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New York firefighters and rescue workers are seen Sept. 11, 2001, carrying Franciscan Fr. Mychal Judge, a chaplain with the New York Fire Department, who died while giving last rites to a firefighter following terrorist attacks that would soon bring down the twin towers of the World Trade Center. (OSV News/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)



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The offering placed before the altar on Sept. 11, 2001, was unlike any ever seen at St. Peter's Catholic Church in Manhattan's Financial District: the lifeless body of 68-year-old Franciscan friar and New York City Fire Department Chaplain Fr. Mychal Judge.

He was killed when the 110 stories of the World Trade Center's south tower collapsed at 9:59 a.m., blasting debris into the adjacent north tower lobby where Father Judge was stationed. At the moment, he reportedly was repeatedly praying, "Jesus, please end this right now! God, please end this!" He was shortly afterward carried from the apocalyptic site.

Some four blocks away, St. Peter's own roof had been struck by landing gear from one of two hijacked jets smashed into both towers that morning. Judge's journey there was captured in an instantly iconic photo seen worldwide — dust-covered, slumped in a chair and already shockingly pale as he was carried by five men.

Since he lost his life, Judge — a friar for 47 years; a priest for 40 — has been hailed as a hero, suggested for sainthood, and praised as a selfless friend not only to first responders, but also to the poor, sick and forgotten of the Big Apple's sometimes tough streets.

Ahead of the 25th anniversary of the deadliest terrorist attack in recorded history, friends of Judge shared memories of his life and loss, and reflected on his legacy.

"People would often say about him, when you talk to him it was like you were the only person before him," said Fr. Kevin Mullen, a Franciscan friar of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe and former president of Siena University in Loudonville, New York, where he currently teaches.

"He engaged you fully; he was not looking around for who he could talk to next. He was fully present to you," Mullen told OSV News. "And that's what made a difference to a lot of people about Mychal Judge — they could talk to him, bare their souls, share their good news, share their bad news. And he was going to be there for them."

'He was there. He was present'

On the morning of 9/11, Mullen, stationed in a parish approximately 15 miles from midtown Manhattan, was responsible for a funeral liturgy.

"I was aware before I started the funeral that the first tower had collapsed," he recalled. "And when I finished the funeral, I was told the second tower had collapsed. So I knew things were getting worse."

That afternoon, he heard a radio announcement reporting an injured fire chaplain at the World Trade Center.

"And my gut said, 'That's Mychal Judge,'" Mullen said. "He was right across the street from a fire station that responded immediately." The church where Judge ministered and the friary where he lived, St. Francis of Assisi on West 31st Street, neighbored New York City Fire Department Engine 1/Ladder 24.

"And I had no doubt he was down there," Mullen said, referring to the disaster area.

To confirm his suspicion, he called the regional head of his order.

"As soon as he answered the phone — he didn't even say, 'Hello, Kevin' — he just said, 'It was Mychal.' And I said, 'I thought so.' That's how I learned."

Mullen said the already crushingly tragic day immediately became painfully personal. But nonetheless, he still found himself certain of one thing.

"I felt that if Mychal was given his choice of how he would go out of this world, that would have been his choice: to be with the firefighters, literally going with his boots on. He was there. He was present."

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'He resided deeper in you than you understood'

The first introduction Michael Daly — journalist and author of *The Book of Mychal: The Surprising Life and Heroic Death of Father Mychal Judge* from St. Martin's Griffin — had to the priest was the sound of his and others' laughter.

And it was coming from, of all places, a hospital burn unit.

Accompanying Patrick "Paddy" Brown — an FDNY captain who later died on 9/11 — Daly was there in 1994 to visit FDNY Captain John Drennan, who had been critically burned battling an apartment fire.

"So I go in," Daly recalled, "and there's all these guys laughing because of something this priest said — and I'm thinking, 'Who is this guy?' "

On 9/11, Daly, a Catholic, was at the scene of the attack for the New York Daily News when the north tower collapsed. He remembers running for his life as a massive cloud of debris — chokingly dense with pulverized concrete, glass, metal and the contents of countless offices — rolled like a tsunami through the surrounding streets.

He admits he was afterward "hazy about timing and hours and all that."

But he does know the air had finally cleared when FDNY Deputy Fire Chief Peter Hayden told him Judge was dead.

"And my knees just went," recalled Daly, overwhelmed with shock. "I didn't expect that; I didn't know Mychal had been down there. Someone had called over the radio for the fire chaplain earlier. But I didn't hear any response. And then — he's gone, you know?"

"I think he just ..." Daly paused, searching for the right description. "He resided deeper in you than you understood."

'A genius priest'

Daly described Judge walking the streets of New York City in his brown Franciscan habit, greeting homeless people by their first names, praying with them and

distributing neatly folded cash.

Daly also recalled Judge often worked 16-hour days ministering at blazes and rescues — counseling firemen, their families and victims — and that he gently tended AIDS patients in an era when medical staff would not make physical contact.

After Judge's death, close friends and associates revealed he was gay — but by all accounts, maintained his vow of celibacy. The response of Kevin Shea, a firefighter at FDNY Engine 40/Ladder 35 in Manhattan's Lincoln Square, apparently typified the reaction of other first responders. "He said," Daly recalled, "Well, if you tell me Michael Judge was gay, I'll tell you I just had my first gay friend."

While not "out" in the fire department, Daly said Judge told Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, who was struggling with his son's gay identity.

"You know, he was a genius priest," said Daly. "He just was."

'I sat with his body for about an hour'

Fr. Christopher Keenan, a friar of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, entered the Franciscans more than 60 years ago at Judge's urging and became a FDNY chaplain after his friend's death. On 9/11, he was helping in the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital.

About 2 miles from ground zero, St. Vincent's staff were caring for the dust-caked and dazed people who had outrun the collapse of the towers.

"I was connecting with their families to come pick them up. And about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, it kind of stopped. I left at 5:30 to walk home from 12th to 31st Street," Father Keenan recalled. "I had a shift of confessions at 6:00. I came out of the hospital, and there's doctors and nurses and staff with stretchers — still waiting for all the people that never came."

Keenan had been looking for Judge.

"So when I arrived at the firehouse across the street from St. Francis of Assisi Church, I asked the guys, had they heard from Mychal? And they said, 'He died — and his body is in the back of the firehouse here.' They had set up sheets and cordoned off a section, where his body was in a black bag. And so I sat with his body for about an hour."

Judge had been moved to Engine 1/Ladder 24 after temporarily lying in front of St. Peter's altar.

"Then the friars came from across the street. And the firefighters gathered that were there ... and we friars sang the Blessing of St. Francis ... and then an ambulance took him to the morgue."

Keenan noted that six from the firehouse had also died.

Victim 0001

Father Judge was later numbered victim DM (Disaster Manhattan) 0001-01 of 2,753 souls eventually tallied in New York City after the World Trade Towers crumpled into an infernal landscape of fiery and smoking rubble. Keenan himself would spend seven months assisting in that rubble with recovery efforts, afterward contracting several forms of cancer.

In Washington that day, 184 were killed when hijacked American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon. Another 40 aboard United Airlines Flight 93 died when a fourth hijacked plane crashed into a Pennsylvania field.

"The 25th anniversary is going to be a very solemn time," Mullen said. "And I hope we have that consciousness still alive in our country — that this is very, very painful, especially for the families," he shared.

"Because a lot of people have just taken this event for granted: 'Well, that's history — it happened, it's over,' he said. "But it's never over for those families. Never, ever, over."

This story appears in the **Sept. 11: 25 years later** feature series. [View the full series.](#)