

Airport chaplains minister to a flock on the move

WASHINGTON - Can you find holiness at an airport? Father Michael Zaniolo thinks so.

Father Zaniolo has been an airport chaplain at Midway and O'Hare International airports in Chicago for the past six years, so he's spent a lot of time meeting travelers from around the world and workers at the two airports.

From what he has seen, Father Zaniolo said, the presence of a chaplain and a chapel can bring comfort amid the stress and worry that travelers and workers often face.

The Chicago archdiocesan priest celebrates Mass in the chapels at each airport and walks around the terminals, bringing "the presence of the church into a place where people never think of seeing the church."

But Father Zaniolo said his job is not easy, especially because he is ministering at two airports. Combined, O'Hare and Midway offer 20 Masses a week, and he and the other chaplains also hear confessions every day.

"I've heard confessions in all sorts of little nooks and crannies, because I bring the chapel out to the people," he told Catholic News Service in a phone interview.

Although travelers through the airports are alerted to Masses over the public-address system, Father Zaniolo said his main outreach is to the people who work at the airports, because with their strange schedules, they often don't have time to go to Mass in their own parishes.

The number of workers at the airports is enough to keep Father Zaniolo and the other chaplains busy. Approximately 43,000 people work at O'Hare, and another 8,500 people work at Midway.

"It's like having a very big, busy parish with a lot of people moving in and out," he said.

Catholic priests and deacons are not the only chaplains making the rounds at airports.

At Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport in Texas, Bishop Donald "DD" Hayes of Gospel Inspirational Fellowship Tabernacle Church Ministries in Fort Worth has been a chaplain for the last 14 years. With five terminals and 52,000 workers, Dallas-Fort Worth is "like a small city," he said.

Bishop Hayes spoke to CNS in a phone interview shortly after seeing off members of the military who were leaving their families to return to Kuwait. Bishop Hayes usually gives Bibles to the soldiers and comforts the family members when they gather for the deployment.

"It gets pretty emotional," he said.

Bishop Hayes - who also works with Catholic chaplains at the airport - usually arrives at 9 in the morning and stays until 7 or 8 at night, six days a week, but he said he is always on call. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, he said he was at the airport for 30 or 40 days straight, comforting travelers who were nervous about flying.

Having a minister in the airport, Bishop Hayes said, helps to calm people and ease their frustration. New security measures, delayed flights and safety concerns can all pile up to make traveling a difficult experience. And with planes to catch and bags to check, travelers can find comfort in the calm of a chapel or in a conversation with a chaplain, he said.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops established People on the Move Ministries as part of Migration and Refugee Services specifically for people who are traveling or who have schedules that make it difficult to participate in parish life, including airline workers, port workers and fishermen, said Scalabrini Sister Myrna Tordillo, the ministries' coordinator.

The first airport chapel was started at Boston's Logan International Airport in 1950 by the late Cardinal Richard J. Cushing. A year later, a chapel was opened in New York City at Idlewild Airport, now called John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Under the direction of the bishop's Committee on Migration, the National Conference of Catholic Airport Chaplains was created in 1986. Father Zaniolo was named president of the conference in 2005. Currently, 31 airports in the United States have Catholic chaplains.

Father Gerard Walker, a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y., has been a chaplain at JFK airport for about a year and a half. Having a chapel and a chaplain at JFK, he said, is a luxury, but it's one that makes Catholics who come to the airport feel more comfortable.

"With the presence of the chaplain, they feel right at home," he told CNS. "So they might be from, I don't know where, someplace in Indiana, and they just march in and they are right at home."

And some people, Father Zaniolo said, feel more comfortable openly discussing issues with him than perhaps with their familiar parish priest.

"I'm an anonymous priest for them, so if there is something that is burdening them, that they may not have felt comfortable talking to their pastor about, I'm somebody they may never see again," he said. In these cases, however, Father Zaniolo also refers them to their own parish or diocese.

Not only does Bishop Hayes provide a calming presence for travelers and workers at Dallas-Fort Worth, but he said he loves working at an airport. He has gotten to know many of the airline workers and said his experience as a former lay chaplain for the U.S. Air Force helps him to relate to their lives.

He said he also has enjoyed meeting travelers who pass through the airport. After more than a decade there, he and his fellow chaplains have some interesting stories about passengers, including one couple who met on an American Airlines flight. Later, when they got engaged, they asked a chaplain to come on the plane with them and marry them in the air.

"It really broadens your perspective on the world," he said.