

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

Ep. 4: Nadine & Alan - "Xavier is a place that feeds me, supports my vocation and challenges it."

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 –

ALAN: Good afternoon everyone. My name is Alan. I'm happy to be here today with Sr. Nadine, a long time parishioner here at Saint Francis Xavier. We are in the parlor room, just outside the church above the 15th Street entrance on a beautiful autumn day. Welcome, Sister Nadine.

SR. NADINE: It's good to be here with you, Alan.

ALAN: It's good to be here with you too. I wanted to first ask you, how do you typically introduce yourself to other people?

SR. NADINE: Um, it depends. My general formal introduction is Sister Nadine, but with people that I know it's Nadine, and at Xavier pretty much I'm known as Nadine.

ALAN: Wonderful, and how long have you been a Sister?

SR. NADINE: A long long time! Entered the convent in 1956.

ALAN: What was your, um, experience growing up with faith in your family life, in your early life?

SR. NADINE: My family was very fervently Catholic. My dad went to Mass every day before work. We said the family rosary every night together. It was blessing before and after meals. Faith was just a very important part of, of my growing up.

ALAN: And were you educated in a parochial school system, or...?

SR. NADINE: Yeah I went to Our Lady of Good Counsel and, um, St. John Nepomucene, then, a Catholic girls high school and, um, Catholic college.

ALAN: So, you grew up here in and around New York City?

SR. NADINE: Uh, yeah. I grew up in Yorkville. I'm a native New Yorker. My community's in Joliet, Illinois, but I'm a native New Yorker.

ALAN: And what drew you to the religious life?

SR. NADINE: Um, there was a sense of a call that I could not get away from. When I graduated from high school, I thought I had been around the nuns too much and decided I was going to start at Hunter College and just get away from this all and see if the call persisted. I loved my semester at Hunter. I never enjoyed school so much as I did that semester, but I also realized that I needed to find out whether this thing was real or not. So I needed to enter and find out, "Is this my call?" Or, don't want to spend the rest of my life thinking maybe I missed it. So...

ALAN: And the order that you chose to join was the Sisters of Saint Francis?

SR. NADINE: Well, that's a long story. I joined the Sisters that taught me in grade school. The Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Uh, they had a grade school up on 66th Street and First Avenue, and I also went to their high school in Danville, Pennsylvania after I was professed, and, um, started teaching. I was sent out to teach math at a new high school that had been started out in Gary, Indiana.

ALAN: Wow!

SR. NADINE: And was out there for 10 years. That was during the time of Vatican II and all kinds of stuff was happening in the Church. In the midwest, there was lots of firmament and we were into it and it was exciting! The community is in Eastern Pennsylvania, surrounded by mountains, and the culture of that place was - anything outside the mountains doesn't exist. And so, I felt more and more like an Oreo cookie. I was wearing their habit, putting their initials after my name on the outside, but not

espousing any of their values, and so started spiritual direction. Made a direct retreat, realized, I had, what I realized, the first question was, "Do I want to be a religious?" And I realized that was the wrong question. The question is, "Do I want to be who I am?" And at the core of who I am is a religious woman. And the second question is, "Okay, how do I live this out in a way that's integral with, with who I am?" And with a lot of help and some searching around, found my home with the Joliet Franciscans, and definitely discovered I have a Franciscan heart.

ALAN: And when you were teaching out in Gary like how did you first come about with the Sisters of Saint Francis how did you what was your first interaction with them?

SR. NADINE: Actually, my first interaction was through my spiritual director who's on the formation team of the Capuchins, and knew lots of formation teams in the area, and told me about the Sisters of Saint Francis. And so I wrote them a letter and said, "Can we talk about this?"

ALAN: When you mentioned Gary, Indiana during the times of Vatican II. That was one of my bonus questions was, like, where, where were you during Vatican II, and what did that feel like, living through that?

SR. NADINE: Oh, exciting, exciting! That was a good time we're just like, "Yes, yes, yes! This is, this is real. This is what the Church is called to be!"

ALAN: And so, what is your story of coming to Xavier? How did you come back or come here?

SR. NADINE: Uh, kind of a long story.

ALAN: Which is, we have time for that.

SR. NADINE: In 1989, June of 1989, I had talked to my community about taking a position as a pastoral associate here in New York City. My dad had died. My mom was getting older. Needed some support around the edges, and so I took this position at what was advertised to be a fairly avant-garde parish. Um, the reality did not live up to the advertising. It was not a good fit, and by Thanksgiving I had cut bait, and I was, "Okay God, now what?" I mean, I just don't fit in most of the churches here in the city. I could go back to high school teaching but, mmmm, I don't really want to. So you know, I need to hang around for mom. "What, what are you saying? What are you doing?" Um, I happened to be talking the previous summer. I was making retreat up at Gloucester and was talking to two Jesuit, um, scholastics, and they said, "You know, if you're in the city, why don't you try Xavier? That might be a place where you're comfortable." So, um, on Sunday morning - it was the Sunday after Epiphany. I remember it very very vividly. I said, "What do I have to lose? Let me go over to Xavier and see what things are like." And so I came over, walked into church, sat in the back, like on the side, way in the back. Uh, the church was dark. It was gloomy. It was cold. There were a couple of people up front, but I was there. What I noticed from the

beginning was, even though there were only a couple of people up front, they really participated. Mike Donahue was the presider, and it was the Sunday after Epiphany. The Gospel was the wedding feast at Cana, and he talked about they have no more wine, and really expounded on our own experience of when we've run out of wine when we have no more energy, no more time, no more. And I thought, "This place speaks to me. I could hang out here!" And so I came back the next Sunday, and moved a little bit further up front. And by the third Sunday, I figured out that Mary Galeone was the pastoral associate, and said, "You know, I think I want to sign up for the parish and I don't want to freeload, so what can I do?" Um the parish was doing, planning, a Lenten retreat where we met in small groups here in church on Wednesday evening and so I was assigned to lead a small group with Tim O'Connell. I remember that Mike Allocca senior and, ah, Tom Harris-Jacobs were in my group and it was just a wonderful wonderful experience. I started meeting people, started getting involved in the parish, and it went on from there. I was hooked.

ALAN: So this is the depth of winter 1989, and you'd only been to three weekends, and then you were already, you know, getting knee deep in the work here. It's amazing. It's wonderful.

SR. NADINE: I just knew it felt right.

ALAN: And you've been here ever since.

SR. NADINE: Yes!

ALAN: In your vocation as a Sister, what sort of various ministries have you been involved with?

SR. NADINE: Over the course, I've taught high school math, been a college campus minister, and also taught math. Occasionally, I'd pick up a course if they had it left over, a math course on the college campus. I was a pastoral associate. I worked at, um, Wyckoff Hospital in Brooklyn for nine years as a director of patient advocacy, did a CPE training at New York Methodist in Brooklyn, and then did chaplaincy and director of pastoral care at Cabrini nursing home, Terence Cardinal Cooke, and most recently, until I retired, at Mount Sinai. There I was the oncology and bone marrow transplant chaplain.

ALAN: Wow, you mentioned that you're retired. I have a feeling that doesn't mean you're not doing anything.

SR. NADINE: Well, actually, when I first retired, I, uh. found out I had accumulated a horrendous sleep debt because I was working, and at that point had been taking care of Marge Zwanziger around the edges, and also Kathy Mulvaney, and as Kathy deteriorated, she needed more and more of my attention. So the first couple of months of my retirement, I just slept and slept and slept. I mean, I didn't do a whole lot. After

that, COVID hit, and that sort of put a wrench in my plans. but I'm getting ready to get up and running again.

ALAN: I wanted to ask how has parish life here had Xavier influenced your vocation as a Sister, or vice versa, how has your vocation influenced your time here at Xavier?

SR. NADINE: That's a good question. I find that Xavier is a place that feeds me. It supports my vocation and it also challenges it. When I was thinking about this, I was thinking about the fact that one of the things about religious life is that it is a prophetic stance. It's not within the hierarchical church, and that's one of the things about Xavier that I'm very much drawn to - the prophetic stance that Xavier has taken on any number of issues, you know, from way back when, when the soup kitchen first started and the people on 15th Street were protesting the people lined up there, to, um, our stance now on racial justice. And Xavier has always been on the cutting edge of where's the prophecy in the church. My spirituality is not Ignatian, it's definitely Franciscan, and so I play a little bit with some of the spirituality that I hear here, but it's an adjustment that I can make.

ALAN: You can toggle back and forth between the way of Ignatius and Saint Francis.

SR. NADINE: And I can use it to my advantage. Uh, one of the things, um, one of my stories is, when I first came here I really missed the celebration of the feast of Saint Francis, which our congregation had back in Joliet Illinois, and had talked to Mike Donohue about, could we do a blessing of animals? And he was like, "No, no, no, no, oh no way!" Well, then one day he happened to give a homily about seeing God in all things, and so I went back into the sacristy and said, "Um, Mike, you know that homily you just gave? Do you believe that operationally or just intellectually?" Being the bright man that he was, he knew where I was heading so he said "I have no problem with blessing animals, I just don't want them in church!" And I said, "No problem, we've got those beautiful front steps! There's no better place to bless animals!" And he said, "Go with my blessing!" The first couple of years, I did it by myself, with a team that I had pulled together. Uh, then it sort of picked up in the parish, and the priests decided they'd like to be part of it. So, I got a priest as part of the team, and have had that ever since. Also, recently, the animals have come in church. We process down the main aisle up to the altar, and the animals get an individual blessing. So, um, Xavier has softened.

ALAN: The tradition continues today, wonderfully. Over the years here at Xavier, we've lost a lot of people. Who do you miss?

SR. NADINE: Um, Kathy Mulvaney, John Bucki, Marge Zwanziger, Paddy Loughlin, Judd Phalen, uh, most recently, Rose Allocca.

ALAN: I've only been here at the parish for 18 years, but I know you know from experiences with you and others - the parish that we have today is because of people like you, and so many of you during decades that have built up our church and our parish life here. And I'm so grateful for that. Saint Francis had that call from God to

rebuild the church. How do you feel you continue to do that, or how do you think we can continue to do that here within Xavier and in our larger Church?

SR. NADINE: I was sort of thinking about what you said before your question, um, and how at one point I was at the center of the action here at Xavier. And I was a liturgical minister, I was on the spirituality committee, we did praying in the new year, we did the communal worship service, the communal dependent services, um, the blessing of animals came out of that. Then I was on the liturgy committee. I used to help out at the Welcome Table, not as a regular, but if they needed help, I'd go down and help out. I'm part of The Women Who Stayed. Currently, I'm working with a group of women to try to make the God language in the lectionary more inclusive, but it might, my senses, I sat with this last night, was I used to be at the center of all the action and now I'm sort of out of the periphery. And others have taken, over and that's okay, and I will do what I can from the edges. And, um, your image of rebuild my church was, yeah, that's what's happened here. We've, we've built a church, we've built a church community, and thank you for that image.

ALAN: Do you have any favorite moments from Xavier that just are sort of touchstones for you in your memory that you hold on to?

SR. NADINE: I've got two. One is a funny one. Back in the early days of Xavier, we were poor as church mice, and the roof was very bad, and we had no money to fix it. And so when it rained, it leaked into church. And so, every Sunday morning before nine o'clock Mass, John Bucki would come out with pickle barrels from the empty picket buckets from the Welcome Table, and put the buckets where the leaks were falling, so that when you went to Communion, you sort of sashayed your way around all the empty pickle buckets. Um, and I sit in this beautiful church right now and say, "Wow," you know? The other was, uh, as my mom was deteriorating and she could no longer independently get to church, and so I said, "I'm gonna, how about coming to church with me? I'll bring you in the wheelchair." John Bucki had been my spiritual director, so he knew about my mom, and I brought her over to church, parked her over by that pillar on the right side, and went in the back because I was a liturgical minister, and found out after Mass, my mother said to me, "I've been going to my parish for 20 some years. The priest doesn't know my name. I come here the first time, and the priest comes out and says, 'Hello, Catherine!' and gives me a kiss. I've never been kissed by a priest before!" And that was just so, so Xavier.

ALAN: What would you say to young people who may have or may not have been raised in the Catholic Church, but come into Xavier or have questions? You know, why should I stay here? What would you say to them?

SR. NADINE: Come check it out. I think there's something here that's, that's worth your while. I, I have a sense in many and especially young adults, uh, a thirst for spirituality that I think we offer, I think we offer the social justice component too which, get me on my bandwagon, I really believe that most of the parishes are very very republican in their political stance and this is not the stance of where young people are, their, their

ethics, their their morals are are very different and so they just don't feel like they fit there. Try Xavier, you might fit here.

ALAN: Is it safe to say you found a home, a spiritual home here?

SR. NADINE: I sure did.

ALAN: you mentioned a lot of the ministries that you've been involved with here at Xavier which ones spoke to you most to your heart?

SR. NADINE: I think probably lecturing. The other was, and this was back, way way back, it may have been Mike Donahue, John Bucki, yet over the summer we used to have communion services at 7:45 and was it 5:15 or whatever that mass was that no longer exists, in leading the Communion services and also training the people that were going to lead the Community services was for me just, just so life-giving,

ALAN: What are your hopes and dreams for Xavier and our Church?

SR. NADINE: I hope that we can continue to deepen in Jesus and in spirituality, continue to support each other as we do, and continue to outreach to the needs as they evolve out there. That it continue to grow and expand and be blessed by the spirit.

ALAN: Any last words that you feel people should know about Xavier or your time here at Xavier?

SR. NADINE: The, um, preparation we're given, the last question was what three words would you use to describe Xavier and I thought about that long and hard, and went through a couple. But the one that I finally came up with and I'm with this is: Body of Christ, I see us as being the Body of Christ - wounded, fragile, weak, but reaching out in compassion to those around us and connecting with Abba, source of all full grace.

ALAN: Thank you so much, Sister Nadine.

SR NADINE: You're welcome.

SR. NADINE: It's great to be here with you today. It challenged me. You took me places I didn't think we were going to go.

ALAN: You've been places that I haven't been. You've laid the foundation for such a wonderful place and I'm grateful for that. Thank you.

SR. NADINE: Thank you, thank you for doing this.

- **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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