

Father O'Connor's Homily
13 September 2026
Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time-A

Sirach 27: 30-28: 7
Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
Romans 14: 7-9
Matthew 18: 21-35

“The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion.”

That was the response to Psalm 103 that we sang today after the first reading. And it is a very fitting response, full of comfort and full of promise for these rocky times we live in: with shootings, violence and racial injustice, devastating forest fires, hurricanes and floods, political fighting, and where taking the life of a preborn child is being re-branded to sound like a humanitarian thing to do.

For decades we had seen the horrors of war portrayed in the movies and on television. And eventually we began to watch those horrors with a certain de-sensitivity as Hollywood turned killings into box office entertainment and cash register receipts.

And, in a way, no wonder. All those terrible things were happening “over there, somewhere else.”

That is, until twenty-five years ago, 11 September 2001, when the unbelievable happened. Terror arrived at our doorstep. America was violated. And we will never be the same again: our travel, our security, our daily living will never be the same as they were prior to the events of that 9/11.

In spite of all this, our God never changes: “The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion.”

I would like to talk with you about the first certified fatality of the 9/11 attacks: a Franciscan priest. Father Mychal Judge was a much-loved New York City Fire Department chaplain. Debris fell on him as he was ministering to others in the lobby of the North Tower that Tuesday morning.

A famous photograph shows a dead Father Judge being carried out by several first responders and looking, for all the world to see, like a modern version of Michelangelo's Pieta: Mary holding the lifeless body of Jesus in her arms after He was taken down from the Cross.

Who was this man? Fr. Mychal Judge was born Robert Emmett Judge in Brooklyn on 11 May 1933, the son of Irish immigrants. He lost his father when he was only six years old and he missed him terribly.

He entered the Franciscans and took the religious name, Mychal. He was ordained a priest in 1961 and he served in several parishes.

In 1992 he became chaplain to the New York City Fire Department. "I always wanted to be a priest or a fireman," he said at the time. "Now I'm both!"

He gained the respect of the firefighters of New York City. He was outgoing and friendly. He had the gift of gab and a rollicking sense of humor. One Franciscan recalled later that Father Mychal Judge "treated everyone like family."

About a month before he died, Father Judge had a strong sense from his prayer that his life would soon end. So he decided to give away his few possessions. A friend of his received a box full of his books.

When word came that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center Towers on the morning of 11 September, Father Judge went downtown with the other firefighters.

Mayor Giuliani saw him rush by with several of them and grabbed him by the arm. "Father Mychal, pray for us," he asked. "I always do!" Father Mychal responded with a nervous smile.

A documentary showed footage of the lobby area inside the first tower. Father Judge is seen walking by the camera, looking worried and distressed with his lips moving slowly. Many presumed that he was saying the rosary.

Moments later he went to bless the body of a fallen firefighter. Just as he removed his helmet, steel debris fell on him, striking him on the back of his head and killing him instantly.

That photograph of first responders carrying his dead body minutes later to nearby Saint Peter's Church traveled around the world. They laid his body in front of the altar. And they covered it with a white alb from the sacristy vestment closet, a reminder of the white garment that he wore at his Baptism when he became a beloved child of God and was promised the gift of eternal life.

Father Mychal Judge was sixty-eight years old at the time of his death.

But it must also be said that this man of many good deeds was not without his struggles. He had to battle daily with his same-sex attraction and with his alcoholism.

He kept his vows and remained celibate. But it was a constant struggle for him. In the early days of AIDS, when even the medical personnel were fearful of any contact, Father Judge ministered to the dying men at New York's Saint Vincent's Hospital. And this was heroic and virtuous.

As for his alcoholism, at the time of his death he had been sober for twenty-three years. And he had saved countless people by taking them to A.A., the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. One man remembers living in a box until Father Judge found and rescued him. This too was heroic and virtuous.

We all have struggles in life. Everyone does. And some are lifelong. It is important for all of us to remember that, with the help of God's grace and with the help of others, choosing Jesus Christ over our struggles leads us to holiness and strength, one day, one opportunity at a time.

Father Judge told one of his friends that when he got up in the morning, he allowed himself "two minutes for a private pity party to feel sorry for myself." After that, he went to work, helping and serving whomever he met.

Father Judge, a man with his own struggles, gave his life in witness to Gospel love: "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" [John 15: 13] – as Jesus said, and as Jesus did for us.

Father Mychal Judge left us this prayer: "Lord, take me where you want me to go. Let me meet whom you want me to meet. Tell me what you want me to say. And keep me out of your way."

Our post-9/11 world has changed so much during these last twenty-five years, and it is still changing. In spite of it all, we need to remember that "the Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion."

God is always faithful to us and asks us, with His grace, to do our part, right where we are, to make this world a better place:

- a little kinder
- a little more merciful
- a little slower to anger
- and a little richer in compassion.

Father Mychal Judge's prayer is a fitting one for us to conclude with today and to renew every day: "Lord, take me where you want me to go.

Let me meet whom you want me to meet. Tell me what you want me to say.
And keep me out of your way.” Amen.