

Postal worker victims of anthrax attacks remembered at shrine

WASHINGTON - Two postal workers who were killed in 2001 when anthrax-tainted letters were sent through the U.S. mail were remembered at an Oct. 21 memorial at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

The ceremony was held 10 years to the day after postal worker Thomas Morris Jr. died as a result of handling tainted mail at the Brentwood postal facility. Co-worker Joseph Curseen Jr., a Catholic who grew up in Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Washington and attended St. John the Evangelist Church in Clinton, Md., died the next day, Oct. 22.

"We remember these two men, whose deaths and lives are memorialized today and the many other postal workers, along with their loved ones, who were sickened and traumatized by those horrific events 10 years ago," said Father Vito Buonanno, the shrine's director of pilgrimage, in his opening prayer.

He noted that "there has been much pain and suffering these 10 years, but there has also been much comfort and support that have helped to heal the brokenness, and restore our hope in humanity and our faith in a God, whose promises never fail."

Curseen - a graduate of local Catholic elementary and high schools - and Morris were remembered at the ceremony that included prayer, Scripture readings, song, dance and speeches.

"At the end of every shift, Joe would shake my hand and say it was a pleasure working with me," recalled James Harper, Curseen's co-worker at Brentwood. "We have found healing over time, but we have not forgotten."

Curseen and his wife, Celestine, lived in Clinton, and were members of St. John the Evangelist Parish, but he also remained a member of his childhood parish, where he was a eucharistic minister.

Among those attending the national shrine event were Patrick Donahoe, the U.S.

postmaster general, and D.C. Councilman Harry Thomas, in whose district the Brentwood facility was located.

Father Carl Dianda, pastor of St. Francis de Sales Parish near the Brentwood facility, told postal workers at the memorial that “it is important that we come together to talk to God and to each other.”

In the days after the anthrax attacks, Father Dianda allowed postal workers to meet at his parish as they gathered to share their fears and determine what course of actions they would take.

The 2001 anthrax attacks began one week after the Sept. 11 attacks. Letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to the U.S. Capitol and to media outlets in New York and Florida. Curseen and Morris worked at the Brentwood facility where the U.S. Capitol mail was processed.

Three other people also died of anthrax inhalation: two in the New York area and one in Florida.

The Brentwood facility was shut down and decontaminated. Employees were sent to other facilities. The decontamination took 26 months and cost \$130 million.

“It was like a family there,” Harper recalled. “This tragic event tore the family apart, but it did not break our spirit.”

Donahoe said the U.S. Postal Service “experienced the unthinkable” during the anthrax attacks. “It was a defining moment,” he said. “I recall with pride the bravery, commitment and dedication each of our employees showed by doing their jobs when this was going on around them.”

A worker at a biodefense lab at Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md., was suspected by the FBI of sending the contaminated letters, although he was never formally charged. The suspect killed himself in 2008, and the FBI closed the case in 2010.