

Travel & Pilgrimages

Airport chapels offer quiet amidst frenzy

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

Anyone who has rushed to grab a plane, juggled carry-on luggage, wedged down into a seat and prayed for a smooth flight might appreciate the calm of a chapel on a layover.

As it turns out, it may be worth one's while to ask if the airport has one.

Some 80 airports around the world have chapels. The first was opened in 1950 at Boston Logan International Airport. The estimated 30 or more airports in the United States that have chapels include John F. Kennedy International Airport (in the International Arrivals Building) in New York, Newark International Airport in New Jersey, Pittsburgh International and Atlanta Hartsfield International airports, and the Greater Rochester International Airport.

"It came really as a grassroots movement on the part of airport employees," said Father James Devine, president of the International Association of Civil Aviation Chaplains and chaplain at Kennedy Airport.

He noted the movement was begun by the Catholic Church after World War II, when the Archdiocese of Boston had more priests than ministries.

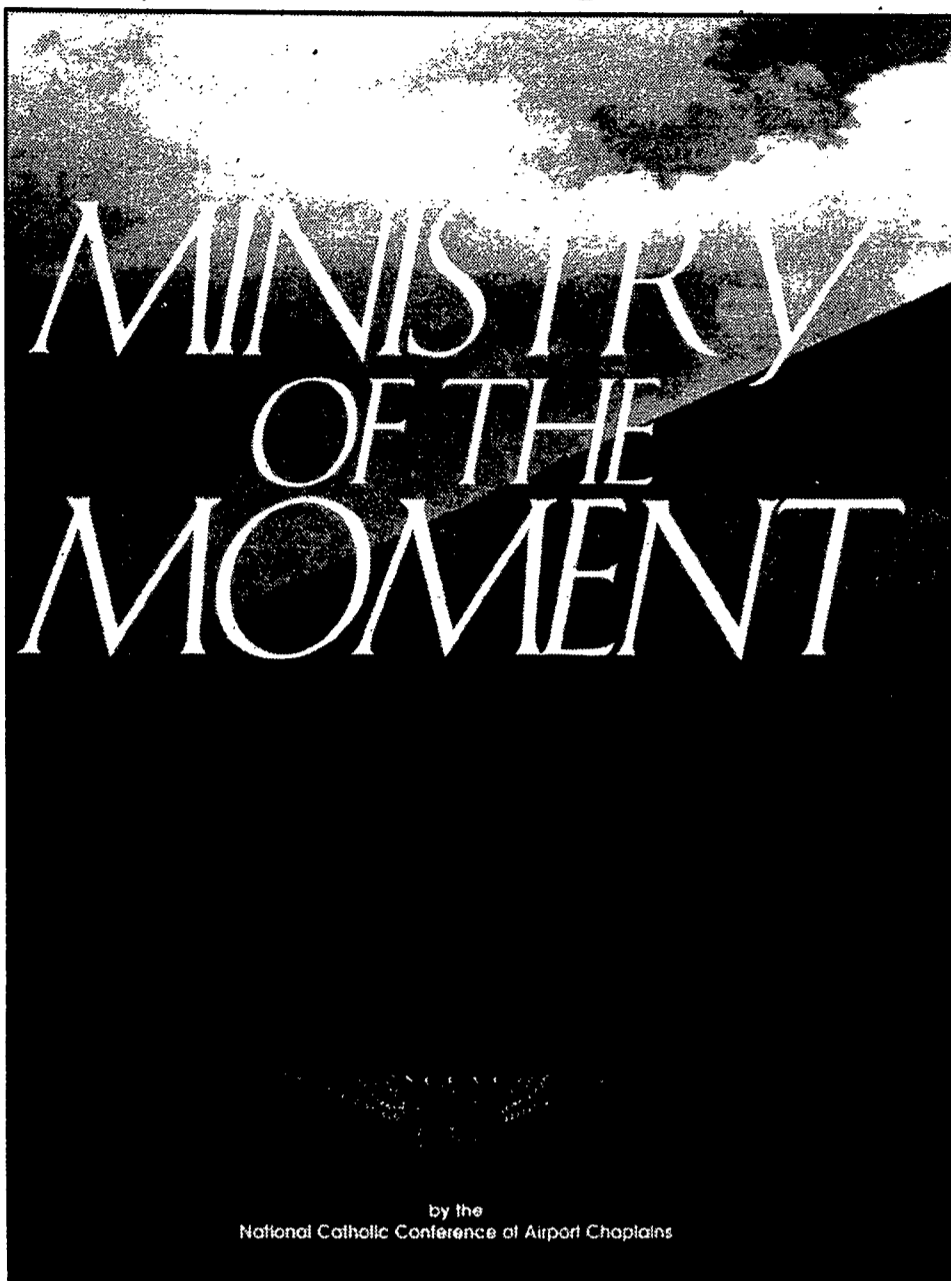
Now, he noted, "Bishops have so many requests for the use of priests" that it's difficult to assign them full-time to airports.

Rochester's airport is apparently one of the few airport chaplaincies in the country without a Catholic chaplain — full- or part-time. The chapel, open 24 hours a day, is located upstairs between the ticket counters and concourses.

"It's a place of prayer," said airport director Terry Slaybaugh. "I think it's appropriate."

Since Slaybaugh, a Catholic, took the airport job last September, he has welcomed further renovations to the five-year-old chapel, including a donated altar with a cross and a plan to add pews — if some can be found.

"When you mention chapel, I envision something that looks more like a place of meditation or prayer," he explained. He added that because the chapel is for any faith, there is a challenge to furnish the 15-by-20-foot room appropriately, however. Some airports even have separate chapels for Jews and Christians.



Because of a growing interest in airport chaplaincies and such issues, the National Catholic Conference of Airport Chaplains just this month issued the first manual on how to develop and operate them. It will be available from the U.S. Catholic Conference Publishing Services. The bishops' Committee on Migration assisted with publication.

"Ministry at an airport takes place during flight delays, on breaks, lunch periods, before and after employees go to work, before departures, and after arrivals," Father John Jannicky wrote in the manual, *Ministry of the Moment*. "An airport chaplain has a small opportunity for ministry, just a brief time, a special

graced moment. That is why we refer to ministry at airports as a 'ministry of the moment.'"

The manual is full of references to Matthew 25:35, "For I was ... a stranger and you welcomed me."

The archbishop of Chicago assigned Father Jannicky to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport 16 years ago as a full-time ministry. There the priest is assisted by four other chaplains. He noted that almost 70 million people go through the airport a year and that it employs 50,000 daily workers.

"It's larger than most towns," Father Jannicky said, noting that many people in the transient aviation business other-

wise might not set roots and frequent any particular parish.

"I baptize, marry and bury," he said. He added, "A lot of businessmen stop for regular confession who come through every week."

He says daily Mass, weekend Mass and special Holy Day Masses. And when contacted by the *Catholic Courier*, he was excitedly anticipating Archbishop Francis E. George's arrival for his May 7 installation.

"This is the gateway to Chicago. I'm going to greet him," he said, adding, "I have 70 to 80 bishops coming through here and they've already called me and asked if I might be able to assist them with anything."

Most of all, he would help assure nobody got lost, he said.

The National Catholic Conference of Airport Chaplains, of which Father Jannicky was president from 1986 to 1997, had 37 members ministering full- or part-time in 26 airports last fall.

In Rochester, the Rev. Richard Otterness, pastor of Brighton's Trinity Reformed Church, serves as the part-time, volunteer chaplain. Sam Cooper, the airport's director of public relations and a member of the church, asked him to serve as chaplain. The minister has since counseled airport employees and also performed a wedding at one employee's home.

The airport has 100 daily employees and about 1,500 people such as vendors who also work there, according to Cooper. About 2.5 million people pass through the airport every year.

Once when a plane ran off the runway Mr. Otterness was asked to be present "in case anyone was shaken up." Another time, he contacted the diocese for someone to counsel a Catholic traveler facing an unexpected death in the family. And on behalf of the airport he responded by letter to a concern that a sculpture in the airport was idolatrous.

While the airport chapel offers privacy for meditation, it also is open for other uses. On Feb. 18, 1995, Cherie Bevona and Raul Fernandez of Chili were married there.

The bride, whose first love is airplanes and who was raised near the airport, was delighted with this quiet spot that "looks out over the eastern part of the ramp, where the big planes taxi up."

"It's just a pretty little place," she said.

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