

Baltimore priest brought prayer to Ground Zero after attack

Father Leo Patalinghug was all set to make a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France, beginning Sept. 13, 2001, when the terrorist attacks of two days earlier abruptly ended his plans. International flights were canceled as the world fixed its attention on New York and Washington.

Then the associate pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex, the young priest had collected prayer petitions in advance of his pilgrimage. He had intended to leave them at the famous Grotto of Lourdes, the site where the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared to St. Bernadette in the 19th century.

Wanting to find another holy site to leave the petitions and feeling called to pray in the wake of the attack, Father Patalinghug boarded a train and headed to New York about a week after the attacks. Seeing the priest in his collar, emergency workers escorted him to the front lines of the recovery effort at Ground Zero. Father Patalinghug knelt and prayed the rosary and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.

"I took my petitions and buried them in some rubble," the priest recalled. "I allowed them to touch something sacred."

Father Patalinghug, now director of pastoral field education at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, remembers people stopping him and asking for prayers. Emergency workers looked "beat up" and "dazed," he said, as they worked in difficult conditions surrounded by a "nauseating" stench. Some gave him a thumbs-up when he promised to pray for them, he said.

It was a powerful experience to see goodness in the face of evil.

Before he left New York, Father Patalinghug delivered several hundred dollars to a Red Cross station. The money had been donated by Our Lady of Mount Carmel parishioners. The priest said he was struck that the Gospel readings on the weekend following the attacks dealt with mercy and forgiveness.

“The only way to get through this was through God’s mercy,” he said. “The Gospel spoke for itself.”