**Joseph P. Perno**

**1930-2021**

***The gentlemen’s gentleman***

It is a very tall order to capture the man who is perhaps the most revered of the parish who this March would have spent his full 91 years, first at Mt. Carmel, the Italian parish, and then here at the Cathedral and always on 318 Berkley St. I guess Joe could have moved anywhere but this was always home, where he belonged and where he ministered to so many:

Ministered as a faithful parishioner: always present for Mass and other celebrations; the dutiful usher who was part of the fabric of Mass as are the readings, the bread and wine which he lived well and was nourished by. The generous parishioner who also shared his treasure weekly, contributed to diocesan causes such as House of Charity and Catholic Strong, while donating to our various projects the last being the organ fund which he had a special penchant for as he played the organ his whole life and had one at his home. A better player than teacher as neither nephew picked up his love for the instrument though Joe tried. Joe also offered Masses for his beloved parents and sisters at various peak celebrations for them. It was clearly evident his affection for them.

Another way he ministered: Joe was a wisdom figure who takes with him so much knowledge that he had yet to impart. He came alive with his history lessons of the city of Camden, the recently completed Ben Franklin Bridge, the Walt Whitman that came 23 years after his birth, the stories of people formally dressed to shop in the stores that surrounded the Cathedral or to attend the two local theaters that were just across the street. Though things changed, Joe never lost the shirt, tie and suitcoat that defined the man, the gentleman he was. How expertly and definitively he waxed eloquently about parishes shuttered and merged. We learned about the CCHS that began here. And it came full circle for him, as in these last three years, Joe gave conferences in January on three separate days to a different third of the freshman class at CCHS as an acculturation project regaling them with stories and pictures of the Cathedral and the old CCHS. I am not sure what they retained but they treated him with such dignity and respect and knew they were in the presence of a kind, holy gentleman. He delighted us in our Sunday breakfasts with stories, newspaper clippings, slides, pictures and whatever was pertinent to last week’s conversation. He was more than the elder statesman perhaps a loving father and grandfather to those enjoying his company and intimacy. In one of our last get togethers, he told us of his 45-minute morning workout routine that included 80 pushups. The rest of us have not done 80 push-ups collectively in our whole lives.

Joe was recognized everywhere in his walks through the city and no doubt his trips to the Reading Terminal where he would get his meats and other Italian delicacies. I sensed he could cook as one night when picking him up for a Hall of Fame event for Bro. Mickey, the house smelled phenomenal.

There are things to this great man that we may have just learned and/or will never know due to his quiet, humble spirit like his involvement with the Lanning Square West Residents Association where he was fondly known as Mr. Joe for whom he developed their logo which you can find on the bulletin board at the back of the church. Here he was the senior member of the elder council which may be attributed to those 80 daily push-ups. Mr. Joe’s opinion was valued especially for his shared commitment to the revitalization of the area. With them, he shared loving memories growing up in this section of Camden. Perhaps the only time I know when he was out of shirt, tie and suitcoat was at the reopening celebration of Washington and 4th St when Mr. Joe donned his bright orange LSWRA t-shirt fashionably topped off with sunglasses. These residents, like all who Joe met, expressed how sorry they are to have lost such a beautiful person and how he will be missed by all. They have a flower arrangement here and will plant a tree in the Spring in Mr. Joe’s honor.

This Sunday, we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, the patron of the Oblates who have served in this parish for the last 13 years. Five years ago, when I first got here, Bob Cavanaugh said that we should do something for Joe to honor his service and the man he is. Joe was the first recipient of the Salesian award that January given to the person(s) or group that best exemplifies the spirit of St, Francis de Sales, the “gentleman saint.” As Joe’s nephews proudly note, he was a gentlemen’s gentleman. Like Francis de Sales, he espoused what we call the great Salesian virtues of humility and gentleness. The award was quite a surprise, but that ever-endearing smile donned his face as he walked up the aisle to a unanimous standing ovation with loud applause and people smiling in agreement that we had made the most perfect inaugural recipient.

Yes, gentleman Joe was the just man described in our first reading who unequivocally trusted in God and understood truth. This faithful man abided with God in love. He was the holy one who exuded grace and mercy. The same God who took care of him for these close to 91 wonderful years will do that now and such much more especially as his soul enjoys the company of his parents and beloved sisters to whom, he was so devoted.

I was taken with Joe’s graduation photo from CCHS and the comments that were underneath “politeness was his motto.” How he perfected that for all to see, enjoy and follow suit. Then we read “always wears a smile.” This engaging smile evidenced his innocence, joy, happiness and above all else, goodness.

The Beatitudes which were proclaimed in the Gospel are laws to make us happy. To be good, we try to see if we can practice one or a few of them. In truth, it seems as though Joe was that rare man of goodness who inculcated all eight.

This cultured, well-rounded, holy man without guile seems to be a lost icon these days.

However, hope seems to be the virtue most bandied about these recent days. Many sense hope with a new Congress and new leadership. Many hope they may work to heal a wounded, cold, finger pointing, quick blaming people into a warm, more compassionate, forgiving and embracing people.

In these days of fear of the pandemic, discord on our streets, between races, in politics, in our church and in any other institution that gathers disparate spirits, we have the opportunity to honor Joe by being humble, gentle, loving and caring and most of all good. Nothing is better than goodness. Like his patron St. Joseph, our Joseph was a good and just man. How graced are we to have been blessed with his presence and example. May we now share that as we pray him home with his family and his loving and gentle Father in heaven.