

“The extraordinary life of Mychal Judge—Franciscan priest, fire department chaplain, counselor to LGBTQ people, hero of 9/11—shows us many things. It shows us what it means to live out a religious vocation in the modern world; it shows us how Franciscan spirituality is ever green and ever new; and it shows us, as if we needed any more assurance, that you can be gay and holy.”

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“A robust and tender volume about a man made infamous in death on 9/11, his body a symbol of that day. From childhood through changes and challenges, DeBernardo skillfully tells the story of Mychal Judge’s life. Reminding us that the wounds are where the healing will be, this book is illuminating. DeBernardo reveals the many sides of Judge’s true humanity, and his gift of being a most wounded—and skilled—healer.”

—Fran Rossi Szpylczyn, is a freelance writer and retreat leader, and is the pastoral associate for administration at Immaculate Conception in Glenville, New York

“Fr. Mychal Judge became world famous on September 11, 2001, through an iconic photo that symbolized the horror of that day. This book is the story of the generous-hearted, compassionate Franciscan friar behind the photo. It is what we need in a divisive time to renew our own paths to community.”

—Simone Campbell, SSS

“This book provides readers with a window into the life, the mind and, most movingly, the heart of Father Mychal Judge. Many know the Franciscan friar’s name because of his heroic last day of Christian ministry to and with the victims of the September 11 attacks, but few know about the many decades of life that preceded it. Francis DeBernardo shares the very human story of a very holy man whose struggles and challenges were as significant in his Christian journey as any success or accomplishment. This book will deepen your appreciation for the life and legacy of Father Mychal Judge.”

—Daniel P. Horan, OFM, Professor and Director of the Center for Spirituality, Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana

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Mychal Judge

*Take Me Where
You Want Me to Go*

Francis DeBernardo



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*In memory of my parents,
Anna, Celia, Jim,
who also gave their lives completely*

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CHAPTER ONE

Brooklyn Boy

An Irish Childhood

Although Mychal Judge was born in Brooklyn, New York, he might as well have been born in Ireland. In the midst of a city that defined the modern world, Judge was raised in a world of traditional culture that reflected small-town Irish life. The seeds of his adult life were planted and grew among the sidewalk cracks of New York City, much like the seeds sown in those days by farmers of County Leitrim, from which his parents emigrated, grew in the region's rocky, hardscrabble land. Ireland and New York City were two gravitational pulls that shaped and directed most of Judge's personality, identity, and spirituality.

His Irish roots began with his parents, both of whom came from long-established farming families. Mary Ann Fallon came from the village of Kilmore, and Michael Judge was from Keshcarrigan, in the same county, but about fifty miles apart from each other. In 1921, they met on the steamship that was bringing them both across the Atlantic Ocean to the new world of dreams. Like most European immigrants

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of the time, they both were looking for a better life than their homeland could offer. Michael's families were farmers, and Mary Ann had served in the Cumann na mBan, the Irish Republican Army women's division, and later worked as a domestic. When they arrived in the United States, great opportunity was not abundant, nor did their steamship introduction immediately blossom. They ended up settling in separate cities: Mary Ann in Brooklyn, working as a domestic, and Michael in Providence, Rhode Island, employed as a laborer. On weekends, Michael would visit Brooklyn and walk up and down past the home where Mary Ann worked, waiting for both the courage and opportunity to speak with her. After an eight-year courtship, they were married on August 30, 1929, at St. Anselm's Parish in the Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn, a strongly immigrant Irish community.

After marriage, the Judges set up household near downtown Brooklyn, in what is now known as the Cobble Hill neighborhood. It was an enclave for European immigrants, many from Ireland. Their home was not far from the waterfront that overlooked the lower tip of Manhattan where the World Trade Center would eventually be built decades later. The center of the neighborhood community was St. Paul's Church on Congress Street, built a century earlier on land donated by Cornelius Heeney, the wealthy Irish immigrant who also donated the land for Manhattan's St. Patrick's Cathedral, the strongest and most enduring symbol of Irish identity in New York City.

Very quickly, the Judge family began to grow. After a year of marriage, the couple had a daughter, Erin. A few years later, a son, Thomas Emmett, was born, but he died at fifteen months from an ear infection that spread to his mastoid bone. On May 11, 1933, Mary Ann again went into labor, and the future Franciscan was born. Her labor, though,

would not end until two days later when his fraternal twin sister, Dympna, was born on May 13.

The history of Ireland's political struggles had a role in the young boy's name. He was baptized Robert Emmett Judge, for the early-nineteenth-century Irish patriot Robert Emmet, who, though Anglican, sympathized with his Catholic countrymen and helped lead a rebellion against the British in 1803. The Judge family called the young boy "Emmett." ("Mychal" would come years later, after a few name changes in religious life.)

Perhaps it was the fabled "luck of the Irish" that helped the family just a year after the twins were born. They had a winning ticket in the Irish Sweepstakes, which had been established just four years earlier by the Irish government to benefit Irish hospitals, with tickets sold around the world. The prize of 514 Irish pounds (around fifty thousand US dollars today) was enough to allow the family to own two luxuries that most immigrants could only dream of: a car and a house.

Like many Catholic immigrants, the family's life was centered around the local parish, which helped them maintain strong ties to old world traditions. While faith was central to their lives and identity, Mary Ann, who became a full-time homemaker after marriage, did not have the fearful respect for the clergy that many Irish immigrants had. She believed the local Irish clergy should have provided more comforting pastoral care to parishioners instead of the strict rules that they enforced. It was not uncommon for her to strongly criticize the pope, bishops, priests, nuns—a forthrightness almost unheard of from devout Catholics of that era but perhaps not surprising from a veteran of the *Cumann na mBan*.

Criticism of the church's leaders did not interfere with her deep and abiding Catholic faith. Praying was a continuous part of Mary Ann's day, her prayers repeated softly,

rhythmically, under her breath. The future priest would later describe how his mother's prayer form "had a rhythm to it, a magic to it," and that "somehow it became part of me."¹ Her connection to God was intimate and personal. Church structures were superfluous to her expression of faith.

Mary Ann's antagonism toward clerical figures could only mean that she must have been filled with great consternation when the toddler Emmett, when asked about his dreams for the future, routinely would answer, "I wanna be a peest."² Despite his inability to correctly pronounce the word *priest*, his decisiveness about a clerical vocation was early, strong, and lasting.

Emmett's father presented a different side of the Irish personality than Mary Ann did. Hardly rebellious, Michael had chosen not to fight militarily in the struggles for Ireland's independence from the British. The elder Judge's connection to the land was less political and more poetic: he was full of music and stories, magic and myth. From early on in Emmett's life, his father's melodies and lyrics about Ireland's heroes, legends, and landscapes danced in the young boy's imagination. Emmett's lifelong love of Irish ballads and his naturally florid ability with language no doubt came from the Judge side of the family.

This Irish consciousness also imbued in him the seamless connection between the sacred and secular. Celtic myth saw the world as infused with the divine, and the Christianization of the Irish nation continued to propagate this awareness. Holiness existed naturally, not supernaturally. Prayers and blessings were not something reserved only for church on Sunday, but they were part of the daily routines of school, play, work, family, and neighborhood. Prayer, as his mother's example showed, was as natural as breathing.

When Emmett was three years old, his father was diagnosed with mastoiditis, a serious infection of the middle and inner

ear—the same condition that had claimed the life of his first son. Complications to this condition can cause blood clots in the brain, vision and hearing loss, facial paralysis, and meningitis. He was admitted to St. Peter’s Hospital, just a few blocks from the family’s home, and remained under treatment there for three years. Perhaps worse than the pain and weakness, his three children were not allowed to visit him.

Emmett’s only connection with his father during this three-year period was occasionally waving to him from the sidewalk as the frail man stood at the window of his hospital room. Throughout his life, Judge always imagined God as a caring father who looked over him. In effect, this was the way that he remembered much of his childhood with his biological father.

Despite nine surgeries, many treatments, and continuous care for three years, Michael Judge did not recover. He died on June 2, 1939, when Emmett was six years old.

The loss was profound for the young boy. Becoming fatherless affected his spiritual imagination in a unique way. The concept of a loving God can be a challenge for many because God is also imagined as physically distant and intangible. However, Emmett’s earthly father was also an absent presence in his life, so it was not a big leap to imagine a similarly loving but untouchable Godhead. In adulthood, Judge reflected on how the loss of his father deepened a personal relationship with God: “I’ve grown up with this God, and I’ve always loved Him. For years I feared Him, but I always talked to Him because there was no father, no uncles, no brothers, no cousins. So God was the man in my life, and very often because He was the man—He was older—I was afraid of Him. But I knew that somehow He would take care of me, and He did.”³

Emmett’s childhood years were spent at St. Paul’s Parish school, run by the Sisters of Charity, and he served as an

altar boy at the church. According to Dympna, he was not one of the brighter students in their class, but he worked hard. She also described his faith as “intuitive.” She said, “It wasn’t three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys. It had nothing to do with what we learned in school or at home. It came out of him.”⁴

Frank Murphy, a friend from childhood with whom Judge stayed in contact throughout his life, recalled how the two boys, both sons of Irish immigrants, grew up in a world guarded by traditions and responsibilities. Murphy recalled: “We had the Irish ethic, peculiar to New York and to the part of Brooklyn we were from, of very strong traditions, belief in respecting authority, a strong relationship with the church, and that dear old Catholic secrecy. ‘What’ll the neighbors say? Never let anybody know anything bad that’s going on.’”⁵

Of course, Irish guilt and doom were also part of this heritage. Judge recalled that when the family drove past the infamous Sing Sing Prison outside New York City, his mother would warn the children that this institution was the destination for those who did not attend Catholic school. His twin, Dympna, remembered being terrified by such warnings, but she recalled that Emmett was more immune to such threats. Guilt instilled in him an immense, sometimes oppressive sense of responsibility. In later life, Judge would say that he always felt he could be doing more for people, that whatever he did was not good enough.

A New York Childhood

While traditional Irish Catholic culture formed the young Judge’s personality, habits, and values, he was not raised in a bucolic, whitewashed cottage with a thatched roof sur-

rounded by green fields and peat bogs. The culture of the fast-paced, gritty streets of New York City would also shape his spirituality and outlook on life. New York's traffic sounds, roaring subways, and boisterous crowds would be his childhood's background soundtrack instead of lilting Irish ballads. Emmett grew up amid bustling urban clamor, and he would be energized by that hustle and bustle all his life. In New York City, one was never physically far from some of the nation's most powerful financial and political leaders or from the nation's most destitute citizens. Emmett grew up surrounded by and keenly aware of both populations.

The Judge family lived at 230 Dean Street, a modest row house. While his street was residential in character, he was only a few blocks away from the intersection of Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues, often referred to as the Times Square of Brooklyn. These two major thoroughfares, which in separate routes went from one end of the borough to the other, were lined with stores and office buildings. A few blocks in the opposite direction led to the Brooklyn Piers, an industrial area where ships from around the world deposited cargo containers by the dozen each day. His home was also not far from the governmental center of Borough Hall and Brooklyn's courts.

Just about a mile from where Emmett was raised stood the Brooklyn Bridge, the nineteenth century's greatest engineering feat, an elegant display of stone towers and intricate cable work that continues to inspire artists, writers, and ordinary folk. The bridge connects the humming world of sophisticated Manhattan with the only slightly less humming world of the humbler borough of Brooklyn. Judge walked the pedestrian planks thousands of times, both as a boy and an adult. The Brooklyn Bridge would be for him a sort of a spiritual touchtone, a place of retreat, for his entire life.

Like any true Brooklynite of the era, Emmett was a devotee of the borough's other great "religious" institution: the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. It's hard to overestimate the communal spirit that the Brooklyn Dodgers engendered in this borough brimming with humanity and with a passion for underdogs. The immense diversity of the city's ethnic, religious, racial, and social classes disappeared at the entrance gates to Ebbets Field, the team's hallowed stadium. The Dodgers would lead America in the great struggle for racial integration. In 1947, when Emmett was fourteen years old and already a die-hard fan, they hired the first black professional baseball player, Jackie Robinson.

The team was also known, during Judge's later childhood and teen years, for breaking their fans' hearts by so frequently winning their league's pennant but then, with only one exception in 1955, falling in defeat (each time to the New York Yankees) in the subsequent World Series. They were perpetual underdogs. Emmett's favorite player would also become the most vilified Dodger. Pitcher Ralph Branca earned an ignominious place in baseball history as the man who delivered the ball to New York Giants slugger Bobby Thompson that resulted in the famous home run—"the shot heard 'round the world"—that cost the Dodgers the just-within-reach championship in 1951. One of the few worldly possessions that Judge took with him to seminary was a framed photo of Branca.

Though Brooklyn's concrete sidewalks, asphalt streets, and adjoined tenement homes were a far cry from the Emerald Isle, what the two locales had in common was shaky economic conditions. Winning the Irish Sweepstakes had been a one-time windfall for the family, but as the Depression worsened, they would have just been able to make ends meet on Michael Judge's salary as a clerk for a local super-

market chain. His long illness would have only worsened their economic status.

After Michael's death in 1939, Mary Ann began to take in boarders to help pay the bills. As with so many families during the Depression, the Judge children were expected to contribute to the family income. Emmett and a friend took up shoe shining, peddling their services near New York's Pennsylvania Railroad Station. This great faucet that poured people into Manhattan was one of the busiest spots in the city, but there was an oasis of peace nearby that would play a determinative role in this Catholic boy's life.

St. Francis of Assisi Church on West 31st Street, just a short walk from the station, became a regular destination for young Emmett. Since he was already familiar with riding the subway to the Pennsylvania Station neighborhood, the Sisters of Charity enlisted him as an errand boy. Whenever a death occurred, they sent him to this Franciscan parish to purchase a Mass card.

By the time of the Depression, St. Francis of Assisi Church already had a long and well-deserved reputation for being a place where anyone, rich or poor, could go for a moment of prayer amid the noise and car exhaust of the interminable pulse of midtown Manhattan. Frequent daily Masses and the sacrament of reconciliation, then known as "confession," were the main ministries conducted by the Franciscan Friars of the Holy Name Province who served the parish.

The church building was wedged between Herald Square, where Macy's and Gimbels attracted the city's highest commercial traffic, and Pennsylvania Station, the city's main gateway. It was also the home of St. Anthony's Breadline, established in 1929 after the stock market crash. Homeless people knew they could get a free daily meal there. Poverty and despair were adjacent to capitalism and power. St. Francis

was a place to be refreshed in the midst of the height of urban confusion and depersonalization.

The Franciscan church was much more spectacular than his familiar neighborhood parish church of St. Paul's. The backdrop of the sanctuary was a mosaic of Mary, Queen of the Order of Friars Minor, which included a long line of Franciscan saints in its tiles. At the time, it was the largest mosaic in the United States. Throughout both the upper and lower churches were other radiant mosaics depicting the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Death of St. Joseph, St. Anthony, the Sorrowful Mother, and St. Francis in Glory.

While these images must have awed the young boy, something else attracted him to this church. Fr. Henry Vincent Lawler, OFM, greeted the boy one day and spoke with him kindly and gently. Emmett was enthralled by the priest, and he began to follow him on church errands and tasks whenever he visited. Years later, Judge fondly recalled this friendly, happy priest: "There was something simple and beautiful about him. Watching him, I realized that I didn't care for material things all that much. I would just walk around and follow him and I loved his brown robe and sandals. I knew then that I wanted to be a friar."⁶

Emmett was hooked. As a teenager he entered St. Francis Preparatory School in Brooklyn, run not by the Order of Friars Minor but by the Franciscan Brothers of Brooklyn, a Third Order community established by Franciscans from Ireland. The academic rigor and discipline was tough, especially since he was not an outstanding student, but Emmett did not endure the crucible for long. During his freshman year, against the wishes of his mother, Emmett applied for membership in the Holy Name Province of the Order of Friars Minor. His mother tried to dissuade him, but he was fixed. "Let him go and let him find out," she eventually decided.

In the early fall of 1948, at the age of fifteen, Emmett Judge left Brooklyn by subway and railroad for St. Joseph Seraphic Seminary in Callicoon, New York, about 120 miles northwest. He left home carrying just one suitcase. The date was September 11.

Franciscan Adulthood

Callicoon, New York, is a peaceful hamlet situated at a bend in the Delaware River, which serves as the border between Pennsylvania and the Empire State. In 1948, when Emmett Judge arrived there, its heyday as a small hub for the modest farming and lumber communities in the region had long since passed. Looming high over the lazy river bend was the imposing St. Joseph's Seraphic Seminary, a Franciscan boarding school, which would be Judge's home over the next six years. It was in these walls made of native bluestone that the teenage Judge would mature as a person, as a Catholic, and as a candidate for the Province of the Holy Name.

Although the institution was called a seminary, technically, it was a minor seminary: a school whose curriculum encompassed high school and the first two years of college. Beyond the academics, the students were also beginning the process of formation as Franciscans, learning about Catholicism and the history, traditions, and spirituality of the religious order founded by St. Francis, the poor man from Assisi whose mission was nothing less than rebuilding the church. For the next thirteen years, as Judge progressed from minor seminary to novitiate to first vows and scholasticate to major seminary to solemn vows and finally to ordination, he would be formed in a spirituality, which, in addition to his Irish culture and New York sensibility, would set a trajectory for his future ministries.

CHAPTER FOUR

On the Margins

New Name, New Ministries

One of the most memorable episodes in the biography of St. Francis of Assisi is the story of his encounter with a man suffering from leprosy. One day Francis was traveling along a road when he saw the man coming toward him. Fear gripped the future saint on seeing this sick man with a dreaded disease. Because people feared contagion, victims of leprosy were ostracized from the community, left to beg and care for themselves as best they could. Against his natural instinct to run, Francis was inspired to approach the man, embrace him, and kiss him. Only later did Francis realize that he had in fact actually embraced and kissed Jesus Christ appearing to him mysteriously in the form of the sick man. The story inspires Franciscans to reach out to the margins, to those excluded from mainstream society, to those who are feared and despised, and to those who have no one to care for them.

Michael Judge returned to the United States from his Canterbury sabbatical renewed in his Franciscan identity

and spirituality. Instead of returning to middle-class, suburban parish life, he joined the friary at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in midtown Manhattan—the same parish where young Emmett had first encountered a Franciscan friar and became inspired to join religious life. The move was a return to his roots, but it also found him branching out to areas of ministry that were on the church’s cutting edge, embracing and kissing the “lepers” of the twentieth century.

Almost as an omen that new things were about to happen, soon after arriving at 31st Street, he changed his name again, this time from *Michael* to *Mychal*. Keeping a form of *Michael* kept him connected to his father and also maintained part of the name he received after entering religious life, Fallon Michael. One explanation for the change was that it distinguished him from the other men named Michael in the large friary. Yet the pronunciation of both names is the same, so the change of spelling would not have been much of a distinction. He could have also distinguished himself by using *Fallon*, the first part of his religious name. Another explanation was that the change honored his Irish heritage. Yet, the authentic Irish spelling would have been *Mícheál*, so that might not have been the whole reason for the change. Judge remained coy about the shift, suggesting somewhat jokingly that the name choice was inspired by a professional basketball player, Mychal Thompson.¹

While the choice of *Mychal* is not definitively known, it is significant that he changed his name at all. A change of names fits a common pattern for many gay men, especially of that era, who, after coming to terms with their sexual identity, select a new way by which they will be known. The emotional impact of self-acceptance is often so profound, a sort of rebirth, that adopting a new identifier feels appropriate. While rare that these men will change their name legally,

they sometimes opt to be known by their middle name or by their formal first name instead of a nickname (*Robert* instead of *Bob*). The name change signals their new outlook on life and the acceptance of a new, more authentic identity.

St. Francis was an urban ministry center, very different from the suburban parishes where Judge had previously served. With few residences nearby, the worshipping community tended to be constantly in flux: out-of-town visitors, workers from the local offices, shoppers from the local stores. On Sundays, people would come for Eucharist from all over the New York metropolitan area, many seeking to pray in a Franciscan church or because they had personal connections with this historic parish or the friars. In a real sense, the parish had no boundaries, and its ministry was directed to the city as a whole. Judge, who thrived on the cacophony and characters of New York City, could not have been more at home. He was back in the Big Apple, where, despite the pollution, at least his soul breathed free.

Judge was part of the parish's regular schedule of multiple daily Masses and opportunities for spiritual counseling or the sacrament of reconciliation. He also became involved in one of the ministries that had made the parish well known throughout the city: St Francis Breadline was established at the parish in 1930, in response to the destitution so many New Yorkers experienced following the stock market crash the previous year, and it continues to provide sandwiches and other food to homeless people to this day.

Young Emmett Judge had been aware of the homeless population of New York City as a young boy. On his many visits to St. Francis Church as a young boy, he would have seen the people on the breadline and would have witnessed the Franciscans' form of nonjudgmental charity. Once a week, his mother would give him and his sisters each a dime

for their own spending pleasure. One day, while walking with his twin sister, Dympna, they were approached by a man seeking handouts. Emmett gave him his dime (an exorbitant sum for a child of that era!), and his sister chided him, saying the man would buy only alcohol. “It doesn’t matter. If he needs it, let him have it,” Emmett replied, more concerned with doing something charitable for the man in need.²

Now as a priest at St. Francis’s, Judge regularly handed out sandwiches and coffee, socks and underwear, and he helped organize the free clothing room. He also worked at the other end of this ministry, too, securing donations from across the city. He had an arrangement with a nearby dry-cleaning business to collect unclaimed clothing every week for distribution.

He also became involved in fundraising, a gift he had developed during his time at Siena College, and he was soon well known among many of the city’s philanthropists and advocates for the homeless, including those in city government. He also sat on the board of Create, Inc., a nonprofit organization founded by a fellow Franciscan that supported homeless people, alcoholics, drug addicts, senior citizens, and others in dire need.³

His gift for personal connection made breadline work into more than a distribution of charity. In one sense, his ministry wasn’t to “the homeless,” but to John and Mary and Howard and Janet and any of the hundreds of homeless people he would befriend over the years. “He knew the names of all the homeless people who gathered around the Pennsylvania Station neighborhood,” recalled his confrere Fr. Hines,⁴ just as he had remembered the names of all his parishioners in New Jersey. On his frequent walks around Manhattan in his brown friar’s robes, Judge was often approached for a handout. He carried a stack of one-dollar

bills to distribute to any and all who asked for money. And he made friends out of these anonymous faces.

Salvatore Sapienza was a young Marist brother in the 1980s when he was befriended by Judge and began to assist him in his ministries. Sapienza remembers walking with Judge in the city on an errand when they encountered two homeless men. Judge greeted them as long-lost friends and suggested that they all go to lunch (his treat) at a nearby fast food restaurant. When they sat down to eat, Judge began the conversation with “Such a beautiful night, isn’t it?”

Later that same evening, Sapienza accompanied Judge to a fundraiser that was being held in the ballroom of one of Manhattan’s elegant hotels. The celebrity guests of honor were the movie star Christopher Reeve and the television actress Marlo Thomas. After Judge was introduced to the celebrities, his conversation opener with them was “Such a beautiful night, isn’t it?”

The repetition of this line underscored for Sapienza something that he had already noticed about Judge: the Franciscan approached all people with equal levels of respect and dignity. He made no distinction between social or economic status.⁵ In fact, Franciscan spirituality revels in the gospel admonition that “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Matt 20:16) and all the topsy-turvy inversions that can occur when that maxim is applied to real life.

Judge spent every Christmas Eve with homeless people. His tradition was to preside at Mass at A Dwelling Place, a Times Square-area shelter run by nuns for women who were homeless or mentally ill. His Franciscan love of making the Incarnation tangible and visible for people meant that he would bring a small doll to the shelter to represent the infant Jesus. He would cradle the doll as he walked up the avenue on Christmas Eve, and when he arrived at the shelter, he

would place the doll on the altar and invite the residents and sisters to approach the image to say a little prayer.⁶

A Different Type of Homelessness

During this period, Mychal also became more actively and personally involved with a group of people experiencing a different type of homelessness. Every Sunday in Manhattan, a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Catholics and their supporters met to celebrate Mass together.⁷ The Mass was hosted by Dignity/New York, a chapter of the national organization DignityUSA, which had been founded in 1969 by a group of gay and lesbian people under the direction of a California priest, Fr. Pat Nidorf. Most Dignity chapters across the United States had the support of the local diocese or at least the parish where they met, though they were often relegated to church basements or other out-of-the-way rooms.

At the time, many LGBT people were not welcomed in their home parishes. Sometimes they received cold shoulders from parishioners or were explicitly excluded from church activities and liturgies by pastors. This rejection mirrored similar rejections they may have experienced from families, friends, employers, and landlords. The gay liberation movement had made few inroads in society by the mid-1980s, so many LGBT people frequently lived with varying degrees of shame, alienation, and well-founded fears of rejection and even violence. Unfortunately, the way many Catholics understood the church's teaching about homosexuality often encouraged discriminatory attitudes and behaviors against LGBT people.

Official church documents by this time had recognized that a homosexual orientation is not, in itself, sinful. In a

1975 document on sexual ethics, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith rejected the idea that homosexuality was a choice by explaining that some people were homosexual because of "some kind of innate instinct."⁸ Because a homosexual orientation is not chosen, it is not sinful. In church teaching, one can sin only by carrying out an action that is freely chosen.

Further documents from individual bishops and national bishops' conferences called for respect for lesbian and gay people by including them in parish communities and providing them with pastoral care. The teaching on respect flows from the Catholic social justice principle that all human beings have inherent dignity, share a fundamental equality, and must be respected regardless of any identity characteristic or even behavior. Some church documents condemned prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities, a notable one even teaching that "prejudice against homosexuals is a greater infringement of the norm of Christian morality than is homosexual . . . activity."⁹

But the church's social justice approach to homosexuality was only a whisper compared to the booming message about sexual ethics. For many decades, church leaders were reluctant to preach the teaching of respect and inclusion, either because they were uncomfortable with the topic or out of fear that people would presume they were endorsing homosexual activity and sexual relationships. For the great majority of Catholics at the time, the scales tipped heavily toward condemnation. The church's rejection of homosexual relationships helped reinforce cultural prejudices and stereotypes about gay and lesbian people.

Of course, there were exceptions to these prevailing Catholic attitudes. A small handful of Catholic voices pushed against the predominant Catholic negativity and

silence, emphasizing the church's teaching on respect for all and encouraging church officials to listen to the lives and spiritual journeys of this marginalized population. In addition to Dignity, another group, New Ways Ministry, was founded by Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent to promote education about the experiences of gay and lesbian people and to encourage respect and pastoral care for this community. For this time period, Judge's outreach to LGBT people "was a very brave thing to do," noted Sapienza. "He wanted to uplift gay people as deserving of dignity and rights."¹⁰ Judge told Sapienza that gay people needed to be embraced and if the church wasn't going to do it, he was.

Judge had been involved with Dignity before his Canterbury experience, but upon his return, he became more deeply involved in this somewhat "underground" ministry. He began to attend the weekly Dignity Mass at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Manhattan and joined a gay priests' support group there. More than occasionally, he presided at Mass for the group. Of course, Judge's natural instinct for ministry and listening often found him in pastoral counseling sessions with members who were having difficulties with coming out, personal rejection, and understanding whether God loved them or not. He was of particular help to Dignity members who were part of the AA movement. While this ministry was deeply personal for him, it was not one that was explicitly accepted by the official church.

At the time, Judge was taking a personal and ecclesial risk by ministering to LGBT people. Even heterosexually oriented ministers who did outreach to sexual and gender minorities risked invoking suspicion about their identity, resulting in marginalization from church circles for their associations with this community. While Judge did not make a public

declaration of his orientation, friends said he did selectively come out to those close to him. One of them, Brendan Fay, explained: “Of course, as a Catholic priest, he could not come out publicly, but he was out with whomever he could trust or he thought it would help.”¹¹

Judge’s role allowed him to show a compassionate face of the church to the LGBT community during a period when few other church leaders did so. Just as he “walked a fine line” about his orientation, as one friend put it,¹² he also walked a fine line when it came to becoming involved with more controversial political issues concerning LGBT people. When the New York City Council held hearings about a sexual orientation nondiscrimination bill, Fr. Bernárd Lynch, SMA, who had also been involved in LGBT ministry, was the sole Catholic priest who testified for its passage. Sister Jeannine Gramick of New Ways Ministry was the sole nun who testified. Judge refrained from doing so, but Lynch recalled that Judge had tears in his eyes when he told him, “Bernárd, I admire you. I cannot go with you. But I will support you.”¹³

Judge walked the same fine line when it came to ecclesiastical issues. In 1986 the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its “Letter to the Bishops on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.” This document introduced into church discourse the term “objective disorder” to describe a homosexual orientation, and it referred to lesbian and gay sexual activity as always “an intrinsic moral evil.”¹⁴ In addition to this terminology, which many church leaders have called pastorally harmful, the document suggested that lesbian and gay people’s relationships were partly responsible for the violence directed against them.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, the document was widely and strongly criticized by the LGBT community, who saw very little in it that could possibly be called “pastoral care.”

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