

In September of 2001, I had just started seminary. And I remember in that first week of class, on 9/11, watching in horror and silence with millions of Americans as we saw the tragedies unfold in New York. But while out of that day there was the evil actions of several terrorists, what also emerged were countless stories of the inherent goodness that is inside people. The kind of good that exhibits what the cross is all about - a sacrificial love - in that you had so many people doing what they could to come together and help.

Among these was a man who would be recorded simply as "Victim 1". He was the first recorded fatality as he was the first body that was recovered that day. And while he died on 9/11, in fact what he did that day was nothing new. Time and time again, he would help people and journey with them, bringing the light of God to them. And that was because for him, sacrifice and giving all he had was a way of life.

The first victim was a Franciscan priest by the name of Fr. Mychal Judge. On 9/11, he rushed from the friary at Saint Francis of Assisi Church to the World Trade center. He gave the anointing to a firefighter, but was hit by debris and killed when he took his helmet off.

Born in Brooklyn on May 11, 1933, he was the son of two Irish immigrants who met on the boat over to America. As a young boy, he watched his father die after a long illness. To help his mother and two sisters make ends meet, he shined shoes in Manhattan, ran errands and did odd jobs. His twin sister remembers that her brother always wanted to be a priest, and he was called to his vocation at the age of 16 when he entered the seminary. He graduated in 1954 after completing the first two years of college. He was received in the order in 1954 and made vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, being ordained to the priesthood on February 25, 1961 at the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C. He'd spend much of his priesthood in ministry at a college and in the parish at Saint Francis of Assisi, but he also spent much of time with the people. He changed the spelling of his first name to be a little different as it seemed everyone was named "Michael" at the friary.

Remarked Michael McCourt, an actor and author who knew him well: "There's a very old postcard of a giant Jesus looking in the window of the Empire State Building in those long, long robes...and that was Mike Judge in New York. He was everywhere. Over the city. And ooohhh, how good it was to know he was there." On any given evening, he might be baptizing a fireman's child, ministering to an AIDS patient, or listening to Black 47, a Celtic rock band that had a regular gig at Connolly's on West 47th Street. Judge got 30 to 40 messages a day on his answering machine. Every six months, he'd wear another machine out. "He was the busiest person alive," says Joe Falco, a firefighter with Engine 1-Ladder 24, the company across the street from Judge's home. "He'd come back at all hours of the morning, blowing his siren so we could park his car. No one knew how he did it. No one understood how he maintained his energy."

One way was actually through facing his weakness: alcohol. Jesus washes the feet of Peter because Peter has weaknesses too as we all do; Jesus needs to heal Him with

grace. Fr. Mychal struggled with alcohol for a time in his life. No one knew, others didn't think he had a problem at all. But Fr. Mychal knew it was serious; he'd find himself in blackouts, and so he got help. But he recognized his problem and, in the words of his superior at the friary, he became to borrow from Fr. Henri Nouwen, the "wounded healer." His weakness made him stronger, and gave him more empathy. He'd lead AA meetings, even take a dozen members to a three-day retreat on Long Island. Through this, he helped thousands of others to face their problems too. "He was a great comfort to those with troubles with the drink," says McCourt, who usually saw Judge twice a month at AA. "He'd always say, 'You're not a bad person -- you have a disease that makes you think you're a bad person, and it's going to mess you up. His fault proved to be a great victory to help others. Which he did again, again and again.

He lived simply in an immaculate but sparse room with a bed, desk and phone. He'd wake up each day at 6:30 and give thanks for his sobriety and pray for the city's workers and leaders. But then he'd step out of the friary. "This was very significant," says Brian Carroll, a friend and fellow friar. "Because when you step out of the sanctuary, you're down with the people, eyeball to eyeball with them. That was the New Yorker in him. As he often said, 'It can get messy, it can get crazy, but it can be an awful lot of fun.' And Fr. Mychal did not at all mind getting a bit messy.

He was great one-on-one with people and with them. Younger friars often looked to Judge as their role model. He was heartily spiritual, never ashamed to introduce God into ordinary conversation. He compulsively blessed people -- the pregnant, the homeless, the random traveler on the bus. "While the rest of us were running around organizing altar boys and choirs and liturgies and decorations," Fr. Michael Duffy, his friend, told the mourners in his homily, "he was in his office listening. His heart was open." (But occasionally not his eyes: Duffy later confessed that once, at their New Jersey parish, Judge was so exhausted he fell asleep while a parishioner was unloading his troubles; he apologized and asked him to please return the following night.) He was always with the people; his main spiritual time was walking the Brooklyn Bridge in his leather sandals and friar's habit.

In the 1980s, when AIDS first became known, patients were shunned. Even by those who should have helped them in the Church. People closed doors to the patients, as it was not known how you could get the disease. Some even so-called "holy" people would hold signs saying it was a plague from God to punish people. They even had a hard time finding funeral homes for the bodies, or churches to offer the funeral. And that's where Fr. Mychal stepped in. He'd stand with the outcast and say "I'm just like you." He'd go on his own to where AIDS patients were, and bathe them and care for them and not be afraid to hold them and help them die. He'd massage the feet of people, get them hand cream, and helped them die in peace. He also would say many funeral Masses in the lower chapel of Saint Francis of Assisi for them.

Once he was called to celebrate Mass in the hospital room of New York police officer Steven McDonald, who had been critically wounded during an investigation of a youth in Central Park. A bullet pierced the mans throat. He was there to be with Steven and his

wife Patti, but the injury left Officer McDonald paralyzed. He kept meeting with Steven though and helped him to let go of his anger and forgive the man who did this to him. This was pretty typical though for Fr. Mychal; his friendships were lasting and deep. He'd write Mother's Day cards to women who'd lost their children and birthday cards for kids who lost their mother's. He and McDonald actually took 3 trips to Ireland together and two more to Lourdes.

When TWA Flight 800 exploded shortly after takeoff from New York in July 1996 and fell into the Atlantic off Long Island, Father Mychal helped counsel the families and friends of the victims every day for three weeks and worked to arrange a permanent memorial at the site. He had since returned every summer to offer a memorial service and comfort the families.

He became a chaplain for the New York City Fire Department in 1992. The firemen loved him. He had a memory like an encyclopedia for family members' names, birthdays and passions. He'd help guys out with marital problems, every problem big or small - he was known to be the priest you could go to. He'd hold Mass in firehouses; and was always with the men. At night he'd spend three to four hours on the phone returning calls, touching base, making sure the shut-in in New Jersey was surviving or the homeless person he found that day and figured out how to hook up their telephone. Some nights the last call was at 1 a.m. to the men at Engine 1-Ladder 24; it was across the street. When a fireman picked up he'd go over to the window and wave.

When he died that day on 9/11, he was carried out in an iconic photograph, a firefighter praying the "Our Father" over his body. Somehow, Judge's body got from the sidewalk at Church and Vesey to St. Peter's church. He was found Judge lying regally on the altar, his helmet and badge perched in mute tribute on his chest. Said Tom Ryan, who found him, "I walked into this church...And in a world that was gray and dark, there was color, and laying on the altar was the body of Mychal Judge. In a horrendous moment, it was a beautiful sight."

The pastor at the church called the cardinal's office. The cardinal's office called the friary. An ambulance picked Judge up. He was slipped into a body bag and brought back to Engine 1-Ladder 24.

The firefighters placed their chaplain on a cot in the back of the station. Then they cordoned off the area with a clothesline and some sheets, creating a small, private shrine. The men formed a circle around him, got down on their knees, and started to cry.

Keenan sat with Judge until he was taken to the morgue. His death certificate bears the number 00001 -- the first official casualty of the World Trade Center.

At the memorial, McCourt told the mourners about his own fantasy. Judge, he says, dies and is momentarily disoriented, because after leading such a simple life, he suddenly finds himself in a place with large marble hallways. A figure approaches.

"Can I help you?"

"Well, I don't know where I am."

"What's your name?"

"Judge. First name Mychal."

"Really? Some people call me Judge, too."

"Oh? And what's your first name?"

"Almighty. What kind of work would you like here, Mychal?"

"I'd like to be someplace where there are fires."

"We don't have any fires here. The only one we know about is very far away, and that burns eternally, because all the firefighters are here, and we don't tell them about it, because otherwise they'd be down there fighting it."

"Well, could I go there and give some people a hand?"

"No, Mychal. Because if you go there, you have to be a sinner, you see? And you're a saint."

"Could I have a temporary pass to go there, then? Could I be an honorary sinner?"

"And away he goes," he finally said. "That's my fantasy about Mychal. He keeps working. He never stops. He's trying to get all of us out of hell."

Tonight, we celebrate the Last Supper, and the "Mandatum" or the washing of the feet. And our job is to get everyone to heaven, which is why Jesus does this action - to save

us and to teach us. We hear in John's Gospel "He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" and after he washes the feet of the apostles, he says "If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do."

Fr. Mychal took those words to heart. Holy Thursday celebrates the sacraments of Holy Orders and the Eucharist as well, and both of these sacraments are also fundamentally related to service. The priest is called to serve the people of God; and the mandate given by Jesus also applies to the laity. We are given the Eucharist as food for the journey, so that all of us could take Jesus into ourselves, and let Jesus transform us into Himself. When we eat that flesh and drink his blood, he abides in us and we abide in him. We become the body of Christ. But we also have to cooperate with grace. We have to open ourselves up to being transformed.

And due to original sin and its effects, we can be prone to losing sight of what it means to take Jesus into our hearts. Some may not think twice of Holy Communion and just go through the motions. Others may show a lot of reverence and go to Mass, spend time in prayer but then lose sight of what it means to truly serve others. So how do we live out the commission of our Lord?

First, we have to have humility and let Jesus wash us. We have to welcome Jesus as our Servant and Savior. Whether we want to admit it or not all of us are impacted by sin, and we have to let Jesus heal us. If we are too proud to allow that to happen, we won't be cured. We must place our hope of salvation in the One who came to serve us, not to be served. That's worth reflecting on especially as we process the Blessed Sacrament to the Altar of Repose at the end of our liturgy. Asking God for the strength to become holy; to let Him take away our sins and think about how we can grow in grace and holiness.

Second, Jesus shows us what He expects of us, His followers, to do, and that is service. When we serve, it brings out the best in us. Instead of being selfish and self-centered, we respond to others needs. At times that will entail painful sacrifice. But when Jesus at every Mass, we should commit our entire lives to serving God and one another. The need to serve is all around us. People may be hurting under our own roof and just need us to be there for them, or to give them the gift of time, or patience. People can suffer in silence at school or work. People can feel alone and isolated. People may be battling an addiction and not know how to ask for help. People may be in silent pain and now know how to ask for help. Opportunities to serve never end, from volunteering to being aware of the need for service that we can sometimes be the most blind to. Many people are overall pretty good people - but what Fr. Mychal did was not to just be content visiting the firehouse for Mass, saying some prayers and then calling it a day. He went above and beyond, which is what a saint does. He was looking for the next opportunity to help people, and seeking people out like the good shepherd. Sometimes we are the one who needs to be found, and Jesus is always there for us.

Other times a person really needs to be found and doesn't even know they are lost, and that's where we come in.

Some people can get pretty negative about the world, and think things were better in some bygone era, or others simply lose hope. In Christ though, we are reminded that God looks to the world with hope. There will always be evil, and there is no solution that will eliminate terrorism, a school shooting, racism, or whatever evil you can think of, because there will always be the impacts of sin. But far greater than that is good and hope. Our God is not distant or removed; our God assumes the role of a slave, and washes our feet, and loves us to the end. But for His love to be continually seen in the world, the Eucharist we receive must always be lived out. As we prepare to receive our Lord, let's open up our eyes to the reality of sin in our lives and that like Peter we needed to be washed clean of it, but also to the reality that we are loved by God who loves us to the end, with grace and mercy the antidote. And let's use that antidote to help others see through us what they saw through Fr. Mychal, the love of God shining through us bringing light to a world that can sometimes seem very dark. People look back on 9/11 and may remember a dark day at first, but I think far more than that people remember the good of the police, the firefighters, the volunteers, and the people like Fr. Mychal who brought God into the rubble - people who showed that good will triumph. So where do we need to bring God? It starts within our souls. But then it continues into the world, a world that can be seemingly filled with evil and hate at times, but a world that God filled with people whom He loved to the end, because he saw past that evil. A love that we are called to pass on. So like Fr. Mychal, may we do just that, never forgetting the power is inside all of us to change this world for the better. That's a job that never ends; sacrifice and giving is a way of life for the Christian. Before us all the time are people who need us to make a difference, so let's open our eyes to seeing them and help them with our words and actions, and never forget that when we live our lives that way, we too can bring people out of the rubble of sin, into the loving arms of Jesus.