

Article traces family history of Archbishop Peter L. Gerety

(Editor's note: The following article, written by Anne Buckley, originally appeared in the June 27, 1974 edition of *The Catholic Advocate*; a special issue that celebrated the arrival of Most Rev. Peter L. Gerety as the third archbishop of the Archdiocese of Newark.)

Archbishop Peter L. Gerety comes to Newark as a newcomer but hardly a stranger. Born in Connecticut, he spent most of his priesthood in New Haven's inner city before going to Portland, ME, as a bishop eight years ago. However, it was in northern New Jersey that the Gerety story began. His parents, Peter Leo Gerety and Charlotte Ursula Daly, native New Jerseyans, were married in Saint Brigid Parish, North Bergen, Jan. 16, 1911. (The parish has since merged with Saint Rocco Parish, Union City.)

A favorite outing of the big Gerety clan—Archbishop Gerety is the oldest of nine boys—was the trip to New Jersey to visit relatives, a journey they made frequently. The Gerety family traveled in a big seven-passenger car with two jump seats, he said. They'd mount an ironing board across the jump seats to accommodate four little boys, instead of two.

"We would take the ferry (to New York City), and there were organ grinders with monkeys," Archbishop Gerety recalled in a recent interview, smiling over the boyhood delight.

Asked about factors involved in his choice of the priesthood, he cited the influence of his parents. "My mother and father had a tremendous religious faith, a tremendously optimistic view of life," he said. "They loved life very much and taught us to feel that we could do almost anything."

Of his mother, Archbishop Gerety wrote a year ago (1973) on her death at the age of 89: "She was always ready for a good time, a trip or a happy gathering with friends or family. And yet under all that, no one who ever lived on this earth was ever more totally and fully convinced of the utter seriousness of life and the necessity for seeing all things in the light of eternity."

The description is from the eulogy he wrote for his mother's funeral Mass. "I couldn't preach it," he said recently, with still a remnant of the emotion of that day in his voice. He asked a priest friend to read it.

The eulogy included this little vignette: "A few months ago I celebrated Mass one day for her at home and gave her Holy Communion. Afterwards I came to her bedside and asked her if she would like to say with me that beautiful Thanksgiving Prayer, 'look down upon me good and gentle Jesus...' You know, Ma," I said. 'You taught us that prayer.' She smiled and said, 'Yes. And do you remember the windows?' 'Yes, I do,' I replied, 'yes I do.'



Archbishop Gerety's official portrait, which appeared on page one of the June 28, 1974 edition of *The Catholic Advocate*.

"And my mind went back to those days in Shelton when as little children, we knelt beside her after Mass in Saint Joseph Parish, and she would lead us in our Thanksgiving Prayer. And then, before we left for home, she would lead her brood around the church and show us the stained glass windows. There we learned of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We learned the meaning of life and God's promise of eternity."

The archbishop's father, Peter L. Gerety was an industrial engineer, the son of American-born parents who were members of Saint Paul Parish in Jersey City's Greenville section and later to Holy Trinity, Hackensack. Charlotte Daly's parents came from County Kerry, Ireland, and were among the founding parishioners of Saint Brigid, North Bergen, where her father, Pierce Daly, owned a florist business on the old Plank Road.

The archbishop's parents moved to Shelton, CT, shortly after their marriage, and it was there that their first son, the new archbishop of Newark, was born on July 19, 1912. Named for his father, he has always been called by his middle name, Leo, by members of his family.

The Gerety family had a big house with a roomy attic used as a playroom by the boys and their friends. Recently in talking of collegiality in the Church, Archbishop Gerety said he supposed it was in the cooperative give and take of his family that he "first sensed that life in the present age must be decreasingly a matter of giving and obeying orders, but rather of people together realizing that 'we' must do something."

His mother once explained that even with a large brood of energetic boys, incidents of disciplinary action were few. Archbishop Gerety recalls, "My mother seldom gave an order, but by persuasion she could get you to do what you were supposed to without forcing it."

Again, one detects in his early life at home the seeds of his style of leadership in the post-conciliar Church. "Today, action is best achieved by persuasion rather than command, and the Church now knows it and is acting upon it," he told an interviewer shortly after his appointment to Newark.

Scholastic honors came frequently to the Gerety boys. There was no parish school in Shelton for the eldest of them (the family later moved to the Connecticut cities of Bridgeport and then Fairfield). The future archbishop attended public grade schools and Shelton High, where he played left end on the football team and was its captain.

The other football player in the family was his brother John, five years younger, who is now a priest of the Trenton Diocese, serving as pastor of Saint James in Jamesburg. Father Gerety remembers their mother's confession that "her heart was in her mouth" as she watched the games, but she always went, in his words, "because she was interested in anything her sons did."

The idea of priesthood was nurtured by the priests of their parish, Saint Joseph in Shelton, he explained. "I always thought the pastor, Father Andrew Plunkett, a great Churchman and strong character, had a great idea. He made a point of boys remaining at the altar all through high school. The priest kept in close contact with us. There was great attention to the dignity of the liturgy, great respect for the proper handling of the sacramental life of the Church and particularly the Mass."

It was not until a few years after high school, during the Great Depression when Leo worked at a variety of jobs, including one in Newark, that he decided to enter Saint Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield, CT.

"I'd toyed with the idea of priesthood," the archbishop said. "You have an internal struggle within yourself. Father Cornelius Buckley, the priest at Saint Joseph with whom I was closest, must have recognized this. He talked to me about it and said I ought to make a decision."

The decision was accompanied by additional internal struggle for Peter Leo Gerety, because of the first of two family tragedies. His father was struck down in the prime of his life, in the early 1930's, with encephalitis which led to Parkinson's disease. Formerly a leading figure among Connecticut industrialists, he was invalidated for years until his death in 1950. The Gerety boys impressed all who knew them with their faithfulness to the care of their father, spelling their mother and each other to ensure that someone was with him at all times.

Seminarian Peter L. Gerety was among those in his class chosen to study abroad, at Saint Sulpice Seminary in Issy, France, which meant five years with no visits from his family. He was ordained in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, June 29, 1939, by Cardinal Jean Verdier. His mother and his aunt, Kathryn Daly, attended the ceremony, returning home for his first solemn Mass, July 23, 1939, in the Shelton parish church where he had been an altar boy.

The youngest of the Gerety boys was killed in action during World War II, at age 18. The remaining sons of Peter and Charlotte Gerety, today include two doctors, Robert F. and Edward J.; two attorneys, Pierce J. and Thomas C.; an electronics engineer, Eugene P.; an aircraft executive, William F.; a parish priest, John, who headed a construction business before entering the seminary after his father's death, and Peter, the current Archbishop Emeritus of Newark.



Peter L. and Charlotte Daly Gerety (center) sit for family portrait along with their nine sons in 1939. The photo was taken shortly after the ordination in France of their eldest son, Father Peter, the future archbishop, (center, standing). Father Gerety is flanked by his brothers Thomas C., William F., Robert F. and John L. Seated are Edward J. Gerety, Richard, the youngest brother, who was killed during World War II in Germany; Eugene P. and Pierce J.

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