

Chaplain describes 'total chaos' after Fort Hood shootings

WASHINGTON - Two months into his new posting as an on-call chaplain at the United States' largest Army base, Father Ed McCabe had the longest day of his military chaplaincy.

Father McCabe was 10 minutes into a weekly chaplain staff meeting at Fort Hood when the clergy got word of the shooting spree taking place at the base.

"We ended the staff meeting and came to the hospital and that's where we stayed," Father McCabe said, "because that's where the wounded were. And then I went over to the crime scene to comfort the people who were there."

Of the 13 who died in the shooting, Father McCabe said he anointed 11.

He said he didn't have time to anoint the 30 wounded. "No, not really other than just a quick prayer. It was total chaos," Father McCabe said.

"I was actually on call when the incident took place - actually not too far from my office, the crime scene site," Father McCabe told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, Nov. 6, the day after the rampage.

Maj. Nidal M. Hasan, 39, a psychiatrist on the base, was suspected to be the sole gunman, who emptied two handguns in the attack. He was wounded, placed into custody and hospitalized.

A priest of the Archdiocese of Boston, Father McCabe, who holds the rank of colonel, had celebrated Mass at noon at Fort Hood, giving him about 30 minutes between the end of Mass and the chaplain staff meeting. The typical Thursday routine flew out the window once he got word of the shootings, which began around 1:30 p.m. Central Standard Time.

After going to the crime scene - a "soldier readiness facility" at the 65,000-troop

base – “I went to the local hospital (Darnall Army Medical Center) to where the wounded were taken,” Father McCabe said. “One died there, a captain. He had been shot three times.”

The priest said he didn’t recognize any of wounded. “The wounded, they all had IVs in,” he added. “I just couldn’t see faces.”

Following the off-base hospital visit, Father McCabe returned to the Fort Hood mortuary to attend to the transportation of the bodies.

His day didn’t end until after 2 a.m. Nov. 6. “I had done an interview with the BBC in London, I think I should have gone to bed sooner,” Father McCabe said.

He woke up after a short night of sleep with a bad case of laryngitis. Father McCabe was waiting for a base doctor to treat him while talking with CNS.

Father McCabe has served as a chaplain for the Army in Afghanistan and Iraq, but asked if he had witnessed anything overseas that compared to the scene at Fort Hood, he replied,” No, no, no, no, no, not at all.”

Father Adam Martinez, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Killeen, which has a substantial military component among its nearly 3,000 registered households, said he first knew something was wrong when “I heard the sirens.”

“My association with the sirens is tornado or bad weather coming. It was the middle of the day and there were no clouds or bad weather,” Father Martinez said. “I thought, ‘That’s funny.’ Just then the (parish) finance officer came running over and said, ‘There’s something going on at Fort Hood. I think someone’s been killed.’ That was what told me something was amiss.”

He scheduled a Nov. 8 memorial Mass for the victims.

“For two hours (after the shootings) there was a calmness and a quietness. No traffic,” Father Martinez said, adding that people were experiencing “fear – are we safe? ... It’s affected the psyche, people don’t feel as safe. I think the psyche of the city itself has been changed.”

Asked if he knew of any parishioners among the victims, Father Martinez told CNS, "Not yet, not yet."

The same "not yet, not yet" answer was given by Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Father Richard O'Rourke, pastor of St. Paul Parish in Harker Heights, Texas. He estimated that 80 percent of his 1,000-plus registered families have an active or retired military member in them.

"I was horrified and aghast" upon hearing of the shootings, Father O'Rourke told CNS Nov. 6.

"The news was pretty slow on filtering through. Then they (base officials) tried to confiscate the cell phones of some people," he said. "They didn't want any news to get out in case it was a terrorist attack. It wasn't until yesterday afternoon that the lockdown was lifted," which had included nine schools on the base.

"What we did here is that we immediately offered our 5:30 p.m. Mass yesterday evening as a requiem Mass," Father O'Rourke said. Intentions for Masses Nov. 7-8 would be for the Fort Hood victims, he added.