

Homily Preached at Funeral Mass for Fr. Mychal Judge, OFM

Delivered by Fr. Michael Duffy, OFM, at the Mass of Christian Burial for Fr. Mychal F. Judge, OFM, celebrated Sept. 15, 2001, at St. Francis of Assisi Church, 135 W. 31st Street, New York, NY. Edward Cardinal Egan, presider.

Your Eminence, Mr. President, our provincial Fr. John, family and friends of Mychal

Judge: good morning everyone and welcome to this celebration. And it is a celebration.

My first thought would be for Michael's sisters, Dympna and Erin. Our hearts are with you all these days and in the days to come.

After all that has been written about Fr. Mychal Judge in the newspapers, after all that has been spoken about him on television, the compliments, the accolades, the great tribute that was given to him last night at the Wake Service, I stand in front of you and honestly feel that the homilist at Mother Teresa's funeral had it easier than I do. [LAUGHTER]

We Franciscans have very many traditions. You, who know us, know that some are odd, some are good. I don't know what category this one fills. [LAUGHTER]

One of our traditions is that we're all given a sheet of paper. The title on the top says, "On the Occasion of Your Death." Notice, it doesn't say, in case you die. [LAUGHTER]

We all know that it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. But on that sheet of paper lists categories that each one of us is to fill out, where we want our funeral celebrated, what readings we'd like, what music we'd like, where we'd like to be buried.

Mychal Judge filled out, next to the word homilist, my name, Mike Duffy. I didn't know this until Wednesday morning. I was shaken and shocked ... for one thing, as you know from this gathering, Mychal Judge knew thousands of people. He knew, he seemed to

know everybody in the world. And if he didn't then, they know him now, I'm sure.

Certainly he had friends that were more intellectual than I, certainly more holy than I, people more well known. And so I sat with that thought, why me ... and I came down to the conclusion that I was simply and solely his friend ... and I'm honored to be called that.

I always tell my volunteers in Philadelphia that through life, you're lucky if you have four or five people whom you can truly call a friend. And you can share any thought you have, enjoy their company, be parted and separated, come back together again and pick up right where you left off. They'll forgive your faults and affirm your virtues. Mychal Judge was one of those people for me. And I believe and hope I was for him ...

We as a nation have been through a terrible four days and it doesn't look like it's ending. Pope John Paul called Tuesday a dark day in the history of humanity. He said it was a terrible affront to human dignity. In our collective emotions, in our collective consciousness, all went through the same thing on Tuesday morning.

I was driving a van in Philadelphia picking up food for our soup kitchen, when I began to hear the news, one after another after another. You all share that with me. We all felt the same ... It was at 2 o'clock in the afternoon that I came back to the soup kitchen, feeling very heavy with the day's events. At 4:30, I received a call from Fr. Ron Pecci, my good friend. I was, we were serving the meal to the homeless. And I was called to the phone. And he said, "It's happened." And I said, "What?" And he said, "Mychal Judge is dead." At that moment, my already strained emotions did spiritually what the World Trade towers had done physically just hours before. And I felt inside ... my whole spirit crumble to the ground and ... turn into a pile of rubble at the bottom of my heart. I sat

down on the stairs to the cellar, with the phone still to my ear and we cried for 15 minutes.

Later that day, I was in my room. I had my head in my hands, on my desk, and a very holy friar, whom I have the privilege to live with, Fr. Charlie Finnegan, just gently slipped a piece of paper in front of me and whispered, "This was written thousands of years ago in the midst of a national tragedy. It's a quote from the Book of Lamentations."

"The favors of the Lord are not exhausted. His mercies are not spent. Every morning, they are renewed. Great is his faithfulness. I will always trust in him." I read that quote and I pondered and listened, contemplated. I thought of other passages in the Gospel that said, evil will not triumph, that in the darkest hour when Jesus lay dying on the cross, that suffering led to the resurrection.

I read and thought that the light is better than darkness, hope better than despair. And in thinking of my faith and the faith of Mychal Judge and all he taught me and from scripture ... I spiritually began to lift up my head and once again see the stars. And so, I had the courage today to stand in front of you to celebrate Mychal's life. For it is his life that speaks, not his death. It is his courage that he showed on Tuesday that speaks, not my fear. And it is his hope and belief in the goodness of all people that speaks, not my despair. And so I am here to talk about my friend.

Because so much has been written about him, I'm sure you know his history. He was a New Yorker through and through. As you know, he was born in Brooklyn ... He was born, well, some of you may not know this, he was a twin. Dympna is his twin ... He was born May 11th, she was born May 13th. [LAUGHTER] Even in birth, Mychal had to have a story. [LAUGHTER] He just did nothing normally, no. [LAUGHTER] He grew up in Brooklyn playing stickball and riding his bike like all the little kids then.

Then, as you've heard the story so many times, he put the shoe polish, the rags in a bag and took his bicycle over here, and in front of the Flatiron building, he shined shoes for extra money, when he was a little kid. But very early on in his life, when he was a teenager, and this is a little unusual, because of the faith that he believed, that his mother and his sisters passed on to him, because of his love for God and Jesus, he thought he would like to be a Franciscan for the rest of his life. And so, as a teenager, he joined the friars. And he never left. He never left because his spirit was truly, purely Franciscan, simple, joyful, life loving and laughter. He was ordained in 1961 and spent many years as a parish priest in New Jersey, East Rutherford, Rochelle Park, West Milford. Spent some time at Siena College, one year I believe in Boston.

And then he came back to his beloved New York, whose heart really never left the city. But I came to know him 10 years after he was ordained. I was ordained and this is a little ironic ... My 30th anniversary of ordination was Tuesday, Sept. 11. This always was a happy day for me, and I think from now, it's going to be mixed. But my first assignment was very happy. I was sent to East Rutherford, New Jersey, and Mychal was there working in parochial work. And of course, if you know in the seminary, we learned a lot of theory. We learn a lot of knowledge but you really have to get out with people to know how to deal and how to really minister. So, I arrived there with my eyes wide open, my ears wide open. And my model turned out to be Mychal Judge. He was, without knowing it, my mentor and I was his pupil. I watched how he dealt with people. He really was a people person. While the rest of us were running around organizing altar boys and choirs and liturgies and decorations, he was in his office listening. His heart was open. His ears were open and especially he listened to people with problems.

He carried around with him an appointment book. He had appointments to see people four and five weeks in advance. He would come to the rec room at night at 11:30, having just finished his last appointment, because when he related to a person, and you all know this, they felt like he was their best friend. When he was talking with you, you were the only person on the face of the earth. And he loved people and that showed and that makes all the difference. You can serve people but unless you love them, it's not really ministry. In fact, a description that St. Bonaventure wrote of St. Francis once, I think is very apt for Michael. St. Bonaventure said that St. Francis had a bent for compassion. And certainly Mychal Judge did. The other thing about Mychal Judge is he loved to be where the action was. If he heard ... a fire engine or a police car, any news, in the car he'd go and away he'd be off. He loved to be where people were active, where there was a crisis, so he could insert God in what was going on. That was his way of doing things.

I remember once I came back to the friary and the secretary told me, "There's a hostage situation in Carlstadt and Mychal Judge is up there." So, I said, "Oh, gosh." Well, I got in the car ... drove up there. There was a house and there was a man on the second floor with a gun pointed to his wife's head and the baby in her arms. And he was threatening to kill her. When I got there, there were several people around, lights, policemen and a fire truck. And where was Mychal Judge? Up on the ladder in his habit, on the top of the ladder, talking to the man through the window of the second floor. I nearly died because in one hand he had his habit out like this, because he didn't want to trip. So, he was hanging on the ladder with one hand. He wasn't very dexterous, anyway. [LAUGHTER] I was fearful and he was, you know, his head bobbing like, "Well, you know, John, maybe we can work this out. You know, this really isn't the way to do it. Why don't you come downstairs, and we'll have a cup of coffee and talk this thing over?" I was there,

we're all there, saying, "He's going to fall off the ladder. There's going to be a gunplay." Not one ounce of fear did he show. But he was telling him, "You know, you're a good man, John. You don't need to do this." I don't know what happened, but he put the gun down and the wife and the baby's lives were saved. But, of course, there were cameras there. [LAUGHTER] Where ... wherever there was a photographer within a mile, you could be sure the lens was pointed at Mychal Judge. [LAUGHTER] In fact, we used to accuse him of paying The Bergen Record's reporter to follow him around just to ... [LAUGHTER]

Another aspect, a lesson that I learned from him, his way of life, is his simplicity. He lived very simply. He didn't have many clothes. They were always pressed, of course, and clean but he didn't have much, no clutter in his room, very simple room. And he would say to me once in a while, "Michael Duffy," he always called me by my full name, "Michael Duffy, you know what I need?" And I would get excited because it was hard to buy him a present or anything. I said, "No, what?" "You know what I really need?" "No, what Mike?" "Absolutely nothing. [MURMURING] I don't need a thing in the world. I am the happiest man on the face of the earth." And then he would go on for ten minutes, telling me how blessed he felt. "I have beautiful sisters. I have nieces and nephews. I have my health. I'm a Franciscan priest. I love my work. I love my ministry." And he would go on, and he would always conclude it by looking up to heaven and saying, "Why am I so blessed? I don't deserve it. Why am I so blessed?" But that's how he felt all his life.

Another characteristic of Mychal Judge, he loved to bless people, and I mean physically. Even if they didn't ask ... [LAUGHTER] A little old lady would come up to him and

he'd talk to them, you know, as if they were the only person on the face of the earth. Then, he'd say, "Let me give you a blessing." He put his big thick Irish hands and pressed her head till I think the poor woman would be crushed, and he'd look up to heaven and he'd ask God to bless her, give her health and give her peace and so forth. A young couple would come up to him and say, "We just found out we're going to have a baby." "Oh, that's wonderful! That's great!" He'd put his hand on the woman's stomach, and call to God to bless the unborn child. When I used to take teenagers on bus trips, he would always be around when we left. He'd jump in the bus, lead the teenagers in prayer, and then bless them all for a safe and a happy time, wherever I was taking them. If a family were in crisis, the husband and wife, he would go up to them ... and sometimes take both their hands at the same time, and put them right next to his and whisper a blessing that the crisis would be over.

He loved to bring Christ to people. He was the bridge between people and God and he loved to do that. And many times over the past few days, there's been several people who have come up and said, Fr. Mychal did my wedding, Fr. Mychal baptized my child. Fr. Mychal came to us when we were in crisis. There are so many things that Fr. Mychal Judge did for people. I think there's not one registry in a rectory in this diocese that doesn't have his name in it for something, a baptism, a marriage or whatever.

But what you may not know, and I'd like to tell you today because this may console you a little, it really was a two-way street. You people think he did so much for you. But you didn't see it from our side, we that lived with him. He would come home and be energized and nourished and thrilled and be full of life because of you.

He would come back and say to me, for instance, "I met this young man today. He's such a good person. He has more faith in his little finger than I do in my own body. Oh, he's

such good people. Oh, they're so great." Or, "I baptized a baby today." And just to see the new life, he'd be enthused and enthused. I want just to let you know, and I think he'd want me to let you know, how much you did for him. You made his life happy. You made him the kind of person that he was for all of us.

It reminds me of that very well known Picasso sketch of two hands holding a bouquet of flowers. You know the one I mean that there's one bouquet, a small bouquet, it's colorful and there's a hand coming from the left side and a hand coming from the right side. Both of them are holding on to the bouquet. But the artist was clever enough to draw the hands in the exact same angle. So, you don't know who's receiving and who is giving. And it's the same way that Mychal related to people. You should know how much you gave to him, and it was that love that he had for people, and that way of relating to him, that led him back to New York City and to become part of the fire department ...

He loved his fire department and all the men in it. He'd call me late at night and tell me all the experiences that he had with them, how wonderful they were, how good they were. It was never so obvious that he loved a group of people so much as his New York firefighters. And that's the way he was when he died.

On Tuesday, one of our friars, Brian Carroll, was walking down Sixth Avenue and actually saw the airplane go overhead at a low altitude. And then a little further, he saw smoke coming from one of the trade towers. He ran into the friary. He ran into Mychal Judge's room and he says, "Mychal, I think they're going to need you. I think the World Trade tower is on fire." Mychal was in his habit. So, he jumped up, took off his habit, got his uniform on, and I have to say this, in case you really think he's perfect, he did take time to comb and spray his hair. [LAUGHTER]

But just for a second, I'm sure ... He ran down the stairs and he got in his car and with some firemen, he went to the World Trade towers ... While he was down there, one of the first people he met was the mayor, Mayor Giuliani, and he, the mayor last night, said, Mychal Judge ran by him and he, the mayor, just put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Mychal, please pray for us." And Mychal turned and with that big Irish smile said, "I always do." And then kept on running with the firefighters into the building. While he was ministering to dying firemen, administering the Sacrament of the Sick and Last Rites, Mychal Judge died. The firemen scooped him up to get him out of the rubble and carried him out of the building and wouldn't you know it? There was a photographer there. That picture appeared in The New York Times, The New York Daily News and USA Today on Wednesday, and someone told me last night that People magazine has that same picture in it. I bet he planned it that way. [LAUGHTER]

But you know when you step back and see how my friend Mychal died, I'm sure that when we finish grieving, when all this is over and we can put things in perspective, look how that man died. He was right where the action was, where he always wanted to be. He was praying, because in the ritual for anointing, we're always saying, Jesus come, Jesus forgive, Jesus save. He was talking to God, and he was helping someone. Can you honestly think of a better way to die? I think it was beautiful.

The firemen took his body and because they respected and loved him so much, they didn't want to leave it in the street. So, they quickly carried it into a church and not just left it in the vestibule, they went up the center aisle. They put the body in front of the altar. They covered it with a sheet. And on the sheet, they placed his stole and his fire

badge. And then they knelt down and they thanked God. And then they rushed back to continue their work.

And so, in my mind ... I picture Mychal Judge's body there in that church in the sanctuary, realizing that the firefighters brought him back to the Father in the Father's house. And the words that come to me, "I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep ... Greater love than this no man hath than to lay down his life for his friends. And I call you my friends." ...

And so I make this statement to you this morning that Mychal Judge has always been my friend. And now he is also my hero.

Mychal Judge's body was the first one released from Ground Zero. His death certificate has the number one on the top ... and I meditated on that fact of the thousands of people that we are going to find out who perished in that terrible holocaust ... Why was Mychal Judge number one? And I think I know the reason. I hope you'll agree with me. Mychal's goal and purpose in life at that time was to bring the firemen to the point of death, so they would be ready to meet their maker. There are between two and three hundred firemen buried there, the commissioner told us last night.

Mychal Judge could not have ministered to them all. It was physically impossible in this life but not in the next. And I think that if he were given his choice, he would prefer to have happened what actually happened. He passed through the other side of life, and now he can continue doing what he wanted to do with all his heart. And the next few weeks, we're going to have names added, name after name of people, who are being brought out

of that rubble. And Mychal Judge is going to be on the other side of death ... to greet them instead of sending them there. And he's going to greet them with that big Irish smile ... he's going to take them by the arm and the hand and say, "Welcome, I want to take you to my Father." ... And so, he can continue doing in death what he couldn't do in life ...

And so, this morning ... we come to bury Mike Judge's body but not his spirit. We come to bury his mind but not his dreams. We come to bury his voice but not his message. We come to bury his hands but not his good works. We come to bury his heart but not his love. Never his love.

And so, I think ... we his family, friends and those who loved him should return the favor that he so often did to us. All of us have felt his big hands at a blessing that he would give to us. I think right now, it would be so appropriate if we called on what the liturgy tells us we are, a royal priesthood and a holy nation. And we ... give Mychal a blessing as he returns to the Father.

So, I'd ask you now could you all please stand. And could you raise your right hand and extend it towards my friend Mychal and repeat after me.

Mychal, may the Lord bless you. May the angels lead you to your Savior. You are a sign of his presence to us. May the Lord now embrace you. And hold you in his love forever. Rest in peace. Amen.

Thank you.