

## Queer and Catholic: A CLGS Oral History Project

### Archival Identification:

**Interviewer:** Emma Cieslik

**Interviewee:** Xorje Olivares

**Date of interview:** August 23, 2022

**Overview:** Xorje Olivares (he/him) is a gay Catholic man of Mexican and Tejano descent. He was born in Eagle Pass, Texas, where he grew up and his entire family still lives, to two schoolteachers. He and his family were and are closely involved in their local parish, Our Lady of Refugee, and he served as an altar server through his childhood. After attending the University of Texas at Austin, where he majored in broadcasting and Mexican American Studies, he moved to New York City after graduating in 2010. In New York City, New York, and today in San Francisco, California, he works a broadcast journalist and podcast producer. His previous work included broadcasting at ABC News and Sirius XM focused on queer and religious identity, including the Queer Channel at Sirius XM, as well as freelance writing for Vice.com, Playboy, and other outlets. Now, he produces the Queer I Am Lord podcast uplifting the stories of Queer Catholics around the United States. He was 34 years old at the time of this interview.

Keywords: Eagle Pass, Texas, Mexican-Texan identity, Mexican Catholic queerness, Mexican machismo, Sirius XM Queer Channel, Out at Saint Paul, Queer I Am Lord podcast

**00:00:00**

*Cieslik:* So I'll go ahead--and we're recording now. This is an interview conducted by myself, Emma Cieslik, on Tuesday, August 23rd, [2022] starting at about 6:04 pm Eastern Standard Time, about 3:04 Pacific Standard Time for Queer and Catholic, A CLGS Oral History Project. I use she/her pronouns. We are recording this oral history interview via Zoom, while I sit at Washington DC, George Washington University Library, and Xorje Olivares sits in San Francisco, California. I wanted to sincerely thank you for your time and for agreeing to contribute to the Queer and Catholic Oral History Project.

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*Olivares:* Of course, thank you for having me.

**00:00:43**

*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and to start out the interview, could you please introduce yourselves?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, sure, so my name is Xorje Olivares. I'm originally from the South Texas region, essentially the Texas-Mexico Border, spent the first eighteen years of my life there, and then after college, moved to New York City. I will say the entire time I was back home on the border, grew up in a very Catholic household. I always like to say that every member of the family was involved in some form of activity within the Church. So I was an altar server for 10 years. My sister was a lector. My mother, I think even still to this day, is the president of the local alter society chapter that we have, and then my dad--my dad is a very

creative sort of arts-forward person, and so my dad is the one who is tasked with helping on Palm Sunday get everything set up for the religious activities,

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*Olivares:* decorating the advent wreath and making sure that that's good to go for that season. So [I] spent a good portion of my time in going to church when I was back home and then did the same when I was going to college, and when I moved to New York, consistently went to church every so often. And then I would say that the last five or six years I was living in New York, which was up until 2020, I was a part of a LGBTQ Catholic group called Out at Saint Paul, which is tied to the Church of Saint Paul the Apostle, which is a Paulist parish in New York City. So all of that happening in the background, while I'm doing professionally broadcasting, worked at Sirius XM radio for several years, now working in podcasting full-time and yeah, doing everything to either talk about my own lived experience or find ways to highlight others who have similarly lived experiences, whether that comes to queer identity, whether it comes to religious identity, anything that sets them apart from, I guess, the traditional way of life that we see in most forms of media.

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*Cieslik:* That's wonderful. I'm so excited that you're able to share your lived experience with the project. I know it will be very, very valuable and rewarding to include this in our future research and what will be shared with the public soon.

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*Olivares:* Nice, I love that.

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*Cieslik:* And starting off, would you mind sharing your personal pronouns?

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*Olivares:* Sure, so my pronouns are he/him/his.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful. Would you mind sharing more about your sexual orientation and gender expression?

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*Olivares:* Sure, so I always go between queer and gay. I will say when it comes to if we're going with strict sexual orientation, identifiers, I say gay, but there's something kind of beautiful about using queer in that I feel like it is far more inclusive of experiences that are beyond my own and because of the--what I feel to be the joyous nature of queerness, which is community and like being amongst others and being a part of this really awesome population that has such a unique fabric to its own existence. Like using queer, I think, just allows it to feel that much deeper, both spiritually, emotionally. So I will say, yeah, I go between the two: queer and gay.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and along those lines, you shared a little bit about what your upbringing looked like. Would you mind sharing when and where you were born?

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*Olivares:* Sure, so I was born in a small border town called Eagle Pass, Texas. I think our population is about 35,000, and we are--if we're talking about the closest large metropolitan city to us--we're about two and a half hours from San Antonio, southwest of San Antonio, so grew up there, essentially third generation Texan, even though my father's--my paternal grandfather, was born in Mexico. Everybody, for the most part has been from this Texas border town, even though we're all ethnically Mexican, Mexican American, so I grew up in this very culturally rich part of the country in Spanish. Like I said the first eighteen years of my life, there did all the things that you could imagine doing when it came to Catholic religious life,

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*Olivares:* since there wasn't much to do in our small town, so it was: hey, there's a youth group at church. Why not do stuff with a youth group? And so that means, you know, going to the bowling alley with the youth group, doing movie nights with the youth group, so very much as involved socially as I could be with other kids my age about what it meant to have this spiritual expression. My whole family still lives there. My sister, my only sibling, lives back home with my parents. Everybody within my family is very much Catholic forward, whether that's going to mass every Sunday or at least having the visual representations of Catholicism in their home, whether that's a crucifix, a crucifix hanging somewhere or because of Mexican culture, images of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

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*Olivares:* So I feel like that's always been a constant presence in my life and then, like I said, went to college and consistently went to--I went to the University of Texas at Austin, and they have a Catholic center, which oddly enough--I mentioned being part of a Paulist parish in New York--the Catholic center at UT [University of Texas] Austin was also a Paulist parish, and I think the thing that I appreciated about the Catholic university was maybe because of where Austin was in terms of political location in the state, like a little bit more liberal than other areas in my state, my home state, there was a bigger opportunity for me to see different sexual or gender expressions within those who would go to Mass. And I feel like that was my first introduction to understanding that, "oh, not everybody who goes to Mass is the straight-presenting person or somebody who exists within a traditional' lifestyle world," and then left college, moved to New York and sort of went on my own Catholic journey in that particular way.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and I know you mentioned a little bit more about where you grew up. Would you mind sharing where you attended primary and secondary school?

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*Olivares:* Sure, so I went to--I was a public school kid. So my elementary school was a little school called Nellie Mae Glass Elementary. It was named after a local resident, and the way it worked out at the time is elementary school was first grade through sixth grade and then we had junior high, which was seventh and eighth grade, and then high school--nine through ten, nine through 12. And because I was in such a small town, we only had two middle schools in the entire town, and then we only had one high school, so--and everything was aptly named Eagle Pass Junior High, Eagle Pass High School. So did all of my schooling there and was blessed to graduate salutatorian, second in my class, and then kind of use that as the jumping off board to go to University of Texas at Austin.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful! When did you start your studies at University in Texas?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, so I went to UT starting in 2006. At the time, I was only a communications major, broadcast journalism and then, in the course of me pursuing my broadcast journalism degree, the idea was I was going to go be a TV reporter somewhere, a local reporter who was just appearing at the 10 PM local news. In the course of taking a few classes, though, started to recognize that we had a really significant Mexican-American studies center at the University of Texas-Austin. So [I] started to learn a little bit more about the center and some of the academic offerings that they had, and then realized that this was something I really wanted to spend some time getting to know a little bit better, so [I] had that become my second major. Because I think my mentality at the time was if I'm going to be a broadcast journalism major and if I was going to be pursuing that as my career--I'm so sorry. [Olivares's video switches bright green and then black.]

**00:09:33**

*Cieslik:* You're good, no worries.

**00:09:35**

*Olivares:* I don't know how that did that. Umm, can you physically see me?

**00:09:45**

*Cieslik:* I can't quite see you. I think I see like the outline of your head.

**00:09:49**

*Olivares:* Let's see if this works, here we go.

**00:09:53**

*Cieslik:* There we go. It's just perfect.

**00:09:55**

*Olivares:* I have never had that happen before, so that was very weird.

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*Cieslik:* No worries.

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*Olivares:* So I figured if I was going to be pursuing this professionally, I wanted to and if I wanted to highlight and showcase stories that were similar to my own, I wanted to be able to say that I had the academic knowledge behind it so that it wasn't just like: "oh, of course you're this Mexican kid who's going to be talking about Mexican issues." At least I could say, "Well, after having read and after having done this and after having studied this," I wanted to always have that sort of in my back pocket should I ever be questioned. So did both of those [majors] in the course of working at the university. I worked at the campus TV station. I worked at the campus radio station, had a chance to have my own weekly show at the campus radio station

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*Olivares:* and was very much involved in the Mexican-American Studies Department that was there, just doing things that I felt were culturally relevant and even though I was somewhat close to my hometown--Austin's maybe about three and a half hours from my hometown--still find ways to sort of lean into Mexican-ness, though I was further away from the epicenter of that Mexican, is for me than I had ever experienced before. So yeah, both of those and graduated in 2010.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and along those lines I was really curious to dig into--earlier, you had mentioned that the parish that you were involved in, in the Paulist-specific student group at that university, affected your understanding of queerness and LGBTQIA+ identity within the Church. What did that look like and when did you first start becoming involved with that group?

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*Olivares:* So I will say the Catholic center at UT--I was never formally a part of a group, but I did notice some students who, because I was in the process of exploring my own sexuality and because of some of the journalism work that I was doing, exploring queer topics and understanding who within the campus was in a position of authority to talk about these queer topics, there were certain faces that I recognized. There were certain people who were tied to groups that I recognized that when I would see them at Mass, I would say, "Oh, okay, I'm not alone here," because I will say that I very much knew that I was already queer when I started going to college. The first people that I came out to was maybe in eighth grade, umm, probably around very early stages of high school.

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*Olivares:* So my understanding of self had already been somewhat completed, so this understanding of me having started going to this church in Austin, I already knew that I was a queer person within this sacred space. So seeing people, even though this was not something I ever witnessed, and I wish that I did at the time because it kind of would have stopped a lot of certain complications, but never really saw anybody, any same-sex person, do anything visually--umm, what's the right word? Like when it came to the sign of the peace, there was never any sort of physical representation of like these, "Oh, these were two queer people

exchanging the sign of peace." There was never a moment where, at the beginning, at the procession part of presenting the gifts to the altar,

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*Olivares:* there was never a same-sex couple who was doing that or anybody who was who presented a little more queer by traditional standards than not. So those cues were missing. It was just that, but I had already slowly and surely started to expose myself to to queer circles on campus and in the Austin area, and so, having seen those people, that's when I thought, "Okay, either this is a welcoming space or we are trying to figure out what is welcoming space, and this is going to be one of the first stops to help us figure out if that's actually true."

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those lines, you mentioned that you had come out to yourself personally in a little bit of middle school and high school before you entered college. What did your coming out experience look like and who did you come out too?

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*Olivares:* I feel like the coming-out experience was very difficult, but not as difficult as it could have been or compared to any of my friends who are also from that same region. So I think a lot of my hesitancy about coming out earlier was because of the Catholic angle, trying to figure out for myself does that mean I'm condemned, does that mean I'm going to Hell, does this mean that, like, should my entire family leave this Earth, will they all be in Heaven and somehow I'm in Hell? What? So, I think, after I was going through all of the rollercoaster, I don't quite remember the moment where I had that realization of, "I don't think I'm going to Hell. If I've been told this whole time that God loves me for who I am and I'm created in the image and likeness of God, I doubt that he'll send me to Hell."

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*Olivares:* So I think once that realization happened, I was a little more forthcoming with who I was with my friends, and so I would say, from eighth grade throughout my high school career, it was just coming out to friends. There was no coming out to family. Up until I was already in college. I figured, you know, should anything come up, at least I'm somewhat on my own. It was [pause] kind of you do all these little wrestling things with yourself and you try to figure out when to come out to somebody and how. But I came out to my sister my sophomore year of college. My sister was also attending the University of Texas at Austin at that time. She is my only sibling. She and I are incredibly close, and so one National Coming Out Day day decided to use that opportunity to talk to my sister.

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*Olivares:* My sister was incredibly supportive and for about three years was the only person in my family who knew. I did not come out to my parents until I was 22. I was already living in New York and kind of similarly to how I felt in college, I felt at least I was already living in New York. I was establishing myself should I need an exit. I mean every queer person thinks of this right. There's this fatalistic mentality of like what's going to happen when I come out, what do I prepare for, and so I was trying to prepare myself that if my parents

didn't approve because of this Catholic and because of this Mexican background, I at least had New York to fall back on, and I am always so grateful that my family was incredibly receptive of the news and took it upon themselves, which I appreciate,

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*Olivares:* and I guess not many people think about this, my mother took the burden of me having to come out to everybody in my family back home, since we're in this very small hometown, and told the people that she felt like I needed to know. So I didn't have to have that awkward conversation with aunts, with uncles, with cousins. My mother and my sister took that responsibility away from me, and it sounds weird even phrasing in that way, but I was glad that they did it and I think in doing so we're able to accept the reality of the situation, more so because they had to keep repeating it to the people around us. So I would say part of the reason why I came out to my parents was because my first job, my first like real big boy job, was it Sirius XM radio working on the Queer Channel,

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*Olivares:* and I was doing some on-air work on the Queer Channel. I don't know how I was able to make that happen at 22, but my parents kept asking me about like, "When can we listen to you? When can we listen to you?" So that precipitated that situation of like, ahh, how can I not say anything? So I'd like to say that from that moment forward, I was always coming out to people because I was always on that channel and whoever listened to it, tada, here's this kid who's talking about being queer, but I never had to do the formal, "Hi, I'm gay. This is my life, take it or leave it." It has just been as a natural expression of my day-to-day, that my queerness comes up, that my gay identity comes up. But the the last time I formerly had to tell somebody, "oh, I'm gay," I feel like was that night 12 years ago or whatever, yeah, I guess, 12 years ago.

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*Cieslik:* I'm so glad to hear it was a positive experience.

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*Olivares:* Thank you.

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*Cieslik:* And that people around you supported you. I'm very glad to hear it.

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*Olivares:* I was very, I was very blessed. I think I was. I will say that it took my dad a little bit of time, but in that little bit of time, I never felt unloved. I never felt completely like cast out, excluded from family life or from this like Olivares love nest that we have as a family. I think it was just me providing him with the necessary space to be able to say what was on his mind, maybe even to just himself. My mother. I've always had a very deep connection with my mother, not to say that I don't have one similarly with my father, but I think the next day my mom sent me all the "I love out" texts and sent me all of the like wonderful affirmations that any queer child would ever hope to receive, and it's been that way ever since.

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*Cieslik:* I'm so glad to hear it. I'm so glad to hear it, [chuckles] and along those same lines, you mentioned that as you were discovering your identity in navigating this, you were essentially trying to unpack the question of what does it mean to be queer and Catholic? Can those things co-exist? Would you mind speaking more to what that experience was like and what prompted it?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, I feel like, whether explicitly or implicitly, I feel like there was always this conversation, and I say that in that I don't remember if this happened, particularly at my parish or because being a part of Millennial generation that was a little already more plugged into the internet culture and like reading things and you know, seeing what this article has to say or what this form of television has to say about this topic. I felt like I was already getting all of these cues, that queerness and religious identity were counter to each other, and I don't think there was ever like a moment at the pulpit where the priest said something that took me aback and was like, "oh, I should never exist here." I never had that moment and I'm very grateful that I didn't, but I feel like that doesn't mean there wasn't in moments of,

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*Olivares:* "You know, we were really excited for you to get confirmed. You're going to get confirmed if you're going to get married, and if our going to get married, like all the wonderful things that come with marriage," and you knew that they were talking about opposite sex marriage. So it just like little things like that I don't think are necessarily religious specific, but we're more societal from what was going on at the moment, so understanding there was all these messages that were coming my way and trying to decipher what those messages actually meant. I think it wasn't until when I had that realization I talked about earlier about, "Well, if God's meant to love me, I think he loves me for who I am," and then also I talked about being part of a youth group,

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*Olivares:* so our youth group would sometimes partner with a neighbouring youth group, and we would just have like retreats, little things to do with each other, and it was during one of those retreats where the priest, for some reason, I have no idea why it came to this issue of identity, but the priest said, "You know, if you're gay, it's totally okay, like you don't have to feel badly about anything," and I think that's when the light turned on in my head like, "Oh, this whole time, I was kind of afraid for nothing." So I really do give that priest a lot of credit for one of those immediate shifts that happened for me where it went from, "umm, I think I might still have some doubts about this" to, "Oh, no, no, I'm totally good then," and part of that was again, I was an altar boy.

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*Olivares:* I knew this priest quite quite well, considering I was serving with this person every Sunday. So for it to come from somebody who was in a position of authority, or at least was a voice that I respected and cared so deeply about, yeah, I kind of took that information, and I ran with it, but I feel like that still doesn't, that still doesn't keep me from feeling certain ways



about oh, you know this language of "you can love the sinner but hate the sin," or "you can be gay, but you can't engage in sexual activity as a queer person," like all of those things were still somewhat lingering because it felt like, "Okay, it was fine to be gay, but then the actual part about being gay, maybe not so much." So that took a little bit of unpacking, but then I got to the point where, like I just can't be bothered, this is becoming so much emotional labor for me that I'd rather continue on my terms of what it meant to be a "good Catholic," while also staying true to myself, knowing that I was very much a queer person and that there was nothing that was going to change that about me.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and do you happen to recall the priest's name?

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*Olivares:* It was Father Jim. I don't remember Father Jim's last name, but Father Jim was part of--because of our local parish, our priest order was Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and they, I think, get rotated out a little more frequently than some other priests. So I feel like he was there for about five years, maybe it bit longer, but he has since rotated out of my hometown parish. I have no idea where he is now, can't say that I keep in communication with him, but I do remember it was Father Jim.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and along those lines, I know you hadn't mentioned it before, did you know anyone, or have anyone in your childhood who identified as queer and religious?

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*Olivares:* Ooh, I would say even to this day, I have not encountered anybody in my family, whether that's extended family, nuclear, close family, nobody. I am the only body, the only body, I'm the only person who is openly queer. That being said, because we grew up in such a small town, and it's the same town that my parents grew up in, my parents have got lifelong friends who still live in our home town and who very much were aunts and uncles for us growing up, and one of these aunts--her name is Becky. Becky has been my dad's best friend since they were like 15 years old and never knew her to be a queer person outwardly, but just knew that she was living with her friend, and they've been together now in hindsight, knowing the reality of the situation, they'd been together several years,

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*Olivares:* were partners for several years and towards the end of me living in my hometown, they would go to Mass, not as often as I would say we did, because altar server, lector, siblings, we were always assigned to something, so we always had to go. But it was then--and then, even though we had zero connection to these people, there is--because in our home town our parish is kind of small, and so everybody always sits in the exact same spot. Come Sunday, it's like, "umm, that's our pew. That's your pew. This is your like--this is how we all sit." For a good portion of time. There was what I now understand to be a gay male couple that would sit behind us, and I don't quite remember if they had a child or not. I feel like my brains trying to make it seem like they did,

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*Olivares:* all that to say I remember them being at Mass, never talked to them, never had any interaction with them. But I appreciated that I saw them, and then there was another person. He was a colleague of my dad's, so both my parents were retired teachers. My dad taught at the local high school, and one of my dad's colleagues had a son who would present a little more queer than others in the city and he would go to Mass every so often. So there were certain cues of people that I would see even in my hometown parish, but it wasn't as prominent that it guided me in a new sort of way like, not like I asked anybody for guidance. I didn't ask anybody for help in discerning my feelings. It was, "Oh, cool, cool. I see you all," but not much of a of an educational process by having them there.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and I know you've mentioned it several times that your family's background from Mexico, as well as your Mexican identity, has influenced how you interpret and how you express your faith. How would you say that interacted with your understanding of sexuality and gender growing up? I know that's a part of it in some way.

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*Olivares:* Yeah, I feel like the thing that's so--I'll say that this is quite specific to the Tejano identity, and like Texas-Mexican identity, just because in the course of my life, having been exposed to other Mexican-American folks who didn't grow up in that region, there's a little bit of a difference in how they approach this, but at least for myself, and because I grew up in such a small town, it's very family-based and very family-oriented and very much like, when you have the like--you have the big parties after the Baptisms and you know there's a big old party after the wedding, and of course the wedding's going to be at church, and there's--I mentioned little bit too before about the pictures of the Virgen de Guadalupe, there's a lot of cultural things,

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*Olivares:* a lot of Mexican cultural things that are very much informed by Catholicism, and I think a lot of it is the iconography. Some of it's the language, like you say, like if you're departing a situation with somebody who's a Spanish monolingual speaker, they'll say, "si Dios lo quiere," "if God wills it." Whenever I would leave my grandmother in any sort of situation, she was a Spanish monolingual speaker, she would say, "que Dios te bendiga," "may God bless you." So even if we weren't like the most devout of Catholics, though to say we were, like there was so much sprinkling of that in how we lived our day-to-day, so that was like the Mexican and the Catholic. Now when it comes to the sexuality part, the biggest difference is when you're talking about Tejano or south Texas identity,

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*Olivares:* you're talking about the cowboy hats, the Stetson boots, you're talking about the big old belt buckle, the absolute definition of like "machismo," and this like masculine energy that is so much ingrained in how we understood male identity to be, so I think that's where a lot of my like, "uhh, I don't quite see myself here," because a lot of the Mexican cultural representation was far more in that space and far more, you know, outlined by gender norms

like, "Mexican women or Mexican-American women look like this, Mexican or Mexican-American men look like this." There is no queer person, outwardly queer person in our town that gave me the visual cue of, "oh, okay, that is something that I am more aligned with you than I am with this cowboy hat wearing figure."

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*Olivares:* So I think it was the ability to remove myself from my hometown and thrust myself into entertainment, into whatever was happening in pop culture. So that way, oddly enough, a lot of my ability to accept my queerness was that looking at non-POC [people of color] people live their queerness, so all the TV shows, the Will and Graces, you know, whatever episodes of Friends, whatever show, whatever like cast member on Real World was queer at the time, it was all very much a white representation of queerness, but even then I felt more called to looking at how they live their life, because I at least got that. I had the Mexican part down, I mean it was already a part of my blood, it was a part of my DNA. I didn't have to worry about how to fully express myself there. It was needing to look at mainstream representation, to kind of get a better sense as to how to reflect that for myself.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, it's a wonderful delve into your experience, and I really appreciate you sharing it. Along those lines and thinking more about the space in which you grew up and experienced a lot of your initial ideologies, can you tell me more about your family of origin?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, so my parents were both born in my hometown of Eagle Pass, Texas. My dad's parents were migrant workers. His father was born in the town across from ours in Mexico, and his mother, my paternal grandmother, was born in Oklahoma to what I have now come to understand, even though, since she has passed, [I] don't have quite all the information but was a part of an indigenous community there. So [I] at least have a bit of indigenous blood in my background, so they were--they lived a little bit more that way. Migrant workers worked at the local stores to try to support my father and his two siblings. And then, on my mother's side, business owners, my paternal, my maternal grandfather, owned one of the local gas stations and then my maternal grandmother operated a grocery store from their home that was attached to their home.

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*Olivares:* So they--different income brackets, different kind of navigation of life because of that, but I think the other biggest distinction is, even though they came from the same hometown, my mother is about 10 years older than my dad, so a little bit different generations and already kind of noticing the differences between like, yeah, just kind of what their economic backgrounds afforded them because of it.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and would you mind sharing the names of both of your parents?

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*Olivares:* Oh yeah, so my dad's name is Juan, and my mom's name is Margarita, and they met

in 1984. My dad was working at the local high school and so was my mother's sister, and so at some point were all in the same space together and connection happened, and they have now been married 37--wait is that the math? They got married in [19]84, 38 years.

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*Cieslik:* That's so exciting, and along those lines as well, which parish did you attend in your hometown when, either when you were growing up or if it was a different one to this day whenever you go back home?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, so it's still the exact same parish I grew up in whenever I go back home. It's called Our Lady of Refuge Church, and it is, I think, one of five or six Catholic churches in our small hometown, so that to say that like it's a pretty Catholic community.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those lines, did you complete any religious education or CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] classes growing up? Was that part of your educational experience?

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*Olivares:* I did so, so I never went to--so our Catholic school was quite small and only went to eighth grade. I never did Catholic school as a form of formal education, but I did go to CCD classes and did the whole First Communion, Confirmation. All--I feel like if I started maybe in like second or third grade, and I would go to classes until maybe like ninth grade or tenth grade, so about six or seven years.

**00:36:41**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those same lines, what did you learn initially? Did you learn anything from those CCD classes about gender and sexuality? Was it more explicit, or I know you mentioned that some parts of your understanding came implicit from things you heard?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, I can't say that I recall anything that was alarming or anything that would have given me pause as already a kid who knew that there was something different about himself. I think if anything did come about, it was sort of what I would have learned outside of church too, which is, "I'm supposed to get married, I'm supposed to have the 2.3 kids, the white picket fence, everything supposed to be glorious and amazing," so nothing that that made me feel unwelcome or made me feel othered.

**00:37:33**

*Cieslik:* That makes sense. And when did you first--I know to you yourself came out about what that experience and identity looked like--but when did you first start to understand that as part of the wider queer and LGBTQIA+ community?

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*Olivares:* Can you say that again?

**00:37:50**

*Cieslik:* Of course, so I know growing up you had an understanding of what you yourself were as a gay man, but when did you come to use that terminology? When did that become part of your understanding?

**00:38:03**

*Olivares:* Ooh, thank you. I will say kind of--I did what, unfortunately, a lot of people do in this queer journey of using a very accurate orientation of bisexuality as a crutch to see, to gauge how people react to that, because I could say, "Look, they're still part of me that's straight because I still experience attractions to women," even though I knew wholeheartedly that that wasn't true for me. But slowly but surely started using that word, having a full understanding of what that word meant, but still knowing that that word wasn't true for me. So I think when I first came out in eighth grade, I did use the word "gay," and again I think a lot of that was from having watched, you know, this TV show, that movie, seeing this music video where I knew what that looked like and then kind of like Googling the right thing or seeing the right dialogue between people where the whole point of,

**00:39:13**

*Olivares:* "Oh, I'm gay. Oh, okay I'm connecting the dots here. This makes sense." So once--I would say used the like bisexuality entrance point for a couple of weeks, like a month, and then I felt a bit ashamed for doing that. I was like, "No, it's not right for me." So then really leaned into using the appropriate language and using the word "gay" for several years solely until, I think maybe moving to New York, and I think once I moved to New York and really got to see queerness more so than just gay male identity, that's when I made the shift of, "Okay, I kind of like this umbrella term a little bit better." But yeah, as I mentioned when I was growing up, there was really no person in my immediate space that used the word "gay" or used any sort of queer identifier, so I couldn't really learn from them. So I think it really was, whatever I saw in entertainment to kind of guide me in that direction.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those lines as well, transitioning to that part of your life, when did you move to New York?

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*Olivares:* So, I moved to New York right after--essentially, right after graduation. I graduated from UT Austin in 2010, and because of the work that I was doing, got a job to work at ABC News, the network, and so I moved in May of 2010 and lived there up until July 2020, and in the course of those 10 years worked at primarily two spaces: one, ABC News, where I did for a few months as a freelancer, and then the vast majority of my time, 95% of my time, working at Sirius XM radio. I was hired to work on the Queer Channel. They were looking for somebody who had on-air experience. I know that I was probably too young for the role but somehow got hired for the role, and I like to think that my exploration of queerness--like I have so much to thank that channel for giving me a full-on introduction to what

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*Olivares:* queerness could look like and for New York City giving me an introduction to what queerness looked like. There are no gay bars or clubs in my hometown. I do not know when there will ever be one because of just the nature of that area. But you know, as many gay bars as I want to go to, as many queer spaces, that I want to go to, the Stonewall Inn, the birthplace of the Queer movement, and then, yeah, just being a part of the Queer Channel because it was a live daily channel hearing people call in about their queer experiences. This person in Arkansas, this person in Wyoming, this person down in Florida, knowing that we existed everywhere and not only did we exist everywhere, but we sounded completely different.

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*Olivares:* We all--I mean there was no way to to see what these people look like, based off of identifiers that they would submit to us, kind of imagine what these people would look like and just really feel like, Wow! How else would I know that we were out there than having this moment to do it." I was also very grateful that, because of my role in the channel, got a chance to be live on the radio when gay marriage was passed, when, you know, the major Supreme Court decisions happened, was very lucky to have spoken with Edie Windsor, who was one of the major plaintiffs in these landmark cases. So I had such a wonderful entry point to queerness that it really fortified how I felt about myself, and I don't want to say that Catholicism took a back seat because it never did.

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*Olivares:* I was still consistently going to church this entire time, but I never allowed one to compete with the other. I never wanted my queerness to make my Catholic side feel badly, or my Catholic side to make my queerness side feel badly. It was, "this is how I am. I'm going to experience all these things." I'm getting a chance to, you know, watch all these different films I would have never seen. Experience queer culture in a way that I never would have experienced it and still feel like I've set aside time to go to mass, either on Saturday or Sunday, to fulfill that obligation that I have for myself to do it. The first six years, five years, six years, was living in New York. I lived across from a Catholic church, so I would go to that church for Mass, but after a while I felt really weird because I would go by myself.

**00:44:14**

*Olivares:* I didn't really have other friends, especially other queer friends, who really wanted to join me in this Catholic expression. Understandably so. They've all felt either abandoned by the Church or hurt by the Church, and it's not my place to force them to go into space they don't feel welcome in, but then after a while I felt weird, like just doing this weird secret thing on my own, even though everybody does it, not everybody, but a good amount of people do it to the point where it shouldn't feel like it's a lonely activity and then randomly in the course of doing the work that I was doing on the Queer Channel at Sirius, somebody mentioned to me, "Have you--you should interview these people who are doing a documentary about the Queer Catholic experience,"

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*Olivares:* and I said, "oh, cool, cool, let me, let me reach out to them." So I reached out to the person who they put me in contact with and immediately figured out that they did not want me to cover them, as you know, this film-making process. They wanted me to be a part of the film itself because they were lacking a Latino, Latinx perspective on what it means to be queer and Catholic, and they figured, because of my broadcasting abilities, because of my comfortability with talking about it, at least already at that point, they wanted me to come into the documentary, and so I did, and that was my entry point to that church that I transition to which was the Church of Saint Paul the Apostle, and the group that put that documentary together again called Out at Saint Paul,

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*Olivares:* they welcomed me and they said, "You know we, we really want you to feel like you could come to Mass here, and really get to live more fully as who you are and to live more authentically," and kind of to juxtapose what I mentioned before about going to church in Austin when I was in college and never seeing any visible signs of affection towards same-sex people within the context of a church setting, as soon as I walked to Mass at Saint Paul's, you've got same-sex people giving each other hugs, kisses on the cheeks, such a warm welcoming that you imagine being the case when you go to church, when you're this large community, I actually for the first time got to see it in a way that was what I had been looking for.

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*Olivares:* So I said goodbye to the church that I was going for several years, that was across the street, and then started going to this church and dove headfirst into all of the activities that the church group was doing. Was never, this is my own personal preference, was never a fan of like the Bible study aspect of it, but more so the socialization of, "We're having, you know, we're having a dinner party, let's have fellowship and let's just talk about what it means to be who we are," and so was heavily involved in the production of certain activities with that group for about five years and even for part of the time that I left New York, was still very much involved in the group. So it was--I will say that that group and finding that group and being a part of that church was one of the most rewarding experiences

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*Olivares:* of my life so far, in that I was able to see the version of myself that I had always wanted to see come to life, finally was able to do that at that parish because it--there was never any question marks about anything. So yeah, probably half of my time in New York was spent making friends with that group, doing stuff with that group. I will note that that documentary that we did, it was presented to the pope. The priests that we had at the time had an audience with the pope and, amongst other folks who had been invited to go, and he provided a DVD copy of the documentary to the pope and from what I remember, the priest saying, communicated to the pope, and this was Pope Francis at the time, communicated to the pope that this was on behalf of the gays from America and that the pope's response was, "please have them pray for me," and assume that the pope's saw it. Who knows? But yeah, I

like to think that there is a version of the story where it ends, where he did watch the documentary.

**00:49:20**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those lines, what was the name of the first parish you attended in New York?

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*Olivares:* Uh, Saint Elizabeth, Saint Elizabeth's in Washington Heights, which is the neighborhood that I was at at the time and then moved to the Church of Saint Paul the Apostle.

**00:49:36**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those lines, I know you mentioned some activities that the ministry was involved in. What other activities changed over time or were added? What did the ministries look like?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, so we, we would do bingo. We would do seasonal Masses that were just specifically for our group. We would do outings with one of the homeless shelters in the area, specifically with the queer kids of that shelter. We would, even though we couldn't necessarily do it as a group for whatever restrictions were in place from the diocese, but some of us would march in Pride in New York City Pride as members of the group. We would have an annual retreat anywhere between 70 to 90 folks would always join us on this retreat that was on the New Jersey shore, and there was a book club that was developed. There was that bible study that I mentioned. Yeah, there was always something happening and even something as little as we would all go to the same Mass.

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*Olivares:* It was known that if you went to the 5:15 Mass on Sunday, that is where you would find most of the members of OSP [Out at Saint Paul], which is the name of the group, and almost every Sunday, certain parts of the group would always go to dinner together. And that was just--it was never anything formal, but it was just like, "hey, we haven't seen each other all week. So let's let's go hang out." But yeah, and I think one of my favorite things that we ever did was we would do--we would have Mass right outside of Stonewall right before Pride. So we would have our priest, who I am always so appreciative of, who was kind of advocating for our group and advocating for us to do these really great things. He always advocated for us to do it outside a Stonewall, and I believe they did it again this year, granted it's not the same priest, but did it again this year after COVID [COVID-19 pandemic] kind of kept them from doing it. But yeah, there's always something. I feel there's till always something that's happening with that group that that makes me really happy.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and what was the name of the priest that coordinated a lot of the activities?



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*Olivares:* His name is Father Gil, Father Gil [Gilbert] Martinez, and he believe is stationed in Los Angeles now, also with a Paulist parish, but he was one of the motivating force behind the creation of that OSP group.

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*Cieslik:* Wonderful, and along those lines as well, I know, coming to New York, which is a very metropolitan and intersectional space, what did the racial, gender and ethnic composition of this group look like?

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*Olivares:* I will say we always struggled with female participation. I think we only had two to four women members at most events, and a large portion of our conversations as a ministry were about what are we not doing right or if it's not necessarily--I think the thing that we have to recognize is one, the Catholic Church is not the most welcoming of places to women, especially queer women, because they feel all sorts of being left out from--I mean, I'll be the first to admit that it's very sexist institution, and so I think that's already keeping them, and then the added addition of queer identity isn't helpful. But that even being the case, we tried very hard to even do outreach at lesbian-specific organizations and kind of what we came to the realization of,

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*Olivares:* not even necessarily just with our women or women-identified members, is that a lot of queer people just feel hurt by the Church, and they either are not at that space where they're ready to accept it back into their lives or they have found other means of spiritual nourishment that going back to a brick-and-mortar parish is the last thing they want to do, so that was always tough. I believe we had a few non-binary folks, nobody who was trans-identifying at the time, and then I think we had a pretty great mixture of, there were a lot of Latinx folks, there were a lot of Asian-American folks, a lot of white folks. Unfortunately, we did not have many Black members, and I think again we were always trying to figure out a way to reach out to them,

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*Olivares:* to the people who might have felt like they weren't a part of the group, but it was hard. It was hard and I wished that we had done a better job. But again in New York, everybody's doing their own thing, everybody's doing this, everyone's doing that. It's so fleeting that trying to have a concerted effort to reach out to certain folks who've got other agendas about like what they want to do with their New York life. Yeah, it was all something that we definitely confronted.

**00:54:54**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and along those lines, when you were at University of Texas, when you were in New York, even back in your hometown, did you ever encounter homophobia, either directly or indirectly, in religious settings?

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*Olivares:* Ooh, ever in a religious setting. Yeah, I think I'm very lucky that never in a religious setting did I feel like somebody was saying something to me. I was like, "oh, ok," specifically, especially at this last parish in New York, never had any issues with that because of just how welcoming it was, and then to that first parish, that Saint Elizabeth's parish, I was by myself, so I never interacted with anyone. It was like, "hi, bye," you know, the sign of the cross, did my little thing, so never had enough time to develop a connection with somebody, to even give them the opportunity to say something offensive, so yeah, thankful that never had to experience that.

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*Cieslik:* Yes, and in charting that, did you experience any homophobia outside of religious settings? And where did it happen, if you feel comfortable sharing?

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*Olivares:* Yeah, so I would say [pause] growing up there was, I feel like every gay male person will say that they can remember the first time that they recalled the word "faggot," and that happened to me when I was in middle school and consistently after I came out to folks, there were like the whispers of like, "oh," lie really passive-aggressive, micro-aggressive things that were said. That was I like, "I guess," that thankfully never escalated to something that I felt was putting me in danger. But I think most of the homophobic things that I have experienced were more so in were--became like in Mexican or Mexican-American spaces just because I was surrounded by other members of that community quite often in my life. In New York, I think I was very lucky in that nothing ever came across this homophobic just because there's a lot of queer people there, and I think whoever were to say something would understand that they're already losing the battle in terms of making sure that they're feelings were well known. So yeah, I think it was just, it was just in those growing up moments then I remembered.

**00:57:42**

*Cieslik:* I'm sorry you experienced that.

**00:57:43**

*Cieslik:* Thank you for saying that.

**00:57:45**

*Cieslik:* And along those lines, I think, in thinking full circle, I know you mentioned that you were in New York and now you're in San Francisco. What does your membership in the religious community look like in San Francisco now?

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*Olivares:* So it's interesting you ask, because it's almost nonexistent. I think part of that's because of COVID. After leaving New York, there was a very brief stint in Boston, but even then as much as we would have wanted to have gone to church, because my partner is also Catholic, yeah, it was like, "ugh, we have to apply for tickets to go to this Mass," and then we would actually make the effort to apply for the tickets, they were all sold out because they

had limited seating, so like the opportunities to go to church we're just never there over the past two years. Now in San Francisco we do, because his family is from here, we'll do sometimes go to Mass with his family and it'll be a Spanish language Mass, and it'll be at a parish that I do not think has a queer ministry.

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*Olivares:* But again, because it's San Francisco and the air of the city is very much leading queerer than not, I would assume that it would be okay. I have some friends who just recently moved to the city who are part of that New York group that I mentioned. They are trying to get me to go to one of their new parishes here that does have a queer group, and I definitely want to try to do that. But what used to be the norm of going to Mass every week or going to Mass at least every other week and being a little bit more consistent with my attendance, that has changed. That doesn't mean that my daily practice of prayer, that my constantly seeking spiritual advice to God in the time that I want to do it, doesn't happen. It definitely does, but the notion of like doing, going through the motions of a regular Mass and sitting and kneeling and standing and saying the prayers, that that doesn't happen as often as it used to.

**01:00:04**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and I know you mentioned--what is the name of the parish you attend now and the one that your friends recommended?

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*Olivares:* So the parish now is called Saint Mary's, and then the ones that my friends go to is called Saint Agnes.

**01:00:21**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and in thinking about that, I know the pandemic has affected a lot of religious practice and what it means to be religious in an age of home quarantine and stay-at-home orders, how would you describe your religious practice? What things do you do that affirm or are part of your Catholic faith?

**01:00:43**

*Olivares:* So as you can see, I'm wearing a cross [necklace]. I've had this cross since I was, since I got confirmed. The story that I have with this one is I went to World Youth Day in 2005, when it was in Cologne, Germany. It was the first World Youth Day that Pope Benedict [XVI] did, and I was wearing this because I had just gotten it confirmed maybe a year or two before, and I don't wear jewelry. This is the only piece of jewelry that I actually do wear, and while we were at World Youth Day, that final day when the pope does mass, there's a portion where he asks you to lift whatever you have so that he can bless it, and I remember I was like lifting whatever was around me, and then I lifted this cross, and so I'd like to think that this is blessed by a pope,

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*Olivares:* and I like to wear it because I feel like it is my own version of protection, and I don't know something like that is very meaningful to me. I don't commute because I work from home and most of the time when I was living in New York, the commute to work was

the perfect place for me to pray. So now I use the time that I walk my dog as the time for prayer and just having that bw both a moment of reflection for what's transpired and then what I hope to be the case moving forward. I do get still some enjoyment of going to Mass, especially those times that we do go with my partner's family, but because I think another part of me feels, having been spoiled of going to a place like I did in New Yor where I had this group and I had these friends,

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*Olivares:* and I had this wonderful chance to really be a version of me that I had been longing for, and because I don't have that right now and because it will take some time for me to develop that, I haven't been in a space to do that work. And so hopefully when I do get the chance to really put in that effort, I'll be able to feel a little bit more comfortable with developing practices that are a little more aligned with how I used to see it. But even just having certain religious elements added to my house, like having a cross by the bed makes me feel little comfortable, yeah little things like that are how I see myself expressing it a little bit more now.

**01:03:16**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and when you mention--my specific interest is material Catholic culture, and so I'm really curious, as you mention with your necklace, what does this protection entail? What is it protecting you from?

**01:03:30**

*Olivares:* I feel like one of the things that I always ask for in terms of my prayers is safety from all evil and anything that could cause me distress, and I'm sure there's like a physical element to that, like I understand that I live in this world as a queer Mexican-American person who looks a particular way, who might, for whatever reasons, whether this post-political climate that we live in or just life, that might have more of a target on my back than other people, so I just have this literal protection, like just making me feel a little bit more at ease. Something that I also used to have, which was there was a sticker, and this was very popular in my hometown and in the region. It's a cartoon Virgen de Guadalupe, and it has a saying in Spanish that just says,

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*Olivares:* "Accompany me, always please," and it is so tattered and it's so--like it's seen better days. But I always kept it in my backpack that I would take with me to work, and I felt like even that had some sort of spiritual powers that it's hard to really speak to other than just to say that as much as I should have thrown it away because it did not look like what it used to look, it gave me a bit of comfort that it was always there. So, yeah, there's so much stuff in this world that we have zero control over, and so just acknowledging that and also asking for help and navigating that uncontrollable mess, it gives me a little bit of joy.

**01:05:19**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and one question I've been really eager to ask interviewees is, I know you

mentioned that you and your partner are eager one day possibly to go back to in-person Masses. What do you envision as your future within the Catholic Church, as a queer person?

**01:05:37**

*Olivares:* I feel like it's just like being a pain in the ass, like so I haven't had a chance to mention, and I guess I probably should have, so I have been very vocal about my positioning within the Church in a variety of different forms. I've written certain articles for different outlets, either for Vice.com, for Playboy, I think, for Teen Vogue, some of these digital publications about the queer Catholic experience. I've appeared in a couple of documentaries about it and even launched my own podcast where I talked to other queer Catholic folks called Queen I Am Lord, and part of what I have done is sort of for myself, in allowing myself to be a little bit more comfortable with challenging the Church, the capital-c Church, knowing that as much as I do want to go to Mass,

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*Olivares:* because I do love the ritualistic aspect of it, uhh, if I never go to mass that resembles what I used to go to, I'll be fine. If I get a chance to do the things that I used to love doing, perfect, right. I don't feel like I'm beholden to a certain pattern of what my Catholic representation used to look like, because I'm still enjoying life for what it is like. I still go into spaces as a queer Catholic person, whether they saw me at Mass or not. I would absolutely be upset with myself if I did not go to Ash Wednesday [Mass] to get my ashes. I would be upset if I didn't go to some form of Easter Vigil Mass or Christmas Midnight Mass, like there are certain little things that I don't want to sacrifice. But at the moment, I feel like a lot of what makes me feel like a "good Catholic" is by being unafraid,

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*Olivares:* to challenge what it means to be Catholic, so that way the Church knows how it can do better and those of us who have struggled in the ways that we have, don't have to feel like all of that weight is on us because it shouldn't have to be on us. So yeah, I feel like it's it's half-parishioner, half-activist and like figuring out if I can make those work for me in a harmonious way.

**01:08:02**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and I'm curious, what do some of these challenges look like? What are these things that you're hoping will change or evolve moving forward in the Church?

**01:08:12**

*Olivares:* You know, it's tough because I feel like I always have to remind myself that the Church is operating and speaking this language that it just doesn't want to modernize itself with, like it's always going to be this millennial-old institution that's like very much steeped in misogyny, sexism, homophobia, like that's not going to change. I've mentioned this a few times in some of the work that I've done, in that, at some point we are going to have a pope who of the Snapchat generation, like there's going to be a changing of the guard at some point, to be a part of a group of people who are far more accepting, tolerant, whatever the

word might be, and so, in an effort to get to that and to get to that a little more happily, raising attention and saying,

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*Olivares:* "hey, you know, pastor, so-and-so, maybe you don't say this from the pulpit, may recognize that there's this child who could hear this or take that and run with it in a way that could be dangerous to them that we haven't fully understood just yet." So I think it's that, it is doing more local activity to change how folks like myself who were part of these small town parishes and really knew nothing else than trusting the authority figure who had the collar and who is speaking to us every Sunday, making sure that they're armed with the right sort of language to make sure that whoever is out there doesn't feel like they're in a spiritually-violent environment because what good does that do anybody.

**01:09:57**

*Cieslik:* Yes, and I believe my last question in bringing things full circle is how do you see your religious and clear identity together? Are they compatible? Are they conflicting? Are they separate? You've touched a little bit on this, but to speak to it directly.

**01:10:13**

*Olivares:* Yeah, I feel like it's completely one and the same, like I've always said that I've known what it means to be Catholic longer than I know what it means to be gay, because it's like tada, Baptized, going to church. I've always seen my life in that lens, but because of just how steeped I've become in queer culture, because of my work and because of just where I've lived, I feel like I've now matched it, like I've understood Catholicism to the degree that I feel most comfortable with, and I understand queerness to the degree that I'm most comfortable with, and all at the end of the day, as much as I can want to make this community feel happy with how I do it and this community feel happy with how I do it, I'm just happy with how I'm doing it. I don't need anybody's approval.

**01:10:56**

*Olivares:* I don't need somebody to tell me that I'm the right kind of gay or the wrong kind of gay, same thing with my Catholic identity. I don't need anybody's approval to tell me that somehow, I'm doing it the right or wrong way because I know that I'm doing it the way that's my way, and so because of that I don't allow any of those conflicts to exist anymore. I try to live my life in this very calm, even-keeled way and in trying to add the calamity that is like Catholic navigation as a queer person, I'd rather not. I'm grown, I've done the battles, I've done all of that internal--dealt with all that internal strife and then come to just see that I'm incredibly blessed to be queer. I'm incredibly blessed to be a queer Catholic, and I don't want to diminish either of those identities by saying that they can't be one and the same because I feel like they very much are one and the same.

**01:12:04**

*Cieslik:* Wonderful, that's a great point to end on. Did you have anything else you'd like to add into the interview before we conclude?

**01:12:13**

*Olivares:* I don't think so. I feel like I'm glad that I brought up the sort of activist aspect of it that at least I'm trying to do a little bit more of. But yeah, I feel like I feel like we've kind of covered quite a bit.

**01:12:27**

*Cieslik:* That's sounds wonderful. Thank you so much for participating in this interview for Queer and Catholic, A CLGS Oral History Project. I'm going to conclude the interview now. I really appreciate your time and support of the project.

**01:12:40**

*Olivares:* Yeah, of course, what are--how does it work after--what are the next steps from the process?