

“Lord, take me where You want me to go, let me meet who You want me to meet, tell me what You want me to say, and keep me out of Your way.” – Father Mychal’s Prayer

He Went First, to Welcome Them Home

by Joan Paylo

September 11, 2001, was expected to be a contentious Primary Election Day in New York City. As the president of our Upper West Side political club, I was to unlock our headquarters door before dawn and be on the phones by 5:30, making sure our troops of volunteers were equipped with the necessary handouts and positioned at their posts near poll sites and subway entrances. They had also been directed to tell me where our competitors had stationed their volunteers.

Around 7, stealing the briefest break, I stepped out from the windowless office suite, on to Amsterdam Avenue, and was mesmerized by the translucent blue of the early autumn sky. I was not alone. To this day, many New Yorkers comment on the pulsing color of the cloudless sky that morning. Heaven seemed a bit closer than usual.

Tell a Catholic that the sky was “Blessed Mother Blue” and they’ll know immediately what you mean. It’s the color that artists most often wrap Our Lady in, whether she is holding the Christ Child or standing at the cross on Calvary; gazing upwards on a funeral prayer card or standing above a rack of flickering vigil lights to the side of the altar in a humble parish church. Her robes are a rich, azure blue sent from above -- simultaneously calming and energizing, warm and all-embracing, reassuring us that God’s in His Heaven, all’s right with the world.

Because of that crystalline sky, a lot of people beginning their Tuesday probably gave a passing thought to Heaven that morning, then let it go, as most always do. Because, why bother? It’s always there, if you care to believe in it.

A few hours later that morning, leading the stream of souls rising from the ashes, a new saint was called to heaven. The life of loving deeds and words he left behind are worth contemplating.

That saint, uncanonized though he be, was the Fire Department’s Catholic chaplain, Father Mychal Judge, a beloved Franciscan priest who lived in the friary at St. Francis Church on West 31st Street in Hell’s Kitchen. A sober alcoholic and a member of Dignity/NY, a gay Catholic organization, he ministered to the down and out, the elderly and lonely.

“If you descend into somebody else’s private hell and stand there with them, it ceases to be hell,” he would say.

With his twinkling Irish eyes and the big hands of a laborer, he shared his kind spirit during hospital visits, in chance encounters on the streets and at the cosmopolitan receptions and fundraisers that a job like his required. I chatted with him a few times over the years, since he was also the chaplain of the New York Press Club. He often gave his coat to a homeless person and officiated at baptisms, weddings and funerals, often for those he served most fervently, the firefighters of New York City.

I won’t recount the spectacular drama that surrounded his demise. In sum, Father Judge donned his firefighter helmet and rushed to the catastrophe. He was praying and giving the Last

Rites to victims inside the Trade Center rotunda when debris hit him on the head and killed him. The five men who carried their revered hero from the chaotic scene to St. Andrew's Church in the shadow of the Municipal Building credit him with saving their lives. They had cleared the immediate area by the time the towers collapsed.

Because he was the first WTC death identified by the City Coroner, he was listed as Victim Number 1. His eulogist said that he died first so he might welcome the other homegoing souls at the Pearly Gates.

Ironically, Father Judge gave the following dedication inside a newly renovated, 100-year-old firehouse on Sept. 10, 2001. Engine 73, Ladder 42 on Prospect Avenue in the West Bronx was an architectural gem with a history of bravery and service to match. The priest was addressing current and former firefighters and their families, but his message is universal when we contemplate the fragility of life as manifested on 9/11.

Good morning, everyone. May the grace of God the Father, the peace of God the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all....

Let us pray:

Thank you, Lord, for life. Thank you for love. Thank you for goodness. Thank you for work. Thank you for family. Thank you for friends. Thank you for every gift because we know that every gift comes from you, and without you, we have and are nothing. So, as we celebrate this day in thanksgiving to you, keep our hearts and minds open. Let us enjoy each other's company, and most of all, let us be conscious of Your presence in our lives and, in a special way, in the lives of all those who have gone before us. Father, we make our prayer, as always, in Jesus' name, who lives with You forever and ever...

That's the way it is. Good days. And bad days. Up days. Down days. Sad days. Happy days. But never a boring day on this job. You do what God has called you to do. You show up. You put one foot in front of another. You get on the rig and you go out and you do the job – which is a mystery; and a surprise. You have no idea when you get on that rig. No matter how big the call. No matter how small. You have no idea what God is calling you to. But he needs you. He needs me. He needs all of us...

What great people. We love the job. We all do. What a blessing that is. A difficult, difficult job and God calls you to it. And then He gives you a love for it so that a difficult job will be well done. Isn't he a wonderful God? Isn't he good to you? To each one of you? And to me! Turn to him each day. Put your faith and your trust and your hope and your life in His hands, and He'll take care of you and you'll have a good life.

And this house will be a great, great blessing to this neighborhood and to this city. Amen.

Rest in peace, Father Judge. If I ever meet the Pope, or at least come within shouting distance, I will say seven words: "Holy Father, please canonize Father Mychal Judge."

