

LONG ISLAND

Priest at Sonny Franzese's funeral Mass: 'He just kept on going'



John (Sonny) Franzese's coffin is carried from Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on Friday. Credit: Craig Ruttle

By Matthew Chayes
matthew.chayes@newsday.com [✕](#)chayesmatthew
February 26, 2020

[SHARE](#)

A eulogy for Colombo family underboss John (Sonny) Franzese had just begun Friday when the glass of a paschal candle shattered, sending a thunderous echo through Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church.

"See? He is here with us right now, and he wants to make sure I'm not gonna to say certain things. That I promise," said the eulogist, Maurice, who described himself as the "unofficial adopted son of Sonny" and owner of Cinema World Studios in nearby Greenpoint, Franzese's childhood neighborhood.

There was laughter among about 75 people in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, at the funeral Mass for Franzese, the charming, menacing mobster who died Sunday at 103. In 2017, he was freed from prison, the federal system's oldest inmate, having served 35 years.

"I don't think anybody ever thought that Sonny Franzese was ever gonna die. He just kept on going," said the officiant, Msgr. David Cassato, standing next to the coffin. "You ever see that image of the Energizer Bunny? Well, he was, in my mind, the Energizer Bunny. He kept going, going and going."

In court papers, the government once said Franzese was responsible for 40 to 50 murders by the late 1960s; he was never convicted of homicide.

His Mafia career was interrupted by a 50-year sentence in 1967 for masterminding bank robberies across the nation. (He long denied guilt.) He was paroled repeatedly but kept being sent back to prison for associating with felons.

In 2010, he went back, at 93, for shaking down Penthouse and Hustler strip clubs in Manhattan, and an Albertson pizzeria. His youngest son, John Jr., testified against the older man and had worn a wire.

In a recent Newsday interview, Sonny Franzese said of his life: "I never hurt nobody that was innocent."

One mourner read from the Book of Sirach: "What is man, of what worth is he? The good, the evil in him, what are these? The sum of a man's days is great if it reaches a hundred years."

Cassato recalled meeting Franzese in 2002, when he came to see the Monsignor to thank him for his work at Mount Carmel, which Franzese considered his parish. (His own mom's funeral had been there in 1966, although he wasn't allowed to attend because he was jailed awaiting trial for murder.)

"He said, 'You know, I've been away at college,'" the Monsignor said, an apparent euphemism by Franzese for prison, before offering: "Anything you need, call me."

"Lo and behold, he went away to school again!" the Monsignor said to laughter.

Three mourners delivered eulogies, including a grandson and granddaughter: Both described him as a family man, a dotting presence who urged them to pursue their passions, be healthy and get educated.

The traditional Catholic Mass was complemented by gospel singers his grandchildren hired, a homage to Franzese's past: In the 1960s, his friends and family have told Newsday, he was a silent partner of two independent music labels and had a booking agency. They said he gave black musicians a chance when some others wouldn't.

On Friday, the gospel singers performed "Amazing Grace" as Franzese's coffin, draped in an American flag, was carried out of the church. (Franzese served in the Army but was dishonorably discharged for "homicidal tendencies" in 1944, according to court records.)

Burial was to follow at St. John Cemetery in Middle Village, Queens.

The Monsignor's homily had invoked Ben Franklin's aphorism that there's nothing certain in life but death and taxes.

"If you're smart," Cassato said, "if you're smart, Sonny taught me, you could avoid some of those taxes."

By Matthew Chayes
matthew.chayes@newsday.com [✕](#)chayesmatthew
Matthew Chayes, a Newsday reporter since 2007, covers New York City.