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St. Francis founder mourned by parish

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VINELAND — The Rev. Richard Gerbino, founding pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church, came to Vineland with a broken pair of eyeglasses and one suitcase. He left behind

AT A GLANCE

A funeral Mass for the Rev. Richard Gerbino will be celebrated Thursday at 11 a.m. in the Nativity Church on Delsea Drive in Franklinville. Burial will be in Sacred Heart Cemetery. A viewing will be held from 9:30 to 10:45 a.m. Thursday in the church.

many friends and a legacy of deep faith.

Gerbino died Good Friday in Our Lady's Residence

in Pleasantville, a nursing home operated by the Camden Diocese. He was 82.

Gerbino was born in

New York City. He was ordained a priest in 1952 at the Immaculate Conception Church in Camden



The Rev.
Richard Gerbino

and held a degree in philosophy. He was assistant pastor at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Camden before coming to Vineland to establish St. Francis Parish.

Known as Father Richard, Poppa Rich and Poppa to many, he arrived in the city in the spring of 1961.

A delegation of business and professional members of the community led by the late George "Duke" Luciano greeted Gerbino and took him to the Circle restaurant, where a luncheon was arranged in his honor.

After lunch, Gerbino spoke about the Camden

Please see GERBINO on A2

Gerbino

From A1

Diocese's ambitious plans to first build a school, then a church, convent and rectory on a seven-acre tract on West Chestnut Avenue near Delsea Drive.

The plan represented the first spin-off from the mother church, Sacred Heart, and many of those in attendance wondered what was going to happen when the Diocese divided the city.

At the time, most Vineland Catholics were unaware that a second division would be made several years later to create the Church of St. Isidore.

By mid-summer, Gerbino was celebrating Sunday Masses in the auditorium of what is now Landis Middle School. Gerbino was an excellent public speaker, and was known for his relatively brief but dynamic Sunday sermons.

"You lose them after five minutes," he always said.

He served St. Francis until 1980, when he was named Parochial Vicar at St. Rose of Lima Church in Haddon Heights. He served in a similar capacity at churches in Cape May, Carney's Point and Atco and his last assignment was at St. Patrick's Church in Woodbury.

'Difficult circumstances'

Gerbino retired in 1994 and lived at Villa Vianney in Cherry Hill until 2003.

Michael Domico, 82, was a longtime finance officer on the St. Francis Parish Council, a Eucharistic minister and usher and one of Gerbino's closest friends.

Domico and city attorney Charles Girard — who last year was ordained a Catholic deacon — are co-executors of Gerbino's will.

"Father Gerbino was the kindest, most friendly human being and priest I've ever met," Domico said. "He was an ecumenical person who accomplished so much in Vineland."

Domico said diocese officials gave no reason for arranging Gerbino's funeral in Franklinville instead of Vineland.

"He left under difficult circumstances and the need for him to resign caused great pain for him and the Catholics of Vineland," Diocese spokesman Walton said late Tuesday.

While Walton would not discuss specifics of Gerbino's resignation, there were reports at the time that his use of alcohol had affected his ability to perform his duties as a pastor. In subsequent letters to *The Daily Journal*, Gerbino denied being an alcoholic.

Sandy Chinnici has been a member of St. Francis Church since its inception and will be one of the six pallbearers at Gerbino's funeral.

"He would have been proud of how the parish has grown," Chinnici said. "He was a gentleman."

Rita Biondi was the former supervisor of the cafeteria at St. Francis School, where she worked for 37 years. Her late husband, Alfred, was a member of the Board of Trustees of the church and served as president of the Parish Council. Gerbino and his parents were guests at the Biondi home during Easter, Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays.

"He was a loving and friendly person," Biondi said. "Many times he would come down from his office and have lunch with the cafeteria staff after the students had been served."

Donald DeRossi, whose grandfather was a major benefactor of St. Francis Church, called Gerbino a compassionate man.

"He was a warm and jovial person who loved Italian food and loved to discuss religion," DeRossi said.

Gerbino developed an intense interest in Egypt and traveled to the country twice, as well as Italy. He often referred to himself as an amateur Egyptologist.

Excellent cook

An innovator and promoter, Gerbino created the highly successful St. Francis of Assisi beef barbecue held three times each summer in the picnic area south of the school building. Gerbino and longtime friend, the late Casey Dallago Sr., created a special sauce that resulted in tender beef sandwiches that were a hit with churchgoers and the general public.

Gerbino was an excellent cook and occasionally provided recipes to the Vineland Times Journal, now *The Daily Journal*. His instructions for "steak ala pizzola" were a big hit.

Breaking with tradition, Gerbino and his assistant priests stood on the altar on Ash Wednesday for hours giving out ashes without a special ceremony. The convenience attracted Catholics from parishes outside the city.

St. Francis loved animals, and so did Gerbino. Occasionally his dog, Bozo, would slowly wander onto the altar during Mass and sit by the priest.

Gerbino's day began at 5:30 a.m. and by 7 a.m. he was in his office working on church business and finances and fielding a never-ending series of telephone calls.

Since he started work early, 4 p.m. was cocktail time. Gerbino had a copper cocktail shaker twice the size of a normal one into which he mixed whiskey, sweet vermouth and a splash of dry vermouth to create a perfect Manhattan.

He offered drinks and sometimes cheese and snacks to numerous late-afternoon visitors as he talked about everything from national politics to innovations within the Catholic Church.

His outgoing personality made him an icon in the city, but he was always a Catholic priest first and foremost. He dedicated his life to saving souls.