

## **Funeral Homily for Gerald (Jerry) T. “Phineas” Lamia**

**By Rev. James M. Ciaramitaro, OFM Conv.**

I first got to know Jerry’s family when I was a newly ordained priest-34 years ago when I was first assigned to the Italian parish of St. Anthony in south Rockford. I’m sure having an Italian last name helped me get that assignment; and that last name may have helped me become friends with Jerry’s mom and dad; Antoinette & Tony. We became fast friends and often enjoyed each other’s company when they would take me out to dinner.

When Tony passed away, I conducted the funeral and that’s when I met their children. But it wasn’t until I returned to St. Anthony’s 12 years ago that I got to really know Tony Jr., Cat, and Jerry: Antoinette and Cat would invite me over with Tony & Jerry for a wonderful meal of pasta, and meatballs, usually followed by lemon meringue pie.

We always enjoyed the food and the good conversations. Put a bunch of Italians together, and we’re not hesitant to tell you what we think. But I can honestly say that we almost always agreed, and even the few times we didn’t, we continued to regard each other with affection and respect; appreciative of the fact that every view was born out of a sincere desire to embrace what is good and true. Needless to say, to anyone here, but I doubt that Jerry ever in his life had any difficulty accepting another person’s ideas or world view, as long as it strove for what is good and beautiful. And in this way, Jerry was very Catholic. You might be a little surprised to hear me describe Jerry that way – I think Jerry himself might be surprised to hear me say that, but I’m touching on the fuller meaning of Catholic-a word which comes from the Greek word: “Katolicos” which means “universal.”

So part of what It means to be Catholic, and really part of being any kind of person who can first of all recognize what is good, and beautiful no matter what it’s source, and then to embrace whatever is good, and beautiful, regardless of its source. I think this very accurately describes Jerry.

He was never one to put people in categories and then feel he had them all figured out he not only focused on what love and goodness there were bringing into the world, but he also focused on what others needed or their happiness.

Jerry used to say; “Love is not a feeling – love is giving spiritual growth to someone else.”

This wasn’t just a pleasant thought for Jerry. He had friends all over the world who were attracted to this warm and sincere man, who cared about their spiritual growth and well-being. His friends were like other members of his family to him. Jerry’s daughter, Tonya, told me that friends and family flocked to her father for his wisdom as he would direct them to a higher power a higher level of love. She told me, “My dad brought everyone closer to God. All his life He was a vessel to bring God’s gifts to others.”

On a personal note Tonya told me that her father always made her feel like she was standing on a pedestal and gave her nothing but pure love.

A big part of what gave Jerry such strong faith in the goodness of the world and in life itself was his deep love of nature. He used to say “We need to use what Mother Nature gave us before Father Time takes it back.”

He loved climbing mountains, fishing, and riding his motorcycle. He easily identified with the Native American Connection to nature. He also saw nature as a readily available connection to the Higher Power.

Every year Jerry and some friends travelled by motorcycle to the site of the Battle of Little Big Horn in Montana for the annual battle reenactment. He became close friends with the Real Bird family – members of the Crow tribe.

Jerry had a unique way for expressing his deep connection to these closest friends. He would give them a silver dollar as a token of his love and respect. That made you a member of the Silver Dollar Club and holding that Silver dollar was a means of reminding you, not only of your friendship with Jerry, but also to trust that from the power of love would come more love, and blessings. I’m happy to say that I was privileged to receive one of these Silver Dollars.

Now in all that I am saying about Jerry, I wouldn’t want anyone to interpret my words to mean that Jerry through life was a Pollyanna attitude. Jerry had seen enough of life’s struggles and difficulties. He had been to Vietnam; and he struggled with chronic illness. But what I am trying to say is that through it all, Jerry’s positive Spirit is what always prevailed.

A year ago one of the medicines Jerry had to take brought on late stage Parkinson's. This brought great physical challenges and he became homebound. For such a nature lover, this was definitely a heavy cross for Jerry.

At the end of April, Jerry suffered a heart attack and that led to a rapid decline in his health including contracting pneumonia. Through this final struggle, Jerry was blessed to have his family close by. Tonya and her boyfriend Scott spoke to me at length about the remarkable things they witnessed in Jerry's last weeks. His spirit never diminished. Even when struggling, he would sing Elvis Presley love songs with the nurses. Tonya and Scott spoke of his immense grace, courage and strength with they have no doubt came from a higher power. They both love restored and strengthened their own relationship. Tonya is convinced her father was left here long enough to make this happen. Scott told me that the way Jerry faced death so courageously and so positively changed Scott's life forever. He said, "While Jerry was suffering, he continued to bring joy and love to everyone around him so this made me realize, I've been living my life with the wrong emphasis. I now realize: why worry about small things, it's better to look at the big picture and appreciate every small gift of love. He told Jerry "You are one in a million." But to me he said, "Really Father, he was one in a billion."

Both Tonya and Scott said the experience of being with Jerry in his last week was nothing short of extraordinary and is something that will affect them the rest of their lives. They said what happened in that hospital was a magnificent gift, the source of its power was something beyond this world. Even as he was dying, what Jerry extended put their mourning in the background and put the happiness of love in the foreground. One last quote for Jerry: "The quality of life is not what you have; it's how you live it."

Thank you Jerry for showing us the true meaning of life, for making the power of God's love present to us in the way you lived and in the way you left this world. We look forward to seeing you again, in a better place where only pure love, exists the kind of love you carried in your heart, and gave to others.