

The motto of his ministry: 'In all things, Christ'

BY MSGR. FRANCIS R. SEYMOUR
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Only a few months ago, just about every form of our modern media showered constant attention on the occurrence of the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the RMS Titanic. Newspapers devoted pages of newsprint every day to articles about one aspect or another of this event. A 3-D version of James Cameron's blockbuster movie about this story was released and television brought back all the old movies about it. There were even memorial cruises to the site where this most memorable of all ships sank in the Atlantic Ocean on that cold night of April 15, 1912.

The anniversary brought up serious discussions about the cause of this famous shipwreck and whether human error or arrogance was responsible. This is a subject that will never cease being debated. The discovery of the remains of this sunken vessel a quarter of a century ago only added more information to the overwhelming store of knowledge that already existed.

Some three months after this tragic loss of 1,500 lives, a child was born in Shelton, CT. Unlike the Titanic, this newborn baby is still alive and well as we celebrate his 100th birthday. All of us in the Archdiocese of Newark and well beyond our borders are rejoicing as we congratulate our Archbishop Emeritus, the Most Rev. Peter Leo Gerety, D.D., on reaching this very significant milestone in a long life that has been filled with much significance. He stands as the oldest archbishop in the world; the oldest bishop in North America; and the world's seventh oldest bishop.

Archbishop Gerety never sought positions of power nor did he ever look for widespread publicity about himself. He has had large doses of both in his 100 years but he accepted these as part of his job. When he was ordained a bishop in 1966, he chose as his episcopal motto, "*In omnibus Christus*." Very simply translated, this means, "In all things, Christ." However, he didn't just get inspired by those words for that occasion. It goes back a lot longer than that.

Archbishop Gerety is the eldest of nine sons born to Peter Leo and Charlotte Ursula Gerety. In her later years, when several of her sons had risen to prominence in their particular fields, someone asked Mrs. Gerety what made her proud of her family. She replied that she was most proud of teaching "my boys" about Jesus Christ and his Church. There it is. From his earliest days in life, he learned about the importance of Christ in his life and he never forgot it.

As he made Christ the center of his life, he wanted to do the same for others by entering the priesthood. After attending Saint Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield, CT, the Bishop of Hartford sent him to Saint Sulpice Seminary in Issy, France. He was ordained a priest on June 29, 1939, in the Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris—just three months before the start of World War II. When he returned to the United States, he was assigned as an assistant at Saint John the Evangelist Parish, New Haven, CT.

He was ordained only three years when he was completely surprised to be charged by the bishop with establishing the first parish for Black Catholics in the State of Connecticut. The Hartford Diocese covered the whole state at that time. He accepted this position without question and he immediately set about accomplishing the task he was given. That was 1942 and the work he began is still flourishing 70 years later as Saint Martin de Porres Parish, New Haven.

In the 1950's he noticed newcomers in his church and discovered they were part of a large number of Puerto Ricans who came to this part of the country at that time. He wanted to make sure that they felt welcome so he taught himself Spanish. Whatever it took to bring Christ into the lives of others, he went for it. He formed committees of laypeople to help him in taking care of the needs of his parishioners. For many years he spent Sundays in other parishes all over Connecticut raising money to help him meet the financial needs of his parish.

After 24 years of establishing and guiding this parish, he felt it was time for a new shepherd to take over. He thought he had given all that he could to this task and he felt he was running out of ideas for it. Few people would agree with his self-assessment but he went to see his ordinary, Archbishop Henry J. O'Brien, since Hartford had been raised to an archdiocese by this time. Archbishop O'Brien asked him to hold on for a little while longer so he did. He was not aware of the plans his archbishop had taken to change the whole course of his life.

The Second Vatican Council ended in December 1965 and three months later an announcement came from Rome that Msgr. Gerety had been appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Portland, ME. The thought of becoming a bishop had never occurred to him but like everything else in his life he accepted it. It was his way of showing that Christ was indeed central in his life. The Diocese of Portland covers the whole State of Maine and he wasted no time in travelling all around it to familiarize himself with the priests and people who comprised his new flock.

He was frequently heard to say, "We have a God of surprises." He ought to know. His life has been filled with them. Checking through what he thought was routine mail one day in 1974, he read a letter telling him that the Holy Father intended to appoint him archbishop of Newark. "*In omnibus Christus*" came through for him again and once more he moved to a whole new territory for him. While he had been a frequent visitor to the Garden State in his youthful days because his mother had come from North Bergen, he now set out to tackle some enormous challenges that awaited him here.

The changes mandated by Vatican II affected every aspect of the Church and the spirit of renewal and demonstrations that marked the late 1960's were in evidence here as well. As if that was not enough, he also faced an archdiocesan debt that was staggering in millions of dollars. He had to give more time than he wished to this last difficulty, but he was ably assisted by a group of outstanding business leaders he appointed to examine the whole matter. They were exceptionally generous in their time and advice and within nine years he was able to declare our archdiocese debt free.

While the territory of this archdiocese is infinitely smaller than the size of the Diocese of Portland, everything else about it is described in extra large proportions. The number of parishes, priests and people along with religious institutions is truly awesome. He spent his first year or so visiting as many of these as it was physically possible to do.

He is a master at balancing work and leisure. When he saw work to be done, he never delayed and went right to it. He fully expected his staff and all who worked with him to have that same determination. However, when his tasks were completed, he thoroughly enjoyed relaxing and thereby gaining back his strength. For many years he looked forward to steering his sailboat in New York Sound or other areas that he visited. His fascination with reading is legendary. Even on his busiest days as an active archbishop, he still found time to read novels, biographies or histories.

While not neglecting his duties as Archbishop of Newark, he still found time to offer his expertise and services to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). He served on several of USCCB committees and he was particularly known for his work with the Call to Action Committee. This group was formed to address and discuss the needs of our faith in this country at the time of the United States bicentennial celebration in 1976.

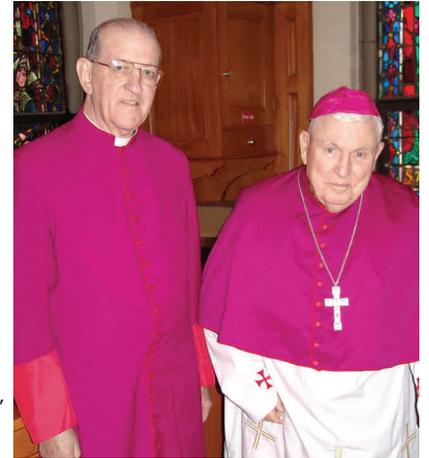
After 12 years as archbishop of Newark, he submitted his resignation to our Holy Father in 1986. He still had another year to go before the mandatory age of 75, but he knew that unless he took this action, everything would crawl to a halt while the archdiocese waited to see who his successor would be.

He is not one to just sit around and bide his time until something happens; nor has he spent his retirement years sitting around and biding his time. Ever since then he has always been available to his two successors—Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick and Archbishop John J. Myers—to fulfill all and any responsibilities they entrusted to him. He has represented them at countless liturgical functions and meetings all over the four counties of the archdiocese.

In the past decade he has given himself totally to the needs of priests who have been charged with misconduct. He has not condemned them or acquitted them but he is constantly available to them. He meets with them as a group on a regular basis and at any time they wish to contact him individually.

Yes, the Titanic started out in a blaze of glory as the largest and most luxurious ocean liner of its kind. Its maiden voyage promised to be the beginning of a long-term catering to the needs of lucky travelers. And, tragically, we all know how exceedingly short that glory lasted. Like the Titanic, Archbishop Gerety began his life in 1912; he is not only still with us but active as well. We thank God for the blessings we have all received through his ministry among us and pray that we will be blessed even more by living our lives as he does: *In omnibus Christus*.

(Editor's note: Rev. Msgr. Francis R. Seymour, K.H.S., is the archdiocesan archivist, University Libraries, Seton Hall University, South Orange; the book editor or the annual Directory and Almanac produced by the Advocate Publishing Corp.; and a frequent contributor to The Catholic Advocate.)



Rev. Msgr. Francis Seymour (left) and Archbishop Emeritus Peter Gerety