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My journey to St. Nicholas began in earnest about 3 years ago. However, as I look back, I realize that the stage was set almost 30 years earlier.

I had been a devoted and active member of Roman Catholic parishes for many years. I embraced the core beliefs of the church with few exceptions, and greatly admired its devotion to social justice, works of charity, and intellectual pursuit. I also admired the willingness of church leaders to speak out on issues of ethics and social justice, even when their messages rattled the cages of world leaders or legions of common people. Though my husband had been raised Jewish, he accepted my desire to raise our children in the Catholic faith. We both believed the post-Vatican II Church modeled what we felt was most important to teach our children: respect for people of all beliefs, and a deep respect for all life.

I disagreed with official church positions on certain issues, but was always able to find a parish where the thinking and climate were more open and progressive. About 6 years ago, however, the disagreements began to snowball. I was very concerned that the church hierarchy was becoming increasingly conservative. After greatly admiring Cardinal Bernardin's teachings and manner, I was disheartened by Cardinal George's very different approach. I was taken aback when I read that he reinstated a full-time exorcist. I feared that this type of thinking could turn back the clock in people's understanding of mental illness, after the painstakingly slow gains made. I was increasingly disappointed by the explosion of news on the mishandling of the problem of priests who had engaged in sexual abuse. In the past, I had felt merely irritated at the refusal of the church to ordain women or allow priests to marry. But I began to believe that restricting ordination to only men willing to forego marriage in a society where attitudes about celibacy had changed so dramatically, thereby excluding everyone else from positions of power, would keep the church an inherently unhealthy institution. The final straw was the Vatican's issuing of the document, *Dominus Jesu*. I believed the content to be a reversal of the teachings of

Vatican II, specifically the critical belief for me that people of all faiths are welcome in God's kingdom.

On a personal level, I felt my interfaith family had been betrayed. My father-in-law escaped from Nazi-occupied Austria in 1939 at the age of 13. Most of his extended family, including the young cousins of his generation, died in concentration camps. Despite this experience, he was one of the most loving, accepting, ethical people I have ever known. One day 25 years ago, I asked my father-in-law how he could accept me so readily, when I was responsible for the fact that his only grandchildren were being raised Catholic. It had been so important to him to pass on the religion Hitler killed his family for believing. I will never forget his answer. He said, "What I learned from Hitler is that love is the only thing that gives life meaning. And hate will never accomplish anything." My father-in-law lived that philosophy every day. How could I ever believe that this Jewish man was not embraced by God and welcomed into heaven the day he died? Even given his family's history, my husband was supportive of his children's Catholic upbringing, and unfailingly respectful toward our religion. It was critically important to us that the church in which we raised our children proclaim the same respect for people of other faiths. All of a sudden, it seemed the rug was pulled out from under us.

Though the priests of my parish courageously spoke out that positions put forth in *Dominus Jesu* were contrary to the teachings of Vatican II, I decided I could no longer stand up and be counted as one who would continue to belong to the larger church despite all that was happening.

Nonetheless, it was painful to leave what I did believe in and love. Being Catholic was part of my identity, plus I dreaded losing the many positive connections in my church. As I looked for another church, I sought one with the same core theological beliefs. Going to mass and receiving the sacrament of Communion were such important parts of my life, I couldn't imagine giving those up.

I found a new home at St. Nicholas. I had begun my search on the Internet, and felt a ray of hope when I read about Steve Martz's background: his personal experience with different denominations, seminary training during Cardinal Bernardin's era, interest in the Holocaust, and work with AIDS patients. When I visited, the mass resonated with what I had known, and the people were warm and welcoming. After a lengthy meeting with Steve, during which he patiently listened to my concerns and answered my questions, I felt confident that the beliefs of the Episcopal Church harmonized with what I valued. Over time, I could see that Steve put those values into action. I'd be lying if I said I never felt the tug to go back to my old church, or that I've never had any doubts or disagreements with the Episcopal Church. But I've lived long enough to know that there will always be differences in opinions and beliefs. I hope I will always be true to those I feel are essential, and open to the opportunities for learning and growth that come with differing viewpoints.

There have been some important bonuses in my move to St. Nicholas. My son and daughter-in-law sharply disagreed with enough happening in the Catholic Church to not only leave, but to decide that my granddaughter would not regularly attend mass with me. However, they feel confident that she will learn acceptance and respect for all people at St. Nicholas. My little Rose

has been my church companion for the past three years. She feels like a very important member, and basks in the love she receives here.

The bigger surprise is that my husband has found a niche at St. Nicholas. He frequently attends the Sunday morning discussion group with me (sometimes even without me!) and has facilitated several topics. He enjoys the enthusiasm and openness of the group. After one session my husband led, I commented to Steve Martz, "Where else would you find a Jew teaching a class on the history of Islam in an Episcopal church?" This example perhaps sums up best what I appreciate about St. Nicholas – all are welcome, and we will do our best to expand our knowledge and our understanding.