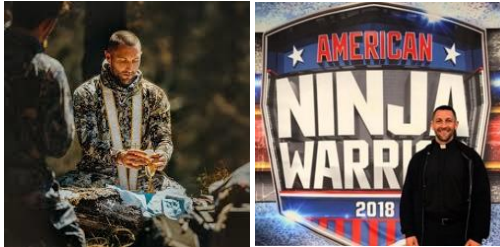


## Chapter 11

Fr. Stephen Gadberry- Power Ninja and Country Boy

*The Making of a Catholic Priest*

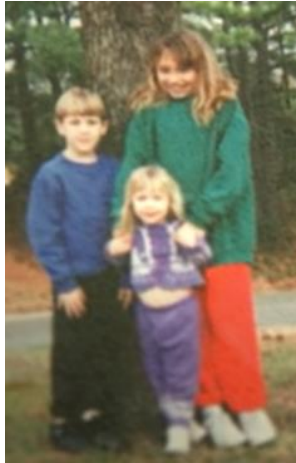
**“There are some things in life you just have to do because of love.” Fr. Stephen**



From his Arkansas upbringing to his military experience, through his vocational ascent, Fr. Stephen Gadberry shares his trials, tragedy, and ultimate joy in answering Christ’s call to the priesthood in the groundbreaking video, *The Making of a Catholic Priest*, released by **Word on Fire** in May 2022. Much of the content is accredited to that video.

On May 5, 1994, 8-year-old Stephen was riding with his 12-year-old sister Courtney and 3-year-old sister, Allison in their Dad’s truck. Their Mom was home resting during her pregnancy but had prepared supper in a casserole dish. When that dish started sliding across the dashboard, his Dad reached for it pulling the car off the road. After the car flipped into a ditch, Stephen checked on his Dad and sisters and quickly realized they needed some help.

Despite a broken ankle, Stephen hobbled up to the road to flag down a passing car. Allison was crushed under the steering wheel by her Dad but would survive after being air lifted from the scene. His older sister, Courtney and his Dad passed away at the scene.



Stephen became the man of the house and never cried about the incident. The house on a farm in Wynne, Arkansas and would soon include twin boys born 6 months after the accident.

**“Life is crazy man; you don’t even realize how delicate it is. This stuff just happens so fast.” Fr. Stephen**

He doesn’t know why this tragedy happened, but he knows it has prepared him for battles in his life.

With all the jobs he needed to do as a young man growing up on a farm Stephen learned many skills. He dreamed of being a plumber, carpenter, mechanic, and opening a handy man business after school.

**“Something that got me through all these years of my childhood was my faith.” Fr. Stephen**

His Mom and Grandmother though encouraged him to go to college, and he tried it for a year. He hated it and thought about going into the military. His only hesitation was leaving home since so many relied on him there.

In 2005 he joined a special operations unit in the Air Force which required survivor skills. He was excited about to tap his various skills learned on the farm even though the United States military was actively in combat since the terrorist attacks on 9/11/01.

The first 2 weeks of training were a weed out phase, and Stephen made it until the very last day. After special operations, the Air Force reassigned him to a logistics role in Germany. Rather than focus on high-speed operations he was planning and executing the transportation and storage of supplies for the various U.S. bases in Europe.

The Air Force provided him a car to drive around Germany and he soon realized his unplanned path in the military had some nice side benefits. Although the role moved him away from his family in Arkansas, it gave him freedom in a new country.

Rather than stray from his faith during this first time on his own, Stephen embraced it. He would attend daily mass and frequently spend time in adoration.

He started getting a fuller image of what it meant to be a Catholic priest from one of the chaplains who mentored him.

In 2007, Stephen deployed to Iraq with his unit and stayed on the largest U.S. base in the sector. Since it was a key headquarters for planning operations, it was frequently targeted with bombings. While his role did not involve direct contact with enemy soldiers, the bombings and combat experience taught him some valuable lessons.



**“Never go into battle alone. Always have a wingman”  
Fr. Stephen**

Even after receiving many awards and an early promotion after his time in Iraq, Stephen felt God was calling him for something else. God had a new mission for him. He felt God wanted him to be a wingman for those looking to follow Christ.

**For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Matthew 18:20**

Before leaving the Air Force, Stephen met with the vocation director in Little Rock, Arkansas and shortly

afterwards he received special permission to get out of the military early.

After taking off the uniform in June 2008 he started the seminary that August. With his military training he quickly embraced the disciplines of the seminary.

His vocation director shared 3 non-negotiables.

1. 40 hours of study a week
2. A daily holy hour
3. Healthy boundaries

These guidelines along with the four pillars shared in the book's introduction, provided the structure Stephen had grown accustomed to in the military. Just as the rules and procedures on the base in Iraq protected him from the bombings, these guidelines and the guidelines of the church protect our souls.



Stephen was instructed to keep the four pillars in balance.

1. Human
2. Intellectual
3. Spiritual
4. Pastoral

The balance was important since all were critical areas of focus for a future priest. As this college dropout poured himself in the study of Philosophy and the church teachings, he found great joy in the intellectual side of the seminary.

**“Through surrender joy came.” Fr. Stephen**

He also found great joy in his hospice ministry. Although it meant dealing with people near death, they and their grieving family members were grateful for the Catholic faith and a shepherd of that faith.

His conversion to deepen his faith was a slow and gradual conversion like Peter. Through daily chipping away at his faults and improving with some steps back along the journey, Stephen continued to move forward.

As a farm boy, he sometimes found it difficult to follow some formalities even after years of military training. Once while in Rome, serving for Pope Francis he was able to share a brief conversation with the pontiff. After talking about one of his heroes, Blessed Stanley Rother, he asked for and received a hug from the holy father.

**“Hey dude, can I have a hug?” Fr. Stephen to Pope Francis in Spanish**



He couldn't have found a better hero. Blessed Stanley Rother was a German farm boy from Oklahoma. He was a simple guy who like Fr. Stephen loved the land and the Lord. Fr. Rother, a priest of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, served in the diocese's mission in Guatemala during the dangerous years of guerilla uprising and government oppression. He helped build a radio station and spread the message of Christ.

**“The shepherd cannot run at the first sign of danger.”  
Blessed Stanley Rother.**

In 1981, Fr. Rother was killed for speaking out for the poor and his parishioners, who were being tortured and killed by government forces. He became the first U.S. born priest to be declared a martyr. His heart remains in Guatemala, but his body is buried in Oklahoma.

To follow the lead of his hero, Stephen was ordained on May 28, 2016, to be that shepherd. He soon became the pastor of not one, but two parishes in Arkansas:

1. St. Mary Church in Batesville
2. St. Cecilia in Newport

An advisor suggested he start working out at a gym during his lunch hour. Although he was hesitant since he felt it was selfish to take the time away from his flock, he grew to know his fellow gym members. They started connecting with him on personal issues. He was not expecting it, but they relished his wisdom as priest. He was evangelizing at the gym.

**“Evangelization is not something you do, but the way you live.” Fr. Stephen**

In 2017, he started serving as a chaplain for the Cross Fit games. As he surrounded himself with these athletes, he received permission from his bishop to try out for and was accepted on the TV show *American Ninja Warrior* in 2018.

Although he did not pass the first stage, he inspired many who saw a priest battling on such a tough course. Just as an *American Ninja Warrior* participant must balance on various obstacles and show strength on others, both skills are needed along our life's journey to Christ.



Above all, the Diocese of Little Rock priest made it clear he's an evangelist: "I'm insanely in love with our Lord Jesus Christ; I want to share him with everybody."

His story shared in the previously mentioned documentary, *The Making of a Catholic Priest*, is a chance to share the story of God's impact on his life on a global scale through the show produced by **Word on Fire**.

**"I believe in the power of the story."** Fr. Stephen





The documentary is about an hour long and tracks his life from childhood growing up in Wynne to his service in the U.S. Air Force in Iraq to his calling to the priesthood. He shared the following in an interview with Aprille Hanson Spivey for *Arkansas Catholic*.

The experience of recording was both “extremely exhausting, but it was a very holy moment,” Father Gadberry explained.

“It was the opportunity to sit down and dig deep into my history for two days,” he said. “... It really showed me how faithful God is and how he has been faithful my whole life.”

One of the more powerful moments of the documentary Father Gadberry said was sharing about the death of his father and older sister.

“I never cried over it,” he explained, adding at the time, he tried to be the man of the house, holding the emotions in. “As I got older, it developed into a wound.”

While talking about the accident in the documentary, he started crying for the first time.

“It was just a flood of emotions,” Father Stephen said. “A bizarre hurricane being unleashed, terribly traumatic memories and terrible wounds in a split-second washing over in a love and peace and it gave me understanding. ... It was really kind of the foot of the cross, from this side of the resurrection. Terribly painful but filled with joy and hope. I knew the cross wasn’t the end at that moment.”

Father Stephen was given the option to watch the documentary before it premiered, but declined, wanting to see it with his parishioners first.

“They all know me, but to see my story presented in its totality in a way I’ve never shared it with people is a very vulnerable moment, and I wanted to experience what they experience at the same time,” he said.

“Because I know the power of God’s mercy, I’ll be able to watch it as if it were somebody else.”

Initially, he was hesitant to do the show, not wanting the focus on him, but rather God’s work in him. He hopes it leads people to Christ.

**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.**

**Romans 1:16**

“People that are not Catholic, people that are not Christian, maybe people totally atheist are going to see this stuff,” he said, adding that the show will appear in at least seven film festivals across the country this summer. “... Hopefully the story that’s being told leads them to Christ. Hopefully the cinematography attracts people, but the message pushes them to God.”

Even after reading much of his story in this book, all readers should find the free video and watch it to hear it in Fr. Stephen’s words.



Growing up on a farm in Wynne, Fr. Stephen was accustomed to the family dogs running around the property.

**“From my time in the military, then subsequently my eight years in seminary, your heart grows fond of all those things from home,” Fr. Stephen**

In the summer of 2017, he went to the Independence County Humane Society and first saw a six-month-old collie mix he would name Murph. He was sitting in the back of a kennel where another young pup was barking and jumping. When the shelter worker let the rambunctious puppy out to run in the yard, “Murph just watched that crazy dog run out. Murph stood up real calmly, walked up to the gate like, ‘This guy’s gone, now can we talk,’” Father Stephen said.

Now 3 years old, “Murph is very disciplined, very athletic, very fast. He’ll run himself to death playing with the ball and frisbee,” he said. His best friend is Shorty, a 3-year-old beagle mix previously owned by a parishioner, who Father Stephen adopted.



This busy power priest who is shown above with another priest featured in this book recently celebrated the 5th year anniversary of his ordination. He keeps a journal of every mass. Like a good logistics soldier, Fr. Stephen logs the date, location and for whom it was celebrated. Over those five years, he celebrated 2,601 masses which is more than 1 a day.

Over those years, God has invited him to be a bold father. He has been with his parishioners at the birth of their children and by their side when they lost loved ones. He has been a powerful spiritual father to them even though he grew up most of his life without a father of his own. He finds peace in showing empathy and mercy.

**“Our heart is restless until it rests in you oh Lord.” St.  
Augustine**

Appropriately this athletic priest emphasizes fitness and shares.

**Please do not underestimate the importance of living a balanced, healthy life. God created us to have happy, holy, healthy lives. We can only be truly happy and joyful if we are truly holy and healthy. The health of our soul is greatly affected by the health of our body and vice-versa. Time spent working on our physical well-being is never wasted time. Intentional discipleship requires attention and dedication. Dropping our nets does not require much physical exertion but following Christ will take a lot out of you. Our bodies will all pass away, but our souls will live on. The healthier we are, the longer we will likely live. This will give us more time to love and to be the hands and feet of Christ, more time to be his disciples here on earth so that we may be with him for eternity! Fr. Stephen**

His favorite saints and heroes reflect his youth and fitness.

- St. Joseph, because he likely lifted heavy stuff while working
- Blessed Fr. Stanley Rother, because of his pastoral determination, zeal, and selflessness.
- Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati and Servant of God Frank Prater, because of their youthful zeal and joy.
- St. Sebastian, his patron saint from Confirmation as well as the patron of athletes.

**“A story can change people’s lives.” Fr. Stephen**

He has shared his story in a video documentary and now in this book. How would you tell your story? How does it reflect God's great plan for you?

**“I believe in the power of the story.” Fr. Stephen**



**Faith Challenge:**

- Learn and contemplate the Corporal Works of Mercy and find time to watch *The Making of a Catholic Priest* on YouTube sponsored by **Word on Fire**.
  1. Feed the hungry
  2. Give drink to the thirsty
  3. Clothe the naked
  4. Shelter the homeless
  5. Visit the sick
  6. Visit the imprisoned
  7. Bury the dead

### Works Challenge:

- Choose one of these corporal works of mercy and put it into practice. Start living the life God has called you to live so your story is part of His great library of stories. To start, consider the 90-day challenge that Exodus offers.



- **Exodus 90-** Is a ninety-day spiritual exercise for men based on Christ's roadmap to freedom: prayer, asceticism, and fraternity. It was founded by James Baxter in 2015 and has reached over 50,000 men in more than 70 countries. Those who take on the initial challenge and subsequent exercises find the freedom to be who God is calling them to be.

**“During my workouts, I am praying almost non-stop, talking with the Lord” Fr. Stephen**

