

“From Age to Age” – Oral History Project of the Church of St. Francis Xavier

Ep. 1 - Roseanne & Pablo "I really felt God led me here"

Introduction music plays –

A segment from the song “Here I Am, Lord” by composer Michael Ward as performed by the Choir of the Church of St. Francis Xavier plays.

“Here I Am, Lord,
I come to do your will.
Make of me what pleases you.
Here I am,
Here I am,
Lord.”

- Podcast series introduction –

Welcome to “From Age to Age,” an oral history podcast series about the parish history and hopes for the future from the Church of St. Francis Xavier in New York City. We're recording in the second-floor parlor of our parish and because of that, you may hear sirens, dogs, or a steady hum of construction.

My name is Michelle Jung and I'm a parishioner of St. Francis Xavier and a member of the Oral History Ministry. The Oral History Project was conceived to preserve the unique history of this church by inviting our long-time parishioners to share their personal stories with a newer generation, illustrating why this parish is distinctive, unique, and a very special place.

- Interview section –

PABLO: Good morning and welcome to the Saint Francis Xavier at the ad majorem dei gloriam journey to peace and love series. I am Pablo and I have been a parishioner and catechist at this church for a little more than three years - sorry, four years in fact. Today is October 18th, 2021 and I will be talking to, uh, Roseann.

ROSEANN: Good morning!

PABLO: Good morning!

ROSEANN: Good morning Pablo!

PABLO: How are you today?

ROSEANN: Great, great, great, happy to be with you.

PABLO: I am very excited and honored to, to talk to you today. We met about four years ago when I first joined the parish and the RCIA. We worked together as part of the staff and, um, I would like to start asking you: how, how did you find Saint Francis Xavier, um, and tell me, was he sort of love at first sight, or was it, you know, a process to discover that this was the parish for you?

ROSEANN: Well, what happened a few years after college, I moved with my college roommate to Manhattan. Always wanted to live in Manhattan from my earliest years. I was born in Brooklyn and one of the things that I loved was so many things, but one of them was visiting all the different churches. Now, that sounds funny, I think, for I was in my 20s and I was excited about, oh I have all these churches I can go to and see their Masses and, uh, so forth. And in one of the, um, churches I visited, in their bulletin there was an advertisement for something called the Lay Spirituality Program and I thought, "Oh, that would be something I'm interested in!" So of course I didn't call right away. I just waited and, um, when I called, I spoke to the pastor at the time, Joe Dirr, and I said, "I'm interested." He says, "Oh, well, we've already begun, you know. You can join the next group." I said, "Fine, okay." So I just continued my adventure in churches and, you know, just, just loved New York City in general. And then when the new group was going to start, Joe Dirr called me to say, "You know, you're still interested?" I said, "Yes," and the first time I ventured into Xavier was for the first meeting of the Lay Spirituality Program. And I didn't know anyone, and I was very, kind of, on the quiet side, which is not anything like I am now. And people were there from Xavier that's when I first met Elda Luisi and Mary Galeone, who remain dear friends to this day and this was in the fall of 1985. So, it was a really long time ago, and they would talk about Xavier and I wasn't living in this neighborhood. So I thought, "Oh, this is such a great parish from what they say, this is such a great place. Oh, I am not worthy of coming here. I don't, I'm not holy enough." This is, this is what I thought. I really did, so finally after that we went. We were in the group for many months. We went on retreat in the fall. I said, "All right, I'm going to come to Mass here!" And I went to a Sunday five Mass and I did, I, I'm home, I'm home, and I no longer went looking at different churches or different communities. I started coming to Xavier from that moment.

PABLO: That's, that's, that's a wonderful story, Roseann. I was remembering when you and I worked together at the RCIA. I learned from you that a special component of our journey of faith is doubt, and now that you have told us how you fell in love with this parish, have there been times of doubt in this process?

ROSEANN: You mean in terms of my faith?

PABLO: Well, I wouldn't go there, um, more like this is the right parish for you in times of crisis?

ROSEANN: Yes, yeah Pablo, you know being here changed my life. You know I already was a person of faith when I came, but knew, I mean, I had gone to a Jesuit college and had a whole conversion, you know, there, but being here, uh, changed my life even more, um, it really changed the whole trajectory of my life because it was, it was real.

The gospel was real here, uh, people like Mary and other the Jesuits on the staff, I mean, it was an embodied faith, it wasn't just talk. And that, that moved me, you know, and I was a quiet person and I was filled with, um, I have to fulfill someone else's expectations, and, uh, so forth. And boy, I came to see, oh no, it's what I do. I hear God saying to me, you know, what do I hear God saying to me? And I worked in the library of a big law firm. I left that job. I came here to work for three years on the staff and, you know, I didn't know anything, so that was really hard. And I said, "You know, I learned so much doing that that I said, "I realized I still have a lot to learn!" And I went off and studied theology at the Jesuit school in Massachusetts and it all just changed me and changed my life, changed my relationship with the world, and with everyone, everyone I met, everyone I met, so I am just complete and utter gratitude. Before I found Xavier in my very hard dark times, I used to really in prayer but really kind of almost silently screaming to God, "Where are you, you know, where, where are you, God?" And then, once I was here, I remember one moment in a quiet moment. I heard God say, "See here, here's one place that you can find Me." And I really felt God, uh, led me here.

PABLO: That's, that's wonderful, thank you.

ROSEANN: Thank you for asking

PABLO: Um, so you said that you arrived to Xavier in the fall of 1985?

ROSEANN: Yes

PABLO: , um, those were times in which there was a lot of change in the church

ROSEANN: Yes

PABLO: Um and even before that probably when you were in college

ROSEANN: Yes

PABLO: so how has that, um, been for you here at Xavier you know the the consequence of the vatican council

ROSEANN: My parish where my parents live or lived they're deceased out on long island it was a good parish you know and I would go there and it was you know vatican ii parish and, um, but nothing like here you know, um, in terms of well first of all you know we're in the city it's chelsea, um, so the welcoming of people of every background and point of view to me that's just very very powerful and very very real and to me god is very real you know and I want to live in reality so I can do that here and I think that we've been blessed with I mean the that the people that I first met from the staff of course are you know gone long gone and many others have come and also have gone and we have now a wonderful staff father Ken Boller is a very holy man. Luz Marina Diaz, as you know is very important to me and uh she gives me opportunities to continue to be in ministry you know which I really means the world to me and father

zach prasudi I got involved a little bit with the his ministry of people who are incarcerated or formally incarcerated and that means a lot to me too I never you know when when you know in different prayer group or you know different gatherings sometimes the question is what are you most grateful for in your life and I always say I am grateful to be alive and that I have had a life that my faith is the core of who I am

PABLO: And I see that in fact that faith keeps you involved in different ministries,

ROSEANN: Yes.

PABLO: Um one of them, um, is the bell choir. In fact yeah we are in october you know advent and christmas season are around the corner

ROSEANN: Yeah we're getting ready, we're rehearsing our Christmas songs.

PABLO: So how did you get involved in the, in the bell choir?

ROSEANN: Oh yeah, that's for me, that's a really good question because, you know, especially once I came to Xavier, and I, you know, I've been in these, you know, various different kinds of groups and there's people who can sing, people who can dance, people who are artists, people who have all kinds of talents. And for a long time, I would ask God, you know, "God, why didn't you give me any gifts, you know, I have no gifts from you," um, you have to edit this out, um, and anyway, and I always wanted to be able to sing, right? And I love music and, um, at one of these fairs, for the ministry fairs, uh, I was walking around, and a member of the choir, Mike Douris, was behind the choir table. He says, "Do you want to join the choir or something?" "No," I said. "I can't sing!" And he says, "Well then, how about the bell choir?" And so I, just in that moment, said, "Okay, all right, I'll join the bell choir." And so, even though I have no natural talent, you know, I'm able to learn, you know. All right, play this bell on this note and etc. So I've been in it, oh God, I don't know, um, I think I joined in 2009, maybe, so that, so 12 years, and yeah, and I still, you know, enjoy it very much. John is great, uh, John Uehlein, and he gets feedback. He says they really enjoy it, they really enjoy when the bells play, so, you know, that's, that's really nice.

PABLO: Yeah, I'm, I mean, I, I've seen you playing, uh, for a few years now, and it's, it's wonderful. I think that the bells play in, in two senses, right? One the music and the other one is that it, it's very playful. It allows us to enjoy and rejoice. There is like a liturgy.

ROSEANN: Yeah, you know, I want to just say two: it's, you know, when you play an instrument like the flute or the violin, you know, you play every note that's in your music, but when you play bells, you don't play every note because other people are playing the other notes. And sometimes, you go for several measures, and you're not playing, and you really have to focus and pay attention to know when you play. And I've been known on more than one occasion to, to ask in a stage whisper where are we? Where are we anyway?

PABLO: That's, that's amazing, Rosann, um, I was thinking about, um, you know, recently, there have been efforts to include racial, racially, um, diverse pieces of art so before we go into that, you were here for the renovation of the church. Tell us how, how was that? How it was before the process? Later on?

ROSEANN: Oh it was really, uh, you know, the pastor at that time was Joe Costantino, and I think he was born to do this renovation at Xavier because he, he had it under his belt. I thought the church was beautiful before the renovation. The first time I went to bell choir rehearsal was down in Hurtado Hall, and that's where we had Masses that that year, and then we came up into the church, but there was the screen, and we were in folding chairs. And I would sit in the back often during those Masses, and that's when I sat behind Nancy Pelosi. She was here for the first time, so that's part of my renovation experience. Her daughter at the time lived nearby, I believe, and I was sitting behind her on the folding chairs. And she turns around during the kiss of peace, you know, and peace be with you, and then I'm like, I will, after that was over, I lean forward and I whisper in her ear, "You look like Nancy Pelosi. She was the speaker then and she turns around and she says, "Yes, yes!" So now I'm telling the people near me, you know, Nancy Pelosi, and anyway so, um, so that was exciting. And on the first time I came into the church after the renovations during the Christmas season, right, it was maybe Christmas Eve Mass. I was, I mean, I just looked with my mouth open. I mean, I just could not believe that this was all hidden underneath all those decades or however long it was of, you know, dirt and grime and grit and whatever it was. It was extraordinary to me. Extraordinary.

PABLO: What are the, um, the parts of the church physically, the, the building that you, that you enjoy the most, or perhaps there has been one that has helped your prayer?

ROSEANN: Usually at Mass I sit on the side, you know, by the Mary Altar. That's my spot with other people there, that we go to the 11 30. But other times, if I go to another Mass, I sit in the pew, you know, facing the altar on, on the left-hand side, um, two or three back and I love to look then at the statues that frame, you know, the murals. And there's one of Jesus pointing to His Sacred Heart, and the first time, like, I really noticed that boy. I felt like He was pointing to His Heart, you know, to me and then after that I kept seeing images of the Sacred Heart and I googled, "What is the symbol of the Sacred Heart? What does that mean?" I don't think about it and then when I, I see the Sacred, I say, "Oh yeah, yeah, um, that, that's something there for, for, for me to reflect on."

PABLO: Thank you, um, that's that's wonderful! I, I hear a lot of people saying that they feel at home or that or we in fact feel at home at Xavier and you have contributed a lot, um, in making this place feel at home for a lot of people throughout the years.

ROSEANN: Oh I hope so, I try to!

PABLO: And more recently you've been working on making it, um, more welcoming for people racially diverse, right? So right now I know you're working on biblical readings on social justice. How did you get ready for those readings? How has it affected your, um, your relationships both inside and outside the church?

ROSEANN: And I do that with Michael Allocca, and he does the scripture part of it, and he's amazing at it. And then on my weeks that I do it, I bring in other source materials, you know, and Church teaching, um, maybe a video. But here's what happened. So I grew up on Long Island and it was, and I say this without judging people at all, but it was all white. I went to public school and K through 12, no, no black students. I didn't share classes with black students or, then, um, have any friends who were black until I got to college, you know, and growing up in that context I knew that it wasn't right. I felt very early on as I began my own education, began looking at things. Racism is a source of, maybe, all of the problematic issues in this country. Maybe everything can go back to that. I know that there is systemic racism in this country and a book that I read that had a big influence on me was Howard Zinn's book, um, People's History of the United States, or, People's History of America. Again, you're going to know my political affiliation, you might want to edit this out, but when Trump was running and then was elected, I said, "Oh, this is the, this hidden racism, this underbelly of racism coming to light, coming, people coming out from under. And so when their book discussion started here and it was going to be, the topic would be racism, um, reading various books on racism. I joined that. It was pre-pandemic. I joined that book group and read all those books, you know, Bryan Massingale's Racial Justice and the Catholic church and others, um, Robin D'angelo's White Fragility. You know, I learned a tremendous amount. I call on those when, um, racial justice, uh, scripture study and, and so on Sundays, you know, when we talk about the issue of racial justice, you know, and we talk, you know, we're a bunch of white people sitting around talking about racial justice. But I think there's a value in that. I think we have to, we have to look at our own prejudices, you know, on a, just a daily basis. Of course everyone needs to do that and then we just keep talking. We keep talking about it, uh, we keep learning, uh, we keep sharing thoughts and ideas and I feel that has value.

PABLO: It does indeed. This, uh, parish has made a great effort in, um, in welcoming people who are very diverse. Um, if I may, one last question?

ROSEANN: Sure!

PABLO: I am an avid reader and, uh, for me and the younger generations at Xavier. If you had to recommend a book...

ROSEANN: Okay...

PABLO: Which one would it be? Maybe one that changed your life, maybe one that you have read many times because you're passionate about.

ROSEANN: Something comes to mind and it was part of the you know pop culture at one time but it, I, I read it twice, and I hardly ever read a book twice unless I'm studying for a test, which I don't have anymore, but I would say The Shack, a book called The Shack.

PABLO: And why The Shack?

ROSEANN: Because it's about a man's journey to hearing God's voice after, uh, one of his kids is murdered.

PABLO: Thank you, Roseann. I will definitely get it soon for the holidays.

ROSEANN: Yeah yeah, Christmas reading.

PABLO: Probably. Thank you, thank you so much.

ROSEANN: Thank you, Pablo.

- **Outro music plays** -

A segment from the song "Here I Am, Lord" by composer Michael Ward as performed by the Choir of the Church of St. Francis Xavier plays again.

"Here I Am, Lord,
I come to do your will."

- **Michelle Jung reads outro text** -

The music you are hearing is provided by the Xavier Music Ministry. "From Age to Age" is produced by St. Francis Xavier Church in New York City.

This episode was recorded and edited by Cynthia Bastidas of Semillita Productions. A special thanks to the staff of St. Francis Xavier and Father Ken. Join us on our next episode.

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