

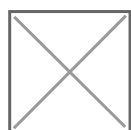


Fr. Joseph Wilson of St. Margaret Church in the New York borough of Queens prays during a candlelight vigil Sept. 11, 2013. The ceremony marked the 12th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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On Sept. 11, 2001 — the date of the worst terrorist attack in American history, when four hijacked jets became deadly weapons — there was no shortage of heroic first responders who confronted danger instead of avoiding it.

Many Catholic clergy and religious ministered among them — including priests, friars and sisters. Some of their stories are perhaps less well known — but the help and healing they also brought to those who experienced the devastating losses of 9/11 are worth remembrance as the 25th anniversary approaches.

"I remember like it was yesterday," Fr. Brian Jordan told OSV News.

A Franciscan friar of his order's Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the priest is the current pastor of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi on West 31st Street in New York City.

That morning, Jordan was at New York Presbyterian Hospital. Hearing of the strike, he returned to the Franciscan friary on 31st Street — attached to St. Francis of Assisi Parish — where he lived, determined to go to the disaster site.

Uncertain what he might find — but expecting both victims and perpetrators — he retrieved holy water and a pair of brass knuckles. "I said, 'I'll bless them with one hand, and just in case there's any bad guys, I'll bless them with the other hand.'"

Before he left, another friar had devastating news: Their fellow Franciscan, Fr. Mychal Judge, was dead. Still, Jordan knew what Judge would want him to do — go help.

After stopping at Manhattan's St. Vincent's Hospital — the only patients were those being treated for dust inhalation after the Twin Towers collapsed — Jordan headed to ground zero, encountering a police captain he knew.

"He gave me a mask; he gave me a pair of gloves. He said, 'Father, put the mask on, put on the gloves and go to work.' And so I went up and down for a couple blocks, and there were bodies and body parts. I just blessed them all."

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On Sept. 16, Jordan said his first Mass at ground zero; he would continue to have Mass there for nearly 10 months.

Then on Sept. 23, there was a surprise.

"A big burly construction worker from Local 731 comes up to me and says, 'Hey, Father, you want to see God's house?'"

"So we go into the ruins of 6 World Trade Center," recalled Jordan. "I had like 25 fighters next to me, and the construction worker says, 'What do you see there, Father, right in the middle?' I said, 'I can't believe this ... I see a cross.'"

Two intersecting steel beams had been sheared into a crucifix, as 6 WTC was struck by debris from the collapse of the North Tower.

The stunning artifact became known as the "Cross at Ground Zero" and eventually became part of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum collection.

It was excavated, placed on a concrete abutment, and blessed. On Oct. 7, a Mass was celebrated near it, at the corner of Vesey and West streets.

"It gave a boost of energy to people at the time," explained Jordan, who wrote his own memoir — *The Ground Zero Cross (Xlibris)* — and was given the distinction of being its unofficial guardian.

On 9/11, Sr. Margaret O' Brien, a Sister of Charity working in the Sisters of Charity Health Care System, was in her office at the Bayley Seton Hospital on Staten Island, briefing a colleague just returned from vacation.

"Her secretary came in and said, 'I just got a call. A plane went into the World Trade Center,' " O' Brien remembered. "We went down the hall to a window we could see from, and we realized, this is going to be bad."

The sisters quickly prepared to go to St. Vincent's Hospital "to set up the emergency and trauma response," explained O' Brien. "And the doctors were there, the stretchers were there, all waiting at the entrance — but after a short while, nobody came."

O' Brien worked the hotline in the sisters' hospital command center, taking calls from people searching for loved ones.

"The telephone was really hard," she reflected. "Because people would give you a name and you'd check your list, and you didn't have them. ... It was very, very emotional the whole time — and for the first couple of days, the phone just kept ringing."

Nonetheless, she found a reason to be thankful.

"I remember being so grateful I had something to be part of, to help," said O' Brien, now assistant to the president of the Sisters of Charity New York.

Trauma was a persistent feature of the sisters' shifts — especially for one colleague who assisted first responders sent for care from recovery work at ground zero.

"Sometimes people would talk, but most of the time they just couldn't," O'Brien explained. Her colleague "remembered one person — he was very quiet — and then he said, 'I can take the arms and the legs. But when I turned over a stone and saw a face, just a head, flattened into the ground.'"

"He lost it," said O'Brien.

Fr. Stephen McGraw — at the time a priest in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington — also saw unspeakable sights.

On the morning of 9/11, he had just concluded a school Mass — and was on his way to Arlington National Cemetery for a burial when he missed the appropriate exit.

"I remember about 9:35, I'm just sitting in this traffic, right in front of the Pentagon."

He was distressed that he would now almost certainly be late for the burial.

"And then without warning, the plane came roaring right over the tops of our cars — very, very low," McGraw said. "I can't say which of my senses was most impacted — there was the vibration and roar of the plane, and a light pole was clipped and fell

over on a taxi driver's car just a few cars away."

Looking to his right, he watched as American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into the Pentagon.

"I saw it crashing, disappearing, with a huge fireball billowing out from the building in the moment after the crash."

Because his radio wasn't on to hear what was happening in New York City, "I just assumed it was a terrible, tragic accident."

Commuters came to a frozen stop, and McGraw leapt from his car — stole, anointing oils and prayer book in hand — vaulting the highway guardrail to the lawn of the Pentagon to reach the victims.

"Basically, my message to them was, 'Jesus is with you.' That's what I kept saying to the several victims I attended," Father McGraw.

One victim who identified himself as Catholic — Juan Cruz, the civilian accounting division manager in the Office of the Administrative Assistant for the Secretary of the Army — was given the sacraments.

Another — Antoinette Sherman, an Army budget analyst, who later died — lay face down on the grass, severely burned on her back, a single shoe on one foot. McGraw gently removed it at her request.

"Then she just said, to perhaps whomever could hear her, 'Tell my mother and father that I love them.' And so I assured her that I would."

McGraw — now a missionary priest and church pastor in the Diocese of Arlington's Bánica Mission in the Dominican Republic — doesn't think his unplanned detour was a coincidence.

"I had a strong sense of divine providence," he told OSV News. "I was meant to be there."

The attacks killed 2,977 people and injured thousands more: 2,753 people died in the Twin Towers collapse, brought down by two hijacked commercial airliners; 184 people died when a third hijacked airliner flew into the Pentagon; and 40 people died in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, when passengers and crew fought back against

hijackers on a fourth airliner, forcing it to crash in a field near Shanksville. Officials believe the fourth plane was headed for the U.S. Capitol or the White House.

The 25th anniversary of 9/11 will not only be a time of solemn remembrance — it also leaves some longing for the national unity Americans once demonstrated.

"We saw evil at its worst," declared Jordan. "But we also saw goodness at its best. New York City came together. The country came together. The world came together."

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