

Fr. Chrysostomos Achilleos Interview Summary

Kingston Greek History Project

Interviewee: Chrysostomos Achilleos

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Fr. Chrysostomos is a beloved former priest for our Greek Community, and is currently a priest in Sarnia. Kingston's Greek Community has a special place in his heart because it is here that he had his first parish as an ordained priest. In this interview, we speak about the Orthodox Religion, the role of the Priest, the role of the church in the Greek community, and much more. We also speak about Fr. Achilleos's family: his wife Presvytera Dina, and his children Maria, Joanna, Nectaria, and Theognostos.

When did you know you wanted to be a priest?

- No one ever thinks they'll end up where they do. He is a prime example of this, because he was initially a tool and die maker. Through our experiences, everyone goes through a different journey. In his experiences, *wanting to serve God* became a bigger and bigger thought in his mind. Through reading, reflection, and conversation with his wife, they decided it was time to attend Seminary, complete his degree, and be ordained.
- He married Presvytera Dina in 2005 and was ordained in 2007. They had Maria, their first of four, in 2006.

Background:

- His parents are from Cyprus. They had difficult times with the Turkish invasion; they knew the difficult times were just beginning, so he immigrated in 1966 to start a better life for his future family. He took a boat to Halifax, as many Greek immigrants did.
- after, he sent over for his wife a year later, who took a plane (there was a difference in technology in just one year)
- growing up, he was made to go to Greek school. The language was always part of their family life. The faith was always there, even if his family didn't go to church as frequently. They lived in Scarborough.

More on decisions to become a priest...

- "When you see someone in pain, in need, does your heart not go out to them?" You make your effort; you try to do as much as you can to help. Slowly, he saw this urge to help people emerge more and more in him. He realized people were starting to seek him out for guidance and advice. It became part of who he was, and the natural progression of things continued that way.
- One of the roles of the priest is to have people come to him for guidance, so now he is in a position to be doing what he wants – helping people – all the time. He didn't know that this was what he wanted, but it was something he realized he was capable of and drawn to. Every person feels good, and deserves to feel good, realizing they can contribute in some way – of course, not from an egotistical perspective as that is a "dangerous path". The warm and fuzzy feeling inside means you have done something *good* for someone.

- It is a sense of fulfillment; and you don't get this when you do it from an egotistical perspective. If your intention is instead to help, you feel a joy in the other person's successes.
- At some point, he realized he wanted to be a priest. It was his role he was meant to fulfill.

Kingston

- His first parish was in Kingston.
- The first year was quite crazy because he was still in Seminary while he had his own parish, and it was an intense program. It was three years, and since it has been elongated into a four year program.
- He'd begun the seminary in 2000 and had left. He and his wife decided that he would finish the seminary, and he was accepted back into the program.
- The Bishop had a need for another priest while Fr. C was still in the seminary. So he was ordained and sent to Kingston, in July 2008.
- During his final year of Seminary, he would drive back and forth between the Toronto area and Kingston *every weekend*.
- Maria was already born, but Joanna was born August of 2008, so Presvytera Dina was very pregnant at Fr. C's ordination. They were living in Brampton still while Fr. C was doing the services in Kingston.
- It was a very busy time.

The role of the priest.

- It is much more than celebrating the liturgy alone. That becomes mechanical. It is *prayer*, and leading the people in prayer. He is given this authority to celebrate the liturgy and, through God's grace, consecrate the gifts. In baptisms, he is given the authority bless the water. It is God doing the work, but priests are a **vessel**.
- They are given the authority on earth to do the work of God, to "work in his garden". That spirit of helping one another, of fulfilment, is only magnified because we realize *it is not just me anymore* – it is God and Man and everyone connected, through the Priest.
- Feeling God's love and being able to share that love with people... "it's indescribable".
- Every time we celebrate the liturgy, it is a bringing together of both the spiritual and physical world.

I've always felt like the Church was a place, set aside from every day life. It always felt very special.

- And it is. In our churches, **all of our senses are stimulated**. Iconography, for visuals. Also the Priests vestments. They seem from a different era altogether – the Byzantine era.
 - And the music is different too, it is also Byzantine.
 - Our noses are stimulated by incense.
 - Our sense of touch... the candles we light, the prayer ropes, the pews... Blessing ourselves with the cross – a tactile representation of our faith.
 - Taste... the holy communion ("come taste the body of Christ"). Note: In the Orthodox church, the bread and wine, when consecrated, become the body and blood of Christ. It is full of majesty.
- **The church takes care of us, from the beginning of our lives to the end and beyond.** When a child is born, the church has a prayer for the first day of life. There is an 8th day

prayer where the priest will go to the home and read it. In 40 days, the mom comes to the church with the baby and the child is introduced to the church. (Note: the church is not the building itself; it's the people in it too, so this is best when the church is full of people); Later on, the baptism of the child. In the baptism, we mimic the journey of coming from outside of the church to inside of the church, since the baptism literally begins in the narthex and then moves inward.

- The goal of the baptism is to have the child fully immersed into the water; it's our initiation into the church, but it is also our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. In the baptism, the child cannot breathe under water (like in death); and when they come out of the water they take a huge breath. They announce that they are alive through this breath and through usually screaming/crying afterwards. (Note: everything in the orthodox church – every practice, every object – has a lot of theological meaning). When Fr. C baptized Joanna, one of the first he baptized, he truly understood the overwhelming significance of this practice. He was choking on his words with emotion when he did it.
- The church is **there for the whole life cycle**.
 - Weddings; The crowns we wear in weddings are the crowns of martyrdom, because in marriage we sacrifice for one another. We don't compromise – this creates resentment – we give it up freely.
 - The priest asks God to bless the union. To give them everything they need so that they may do good in the world.
 - Confession: this is huge in Orthodoxy. We call it a second baptism, or a baptism of tears. It is the **re-washing** of the soul.
 - We don't use *sin* in our church. We use "amartia"- we've missed the mark. In confession, we recognize the error of what we have done and we ask for forgiveness from God, *through* the priest. The priest isn't the one doing the forgiving; it is *through him*, "the sinner". The priest also recognizes he is a sinner, because everyone is. It is a humbling. He is no better than anybody else. The priest too has to go for confession!
 - this really exemplifies how it is not the priest who is meant to be powerful and egotistical. He is only the vessel.
 - We are given penances, but they are to be done with heart. They are not mechanical: they are done with the soul (such as prayers to recite). When we are praying, we also are limiting opportunities for temptation.
 - **Funerals**: priest prayers for the soul of the departed. They also give support to the living.
- The priest is there not only when things go bad but also when things are good, which we tend to forget. He tells the story of when he was in the hospital visiting the maternity ward, and the lady in the elevator said she was sorry, because she assumed someone was sick or dying for him to be there. He said "why sorry?" and explained that it was a time to celebrate, because a mother and her baby had made it through childhood. By the time the elevator ride ended, the woman's perception had changed.
- In the services, the priest has his back facing you; this is because he is the **leader**: he is leading as we all face God (face the front of the church).

The role of the church in the community.

- The church is absolutely a pillar of the community. When relatives came to Canada, they were strangers in this new land. They wanted to feel this sense of home, and the way to get people together was to build a church. It was two-fold: of course for the faith, but also for the ethnic community to be built around it.
- For us today, the church is more a space for religion than ethnicity since our heritage is Canadian. At first, though, for immigrants it was a space for their ethnicity.
- Our roots are important: it is important to remember where we came from, and growing up in the Church is important because we carry it with us for the rest of our lives.
- It is important to know that there are roles in the church for everyone. Yes, the clergy is all men, but there are many other roles for everybody. Philoptohos (a very important philanthropic part of our church), Greek School, Sunday School, etc.
 - Our only goal is to spread the love of God, and there are so many ways to do this. It's not only through preaching.
 - Our works are most important. As Apostle Paul said, "they will know you by your works".
- The priest is present in all council meetings; he provides spiritual guidance. It is hard for everyone to agree on what is good for the community, and in these moments we need to turn to our obedience to God. We need to set aside personal interests in for the good of the community.

The role of the Presvytera

- Presvytera Dina is his wife. She is an amazing woman.
- "She is my partner in life. She is my sounding board. She... has given up more for the sake of the ministry than I have. Without her, what I have done – what God has done through me – would not have been possible."
- There is an old proverb that the Presvytera has to love God more than the Priest does, because of their sacrifices.
 - This is why the Presvytera is a role in itself; it isn't just the "wife of the priest".
- An important memory Fr. C has was at a festival in Sarnia, when Presvytera Dina gathered all the children to dance one of the Greek dances. And it was the Priest, as the father of the community, and he was looking at her thinking "**and this is the mother of the community**". As in any family, the mother and father have both shared and distinct roles. She has important roles in the community.
 - And **she was glowing** in that moment, like a mother with her children does.
- When Fr. C has a moment like this, he knows *this is where he is supposed to be.*