

The Corner **OUTREACH**

Saint Augustine and Saint Francis Xavier parishes'
newsletter for Spring 2022

Faith Formation continues to enlighten

The Corner Outreach (CO) team interviewed Sr. Helene Conway and Natalia Parra, respectively the former and current Director of Faith Formation and Pastoral Associate for the parish of St. Augustine - St. Francis Xavier. We wanted to hear about our Children's Faith Formation program and how it has been changed and sustained during pandemic restrictions. We also wanted to introduce Natalia and hear about her first several months at our parish. Here's what they had to say:

CO: How has covid affected the Faith Formation program?

Sr. H: Covid has undoubtedly affected the program and presented many challenges for the catechists as well as for the children and their families. In March 2020, when everything shut down, there were no in-person or virtual classes, and so the initial challenge was to encourage parents to keep the primary goal of our program alive in a family setting. The goal has always been to help the children know how much God loves them, to help them develop a strong personal relationship with Jesus, and enable them to discover the richness of our Catholic faith. Parents were reminded that they are the first and foremost educators of their children in



matters of faith, not just by keeping up with the work book but by the example of their lives. Many parents accepted that challenge and, even in such stressful and difficult times, kept the children conscious of the fact that God "lives in their homes" and is always present to them.

In the fall of 2020, when we began virtual classes, the catechists faced significant challenges. They had to learn to use technology to continue providing the quality faith formation to which our program has always been committed.

They had to familiarize themselves with a whole new program developed for virtual learning and face the unique challenge of a remote classroom. Once we returned to in-person classes, there were new challenges to providing a safe environment so there were screening, sanitizing, social distancing, and air quality processes put in place. Because of social distancing and safety concerns, gathering for prayer in the classroom had to be adjusted. Supplies like crayons, glue sticks, and scissors that previously could be shared now had to be given to each child. The catechists met these and all challenges and have gone above and beyond what has been asked of them, proving that we are blessed with dedicated and creative catechists who enable our program to work so well.

CO: What were the challenges of a virtual classroom?

Sr. H: The biggest challenge of the virtual classroom is keeping the children engaged and focused when we are not physically in the same space. Time constraints made getting the main message of the lesson to take root in the minds and hearts of the children more difficult. Class time can be longer when you are in-person because you can have the

children move around and do different activities. Virtually, the amount of time for the lesson needed to be shorter. Therefore, we needed parents to understand that we partner with them to present the full lesson and that their cooperation is required in “doing the homework” necessary to complete the lesson. Most parents stepped up to the plate and did their share. Another challenge was to create that warm and personal relationship between catechist and child, getting to know one another and creating a safe environment where faith can be nurtured. This is obviously more difficult to do virtually. I did visit each class virtually every weekend to encourage them to share with their families what was being taught to them, at times giving them “simple homework” to involve their parents.

CO: How have you dealt with the challenges created by the renovation of the former SFX school facility?

Sr. H: As part of the lease agreement with the Board of Education, the parish can use the building on weekends for faith formation classes. Since there are two buildings, the agreement allowed us to use the annex building (the newer building) while renovations would begin in the main building and then switch when necessary. Originally, the parish had all new windows installed in both buildings, which created quite a mess, but the annex building was cleaned and made ready for our program. Use of the auditorium was a bit difficult because it is in the main building, which has not yet had any renovations. Since it had been our gathering spot, we’ve had to deal with some problems in order to use the auditorium. Recently there was a lack of communication about when and where work in the building was happening, causing some last-minute adjustments to the program and even a last-minute cancellation of classes.

Communication seems to be better now, and hopefully, future problems will be avoided. All in all, it has been a challenge holding classes in the school building and having the office across the street. Books and supplies, etc. need to be transferred from one place to the other; but slowly we are adjusting to the situation. Another challenge has been creating a warm faith learning environment for learning in classrooms that are empty. Previously, we used classrooms occupied by the children attending St. Francis Xavier Academy, which were decorated and where the environment was obviously Catholic.

Despite the challenges that the leasing and renovating have presented, we are hopeful that one day we will be able to have classes in a newly renovated space where the catechists and children will feel at home and continue to hear the Word of God and learn to live it.

“I am always pleasantly surprised at how much parishioner involvement there is. It is certainly something that is new to me.”

CO: Has the pandemic caused families to move away from the parish or to become more hesitant to enroll their children?

Sr. H: Yes, both; several families moved away in the early days of the pandemic, most relocating with or near other family members, and the majority have not returned. During that year of virtual classes, those children and families did stay connected, attending the remote classes each week from Florida, Iowa, Missouri, and elsewhere. One catechist even conducted class from the Midwest. Others were hesitant to enroll their children, feeling overwhelmed with the stress of regular school classes online as well. Even as in-person classes re-

sumed, several families have still not returned. For some, there are issues of family members being compromised because of health issues, and so there is an option for remote learning. For others, unfortunately, it has simply become an excuse. If children can return to sports and other recreational activities, why not faith formation classes? Hopefully, those parents will come to realize that the development of a strong faith life is one of the most meaningful gifts they can give their children, and while the example of faith in the family is essential, so is the opportunity to learn more about Scripture and our Faith Tradition. Credit should be given to those parents who did realize the importance of having their children attend classes during the pandemic and who continue to do so; we realize this is a challenge for families. Hopefully, we can continue to be partners in helping our children to know God and to live a faith-filled life.

CO: How has the merger of Saint Augustine and Saint Francis Xavier affected the Faith Formation program?

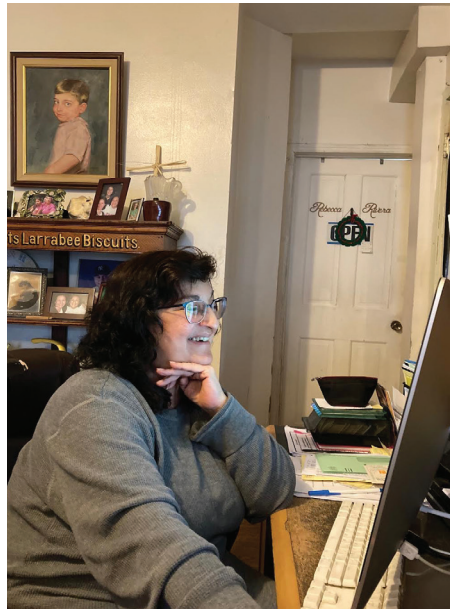
Sr. H: During the merger, we worked together to make the transition as easy as possible for the children, families, and catechists. The two parishes were already in the beginning stages of merged ministries, and since the program at St. Augustine was very small, it made sense to merge with the program at St. Francis Xavier. Gladys Jusino, who at the time was coordinating the program at St. Augustine, reached out to the families and encouraged them to register in the merged program. Three of the catechists from St. Augustine came on board in the merged program, which helped with the transition and helped the St. Augustine families to feel a

connection. All were welcomed, and we became the St. Augustine-St. Francis Xavier Faith Formation Program without much difficulty. I believe the merger of the two parishes has enriched all aspects of our Faith Formation program. The spirituality of each individual makes us stronger as a community and more ready to bring the message of the Gospel to our Park Slope neighbors and beyond.

CO: Natalia, Welcome to SASFX, and congratulations on your role as our Pastoral Associate and Director of Faith Formation. What drew you to join our parish in these roles?

NP: Thank you for the warm welcome. I am grateful for the kindness and generosity of all who have made this transition a pleasant experience. While I am familiar with the role of Director of Faith Formation, expectations and needs vary from parish to parish and even from pastor to pastor. Because of my connection to Father Tumino, I was offered the opportunity to work and serve the people of SASFX. I am familiar with Park Slope and have spent many weekends exploring local restaurants with friends. This neighborhood is beautiful, and the architecture of the church buildings so attracts me. I consider myself lucky to be in close proximity to so much beauty. I still find myself looking up and staring at the stained glass windows, the images of the Saints, and the fine details that reflect the glory of God present with us in these sacred spaces.

I learned so much from the people of Saint Thomas the Apostle but most of all from Father Tumino. I still have much more to learn from him and the wonderful people he has been called to shepherd. Only six months in, I have already witnessed the radical generosity and care of parish members. I look forward to the beautiful friendships I



Joan Rodriguez, 6th Grade Catechist teaching her class remotely

am sure I will make as I continue to settle-in.

CO: What was the best advice you received as you transitioned into this position?

NP: To take time to observe how things have been done and be patient with myself. This is an essential piece of advice for anyone going through a big change in their lives. I am still in the early stages of my journey here at SASFX, but this advice has helped me so far.

CO: What have been some of the differences and similarities you've found between SASFX and Saint Thomas the Apostle?

NP: Both parishes are filled with good, faithful, and generous people who are trying their best to lead faithful lives as witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Like at SASFX, there is a community of religious sisters living at Saint Thomas the Apostle. Both Saint Thomas and SASFX are one-priest parishes with a small, hard-working staff.

At SASFX I found a lot more lay leader involvement than at Saint Thomas.

The great number of parish groups and ministries at the service of God is impressive. Although historically, Saint Augustine and Saint Francis Xavier have been two distinct communities with different personalities and charisms, I have seen them united as the people of God and a light to Park Slope. I am honored to have been invited to be a part of it.

CO: Is there anything that has surprised you about the role, the faith formation program, or the parish?

NP: There have been many. The greatest surprise has been the number of active ministries and parish groups. I have been pleasantly surprised at how much parishioner involvement there is. It is certainly something that is new to me.

CO: How did Sister Helene help as you transitioned into the role?

NP: Sister Helene's presence has been one of the best and most comforting aspects of my transition to this new role. I am still in awe of all that she has done and been for this community. She walked me through my first days and has been a constant resource. I certainly have big shoes to fill. It is an honor to get to know her.

CO: Are there any changes to the program that you hope to make post-Covid?

NP: I will take my time to observe and learn before committing to any significant changes. This parish has a rich history and tradition. I want to be respectful of that in the choices I discern for the program and my responsibilities as Pastoral Associate.

One goal I have, post-COVID, is to recruit and train more volunteers. Having more adults present to help will provide a safer environment and alleviate the burden of some of our most faithful and consistent volunteers.

The Paschal Candle Christ Our Light

The Church is in total darkness, a fire is kindled and blessed, and from that fire a large candle -the Paschal Candle - is lit. This is the opening of the Easter Vigil. As the candle is carried through the church, Christ Our Light is chanted three times and the flame from that candle is spread from parishioner to parishioner until its light fills the church. The Exultet, the Easter Proclamation, is then sung before the candle. The service continues as we listen to our history by the light of that candle – the history of salvation told in the Liturgy of the Word. The candle, first lit at the Easter Vigil, will be lit at all Masses celebrated from Easter to Pentecost and, for the remainder of the liturgical year, on special occasions like baptisms or funerals. What is the significance of the Paschal Candle? It is symbolic of Christ’s resurrection and the victory of the light of Christ over the darkness of death. At baptisms, light from the Paschal Candle is used to light the candles presented to the newly baptized, representing Christ whom they are called to follow. At funeral services it represents our belief in the resurrection of the dead and our life with Christ in the world to come.

If you haven’t taken a close look the candle, you might want to do so. Where will you find it? Most days it will be near the



baptismal font, though during the Easter Season it will be near the ambo, or pulpit. The candle carries many Christian symbols, which include a cross (for Christ’s sacrifice); the Greek letters Alpha and Omega (Christ is the beginning and the end); and five grains of incense representing the wounds in Christ’s hands, feet, and side. The candle is quite large – usually the largest one in the church, and sits on a special candle holder. Our candle holders at each worship site were actually re-purposed. The stand at Saint Francis Xavier was originally part of a candelabra that stood in the sanctuary and the one at Saint Augustine once held the sanctuary lamp.

We are a lively community where interesting things happen. Please feel free to peruse our website, call with any questions and/or follow us on Facebook: @staugustinercparkslope; @stfxbrooklyn

St. Augustine - St. Francis Xavier
Saturday Vigil Mass
5:00 PM at St. Francis Xavier
(225 6th Avenue)
Sunday Masses
9:30 AM at St. Francis Xavier
(225 6th Avenue)
12:00 Noon at St. Augustine
(116 6th Avenue)

Contact Information
225 6th Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11215
718-638-1880
info@sasfx.org
www.sasfx.org

Pastor
Father Frank Tumino

Director of Faith Formation and
Pastoral Associate
Natalia Parra