

# FEATURE

## Jesuit and his school cope with 9-11 aftermath

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

How does a priest find the right words to say when his flock has experienced the sudden deaths of numerous loved ones?

That was the daunting task Jesuit Father James Coughlin faced on the morning of Sept. 17, 2001. Calling it the toughest experience "by far" in his priesthood, Father Coughlin delivered a homily to a devastated group of high-school students and faculty at Manhattan's St. Francis Xavier High School, about two miles from the World Trade Center towers which had collapsed six days earlier.

"I was preaching to over 1,000 people, on all different levels. I did not know who out there had lost a father or a mother or an uncle or a home. I came to find out later that I had all of that in front of me," recalled Father Coughlin, a native of Irondequoit's St. James Parish, a 1983 graduate of McQuaid Jesuit High School and a 1987 graduate of St. John Fisher College.

More than six months have gone by since the terrorist attacks. Two subsequent tragedies have further rocked the Xavier community, making Father Coughlin's ministry a constant challenge. Several times during a telephone interview, the 36-year-old priest's voice cracked with emotion as he recalled the horrific events.

"I just remember that last fall, all I did was to go to funerals and memorial services — memorial services because they couldn't find bodies. You just became numb after awhile," Father Coughlin said. "There's not one person I associate with Sept. 11, because there's so many for me. You've not yet had time to grieve."

For the most part, teaching had been a consistently joyful experience for Father Coughlin. He has taught at Xavier, a 960-student all-boys' high school on West 16th Street, since his 1998 ordination to the priesthood.

"The high-school kid is just learning to use his mind in an adult way. He's learning how to read real literature, how to calculate. It's just fascinating to watch that process going on, just as a parent watches a child take that first step," Father Coughlin said.

The young priest is so immersed in his teaching ministry that he only visits Rochester about twice per year. He currently attends graduate school at New York University for mathematics; serves as moderator of dramatics at Xavier; and chairs the school's science department while teaching physics and chemistry.

In fact, Father Coughlin clearly recalls the morning of Sept. 11 because he had just begun classes in a newly designed physics lab for which he had worked feverishly to obtain funding.

"It was a beautiful morning, stunningly beautiful. The sky was crystal clear, and we had brand new equipment being used for the first time," he said.

Around mid-morning, a teacher came by and told Father Coughlin to close and lock all the doors. "We knew something was up, but we did not know what," he

said. "I had such little information." Students who had family members employed at the World Trade Center were instructed to see school administrators: "At that point I saw half my class get up and go."

Further news of the attacks gradually reached the school. "Rumors were flying — we were perhaps estimating that 20,000 were killed," Father Coughlin said. Official estimates in the ensuing days were 5,000 to 6,000 dead, and are now about half that amount.

The decision was made to continue school on Sept. 11. Students and teachers carried on in subdued fashion while American fighter planes could be heard overhead. "I had no idea — were battles going on, were things being shot down?" Father Coughlin recalled wondering.

The Twin Towers had been plainly visible from Xavier. Now they were gone, replaced by a cloud of smoke and dust that filled the air for days. This, along with several bomb threats in Manhattan, made Father Coughlin uneasy about even stepping outside. Phone communication was shaky, but Father Coughlin did manage to contact his family via the Internet.

"I am just so sad," he stated in a Sept. 12 e-mail to his parents, Thomas and Nickie Coughlin. The priest went on to describe attending a Mass with several hundred other people, and becoming annoyed at a woman who wasn't keeping track of her two small children. "When she turned around at the kiss of peace, I saw that her eyes were red from crying for a long time; I wonder if she lost her husband and now has two kids to raise alone. I guess a little commotion in the church is really not a big deal. Gives you a little perspective," he wrote.

According to Jesuit Father Daniel Gatti, school president, 10 Xavier alumni as well as 40 relatives of students, faculty and staff were killed in the attacks. After a three-day shutdown, school resumed the following Monday with the Mass at which Father Coughlin preached. He decided to offer "not pious platitudes, but to meet people in their fear and pain," he recalled.

Father Coughlin also assists at St. Francis Xavier Church, which is located adjacent to the school. Several parishioners or family members in that community were lost in the Sept. 11 attacks as well. "Being to so many memorial services and seeing mothers cry over their missing sons or daughters ... you have to sit in the sanctuary and try to be a minister to all their pain. Where do you even start?" Father Coughlin remarked.

As the weeks went on, the fear of more attacks hovered over the city, he added. "You didn't hear car horns; all you would hear was loud sirens. And people would jump, because they didn't know what it meant."

Then, on Nov. 12, an American Airlines jet crashed in the Rockaway Beach neighborhood of Queens, where many of the high school's students live. The jolt knocked one Xavier boy right out of his bed. All 260 passengers and some people on the ground were killed in what has been deemed an accident, not a terrorist



Photo courtesy of Nickie Coughlin  
**Irondequoit native Father James Coughlin, shown on the day of his 1998 ordination, teaches in a Jesuit high school that was severely impacted by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.**

on eggshells. Sometimes you misjudge and you have to be able to admit that, and swallow your pride when you do."

Add it all up, Father Coughlin said, and "when you get out of bed in the morning it's a little harder to lift your head." But he carries on, as does the rest of New York City.

"What I saw was that people started giving each other a wide berth. I saw kids and adults just being patient with each other," he said. "You see the goodness of God in how kind and supportive people are to each other. When you see how God is, how can you but go and do the same?"

He acknowledged that many people have told him they've questioned their faith, but he tells them to be patient. "If they say they've lost their faith then maybe they need to take some time off. Maybe it's got to grow into something new, and that could take a while. And you know, that's OK."

Father Coughlin has coped with his own grief by leaning on the Jesuit priests with whom he lives: "I think our community had made an effort to spend more time with each other. Sometimes you just need to be with other people, and your prayer is just in the experience."

He accepts the challenges he's faced in recent months, saying, "There's going to be (other) times it's wonderful to be the younger priest on staff and it's nice to talk to parents and they say, 'My son understands science better in your class than any other one he's had.'"

The Jesuit priest added that any kind of vocation carries a lifelong willingness to take the bad with the good.

"You never know — that's just kind of the way life is," he remarked. "You take a vow to religious life or married life, that's what you're vowing to. The unknown."

attack.

Although nobody from Xavier was lost in that mishap, a student was killed less than two months later — in a car accident over Christmas break.

"Three strikes this year. The kids are so fragile," Father Coughlin said. He said some students have carried on with a sense of duty, others with apathy: "They say, 'What's the point of anything?' And so their grades tumble into the toilet. And then there are kids who just want to run away and are exhausted from being asked, 'How are you doing?' They didn't want to hear 'What's it like being at home living without your father?' They just want to hear a good joke, to pretend like nothing happened just for a day. It's like walking

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