

What the Holy Spirit Spoke to One Chaplain Ministering to Victims on 9/11

Getting on the plane was a battle. As we all may remember, after 9/11, all air travel was suspended. When they began to fly again, I received orders to proceed to New York City as a part of the Chaplains' Emergency Response Team comprised of chaplains serving with the Coast Guard.

I arrived at night, secured a rental car and drove to Manhattan. At Battery Park, there were armed soldiers. Later, I would learn that there were Coast Guard boats armed with 50 caliber machine guns patrolling the river.

The next day, after a brief orientation, we began to fan out two by two. For the first third of the day, we were actually at "The Pile," ministering to those who were by this time looking for bodies. We were instructed to listen for the blasts of an alarm. One signal meant stay quiet and still; they might have found something. The other signal meant get out; something was collapsing.

A somber protocol began to take shape. If they found a firefighter or policeman, they would ascend the rubble and with great reverence put the body (or part of a body) on a stretcher. Ranks would form, hard hats would come off and heads bow as they made their way to the ambulance.

Strangely, it's the dogs that I remember. The rescue dogs actually got depressed because they were not finding any survivors. I heard one report of a dog handler who actually hid in the rubble so his dog could find "Someone, anyone."

The next third of our day was spent at the morgue. It was a little tent city attached to the medical examiner's office. I

was in awe of the amazing teams of forensic experts who volunteered to come and try to identify the remains of the victims. The smell of death was everywhere. It clung to my uniform, and I could swear I could actually taste it on my mustache. Again, a ritual developed. Every time they transferred a body part from the refrigerator trucks (hidden by a plywood wall) ranks would form, hats would come off and heads would bow.

The last part of the day was spent on the other side of Manhattan at the piers, where they had a huge contingent of lawyers, translators, counselors and clergy and various other experts there to help the families of the lost. I can vividly recall the first time I saw the temporary nursery/play area set aside for the children. We chaplains went from seeing the Pile (it was still on fire) to the morgue, where they were identifying pieces of people, to seeing the children of those who were killed.

One day in the van riding to the piers, I hit the wall. I honestly didn't think I could bear to see one more person crying or asking me if I had any word about their mom or dad or husband or wife. I pulled my hardhat down over my face and tried hard not to sob. It was then that I began to pray in the Spirit. Truly this was a time for "groanings too deep for words" (see Rom. 8:26).

I don't know how long I prayed, but I will never forget what I saw when I lifted up my eyes. A ship had pulled alongside in the pier next the one where the families were. It was not a battleship-gray war ship.

No, it was so bright white you almost had to squint to look at it. And there in bold letters was written "USS Comfort." It was a Navy Hospital ship that had literally "pulled alongside to help."

I thought of the Holy Spirit (also called the Comforter), and

the Lord powerfully spoke to my heart that it was not up to me to be strong or to comfort anyone. He would comfort them through me.

Everything changed after that. I had knowledge that I could never have come up with, wisdom that superseded any human wisdom and, yes, power from on high to face the horror and devastation that was 9/11.

This Sept. 11 is the 16th anniversary of the worst attack on U.S. soil, and our nation is in dire straits again. This time it is not from an overt attack, but from an insidious moral and spiritual decline and a rekindling of hatred that threatens to tear us apart. No politician is going to fix this. No legislation can change a human heart. Perhaps it's time to find a quiet place, speak the language of heaven and call out, "Come, Holy Spirit! Come, Holy Spirit!"

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