

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

### **Ep. 6: Paula, Roe & Brandon - "This is what we were baptized into"**

#### **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 –**

BRANDON: Sounds good. Well, welcome to Tuesday morning at Xavier. Roe and Paula, so nice to have you here. So just to warm up, um, we'll get a conversation going here. This is our inaugural year of these recorded conversations. So wonderful to have you two with us this morning. How did it feel when the Oral History Ministry reached out to you? What was your initial impression?

ROE: I was touched, I, you know, even though we're here about 20 years I still feel like a newbie. So I thought they may have wanted, you know, history and I'm like, ‘Well, why are you coming to me? I'm new to Xavier.’ But I'm not. But I was, I was flattered actually.

BRANDON: And Paula?

PAULA: I mean, I love the idea of it and, um, there is so much history here and it's so different throughout long before we were here. I mean the history was even bigger, let's say, so I think it's great. I think this is a great thing.

BRANDON: So you both joined the parish about 20 years ago?

ROE & PAULA: In 2000.

BRANDON: 2000, okay. And how did you find Xavier?

PAULA: You want me to tell the story?

ROE: I can start. (laughter) I'll start. We, um, we have a friend who, um, who was coming to Xavier, who we met at a wedding somewhere, right? And we weren't going to church at that point, you know, we gave up on it and, um, her name was Barbara. And she was telling us about Xavier and was going on and on about how great it was, and how inclusive it was, and we really have to try it. So we said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' And, um, we didn't come for a long time after we met her.

PAULA: I have to just, that was in September when we met her and her husband at a wedding. And every Sunday they came from Jersey to Xavier. Every Sunday we would get an email saying, 'I didn't see you at church today.' Keep in mind that was in September. Go ahead.

ROE: So then it was, um, and we would just, you know, be going along with it sort of. And so finally we decided that through her persistence that we would try Xavier, and sort of just to say to her, 'All right, look we tried it.' So we came here one Sunday in May, wasn't it May?

PAULA: Mhmm.

ROE: In May, and we were so taken aback by our experience here, and how wonderful it was. And they actually had, like the gay section in church, and that's where we went and it was phenomenal. Barbara wasn't here that day. So we went home and we emailed her and we said, 'We didn't see you at church today.' (laughter)

BRANDON: What was it that gave you that sense of wanting to come back?

\_\_\_\_\_: First off, Ned Coughlin was the pastor at the time. He was giving the homily and Ned is really a Southern Baptist. He walked up and down the aisles and was very dramatic, a gay man himself. The bulletin, uh, mentions all these gay activities and they played All Are Welcome.

\_\_\_\_\_: Yeah.

\_\_\_\_\_: I'm getting verklempt again 20 years later. It was like nothing we'd ever experienced.

\_\_\_\_\_: And when we sat down, because Barbara told us exactly where to go, to sit and everything, and she said, 'You should go there and you're going to see this one and this one and this one.' And we didn't really walk up to anybody, you know, um, but people there, you know, during the mass when when everybody, uh, shakes hands and stuff, people introduce themselves to us and it was just such a unique and welcoming and and inclusive experience, you know, that it made us want to come back.

BRANDON: So it sounds like you both weren't new to Catholicism, and coming to Xavier, perhaps you were raised Catholic, is that right?

\_\_\_\_\_: Oh, yes.

BRANDON: Yeah, and then what was the gap between when you stopped going to mass to rejoining mass at Xavier in 2000?

\_\_\_\_\_: It was years.

\_\_\_\_\_: Years, it was years. And we had been, even after we became a couple, we were going to mass and then at the church we were going to in Yonkers. It was Pride Sunday and the priest said, 'Let's pray for the sinners on Fifth Avenue.' And I left, and I said, 'That's it.'

BRANDON: Were you looking for a faith community?

\_\_\_\_\_: We wanted, well, we did want a community, that was it. It wasn't so much about the church itself, you know, but we wanted a community, we wanted a place where we could belong. And we thought about actually going to other churches and even changing religion. And then we said, 'You know, but this is what we know. This is what we were baptized into and, you know, so if we can't have that, then we're not going to have anything.' And we even did our own, our own, we even had our own little masses at home. We had our own ceremonies that we put together so we could have that. And that was great, but we didn't have a community. So that was really it. Was missing the community.

BRANDON: Yeah, so it sounds like you were able to maintain your own faith between the two of you and individually, but then coming together at Xavier was, you feel the sense of community, you can connect with other people. When you came to mass was it immediate, 'I'm coming back every week.' Was it, did it, was it a gradual process? Did it take you a little time to trust again?

\_\_\_\_\_: Yeah, it was more gradual. But what really struck me the most, um, was the fact that they had have the Welcome Table on Sundays. And I was like, 'Wow, this church practices, doesn't just talk about this stuff, you know.' Because i joined, shortly

after I joined some, doing some of the volunteer work. But it took us a while to come to mass on a regular basis. But I was more committed when I saw how much work they were doing with the poor and, you know. I thought that was...

\_\_\_\_\_: The Welcome Table and the Shelter and the Food pantry. I mean, once we saw that, I mean, this really was the Gospel at work. I mean, you know, it was more than just coming to the mass. But it did take a while, you know, for us to get oriented into doing that, you know.

BRANDON: So it wasn't just a community where you could feel welcomed as gay people, it was also the Christian mission was at work.

\_\_\_\_\_: Yes.

BRANDON: Yeah, so you had perspective on the church of the last 20, 20 years of perspective, which is more than me. I've only been a member for four or five years. So I'm curious, you've probably seen pastors come and go, parishioners come and go. What has changed in the church over the last 20 years, this parish? And what remains the same despite the changes that happen?

PAULA: There's been many changes, you know, with the church in general. And, um, when we, when we started to come here, and when Ned was pastor, I mean, I think that at that point things were starting to be a little more progressive within the, within the global church, and at Xavier and things were were starting to move in a more progressive manner at that point. And then things changed, um, and we, some of the hierarchy changed, not just the pastors here, and I felt like things were starting to move backward again. I don't think that that affected me immediately, but also, you know, we're very, um, we belong to, um, Call To Action and seeing some of the things that are going on all over the place, I mean Xavier is unique, so it's kind of like this is a little island, and you you kind of lose your perspective sometimes that, the same you know, it's not the same everywhere. And then different pastors have come, and most of the time I think we've had issues with a lot of them, you know. But we've had communication, and that was the important thing, we were able to communicate. And as long as we could communicate, and their doors were open, we could battle our battles. And they weren't just, uh, gay and lesbian battles, they were other battles too. There were battles about women and lots of things. But as long as we could communicate, there was compromise, and that's okay. Sometimes compromise is okay because it means you're moving a little bit.

BRANDON: It sounds like you felt that there was an opportunity, or platform for your voice to be heard within the parish.

PAULA: Yeah, exactly.

BRANDON: And not just being, it wasn't a dictator or fashion, it was a dynamic relationship between parishioner and leader.

PAULA: Yeah.

BRANDON: Roe, anything you want to add?

ROE: You know, you're making it sound so easy. Yeah, I mean but we did. We're a very strong, opinionated parish. And it takes a very strong person to be a pastor here. And some of them came in thinking they were going to change things, and they didn't know who they were up against. It wasn't just the LGBT, it was everybody, because everybody felt the same, um, and as soon as we'd break somebody in, uh, they would transfer them, you know. I mean, we had, and you had the Cardinal was always coming down on us because we're the only ones that march in the Pride March with the banner with the church name. And one pastor came in and he said, 'Well, Dolan didn't want to see the banner anymore, doesn't want to see the banner in the parade anymore.' Well that's, are you kidding, that's not happening. Where we were used to the pastor fighting with the, or whatever, with the Cardinal, he was, he wanted us to go along and he had no clue who he was talking to. And we had multiple meetings, and multiple things.

PAULA: Yeah, we basically were living in the parish then. Because we were here so much, talking about that issue.

ROE: Yeah, because it was a constant discussion with each new pastor. And with this, but that was a big turning point issue, when I think they realized. Dolan said he didn't want to see the banner. Okay, so we marched with the banner backwards.

BRANDON: I heard about that.

ROE: Which brought CNN to the church. CNN videoed the church and video, it brought more attention, which is exactly what he, but he didn't see the banner, you know. And it was things like that. They never told us to do that again.

BRANDON: What Pride year was that?

ROE: Oh my goodness. I'm going to try and remember the year.

PAULA: At least 10 years ago.

ROE: Was it 2010, maybe?

PAULA: I would say at least 10 years ago.

ROE: It was either 2010, at least. Somehow that sticks in my head. That is was that year.

BRANDON: Detail for me what that was like, that like, the few weeks leading up to the March and how the communication went back and forth.

\_\_\_\_\_: Oh, it was months.

BRANDON: And was it a split decision to turn the banner around.

PAULA: No, oh no.

ROE: She came up with that when we were, a bunch of the women went up to Vermont to talk about the issue.

BRANDON: Paula, was this your idea?

PAULA: This was her idea.

BRANDON: This is an infamous idea I've heard of. I feel very honored to sit next to you. (laughter)

ROE: This was her idea. Many of the men in the church wanted to go along with it, you know, and write something silly, you know, Catholic People or something.

BRANDON: To kind of be...

ROE: Instead of a banner. There'd be 50, 60 people in the Mary Chapel meeting two three times a week, screaming people, getting angry at each other, people who were friends up until then. It was really quite a... So we kind of mused to just get a core group, of which the four of us were, um, and a core group of the guys, and we sat in the other room over there the West Room, and we got, um, Paula brought up her idea again and they loved it. So we dragged the pastor, and we called him, 'Come on over, we're here, we're not killing each other.' He loves it too.

PAULA: What was so intense about that, was that, it was so moving really when, 2020, you know, looking in hindsight. But it was so moving because when people didn't want to march with the banner, it wasn't because they wanted to do what the pastor said, you know, it was because they were so frightened that they were going to lose what they had here. That's really what it was about. You could, sometimes the fear was so intense you could feel it in the room. People were so frightened, and I say mostly the guys, because a lot of the guys have been here a lot longer than the women. And, um, their fear was so palpable, you know, that they were afraid they were going to lose what they had here.

BRANDON: So was it that they, the fear that maybe the church would be shut down?

PAULA: Yeah, I think that they would be kicked out and, you know, and because some of them had experienced that when Dignity used to be able to meet here.

BRANDON: Right.

PAULA: And they had to leave and so they were really frightened about that, and they were like, 'We'll do whatever we have to do just to keep what we have. Let's just keep what we have.' And I never wanted to compromise. I never wanted to not march with the banner forward, but I felt like the division within our own community was so great and if, and you could, like I said, you could feel the fear that we had to, we had to make that compromise. I don't know how I came up with it. But I felt like this is a compromise I could live with.

BRANDON: Right. I mean, I feel such compassion for, um, the members of the church, who on both sides, who felt that something precious was going to be taken away from them, and it's a sign, how rare that was, to find a Catholic community that was so nurturing and welcoming and embracing. Now that, would you say, I don't put words in your mouth, but would you say that Pride March was sort of a marker? Did things get better after there, and was there, how did things change in terms of...

PAULA: The very next year, actually, we did not march with the banner. We marched with another banner and I'm not, I don't really remember why that happened. Do you remember why?

ROE: Well for, we lost the banner.

PAULA: Was that it, that we lost it?

ROE: Yes, we had given it to, uh, I think one of the guys to hold and he couldn't remember where he put it. I don't know. Because we couldn't find it. Once we found it, and this is, well, I'll put this on record, from now on only women take it, and watch it during the year. (laughter)

BRANDON: Good! Thank you.

ROE: No offense!

BRANDON: None taken!

ROE: He was like, 'I don't remember where i put it.' We tore his house apart. Um, and you know, different pastors have had different comfort level with it. Ned marched with us. Many, often, the day of the...

PAULA: Dan marched with us.

ROE: The day of the backwards banner we had more people, it was probably more straight people marching with us that year because they joined the, the uh, battle. Keeping what we have. And that's so important too, you know. That you have the support of the rest of the community.

BRANDON: Right. I see that now with the Family Faith group, with straight couples who are out and supporting the gay and lesbian groups as well, they're advocates and I think it's a, I've always thought what's so unique about having this parish, particularly in New York City where you have such, um, open-mindedness and diversity too. And I'm curious to know from your perspective, what are your thoughts about how Xavier leads as a parish, leads the Catholic church in many ways. What is, what's unique about this parish that other churches have to learn from?

\_\_\_\_\_: Well, actually it's it's kind of funny that first, uh, I work at the, uh, Food Pantry and just last week, or with the last Food Pantry two weeks ago, a woman who was new to the pantry, had never come before, she was a client, you know coming for food. She says to me, 'Why don't the other churches get it, and do the mission the way this does?' I said, 'Maybe you should ask them? You know, tell them about us.' So it's interesting you said that because it's an example, but I'm not sure if the other churches, I don't, I'm not sure how you wake them up. You know, the Jesuits are unique unto themselves. We have three grandsons who were baptized here because their parishes would not baptize them. Um, and for three different reasons, you know. And all I had to do was pick up the phone and say, 'Peter.' Peter Fink was here, Father Fink. I'd say, 'Peter, they're not going to baptize Gideon. They're not...' 'Come on down, come on.' You know.

BRANDON: Wow, no barriers to being welcomed.

\_\_\_\_\_: And it was like, he didn't care, he didn't care if they weren't married. He didn't care they were a gay couple, you know. It was things like that, the other churches were turning, turning away these kids.

BRANDON: It seems that there's an authenticity, there's a Christian mission of being welcoming and opening and accepting of all. Xavier seems to have a track record, the leaders and the church have a track record of taking action on that.

\_\_\_\_\_: Yes, yes.

BRANDON: They show up to the Pantry, they baptize, all are welcome. So acts that Jesus did, right?

\_\_\_\_\_: Right, exactly.

BRANDON: Is there anything I haven't asked about you'd like to, any specific moments or events or...?

\_\_\_\_\_: Well, we were married here in the church.

BRANDON: Okay, let's hear about that.

\_\_\_\_\_: Okay, we were married in the Mary Chapel.

BRANDON: Beautiful.

\_\_\_\_\_: And actually it wasn't even our idea. It was Ned's idea.

BRANDON: Father Ned.

\_\_\_\_\_: Yeah.

BRANDON: Okay, let's hear about this.

\_\_\_\_\_: It was our 25th anniversary, and um, we were planning a big party and...

\_\_\_\_\_: I asked Ned if he would bless us after one of, he had been marrying the guys and he got in trouble for that, was told to stop. So I asked him if he would bless us one day after mass in the back of the church. So said, 'Sure, of course.' I was working in the Food Pantry. Dennis who was the associate came down to me while I was working in the Food Pantry and said, 'Ned said, no way, he's not going to bless you. He's going to have a mass. You're parishioners, you're going to have a mass. Invite your family, your friends, this is the date, this is the time, this is...' Um, so we did.

\_\_\_\_\_: And he told us, he said, 'I can't do it in the Main Church.' Which was, you know, we understood. And he said, 'We'll do it in the Mary Chapel.' And he said, 'Just make sure everybody who's there, you know them.' You know, because, you know, Xavier's always been under the glass, as far as, you know, checking. Everybody wants to know what's going on here, the hierarchy anyway.

So it was wonderful. We had a full mass.

\_\_\_\_\_: He blessed our rings.

BRANDON: Wow, what year was that?

\_\_\_\_\_: That was in 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_: Yeah, 2004.

BRANDON: Beautiful. So you had no idea joining a parish in 2000, that four years later you'd be married.

\_\_\_\_\_: We'd be married here in this... Yeah, I mean people were stunned, you know. We actually had a few friends write letters to Ned, some weren't even Catholics saying, 'I can't believe you did that, that's wonderful.' You know and it's a shame that can't be, like, more public, you know. That would make us more of a beacon if we could, but that would also cause problems.

BRANDON: I just think about though, the members of the church in other parts of the country that might not have access to a parish like this or other parts of the world, and to hear stories like this. Hopefully this session we're doing today can be that, part of that light, and you sharing your story would give such tremendous hope to anybody who is, might be gay or lesbian or just wants to be part of a parish that's more welcoming. Um, it is an incredible, incredible example. It's interesting, um, that a marriage, which a straight marriage we don't think of as rebellious, but maybe there's almost a sense of blessed rebellion in your marriage, right, in the context of the church?

\_\_\_\_\_: Definitely.

BRANDON: I think it sounds like we need to wrap up. Although I could stay here several more hours.

\_\_\_\_\_: Sorry, I know, we just keep babbling.

BRANDON: Delightful. Thank you so, so much. And honestly I feel so proud to be part of the parish, and to know this side of it as well. Thank you so much!

PAULA & ROE: 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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