

Archbishop was inspired by spirit of Vatican II to lead Church of Newark

BY WARD MIELE
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The only thing I can do is thank God," a reflective Archbishop Emeritus Peter L. Gerety said on the eve of turning 100 years old. As he approaches the century mark, Archbishop Gerety wants everyone in the Archdiocese of Newark to realize "the blessing of our Catholic faith. It's our compass in life."

And for Archbishop Gerety, the landmark changes initiated by Vatican II during the mid- 1960s have served as a compass for his long ministry in Newark.

He will be honored for a lifetime in God's service during a special Mass on his birthday tomorrow (July 19) at 3 p.m. in the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark. Archbishop John J. Myers will be the main celebrant.

Interviewed recently in his office at the Saint John Vianney residence in Rutherford, Archbishop Gerety, who served as shepherd of the Church of Newark from 1974 until 1986, emphatically declared that to be a good priest means "staying close to the Lord."

This year, as the Archdiocese of Newark ordained 16 men to the priesthood on May 26, Archbishop Gerety declares "God has blessed us." His message to the Class of 2012 is that being a priest is "a happy life," saying the new priests can experience joyful service by "always staying close to the people."

To men of the 21st century who have heard God's call and are pondering a life in the priesthood, Archbishop Gerety urged them to be "good priests," saying there's no greater cause than Jesus Christ. A good priest, Archbishop Gerety explained, is a man who has "total commitment to Jesus and His people in the Church. Through prayer a priest keeps very close to our Lord. If a man tries to be a priest of the Eucharist, it will strengthen him to be a model for his people and to be constantly supported by the Holy Spirit."

He credits his parents as one of the major influences on his decision to become a priest. Another source of inspiration was the clergy of his boyhood parish, Saint Joseph's in Shelton. His Connecticut hometown had no Catholic school so he attended the local public schools. His mother, whose primary concern was a Catholic education for her children, was active in many organizations comprised of Catholics and Protestants—a situation her son now sees as the foreshadowing of today's ecumenical movement. He had, Archbishop Gerety said nostalgically, "many wonderful Protestant friends."

Recalling his days in the seminary, Archbishop Gerety became nostalgic. "It a wonderful time in my life. I am most grateful for God's call to the priesthood." Ordained on June 29, 1939 at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Archbishop Gerety recalls the tension in the air as Europe was on the brink of World War II. "There was a state of turmoil. It was a tough time." Still, despite the uneasy atmosphere, nothing could take away from the special presence on that momentous day of his mother and his aunt. It was, he notes, "a big thing" for them to be there.

Following his ordination, then-Father Gerety returned to the United States and was assigned to Saint John the Evangelist Parish in New Haven, CT. He was assigned to Saint Brendan's Parish in New Haven in 1942. The move was made necessary because Archbishop Henry O'Brien had established an interracial social and religious center to minister to the community's African-American Catholic population. He served as director of the New Haven facility, then known as the Blessed Martin de Porres Center, from 1942-56. In 1956 the center became Saint Martin de Porres Parish and then-Father Gerety was named its pastor. During his years as a priest in New Haven he was a passionate champion of social justice.

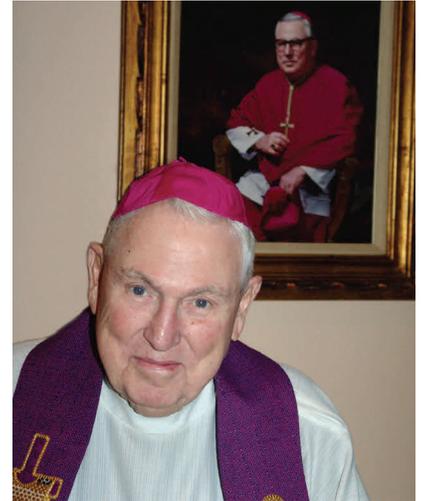
On March 4, 1966, Pope Paul VI appointed him coadjutor bishop with the right of succession to Bishop Daniel J. Feeney of Portland, ME. He was ordained to the episcopacy on June 1, 1966 in Saint Joseph Cathedral in Hartford, CT. His formal accession to the Portland See was on Sept. 15, 1969 following the death of Bishop Feeney.

Archbishop Gerety was installed the shepherd of the Church of Newark on June 28, 1974. He continued his outreach to the African-American community when he arrived in Newark—a ministry that became one of the hallmarks of his career.

While at the helm of the archdiocese, he also enjoyed assisting with the post- Vatican II "change of attitude in the Church, fostering the servant nature of the Church's authority." Looking back from the perspective of his almost unparalleled seven-decade tenure in the priesthood, Archbishop Gerety calls the Church's shift to Vatican II "an enormous step." That was so, he explained during an interview in 2007, because it moved the liturgy "closer to the people."

Implementation of the Vatican II decrees marked "a new era in the history of the Church at both the divine and human levels," according to Archbishop Gerety. Vatican II, he explained, was a time when the Church embraced what Pope Paul VI called a new attitude toward the world. One of the most important changes, he noted, was a shift in the "top-down" mindset in the Church, which had emphasized the authority of the hierarchy in favor of a focus on the hierarchy as servants. Archbishop Gerety said he was guided by Vatican II's impact and inspired to carry out its decrees. Perhaps the best known is *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Age"), the declaration of the Church's relationship with non-Christian religions, which was proclaimed by Pope Paul II on Oct. 28, 1965.

The Church in Newark, he pointed out, "really and truly was able to put flesh" on many of the reforms established by the Second Vatican Council. His predecessor, Archbishop Thomas A. Boland, Archbishop Gerety stressed, was "one of the fathers" of the Second Vatican Council and as his successor he strived to continue that work.



Advocate photo— M. Gabriele
Captured in a photo taken at his residence in Rutherford in 2009, Archbishop Emeritus Peter L. Gerety smiles as a familiar figure looks over his shoulder—a formal portrait from his younger days.