



Dear People of God,

My family and I feel so blessed to be coming to St. Martin's parish. St. Martin has always been one of my favorite saints, and I am excited to be a part of a congregation that is following his example of loving Christ by welcoming and serving others with radical hospitality and compassion. I will be in increasing communication with you all as December approaches, but I would like to take an opportunity in this first letter to introduce myself.

I was born and raised in a small town in North Carolina a few miles from Greensboro. I was raised in a devout Pentecostal family, where the church was central to their lives. My grandfather was my pastor for all of my childhood. We were very close, and so it was easy for me to be active in the church even after he retired. In my youth I sang in the choir and was very active in the youth group. But I never felt quite at home in the church of my youth.

I was first introduced to the Episcopal Church while attending Duke Divinity School, where I was studying for a Master's in Religious Education. It was the custom of the seminary to celebrate the Wednesday Community Eucharist according to the various denominational groups represented in the student body and faculty. On one Wednesday in my first year, the Holy Eucharist was celebrated by an Episcopal priest. It was in fact a Solemn Mass with chanting, beautiful music, and fragrant clouds of incense. I was deeply touched by the liturgy, but it was during the Holy Communion that I experienced the presence of Christ in a new and profound way. As a Pentecostal I could not yet articulate a theology of "the real presence of Christ" in the Eucharist; but, I had experienced that presence in a dramatic and transformational way. I felt like I had found my spiritual home. I started a journey which would eventually lead to my becoming confirmed in the Episcopal Church, and answering God's call to serve the church as a parish priest.

That first liturgical experience has shaped my spirituality and priestly calling. While I try to be open to all of the ways that God seeks to be present with me, I feel closest to Christ as we celebrate the Holy Eucharist- and music, art- especially icons- and "smells and bells" remain important conduits through which I encounter the Holy. But I also encounter the holy in quiet moments in God's creation, where I can be still, centered, and renewed. This is one reason why my family and I enjoy hiking and taking long walks. We are looking forward to exploring the natural beauty of central New Jersey.

My husband, Fausto, is from Venezuela. He is a medical doctor and is currently working on getting his license to practice medicine in the United States. He was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, but was received into the Episcopal Church last year. As a family we enjoy traveling and experiencing other cultures. Fausto and I love Brasil, and we continue to try to improve our Portuguese skills. We also enjoy visiting museums, and (at least before the pandemic) we try to maintain a healthy lifestyle by staying active in the gym and being careful about what we eat. Fausto also enjoys photography as a hobby, and especially enjoys photographing nature.

We have a son, Zachary, who is a senior at Temple University in Philadelphia, majoring in Environmental Studies. He is an avid reader, and like us, enjoys traveling, music and art. Zac (and I) are pescatarians (mostly vegetarians), and he enjoys trying to make vegetarian versions of meat recipes. He is looking forward to meeting you all.

It is impossible to include everything about us in a brief letter- and I am sure I have left out things that later I will wish that I had included. I look forward to being able to see you all in person, where we can begin to know each other better. I look forward to hearing your stories and learning about your faith journeys, your interests, and your dreams for St. Martin's. Until then, may God bless and keep you all. May the peace of Christ dwell in your hearts. May the love of the Holy Spirit unite us all, and may we, with the Mother of God, always be ready to say "yes" to God's invitation to walk in the way of love.

In the peace of Christ,

Father Rob+