

Louis Gigante, Priest Who Led South Bronx Revival, Dies at 90

The brother of a convicted Mafia boss, he became a Democratic Party leader and a city councilman, and helped build thousands of units of housing.

By Robert D. McFadden

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The Rev. Louis R. Gigante, a Roman Catholic priest who was instrumental in rebuilding one of America's most notorious slums, in the South Bronx, into a thriving and safer neighborhood with thousands of new homes, died on Wednesday. He was 90.

His death was confirmed by Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York. Mr. Zwilling did not specify where Father Gigante died, or the cause.

If the surname is familiar, it's because all four of his brothers were mobsters, including Vincent ("the Chin") Gigante, boss of the Genovese Mafia family that dominated organized crime in New York City for decades. After the deaths or imprisonment of Vincent's rivals, he was widely recognized as the most powerful crime boss in the nation until he went to prison in 1997.

In an era when drugs, arson and abandoned housing made the South Bronx a symbol of urban decay, Father Gigante was a savvy street priest, a political and spiritual leader for thousands of residents who, a city medical examiner said, had only a 1-in-20 chance of dying of natural causes. The priest became a city councilman, a developer with clout in Washington, the chaplain of the Italian American Civil Rights League and an outspoken defender of criminal kingpins.

Although revered by the predominantly Hispanic community in the South Bronx, Father Gigante had many personal and political enemies, who accused him of conspiring with organized crime to take graft and even secret real estate holdings in upstate New York. But he also won \$50 million in legitimate grants and subsidies for his projects from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

He sometimes carried a baseball bat to defend himself in the streets, and once went to jail for refusing to tell the authorities about his underworld contacts. He lost a race for a congressional seat but doled out patronage jobs as a Democratic district leader, even as he celebrated masses, officiated at weddings and funerals, heard confessions, visited the sick and buried the dead.

In a black cassock and a white reversed collar, he was a familiar figure in the South Bronx for nearly a half-century, an ebullient associate pastor of St. Athanasius Church who gave sermons and greeted friends and parishioners in English or Spanish. As his hair went white, he still had the springy step of the basketball star he had been at Georgetown University in the early 1950s.



Father Gigante in 1997 outside the courthouse in Brooklyn where his brother Vincent was convicted of murder and racketeering charges. Frances Roberts/The New York Times

Father G., as he was known from Hunts Point to City Hall, founded the South East Bronx Community Organization, or SEBCO, in 1968 as a cornerstone to resurrect the South Bronx. For years, it was just another neighborhood tax-exempt anti-poverty group with few resources, no master plan and little hope. It needed political muscle, and Father Gigante, as SEBCO's president and driving spirit, went after it.

Brash and inexperienced, he reached too far too fast, losing a congressional primary to Representative Herman Badillo in 1970. But a year later, he was the first priest in the city's history to become an accredited political boss, winning the Democratic leadership of the 77th Assembly District. His busy headquarters, the storefront Bruckner Democratic Club, was a visible sign of progress.

"It's an advantage for me to be a priest as well as the district leader," he told *The New York Times* in 1972. "At first there were those who felt it was wrong for a priest to be a politician. But then when I did a few favors for them, these same people changed their minds. Patronage is where it is."

Before clubhouse meetings, Father Gigante went to a back room to hear requests for favors. Someone's son was in trouble with the law. Did he know a lawyer? A nod, and it was done. Someone needed a part-time job, perhaps as a building super. He would make calls the next day. He was paid for his work for his community group, but he said most of his salary went to support his aging mother.

In 1973, he won a seat on the City Council. In 1974, he had to run for it again because of a redistricting problem, and won again. His Council tenure was not especially noteworthy, but he said it helped him to get to know the city's political players and to lay a foundation for his later housing successes. He did not run again in 1977, focusing instead on obtaining government grants.

He said that by 1981 he had orchestrated the construction and rehabilitation of 1,100 federally subsidized apartments in Hunts Point, the heart of the South Bronx. SEBCO said that it made \$1 million, but that it had poured most of the money back into the community for jobs and building services.

The Times reported: "The achievement — a concrete and brick miracle in a neighborhood that was legendary for the resoluteness of its death march — has earned him the highest respect and praise from government officials as well as from a grateful community."

"What he's done for that area is fantastic," Anthony Gliedman, the city's housing commissioner, told reporters. "It's almost like a phoenix rising from the ashes."

The renewal was hardly a smooth passage. There were false starts and long delays. Building flaws were inevitable. Even with subsidized rents, tenants fell behind. Co-ops that sold for \$90,000 had roof and plumbing problems. Some tenants called Father Gigante a slumlord. Drug dealers and prostitutes lingered on corners. It was no utopia.

Father Gigante was subpoenaed by several grand juries seeking information about organized crime leaders, including his brothers and Joseph Colombo, who founded the Italian American Civil Rights League in 1970 and was shot and paralyzed at a 1971 rally in Columbus Circle. Father Gigante refused to give straight answers, saying he was exempted by priest-penitent confidentiality. He was once convicted of contempt and sentenced to 10 days in jail, but released three days early for good behavior.

In 1997, Vincent Gigante was convicted in Brooklyn federal court of murder and racketeering charges. He had often wandered the streets in a bathrobe, mumbling to himself. His lawyers said he was unfit to stand trial, but the court overruled them. Father Gigante denied any knowledge of organized crime, called the Mafia an anti-Italian stereotype created by the news media and law enforcement officials and insisted his brother was mentally ill. Vincent died in prison in 2005.



The Erma Cava Houses in the South Bronx were developed by the Southeast Bronx Community Organization, started by Father Gigante in 1968. Angel Franco/*The New York Times*

But Father Gigante's work went on. By 2004 SEBCO said that it had developed 3,000 housing units since its inception, and that it was breaking ground on Tiffany Gardens, a \$14 million, 105-unit low- and middle-income apartment complex the length of a football field.

Edward Logue, head of the city's South Bronx Development Organization, hailed SEBCO and Father Gigante for what the Archdiocese of New York called "the most successful critical mass of neighborhood rebuilding in the whole city."

Two lawsuits were filed last year charging that Father Gigante had sexually assaulted a girl in the early 1960s when she was about 10 years old and a boy in the mid-1970s when he was 9 or 10 years old. Both cases are pending in State Supreme Court, according to court documents. Father Gigante did not comment on the suits at the time.

Louis Robert Gigante was born in Manhattan on March 19, 1932, the youngest of five sons of Salvatore and Yolanda (Santasilvia) Gigante, immigrants from Naples who never learned English. The father was a watchmaker and the mother a seamstress. Louis and his brothers, Vincent, Mario, Pasquale and Ralph, grew up in Greenwich Village.

Louis attended Public School 3 in the West Village and Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx, where he starred on a basketball team that won the Catholic schools city championship in 1949. He graduated from high school in 1950. Louis received an athletic scholarship to Georgetown, became an outstanding guard and co-captain of the Hoyas basketball team and graduated in 1954.

He trained for the priesthood at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y., and was ordained in 1959. Over the next three years, he was posted to Puerto Rico, where he learned Spanish, and to St. James Church on the Lower East Side, where he worked with youth groups. He was transferred to St. Athanasius in 1962 and remained there until 2002, when he retired as a priest.

Complete information on survivors was not immediately available. All of his brothers are deceased.

In December 2007, Father Gigante stepped down as the leader of SEBCO after 40 years. By then, the organization had 300 employees, and it said it had developed more than 6,000 units of affordable and low-income housing, including condominiums, cooperative apartments and private homes. It also said it still managed 3,000 units of low-income and senior-citizen apartments. Its new president was Father Gigante's nephew Salvatore Gigante.

"I'm 75 years old," Father Gigante told a gathering for his retirement. "I think it's about time I went out to pasture and took it easy."

Alex Traub contributed reporting.

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