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Sr. Rose Pacatte | Sep. 13, 2011 NCR Today

I grew up in San Diego listening to my Connecticut born and bred mother praising the wonders of New York City. Her parents took her and her siblings there often to visit an aunt who lived and prospered there. For some reason the Museum of Natural History was the place she most often described for us kids.

After three years in the convent in Boston, we novices went by car to New York in November 1970, to have an experience of our apostolate of evangelization with the media and to see what convent life was like in a smaller community than that of the provincial-novitiate house.

We drove our van down the Hudson Parkway and under the George Washington Bridge, with the Cloisters to our left, and the shrine of Mother Cabrini, Sr. Anthony told us. But I fell into something that must be like ecstasy as Manhattan was revealed via the view from the then-elevated West Side Highway. It wouldn't be closed until 1973 and completely closed and demolished until 1989.

Sr. Anthony also told us that the Sixth Avenue El (elevated) train that used to go up and down the middle of Manhattan was dismantled and the iron sold to the Japanese as scrap and they gave it back in bullets. Learning history from our older nuns was always an eye-opener (this allegation has been always denied by city officials but myths live long and die hard).

Manhattan took my breath away. It looked old and dirty, yes, but the Empire State Building was a visual magnet of promise and wonder. I loved the sense of history that came from the worn and torn look of old buildings and streets.

On the right, the piers, though dilapidated, were still working, and the nose from one of the passenger ships from the Italian Line seemed too close to the highway.

As we neared the tip of Manhattan to take the ferry to Staten Island, Sr. Anthony explained that there, on the left, where there lay an overgrown field several blocks large, where one or two produce companies stood, was where the World Trade Center would be built. What was that? Two big office buildings, the biggest in the world. Aren't there other produce companies than those two over there? Yes, they just built a new market at Hunts Point in the Bronx. These are going away, too, she said. I don't recall Sr. Anthony mentioning Mother Seton's house on the battery; even if she had, it would have just added to my sense of awe.

Although ground had been broken in the late 1960s for what would become a seven building complex, that chilly Sunday afternoon there was no hint of what was to come.

Over the next three years, though, construction started in earnest. First they dug very deep and then for the next two Christmases construction workers put Christmas trees on top of the twin towers, marking their ascent to heaven. 'The North Tower was topped off in December 1972 and the South Tower in July 1973. I was in New York for both.

I lived and carried out our apostolate in New York for almost 13 continuous years, from 1970 ? 1980 and then from 1990 - 1993. I cannot tell you how many times I went to the World Trade towers for mission or convent business, to the Customs House (WTC 6) to clear cargo imports, to take the PATH train to New Jersey, and to take visitors to the top. In 1992, my 10-year-old niece dropped a glass bottle of some sticky colored beverage on the floor of one of the buildings where the airlines had their counters. Do you have any idea how far 16 oz. can splash and how far the glass can shatter on a terrazzo floor?

Up in the towers it always seemed like there were 1000 secretaries typing, but the tap-tap-tap was from the buildings swaying with the earth and wind.

I was at home in Staten Island the day the bomb went off under the North Tower on February 26, 1993. It was shocking, but things went back to normal so soon. The incident made me recall the story one of our older Italian nuns, Sr. Sira, used to tell about a wayward B-25 bomber that crashed into the 79th floor of the Empire State Building at 9:49am, July 28, 1945 -- right into the War Relief Offices of the Catholic Welfare Conference. Eleven office workers were killed and three crewmen.

After my assignment in New York ended in 1993, I went to Guam and then to London to study for a graduate degree until late 1995. Then Boston was my home until 2002, so I was working in our media studies center on 9/11/01. I was taping the film "Restoration" from television to use a clip in a workshop I would be giving in Toronto, departing on September 12. I have no memory of what that clip was or how I was going to use it. Sr. Marie came in and told me to turn on the news, a plane had hit the World Trade Center. I didn't want to interrupt the taping so I went across the hall to check the television there. 'I thought this had to be like the plane Sr. Sira told us about; I stayed for a while and went back to work.

Not long after, Sr. Marie came racing back in, yelling "You have to turn on the television; a plane hit the other tower!" Then I knew. This was not wayward plane; this was an attack. I turned off the video recorder, and turned on the news. I knew the borders would be closed between the U.S. and Canada and flights would stop. There would be no trip to Toronto, long planned a year ago.

A group of our sisters were at our General Chapter in Rome, so for weeks I became a correspondent, watching CNN and other outlets and typing reports into my computer to send e-mail, including local reactions, and news from our sisters in Staten Island. The sisters at the Chapter had access, but they could not glue themselves to the television.

Somewhere, I have two big red binders of all the emails I sent and received from all kinds of people in the weeks following 9/11.

That Sunday after 9/11, day five after the attacks, I went to our local Barnes and Noble bookstore at Chestnut Hill and found the friendly server at the coffee bar.

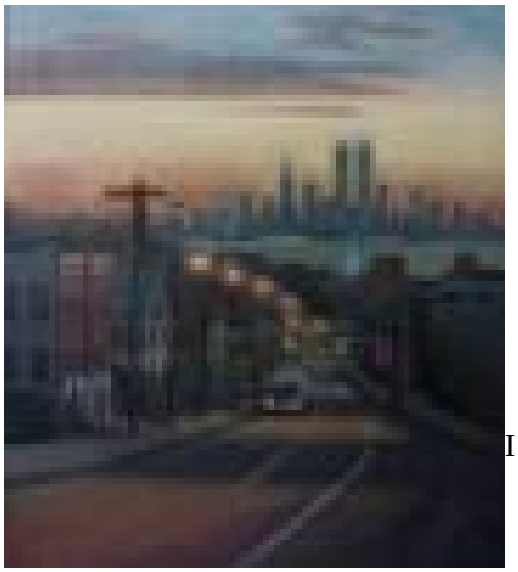
His usual cheerful demeanor was toned down and when he handed me my coffee, he said, "Sr. Rose, the FBI was here. Three terrorists stayed at that motel there; they found their car there -- see?" and he nodded toward the window. "Parked right there, and they thought we might have seen them, or that they might have come in here. They questioned all of us. We saw nothing -- the FBI doesn't even want us talking about it. Now people are coming in and asking me, 'So, did you serve coffee to a terrorist?' How can they be so cruel? We were just doing our jobs and how would we have known anything?" I thought I saw tears in his gentle eyes.

As the investigations began and blame assigned, I remembered something that happened often at Logan International Airport since carry-on baggage scanners were installed. Whenever I took the shuttle to New York from Terminal A (the old one; it has now been rebuilt), I would put my carry on through the scanner, but the

people running it were always laughing and talking.

Maybe five or six months before 9/11, I was waiting at the new and comfortable U.S. Airways gates at another terminal, going I don't remember where, when a very nice lady approached me and asked if I would fill our an airport survey. Sure, I said. I always have an opinion. 'I don't recall if there were security questions on the form, but when she came back, I gave her an earful about how the nuns at the convent often talk about how safe Logan is when the people at the scanners never look at the baggage; they are just laughing and talking to each other. She looked rather surprised at my concern, thanked me, and took my survey. 'I wonder whatever happened to that survey or if that nice lady passed on my observation. Guess not.

There's a place on Staten Island, where Victory Boulevard and Forest Avenue meet. So often I would drive home, taking Victory Boulevard and stopping at the traffic light, or turn left slowly from Forest Avenue so as to take in the view. It was there, on a rare crystal clear day, that Manhattan, New York, New York, tattooed itself on my soul over and over again. The Twin Towers articulating its place in the history and culture of the world, like an optical illusion that I could reach out and touch. Oz. New York, New York.


I don't think I ever took a photo of this view, but artist Sarah Yuster painted, what I now find so deeply moving, a pre-dawn image of it.

New York is a tough place to live and work. It's hot, smelly, and freezing cold. Our house was the revolving door for the province; we were always at the airport. I remember telling sisters newly assigned to our community in New York: "It's hard work here, and you'll be exhausted most of the time. But if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere." I thought that was an original insight. Ha! I must have heard it from Liza Minelli [1]. Still, it is so true.

Our nuns told me that on September 11, 2001, that they left our convent in St. George (near the ferry) as usual to go by car to our bookstore in Edison, N.J. But they were turned back at the Outerbridge Crossing; the bridge was closed. They turned on the radio and learned that one plane, then another, had crashed into the towers. 'They were stopped at the light at the corner of Victory and Forest just as the first tower fell at 9:58am. 'It took their breath away.

I have not been back to Manhattan since 9/11. A month after the attacks, one of our older nuns in the Staten Island community died suddenly (she lost a good friend in one of the towers, and had been an adolescent in northern Italy during World War II; her heart could not bear it all), and I took the train to Newark for the funeral where a relative of one of the sisters picked me up. You get into Staten Island the back way through New Jersey. That's as close as I have gotten to the World Trade Center in 10 years.

Ever since I first set eyes on Manhattan all those years ago, I have considered myself a spiritual New Yorker. I love New York, the people, the crazy but brilliant drivers, the way New Yorkers share a special language, an understanding of humanity that lets them do great things, incredible bad things, and ordinary things with such gusto for life. I don't know why I do not wish to go back; that I avoid every opportunity. '

I think I am still waiting to get my breath back that you took away, New York, the minute I laid eyes on you.

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Links:
[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgusCINe260