

Steve Martz, pastor



Hi. My name is Steve Martz, and I've been pastor of St. Nicholas since 1995. I presently work part-time in that role. This is important, because at St. Nicholas we've discovered that we are a better community when we share the ministry of the parish rather than look to the pastor to do it all for us. It's important for me, too, because I have two professional passions: parish ministry and psychotherapy.

There are many things I love about parish ministry: leading worship, working with children, preaching, and collaborating with parishioners to grow and strengthen our church. I especially enjoy the relationships that develop during longer-term ministry. But the reason I became--and remain--a priest is because I love working with people who want (or need) to look inside themselves and discover who it was that God made them, and who exactly God is for them.

I believe that if what we do in church does not help us to experience the living God, then the Christianity we profess is nothing more than a collection of rules. I also believe that each of us is uniquely made in the image of God, and the spiritual journey often begins when we discover and rejoice in who God created us to be. It continues when, knowing who we truly are, we develop and deepen a life-giving relationship with the God who made us.

Given this passionate conviction of mine, it is easy to see why I also practice psychotherapy and--for those of you who know something about the field--why I have recently completed my training as a Jungian analyst.

It's been a long journey. I was born in Washington, DC and grew to adulthood during the 1960s. Not surprisingly, one of my early passions was politics. I took breaks from college to work on a presidential campaign and later a Senate campaign before graduating summa cum laude from the University of Maryland.

My religious upbringing was probably not what you would imagine of a priest. My family was nominally Methodist, typically attending on Christmas and Easter. I began attending church regularly when I was 28. But not because I had gotten married or had a baby--common reasons people seek church in their late 20s or early 30s. I began going to church, because during the 1979 visit of Pope John Paul II to the United States I had an intense, out-of-the-blue religious conversion. I had just finished exercising at the "Y" as the Pope was arriving at St. Matthew's Cathedral. Instead of walking up to Dupont Circle as I had planned, I stood outside the cathedral

and listened. In one sense, I didn't really know what I was hearing. But during what I now know was the communion hymn, I began crying, overcome with powerful feelings and an intense desire to join the Catholic Church. At first, I thought I'd gone a bit loony. But I also knew I'd never experienced anything like this, and I had to take it seriously. One thing led to another, and four years later, I was on my way to Chicago, where I became a member of a religious order.

It took me several years before I realized that what had happened had been years in the making. For years, I had been grappling with questions of good and evil, and the existence of God through my political work, some intensive reading of Holocaust literature, and in conversations with friends. I had not thought of any of this as "religious," but all of it was, and all of it prepared me for that surprising Saturday morning that changed my life for ever.

My five years as a Roman Catholic "religious" were among the most satisfying years of my life. They provided me a solid spiritual formation, an experience of authentic Christian community that remains a touchstone, and a strong education. During those years, I became deeply involved in the pastoral response to the AIDS epidemic, and was a principal founder of the Chicago AIDS Pastoral Care Network. I remain profoundly grateful to my former community, the Claretians, for the opportunities and support they provided me.

Yet I had to leave the Roman Catholic Church. The immediate precipitant was that I fell in love and wanted to marry. But there were other issues. I had grown concerned by the increased concentration of power in the hierarchy, and was heartsick at the attitude of much of the Church's leadership toward gays and lesbians. But the issue was even deeper. "Mother Church" and, paradoxically, her entrenched patriarchal culture, were simply too tempting, too enticing for me. I could not become myself, the person God created me to be, so long as I remained in her embrace. That may say as much about me as about the Roman Church, but I know many have had similar experiences.

While far from perfect, the Episcopal Church has been a much better fit. Power is shared between clergy and lay people; I feel more able to be myself (in all my complexity) than I ever did as a Roman Catholic; and I am proud to be a member of a denomination with an openly gay bishop! I'm also quite happy at this point in my life to be at St. Nicholas. My first years here were difficult and controversial, as I led the parish through some significant changes to help us become a more collaborative and inclusive church. These changes were successful, and in recent years, a strong group of people sharing my vision has developed. As a result, St. Nicholas has become much more energetic, forward-looking, and joyful. It's not Eden, and never will be. But it is becoming a place where people can experience the living God, be their true selves, and work together to serve God's people.