

It seems ironic that as I approached the rectory near the hospital where I worked on 9/11/2001 there was a beautiful clear blue sky, something I had never seen before in New York City. When I entered the rectory, the secretary told me that a plane had just hit a World Trade Center building. As we watched on the TV a second plane hit the other World Trade Center building. I then realized what I thought was just an accident turned into a deliberate warlike action. I felt an immediate impulse to head down to the site and I left a visiting priest to cover the hospital for emergencies.

I hailed an ambulance that was heading down to pick up the injured and proceeded down on a bumpy ride to the site. When I arrived I joined Father Judge, the NY Fire Department's chaplain, who graciously greeted me as he was speaking to two police officers who were photographers. Some people were jumping from the burning floors and I prayed for them as they came down. One was on fire as he fell. I then walked down West Street to be of assistance to any of the injured. I went under a trestle by the Winter Garden that linked it to Tower 1 where I found an abandoned medical triage area. As I waited with a fireman, a section of the side of Tower 2 suddenly began to fall. It looked like a giant map of South America coming down, but about 20 stories tall and eight stories wide. The firemen turned to me and said, "Run for your life!" I followed him into the Winter Garden and someone called out "Oh s***, a glass ceiling." I instantly said to myself "God are you going to take me now?" I was afraid that I was about to be crushed by the debris from the falling building. There was a loud low pitched rumble, not loud enough to prevent us from hearing each other. We ran into a huge dark room now pitch black, probably from the smoke that now covered the building. The electric power was already out. I followed the firemen running ahead of me until we reached a corridor that lead me to Cedar Street. I still did not know that Tower 2 had actually collapsed and that about 300 fire fighters and police were killed and possibly Fr. Judge.

As I advanced in the direction of the Hudson River where everyone was on the run heading north. I tried to gather some people around me to pray for the dead since we seemed to be at a safe distance from the burning buildings. I knew that there had to be a lot of dead since about 60,000 people worked in the two buildings. I saw WTC1's antenna standing over the dark cloud of dust, but all of a sudden it started to descend straight down. I was in disbelief. I realized that what I thought was only the shingles of Tower 2 was actually the support for the whole building which also went straight down as I was escaping into the Winter Garden. The police then came over to me and told me to head north along the Hudson River to safety. As soon as I could, I then broke off from the crowd and headed back to the site to see if I could help the injured. I realized that I was getting dehydrated so I entered a bar which was filled with men watching the TV. I asked if I could have some water so the bartender handed me a little bottle of sparkling water. After I quickly drank it and offered to pay for it, he just waved me off.

As I approached the site, I saw what looked like two piles each about four stories tall. I then realized that it would be a miracle to find any survivors. I was then called over to bless a body outside. It actually was an arm with its pointing finger out as if it was telling me to look toward a covered body a few feet away. I then said the prayers for the dead. I then walked back to my rectory which was across the street from the Staten Island Ferry. It was eerie to pass by the outdoor cafes without hearing the clanging of dishes. When I got home, I then had a stiff drink of bourbon when I got to my room. The electric power was now weak, causing the lights to be dim, but I was able to turn on my TV and get a UHF station from New Jersey to see what was going on. I was relieved to hear that only about 3,000 people were unaccounted for. I had thought we had lost the entire financial community of 60,000.

The next day I returned to the site now called "ground zero." As I approached the site things were very quiet and the surroundings looked like a snow had fallen from all the dust that came off the building. As I approached the site, there was a hustle and bustle of men working to clear the streets with large construction vehicles. They only retrieved about 24 body parts in bags. Inside one appeared to be the body of a young boy whose face was exposed, an intact woman and one fireman. I decided to walk over and take a break at St. Peter's Church and

pray for the dead. All the candles were lit since there was no electric power. There was an Hispanic woman who may have been a nun earnestly praying there alone. I could see a small dry pool of blood in front of the altar with a purple stole lying nearby. Next to it was a saline infusion bag. It probably was from the body of Fr. Judge. I did not know what else to do so I went out and circled the site and at each clearing I would stop and say the prayers for the dead. I then visited the temporary morgues. What attracted me to it was I could see a pile of what I thought were bodies, but as I got up closer, I was relieved to see a pile of manikins that were taken out of the Brook Brothers store to make room for the dead. Several doctors gathered around me as I prayed over the dead bodies and body parts. I sprinkled the body bags with holy water and then left. I then headed down to Cedar Street and came upon a red pickup truck with a torso of a dead body dressed in dark blue with no legs and no head. Near it was what looked like a cockpit jumper seat. The area smelled real bad. I wondered if this was a crew member or a terrorist. I blessed the body and moved on. As I walked to WTC 4 I could feel vibrations under my feet so just said some prayers for the dead and then left fearing that something bad was going to happen. It did eventually collapse. I was not allowed to return to my residence by walking along the Hudson River because of the dangers of more buildings falling. I recalled that tug boats were down where I lived. They were loading up supplies to bring things up to the workers. So I asked them if I could hitch a ride to get home. I then hopped onto a tug boat to get a ride home.

When I returned to work, we had only about three patients from the attack. One died after several weeks in the ICU. What seemed like such a beautiful day turned out to be a day that only a man could ruin.

I led a pilgrimage to Fatima in October and I could not help to think about the third secret that was recently revealed by Pope John Paul II. The secret was a vision of people walking through the ruins of buildings much like what one would see in Gaza, but there were people climbing up a hill with a cross on top. One was a Pope and as he reached the top he was executed by soldiers. Certainly walking through the debris at 9/11 made me reflect on what we have the capability of doing, but also the possibility of not doing it. But what is in the hearts of the people now living in all the war torn places in this world.

On the first anniversary of 9/11, I was asked to lead a prayer for the medical students and coroners who helped to identify the bodies and body parts. It reflected much of the feelings that we New Yorkers felt when the city was struggling to get back to normal.

Merciful God, we who have survived the attacks in lower Manhattan thank You for sparing our lives, but help us not to ruminate in our hearts the horrible memories of so many people dying so tragically. We who worked in despair, hoping to find the living, the fathers and mothers of children, sons and daughters of parents, husbands and wives of spouses and friends of friends, or only to return something in remembrance of most of them, thank You for letting us bring some consolation for most of the mourners, but now help us sort out our own distorted and repressed emotions. We who live in this great city, who mourn each time we try to take our bearings by looking to the sky for our two landmarks, or get a rush of fear when we see a low flying airliner racing over the city, thank You for letting us see blue skies and beautiful sunsets again, but give us courage as we live in fear of another attack.

God of Justice, help us to neutralize the sinful forces that have destroyed so much talent and achievement in our world, but let not our justice ever turn into hatred. Our leaders have rightly spent much time and resources seeking out those evil doers, but they must also begin to diligently seek the whys of this tragedy. Help us to put an end to ultimate acts of egoism and vengeance, which destroy the hopes and dreams of the young who are trapped in a

world where they cannot be free. You have always shown us that peace is not just the absence of war. Help us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us to see that we are all made in Your image and likeness. We are weak and our need is great. Our very existence is now at stake by a perversion of our progress, making the world small and dangerous.

God of Wisdom and Love, turn this tragedy here in New York City, in Washington and in Shanksville, into a new beginning. This great country alone once restored Europe and Asia after a horrendous war in such a way that even our enemies are now living in freedom and contributing to the stability of the world order. Help us again to revive that same spirit, taking warlord nations and making them into nations living in freedom. Help us to undertake new and creative political, diplomatic and economic initiatives, aimed at relieving the scandalous situations of gross injustice, oppression and marginalization which continue to oppress countless members of the human family. Make us practitioners of true religion, which liberates, so that we can contribute to society the gifts that You have uniquely given each of us. Never let us turn believers into mobs or cells of sociopaths. Help us to think like You so that what we wish, will always be for the common good. Grant us a deep knowledge of You so that we can become faithful seekers of Your truth – for to love You is nothing else but to love righteousness. You have always taught us that the hope of a better tomorrow lies only in the conversion of hearts and the spiritual renewal of society. The building of such a global culture of solidarity is now America's greatest moral task. Almighty God, let America's 226 years of success now take on the challenge of its lifetime – the challenge to bring a new world order of peace. Amen.

Fr. Vincent T. Euk, 9/11/2002

Prayer for Living presented at the Day of Hope and Remembrance for 9/11 at the NYU Medical Center