

September 20, 2001

Fr. Mychal Judge, OFM, 1933 - 2001

A beacon of light during America's Darkest Hour

by John Zawadzinski

NEW YORK, N.Y. - Father Mychal Judge, OFM, chaplain to the New York City fire department since 1992, died Tuesday, Sept. 11 in a hail of steel and concrete as he administered last rites to a firefighter near the scene of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Father Judge became the first officially recorded fatality following the attack. He was 68.

"The losses within our fire department are staggering, but I know Father Judge is praying for us," New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said. "The fire department is going to emerge stronger from this tragedy and Father Judge is going to be there praying for us and supporting us."

Firefighters found Father Judge's lifeless body beneath a smashed fire engine at "ground zero" and took him to St. Peter's Church on nearby Barclay Street. They laid the friar in front of the altar, covered him with a white cloth and his priest's stole before placing his helmet and chaplain's badge on his chest. He was then taken to Engine 1 and Ladder 24 on West 31st Street here, the location where he kept his chaplain's car.

"There is a lot of sadness because this is a tremendous loss, but the manner in which Mychal died is also a great honor because he died in service," said Father Peter Brophy, OFM, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church, located almost directly across the street from the firehouse. "As a friar, I'm honored by who he was and how he reached out to people no matter who they were."

Edward Cardinal Egan, Archbishop of New York, who was the principal celebrant of Father Judge's funeral Mass Saturday, Sept. 15 at St. Francis of Assisi Church said, "New York is going to be rebuilt better and stronger than ever before out of the blood and sweat of our heroes."

It was estimated that more than 2,800 people attended Father Judge's funeral Mass including hundreds of Franciscans from Holy Name Province, religious, uniformed members of the fire and police departments and friends.

The mourners also included former President Bill Clinton, New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, their daughter, Chelsea, New York Public Advocate Mark Green, former New York Mayor David Dinkins and former New York City Police Chief William Bratton.

Father John Felice, OFM, Provincial Minister of Holy Name Province, Father Brophy and Father Myles Murphy, a priest from the Archdiocese of New York and a cousin of Father Judge, all served as concelebrants. Father Michael Duffy, OFM, in service at St. Francis Inn, a Franciscan-run soup kitchen in Philadelphia, was the homilist.

During the homily, Father Duffy told the congregation he served with Father Judge during the

early 1970s at St. Joseph's Church in East Rutherford, N.J. He recalled Father Judge, then pastor, would always put the needs of his parishioners first, especially if they needed someone to talk to or listen to their problems.

"His heart was open, his ears were open and he truly was a people person," Father Duffy said.

"When he was talking to you, he made you feel like you were the only person on the face of the earth."

Father Duffy also said, "Father Judge loved to be where the action was. He loved to be where there was a crisis, so he could serve God."

In 1986 after Father Judge returned from studying in England, he was called to Bellevue Hospital to say Mass for New York City police officer Steven McDonald, who was left paralyzed from the neck down after being shot by a 15-year-old he was questioning in Central Park.

"When I first saw him, he was just lying in bed, motionless," Father Judge told this reporter, this past July. "He was in bad shape, but determined to live."

In the days and years following the shooting, Father Judge became extremely close to McDonald, his wife, Patti Ann and their son, Conor. The priest also had the opportunity to travel with McDonald during a number speaking engagements in the United States and Northern Ireland.

"He was my confessor, my spiritual advisor and my best friend," McDonald said. "He was my idea of what a priest should be and above all, he was a living example of Jesus Christ. I'm going to miss him a great deal and I'm not sure what I'm going to do without him."

McDonald called Father Judge to inform him about the 1996 crash of TWA flight 800 off Long Island in which all 230 people aboard were killed. For more than two weeks straight, Father Judge drove daily from Manhattan to the Ramada Hotel near JFK Airport. There he spent 12 hours a day consoling friends and families who lost their loved ones. He also celebrated Mass every other day, participated in counseling sessions for people of all denominations and organized ecumenical, memorial prayer services for the victims' families and TWA personnel.

"When that call came through it was the Lord calling me somehow," he told this reporter, some years ago, during a visit to his third-floor room at the friary, which overlooks Engine 1 and Ladder 24. "I went out there that night and I stayed there for all hours of the morning, talking to people from all over the country and all over the world."

When tragedy struck on Sept. 11, Father Brian Carroll, OFM, went up to Father Judge's room to inform him that a plane had just crashed into one of the World Trade Center towers. Father Carroll recalled that without hesitation, Father Judge quickly took off his Franciscan habit, changed into his chaplain's uniform and headed for the door. That was the last time the friar would see his friend alive.

Born in Brooklyn, the son of two Irish immigrants from County Leitrim, Father Judge watched his father die from a long illness. As a result, the six-year-old was unable to establish a relationship with his father. To help his mother and two sisters make ends meet, he shined shoes

at Penn Station, ran errands and did odd jobs, before being called to his Franciscan vocation at 15.

He was ordained in 1961 and assigned to St. Joseph's Church in East Rutherford and Sacred Heart in Rochelle Park, N.J., before serving as assistant to the president at Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y. He was later named pastor of St. Joseph's Church in West Milford, N.J., before becoming a fire chaplain in 1992.

"I always wanted to be a priest or a fireman, now I'm both," Father Judge told me some years ago. "I had to bust my tail to get this habit, so I wear it always. I wanted to be a Franciscan so bad and this is something I believe so strongly in and I have absolutely no regrets."

In addition to his work with the fire department, Father Judge was also involved in ministering to AIDS/HIV patients, recovering alcoholics and with the simply professed friars who have been associated with Holy Name Province for less than five years.

Although Father Duffy told the congregation he was spiritually crushed when he heard the news of Father Judge's death, he saw God's purpose for choosing him to be among the first to die in the line of duty.

"We're going to have more and more people brought out of the rubble and Mychal Judge is going to greet them on the other side of death," he said. "He's going to greet them with his big Irish smile. He's going to take them by the hand and say, 'Welcome, let me take you to our father.'"

Father Judge was buried at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Totowa, N.J., and is survived by two sisters, Erin McTernan and Dympna Jessich, both of Berlin, Md.