Minister’s Letter

Brother Clark Berge, Minister General of the First Order Brothers, writes:

Dear Friends,

It's September, and the month always brings the question: "Where were you on September 11, 2001?" It is hard to believe it has been 10 years. The brothers at Little Portion Friary in New York were having our weekly Bible Study; it was about 9:00 on a Tuesday morning. Our secretary came up to the common room, and burst in saying "America is under attack!" At first we didn't believe her. But we turned on the television and watched the horrific events unfold. Soon the phone began to ring, we were asked to be chaplains at what became known as Ground Zero. The State University of New York, where I was Protestant Campus Ministry Chaplain called. Students were gathering spontaneously; there would be an interfaith prayer service the next day. The next day we could smell ash, and the constant roar of circling planes and helicopters made us very uneasy.

"9/11" was an important wake up call. It forced Americans, and many others around the world, to consider our vulnerability and responsibility. It obliged us to look at how deeply connected we are in everything that goes on in the world. In the years since, in my travels as Minister General of the Brothers, I have had many conversations with people about American foreign and economic policies. While there is absolutely no excusing the deaths of so many innocent people during 9/11, many innocent people have died in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in our war on terror. And there is no escaping that oil is a factor in these conflicts.

I wish I could remember the Bible text for our study that day, but the fact that that is what we were doing has remained significant for me. The spiritual challenges have been ongoing. There were no easy answers to the questions of "Why?" "What can we do?" "What is the right thing to do?" Some things are very clear. My Christian faith calls me to love my enemies, although that's hard to do in a state of emergency. A week later, though, the brothers and the Campus Ministry were hosting a meal with the Muslim Students Association. It was imperative that Christians and Muslims start to talk, especially on the local level. I feel deep sympathy for those who lost family and loved ones: our chapel was full all day as people came to weep, pray and sit quietly.

There was extraordinary sacrifice and heroism among all the people who responded to the events of that day. We all mourned the death of Fr. Mychal Judge, ofm, Chaplain to the New York Fire Department. Br. Justus was a long-time Chaplain at Ground Zero, and he told many stories about the tireless devotion of thousands of people who helped out. Messages poured into New York with gifts, and prayers. A remarkable sense of community emerged; it was a shame a catastrophe brought it to the fore.

Many of us are still marked by the pain of 9/11. Yet the pain can teach us. It is a reminder to seek deeper understanding with Muslims. It is a call to live more simply, curbing the need for more and more oil. It is a reminder too to live every day with joy and passion; life is fragile and very, very precious.

Pax et bonum.