FBI chaplain maintains his connection to 9/11

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Categories: News
Tags: Diocesan News, Featured
Father Joseph McCarey had just earned his pilot’s license and was hoping to take to the skies on the crisp, sunny morning of September 11, 2001, when parishioners told him after Mass that a plane had crashed into one of the twin towers in New York City.

He hurried to his rectory at Saint James the Apostle Parish in New Bedford, Lawrence County, where he learned that a second plane had struck the other tower.

In addition to his parish duties, Father McCarey is chaplain to the Pittsburgh office of the FBI. When Flight 93 went down in Shanksville, PA, he knew he would respond.

Father McCarey recalled those fateful moments yesterday after delivering the invocation in a Program of Remembrance on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, held at the federal courthouse in Pittsburgh. Among the attendees was former president George W. Bush, who appeared via video link.

When Father McCarey reached the crash site on September 12, he shared that his first act was to consecrate what was now a mass grave.

He cast holy water toward the impact crater, praying, “By the Lord’s own three days in the tomb, He hallowed the graves of all who believe in Him and made the grave a sign of hope and a promise of the resurrection, even as it claims our mortal bodies.”

A family member of one of the victims was at yesterday’s program and said Father McCaffrey’s words comforted him.

His FBI duties normally involve helping law enforcement officers cope with the impact of traumatic situations. This time they asked him to care for the families of the dead, who would soon start arriving in Shanksville. He became the liaison between Flight 93 relatives and law enforcement, and remains in touch with some today.
By happenstance, the first family to arrive was Catholic, and their first question was whether he had blessed the ground. He was able to assure them that he had. But his ministry was to people of all faiths, and of no faith at all, whose hearts were broken on 9/11.

“We are there for everyone,” he said of chaplains. It’s about “listening skills, being present supportive and encouraging. Sometimes it’s just the presence...just being there is very helpful to people.”

Father McCarey said he sought light in darkness.

“In all religions there is a sense that God brings good out of evil. It’s what I was praying and thinking about. We have this terrible attack, yet our hope is not lost. God will, in his providence, bring about good.”

For Father McCaffrey that goodness was found in the solidarity he witnessed, whether between law enforcement agencies that were typically at loggerheads, or neighbors of differing viewpoints. It was especially evident among the passengers who boarded Flight 93 as strangers, but banded together to make their deaths an instrument for saving others.

The national unity after 9/11 went deeper than patriotism, he said. “I saw it as a sign of humanity coming together in compassion and love and cooperation. And that sticks with me to this day.”

He added, “We did it then. We can do it now.”

Watch Father McCaffrey's entire remarks. Video courtesy of the FBI, Pittsburgh office
Meeting a Vagabond missionary transformed Jaylen Campbell's life. So, he decided to give his over to God—joining the Catholic Church and becoming a missionary himself.

Campbell, who turns 20 later this month, was playing basketball in a park near his home in Pittsburgh's Garfield neighborhood several years ago when missionary Christopher Kerfoot came up and asked to play.

“He wasn't very good,” Campbell recalled with a smile, “but he invited us to the Underground (youth center). It changed my life.”

Meeting teens in parks, on streets and at school, missionaries build relationships, showing kids that they care. They teach them the Catholic faith, holding worship nights, Bible studies, and hosting retreats and trips.

Growing up in Garfield was rough, Campbell recalled.

“I lost friends and classmates to gun violence and drugs,” he said. “My mother and grandmother kept me in the house a lot for my own protection. They did well in raising me.”

When he wasn’t in classes, Campbell was hanging out at the Underground, making friends and learning about Catholicism, having been raised a Christian but not in any particular faith tradition. He entered the Church this past Easter.

From two missionaries at that first site in Saint Maria Goretti Parish in 2015, Vagabond Missions has grown to 19 missionaries in four locations in Pittsburgh—adding Sharpsburg, Allentown/Mt. Oliver and the Hill District over the years. Five of the missionaries, including Campbell, were youths in the program.
Pittsburgh is also the national headquarters of the organization, which now serves inner city teens in Mobile, AL, as well as in Steubenville, OH, Greenville, NC, and Wichita, KS.

This past summer the missionaries took young people to a sports camp in Monroeville, and to an adventure camp in Ohio, according to area director Shannon Loucks. Small group talks, adoration, confession and Mass were on the agenda.

Loucks said they spent the summer meeting kids in parks, grilling hot dogs and holding movie nights. This fall they are starting up new discipleship groups and RCIA.

Campbell begins his ministry this month in the Hill District, reaching out to young people the same way he was approached—with a friendly smile and brotherly love.

“The Catholic faith is a beautiful thing,” Campbell said. “I always wanted to do something more with my faith. I know God is walking with me, and gives me His grace.”

Young people take a break at Camp Damascus in Ohio.
‘Port’ is a safe harbor

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Amid the hustle and bustle of Butler Street in Pittsburgh’s Lawrenceville neighborhood, the Capuchin Franciscan Friars offer young adults an oasis of Catholic community and connection.

Through a new young adult ministry, the Capuchins host diverse events that appeal to a wide array of interests: prayer, art and beauty, intellectual formation, and athletics and outdoor activity. Their goal is to help young adults deepen their faith and form new friendships, and to equip them to live out their faith every day.

Brother Ross Henley and Brother Matt Hindelang head up the ministry.

“We hope to offer an opportunity for people to encounter Christ,” said Brother Ross. “We try to create events that speak to everyone and form a bridge between the Church and the secular community.”

The friars aren’t exactly new to Lawrenceville; they have been there since 1873. After completing a major renovation of their motherhouse last year, the friars set aside storefront space for an evangelization ministry focused primarily on young adults.

To anchor their new outreach, the Capuchins looked to the example of Saint Francis of Assisi. They named both the ministry and its location after the Portiuncula (Por-zii-OON-coo-la), which means “little portion.” The name is a nod to the chapel that Saint Francis rebuilt, which became a spiritual hub for his first followers.

The friars shorten the name to the “Port,” liking the image it evokes of ships coming safely into a harbor. They hope that, like ships on the sea, the people who come to the Port find refuge and rest, before going back out into the world.
“Being grounded in Catholicism and in Christian community at the Port helps young adults to engage the world better,” Brother Matt said.

The activities and cultural events offered by the Port help foster camaraderie among participants before drawing them deeper into the faith. Every Thursday at 6:30 a.m., friars and young adults meet for a run or a walk on Butler Street, followed by Mass, coffee and fellowship.

The friars host “Capuchin Café,” an evening of adoration with praise music, followed by live music, coffee, and snacks. On weekdays, Confessions are available from noon to 1 p.m. Brother Ross and Brother Matt are available to talk with anyone looking to unburden their heart or to process a difficult situation.

Through the Assisi Arts Community at the Port, the friars invite local Catholic artists to teach drawing workshops and host drawing sessions during which participants can sketch live models. At Sacred Art exhibitions, participants can connect with each other as they discuss beautiful works of art.

Emily Pino appreciates that the Port’s events are both social and prayerful. She had never encountered a young adult ministry that integrated art appreciation. She was inspired by the art she saw and the artists she met at the most recent exhibition.

Pino said that she and her fellow young adults have been bolstered by the authentic friendships with have formed with the friars.

“Everybody knows that they can count on the Capuchins and feels very welcomed by them. Young adults have someone religious that they can talk to and become genuine friends with,” she said.

To learn more about upcoming events at the Port, visit https://www.portpgh.com/ or follow the Port on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
Substance abuse support expands at new center

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https://youtube.com/watch?v=SJuY2Pnjh-M
In Allegheny County last year, 689 people died of overdoses, up 22 percent from 2019, with the increase due in large part to the pandemic, according to Father Michael Decewicz, who founded the diocese’s Addiction Recovery Ministry (ARM) in 2018.

“Addiction is a disease of isolation. That isolation leads to more use, to relapses,” Father Decewicz said. “So many people I have seen during this pandemic who have relapsed have moved away from their 12-step support group. That loss of fellowship...really had a great impact.”

Supporters of ARM are set to celebrate the opening of its new location with the goal of helping more people suffering from substance abuse disorders.

A grand opening will be held on Sunday, Sept. 12, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the Venerable Matthew Talbot Center for Hope and Healing. It is located in the lower level of Saint Francis of Assisi Church in Harmar, 2599 Freeport Rd, Pittsburgh, 15238. The church is part of the new Christ the King Parish.

Father Decewicz, who retired recently from parish ministry, moved ARM from Sharpsburg to Harmar and will continue as director.

Father Levi Hartle will kick off the program Sunday, leading Prayer and Praise Nation Pittsburgh. Attendees will be invited to paint the names of loved ones lost to addiction on rocks that will be placed in a new memory garden. The celebration will close with the reading of the 12 Steps and 12 Promises and the song “Amazing Grace.”

ARM’s mission is “to provide support, encouragement, education, and to bring the love of God to all those struggling with addiction and recovery, and to all those loved ones who have been affected in any way by this disease.”

The ministry will continue to offer weekly meetings, spiritual enrichment and special events in Sharpsburg, with 12-step recovery meetings and support groups for loved ones four nights a week at the John Paul I Center. Classes including Six Steps to Sanity are held for those trying to help the suffering, along with a grief support group for families who have lost someone to substance abuse.

Father Decewicz celebrates Mass at noon Tuesday through Thursday at Saint Francis Church. Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament takes place after Mass on Wednesdays, AA meetings are held at 6:30, with a Holy Hour for Recovery that begins at 7 p.m.

To learn more, visit https://www.addictionrecoveryministrypittsburgh.org/ or https://www.facebook.com/Addiction-Recovery-Ministry-Pittsburgh-272173470125033.
Fr. Decewicz gives a tour of the new Talbot Center for Hope and Healing at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Harmar.
Holy Family focuses on fellowship, evangelization

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When the pandemic forced the faithful to stay home from church for months, many said their deepest loss was not receiving the Eucharist. They also missed their fellow parishioners, and in newly merged parishes like Holy Family Parish in Oakmont, Plum and Verona, members simply hadn’t gotten the chance to meet one another yet.

On September 19, Holy Family Parish will officially welcome back parishioners for National Back to Church Sunday, a movement that began 12 years ago as a day to reclaim the true nature of Church—just as Christ commanded. Today more than 40,000 churches participate.

In the spirit of serving others, a special collection will be taken up for victims of the tragic earthquake in Haiti.

The pastor of Holy Family Parish, Father Kevin Poecking, sees the need to combine a return to a basic practice of the faith with fellowship.

“We wanted to engage our parishioners, to welcome them back to Communion and help them get to know each other better,” Father Poecking said. “Bring back the social activities and also encourage them to explore their relationship with God.”

Three of the previous five parishes had presented the spiritual awakening programs Alpha and ChristLife.

“We settled on Alpha because it seemed to be the best fit for us,” Father Poecking said. “It has two key ingredients—fellowship and building a relationship with God. People get together for a great meal in a friendly, informal setting and talk about their faith.”
Father Poecking learned about National Back to Church Sunday in reading about Alpha.

A series of Welcome Back events have been taking place at Holy Family Parish in the past several weeks. Outdoor Masses have been celebrated at Saint Januarius Church in Plum, Saint Irenaeus in Oakmont and Saint John the Baptist in Plum, followed by a cookout and concert. Father Poecking said Masses were held outside so people would feel safer and COVID-19 protocols were observed.

On the 19\textsuperscript{th}, parishioners will be welcomed back at all 12 Masses, and a donut social will follow the 10 a.m. Mass at Our Lady of Joy Church in Holiday Park.

The fifth church in the new parish is Saint Joseph in Verona.

*Father Kevin Poecking celebrates Mass outdoors.*
Living your faith

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By Father Richard S. Jones

Chaplain, UPMC Mercy Hospital

A missionary once asked the great Indian human rights leader Mahatma Gandhi, “How can Christianity make a stronger impact on your country?”

Gandhi, a Hindu who had been considerably influenced by Jesus’ teachings, gave three simple insights:

1.) Christians need to live more like Jesus;

2.) Christians must present the message of Jesus without adulteration, or cultural baggage;

3.) Christians should emphasize love, the core message of the faith.

These insights from a non-Christian should lead us to examine how we are living the Gospel. Do you live like Jesus in your actions, your attitudes, your priorities and your motivations? Do you present the message of Jesus in its purest form? Do you emphasize love in everything that you say, think, and do?

Moses urged the people to be faithful to God's law, not as a burden to be endured, but a blessing that that would lead to life and wisdom. God summoned His people at Sinai to live a faithful, covenantal life as an alternative to the distortions in their lives. God's law is wider, deeper, longer, and higher than any code of laws written for human guidance. We need to do more than know God’s commands, we need to live them.
Saint James 1:21-22 clearly states—“Humbly welcome the word that has taken root in you, with its power to save you. Be doers of the word and not hearers only”. To thank God for giving us the word, we share it, we put our faith into practice. On Judgment Day, the Lord will not ask us what we know of His Word, but how we’ve lived it: “For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of the God; it is those who keep it who will be declared just” (Romans 2:13).

Jesus said on the Sermon of the Mount: “Anyone who hears My words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock.” (Matthew 7:24) He also promised: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act upon it.” (Luke 8:21) A Christian, a ‘Jesus-follower’ is to be someone who demonstrates their faith in what they do every day. Less talk and more action!

When we help others, especially the poor, widows, orphans, immigrants, and other marginalized people, we facilitate Divine care in the world. Our faith is like a living tree that grows upward, outward and downward, deepening us, and broadening us.

The Bible tells us that the heart – the center of our emotions, desires and will — is the source from which flow all our thoughts, words and deeds. No one can be in a relationship with God without their heart undergoing conversion and overflowing with repentance. The more someone opens their heart to God, the more authentic and caring their relationships become with others.

Where is our center? It is our heart. In the words of Pope Francis, “The good that humanity accomplishes is not the result of calculations or policies, nor is it the result of hereditary genetics or of social status. Rather, it is the fruit of a willing heart, of free choice that seeks true goodness. Science and technology are not enough; doing good works requires wisdom of heart.”

Our hearts undergo conversion when we realize that all our goodness comes from God’s love for us. We need to keep our hearts open. If we harden our hearts toward one person, we harden our hearts to all people, including ourselves. Many saints have commented that the more deeply they saw their sin, the more fully they recognized God’s mercy and love.

Remember when the Pharisees asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment? Jesus did not point to a rule or a religious observance or a church tradition. Rather, he pointed to a relationship: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Here is a standard to measure our faith. Am I a divided soul, partly doing God’s will and partly serving myself? Do I fear punishment for breaking the law, or do I allow Jesus’ law of love to set me free? How will I put God’s word into action

God can use our intelligence, our charisma, our energy, our skills, and our talents to share His message with others. While those gifts – which He gave us – are useful to Him, they are not essential. The only essential thing that God needs from us is our commitment. Only our total desire to love and serve Him with everything we have will make us more effective, authentic, and persuasive.

We need to hear Him calling us to offer understanding instead of judgment, forgiveness instead of vengeance, respect, instead of ridicule, reconciliation instead of division. May God open our hearts, our minds, our
consciences, our spirits, our wills, and our lives to listen to His voice in the deepest recesses of that most sacred space: the human heart.