

Parishioners relate to Percell, he says, "because I've struggled to make tuition payments, I've waited for teenagers out past their curfew."

FATHER, GRANDFATHER, PRIEST

After his wife passed away, Lawrence Percell turned to life in the Catholic Church

One Sunday morning this past July, Father Lawrence Percell stood at the altar of St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Los Altos, Calif., pouring holy water over the heads of two infants. A routine baptism, by most standards—except the babies were Percell's grandchildren: Virginia, 7 months, and Devin, 11 months. And in the Roman Catholic Church, where most men who enter the priesthood have never been married, a grandfather in vestments baptizing his own grandkids is more than a little unusual. "To share the very life of God with them," he says, "it was beyond belief."

Except, perhaps, to those who know him best. A widower after 28 years of marriage, Percell, 59, had always been drawn to religious life and after the death of his wife, his two grown children embraced his decision to enter the priesthood. "We knew," says his daughter Lisa, 31, "that it would make him happy." As did

his parishioners at St. Nicholas. "He is someone you can relate to," says parishioner Dr. Bob Gaspitch, 82. "This man has raised kids and lost his wife—he's one of us."

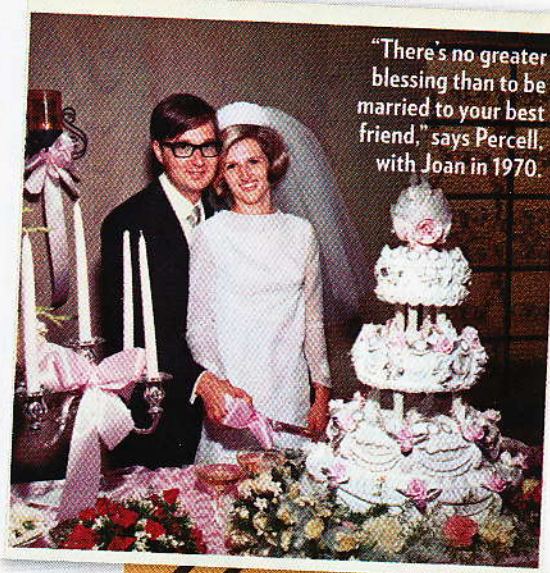
Percell is one of a growing number of Roman Catholics who have entered the priesthood after becoming widowers. Exact numbers are difficult to gather, but, says Sister Mary Ann Walsh, spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "it used to be that no one much older than 30 ever entered the seminary. That's completely changed."

For Percell, who worked as a psychologist for most of his adult life, the priesthood had long been the path not taken. "Religion was something I was always drawn to," he says. In fact Percell, who grew up in a Catholic family in San Francisco, entered the seminary after eighth grade. "There were no questions in my mind" about the decision, he recalls. That is, until his late teens. "I was certainly interested in and fascinated by girls," he admits. "I started to think, 'Do I really want to be a single man my whole life?'" Meeting Joan Herrmann in 1969, while on a leave of absence from

the seminary to study psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, helped answer that question. Like Percell, Herrmann had considered a religious vocation, studying to be a nun. (She left the convent in her early 20s because she wanted a family.) "Our backgrounds were very similar," says Percell. "We had a spiritual connection that really blossomed."

Shortly after the two began dating, Percell dropped out of the seminary for good. In 1970 they wed and moved to Sunnyvale, Calif., where Percell went on to get a doctorate in clinical psychology and work as a psychologist while he and Joan raised their two children (Lisa, a stay-at-home mom in Gilroy, Calif., and Jeff, 30, an assistant principal in Fresno). "We had our struggles like anyone, learning how to live with someone and compromise," Percell recalls. "But ours was a happy marriage. Joan and I were really soulmates." They were also active in their local church, holding ministerial roles and counseling others considering joining the faith. "People came to view Joan and me as the ideal married-priest couple," he says. "If the Church had decided to offer the priesthood to me as a married man, I would have accepted."

In 1999 Joan was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. "It was the most painful thing I had ever experienced," says Percell. "It caused both of us to rely on God's strength more than ever." After she died at 52 in 2000—just months before their 29th wedding anniversary—Percell turned to the seminary once again, becoming ordained in



"There's no greater blessing than to be married to your best friend," says Percell, with Joan in 1970.

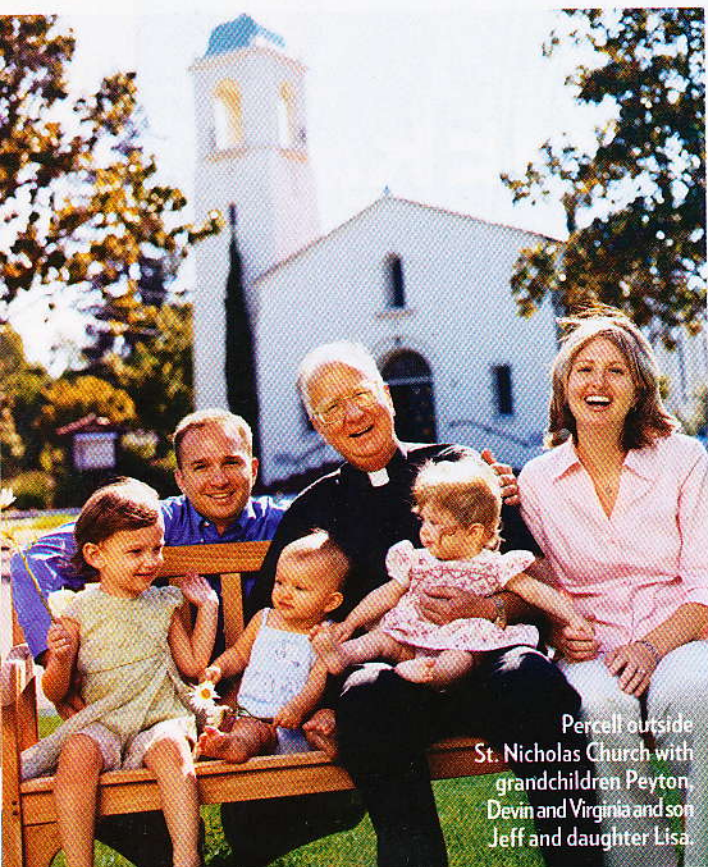
“It's like being the father in a huge family”

—FATHER LAWRENCE PERCELL

2003. His family expected the decision. "When Mom was sick, she said, 'Don't be surprised if Dad becomes a priest,'" recalls Lisa.

Being a Catholic pastor with children of his own has many blessings for Percell. Besides baptizing his grandchildren, he was able to perform his daughter's 2002 wedding ceremony—"an entirely overwhelming experience," he says. "This was the little girl I helped bring into the world. I was so moved." His life today is busy. He lives in the parish rectory at St. Nicholas, says morning Mass, presides over weddings and funerals, counsels parishioners and oversees programs ranging from the recycling of bicycles and cell phones for the needy to group discussion meetings with divorced and separated couples. Any drawbacks? Perhaps the Church's requirement that priests be celibate? "It is not an unfair demand," he says. "I could not make that promise earlier. I felt able to make that promise now because I had been married. Joan opened my heart wider than it ever could have been."

By Marisa Wong. Andrea Orr in Los Altos



Percell outside St. Nicholas Church with grandchildren Peyton, Devin and Virginia and son Jeff and daughter Lisa.