

“Mrs. O’Callahan, your son is the bravest man I ever saw.” These were the words from Captain Leslie Gehres, commander of the aircraft carrier the USS Franklin, when he spoke to the mother of Fr. Joseph Timothy O’Callahan; Fr. Joe as he was known to the troops, and a US Navy Chaplain who was a Lt. Commander. The conversation took place after the chaotic night in March of 1945 when many men lost their lives, but many more would have were it not for the heroic actions of a humble priest.

Her son did not fit the stereotypical image of a hero. He was 35 years old when the war began. He was nearsighted, and had a bad case of claustrophobia and high blood pressure. He was more scholarly than athletic, and was a college professor before the war, teaching philosophy and math at Boston College and College of the Holy Cross. He was more likely pictured in front of a classroom than in the midst of a combat zone. But, a hero he was.

Joseph Timothy O’Callahan was born on May 14, 1905, in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Upon graduating from high school, he joined the Jesuits and was ordained in 1934. For the next six years, he taught mathematics, physics and philosophy at several of the Order’s colleges.

In August 1940, with war raging in Europe, Father O'Callahan enlisted in the Naval Reserve Chaplains Corps. Several assignments followed before he reported on March 2, 1945 to the aircraft carrier USS Franklin to serve as chaplain to its 3,200 men. The ship was part of a task force whose mission was to track down the Japanese fleet and destroy it.

On March 18, with the U.S. ships about 100 miles from Japan, American planes took off in waves beginning at first light. Their role was to engage and destroy Japanese air power, and then locate the enemy vessels which were scattered throughout inland waters. Before each flight, Fr. Joseph O'Callahan visited the various pilot ready rooms, praying with the men and giving them general absolution. The U.S. pilots dominated the skies, but did not locate the enemy ships until just before dark. The strike against them would have to wait until the next morning.

March 19 began as the day before. The first wave of planes left the carrier at 5:30 AM. Shortly afterwards, as the second wave was being readied, with full tanks of fuel and loads of rockets and bombs, a Japanese plane evaded the American air cover. It flew over the Franklin releasing a bomb

that penetrated the flight and gallery decks and exploded in the hangar. Within seconds, gasoline ignited and a wave of searing flame raced down the three football-field length of the hangar, gaining impetus as it proceeded from exploding planes. Some 8001 men were dead or would die within the next few days. Father O'Callahan retrieved a vial of holy oil and his helmet marked with a large white cross as he made his way through passages filled with flames and smoke to the open area above. On the hangar deck, bombs and rockets, engulfed in a mass of flames, were exploding at a rate of about one per minute.

Father continued upward to the flight deck. Here nearly 90 percent of the 1,000-foot apron was aflame. The clear portion was full of the injured. He spent a few moments with each of those who were alive, praying, absolving, anointing. Explosions tore apart the steam lines and the boilers shut down. By 9:30 AM, the ship was powerless and listing. Twenty minutes later, a rear service magazine of five-inch shells exploded, raining debris onto the deck.

The fury brought disorganization. Key officers were dead, and many chiefs, if alive, were dispersed or trapped. Flames, explosions and noxious smoke

smearred faces and uniforms making it almost impossible to recognize anyone from a distance. One thing stood out, however, the white cross on the chaplain's helmet. It had the power to inspire.

Depleted hose crews needed help. Father rallied a group of men to join him on the hoses. When the fire marshal entered smoke-filled portions of the ship looking for breather masks, the priest was with him.

When a live, thousand-pound bomb was spotted on the deck, the chaplain stood by for moral support while a team defused it; then he mustered a group of men to drop it overboard. When the fires were pushed back from the forward gun turret and its ready-ammunition magazine, hundreds of five-inch shells stored there had to be jettisoned before they exploded.

Father O'Callahan had men form a chain, taking his turn in the line, to pass the hot shells from the magazine to the edge of the ship where they were dumped. He then joined a crew to flood a lower-deck magazine whose ammunition could not be easily unloaded.

When the fires on the hangar deck began to subside, Father led a hose crew through a smoke-filled, dark passage to the area. On the flight deck,

as the fires receded, six loose, but live, thousand-pound bombs were discovered. The chaplain was there encouraging the men as a hose crew worked to cool the bombs so others could defuse them.

That evening, the engineers were able to return to their stations, make emergency repairs and get the boilers started. By 9 AM on the 20th, the Franklin was moving under its own power. Burial parties were formed to take care of the hundreds of dead. All day and night, the priest and the Protestant chaplain held a brief prayer service for each man as he was assigned to the sea. On April 3, one month after it had left, the ship reentered Pearl Harbor.

For his courageous acts, Fr. Joseph Timothy O'Callahan was awarded the Medal of Honor, the first chaplain since the Civil War to be so honored.

Released from active duty in November 1946, Father O'Callahan returned to Holy Cross College as a professor of philosophy. He died in Worcester on March 18, 1964, the eve of the nineteenth anniversary of his heroic acts.

When awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, among the words on the citation, it's stated: *Serving with courage, fortitude, and deep spiritual strength, Lieutenant Commander O Callahan inspired the gallant officers*

*and men of the FRANKLIN to fight heroically and with profound faith in the face of almost certain death and to return their stricken ship to port.*

What is it that would make a man who could have avoided the draft at his age, and stayed in his position at a college, all of a sudden decide to sign up and serve his country, and willingly go into dangerous battle zones?

What is it that would make a man run into a raging fire to give other sailors comfort in their last moments, or be a voice of calm amidst chaos helping to save lives? The answer is the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit does so much to help us become the kind of people God knows we can become. This is done through the power of the Spirit as we discern where we are called to do, and as we learn about what needs to change in our lives, and as we go forward on our mission confronting fear head-on.

We are told in the first reading from Acts that when the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind and it filled the entire house in which they were. Sometimes people use the term “winds of change” and the thing with wind is you can’t see it, but you can feel it. And it ushers in change all the time; a southern wind brings in warm air; a northern wind brings in cold air. Winds also often

usher in big storms. It's quite powerful, the wind. And it's a beautiful symbol of the Holy Spirit because we start with being open to that change the Spirit is trying to bring into our souls and hearts. What is it time to change in my life? When we listen to the Spirit, saying "Lord what do you want to accomplish through me," we can then bring about such remarkable change in the world. Sometimes when we are stubborn this can be an obstacle to spiritual growth; but when we are open to letting God burst into our lives like Peter meeting Jesus the first time and Jesus just getting into his boat without asking telling him to go cast his net one more time, God will do incredible things with us. So listen to the Spirit and what you may be called to do next. Maybe it's time for a change; or to do something different; or to take a different approach, be it with your job, your parenting, your relationships, your volunteering. Change isn't something we should fear, but we should embrace when we listen, pray, and act.

The Pentecost also features we are told "tongues of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them." About 10 years ago, I visited Glacier National Park for the first time. One of the rangers led a hike through a thick forest, and she pointed out that the forest was "sick" in the sense that they were in need of a forest fire. They have since had one, and while a

forest fire can rage out of control and destroy, it can also clear things that are sick so new growth can occur. So it is in our souls. We shouldn't just look to Lent as the time to look at what needs to change, but rather should continually look at what needs to change in our lives. What are the sins we keep making excuses for? What bad habits do we have that we keep clinging to? God's mercy is always there, but God also wants us to progress. Sometimes a person can start doing things they know diminish them as a person, but just accept them as a part of their life. Rather than do that, let's use the Holy Spirit to help us confront these things.

Fire though is also powerful; it destroys, but it also unleashes power. Fear tries to destroy it. When we have the fire of the Spirit, we are able to speak with conviction and carry out the mission. Note the apostles speak about the faith. The Holy Spirit enables us to do that. Through the Holy Spirit, Fr. Joe spoke about God to the men he served, but through the Holy Spirit, he was also given fortitude to carry out his mission. The world can be a scary place; there is so much hostility to the faith; and it's scary to talk about faith and morals to both strangers but also people in our families. It's also hard work to raise kids, or to take a hard look at ourselves and say "this needs to change" as we can fear our own shadows. It's scary to try something new



thinking “what if I fail?” But as I’ve said a million times, a Christian can’t cling to their safe space. The Christian is called to go on the adventure of life with God, and to change the world. We do that through our words and actions. Will we fail? Will we face animosity and adversity? You bet. But will we save souls for Christ? Will we make a difference and bring hope into this world? Yes - through the Holy Spirit working within us.

Lastly, who are we sent to? Fr. Joe served Catholics on the ship, but he also served all the sailors. When crisis came, or when someone needed spiritual care, he did not first ask “are you a Catholic?” and then help them. Note a theme of Pentecost is unity. The apostles speak in their native tongues; all different, but all understood. This symbolizes how God loves us all, and came for all. The reminder is that we serve the greater world, and are also sent to evangelize. We do this through our words and actions; trying to see God in all people, even when that’s a challenge, and also not fearing sharing what we believe and why to change hearts and minds.

Today begins summer for most people, and we need vacation. We need down time. We need time to play, to relax, and to enjoy life. But ultimately, we are all sent on a mission, which isn’t just to coast through life, but to

truly go and make a difference. The reason we have a nation is because of the men and women who did just that whom we honor this weekend. And the reason people come to know God is through the power of the Holy Spirit, guiding our Church, and also guiding you and me. So let us let go, let God, and be open to going where we are called. As the Father has sent me, so I send you are the words Jesus gives us. So with the Holy Spirit, let's not be afraid to get to work, bringing hope, love, peace, and the message of Jesus into our world.