Opinion
Spirituality
People walk away from the World Trade Center tower in New York City Sept. 11, 2001. (CNS/R

People walk away from the World Trade Center tower in New York City Sept. 11, 2001. (CNS/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)



by Stephanie Yeagle

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Today, as we recognize the 20th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, NCR readers shared their stories — including how their faith may have helped on Sept. 11, 2001, and after. You can share your experience here. Unfortunately, we do not have space to publish every response. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

I had just attended daily Mass and that security of the Eucharist allowed me to rest in God as I waited for news of my brother, Jim. He worked for the New York State parks department and was meeting in Tower One that morning. The meeting ended early and he was across the street when he heard the first impact. He turned in horror and disbelief, as did everyone there, to witness not only the plane impact Tower One, but the impact of the second plane in Tower Two.

As people began running north away from the buildings, my brother ran south toward the buildings. Being raised in a Catholic household there was no question that he would help regardless of his own safety. He was one of many who were anonymous first responders. There were no masks, no hazmat suits, just bare hands and raw energy. He worked for three days with no sleep helping people, moving debris. Since the phone system was so overloaded, he wasn't able to contact my mother until the second day to tell her he was okay.

He physically survived the day, but 11 years later, he died of multiple cancers directly related to his service on Sept. 11. For me, there are no recriminations. There is a peace knowing my brother did what our faith commands us to do.

Do I miss him? Of course, but there is also great joy knowing that he rests now in God. Is my faith stronger? Not necessarily, but perhaps this is validation that even in horror there is God. Even in tragedy, the Spirit rises.

VALERIE HAMILTON POTTER

Crystal, Minnesota

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I was a chaplain at St. Anthony North Hospital in Westminster, Colorado. When it became clear that the country was under attack, the lead chaplain, Charity Sr. Patricia Hayden and I put together a prayer service and at noon that day, held the service in a packed chapel. Staff and visitors appreciated having a way to beg for God's protection in that emotion-filled moment.

ANDY DRANCE

Aurora, Colorado

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I saw the planes swerve into the buildings from an office window. And I remembered my dad describing how he prayed during the Battle of Leyte Gulf in World War II, as

the planes swerved into the U.S. ships.

I saw the second plane do the same kind of turning and prayed out loud "Dear God, this is war!" Others watching just turned to me as if I was mad. But I believed I was right. And I was.

HARRY STEWART

Leominster, England

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I was running late that morning, headed to my job at the Maryknoll Mission Archives in Maryknoll, New York when I heard the first reports on my local NPR station as I was driving. By the time I got to work, all media outlets were jammed or inaccessible (radio, tv, internet).

Our entire campus was sent to the chapel, where we sat all day, mostly in stunned silence; praying together, waiting for updates, and witnessing the profound inconsolable grief as friends and colleagues learned the tragic fate of their loved ones.

Looking back, I am so grateful that Maryknoll had the wisdom to instruct us to report to the chapel. Overwhelmed and despairing over the inexplicability of it all, I needed to be with God that day, and I needed to know that God was with me.

LISA GIBBON

Cleveland, Ohio

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I was preparing to enter my Franciscan community the Saturday after Sept. 11. I had left my job, so I was home to watch the horror unfold. My home parish had an unscheduled Mass that evening. I joined other stunned parishioners as we prayed for everyone involved. Joining my community with our Franciscan emphasis on peace became even more meaningful.

(Sr.) GAYLE RUSBASAN, OSF

Frankfort, Illinois

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I was at work at the Staten Island Campus of St. John's University which overlooks New York Harbor when the Twin Towers were struck. I looked to the heavens for guidance as I watched the two towers on fire. The most eerie sight was watching just one tower stand.

While watching the towers, I heard that the Pentagon was hit, so I knew we were being attacked. The campus was immediately closed. The bridges were closed so all that did not live on Staten Island were left on campus.

The community on campus joined for Mass outside watching the smoke in the air from the burning buildings and then watching the fighter jets circling the city. The Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice were so vivid at that Mass. The union of heaven and earth were tangible knowing that so many a few miles away were crossing over to risen life.

It was a frightening time. We asked God to give us peace and hope that our loved ones in the towers were still alive.

JAMES SHEEHAN

Hicksville, New York

People attend a candlelight vigil at the UAL Flight 93 Memorial Chapel near Shanksville, Penn

People attend a candlelight vigil at the UAL Flight 93 Memorial Chapel near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, Sept. 10, 2002. (CNS/Reuters/Tim Shaffer)

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Sept. 11 made me feel more deeply my identity as a New Yorker and a Catholic. In those days, the two were linked. I walked the six miles home from work, over the 59th Street Bridge to Queens, while a few miles to the south the Towers burned.

It was a clear late summer day, and if you didn't know what had just happened, it looked like a casual march of office workers enjoying the sunshine. My wife's aunt, uncle and cousin worked in a business they owned headquartered at the World

Trade Center. I spent that morning trying to reach her cousin, only to get her voice on an answering machine.

I remember the days following: the rides to work on the subway, filled with an eerie silence, the sense that what happened could just be the beginning of something even more horrible (at the time no one knew for sure), the impromptu shrines all over the city, erected in memory to young people who had perished, all with the heartbreaking plea, "Have you seen NAME?" I couldn't help but think that shrines are reflexively Catholic symbols of death and resurrection, now embraced by a secular city.

I went to Mass at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan, and heard the priest acknowledge we could not comprehend the evil that had just overtaken New York, that faith had no easy answers and as Catholics that was okay, to admit that we just don't know.

The anonymity of city life lifted for a few weeks: my basketball group, a motley collection of guys who gather as weekend warriors on the weekends, prayed together for the first time, joining hands, something that never happened before or since. My daughter was at college in Spain, and she told us about two older Spaniards at a bar who scoffed at her for being upset as they watched the towers fall. She told me about a friend who was nearly trampled in the rush to get out of the Twin Towers (not everyone responded with grace and courage that day). My son was at college upstate, we were happy he was safe, but he was upset that he could not return.

I remember eating lunch at a diner alone a week after 9/11. I thought about what could have been: both of my children worked at World Trade Center that summer, and only returning to school spared them. My wife's cousin made it out of the Towers that day. I wept as I thought about what might have been for my family, and thankfully wasn't, and also for those who couldn't say the same in a city that was wracked with grief.

PETER FEUERHERD

Rockaway Park, New York

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In 1968, I went on active duty as a U.S. Navy chaplain. I stepped out of my protected life ever so fast. My first duty station was in Vietnam. My faith was challenged in many ways, but one was the toughest: There is evil in the world, and I am unable to fix it, to mend all the lives, and bring all to a world of peace and justice.

I came home from Vietnam a changed person, finally having been challenged in my faith, and having to wrestle with the entire gamut of my Catholic background. I spent 30 years on active duty in the Navy.

My faith was challenged again in 1983, when I accompanied senior Navy and Marine Corps officers to Dover Air Force Base, to formally receive the first 15 bodies from the huge explosion in Beirut that year. The process at Dover has been repeated many times since then, but this special occasion taught me once again that there is evil in the world, and I am unable to fix it.

After the Navy, I spent 2 1/2 years as administrator of our own (Holy Cross) Retirement and Medical Facility located next to the University of Notre Dame in northern Indiana. Nineteen Holy Cross priests died while I was there, and I walked through their faith, and their questions, which have come to be much like my own today at 87 years of age.

Part of my education after the Navy included being recognized as a master chaplain among National Association of Police Chaplains. I worked for 10 years as chaplain for the Arizona State Police, during which time I made 260 notification calls along with an officer. In the midst of that, I became a Certified Crisis Ministry Chaplain from the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation. As part of that training, I volunteered to be a member of the American Red Cross Spiritual Care Team.

In that position, I arrived in New York City two weeks after 9/11, and spent three weeks at Ground Zero, serving as a Catholic chaplain, and also part of that time as supervisor of almost 500 chaplains of all faiths who had come to help.

It was the same as before — the presence of real evil in the world, and my inability to fix it. My faith was put to its limits in finally becoming a real human being and also a Catholic priest, and knowing that God does not expect me to save the world, but to do only what I can (as Mother Theresa taught) with the person in front of me.

I am mostly retired today, living in a retirement home, and serving as the "Sunday priest" for a wonderful community of senior citizens. My faith is still challenged, and I

know that I am growing every day in the graces God has sent me through his son Jesus Christ.

(Fr.) JOSEPH F ODONNELL, CSC

Phoenix, Arizona

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Twenty years later, this day still feels unbearably fresh in my memory. I have a more personal connection to the events that occurred that day as I was in New York attending a meeting in the city. I will never forget the events that I witnessed and know that I was in some state of shock as the next few days came and went and I managed to travel home.

While arriving at the airport that morning, I noticed a plane flying very low almost following 5th Avenue. When we landed at the airport, news was being shared that there had been an accident with a plane and one of the towers. Sadly, as we passed by the Twin Towers to land, I thought to myself how beautiful they were — not even knowing that later that morning they would no longer exist.

Our bus driver could not take us through the Holland Tunnel as he usually did and instead dropped the passengers off at the Queensboro Bridge. In order to get to my meeting, and not knowing the severity of the situation, I began to walk across the bridge. About halfway across, I witnessed people jumping out of windows, almost like the building was weeping and shortly after, one of the towers collapsed.

I tried to pray — but honestly, I just could not believe what I was seeing. In my own fog, I was able to say the prayer for general absolution for all.

As I sat by the window that evening, the silence was thunderous — no trucks, no taxis, nothing except the whirring of the fighter jets patrolling over the city. As I left early the next morning, I saw weary fire fighters, police officers and emergency workers, covered in dust who had spent the last day searching and helping victims and grieving for those of their crews who were lost.

I took a train to Philadelphia where I was able to rent a car and continue my journey home. When I got home, I was exhausted both mentally and physically and continued to think about everything that happened.

It was God’s will that I was on that bridge on Sept. 11, 2001. Despite my own mental fog, I was able to provide some comfort to those around me and provide spiritual absolution to others who didn’t make it home that night. Twenty years have passed and yet it’s still as fresh as yesterday's news.

When we return to the events of Sept. 11, we are called to remember. Let us pray for all those who lost their lives that day and those who have lost them since from service that day.

(Msgr.) JAMES A. MOLONEY

Dearborn Heights, Michigan



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It was the next day (Sept.1 12), when I had to introduce a class of 85 college students to the basics of music, that my role as a music teacher never seemed less significant. I was empty; there was a void where my usual enthusiasm and energy lived, even praying was out of my grasp.

It took a tremendous amount of courage, physical and emotional energy to enter the classroom, convinced I couldn’t get through the next two hours. Why were we even spending time with the triteness of melody and rhythm?

The first time I started class with a prayer was that day: Psalm 46: 1-3, followed by a blessing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “And now unto him who is able to keep us from falling and lift us from the dark valley of despair to the bright mountain of hope,

from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy; to him be power and authority, for ever and ever.”

We gently began class, listened to simple melodies and explored rhythmic patterns; and for two hours the students, my faculty team and I were lifted from the dark valley into a place of solace and simple peace.

LINETTE POPOFF-PARKS

Plymouth, Michigan

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I clearly remember my mom picking my younger brother and I up from elementary school that day. Instead of going home, we drove straight to our parish. I was confused, because it wasn't a Sunday, yet there were so many people there — praying and sobbing in the pews, lighting candles, etc.

Even though I was too young to understand the gravity of that day, I witnessed the importance of a faith community gathering together in prayer and support during times of overwhelming grief.

(Br.) MICHAEL SPECHT, OFM

Chicago, Illinois

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At the time, I was principal of a large Catholic high school in Oakland, California. I recall that when I came to breakfast at around 6:30 a.m. Oakland time, the TV was on and the scene in New York City was rapidly unfolding before my eyes.

At first, I thought I was looking at something similar to the infamous "War of the Worlds" broadcast, but then realized this was happening in real time. As the day unfolded and I and my colleagues had to ensure that 1,110 students and more than 120 staff were kept safe and as untraumatized as possible, I realized that the only response to the unfolding tragedy that made any sense to me — apart from locking down the school — was, as Scripture so aptly puts it, to have recourse to the Lord and to place our hopes and fears in his hands.

Although the images from New York that day have never faded from my memory and at times have tempted me to dive into the proverbial rabbit hole of pessimism and even despair for the future of humankind, I firmly believe that my faith in the existence of a God who in spite of everything always reaches out in love and compassion to his people strengthened me not only on 9/11 but every day since.

(Fr.) DONALD MCLEOD, CSB

Scarborough, Ontario

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I was the pastoral associate in a parish on an island in southeast Alaska. Many people came to the Catholic Church to pray, to light candles, to talk, and to weep. There were a few cruise ships in port that day and people disembarked from the small boats and came across the harbor to church.

What was so significant to me was the eerie silence in the days that followed. No planes were permitted to fly/land in Sitka. The Coast Guard was on patrol and quite visible from the island. People on the island came to church. For about a week or more, we did not get any mail (came on the planes), groceries began to disappear from the shelves (brought in by plane and on barges). Life as we knew it stood still.

Since my religious congregation and family was in Philadelphia, many reached out and called. The isolation was difficult for all of us to endure but we had one another and a common faith that God would see us through it.

(Sr.) MARGARET BUTLER, SSJ

Flourtown, Pennsylvania

This story appears in the **Sept. 11: 20 Years Later** and **Tell Us** feature series.