In September of 2001, I had just started seminary. And I remember in that first week of class, on 9/11, watching in horror and silence with millions of Americans as we saw the tragedies unfold in New York. But while out of that day there was the evil actions of several terrorists, what also emerged were countless stories of the inherent goodness that is inside people. The kind of good that exhibits what the cross is all about - a sacrificial love - in that you had so many people doing what they could to come together and help.

Among these was a man who would be recorded simply as “Victim 1”. He was the first recorded fatality as he was the first body that was recovered that day. And while he died on 9/11, in fact what he did that day was nothing new. Time and time again, he would help people and journey with them, bringing the light of God to them. And that was because for him, sacrifice and giving all he had was a way of life.

The first victim was a Franciscan priest by the name of Fr. Mychal Judge. On 9/11, he rushed from the friary at Saint Francis of Assisi Church to the World Trade center. He gave the anointing to a firefighter, but was hit by debris and killed when he took his helmet off.

Born in Brooklyn on May 11, 1933, he was the son of two Irish immigrants who met on the boat over to America. As a young boy, he watched his father die after a long illness. To help his mother and two sisters make ends meet, he shined shoes in Manhattan, ran errands and did odd jobs. His twin sister remembers that her brother always wanted to be a priest, and he was called to his vocation at the age of 16 when he entered the seminary. He graduated in 1954 after completing the first two years of college. He was received in the order in 1954 and made vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, being ordained to the priesthood on February 25, 1961 at the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C. He'd spend much of his priesthood in ministry at a college and in the parish at Saint Francis of Assisi, but he also spent much of time with the people. He changed the spelling of his first name to be a little different as it seemed everyone was named "Michael" at the friary.

Remarked Michael McCourt, an actor and author who knew him well: "There's a very old postcard of a giant Jesus looking in the window of the Empire State Building in those long, long robes…and that was Mike Judge in New York. He was everywhere. Over the city. And ooohhh, how good it

was to know he was there.” On any given evening, he might be baptizing a fireman's child, ministering to an AIDS patient, or listening to Black 47, a Celtic rock band that had a regular gig at Connolly's on West 47th Street. Judge got 30 to 40 messages a day on his answering machine. Every six months, he'd wear another machine out. "He was the busiest person alive," says Joe Falco, a firefighter with Engine 1-Ladder 24, the company across the street from Judge's home. "He'd come back at all hours of the morning, blowing his siren so we could park his car. No one knew how he did it. No one understood how he maintained his energy."

One way was actually through facing his weakness: alcohol. Jesus washes the feet of Peter because Peter has weaknesses too as we all do; Jesus needs to heal Him with grace. Fr. Mychal struggled with alcohol for a time in his life. No one knew, others didn’t think he had a problem at all. But Fr. Mychal knew it was serious; he’d find himself in blackouts, and so he got help. But he recognized his problem and, in the words of his superior at the friary, he became to borrow from Fr. Henri Nouwen, the “wounded healer.” His weakness made him stronger, and gave him more empathy. He’d lead AA meetings, even take a dozen members to a three-day retreat on Long Island. Through this, he helped thousands of others to face their problems

too. "He was a great comfort to those with troubles with the drink," says McCourt, who usually saw Judge twice a month at AA. "He'd always say, 'You're not a bad person -- you have a disease that makes you think you're a bad person, and it's going to mess you up. His fault proved to be a great victory to help others. Which he did again, again and again.

He lived simply in an immaculate but sparse room with a bed, desk and phone. He'd wake up each day at 6:30 and give thanks for his sobriety and pray for the city's workers and leaders. But then he'd step out of the friary. "This was very significant," says Brian Carroll, a friend and fellow friar. "Because when you step out of the sanctuary, you're down with the people, eyeball to eyeball with them. That was the New Yorker in him. As he often said, 'It can get messy, it can get crazy, but it can be an awful lot of fun.' And Fr. Mychal did not at all mind getting a bit messy.

He was great one-on-one with people and with them. Younger friars often looked to Judge as their role model. He was heartily spiritual, never ashamed to introduce God into ordinary conversation. He compulsively blessed people -- the pregnant, the homeless, the random traveler on the bus. "While the rest of us were running around organizing altar boys and

choirs and liturgies and decorations," Fr. Michael Duffy, his friend, told the mourners in his homily, "he was in his office listening. His heart was open." (But occasionally not his eyes: Duffy later confessed that once, at their New Jersey parish, Judge was so exhausted he fell asleep while a parishioner was unloading his troubles; he apologized and asked him to please return the following night.) He was always with the people; his main spiritual time was walking the Brooklyn Bridge in his leather sandals and friar's habit.

In the 1980s, when AIDS first became known, patients were shunned. Even by those who should have helped them in the Church. People closed doors to the patients, as it was not known how you could get the disease. Some even so-called "holy" people would hold signs saying it was a plague from God to punish people. They even had a hard time finding funeral homes for the bodies, or churches to offer the funeral. And that's where Fr. Mychal stepped in. He'd stand with the outcast and say "I'm just like you." He'd go on his own to where AIDS patients were, and bathe them and care for them and not be afraid to hold them and help them die. He'd massage the feet of people, get them hand cream, and helped them die in peace. He also would say many funeral Masses in the lower chapel of Saint Francis of Assisi for them.

Once he was called to celebrate Mass in the hospital room of New York police officer Steven McDonald, who had been critically wounded during an investigation of a youth in Central Park. A bullet pierced the mans throat. He was there to be with Steven and his wife Patti, but the injury left Officer McDonald paralyzed. He kept meeting with Steven though and helped him to let go of his anger and forgive the man who did this to him. This was pretty typical though for Fr. Mychal; his friendships were lasting and deep. He'd write Mother's Day cards to women who'd lost their children and birthday cards for kids who lost their mother's. He and McDonald actually took 3 trips to Ireland together and two more to Lourdes.

When TWA Flight 800 exploded shortly after takeoff from New York in July 1996 and fell into the Atlantic off Long Island, Father Mychal helped counsel the families and friends of the victims every day for three weeks and worked to arrange a permanent memorial at the site. He had since returned every summer to offer a memorial service and comfort the families.

He became a chaplain for the New York City Fire Department in 1992. The firemen loved him. He had a memory like an encyclopedia for family members' names, birthdays and passions. He'd help guys out with marital problems, every problem big or small - he was known to be the priest you could go to. He'd hold Mass in firehouses; and was always with the men. At night he'd spend three to four hours on the phone returning calls, touching base, making sure the shut-in in New Jersey was surviving or the homeless person he found that day and figured out how to hook up their telephone. Some nights the last call was at 1 a.m. to the men at Engine 1-Ladder 24; it was across the street. When a fireman picked up he'd go over to the window and wave.

When he died that day on 9/11, he was carried out in an iconic photograph, a firefighter praying the "Our Father" over his body. Somehow, Judge's body got from the sidewalk at Church and Vesey to St. Peter's church. He was found Judge lying regally on the altar, his helmet and badge perched in mute tribute on his chest. Said Tom Ryan, who found him, "I walked into this church…And in a world that was gray and dark, there was color, and laying on the altar was the body of Mychal Judge. In a horrendous moment, it was a beautiful sight."

The pastor at the church called the cardinal's office. The cardinal's office called the friary. An ambulance picked Judge up. He was slipped into a body bag and brought back to Engine 1-Ladder 24.

The firefighters placed their chaplain on a cot in the back of the station. Then they cordoned off the area with a clothesline and some sheets, creating a small, private shrine. The men formed a circle around him, got down on their knees, and started to cry.

Keenan sat with Judge until he was taken to the morgue. His death certificate bears the number 00001 -- the first official casualty of the World Trade Center.

At the memorial, McCourt told the mourners about his own fantasy. Judge, he says, dies and is momentarily disoriented, because after leading such a simple life, he suddenly finds himself in a place with large marble hallways. A figure approaches.

"Can I help you?"

"Well, I don't know where I am."

"What's your name?"

"Judge. First name Mychal."

"Really? Some people call me Judge, too."

"Oh? And what's your first name?"

"Almighty. What kind of work would you like here, Mychal?"

"I'd like to be someplace where there are fires."

"We don't have any fires here. The only one we know about is very far away, and that burns eternally, because all the firefighters are here, and we don't tell them about it, because otherwise they'd be down there fighting it."

"Well, could I go there and give some people a hand?"

"No, Mychal. Because if you go there, you have to be a sinner, you see? And you're a saint."

"Could I have a temporary pass to go there, then? Could I be an honorary sinner?"

"And away he goes," he finally said. "That's my fantasy about Mychal. He keeps working. He never stops. He's trying to get all of us out of hell."

I first heard his story some years after 9/11, and it called to mind the famous "Cross at Ground Zero" where two beams were formed in the shape of a cross in the rubble that day. For those of us who remember that day well, we remember at first the horrifying images of evil, but from that also emerged so many stories of good.

It's hard not to think of Fr. Mychal's story on this Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, because this feast commemorates what God in Jesus does for us as humans, and what we are called to do for one another.

Crucifixion for the Romans were a sign of power, it's how Rome extended it's power over people with fear. And this is why it's rather curious that the early Christians point to the Cross, which would seemingly be a sign that Jesus was not in fact a Messiah. However Paul says that he knows one

thing and that is Christ crucified; he boasts in the Cross. Why would he and so many others do this? Because it shows the nature of our God when we link it to the resurrection. Jesus rises from the dead; destroying the power of evil and death. Jesus in raising from the dead shows God is not on the side of earthly power, but on the side of those who are hurting, in pain, in need - standing with us always. Whereas Adam wanted to be like God, believing the lies of the devil (taking from what belonged to God in the garden) as Saint Paul reminds us in that second reading, Jesus lowered Himself and emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave. In doing this, Jesus wants to remake us. He wants to bring us mercy, forgiveness and compassion. His action of becoming one of us and dying for us is God's message of love and mercy being the most powerful things in the world - far more powerful than the power of sin. On our part, may we receive that love, and let it transform us. We do this by opening our hearts to God. By acknowledging where we need His light to liberate us from our pains and sufferings, just like Fr. Mychael did turning to God to overcome his battles. By being honest about our sins and struggles and not hiding as Adam and Eve did when the Father comes to the Garden, but rather acknowledging our battles and turning them over to Jesus who wants to set us free.

But with this there is a challenge - for us to change the world, to make this love and mercy known. And how are we going to change it? By doing as Jesus does. By doing as Fr. Mychal Judge did. He went into burning buildings with firefighters to help bring comfort and hope, but also on the streets of New York to be with all kinds of people in need, and when we do as he did and as Jesus did, that's how we change things. Think of a parent trying to help a child; the good parent listens to the child, talks with the child, comforts them, and sets a good example for them - they don't just bark orders from another room. So we need to ask ourselves are we willing to lower ourselves too? Are we willing to give of our time to those in need? Are we willing to meet people with compassion and mercy and forgiveness? Are we willing to do less shouting and more listening and conversation, like Charlie Kirk was trying to do in meeting people and conversing and debating with them to promote greater understanding and less violence in the world? Every day we face these choices when we look at our families, our coworkers, the people we go to school with, the people we meet at our kids sporting games, the people we pass by on the street or in the parking lot. There's so much need out there, and it's easy to stay distant or away, but we need to be agents of hope.

In his last homily Fr. Judge said there are “good days, bad days, up days, down days, sad days, happy days but never a boring day on the job - you do what God called you to do - show up, put one foot in front of another and get on rig and do the job. You have know idea what God is calling you to, but he needs you, me and all of us.” He was preaching to firefighters, but the message applies just as much to you and me. God gives us a job to do - to be people of hope in this world which can be so hostile. I’m reminded of the ugliness every time I gaze upon a crucifix or see things like happened a few days ago to Charlie Kirk, and in things like visiting the volunteers putting up our Memorial of the Innocent when someone drove by screaming nasty words just upon seeing the crosses that are there not to shame anyone but to remind people of the cost of sin. People also swore and spat upon Jesus on the Cross on that first Good Friday. And this is why Fr. Judge’s words from his last homily are more important than ever - do the job. We do this when we embrace the love that Jesus gives us to help transform us into better people, but when like Jesus and the apostles and like Fr. Mychal we do the job, going not into a burning building, but into a world that is so lost. And how powerful fear can be to prevent us from doing it - fear of being hated, of being targeted, of being ostracized. But when we gaze upon a crucifix, we see a God who went down to fix you and me, and

humanity which is so ugly and dysfunctional. On our part, may we with Paul say “I know one thing, Christ and Him Crucified,” and not remain trapped in fear with the doors locked, not wanting to think about the choices we sometimes make or face the bad things in the world, but rather like Jesus, like Fr. Mychal, get to work in revealing the meaning of the Cross every day with our faith, hope and love, knowing that Jesus is with us every step of the way.