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Fallen 9/11 priest emerges as an icon for gay Catholics

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service



Franciscan Father Mychal Judge, a chaplain with the New York Fire Department, is pictured in an undated photo wearing his helmet and bunker coat. (CNS photo/courtesy Holy Name Province Franciscans)

When All Saints Church sought to signal its hospitality to gays and lesbians, the Catholic parish in Syracuse, N.Y., turned to a well-known image from the 9/11 attacks: five firefighters carrying a body from the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

The body belonged to the Rev. Mychal Judge, a Franciscan fire chaplain who rushed to the burning buildings and was killed by falling debris. Later, a half-hidden secret emerged about the gallant priest: he was gay.

All Saints hopes the statue will demonstrate that the parish, following Judge's lead, is committed to closing the chasms between rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, said the Rev. Fred Daley, the church's pastor.

Moreover, Daley said, the monument will memorialize a man who, like many gays and lesbians, struggled to fit into a church that considers homosexual desires "an intrinsic moral evil" and seeks to prohibit gay men from becoming priests.

"Here's a gay person who was committed to celibacy, flourishing in the priesthood. It breaks so many stereotypes that people have," said Daley, who came out as gay himself in 2004. "For young gay people in particular, how good it is that Mychal Judge can be a role model for them."

Of 9/11's myriad effects on American life, among the more surprising is the emergence of a New York City Fire Department chaplain as a gay icon -- a hero bordering on sainthood to scores of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics.

A gay civil rights group has produced a documentary called "Saint of 9/11"; gay activists hold vigils on the anniversary of his death; statues and icons of the sandal-shod Franciscan crop up nationwide; and his example has been employed to oppose Vatican policies that bar men with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" from the priesthood.

The gay Catholic pundit Andrew Sullivan has called Judge's death an "emblem of service and holiness and courage," and argued that, by the Vatican's logic, the priest "should never have been ordained."

Researchers estimate that thousands of gay priests like Judge serve the church while remaining faithful to their vows of celibacy. Only a few, however, have publicly revealed their sexual orientation, leaving a dearth of positive role models for gay Catholics, Daley said.

The Rev. James Martin, culture editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, said some Catholics are uncomfortable with Judge's sexual orientation and downplay that aspect of his life.

"But why should they be? For all we know, he lived a perfectly celibate life," Martin said. "He lived as the Catechism asked him to live and kept his ordination promises. Gay, straight or somewhere in between, he's a hero. If you rush into a burning building to minister to people, while knowing that you might die, that's true holiness."

Omitting any mention of Judge's sexuality, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has used Judge's heroic life and death for its own ends: in promotional materials encouraging men to join priesthood.

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"One's orientation should never dominate one's ministry as a priest," said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the bishops. "Clearly, it did not dominate the ministry of Father Judge, who by all reports was held in high esteem by many, especially by the fire department he served so well."

Charismatic and witty, Judge made legions of friends and admirers during his 68 years -- from President Clinton to homeless addicts. His funeral was packed with conservative Catholics, politicians, firefighters, recovering alcoholics and gay activists, recalls friend Brendan Fay.

"He had a strange way of weaving his way through communities that could barely tolerate each other," said Fay, a gay rights activist in New York.

Some of those friends now bristle at the focus on the Franciscan's sexual orientation.

?How come any time anyone talks about Mychal Judge they only want to talk about that subject?? asked Dennis Lynch, a lawyer in Nyack, N.Y., who worked with Judge on reconciling Catholic and Protestant factions in Northern Ireland.

Lynch has denied that Judge was gay and argued that gay activists ?hijacked the truth? to ?advance a particular cause.?

?I think the last thing Father Mike would want as his legacy would be for people to debate his sexual orientation,? Lynch said.

Journal entries published in a ?The Book of Mychal,? a 2008 biography, show Judge struggling with the secretiveness his sexual orientation sometimes required. ?I thought of my gay self and how the people I meet never get to know me fully,? he wrote.

The priest bent church rules by joining the gay Catholic group Dignity and allowing it to meet in his Franciscan-run parish. He counseled gay couples and the parents of gay children, according to Fay, and began ministering to AIDS victims during the 1980s, when the disease was considered a gay scourge.

But even some of the Judge?s closest friends didn?t know he was gay, said David Fullam, whose firehouse sat across the street from the Franciscan friary. The former firefighter wears a bracelet emblazoned with Judge?s name and donated \$240 recently to All Saints? monument fund.

?We knew that he ministered to the AIDS population and the gay population,? Fullam said. ?He was very inclusive.? While some firefighters were taken aback when they learned that Judge was gay after his death, they would have accepted him regardless, he said.

?We didn?t care if he was gay or straight,? Fullam said. ?We loved him.?

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- Interfaith relations seen as both better, worse, since terror attacks, by Mark Pattison
- Men central to Pennsylvania 9/11 events find strength in Catholic faith, by Bruce A. Tomaselli
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