

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

Ep. 7: John & Caitlin: "I like that you found Xavier out of a necessity of getting out of the rain."

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 –

CAITLIN: Welcome for all of our listeners and thank you for joining us. My name is Caitlin. I'm 27 years old and have been a parishioner of St. Francis Xavier for four years now. Today I feel very excited to be chatting with a long time parishioner, John. Welcome, John.

JOHN: Good morning everybody, and good morning, Caitlin.

CAITLIN: Uh, once again, thank you so much for joining us. Uh, we are going to be having a conversation today about your time at Xavier, um, and so my first question for you is, uh, this is the inaugural year of these recorded conversations. What did you think, or how did you feel when the oral history ministry reached out to you?

JOHN: I think it's very important that our stories be told not only for the historic value, but for, to clear up any misunderstandings about who we are as a parish. Uh, many

negative things have been said about us online and by the super conservatives and I want our truth out there.

CAITLIN: Amazing, amazing. Um, and I should ask you and I, I, I, didn't originally feel like a newbie at Xavier even though I've been here for, for about four years. Can you tell our listeners how long you've been at Xavier, what originally brought you to Xavier, and why you've continued to stay?

JOHN: Yeah. I, I've been at Xavier about 40 years and, um, what brought me to Xavier were two happenstance events. I used to sing many years ago. I sang with a choral group who performed an evening concert here in the church. And then I would guess a year or so after that if any of our listeners remember the Barnes and Noble text outlet store that used to be on Fifth avenue on 18th Street. I was shopping there one Saturday and I was on my way home, and it started to rain, heavily rain, and I was walking down 16th street. And I saw the church, and the portico and I decided, "Oh I gotta get out of the rain!" And it continued to rain, so I walked into the church and hung out, and I read the bulletin, and I said, "Oh this is a very cool place. I'm going to have to come back here again one day, go to Mass." And then I did do that. I live in Jersey so it's not easy to get in every Sunday like a regular parishioner, right? Um, and so I started to come in more on Sundays because of the homilies and the music, and then I said, "Okay this is, this is where I need to be.

CAITLIN: Now were you religious or spiritual practicing before you came to Xavier or, or what sparked your initial interest in attending Mass?

JOHN: Well I grew up I'm a cradle Catholic, and I hope everybody knows what that expression is. Uh, in a very spiritual and religious, um, home. It was in the Franciscan tradition and when in my 20s and 30s as many of us experienced, you know, you're not centered. And that was up to about when it rained, and then I found Xavier. You know, I'd go for holiday Mass and in my local church, and, uh, Easter, you know, Easter, Christmas, and then when I found Xavier it spoke to me through the homilies and the welcoming. And I learned more about the Ignatian spirituality here. And so I've combined, like our pope, the Ignatian and Franciscan spiritualities, and that's where I'm the most comfortable here.

CAITLIN: That's really beautiful. Um, I like that you were able to find Xavier out of a necessity of getting out of the rain, and then it seems like it's it became a necessity in a much different way, in a spiritual way. Um, I also find it fascinating that I think for myself and a lot of other parishioners, they're willing to make the trek to Xavier even though they don't live in the neighborhood. In fact, you don't, you don't live in the state and so, um, I I would love for you to elaborate a little bit more on what, what you found about those homilies. What you found about the Jesuit spirituality specifically that drew you, um, that might have appeared differently than at other parishes or within other Masses that you had experienced?

JOHN: Well, the, the main focus... remember, I think I said it before, but it was the 1980s when I first discovered and started to come to Xavier and that was in the height of the AIDS crisis. So a lot of my, my friends were dying. They were, you know, being brought to Saint Vincent's hospital which is a couple of blocks away and they were being, when they died, the Catholic church in New York refused to have burials, uh, funeral Masses for gay men who had died of AIDS. There was the trauma behind it and so there were only two churches in the West Village - Saint John the Baptist on Christopher Street and Saint Luke's of the Fields who, and, Saint Luke's is famous for any movie made about AIDS when they show the memorial. That's the church and it just so happens that, uh, Reddens Funeral Home, which is on 14th Street right around the corner from here, uh, did the first Catholic burial. You know, they, they took care of the body and Xavier as far as I know for sure, Xavier performed the first Catholic rite funeral for someone who had died of AIDS. And, and I think it was 1986, and so from a homily perspective, the parish spoke about it publicly and you wouldn't hear that in any other parish. And that moved me and, um, you know, it was very very important to me not so much that we're a progressive parish but as I had said before, we tell the truth.

CAITLIN: Wow, I just, I mean, I really got chills. I think that that's something that I even recognize about Xavier that stands out is that Xavier is a place that is not going to beat around the bush, right? We like to address things head-on and I think that that speaks a lot to our faith and our spirituality, too.

JOHN: Yeah. regarding both of the spiritualities. One of the the Ignatian tenets is, *set the world on fire*, and the Franciscan tenet is, *preach the gospel and at times use words*, so we, we are really a combination of both. Um, we tell our truth in our homilies and we tell our truths we make the gospel alive also by our actions. You know, we as a parish, we're more than just Sunday Mass, which is a lot of, uh, you know, other parishes around the world, uh, they're only open for Sunday Mass or prayer, but we're much, much bigger than that as a parish.

CAITLIN: Mm, mm. What is it about St Francis Xavier that makes you happy to continue your spiritual life here? What does it bring to your life?

JOHN: Well there's a community here. We pray together, and, you know, we, we use the word companionship quite often because that is, again, an Ignatian tenant. We pray together, we cry together, we work together, and I think that's, that's what really helps my spirituality. That I'm not alone doing this. There are a group of people on the same journey regardless of where we are in the journey. We're still journey, journey, journey, on the journey together.

CAITLIN: Um, are there certain ministries that you find yourself being called to that companionship more or that you found community in, um, at Saint Francis Xavier?

JOHN: Well, it took me a while for me to get involved, so I'm, I was poking around Xavier in the 80s and then I started to attend Mass more regularly in the mid 90s and I had found out that they had a LGBT ministry at the time it was a combined ministry and

I said, "Oh that's that's really interesting!" And what drew me was because of the AIDS crisis but what made me stay was the LGBT ministry. And I went to my first couple of meetings, um, and I said I'm not sure that this was for me this is for, me this is who I am, and I think it was 1998. I went on, I, they were offering a retreat weekend retreat away and I went and it was one of the most moving things I'd ever, retreats that I had ever been on. People shared of themselves. They welcomed me like I had never been welcomed before as a new person, and I said, "Okay, really, I found a home."

CAITLIN: Um, John I want to ask as well what is it like for you during celebrations of the Mass on ordinary Sundays, during big holy days like Easter and Christmas. Does anything stand out to you that, um, you particularly like or or have certain questions about or might appear differently at Xavier?

JOHN: Well, one, one of the interesting things and especially in this past year. There was a lot said about Xavier - and I rather than use the whole name we in the family just call it Xavier or we call it SFX. There was a lot in the conservative outlets saying that, you know, are we really a Catholic Church, and we push the boundaries too much and blah blah, you can only imagine what was said about us and as I in the opening and I said I want to tell our truth our liturgies are like every you can go anywhere in the world and the Catholic liturgy should be the same. And at Xavier, we follow the rules, the liturgy is the same, the readings are the same regardless where you go. The difference here, though, is that the liturgy is alive at Xavier; the music is picked to match the readings and enhance the liturgy. Our eucharistic ministers - our welcoming, we call them hospitality people. Somebody in other churches, they call them ushers, but hospitality ministers are both male male and female the second you walk in you're welcomed. But one one thing about the liturgies that, that one liturgy that actually stands out for me and has always stood out for me is the Easter Vigil when, um, unfortunately Kathy Mulvaney one of our, our senior parishioners died a couple of years ago. She was a blind woman who always read the creation story at the Easter Vigil. So if you know the Easter Vigil, we light the fire of resurrection. The church is dark up until the gospel so the first reading is done in complete darkness. She's blind, she didn't care, it didn't matter, but I always assisted her to the lectern, and she and I became very good friends. We always sat near each other at Mass. But to hear her read the, uh, well I should say, recite, the creation story was so powerful and so moving. Um, that, that is the epitome of what our liturgies are here. You know the every aspect of it regard what any Sunday anytime you come here you can be moved by our liturgies as opposed to attending and sitting and saying, "Oh the homilies, you know, the homily's too long," or, "Oh he he went 35 minutes today instead of 15 minutes." For the most part, we don't care about that. It's the liturgy is the life of the church.

CAITLIN: Yeah, I completely agree. I think that something I've noticed that makes Xavier different is that there's just so much intentionality, um, among parishioners, among those that are are higher up in the church if you will, um, even I mean I'm thinking to Easter Masses as well, and it was the first time that I'd I think one of the Masses doesn't need to be done by, by the priest. And so I witnessed, uh, a parishioner of ours, a woman, standing at the altar, and, and give one of the services and I never

witnessed anything like that before in my life and I couldn't stop crying. I was, I was in the choir for the Easter Masses and I was just sobbing and I think, they seem small, these acts seem so small and, they're so important, I think, to our, our faith, our community, to show that we we care about one another.

JOHN: yeah to clarify that a little bit...

CAITLIN: Yeah, please do.

JOHN: Because it is semantics and this, this is where we get, we get in trouble incorrectly. So, it's almost always the Good Friday service which is a continuation of the Triduum, you know, from Good Friday through, um, Easter Sunday, so it's a service that's um...

CAITLIN: It's different than a Mass.

JOHN: That's different than a Mass. So, and those women who have done the service before, on..., again we're one of the few churches who have women profess the gospel in a viable situation, you know, there's nowhere in the rules of the Church that say the women can't sit, profess the Word to people. You know. we're hung up on the, they can't say Mass, and I'm hoping that, that changes at some point.

CAITLIN: Right, right. I, I appreciate you making that, I realize that sometimes I can, I can get lost in, I don't know as much about the the technicalities I suppose. So, um, or maybe that's not even the right word, but I appreciate that.

JOHN: They'll use that against us.

CAITLIN: So John, you mentioned, um, the truth of, of Xavier and, and what you find to be, um, your truth. I think our truths as a Church and I'm wondering if you can elaborate on that a little bit more. Um, what you mean exactly when you say the profession of our, our truth that Xavier, your truth, or, or what others maybe view to be their truths and how those might, um, be in combat with one another?

JOHN: One of the, um, I'd mentioned the LBGT ministries before, and I've been a member of the group since the the late to mid 90s, and quite often the facilitator over many years. And one thing we talk about as gay men or as LGBT people is your authentic self. You have to be your authentic self so that you have a gift then you can bring, bring to the world. If you don't know who you are, you know, it makes it confusing in conversation or, and or in, and your personal relationships. So I believe, believe that our spirituality here at Xavier is: we are our authentic self. The Church, well, Xavier, not the Church, Xavier encourages us regardless of where you are in your journey. Everyone is welcome here. Everybody is welcome at the table. We don't exclude, so regardless of where you are on the journey, there are companions here that will assist you along the way, uh, regardless of what you need, um, and that's really an important aspect of our truth. No one is turned away from Xavier.

CAITLIN: Hmm absolutely. Um, are there any things that you've noticed that have changed at Xavier since you initially came, um, and, and if so, what were they, and how did they make an impact on you?

JOHN: Well, the world's changed, as we all know. You know, every decade from the 80s to to now, you know, there was something, uh, that created either a firestorm in the world or a reason for us to be vocal at Xavier. And, um, you know I had mentioned the, the AIDS crisis. We have a Welcome Table, which is, you know, the churches call them soup kitchens. Every Sunday, we feed over 1600 people a week, every Sunday. Even through the pandemic, we couldn't have people physically come in to sit down to eat, but we had takeaway, you know, people lined up and they brown bag every Sunday throughout the pandemic. Um, can you repeat the question again because I...

CAITLIN: Yeah, how I had a thought, sure how have things changed at Xavier since you first came?

JOHN: Um, so during Black, you know, like I said, the world changes. During Black Lives Matter, we, um, we added to the liturgy at the end of the liturgy, liturgy on a pledge, you know, a pledge to combat racism. Um, the refugee crisis, you know, we have many parishioners who volunteer outside of the church around the world. We've gone to Haiti. We have an, uh, Honduras ministry, and people go to those places. And we have a climate change, you know, environmental ministry, uh, the woman who, who facilitates that really is a person who cares and gets us to care, so when you look at the big picture of Xavier, as the world changes we change, and we tend to add ministries. Sometimes it's a little overwhelming, every time you turn around, oh no, another ministry, but it's who we are, you know. The world changes. We change with it.

CAITLIN: Right, absolutely. Um, I came to Xavier my, my second week in New York and I never looked back. It was the parish I wanted to be a part of. I think because of just the active parishioners, all these various ministries, there was just, there were so many ways to, to take that Jesuit pillar of faith in action, faith that does justice, and, and be sure to carry it out in the world. And it really is inspiring, I think, to see so many people that are so directly involved, and you're right, so passionate about what they do that it makes you want to be involved too. Um, I think I have a, a final question for you, um, and that is what would you want anyone who hears about these stories to know about Xavier. What would you tell them, and, and why?

JOHN: Well I, I think I said it, um, about companionship. If you're struggling, if you you're lost and you need a place to work it out, Xavier is one of those places. And you had mentioned, you know, I come in from New Jersey. It's not a big deal. There are people who come in from Connecticut. I had a, have a very close friend who used to come in from Allentown Pennsylvania. That's a two-hour drive in both directions. Came in every Sunday. Um, if you can get here, come here. You'll certainly be changed. I'm not sure if everyone is changed the same way, but you will be welcomed here, you'll find compassion here, and you, you'll find companionship. So if you're questioning, and

we're, we have live stream now. You know, so if you can't get here, you know, there's there's always live stream.

CAITLIN: Excellent, thank you so much, John. Um, I do want to tell our listeners, too, that, that something I'm thinking about is, I think that the fact that people are so welcome to Xavier is due in no small part to people like you, John. So I'm so appreciative to you, the work that you've done here at Xavier. Your commitment to our community, um, and I feel very grateful to have been able to speak with you today.

JOHN: And thank you so much, and, and, welcome, Caitlin.

CAITLIN: Thank you, thank you.

JOHN: You're here a number of years, but again, welcome.

CAITLIN: Thank you. I appreciate it.

- **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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