

God Bless America

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INTRODUCTION

GOD BLESS AMERICA

REVEREND JOHN J. COUGHLIN, O.F.M.†

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the friars at St. Francis of Assisi Church on West 31st Street in Manhattan had just prayed matins, the ancient morning prayer of the Catholic Church. Afterwards, Fr. Mychael Judge, O.F.M., and his brother Franciscans were enjoying the simple pleasure of their first cup of coffee of the day in the peace of Friary's Refectory. Directly across the street from the Church, an ominous all-alarm bell began to sound in the firehouse, while Fr. Mychael's fire department beeper went off. As he had done so many times previously, the Chaplain to the New York City Fire Department raced across the street to the fraternity of New York's bravest. Jumping aboard trucks, they sped to the scene of what would become the single greatest tragedy in the long history of New York City.

Across the five boroughs of our great city, the all-alarm beckoned firefighters, police officers, and emergency service workers. As they approached lower Manhattan, the rescuers witnessed intense flames and dark clouds of smoke engulfing the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. In a carefully orchestrated campaign of terrorism, fully-loaded commercial jet liners had been thrust through the sleek skin of each of the Towers. On that astounding day, both Towers eventually collapsed. Hundreds of public servants surrendered their lives. Thousands of innocent human beings perished inside the vast commercial complex. The City was shaken. As never before, its

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vulnerability was exposed.

Like Fr. Mychael, among those who raced into the chaotic inferno only not to return was Captain Timothy Stackpole. In 1998, Stackpole and other firefighters had entered a burning building in Brooklyn that collapsed on them. During his miraculous recovery from severe burns, he spent many long and painful months in the intensive care burn unit at Cornell University Hospital on the East Side. Fr. Mychael had been a frequent visitor to the burn unit. This long purgation of body and soul left Stackpole a man filled with gratitude, humility, and faith. A short time prior to the September 11th attack, he had returned to active service and been promoted to rank of Captain in the fire department. Now he and the Franciscan priest had gone to the Eternal Father.

The President of the United States, George W. Bush, was informed of the attack while he was visiting an elementary school in Florida. In Washington, D.C., the Pentagon had been damaged by another highjacked jet. The passengers on a fourth plane, apparently also seized by terrorists, forced the liner to crash in rural Pennsylvania. At the Commander-in-Chief's mandate, the nation went on a state of highest alert.

Back in New York City, Mayor Rudolph Guiliani was responding to the crisis with a stunning sense of purpose that integrated urgency with calm. In order to secure the city and facilitate the speedy passage of emergency vehicles, Manhattan went into lockdown. Institutions such as St. John's University closed. At the Law School, Dean Joseph Bellacosa dismissed classes with prayer. All of us wished each other the kind admonition to stay safe. Although we tried to be brave, anxiety permeated the air. Throughout the city, and in particular at specially designated spots in lower Manhattan, survivors hoped against hope. They searched for their loved ones, often attaching photographs of the missing to outer walls of public buildings and houses of worship. These informal sidewalk shrines transformed the flow of passers-by into pilgrims, who paused to read, reflect, and light candles.

During the mournful days that followed September 11th, the staggering costs of the attack became all too clear. The official death toll would ultimately be set at over 2,800 human lives. The financial loss was calculated in the multi-billions of dollars. Death stung St. John's Law School. Three of our fine alumni,

Hon. William H. Poolmen '68, Michael Cahill '91, and Walter G. Hynes '92, lost their lives in the attack. Other members of the law school community lost family and friends. Only a few months later our grief was intensified. Christopher Lawler '03, a member of the second year class, lost his life, as did his mother, when a plane crashed into their home in Belle Harbor, Queens. From the September attack until at least Christmas, it seemed as if the city had entered one long continuous funeral. At churches, synagogues, and mosques, throughout the metropolitan area, the sound of bagpipes pierced the Autumn air while family, friends, and civic officials grieved the dead.

If it were possible to find a moment of humor in the midst of this horrific drama of human tragedy, the story of one of my students seems apt. On the morning of September 11th, she was on her way to job interview at the World Trade Center. Appropriately enough, she was preoccupied, going over in her head possible questions and answers for the impending interview. As she ascended the stairs of the subway, she noticed an elderly lady kneeling in prayer. Not being a native New Yorker, she hastened by the strange site while recalling the saying that "one sees everything in New York." Upon emerging, she found herself in the midst of a dust storm and immediately ran back into the subway. On her way down the subway stairs as she passed the lady, she reached out, grabbed her hand and exclaimed: "Keep praying, but run!" It struck me that her response constituted the quintessential Catholic, which at once blended the contemplative with practical action. Indeed, she may well have saved not only her own life but that of the devout woman as well. To be sure, she proved herself a worthy heir of the University's Vincentian tradition of prayer in the marketplace.

On the morning of September 11th, two French filmmakers were shooting a documentary that fateful morning on the New York City Fire Department. They captured the image of Fr. Mychael in his grace-filled and redemptive last moments. With a worried and anxious face framed by his clerical collar and fire department helmet, he abandoned himself to Christ, and ministered the holy Sacraments to the injured and fallen. When Tower 2 collapsed, the film went momentarily dark. It resumed with footage of firefighters carrying the priest's body from the Trade Center to St. Peter's Church. He would be the first

officially recorded fatality and designated by Death Certificate No. 001. Several days later, thousands packed St. Francis of Assisi Church and flowed out onto West 31st Street to attend the funeral of the first fallen. At the conclusion of the ceremonies, Fr. Michael's remains were placed onto a fire engine while the immense crowd sang "God Bless America."

That patriotic anthem was heard again when the suspended baseball season, in the thick of several pennant races, resumed on a late September night at Shea Stadium. Captain Stackpole was survived by his widow, Tara, and six young children. His two oldest sons were the press-box guests of Mets broadcaster Ralph Kiner. The Pittsburgh homerun king and hall-of-famer asked the boys if they had ever cheered for New York sensations Yankee shortstop, Derek Jeter, and Met catcher, Mike Piazza. No stranger to such acclaim in an earlier age, Kiner then told the young men that the real cheers belonged to their father, Captain Stackpole, and the other heroes who sacrificed their lives in the line of duty. At a tremendous cost, perhaps the tragedy had reminded us that in our headlong dash for material wealth, we may have forgotten what counts as true value. The singing of the anthem somehow seemed to proclaim their self-sacrifice in opposition to the anti-values of a post-human age.

It was as if grief encountered outrage in the collective psyche of the American people to forge a profound national resolve. Reminiscent of the inaugural words of the late President John F. Kennedy, a unitary American voice seemed to respond: "Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike . . . that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to ensure the success of liberty." Echoing that chorus, the entire community of St. John's Law School expresses compassion for the aggrieved and joins in the resolve to defend human dignity and freedom under the law no matter what the cost. As an academic and legal community, we treasure peace and wholeheartedly endorse our national commitment to secure true peace. In the difficult days ahead, may God bless America.