

WORLD & NATION

Fire chaplain Father 'Mike' mourned in Big Apple

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Emotions ran strong and deep as New York said its farewell Sept. 15 to the fire department chaplain who gave his life at the World Trade Center, Franciscan Father Mychal F. Judge.

Police blocked off the street in front of the church, St. Francis of Assisi, where Father Judge lived, and a fire department unit of two dozen bagpipes, each with an American flag attached, played as mourners arrived.

A group of FBI agents had come, accompanied by an Episcopal minister as chaplain. A throng of reporters and photographers watched from a sidewalk area set up for them by police. Flag bearers stood at attention.

Then, as just one bagpiper played "Amazing Grace," a detail of firefighters carried their chaplain into the church for a funeral Mass celebrated by Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York.

Father Judge rushed to the World Trade Center Sept. 11 right after the first tower was hit, and was giving last rites to a firefighter who had been killed inside when he himself was struck in the head by falling debris.

After the 68-year-old priest died at the scene, other firefighters took their chaplain's body to a nearby church, St. Peter's.

The pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church then claimed the body and it was taken to a firehouse across the street from St. Francis of Assisi, and then to a funeral home.

Father Judge's body was brought back Sept. 13 for viewing at the church.

At the Sept. 15 funeral, Cardinal Egan began with a prayer for "our brother who was suddenly and violently taken from us," and just before the final committal reiterated the conviction often expressed by New Yorkers that the city "will be rebuilt, stronger than before, out of the blood and sweat of our heroes."

In one of the eulogies after the Mass, U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., told of hearing about the extraordinary and varied ministries of Father Judge during her White House years, and inviting him to a prayer breakfast there.

She had him seated at her table and listened to him tell of growing up in New York, shining shoes to make money



Reuters/CNS

A retired firefighter kneels in the street outside St. Francis of Assisi Church in New York Sept. 15 during the funeral Mass for New York Fire Department chaplain Father Mychal Judge, a victim of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. In back a memorial to the priest is seen with the words "true hero."

as a boy and later undertaking his work for the Fire Department with a sense of mission.

Former President Bill Clinton and the Clintons' daughter, Chelsea, were also among the many prominent figures attending the Mass.

Mark Green, who has an ombudsman role as the city's public advocate and is currently a Democratic candidate for mayor, spoke on behalf of city officials.

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who was attending the funeral of one of the top fire department officials who died at the World Trade Center, had spoken at a wake service for Father Judge the evening before.

The mayor told of seeing Father Judge at the World Trade Center shortly before his death, asking him to "pray for us" and getting the answer, "I always do."

Green, who is Jewish, called Father Judge a bridge among the various groups of New York.

"Boy, could he preach and connect," Green said.

The Mass homily was given by Franciscan Father Michael A. Duffy, who operates a soup kitchen ministry in Philadelphia.

He explained that Franciscans are asked to designate who they want to give their funeral homily, and he did not know Father Judge had written down his name until the morning after the death.

Father Duffy said that when he heard what had happened, his emotions, like the towers of the World Trade Center, "crumbled to the ground and turned into a pile of rubble at the bottom of my heart."

He described Father Judge as a man who always wanted to be "where the action was," and on one occasion had fearlessly climbed a ladder and talked a man out of killing a woman he had taken hostage.

When Father Judge died, he was yet again "where the action was," he was "talking to God" in giving the last rites and "he was helping someone," Father Duffy said.

"Can you think of a better way to die?" he asked.

At the conclusion of the homily, he called on the congregation, acting as a "royal priesthood," to raise their right hands and repeat a blessing for Father Judge.

Inside and outside, in uniform and civilian dress, New Yorkers raised their hands to bless the life and work of the chaplain called Father Mike.

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