

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

Ep. 5: Maria, Joan & Tess - "They want to worship. Where do you want them to go?"

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 –

TESS: I'm here with Joan and Maria this morning in the parlor room at Saint Francis Xavier. And it's been a while since we've seen each other, so it's really nice to be here with you today.

JOAN: Good to see you.

TESS: Yeah, it's great to see both of you. This is the first time that we're doing these conversations for the Oral History Project. What was your reaction when we reached out to you?

JOAN: Well, I thought it was wonderful doing an oral history, really. And um, I mean since we've been around for such a long time, ‘Yeah okay, it's all right with me.’ Right?

MARIA: Yes, of course.

TESS: How did you find, uh, Francis Xavier? Um, you know, back then, what was it like when you first came to mass or came to the building?

MARIA: Well, it uh, we were coming sporadically to the Dignity mass in the evenings and Saturday evenings. And uh, we have two very good friends very old friends of mine, Ann Sheridan and Frank. And uh, we went with them one day, and they said, 'Come, we're gonna show you our church. I think you're gonna like this church. I think you're gonna be very happy to come here like we are.'

TESS: An introduction from friends.

JOAN: Yeah, yeah.

TESS: That was before the restoration, right? What did it look like in here?

MARIA: Oh yeah, way before the restoration.

JOAN: When was it 1994, '93?

MARIA: We really don't remember the exact day.

JOAN: I remember the evening we came. We came on Christmas Eve. Let's try it, you know, kind of thing. So we went and Anora Nicholson was her name?

MARIA: Yes.

JOAN: We were coming in and she said, and we were looking, it was very crowded, and she said, 'No, no, no, no, come up front.' So we were actually right opposite the altar. And I hadn't been opposite an altar in a long time. So I said 'This is, you know, it was very nice.' But as the mass went on, uh, the three of us were there, and I remember crying, uh, you know. Because I hadn't been, and I hadn't been welcomed in a long time, that's the other thing. You know, I mean, it was, it wasn't an official welcoming but it was a very spontaneous kind of thing. Do you remember Maria?

MARIA: Yes, Anora was a very spontaneous person, and very welcoming, and very loved here at Xavier at that time.

TESS: When was the last time that you, uh, were in a church or, uh, at Christmas Eve mass?

JOAN: Oh gosh, they were, I don't remember, do you?

MARIA: Well, we used to go sometimes, like we have gone at St. Vincent's church up in the East Side, sometimes for Christmas with my brother.

JOAN: We kept, um, we always kept in touch with the church somehow. We belonged to other lesbian groups and they were all Catholic usually, and we had some prayer meetings. But we actually wanted to, I think, wanted to really come back and to be part of the church. That's the way I feel about it. Right?

MARIA: Yes.

TESS: It makes a real difference to feel that welcome, and to feel that welcome from, uh, people who become friends and community members. What got you to stay at Xavier? You had that initial welcome, but you're still here now, so something got you to stick around.

MARIA: Yeah, well, we joined the, at that time, the gay and lesbian group and, um, Joan became, she got involved with the Lay Spirits for seven, 17 hard months for me. And you know, we also found some community. We found people that were very like us, similar to us in different ways, in a lot of ways, in spiritually and every other way and we found a lot of commonality, we found, we found a community.

JOAN: Yes, that was the important part. We belonged. We began gradually to belong. And I did join, uh, Lay Spirits but that was, um, in 1997. It was 18 months. It was a program then. It's not that long now. So, uh, but it was a wonderful experience because there were, I think, there was about 10 people in the group, and we used, we stayed together pretty much. And, um, we met once a week, right? You remember? And, um, and then we went away for a retreat, and then we went to, um, what was the name?

MARIA: A week-long retreat at Linwood.

JOAN: Linwood, we went to Linwood. The experience was wonderful because at Linwood I met Ned Coughlin, who later became the pastor here.

MARIA: And who was your spiritual director at that retreat that you had for a week, a silent retreat.

JOAN: Right, right. And, um, that was a wonderful experience. He was, he was such a wonderful man, he was such a wonderful priest, and very, um, very easy. The spirituality that he had, uh was, you know, 'Oh don't worry. God loves you. What are you worried about?' You know, kind of thing. So it was a very wonderful experience. Now Marie didn't go. I wish she had joined the group, but she didn't at that time, so it was just my experience.

TESS: What inspired you to get involved with Lay Spirits, especially was causing some friction at home?

JOAN: I, you know, I'm not really sure. I think it came up and I said, 'Why don't we join?' And Maria didn't feel like joining at that time. She's not into that. So, um, I said, 'Well, I'm gonna go.' And we met, what did we meet, once a month, or once a week?

MARIA: You met once a week with your group.

JOAN: Yeah, and it was men and women, so it was, um, it was very interesting, very, very vast difference. The experiences of the people were very different. And then after that year we, that summer, we had to go to a retreat at Linwood and that was a whole 10 days I think. So that was, that was fun. That was very nice to be there, you know.

MARIA: That's when you met Nanette.

JOAN: That's when I met Ned, yeah.

MARIA: Before he became a pastor here.

JOAN: And I remember joining with, uh, one of the members and we played tennis, but very silently because we were supposed to be on a silent retreat. So it was, you know, it was just joyous, in a way, you know, freeing, very freeing.

TESS: It's, uh, funny you say that because I feel like that's the words I associate with Xavier, joyous and freeing.

JOAN: Yeah.

TESS: And it sounds like that's been part of your experience also.

JOAN: Yes, yes. I feel like the Spirit moves here, you know. You move from one thing to the other. That's, you know, you might...

MARIA: And you did Joan. You participated in the ESL, way back, because that was terminated somehow.

JOAN: Yeah;

MARIA: Then you became involved in mentoring the homeless, and you did that for a few years in the evening once, once a week I think it was.

JOAN: And that was interesting too. Xavier offered a lot to really get you involved and the spirituality wasn't overwhelming, it wasn't, oh, blessing yourself all the time, but it was participation in things, and being with other people and sharing other things. So that's why, um, I guess we stayed. We stayed, seems like forever, but it is really worth it. And that's how we felt about Xavier. And Ned, he was here for nine years, I think.

MARIA: When Ned came he was very happy to see you because he knew you from the, um...

JOAN: Yeah, we knew each other.

MARIA: So he was, he was very happy, and it was a wonderful, um, he was a wonderful pastor. He was incredible, uh, for particularly, for the gay and lesbian community. Uh, Ned Coughlin was a very, very, very, he was a tremendous preacher. He was so smart and things flew, he never had a little paper or anything. And things flew out of his head, in the heart, of course, in such a way it was unbelievable. I said, 'Oh my God, Ned why don't you put a book out? Why don't you write down?' No he didn't. But it was, he was just such a smart person, such a brave person. It was a wonderful experience being with him for all those years, yes.

TESS: Does any story stand out about something Ned said, or an experience you had here?

JOAN: I remember one time, remember in the beginning? He was called down to the head Jesuit place. And they wanted to know, you know, what is this lesbian and gay thing?

MARIA: I think it was the Chancery with the, uh, Cardinal

JOAN: Oh, the Cardinal too, yeah. Okay so he, you know, he was called down, because he was very, very supportive, very, you know. 'Yes we're all involved, get involved, yes, yes.' And he said to them, and we know he said this because he told all of us. He said, 'Where do you want them to go and worship?'

MARIA: They ask him, 'What do they want?' He said to them, 'They want to worship. What do you want them to do? Where do you want them to go?'

JOAN: So he, um, that was it. He never had any problem with that again. I mean he...

MARIA: He stood his ground all the time with the Cardinal, and all the hierarchies, the higher ups.

TESS: I know so much as, um, so much has changed. And so much has stayed the same in the church over the years. Do you feel like that at Xavier as well? Do you feel like things have changed over the years?

MARIA: Well, I'll say life changes, but we had wonderful priests after that. We had Joe Costantino, who we are friends with. And I was thrilled to go to Cuba with him in a pilgrimage. And we had Joe Marina, who was another as another friend. They are both cherished by us. And we have a little trouble on and off with the banner, and going to the March. And don't march with the banner and the whole thing and, you know. And there was a time when we, uh, as inspiration from Paula, a cutie, we marched with the banner, uh, reversed. And that was a hit.

JOAN: Yeah.

MARIA: That was a hit.

TESS: What was the objection to the banner?

MARIA: The objection was the, um, Father Constantino had received a note from the Cardinal and then Bishop, I guess, uh, Dolan saying that he didn't want to have the name of the church out in the March. That was the objection, so he was very concerned, very upset about it, and we had meetings upon meetings, and anyway we did that. And it was, uh, it was a good thing. We did it, we did it very well.

JOAN: We marched but with it backwards.

MARIA: They said the microphones at the march that, 'There is Xavier, they cannot say their name, but I do say their name, St. Francis Xavier.'

TESS: Yeah, it's been a long time that Xavier has had a presence in the March, uh, the Pride March. Maybe back to the, back into the 90's, do you think? Do you remember the first one?

JOAN: The first one?

MARIA: Oh, I guess, I guess the first one was when Ned was here. I don't know.

JOAN: I don't remember either. It was funny that's one thing I remember, when we marched we didn't always march the same route, but we came down, um...

MARIA: Saint Christopher Street, around Christopher Street.

JOAN: Yeah, yeah, and the kids, you know, 'Here come the nuns.' And, you know, poor nuns, I guess they. But they weren't nuns, they were us.

MARIA: But it was us with gray hair, etcetera...

JOAN: Well we didn't have gray hair then... Um, you know, so it was very, it was, it was funny. Here come the nuns. But anyway...

MARIA: But we had this, um, kind of discrepancies with, uh, Father Joe Constantino but we love him anyway, he's our friend. And so is Father Joe Marina, who also had a little problem at the beginning.

He said, 'But you know, I don't like these other people, and this and that, and you know. What do they have to do this? What do they have to do that?' So some of the men explained to him that situations and about that, we would not discriminate anyone, no

matter what, at the March. And so Father Marina understood and we continued marching. And way back with Father Ned Coughlin, there were a few priests who marched with us including himself. They join us right here, at the corner here, in the 5th Avenue.

TESS: Maria, I know you just mentioned earlier as well that you went on pilgrimage to Cuba with Joe Constantino. I don't know if you wanted to share why that was so meaningful for you.

MARIA: Well I was born in Cuba, quite a long time ago. And I have Father Constantino told me he was going to Cuba when he was in a sabbatical year.

And I said, 'Wow, where?' He said, 'Well, uh, there is a person, Angie Cruz who is going to take a pilgrimage.' So I said to Joan, 'Joan, I think we're gonna go.' I would, I decided not to visit my house, not to visit familiar things, I didn't want to have a lot of pain. But it was a pilgrimage and I did some, some of my relatives came to see me at the hotel. And, uh, it was, it was a great thing to have done.

TESS: That really sounds like a blessing.

JOAN: Yeah, it was. It was very interesting too, particularly for me, but it was a happy, a mixed bag for Maria, you know. It was both nice and sad too.

TESS: That's making me think of as well, um, both of you are Catholic but kind of coming from different backgrounds as well, like, how has it been, like, sharing that over the years, Cuban, Irish, learning about each other?

JOAN: Well I learned, I even took classes in Spanish. I felt obligated to do that, but of course her family was Spanish speaking. And I felt, 'Well if I'm going to fit in here,' I mean, I didn't know. But, um, I said, 'Well I'll take it.' So what was that program at the diocese?

MARIA: I taught, um, at a program that the diocese had for priests and sisters and social workers. And I taught in that program for 10 years, so did my brother. And this is where I met Frank Sheridan who was, who had been a brother, who was a brother then. And Ann who was a nun, and I became very close friends of theirs. And throughout the years they had, Frank is deceased, but Ann is still our friend, then we keep in touch with her and.. But we also have to mention that Joan participated in a lot of other activities at the church. Joan?

JOAN: I did, yes. (laughter)

MARIA: She was, she has been a eucharistic minister.

JOAN: I taught ESL. What else did I do?

MARIA: She was, uh, part of the, oh, she was in the Council, in the Parish Council also. When we were having the discussion about the banner, she was a member of the Parish Council, and it wasn't a great situation for her actually.

JOAN: Yeah, so I didn't stay long in the, I actually left the Council, but that was all right.

MARIA: Because of that you left the Council. Because there was a, you know.

JOAN: Anyway, what else? You know, I just found that there was a place to, I was a teacher, school psychologist and all the programs fitted into what was my life. I did that mentoring program with the men and some women. And that was, that was an interesting program. I learned a lot about their lives, it added to mine as well as, uh, I hope helped them. Um, but it was a support, it was a support group.

TESS: Does any, uh, story stand out from that time, or anything particular you remember?

JOAN: Well, there was a woman, uh, I encouraged her, you know, to come, you know, and she came to mass which was a big, big thing. And she couldn't believe it. She was around and they had those banners, they marched with the banners up in the church. So she was so thrilled, she was so happy she said, 'Oh, this is wonderful, this is a wonderful experience.' Now I don't know what happened to that lady whether she ever, you know, came back but she was, you know, she was really impressed with Xavier, and she loved the idea that we invited her, you know, that she was welcome in the church.

MARIA: So before we forget, I want, I don't want to forget that Joan has been part, was part of the retreat team that we, that we had every, yearly we had a retreat, um, for gay and lesbians and Joan was part of the team that prepared and, uh, did the retreat for so many years.

JOAN: Ned was, we started well, it was going on before but it was with the women too. And he was, uh, he was helping us with the retreat so that's, you know, how I was comfortable to be part of it. I mean I have no other training other than my skill you know as a teacher, but anyway we had a good time with that and, um, I stayed up for quite a while. Got kind of tired of it after a while. I got old. I think that was it.

TESS: I'm on the retreat team now, so yeah, um, I guess I took up your spot. What was it like to start organizing it, what was your experience?

JOAN: Well, it actually, the men actually had a retreat, I think, so when the women came together it was, you know, a little bit of a struggle. But that wasn't too bad, we went to Esopus.

MARIA: Yes, it was the Redemptorist seminary. I forgot the name exactly

JOAN: Saint Alphonsus.

MARIA: Saint Alphonsus, yes.

JOAN: And it was a beautiful place to be, but it was really a seminary, so it was rather school-like. But anyway, we had very good retreats there, and then we moved to Linwood and, um, it was very homey. After a while, you know, we integrated the team so, um.

MARIA: And then, and then we are having in the last couple of years, because of COVID, we're having virtual retreats, so we never stop that. And they are wonderful, they are prepared. We used to have every now and then a priest the kind of leading the group, and also nuns have been and other people, but then other times there was only the team, and right now it's only the team, the lay people who are the ones that put all of it together and do a wonderful job.

TESS: I know it's the pandemic now, so we have been doing all these virtual things, but before, what was your typical Sunday at Xavier?

MARIA: Well we came, we came to church all the time at 11:30. Then we got, then we went to eat breakfast with our closest friends. And right now the, our closest friends are all men and women people from Xavier. They are really our closest friends, our community. And a lot of these people are in the same situation, they have become friends with the community at Xavier. And uh we're, we're very supportive, it's a very supportive community.

JOAN: Yeah, we keep together.

TESS: That's a very tight-knit group here, I think. What do you think is important for, you know, the coming generations to know about Xavier? What do you want them to remember?

JOAN: What I like is the community. What was wonderful is that straight and gay and lesbian can be here and participate in different things, but we are, um, everybody is friendly. I really have not seen anybody running from us because we happen to be lesbians and, um, we work together with other people, straight and gay and, and it, you know, it just, that's what I think the church is supposed to be. I don't think it's meant to be different parts, you know. And we had a feeling, it was, it was I think it helps that the priests that we hear, you know, Ned particularly, it was welcome. Everybody was welcome. And that caught on. And even, you know, all the rest of them too, but I think it's that we can work side by side and have the same purpose and I think that's what makes Xavier very great.

MARIA: And it's also a place where people feel they can contribute to the world in general, causes, important causes. And as even climate, there is somebody here, Nancy, who is very much involved in those kinds of things and, uh, you know, so there

are all kinds of causes and all kinds of, you know, justice groups and all kinds of people that we help and, uh, that feel included. Very many missions, and very many purposes.

TESS: Thank you so much, it was really great to just, you know, hear more about your experiences and, you know, I think some stories are I already knew, but great to get it like more deeply. I just, I really appreciate your time contributing to Xavier and also talking with you today.

MARIA: Joan and I have been together for 51 years now.

TESS: Wow!

MARIA: And we love, we love each other more and more every day.

TESS: Okay, last question then, advice for being together for 51 years.

MARIA: Create interests, common interests that you can participate together. Such as us with art and reading, we love, we love to read together, participating in theater, participating in interesting things. That's my advice.

JOAN: She's right, that's it.

TESS: Wonderful! Thank you so much.

MARIA: You're welcome.

JOAN: Thank you very much.

MARIA: Thank you very much for this opportunity.

- 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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