarship. She is an inspiration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and a role model for her home community," said Ms Ceolin.

Australian Ambassador to the Holy See HE Melissa Hitchman congratulated Calle reflecting that, though ACU's generosity, the Scholarship allowed Francis Xavier Conaci's journey to continue for future generations. 'Much of his story remains a mystery. It deserves to be discovered and fully revealed. Calle and the other Conaci Scholars have the privilege of retracing his footsteps and forging their own way towards a renewed church/state/Indigenous future'.

Calle said she was delighted to receive the award and is excited to be studying at the ACU Rome Campus.

"I was extremely grateful and excited when I found out I had been awarded this particular scholarship. It is a once in a life time opportunity and, with only one student being selected, I feel very proud to be this particular person and look forward to representing my culture," said Calle.

"I have never been to Europe before so what better way to explore it than being able to pursue my degree at the same time. I also have friends who are doing the same unit in Rome so during our spare time we wish to explore the beautiful city, its surroundings and learn more about Roman culture."

"I feel this scholarship is very fitting in relation to the theme of NAIDOC week. This is because we are constantly trying to make our people heard. Being in Rome to represent my culture means I have the ability to have a voice, I can advocate for the rights of my people, expose the truth and promote change. This is a very important time for Indigenous people as it recognises the history, hardship and disadvantage we face on a day to day basis."

ACU has worked in close partnership with the Australian Embassy to the Holy See on the Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship since its launch in 2016 and the arrival of the Inaugural Scholar in 2017 to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and the 25th anniversary of the Mabo decision.

The University has also collaborated with the Benedictine community of New Norcia and the New Norcia Aboriginal Corporation to respectfully honour Conaci's memory.

ACU is committed to providing education opportunities and supporting success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through the First Peoples and Equity Pathways Directorate and Indigenous Higher Education Units located at each campus, as well as scholarships and bursaries.