

## **INTERVIEW WITH NATALIE BLASCO, CONTINIED (IN FULL)**

- 1. Natalie, tell us a little about yourself, i.e. where you were born and grew up; education; seminary background; ordination and ministry assignments to date and family.**

I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico during the time when my father was the Rector of San Jose Episcopal Church in a barrio called Caimito. I am the youngest of three. We lived in Puerto Rico until 1976, when my father was called to plant a new Latino mission in a suburb of Miami called Hialeah. The family served that parish until my father's passing in 2003. At the time of his death, we all lived in Broward County and remained there until 2021, when we decided to follow one of my sisters and her family to Jacksonville.

In January of 2012, I was accepted as a Postulant for Holy Order. I attended seminary at Yale/Berkeley Divinity Schools. I was ordained to the Diaconate in December of 2014 and to the Priesthood in December of 2015, at the hands of Bishop Leo Frade.

In 2015, my very first assignment was as Director of Family Services at St. Christopher's By-the-Sea Episcopal Church and Montessori School in Key Biscayne, Florida. In 2017, I accepted the position of Associate Rector at St. Mary Magdalene Episcopal Church in Coral Springs.

I have been married to Antonio Buehler since 1997 and very openly struggled with infertility. We were never able to have a live birth but are blessed with three nephews from my side of the family and four nieces from Tony's. My mother, Carmen, suffers from dementia and lives with us full-time in our home on the Westside of Jacksonville.

- 2. What form did your call to the ordained ministry take? Seemingly straightforward and/or dependent upon a particular event or series of events or moments in your life and Christian formation? You are the daughter of a priest. How might growing up in a clergy family have informed your formation for ministry?**

By the time my father passed away, he had been retired for about eight (8) years. He had been still serving the same Latino congregation, although, by then, as a supply priest. The church building that they had occupied for 18 years had been sold some years before and the congregation was meeting in the chapel of an assisted living facility. With no church building and no priest, the congregation, lead by the vestry, asked me to accept appointment as a vestry member and the position of Senior Warden. They needed leadership and they felt I would be able to do that.

For three years after my father's death, we paid supply clergy for our weekly Sunday services, and I took on the administrative responsibilities. After a few years of that, the Assistant Bishop of Southeast Florida, Bishop James Ottley, asked me to rent space from the nearest church, All Angels Episcopal Church in Miami Springs. I met the priest there, Mother Susan Keedy, and together we made a plan. A few short months later, we concluded that two Episcopal churches sharing one space was a silly situation. Being one church was a much better solution. We decided to collectively transfer into All Angels and become the

Latino congregation of that church. Susan learned Spanish and I assisted her in any way I could, with Bishop Frade's consent.

Bishop Ottley then turned his attention towards trying to convince me to enter into a discernment process. I eventually did, although I did it kicking and screaming all the way.

I knew the hardships that clergy families live out every day. I was not interested in putting my family through that again. Under Bishop Ottley's direction, I learned that I didn't have to be the same type of self-sacrificing priest my father had been. I could offer myself and my life to the church without sacrificing the well-being of my family and our relationships. It took a while, but I finally said yes to the calling I had felt for many years.

**3. What has been the pattern of your life as a full-time priest? How did your former charges or responsibilities prepare you to date when you accepted a call to St Peter's, Jacksonville? You came directly to St Peter's from St Catherine's Church, Jacksonville, where you had oversight of a Hispanic congregation (within the fold of the wider St Catherine's congregation--- if I understand correctly).**

Yes, at St. Catherine's, I was considered the Associate in charge of the Latino congregation. That meant that I also ministered to the English-speaking parishioners and congregations, if Mother Michael needed me to.

I inherited that congregation from Father Ricardo Medina, who is Cuban and comes from the Old Catholic tradition. Immediately, there were challenges, mainly because I am a cradle Episcopalian and not familiar with some of the Latino traditions of venerating the saints. It was also more of a sacramental congregation, in that baptisms and first communions were the reason why the pews were filled almost every week. I in turn, wanted a congregation that attends church because they desire to worship the Lord and live out a Christ-centered ministry within the contexts of their lives. Although I am not opposed to baptizing children whose parents will never bring them back to church (other than for Christmas and Easter), my process for preparing members for baptism is a little more than those types of families would want to go through.

When I interviewed at St. Peter's, there was some initial pushback with the idea of calling a Liberal woman to be the next rector of their Conservative parish. After jumping through a few hoops and connecting with the leadership of the church, I was finally called to be their Priest-in-Charge, in November of 2023. What they found was that I don't bring politics into the church, but I do insist that if we want to be followers of Christ that we actually have to follow his teachings in everything that we do. The special events in his life and ministry are wonderful celebrations in our Church but his everyday life and teachings are how we should be living our every day.

Much of how I serve the community at St. Peter's is informed by my time as Associate Rector at St. Mary Magdalene in Coral Springs, Florida. St. Peter's has lived through some very good and prosperous times but there has also been a lot of bad times here. I lived the bad times at St. Mary Magdalen. Just six months after beginning my ministry there, the school shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas occurred. Our beloved youth group president, Carmen Schentrup, was a victim of that event. This church, with an AWA of 350, went into mourning alongside the family. It was a time of trauma, not just for the parishioners but also for us as clergy. Two and half months later, the long-time rector was

removed for disciplinary purposes and the process of that removal became a source of trauma also. I lead that church, along with a deacon, for a year and a half. We were able to provide pastoral care to the congregation, on a one-to-one basis or in small group settings, and, by the time an Interim was called, the congregation was intact and working really hard to overcome the lived traumas of the community.

During that time, I also found a parish that had been completely clergy centered. All of the administration had been centered around one person who had the rector's ear and trust. Although she was someone that was trusted and she at no point had committed any malfeasance, the fact was that she had more control than any one person should. Having to navigate leading the parish out of that administrative situation, while also providing the pastoral care necessary throughout the changes, was exhausting. By the time I left there to move to Jacksonville, I thought that I might not have it in me for another call. Instead, those extreme challenges have really made me aware of how well-rounded a priest must be to be able to care for a community spiritually, emotionally and also administratively and financially. All those things are not taught in seminary (neither are plumbing and electrical work) but all of those skills are needed. I do my best to inform myself and learn every day, not just for what I will need for my next sermon or newsletter article, but also about all the things that an Executive Director of a non-profit organization needs to know to be successful. It's hard work but it's work that is necessary for our survival as an institution in our communities.

**4. What is the nature of your ministry at St Peter's? Do you continue to combine being Rector to a wider congregation while maintaining ministry to Hispanic Episcopalians?**

At St. Peter's, I am the full-time Rector of a bilingual community. We have a small English-speaking congregation and an even smaller Latino congregation. I celebrate two services every Sunday, one in each language. On special occasions, we have bilingual services, such as during Holy Week and on Easter Sunday and Christmas. It is my intention to create one community that loves each other and works together to serve the greater community. We need to grow but we need to do that together.

As Rector of St. Peter's, I am also the President of the Board of Directors of Community Health Outreach (CHO). CHO has three different ministries. The first is a medical and dental clinic that offers completely free services to people who do not have insurance and cannot afford medical care. The second is The Lord's Pantry. Every Saturday morning, we offer groceries to the surrounding community, most of which is Latino. Finally, the third ministry is called Baby Luv. On Wednesday mornings, families line up to receive diapers, formula, and fresh and healthy food for their babies.

Outreach is an essential component of St. Peter's. When I first interviewed for the position, I was worried that this church, that could not afford a full-time priest, would die off and the community being served, both at the church and at CHO, would not have the resources needed for their survival. We are in a community that is considered a medical and food desert. When a church closes, although a sad moment for sure, the members have a variety of churches that they can attend instead. Our poor communities don't have the luxury of moving around to find the services that they so desperately need for their families. It has always been evident to me that the outreach that happens in this place is the core ministry

here. That was confirmed to me when we had a “dreaming session” with the entire congregation and almost everything that they “dreamed” of was concerning the care of those in need in their immediate community.

**5. Share a little, if you will, of your vision for St Peter’s, Jacksonville. What sort of parish church do you see it as being and as having the potential to realize more fully?**

At St. Peter’s, we are in the process of trying to develop a Redevelopment plan for the church property. We have buildings that have many, many years of deferred maintenance and that were built for a church that needed to accommodate a congregation of 500. Sadly, that is not the case today and I don’t think, given our current environment, that it will ever be again.

Nevertheless, we do understand that our presence here in this corner of Jacksonville, is not about being the traditional church. Our community needs more than that. We want to make sure our presence here is guaranteed for many more generations to come, so that we can meet those needs for a very long time. Our redevelopment plan, as it still lives in our minds, is one that will preserve our church, but the majority of the property will be used to offer services to those in need, such as affordable housing, the expansion of CHO services and possibly the collaboration with other non-profits that also serve this particular community.

It's a fact that the number of people in churches, of any denomination, is slowly decreasing as time passes. And, as generations grow up not experiencing a traditional commitment to the worship of God and the development of a Christ-centered community, we must find new ways to do that. Sometimes that means the shedding of our traditional buildings so that they can be utilized for the good of all rather than for the good of a select few.

**6. You and I began to talk about putting together a licensed lay ministry course sponsored by the Bishop’s Institute that would take its shape and development from a specifically Hispanic perspective of life in the Episcopal Church. I think it is fair to say we discovered, in the first instance, that there is not an abundance of resource materials readily available in setting it up. What would such a course look like and how would it serve developing lay leadership to serve the needs of Episcopalians of Hispanic background and community?**

When I served the church in Southeast Florida, this question would have been easier to answer. The majority of the Latinos served there are of Cuban descent and the Cuban Episcopal Church is pretty well established. Here in Jacksonville, I first have to explain to people who I am, why I call myself a priest, and why there is no statue of the Virgin in the Sanctuary. Once they have accepted my explanations and decide to come to church on a regular basis, my biggest challenge is that I have to teach them the Bible as if I was teaching a Sunday School class. They are, mostly, not familiar with the stories of the Bible. To add to the difficulty, we have very few Latino priests and Latino leaders in the Episcopal Church to help with the extensive teaching that has to happen in order to get people to where they need to be in relation to God and the Church.

I believe that those few of us who are capable of developing materials, even if just for local use, should make that a priority so that we can train more leaders in the church. That training needs to incorporate the Bible, directly and not as a reference. Many times, we

leaders take it for granted that our parishioners know what we are talking about when we reference a historical event mentioned in the Bible. We cannot do that with our Latino parishioners. Once we have their commitment to be a leader, we have to kill two birds within one training – the study of the Bible and how to serve in Christ’s holy church.

We also must take into account that most Latinos in this particular community are people that are struggling financially. I say that because, often in the Episcopal Church, we offer training and ask for what we might think is a minimal contribution. The people that are sitting in my pews for a Spanish service are also getting in line on Saturdays for groceries at CHO. They do not have an extra \$35 to attend a training and it is not feasible for them to drive a long way to attend.

**7. Looking to the future and to the mission of the Christian church in the world, what gifts or charism might the Episcopal Church have that are useful to that mission?**

When I was in seminary, a young seminarian told me that my Anglican identity challenged his Anglican identity, and he wasn’t very happy about that. That young man is now serving a predominantly White, affluent church in New York City. I doubt that my Anglican identity is every going to cross paths with his but, if he continues the path that he is on, they will never need to.

Who are we trying to serve in the Episcopal Church? That is the question we need to ask ourselves. If who we want filling our pews are the affluent few of this world, then no change is needed. The rest of our churches will just die off, eventually. But, if we are sincere in saying that we want to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world, then we must meet people where they are, even if that challenges the way we worship or the way that we know our selves to be as a Church. Our country doesn’t look or sound like it did some generations ago. I know that for some people that is a scary thing but it’s the reality that we are living. If we want our Episcopal Church to thrive, then our mindset needs to change, in step with our new demographic.

You ask which gifts might the Episcopal Church have or develop? I would say that the Church must accept the gifts that walk in through our doors, whether or not those gifts are the ones we are used to. For example, does church music have to be exclusively from The Hymnal 1982? Can we incorporate that young man from Cuba, that has a gift for playing the bongos, into our music ministry? What about letting that group of African American ladies develop a Gospel Choir? Can we hire speakers that don’t look like us or sound like us as guest speakers for our Clergy Conference or any other type of training? We say that we don’t have more diverse congregations because we are not attracting those populations in our communities but are we doing anything that would actually attract them?

In my particular context, I find that I am welcome as a Latino priest, as long as the Episcopal Church doesn’t have to change to accommodate me or my people. One of the facts that I learned from the Latino Ministry Competency Course, that I attended two years ago at VTS, was that the majority of Latinos in this country don’t actually speak Spanish but they identify as Latino and are attracted to the cultural aspects of Latino worship. To me, that means that we could have more Latino ministry going on in our Church if we allowed those Latinos to share their cultural gifts within an English-speaking context.

In answer to your question, I believe that the gifts that we should be developing are the gifts of acceptance and inclusion.