

The Clergy Family Life:

Q&A with
Rev. Fr. Conan Gill



INTERVIEW BY SARAH PARRO

Where did you grow up and what is your educational and professional background?

I was born in Lubbock, Texas, and spent my childhood participating in tennis, competitive skateboarding, table tennis and Taekwondo where I earned a second degree black belt. My family was actively involved in the Church of Christ where we attended services on Sundays and Bible study on Wednesday evenings. Christian living was very important in our household.

During high school, however, I started to question some of the principles of the Church of Christ. As I began digging deeper, I started seeing more and more vagueness and lack of clarity with the fundamentals of the church. I spent time researching other Christian faiths trying to discover the “true church” Christ began in the New Testament. It was not until several years later that I first set foot into an Orthodox church where I immediately felt at home. The church was St. Andrew Greek Orthodox Church in Lubbock. During my time there,

I served in several capacities—as an acolyte, chanter, steward, parish council member and Sunday school teacher.

My educational background up until this point consisted of a bachelor’s degree in accounting from Texas Tech University. Upon graduation, I worked for a regional accounting firm before taking the position of chief accountant of tax compliance and reporting for Texas Tech University. It was when I began spending all of my working hours thinking about the Church that I knew it was time to leave my profession and move to Brookline, Massachusetts, for seminary in September of 2003.

Tell us about your family life in general. When were you ordained, and how long have you been at your current parish?

My wife, Stephanie, and I met in 2005, during my parish assignment from seminary in Lowell, Massachusetts, and we were married the following year. I was ordained in March of 2007

and was assigned to Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Dallas, Texas, where we stayed for two and a half years and celebrated the birth of our first son, Nikolaos. In September of 2010, we were reassigned to St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where we still currently serve. God blessed us with two more sons, Andreas and Gaius, and last year we welcomed baby twin girls, Kassiani and Theana. The children are currently eight, six, four and twenty months old.

If you had to summarize a priest's job, as if for a job posting, what would you say?

A leader who will define reality and not forget to say thank you. A man who, in leading, becomes a servant. A true icon of Christ.

Take us through a recent weekend / Sunday for you and your family.

Saturdays for our family are unpredictable and completely dependent upon whether there are any sacraments scheduled. My wife and kids never know if I'll be around and therefore have to schedule activities around me. Sometimes this involves bringing everyone to a reception, sometimes we need to schedule additional childcare and sometimes they just do things without me. Sundays I leave the house before 7:00 AM and typically don't return until 3:00 PM or later. Most of the time, I haven't even eaten. From my wife's perspective, she often cringes at the thought of handling the morning alone, getting five kids up and dressed and to church, handling them through Liturgy and fellowship hour and getting back home and settled without me, while also trying to pray and be present and talk with other parishioners whom, unlike me, she only has a chance to converse with on a Sunday. We do try and get a little rest and family time on Sunday evenings.

What are some things that might come up for you during an "average" workweek?

Lots of last-minute things, sometimes. I could have laid out the articles, sermons, Bible studies and youth lessons that I need to plan for in the next week, yet find myself constantly interrupted by visitors to the office and phone calls (some emergency, some not), fixing the copier, waiting on a floral delivery that no one told me was coming, moving goods from a dying freezer in the kitchen. There's also marital interventions or confessions, planning committee meetings, deaths and hospital or home-

bound visits. I juggle this all the while occasionally forgetting to eat or hoping my wife doesn't need me to pick up any of our kids anywhere!

Who are the people who help you get things done, and how do you rely on them?

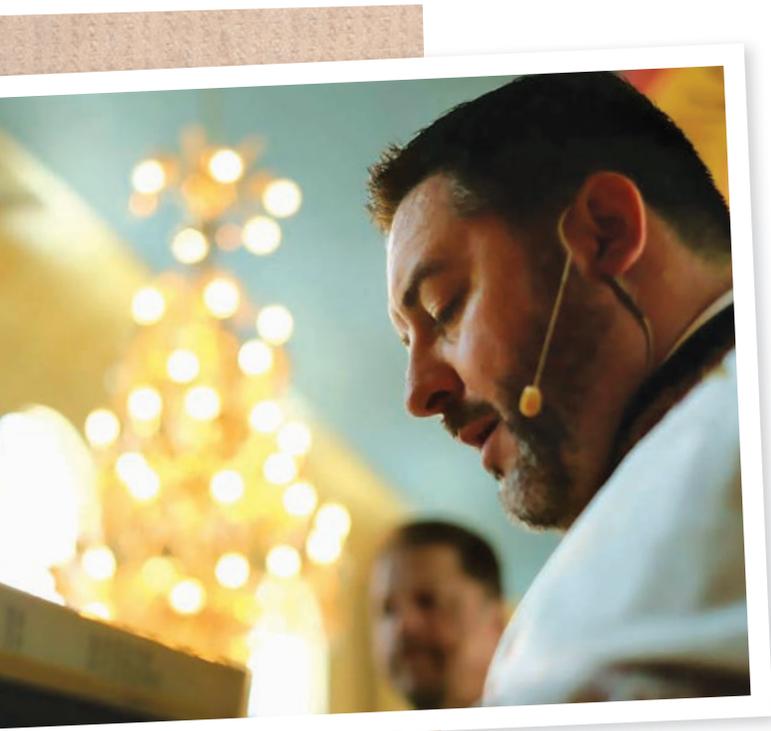
Yes, who are those people and how do you find or recognize them? Quite honestly, I have to begin by saying I don't find it useful forcing square pegs into round holes. I know every believer has received at least one gift of the Holy Spirit. Knowing and working in our gifts is vital to experiencing the full power of God in our lives and ministry, but I have learned the hard way that putting the wrong person in the right job creates more trouble than blessing. I believe that the very first thing I have to do is pray (on my knees) for God to send me people who are faithful, want to grow in a life of Christ and fulfill a ministry need. From there, I enjoy getting to know people, whether through visiting their homes or businesses during a blessing service or just spending a few minutes chatting after weekday services or at a wedding reception or other event; it is only once their talents have been revealed and I get to know their backgrounds that I can begin matching their gifts with ministries in the church.



Every parish is different, but we at St. George are blessed to have a full-time secretary, a Sunday deacon and a full-time chanter/lay assistant. I don't know how I could do what I do without them!

What do your weekdays look like?

Every day is different. And I love that! The unexpected rules the day—this is especially true with regard to deaths and emergencies. Every day I wake up and look at my calendar, but I pray, “Lord, what am I doing today?” And of course it just fills up. A good example is one Monday, I was surveying the week: not much going on other than Liturgy and a wedding rehearsal on Friday. And yet I found myself busy all week long. I woke up early Friday morning to a phone call about an unexpected death at 6:00 AM, a forty-day day baby blessing at 8:00 AM, Orthros and Divine Liturgy at 8:30 AM and an 11:30 AM investment meeting concerning some land the church owns. At 1:00 PM I ran home to see Presvytera and the kids for just a few minutes, and then by 2:00 PM, I was back at it giving the benediction and a short speech for a parishioner's military promotion. At 5:00 PM, I returned to the church for a wedding rehearsal. I walked in the door at home that night around 9:00 PM.



How many hours per day or week would you say you typically work?

It varies; thirty-two to sixty-eight per week? I had three people die in one day and ended up working eighteen hours straight. However, the work is never ending. The calls and texts never stop, nor do the ideas constantly formulating in my head about moving our church forward. There's always another sermon, Bible study or newsletter article to write ... unfortunately, keeping boundaries is almost impossible with this vocation, or at least with me. Even when I'm home, it's not always easy to be present in my home life. People need their priest for various things and I do my best to live up to that and be there for my families. It just makes things incredibly difficult to plan.

What do you and your family do to relax or have family time?

Well, it's not always relaxing with five children and even my “off” time can be challenging! It's usually loud and unpredictable. But we do enjoy outings—farmer's markets, nature walks, visiting new areas and exploring. We recently finished our backyard and enjoyed it quite a lot this past summer.

What are some of the unique challenges and blessings of being a clergy family?

I'm pretty sure that my wife would say the biggest challenge is sharing me. My family supports what I do—loves it, even—but it's incredibly unpredictable and they never know when they are going to have me, what I have to walk out on or cut short or when we can have a family day or trip. At times, it must seem to them as if I'm either at work (church) or at home on my computer working, or dealing with an issue through text or talking with a parishioner on the phone.

On the flip side, we have also been blessed beyond measure. We are the recipients of hundreds of prayers just due to our position as a clergy family. We're invited into homes or out to dinner, we receive gifts we don't deserve, receive comp tickets, have electricians and mechanics and dentists serve our home or members of my family on a moment's notice and often at a great discount. People want to know us. We also get unique opportunities to be included in our parish families' lives: their weddings, baptisms, graduations, anniversary parties and retirements. We sit at head tables, meet dignitaries and attend spiritual retreats, pilgrimages and conventions. As a home-schooling family, we can even attend all major feasts together.

It truly has been a blessing to work and serve in our daily life in a place that is in complete alignment with our faith.

How does your work as a priest influence your parenting?

It can be hard to be shepherd of the sheep entrusted to our care, including family. I try to remember I am a son, brother, husband, father of five children and also a priest. Unfortunately, I am someone who is and always has been a workaholic. I poorly prioritize the most important things in my life. Time management is one of the most frustrating aspects of both pastoral ministry and my family dynamics. My family suffers most because of my poor time management choices. I imagine I am not alone in this sin. Why do priests work so much? Probably because our churches want their priests to be fabulous communicators, competent managers, sympathetic caregivers, wise counselors and successful leaders who can be reached 24/7 and will respond to their every need within minutes. When I give in to this line of thinking, and when I try to rely on my own strength, I fail my family, my parish and ultimately my faith.

Perhaps I (we) should faithfully pattern our time-management philosophy after Jesus. Our Savior, in just three short years, was able to train men and women, friends and family who would become the largest spiritual force for change the world has ever seen. So what was at the core of Jesus's time management? I think it is found in Mark 1:35, which says, "Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed." Jesus began His day in prayer, and so should we. Christ knew that He could not fulfill the day's purpose without His Father's assistance and the Spirit's power. If I learn to rely on God to strengthen me as husband to my wife, father to my children and pastor to my flock, then I won't have to shuck off my responsibilities at home by getting up earlier, working harder, and staying up later. By giving God His glory and thanksgiving through my prayer and tempered service, hopefully I will be able to meet all the needs I am expected to through Him who strengthens me.

What has it been like raising your kids as "PKs" (priest's kids)?

So far, so good. My kids are young, so they aren't exactly aware of this term or what it means yet. They haven't been through moves that they remember or been forced to change schools and leave friends and family, fortunately. I know others aren't

as blessed. They also, for the most part, have never missed a Sunday Liturgy since their forty-day churching. They don't know differently and haven't rebelled against church yet. They may be watched in the parish more closely, but they have also been loved richly. We have received more than we possibly deserve just because of the title of clergy family. People want to know our kids and often give them gifts and attention that other families may not experience. They participate in Sunday school and HOPE/JOY and the older ones have joined the altar servers and begun a chant class. They dance and work at the festivals and enjoy their friends and time at church. Thank God.

*Jesus began His day in prayer,
and so should we.*

What's something surprising that people might not know about clergy family life? Is there something you've encountered that you didn't expect would be part of the job?

No one told me at seminary I would have to answer questions like, "How do you spell baklava?" and, "What are the names of the four children of Oedipus?" or my favorite, "What color is the Holy Spirit?"

But honestly, I suppose the fact that there's no continuing education, so to speak, for clergy is something that most people don't think about. In any other field or business, there remains to be continuous training, assessments, team-building exercises, seminars, workshops, etc., for executives to help them become the best in their field. For many priests, the training ends at Holy Cross graduation. We're thrown into the field and we're expected to know everything. Every parish wants a seasoned, accomplished jack-of-all trades clergyman—perfection personified. But so few parishes recognize the need for continuing professional education.

What's the best advice you've ever received?

One of my brother priests lovingly reminds me when I am down, negative and broken that, "God's in charge. He knows what He is doing, most especially when it seems like He doesn't." It helps me look for hope!