



Judge, Father Mychal (1933-2001)

by Linda Rapp

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Father Mychal Judge devoted his life to the care and service of others, including those marginalized by society. He ministered to AIDS patients and was a chaplain for Dignity, an organization of gay and lesbian Roman Catholics. He was also a chaplain for the Fire Department of New York City and died in the line of duty at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Father Mychal Judge's parents, Michael Judge and Mary Fallon, were both from County Leitrim, Ireland, but only met and fell in love on board the ship that was bringing them to a new life in the United States in the 1920s. They married and settled in Brooklyn, where Mr. Judge ran a neighborhood grocery store.

Mychal Judge, their second child and only son, was born on May 11, 1933, two days before the arrival of his twin sister, Dympna. Judge was given the name Robert Emmett at baptism. He would adopt a new one upon entering the Franciscan order.

When Judge was only a small child, his father fell gravely ill and was hospitalized for three years. Since children were not allowed as hospital visitors, Judge and his sisters were limited to exchanging waves with their father when he could come to the window of his room.

The senior Judge died when his son was six. Throughout his life, Mychal Judge regretted that he had "never called anyone 'Dad'" or gotten to know his father.

The death of Judge's father left the family in difficult financial straits. Early on, Judge began contributing to their income by running errands, doing odd jobs, and bicycling to Manhattan to set up shoe-shine stands at busy venues like Penn Station, Grand Central Station, and the Flatiron Building.

Judge's shoe-shine stand at Penn Station was near the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, whose leather-sandaled friars were not among his customers but who befriended him. Through this association Judge recognized his religious vocation and his strong attraction to the Franciscan order.

Judge began his studies for the priesthood in 1954 at St. Joseph's Seraphic Seminary in Callicoon, New York, where he nearly washed out when "a standard personality test suggested that he was an unsuitable candidate for the priesthood." His guardian in the order managed to prevail over the assessor, and so Judge continued his progress toward ordination.

Upon entering the order, Judge was required to take a new name, signifying his new way of life. He chose Fallon Michael to honor both of his parents. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), members of religious orders were allowed to resume their baptismal names, but Judge did not do so, opting to continue to share the name of his father, although later altering the spelling.

Judge studied philosophy at St. Francis College in Rye Beach, New Hampshire from 1955 until 1957, after which he completed a four-year theology program at Holy Name College in Washington, D. C. Father Francis

Muller, one of his professors at Holy Name, recalled Judge as a good student but not "brilliant academically. He didn't know canon law by heart like some of them."

Analyzing and imposing all the strictures of the canon was not the priestly role for which Judge was cut out. Recalling his ordination on February 25, 1961, he said, "I knew I would say Mass and preach, that I would baptize, bury the dead, and perform weddings. The rest was all in the hands of God. I could never have dreamt of all the parish years I would enjoy." His mission would be to serve, console, encourage, and sustain everyone who came within the purview of his ministry, and he always made it his business to include as many people as possible, particularly those marginalized by society.

Judge served as a parish priest at St. Joseph's in East Rutherford, New Jersey (1962-1966) and at Sacred Heart in Rochelle Park, New Jersey (1967-1969) before returning to his community at St. Francis Church in Manhattan, where he spent a year as director of the Third Order, an organization of lay Catholics who typically do not take holy orders but commit themselves to following the Franciscan Rule.

Judge subsequently went back to St. Joseph's, where in 1974 he used his interpersonal skills to extraordinary effect. Responding to a hostage situation in which a man held a gun to the head of his wife, who was holding their baby, Judge, encumbered by his long brown habit, worked his way up a ladder to speak to the husband through a second-floor window. His efforts were successful, but, with typical modesty, he downplayed his role in the happy conclusion: "I don't know what happened, but he put the gun down, and the wife's and the baby's lives were saved."

In 1976 Judge was appointed as assistant to the President of Siena College in Loudonville, New York, where he chose to live in a student dormitory so that he could be available to provide pastoral care to any student at any hour.

While devoting himself to the care of his flock, Judge was fighting his own demons: in 1978 he joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Although his drinking had never prevented him from fulfilling his duties, he felt that it was a part of his life that he needed to get under control.

He subsequently took an even braver step, attending AA meetings for groups consisting mostly of gay people. Though he remained true to his priestly vow of celibacy, he acknowledged his homosexuality and became a member of a priests' support group for Dignity, an organization of glbtq Roman Catholics.

When the AIDS pandemic struck, Judge put in long hours ministering to patients. His friend Father Michael Duffy recalled his compassion for "a man who was in such advanced illness that no one would go near him because of the stench": "Mychal said to me, 'You know, no one touches this man. He must be so lonely.' So he'd go visit him and hold his hand. He told me that even once he bent over and kissed him on the forehead because he felt so bad that no one would come near him."

Judge's biographer Michael Ford wrote that Judge's "ministry . . . helped many gay people, alienated from the church, reconnect with their faith. Father Mychal was a living symbol of the church as it ought to be."

Some Catholic churches were reluctant to celebrate funeral Masses for people who had died of AIDS, but Judge was always willing to do so at the request of a family or lover. Nor did he limit his service to Catholics; he had cards printed and distributed to inform any and all AIDS patients that he was ready to attend them if called upon.

In keeping with the Franciscan ideal of service to the poor, Judge walked the streets, ministering to the homeless, befriending them, and giving them clothing whenever he received some as a gift because the poor had a greater need for it. It was his custom to carry a wad of dollar bills so that he might offer a bit of

help to the people he encountered on his rounds.

The friar who knew homeless people in New York by name also moved in more exalted circles. In 1999 he was among 130 American members of the clergy who attended the annual breakfast prayer meeting at the White House with President Bill Clinton, whom he admired for his social policies.

He returned for a similar event early in the administration of Clinton's successor, George W. Bush. Not a particularly political person, Judge does not seem to have made much public comment on the Bush agenda. His political goal--to the extent that he had one--was to appeal to leaders across the spectrum to seek help and support for the poor and disadvantaged.

Judge's friend writer Malachy McCourt recalled, "He was very mischievous with money. He had a vow of poverty, so he would wonder, 'How can I use this in the most efficient and efficacious manner?' He would get money from very conservative organizations that had the Irish habit of saying: 'Here are a few dollars, Father. Use them as you see fit.' Even the right-wingers liked him, but he would give their money to a gay organization as an anonymous contribution. And they wouldn't know."

Many who met Judge commented upon his gift of offering consolation. This was greatly needed in the summer of 1996, when TWA Flight 800 crashed off Long Island, killing all 230 people aboard. On hearing of the disaster, Judge rushed to the hotel where loved ones of the victims were gathering. Each day for the following couple of weeks he spent long hours there, comforting the bereaved. He also organized an ecumenical service of remembrance for the deceased.

Judge's skills as a comforter were also needed in his work as a chaplain for the Fire Department of New York, a position he took on in 1992.

A beloved figure at Engine 1/Ladder 24, where he was considered "one of the family," he was unstinting in visiting hospitals around the city to console injured firefighters and to provide loving support for their family and friends.

Whenever a fire call went out, Judge changed from his typical brown Franciscan habit to a fireman's uniform (for reasons of safety) and raced to the scene. The last call to which he responded was at Tower One of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Fellow members of the fire department discovered him after he had been wounded by falling debris. They rushed him outside, but he was beyond help. Not wishing to leave him lying on the sidewalk, they reverently carried his body to the nearby St. Peter's Church.

Father Mychal Judge was listed as victim 0001 of the attacks on September 11.

His funeral Mass on September 15 drew a crowd of three thousand to St. Francis Church, with many more outside, watching the service on specially set-up television screens. No one will ever know how many AIDS patients, homeless people, and recovering alcoholics joined in the sorrow that day.

On November 18 Senator Charles Schumer of New York requested that Judge be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, noting that "Father Judge died as he lived--serving others" and that, when "advised to move to a safer location, he refused to leave his compatriots." Senator Hillary Clinton joined in supporting the nomination.

In June 2002 the United States Congress passed the Mychal Judge Act, signed into law by Bush over the objections of Attorney General John Ashcroft. The legislation authorized the payment of federal death

benefits to anyone named as a beneficiary on the insurance policy of a firefighter or police officer who died in the line of duty. Previously, only spouses, parents, and children had been eligible.

The passage of the Mychal Judge Act meant that, for the first time, gay and lesbian partners could receive a federal benefit. (In Judge's case, his two sisters were the beneficiaries.)

The bill was sponsored by Representatives Jerrold Nadler, a Democrat from New York with a strong record of support for glbtq rights, and Republican Donald Manzullo of Illinois, whose record was quite the opposite.

Nadler commented, "I disagree with Don on just about everything," but said that they had worked closely to pass the bill. For his part, Manzullo denied any intent to benefit same-sex couples. "I'm in zero contact with the gay community," he stated (apparently forgetting that several members of the community were his congressional colleagues).

In March 2002 organizers of the Chicago St. Patrick's Day parade recognized Judge by symbolically naming him Grand Marshal. He was also honored at the New York parade, in which he could not have marched as a member of Dignity and so chose not to march at all. The proud son of Irish immigrants had marched in a different New York parade, an inclusive one in Queens organized by his friend Brendan Fay in 2000 to protest the banning of glbtq people from the main event. Judge responded to the jeers of protesters by offering a smile and a blessing.

In the months after Judge's death, his fire department colleagues asked Cardinal Edward Egan of New York to begin the process of canonization, but the Archbishop was not receptive to the idea. Nor was the Franciscan provincial minister, Father John Felice, who considered the push for sainthood "a mistake."

Their reluctance is hardly surprising given the church's teachings about homosexuality. Judge was clearly at odds with Roman Catholic authorities in his views on the topic and his vision for the future. He once told Fay, "Look at who we are as gay people at this moment in history as being a gift to the church, to witness change and be agents for change both in church and society."

Although church officials have been discouraging, others have pressed forward. Television producer Burt Kearns established the website www.saintmychal.com to provide information about Judge and promote the effort to have him canonized. By 2003 readers had sent Kearns reports of four incidents that they considered miracles attributable to the intercession of Judge. (Two miracles accepted by the Vatican are one of the requisites for sainthood.)

A parish of the Old Catholic Church has already chosen to honor Judge by naming their church in Dallas St. Mychal Judge. The church, which is not affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, describes itself as "open and accepting" and "welcom[ing to] both saints and sinners, and most of us are closer to sinner than saint." It is progressive in accepting women as priests and conducting celebrations of holy unions for same-sex couples but even more traditional than typical Roman Catholic churches in holding regular recitations of the rosary in Latin.

As for the question of the possible canonization of Judge, they state, "Although we honor and respect our Roman brothers and sisters, we are not bound by anything they do or don't do. If asked, we would suggest that the Vatican recognize the sainthood of Father Mychal. They don't ask, so we don't tell."

Judge is the subject of a documentary film, *Saint of 9/11* (2006, directed by Glenn Holsten). Narrated by Sir Ian McKellen, it is a touching portrait of Father Judge, capturing the man not only in his enormous sense of duty and service to others but also in his gifts as a witty story-teller with an irrepressible sense of humor and an abiding belief in hope.

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