

**An Appreciation of the Life of Andrew F. Seeger
Offered at the Mass for Christian Burial, Saint Mary of the Lakes Church
Medford, New Jersey**

February 3, 2003

Good morning, everyone.

My father and mother had four children – my brother Larry, my sister Enid, who died in an automobile accident in 1995, my sister Betty, and myself. They had four natural grandchildren, Omie, Jeanne-Marie, Michael and Cindy, and an adoptive grandchild, Tuot Kevin, and so far they have five natural great grandchildren, Abigail, Katherine, Sophia, Gwendolyn, and Ethan, and two adoptive great grandchildren, Serena and Timothy. All these members of our family thank you for gathering with us for this Funeral Mass for my father, Andrew, and for supporting us in so many helpful ways in this time of grief.

We are particularly grateful to Ruth Hayes, who arranged for Father Charles Muorah to administer the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church to my father the day before he died, and to Joe and Sue Tedeschi, whose ministry of consolation meant so much to our family at the time of my mother's death, as well as now. With Ann Naulty's help my Mom and Dad always faithfully attended the masses celebrated by Father Tedesco at Medford Leas. So we are grateful also to the people of Saint Mary's church for supporting all these various ministries. My parents were too old when they moved here to contribute much to the life of Saint Mary's parish, but they were members of Saint Kevin's Church in Flushing, New York for 51 years. The universal and enduring community of the Church is a miracle in which we are all blessed to participate.

I would also like to acknowledge the supportive outreach of my good friend, General Preston Taylor, the honorable Mayor of Lumberton, who is with us this morning.

My Dad was born in Brooklyn on January 5, 1906, and he died on January 29, 2003, a few weeks after his 97th birthday. His parents, Frederick Seeger and Anna Arnold

Seeger, were each the children of German immigrants. My grandparents' childhood and early married years were lived within the context of a German-American community in Brooklyn centered around the Church of Saint Aloysius. Although my father was a third generation American, the strength of Old World ways in the ethnically German community in which they lived was so strong that he only learned English as a second language when he went to grammar school.

My Dad was the oldest of my grandparents' eight children. My grandfather was a laborer in a brewery, and the family was poor. But my grandparents' families came from the southern, Roman Catholic part of Germany, and the family was rich in Christian piety. I was still a child when my grandparents passed away, and so my recollection of their faith is confined to the simple sort of images which might impress a very young person. But I remember that my grandparents' house had small holy water fonts hanging near the door jambs of the several rooms, and that my grandmother use to bless herself, making the sign of the cross with holy water, when going from place to place through the house, and I remember being liberally sprinkled with holy water myself when I went to visit her.

In any event, the life of the Church was the central component of Seeger family culture, and two of my father's younger brothers, my Uncle Peter and my Uncle Frank, became parish priests in the Diocese of Brooklyn, my Uncle Peter eventually becoming pastor of the large parish of Saint Fidelis in Astoria, and one of my father's sisters, my Aunt Florence, became a Dominican nun. So three of my grandparents' eight children entered religious life.

Happily, my Dad was drawn to the spiritual path of the householder, otherwise many of us would not be here today. But, as I indicated, my grandparents and their eight children were poor. My Dad, being the oldest, went to work as soon as he completed grammar school in order to help support the rest of the family. It is astonishing to realize that this intelligent and perceptive man had no formal education beyond the eighth grade. There were a few stabs made at night school, but these attempts usually foundered on the need to work overtime hours when overtime hours were available.

When my Dad entered the labor force at age fourteen he was employed by a small, family owned firm named Adolph Gottscho, Incorporated. The firm made the sort of rubber stamps which are still sometimes in use, devices with which you stamp "PAID" on a bill, or "First Class Mail" on an envelope. It also published specialty newspapers,

such as union newsletters. My father started out at age fourteen running errands and cleaning the shop, but graduated to becoming a compositor. He worked with large drawers full of brass letters – drawers called fonts – and when a rubber stamp had to be made or a column of news-print assembled he would deftly pull the required letters from the font drawer, put them in a kind of frame, and then pour molten lead over the brass letters so that a line of type was formed in lead, whereupon the brass font letters would be replaced in the font drawer. This involved not only manual dexterity, but also the ability to read text backwards and inside out so as to spot typographical errors before they were cast in lead. Dad used to bring me to his workplace for a day once every year or so. I was always fascinated and looked forward to these outings, and I always came home with a new rubber stamp with my name and address on it.

My Dad and Mom were married in 1934, and thus began their life together when the country was in a deep depression. They had their four children during the first twelve years of their marriage. When the family outgrew apartment living they managed to buy a small bungalow-type house in Flushing, Queens. My father continued working for the same firm he had joined at age fourteen. With his lack of education he did not feel he had much job mobility, and he valued the mutual loyalty which had built up between himself and the small family firm in which he was employed. Operating a small business profitably is always a challenge, and we know that many small businesses fail. Fortunately, Adolph Gottscho, Inc. did not fail, but like most small businesses in that era it was subjected to periodic rocky times and near bankruptcies, which produced anxious reverberations in our household. My parents never fought with each other over money, but together they often felt overwhelmed by the stresses of keeping the family afloat financially. The Adolph Gottscho firm moved from Manhattan to New Jersey to lower overhead, and my father began commuting two hours each way from Queens on public transportation, in addition to working as much overtime as he could to help make ends meet. Our lifestyle was conspicuously simpler than that of our neighbors, modest though that was. We were the only family without an automobile, for example, and used to cart our groceries from the shopping district three-quarters of a mile away in a red wagon or a disused baby carriage. Nor did we have a telephone, but relied on neighbors when using a telephone was necessary.

Thus, my Dad's life was characterized by long years of self-giving, first to his parents and siblings, and then to his wife and children. He did all this without any hint of complaint or self-pity. He manifested a sort of simple enduring patience; he knew what his responsibilities were, and he faced them forthrightly. He was blessed with a wry sense of humor, which diffused tension and lent balance. I have often thought about my Dad's sense of humor. He was not an extroverted, glad-handed jokster. His humor was subtle. Almost all humor has a victim, yet I cannot remember my Dad's humor ever being cruel. But he always, in his quiet way, had a twinkle in his eye, and was

ready with some observation or quip that would produce smiles in those who heard him.

There were two ways in which my parents seemed to seek clearly to distinguish themselves from their own parents. One was that I was never pressured to cut short my own education to help make ends meet at home, as my Dad had been; rather, the operating assumption was that I should go to college. And indeed, in spite of the difficulties they faced, my parents encouraged all four of their children in our aspirations for higher education.

Second, my mother's father, my grandfather Baxendale, had boycotted their wedding ceremony because he disapproved of their marriage. Happily, a reconciliation occurred before too much time elapsed. But, in contrast, my parents never boycotted us or disowned us in any way. We know that the conditions of modern life are such that, in rapidly changing social circumstances, there are often value conflicts between the generations, and such value conflicts did indeed occur in our family. My parents found my own involvement in the Religious Society of Friends and my conscientious objection to military service to be inexplicable, for example. But they bore with patience the excruciating embarrassment of having the FBI interview their neighbors about me, and came to Washington and stood by me when the case of the United States of America versus Daniel A. Seeger was argued before the Supreme Court. Other conflicts between the generations in our family occurred; they do not need to be cataloged here. But it is important to recognize that however far afield we might roam, my parents never even hinted at anything like disownment or a boycott, but always exhibited a rock-like loyalty to their children.

When my youngest sister Betty went to high school, my mother returned to work. The mortgage on the bungalow got paid off, and things eased for my parents. They began accumulating some modest assets which they thought of as a legacy for their children. They acquired a car. They had an enormous love for their grandchildren, and took great pride in their accomplishments. They enjoyed frequent visits with the nearby ones, Omie and Cindy, and journeyed to Clarion, Pennsylvania to visit with Jeanne Marie and Michael whenever they could. My father eventually retired from Adolph Gottscho, Incorporated, and my parents took a grand automobile tour of the United States which the company made possible.

Eventually, as their retirement years passed, it seemed impractical for them to

continue living in their small house. My father lost his drivers license when he was in his mid-eighties, and carting groceries in a red wagon for three quarters of a mile, reasonable enough for people in the prime of life, seemed not feasible for an elderly couple. Larry, Enid, Betty and I began encouraging them to move to Medford Leas. They were reluctant. They hated to leave the home in which they had lived for 51 years and in which they had raised their family. They also did not like the idea of abolishing the legacy, which the costs associated with Medford Leas would involve.

One evening, when I went to visit them, as I parked my car in their driveway, a shadowy figure emerg-ed from the darkness, pointed a gun at me, and demanded my wallet. Such a turn of events was unheard of in the sedate neighborhood in which my parents lived. I was quite startled, needless to say, but readily handed over my wallet with its cash and cred-it cards. Then the thief wanted my briefcase. My appointment book was in my briefcase, and I had a deep aversion to facing all the confusions which loss of my calendar would involve. I clung to the briefcase, and the thief punched me in the face, caus-ing a wound which eventually required 28 stitches. I let my briefcase go. This incident convinced my parents that they were getting to be too much trouble for us, and they came to Medford Leas. If I had known it would have had this result I might, perhaps, have paid someone to mug me.

Once installed at Medford Leas for about a week, my Dad said to me, "You know, we should have come here many years sooner. We would have gotten so much more out of this place if we had come when we were younger." But even though of an advanced age, they had good years at Medford Leas, where community activities offered many new interests, and where the enormous kindness and competence of the staff did a great deal to enrich life for them. At age 92 my Dad took up the computer, using a computer his grandson Tuot Kevin assembled for him, and you can imagine his amazement and delight, given his background as a compositor in the printing business, at the miracle of word processing and desk-top publishing.

My mother suffered a massive stroke about three years before she died. She became completely disabled, was paralyzed and unable to speak, and had to be moved to the nursing wing. At first my father hoped, as we all did, that my mother would recover. But as it gradually became apparent that her condition was irreversible, he would say things like: "If only we could say a few more words to each other before we die." The staff at Med-ford Leas provided excellent care for my Mom, but my Dad made her the center of his life and of his attention as much as ever. He would visit with her twice a day, and push her about in her wheelchair so that she would enjoy a change of scenery. He would bring her back to the apartment so they could watch the same TV

programs they enjoyed when she was well, and he fed her grapes and other pieces of fruit. When he became too frail to push her about, he would supervise Larry, Betty and me in the routines he had developed for her comfort and stimulation whenever we went to visit.

Even while my mother was alive I had developed some ideas, ideas which I thought were good ideas, about how my father's life could be improved. When my mother died, I thought it was a good time to implement them. He was frail and was using a walking frame to get about. Falling was a constant danger. I thought it would be a good idea if he would upgrade to assisted living. I thought he needed new teeth so he could eat better. I wanted to get him new clothes, and I wanted him to get a hearing aid. He evaded all these grand plans. Each time I proposed something he would say it was too much of a hassle to undertake when he was not going to be around that much longer anyway. One day I was talking to him very directly about some life improvement project, and he was looking straight back at me with the bemused smile he always adopted when he knew, and I knew, he was not going to pay any attention to me. Although he was 96 years old and very frail, he never really got into the swing of being managed by his children. So, anticipating his usual excuse, that it was not worth the trouble for the time left to him, I said, "You know Dad, although you are frail, you are not really ill, and it is conceivable you might live for another five years." In the instant I said that, his smile faded and a cloud passed over his face, as if I had pronounced some sort of sentence upon him. But he quickly recovered and waved me off in his usual way. But I knew that I should stop my advocacy.

I want to be clear about this. My father was not depressed or despondent, and to be with him was never to be cast down in spirit. His clarity of mind and his sense of humor remained to the very end. But he recognized that the tasks for which he had been placed in this world were completed, and that death was not an enemy. We live in a world where children die needlessly of starvation and where so many people are killed in wars. This is a state of sinfulness in which all of us are deeply implicated. In these situations of needless starvation and of war, death is indeed an enemy. But when circumstances permit the unfolding of a life in the way the Creator intended, there comes a point where nothing can be added or taken away, regardless of what the additional number of our days may be, and where gratitude and obedience are the only appropriate responses. There is no need to escape from our mortality, no need to imagine ourselves to be reincarnations of Napoleon or Cleopatra, and no need to freeze our bodies or our brains, as some people are apparently doing, in the hope of being revived in some future century. It is given to each of us to live only once in this earthly sphere, but as my father's life shows, once is enough if we do it right.

Let us, then, celebrate this liturgy with the same spirit of gratitude and obedience. Let us pray, as I know my father would have us do, that the greatness of divine love, the love which has raised all things up from the formless dust, will increasingly become known to all the nations of the world, so that the human estate will more and more come to resemble the City of God, a City where all people can live out the full measure of their days on this earth, as it has so Providentially been given to my father to do.

Daniel A. Seeger