

When a loved one leaves the Church

The other day a friend mentioned that her mother has decided to leave the Catholic Church to become an Episcopalian. We talked about how hard it is (not theologically, but personally) when someone you love decides to leave the Church for another faith—or none at all.

As we were talking, I realized a friend who is a Jesuit priest was standing with us, listening. I wondered what he would say.

When he spoke, he shared his own story of a friend, a former student, who had surprised him when he decided to leave the Catholic Church to become Greek Orthodox.



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You have to respect where people are in their individual faith journeys, our Jesuit friend said. But we can also acknowledge that especially when the person leaving the Church is a family member, it can leave us with a sense of loss. After all, he said, you lose that shared experience, that connection, that part of your past that you shared with that person. And that is a significant change—and a difficult one.

I hadn't really considered it in that way. It struck me that when people I love have decided to leave the Catholic Church, I have felt confused and a bit shaken. Initially I even argued with them about theology. But faith is not a matter of human persuasion. And I truly can't see into people's hearts and know what they believe or what they are seeking.

As it turns out, even as members of different churches, it isn't as if we can't still talk about our different faith journeys because we can and we do. We love and support one another, of course. We celebrate our children's milestones on their faith journeys, even though we are in different churches.

But although we may have begun at the same starting point, we are on different paths today. And especially because our faith was so much a part of our connection, that change can be difficult to accept.

Maybe this would be obvious to most people, but it wasn't to me—and I liked that my Jesuit friend acknowledged that that was normal, and even expected.

So I pray for my friends and family who are on their own faith journeys and hope they pray for me on mine.

Have you had a loved one leave the Catholic Church? How did you deal with it?

Joining Theology Is a Verb and Reconciled to You for Worth Revisiting Wednesday.