

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

Ep. 3: Kathleen & Bill - "We're here to contribute"

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 –

BILL: Well, hello, my name is Bill. And I'm here with Kathleen and we're going to have a conversation about St. Francis Xavier. And it's really great to be here. I've been a parishioner for, on and off for, you know, 15 or more years and, um, and we've been in some meetings together with having had a one-on-one conversation. So, we're really excited to be having this conversation here with you today.

KATHLEEN: Yeah. Hi, Bill. This is really nice to have a chance to talk and be, to get to know each other. I've been a parishioner for almost 18 years.

BILL: That's great. That's wonderful. So grateful for your leadership. And if you've had such an impact on our parish, and so great to talk about your experiences here.

KATHLEEN: Oh, thank you so much, you, too!

BILL: Well, thanks. So I guess one of the first questions is, kind of, how did you find St. Francis Xavier? And, kind of, do you remember what it first felt like when you attended here?

KATHLEEN: Yeah. So, I moved to New York in 2002, and I was looking for a progressive and inclusive parish. I lived uptown. So, I began looking for churches near where I lived. And eventually, found my way down, down, down, to Chelsea. When I walked into this church, I just felt the warmth of the community. You know, for one of the first times in my churchgoing in New York, somebody said hello to me. They're very warm, welcoming. And the homily, it was different than what I've been used to. It's very challenging, very, um, focused on inclusion and social justice. And then, I looked at the bulletin, and found pages and pages of groups, activities – all kinds of cool things. So then I knew I was home.

BILL: Sounds like you knew right from the moment you walked in that you felt at home here. That's really beautiful.

KATHLEEN: Yeah. Pretty much! How about you?

BILL: It definitely felt like home for me when, when I was first here. But I always kind of felt like it didn't matter whether I was here or not. It seemed like such a big parish. And it wasn't until you know, only recent years that I realized how much of a need there was for people to take on leadership roles and get more involved. Um, so that was that was kind of much, very much of an evolution for me. You know, I've been all sort of all inspired by your leadership on Disability Justice work. And there have been a couple of meetings a couple years ago with Father Dan that, uh...

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: At around disability justice stuff,

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: and I've been so impressed with your kind of leadership of that work in such a powerful kind of prophetic voice within our community to call ourselves to our better angels in that regard.

KATHLEEN: Oh, thank you so much. One of the reasons why I feel so at home here at Xavier is because Xavier is so welcoming of all different sorts of people. Sometimes when I go to a church, people assume I'm there to be prayed for, to be healed, to be fixed in some way. And no, like, I am who I am, I have a permanent disability. It's never gonna change, and that's okay. And, well, I think Xavier does really well is includes people of a variety of backgrounds and abilities and, yeah, everything. To not only be let in the door, but to be involved in parish life.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: I remember, once at a church I volunteered to be a minister of hospitality.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: And basically, they were like, "Nah, we're good." So, I'm like, "What?" But here at Xavier, they do allow me and other people with different abilities to really be involved and to show our talents.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: And, I, we're not people who come to church to be healed, or to be prayed for, although that's always good [the prayer], but we're not here to get "fixed." We're here to contribute.

BILL: And I missed the last part of that, we're not here to be fixed but...

KATHLEEN: We're here to contribute. We're here to be involved.

BILL: Uh huh, to contribute, uh huh.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah.

BILL: Okay, great. Wonderful, that's beautiful.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah. How about you? Tell us more about what the Xavier Outings does.

BILL: Well, I think one of the things that we thought about when we were starting that was this parish is so great on social justice works and the Xavier Mission and, um, that so many of the people are leaders on environmental justice and Disability Justice and other things. And sometimes the work of our church is very heavy. Uh, and that there's a great quote about religion should "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." And so Xavier Outings was sort of started to kind of go out and do fun things together and sort of the, the fruit of our faith should be joy, and what ways can we connect people and go do fun things together.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: And celebrate the joy of our lives!

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: Especially many of us who spend a lot of time in our professional work or elsewhere, working for justice and can feel very kind of tired and burdened, and...

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah.

BILL: So, so that's, that's one of the things that feels a little light and kind of superficial at times.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: To sort of be focused on that.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, but I think it's really important. Because, if we get too focused on the heavy stuff,

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, we can get burned out. Or just frustrated.

BILL: Yeah.

KATHLEEN: Because change is very slow. And we need to enjoy our lives.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: as it is.

BILL: So, tell me more about time ministries you've been involved in over the years?

KATHLEEN: Sure. Well, I've been involved in disability ministries. So, one thing that we did many years ago was to help educate other ministers to welcome people with disabilities as equals in ministry. And, um, so that worked out pretty well, so we have people serve who have different abilities. Yup, we had a woman who used to be a lector, and she would read Braille from the pulpit. That was really cool.

BILL: Is it a process to get the Braille Bibles?

KATHLEEN: Quite the process, you wouldn't believe it!

BILL: Really?

KATHLEEN: With disability issues, sometimes it's so complicated to get, so we have to give it in at least a week or two notice. They can take a, a long time to make. Even a one page reading into Braille. And I think also, there aren't a whole lot of places who do that. We're lucky to have some, because we live in a big city, but even then, it's really slow, so it's annoying. But we got it done.

BILL: That's good!

KATHLEEN: We have readings.

BILL: That's great!

KATHLEEN: I've also been a Eucharistic Minister, Hospitality Minister, and for a while, I was a catechist for the children's program. About 8 years ago, I got a new job and moved to Westchester, and getting here at 8:30 on a Sunday was not, not really, did not really fit my life anymore. So, I really, I probably taught for five or six years, and it was really fun.

BILL: That's great!

KATHLEEN: I do miss it, but, like you said, it's time for new people...

BILL: Mm hmm

KATHLEEN: ...to get involved.

BILL: That's great! What ages did you teach?

KATHLEEN: Mostly I taught the little ones, so from ages four to like first grade, or, second grade, usually. I like them because they're still at the age where they wanna be here, they like teachers, yeah, like if you say, "Draw something," they'll be all set for like 20 minutes. They're like, when you're teaching, one year I taught fifth graders, and that was a whole different story. It's also fun, but, yeah, they want answers. They, there aren't a lot of answers in faith.

BILL: [laughs]

KATHLEEN: Enriching to my life to be around these kids and to hear what they, what they want to know.

BILL: That's awesome.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: Sounds like you've been involved in all sorts of ministries here.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: At the parish.

KATHLEEN: It's been, it's been, a lot of fun.

BILL: Yeah. Well, I guess I'd be curious to think about kind of what your experience is kind of during Mass and that kind of celebrations of Mass at Xavier on, kind of, ordinary Sundays and during big holidays like Easter or Christmas?

KATHLEEN: Oh, right.

BILL: Do things stand out for you particularly are things you have questions about of kind of our faith life here?

KATHLEEN: Most of the days, the holy days, I'm not here, I'm with my family.

BILL: Uh huh.

KATHLEEN: So I've never done a Christmas Mass. I've been to some Easter Vigils, and they're just amazing, with, yeah, singing, dancing, candles, and just very powerful stuff. It's really powerful to see other people really engaged in liturgy. I feel like maybe less so in other places you know people pay attention, people sing, sing with the choir. You know, my parents' church, in a rural town, nobody sings, except a cantor, and there's not much that goes on in the parish, other than, you know, Masses, and Family Faith, and weddings and funerals. I absolutely love our church. I think here, the liturgy is so rich and so, like, deliberate. It's obvious that people, you know, plan it very carefully.

BILL: And you said deliberate, was that the word you used?

KATHLEEN: Yeah. Yeah, even we have, um, I don't know if I can say this, like, non priests, you know, saying, voicing their thoughts, yeah, as a reflection or homily of sorts. Was it last week? Yeah, last Sunday, like, a week ago, was Mission Sunday. And Cassie Agredo, who is the Executive Director of the Xavier Mission, spoke from the pulpit about the Mission.

BILL: Um hmm.

KATHLEEN: And I felt like it's really nice to connect the, the real world to, to liturgy.

BILL: Um hmm.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: That's beautiful, yeah.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, I like it! How about you, what do you, like, what do you think of liturgy?

BILL: You know, I think what you said is so beautiful. I think the idea of kind of connecting the real world with the liturgy, and Cassandra and kind of her talking about Xavier Mission. so profound, you know, when we're upstairs and downstairs there,

people being fed and the kinds of programs that they run that run the gamut for kind of adult education.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: And the variety of programs that they're doing is, is pretty, um, remarkable. And then I think the lay people being able to feel that be involved in preaching and kind of sharing their reflections. And then the participation of the congregation, uh.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: that is pretty amazing. And even just the diversity, I think sometimes we struggle with being as inclusive as we could be. And, you know, I think, on some racial justice elements, we've, we've have a room where we could be and I think we're working on that.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah.

BILL: And then gender diversity, I think, is a big issue within the Church.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: But I think, but I think there is some attention to that in terms of, you know, who are the Eucharistic ministers, and you know, who's who's doing the readings, and that there is kind of a diversity of representation. Maybe we can, I was gonna say, maybe we can do better. I'm sure we can do better. I know we can do better.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah.

BILL: But, but it is good to see that we're doing better than maybe then. In some other places.

KATHLEEN: Right, yeah, yeah.

BILL: Um, so... yeah.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, I also like, I think it's during the past year, they added an American Sign Language Interpreter to Mass, so that's also cool.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: To see.

BILL: Yeah. To have sign language.

KATHLEEN: To see. Yeah.

BILL: That's amazing. Were you a part of having that, having that happen...

KATHLEEN: Amazingly, no!

BILL: ... was that part of the disability justice committee?

KATHLEEN: Amazingly no! I was so impressed. I thought, "Whoa, they did something without me begging them, yeah!" 'Cause usually I'm the one, or, like, there's a few of us, and we're the ones often saying, "Yeah, oh, we need this, can we have this?" and no, they just did it. So that was pretty cool!

BILL: That's great.

KATHLEEN: 'Cause like, sometimes, like, we got to know, leadership needs to change over time, and sometimes, particularly in the disability committee, we are pretty small. So it's good to see things happen that we didn't, like, beg for.

BILL: Uh huh.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah, so that's cool.

BILL: That's great.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: And you said, it's a small community. And I was also, I know, when we did this Stations of the Cross last year, I was looking at some of the data and there's a remarkably high number of people with disabilities, uh, not all of which are visible. I forget what the statistic is, do you know, do you recall?

KATHLEEN: Yeah, it's between one in five people or one of four people. Between 20-25% of people have a disability, whether it's physical, emotional, mental.

BILL: It's a remarkably high number. And I think, uh, the ways in which they're not, disabilities aren't always visible.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: And how meaningful the work of your ministry is for many people who may not even know you're, you know, touching and changing their lives.

KATHLEEN: Oh, thanks.

BILL: It's pretty powerful.

KATHLEEN: It's pretty cool, thanks.

BILL: And it's I think it's a real kind of education. And I know there's a lot of resistance within the Church, within any community, I think, to be, kind of, fully inclusive.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: and I can imagine that's been frustrating at times. How do you deal with the, kind of, frustration of, kind of having to keep pushing on that?

KATHLEEN: Yeah, I think it helps to have friends, who are, like, involved, who are bringing people together, we can do that.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: And also, I think it helps that, um, yeah, different people take on different roles, at different times.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: So, like, if I'm exhausted, someone else can do it for a while.

BILL: Mm hmm.

KATHLEEN: It is exhausting to ask for stuff. Yeah, I think just sharing the load helps a lot.

BILL: Sharing the load helps a lot. Yeah, I think that's true. Yeah. You have such a positive attitude, such a joyful attitude.

KATHLEEN: Oh, thanks!

BILL: Even though you've worked so hard and face some of those frustrations for...

KATHLEEN: Ah, thanks!

BILL: For a number of years. I think...

KATHLEEN: Even growing up, yeah, I had to fight for stuff, even though, my parents did when I was too young to fight for myself. And then, I had to learn how to ask for what I need.

BILL: Mm hmm.

And it's not always well received.

BILL: It's not always well received?

KATHLEEN: Yeah, eventually, I either help out, or just move on, yeah.

BILL: Do you feel like our parish has kind of grown and evolved your time here?

KATHLEEN: Oh, oh for sure. Yeah, I feel there's been a lot of shift from, it was always, there were always lay people involved, but in the last several years, maybe, I think, because of the shortage and the changeover of priests, the lay leadership has gotten even stronger.

BILL: I think what you said about kind of community and sort of...

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: Taking turns and when one person's tired, somebody else can...

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: Pick up the charge...

KATHLEEN: Totally.

BILL: Supporting each other.

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: And I guess I'm one of the things I was curious about in terms of some of the friendships and community you've developed here, kind of how did that come about? And how does that kind of impact your life?

KATHLEEN: Um I feel like I've known, met most people outside of Mass. Mass isn't really like a social event, but like getting involved in ministries, even going to events, when I'm not involved, just going to them, you meet people. And when you go to meetings, you also meet people, who are also interested in whatever issues that group takes on. That makes it easy to make friends. How about you?

BILL: Yeah, I think with the kind of Xavier Outings, activities, and we've tried to do a lot of activities across different ministries. And so, like, with the family faith program, and some folks who, you know, kids and families and, you know, tried to reach out to different ministries within the parish to try and bring people together that don't always, you know, the different community at the 930 Mass versus the Sunday five o'clock, and...

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: and those folks may never see each other if we didn't try and plan some things out outside of mass to...

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah.

BILL: Try to connect people. And to me, it really is, you know, an extension of my family and the kind of relationships I've built and...

KATHLEEN: Yeah.

BILL: And people that care about and support me and I try and support them as it becomes a profound part of what the experience is here.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, yeah, I agree.

BILL: So and then people like you who I think, um, you know, have been just so profound leaders in this parish.

KATHLEEN: Aw, thanks!

BILL: and I feel like I've known you and admired you for a long time, but it's been such a pleasure to get to sit down and have a conversation one on one with you today.

KATHLEEN: You, too! I've seen you on Zoom, God knows how many times in the last two years. Yes, it is really good to see you in person and talk to you and reflect on how much you also do in this parish.

BILL: Thanks so much. Great to be with you in person and not on Zoom.

KATHLEEN: I know, yeah!

BILL: And look forward to lots of things ahead.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, thank you!

- **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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