

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

Ep. 8: Stephanie & Natasha -"Desire the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy."

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 –

NATASHA: I wanted to let you know Steph, uh today they asked me to do, to be part of the Oral History Project for Saint Francis Xavier and we were actually hoping that you could tell us a little bit about you know your experiences at Xavier. How did you get started? I know you've been here for a long time. I can't remember how many years. I think you...

STEPHANIE: You were 10 years old when I got here.

NATASHA: Oh my gosh!

STEPHANIE: So that's how long I've been here. (laughter)

NATASHA: Oh my goodness, oh my goodness. Okay, all right I know there's probably a lot of like interesting stories there. Because I know you and Mary have been a part of this church for a long time, right?

STEPHANIE: Yeah, yeah, well um, I actually it was I think 2000, when did 9/11? 2001. So it was 2001 uh Holy Week or a little before Holy Week maybe I was um, my twin brother Stephen he's a church-going guy and he had been exploring different Catholic churches in Manhattan when he moved here and uh he ended up at Saint Francis Xavier through his hairdresser who told him you're just gonna love Xavier. So my brother who is gay, as well as I am, went to Xavier and he totally fell in love with Xavier and um I didn't know about it but finally he just invited me. He told me you know I've been away from the church for over a quarter of a century maybe and um so I went one time and I just wept Natasha. I went when I went in there and I think I really just kept crying every time I came back and I have no idea what it was except that um maybe because it you know the song, the choir, the people welcoming you when you enter the door. In fact Michael Orza remembered me coming in and he just um and it's funny because I don't remember but they you know how they have the hospitality ministers that greet you and uh who greet you and and make sure you have a bulletin and I was sitting on the right side in the middle and I just felt love in that church and that's like whoever, however you can define that. That was an amazing, um embrace and experience so.

NATASHA: That's beautiful. My experience was, I'm pretty sure my experience is uh is going to be different in terms of context as compared to yours. But um a lot of the emotions were the same considering you know we're both from, we're both LGBT. And famously the church has not been kind to LGBT people especially even like LGBT Catholics.

STEPHANIE: Yeah.

NATASHA: So having a place like Xavier, hearing about a place like Xavier is just a blessing really. But I also think that societially things have gotten a little bit like easier, and not to say that there aren't any struggles, you know, but yeah um the challenges that you faced back then were probably different from the challenges that we face now, right?

STEPHANIE: Yeah, um you know, I'm not so sure. See that's the thing, like I came to Xavier in 2001 and uh just in terms of personal development and you know I was already at the point where I'm comfortable with being a lesbian. I'm you know so I didn't even identify as Catholic at that point, um even though I was baptized Catholic. So you know the issues of struggle, I don't think I have the same issues as uh, not a lot, or some people who are, who really stayed with the church, have stayed with the church from their birth because I was away for so long. And it doesn't, it didn't and it didn't hold the importance to me as it does in my life now. So I don't have that Catholic guilt. I don't have that Catholic, um whatever it is the burden of being, um uh I don't know weighed down by whatever whatever um you know whatever pressures of being Catholic, Christian and gay. I didn't have it, I don't have it.

NATASHA: Like for example, for me, um it took a long time for me to reconcile both those parts of me, like I always I was raised Catholic in a very conservative you know country, Catholic country. Because as you know I'm from the Philippines. So you know it's a very conservative, traditional upbringing. So that part of me was always, you know, I was always Catholic, and the whole part of me that was bi, and it was, it was kind of like a different side and coming to Xavier allowed me that sort of reconciliation between those two parts of myself. And I was wondering is there, is that a same experience for you, is it?

STEPHANIE: No, it's not. Not at all, because I didn't identify as Catholic even though I was baptized, brought up Roman Catholic. My mother who was born and raised in Hawaii, but of Filipina ancestry, she's Catholic. My father who is Filipino born in the Philippines, was Protestant, brought up Protestant. And so we had the experience of going to Catholic church and see Protestant Sunday school, and you know, so it was never always just, it was more about, um yeah, when I got to Xavier I was already, I was not what you'd say, uh affiliated with any Protestant, Catholic, you know dabbled in many different things um but whatever brought me to church in 2001 to Xavier um I think I'm, and this may sound funny, but I think I was in between relationships and maybe I needed something and I maybe I didn't have a partner at the time, I'm trying to think, or a lover and so I had a Sunday free, you know and so yes, I'll go with you Steve, and whatever brought me there that's when I rediscovered my Catholicism. Or not even rediscovered it but discovered it you know because I approached it now I was a full, an adult, you know. 2001 I think I was 37, I was going to be 37, so I was 36 when I got there. So already lived some life and felt quite, you know um, pretty good in my skin but obviously, um, obviously I was broken too but I could accept the brokenness or I felt my brokenness was accepted in that environment, in the pew, something. Does that make sense Natasha?

NATASHA: Yeah, it sounds it sounds like you had, like you had a lot of emotional maturity when you came into Xavier and it kind of like uh, did it help you with your spirituality any? Because I feel like when you were talking about it, you said you had discovered your Catholicism when you came to Xavier.

STEPHANIE: Yeah, yeah.

NATASHA: So that sounds that sounds really interesting.

STEPHANIE: And let me say, I wasn't, you know I may say I was emotionally mature, probably not because I'm still not emotionally mature but, you know I felt like I was, you know. And I think too Natasha of the intelligence of the the priests who were there and who were giving the homilies and that also spoke just not just to the head but to the heart and but yet also social justice I mean that was...

NATASHA: Exactly.

STEPHANIE: I've never, I mean right? The Church of Saint Francis Xavier is like a, uh, the mecca for social justice and I'm like wow and to hear it from the priest's mouth, from these males, you know, and these guys in their robes. But they had, they have, and they had intelligence and they have uh heart, and they have integrity and you know, you can't fake that stuff.

NATASHA: Before I came here I did try a few churches. I went to a Christian church and then when I first came here to New York I also started looking for other Catholic churches. And I would say that it's not just also the social justice, which of course that's a very important aspect of it, but yeah, the way that the priests talk here it's just so much more, um in touch and aware I suppose, because in the other places I went to, they would give homilies based on, you know, the Bible readings and they would reiterate what was said in the passage, and most of the time I honestly I wouldn't even be paying much attention because, you know, it just was not said in an interesting way, I suppose. But when you come here to Xavier everybody is so eloquent. And you know, they're very much aware of everything that's happening not just within the Catholic church but their eyes are open to everything else that's happening around us. And not just the priests but the women too, I mean, we're both in Catholic Lesbians, and it's possibly one of the most intelligent, a group of intelligent women that I've ever met and my life has been so much enriched by that.

STEPHANIE: Well, you're one of the smarty ones too. You're one of the intelligent ones. I will say, I feel really stupid with all these young people who are so well-versed and uh knowledgeable. I mean, I think our Catholic meetings have become, our Catholic Lesbians meetings have become like little, uh, college courses. I mean, what you did, I mean all the history you bring about the Philippines and Transgendered people in that country's history and, you know, um we've really stepped it up with you youngins. I mean, and I will say because I do hatchling, the hatchlings that we lovingly called you and all the young women, uh you know, and not necessarily all lesbians, I mean, some are queer, some are bi, that's like unheard of, right? To have an active, where there's, where it's not courage, it's not conversion therapy, it's Catholic Lesbians yes. You are here, you are part of the church and give us what you got.

NATASHA: I just, I was thinking to say, I remember when we went to the Pride March and, um, everybody was like talking about Catholic Lesbians because they saw our t-shirts, the one with the purple t-shirts with the tarot cards.

STEPHANIE: Oh, the Dyke March. When we went to the Dyke March.

NATASHA: Yeah, sorry. Yeah, when we had the t-shirts with the tarot cards and the name of the group there in the front. And everybody was saying, oh my goodness there's a group for like, lesbians, like everybody was shocked and everybody was asking.

STEPHANIE: Well, we had the coolest t-shirts.

NATASHA: We did. We did, it was fantastic! It was a, I love the color of it, the purple of it. It's so bright and loud and I love it.

STEPHANIE: Oh, I'll pull that shirt. I can move while I'm talking to you and pull that shirt out of my drawer. That was...

NATASHA: Everybody loved that shirt.

STEPHANIE: Oh here, I have it right here. Purple and white with huge Catholic Lesbians Dyke March 2021. And it's the Nine of Pentacles, I think, with the image of the parrot. This woman looks like a woman with a bird up, she's holding in her left arm and the verse is from First Corinthians 14:1. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.

NATASHA: I remember that because for context we had a session with the Catholic Lesbians where, uh, one of the members had done a tarot card reading for a lot of us. Yep, I was one of those people. And the when it was Mary Lee, I think, right, and she drew a card for the whole group and it was a Nine of Pentacles.

STEPHANIE: Yeah, I love that too, because we can explore tarot cards without worrying about it being heretical.

NATASHA: I think it's funny when you mentioned, like, you know, the fear of being, like called heretical and all of that because you know, being a Catholic and being gay is already, I mentioned once before that the name Catholic Lesbians is already kind of like an oxymoro, isn't it? Like in the sense that, oh my goodness you're a lesbian, but you're Catholic? And you know, and being in this group and being in Xavier actually, and not being afraid of having those sides of you because, um, you're not going to be told that, oh being gay is a sin, or prophecy is like doing tarot cards is a sin. It's not something that you encounter here.

STEPHANIE: No, and you know, I always have to remember how very fortunate we are to have Xavier. And to be able to be, again fully who we are and I think that's the beauty of Xavier as well. Is having seen same-sex couples have their children baptized and there's no question, and this was even before gay marriage. It doesn't matter. You are welcome here. You want to be part of this church? Yes, we'll baptize your child in this church. And yes, we welcome you. And yes, we bless your relationship because you are committed to each other as a family. And you know, even divorced people that yes, come have communion, don't, you don't have to make an appointment for confession and go through all that rigamarole. You want, you want to come to the table? Yes, we want to break bread with you. Come, come as you are. And you know, it's all, and to have women homilists. I mean, I can say even back in the day, uh, Ned Coughlin he was a prophet. And he, God bless him, he died. He died actually on a, uh, when we were gonna have a Pride March. And uh, in, man this maybe was about five years ago or so, but he encouraged female homilists. And yes, we have to say reflection, but he wanted to hear the voices of women and he made that happen at

masses where women took the ambo and they broke open the word. And you know, I can say that some priests are more open to it. Others weren't. Ned was quite a prophet and quite welcoming. And you know, even now Ken Boller, he's working with lots of different things with racial justice and with the language of the Lectionary and I mean there's this team of women who are working on making the readings inclusive. And you know, being gentle with the Word because we have to, um, but you know, but having this happen is like, oh, this is a miracle, this is a gift we are we are fortunate to have Xavier.

NATASHA: Women homilists, that's not something that I've heard of in a Catholic church, you know. And it's just like, it's almost revolutionary, it's an act of courage for you to be able to stand up and say that we need to include more voices. We need to, you know, to baptize these children of same-sex couples. We need to bless the marriages of these same-sex couples. That's an act of courage in itself when, you know, when the rest of the church is not ready to accept it. And I know you did, you and Mary also get married at Xavier?

STEPHANIE: I was a little concerned about this, uh, conversation because it will go on record. But you know, a lot of, a lot of history, herstory is not recorded especially women's stories, and lesbian stories, and any marginalized group. And I do not, so I will not name, but we got married at Xavier. And we got married and we had a bold pastor who said, 'Of course. Of course, you can get married here.' But of course, we had to work things out where, you know, we actually had a dear friend Marya, she was allowed to marry us legally. And then we had a full mass. And so to me, that was, if I was going to get married, it was going to be, why should I, I need to get married just like my sisters and brothers got married in the Catholic church. So what, and Xavier allowed that. Now will the church get closed because I'm saying this, and it's recorded? Well, I don't know. But you want the real history? This takes very courageous, as you said courageous, um, uh, people from all, not just from the top, but from the middle and below and throughout the church. And this is our church. Why shouldn't we be married in our church, right? This is our community. Why shouldn't it be in our community? We, and we give money to the church. I mean, I don't give a lot of money, but you know, we we give our blood, sweat and tears to this church. So it's like, we're no different, and we are, because we're gay, because we're lesbians. But we are no different. Again I think of the many, many gay Catholics and women who don't get this. So I'm very, very much aware of how special Xavier is. Yeah.

NATASHA: I'm just glad, you know, it's such a beautiful thing, you mentioned that, you know, you got the same wedding that your sisters and your brother did. Your brother was it, your brother?

STEPHANIE: Two brothers. Yeah, my two brothers and two sisters.

NATASHA: You got the same wedding that they did. You got the same wedding that any woman, any Catholic woman would want. That you had it in the church. You had it surrounded by your family, your community, and that's such a beautiful thing and it's

something that most people take for granted. But then, if you're a gay person, if you're a lesbian, bi or queer, you just, you don't get those same experiences. But then you come to a place like this, that's so open and welcoming and you can get that same experience as they did.

STEPHANIE: Yeah.

NATASHA: Okay, so well thank you so much Steph. You have given us so much and, you know, your stories are so interesting and you're always such an interesting person to talk to.

STEPHANIE: Oh, you're so kind Natasha. It's okay. (laughter) But yeah, no, I'm so happy this project is happening and, um, yeah.

NATASHA: I'm so happy to part of it

STEPHANIE: I'm glad you're in it. Yeah, totally, totally.

- **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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