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# **“In the Face of Adversity”: The Response of the Vincentian and Charity Families to 9/11**

BY

REGINA BECHTLE, S.C.

In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, many spiritual descendants of Saints Elizabeth Seton, Vincent de Paul, and Louise de Marillac ministered heroically in the spirit of effective and affective love. This article seeks to tell the story of their response, using their own words, whenever possible. Inventive to infinity, congregations, communities, and organizations gave flesh to the Vincentian ideal of collaboration and networking in circumstances that defy description. In faith we commend the victims and survivors of 9/11, with their families and loved ones, to God’s compassionate embrace. In hope of the peace which surpasses understanding, we commend the perpetrators to God’s unfathomable mercy.

Each person or institution cited represents countless others whose stories, for reasons of space, were not included. The author wishes to thank all those who contributed material: from the Vincentian Fathers and Brothers, Eastern Province (C.M.); Daughters of Charity, North-east and Emmitsburg Provinces (D.C.); congregations of the Sisters of Charity with motherhouses at Mount Saint Vincent, New York (S.C.–N.Y.), Convent Station, New Jersey (S.C.–N.J.), Halifax, Nova Scotia (S.C.–Hal.), Mount Saint Joseph, Cincinnati, Ohio (S.C.–Cin.), Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania (S.C.–PA); Religieuses de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur, Dieppe, New Brunswick (N.D.S.C.). Abbreviations in parentheses are used throughout.

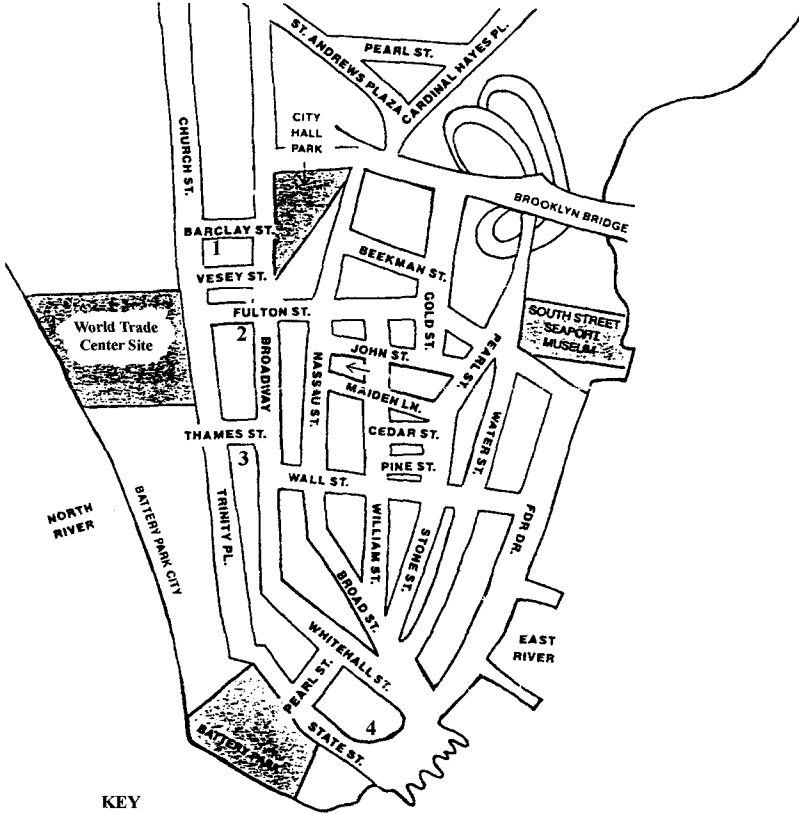
## **I. “She Still Watches Over New York”:<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Seton’s Native City**

Ground Zero, the site of the attack on the World Trade Center, covers sixteen acres, the size of fourteen football fields. Its boundaries – Vesey, Church, Liberty and West Streets – mark the area where, 225 years ago, the Great Fire of 1776 destroyed the entire southeast part of New York City, including Trinity Episcopal Church. At the time, Eliza-

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<sup>1</sup> Sr. Maureen Skelly (S.C.–Hal.), quoted from e-mail, November 13, 2001.

Elizabeth Seton's Manhattan



KEY

- 1. Saint Peter's
- 2. Saint Paul's
- 3. Trinity
- 4. Seton Home on State Street



The churchyard of Trinity Episcopal Church, blanketed in the ash, paper, and debris which fell from the World Trade Center.

*Public Domain*

beth Ann Bayley was only two years old. Later, as the wife of prominent New York merchant William Magee Seton and mother of five children, Elizabeth Seton spent most of her next thirty-two years in and around this very area, before founding the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, in 1809.

Trinity Episcopal Church was Elizabeth's first parish and where she was baptized. Some of her relatives are buried in the churchyard that was covered with ash and debris on September 11. The home at 8 State Street on the Battery where Elizabeth, her husband William and their five children lived for a time is now Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church and a shrine in her honor. After 9/11, pastor **Reverend Peter Meehan** opened the church's doors to Trinity parishioners until they could once again worship in their own sacred space. On the day of the attack, thousands of people streamed past the church, seeking safety, gasping for air, lungs filled with smoke, bodies covered with dust as if from a volcano. "We gave out paper towels, we washed people's faces, we prayed with them, we helped them to breathe," Reverend Meehan said.

Elizabeth Seton, the New York matron, attended many an Episcopal service in Saint Paul's Chapel, on Broadway and Fulton Street. As she struggled with her attraction to Catholicism, she wrote of sitting in a side pew at Saint Paul's and turning towards the Blessed Sacrament at nearby Saint Peter's Catholic Church (Barclay and Church Streets).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds.; Ellin M. Kelly, ms. ed., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings, Correspondence and Journals 1793-1808*, vol. 1 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2000), 369-70, Journal to Amabilia Filicchi, entry for September 1804. (Hereinafter cited as CWI)

After the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, emergency workers carried bodies of victims to the ancient churchyard of Saint Paul's, the oldest public building in continuous use in New York City. For months afterward, Saint Paul's, in the shadow of Ground Zero, served as a respite center where rescue workers could find food, rest, counseling, even a massage.

The first officially recorded death on 9/11 was that of **Mychal Judge, O.F.M.** Judge had been a chaplain with the New York City Fire Department for almost ten years and, since 1968, a parochial vicar at Saint Francis of Assisi, West 31<sup>st</sup> Street, Manhattan, where he was noted for his ministry to the homeless and to persons with AIDS. When the call came on 9/11, Judge donned his fire gear and raced to the scene to minister to his comrades. He was standing by the command post in the lobby of Tower One just before it collapsed. Rescue workers trying to make their way through the sudden mountain of rubble found his body, took it to nearby Saint Peter's Church, and laid it by the altar.

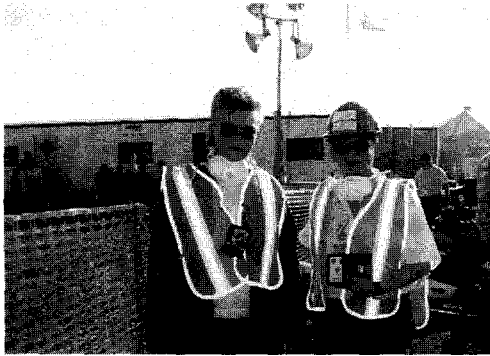
Educated by the Sisters of Charity of New York at Saint Paul's School, Brooklyn, Judge was never shy about his devotion to Saint Elizabeth Seton. Probably no one who brought his body to Saint Peter's knew that it was the site of Elizabeth's profession of faith as a Catholic, and her first Communion. The coincidence would have delighted Judge.

## II. "Ground Zero in My Heart": September 11, 2001

From their classroom windows eighth graders at Saint Mary's-Resurrection School in Jersey City saw the attack on the World Trade Center. So did children and teachers in Saint John the Baptist School in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant section. So did **Sisters Mary Burns** and **Elizabeth Minturn** (S.C.-Hal.) at the Maura Clarke-Ita Ford Center in Brooklyn, along with the immigrant women who were registering there for classes in English and job skills.

Retired **Sister Elizabeth McLoughlin** (S.C.-N.Y.), on the way to her volunteer post at Saint Vincent's Hospital, Manhattan, watched in disbelief as first one and then the other tower erupted in flames. "'Lord, be merciful,'" she prayed, "then I tried to lift my feet from the concrete and go on."

When the Twin Towers collapsed, waves of people began to run north and east to escape the inferno. Well-dressed professionals streamed across the Brooklyn Bridge on foot; women had taken off



Sister Maureen Skelly, S.C. (at left), and Sister Grazyna Michniewicz, S.C., pictured at the Fresh Kills Landfill, Staten Island, New York.

*Courtesy of the author*

their dress pumps to run faster. Later they recounted how homeless people met them, hugged them, and offered to bring them to shelters.

*Jersey City, New Jersey*

From the primary school campus of Resurrection parish, social worker **Sister Maryanne Van Note** (S.C.–N.J.), remembers thinking, “We have to shield the young children from this sight.” Later, ferries began to cross the Hudson River with waves of people fleeing lower Manhattan, preschoolers among them. The lucky ones came with parents.

Police escorted Sisters of Charity from nearby Saint Brigid’s Convent, Emory Street, including two members of the congregation’s leadership council, to the emergency shelter at the local public high school. The Sisters brought supplies, found emergency medication for those in need, and “just sat and talked to people.” The convent gave hospitality to a Chinese couple until they made contact with relatives. The mission of Charity came alive for Sister Maryanne in “just being there for people – the human connection.”

*Staten Island, New York*

**Sister Maureen Skelly** is a spiritual director on the staff of Mount Manresa, a Jesuit retreat house on Staten Island, New York. **Sister Grazyna Michniewicz** serves on the Crisis Intervention Team at Monsignor Farrell, an archdiocesan high school on Staten Island. Both are

Sisters of Charity of Halifax and New York Police Department (N.Y.P.D.) chaplains trained in crisis and bereavement counseling. Sister Maureen e-mailed her congregation shortly after 9/11:

I am a Police Chaplain for the Police Department in New York. On Tuesday afternoon [9/11], Sister Grazyna and I were escorted by police to the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge where we were given vests, hard hats and masks. We stayed with the triage set up for police and fire persons and were prepared to go into the morgue with relatives to ID bodies. Unfortunately there were no bodies. As all know now that was a very tragic sign. After several hours we were escorted back to the command center in Brooklyn and we went home to be on call.

At first, Sister Maureen could not begin to comprehend the meaning of the pulverized dust and ashes that covered her shoes. "TV is a mercy," she said, speaking of the incomprehensible carnage she witnessed at the site, chaos that could never be captured on camera.

*Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, Manhattan (S.V.M.)*<sup>3</sup>

Saint Vincent's sits on a city block in lower Manhattan fourteen blocks from what was the World Trade Center complex, for which it served as the primary trauma center. In the board room, S.V.C.M.C. chief executive officer **David Campbell** was meeting with the presidents of the system's five divisions when the first plane crashed into the north tower. Disaster plans went into effect at 8:50 A.M. S.V.M. paramedics were among the first emergency medical personnel to arrive at Ground Zero. They found a war zone in the middle of Manhattan.

Back at the hospital, two trauma teams set up gurneys and wheelchairs outside the emergency department and ordered emergency medical supplies from the hospital's central supply warehouse. Hos-

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<sup>3</sup> In 1849, two years after the Sisters of Charity of New York became a separate foundation from the Emmitsburg congregation, three New York Sisters of Charity opened Saint Vincent's, the city's first Catholic hospital, as one of the new congregation's first missions. Since 2000 the acute care facility has been part of Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers (S.V.C.M.C.), an eight-hospital system cosponsored by the Sisters of Charity of New York and the diocese of Brooklyn.

This account is edited from reports by Nancy Burkley, communications director, Sisters of Charity of New York; S.V.C.M.C. newsletter, *One Mission* (October-November 2001); and *Catholic Health World* 17, no. 17 (October 1, 2001).



A study of the base of The Wall of Hope and Remembrance, Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, Manhattan. Our thanks to James F. Leach, Saint Vincent's Hospital Archives, and Lisa Feldman.

*Lisa Feldman © 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Saint Vincent's Hospital Archives, New York City, New York*

pital personnel also set up six overflow emergency rooms, called in an additional 300 doctors, 100 nurses and 500 other staff, and canceled all elective surgery to prepare to treat victims. Outside, hundreds of doctors, nurses, and health care aides waited on the sidewalks with medical equipment. By 9:30 A.M. they had treated 327 people, and as the day wore on they attended to over 300 more. Hours passed, however, and fewer and fewer survivors were found. By 3 P.M., as the reality hit, staff began to feel the frustration and fatigue that comes from sheer helplessness. Emergency room case manager **Susanne Greenblatt** later described it as a day when "we were ready for so many, but so few were able to come."

**Sister Catherine Sherry** (S.C.–N.Y.) coordinated the Blood Bank as it dealt with more than 500 blood donors who assembled outside within two hours of the disaster. 10,000 calls were managed by a special call center for patient information. An average of fifteen people per shift staffed the phones. S.V.M. set up a round-the-clock family crisis center. As many as fifty employees per shift checked names of the missing against several hospitals' patient lists, and provided transportation if a match were made. Information was scarce, said **Sister Miriam Kevin Phillips** (S.C.–N.Y.), S.V.M. senior vice president for mission. "But it helped us switch our energy, and we made sure that everyone who came in or called got to talk to a real person." During the next few days 6,800 family members and friends would contact the crisis center.



Sister Kevin operated out of the main command center. "As I moved throughout the medical center, my role was to be a visible presence of our mission," she said. In the emergency room, **Sisters Margaret Sweeney** and **Mary T. Boyle** (S.C.–N.Y.) were among those who helped with triage as victims arrived. Sister Mary reflected on her role: "As I saw the victims coming in, some of whom were badly burned, and then families coming in desperately looking for their loved ones, each with a story more sorrowful than the next, all I knew was that we had to help them."

Other Sisters of Charity in supportive services at the hospital along with many associates, lay and religious, volunteered in pastoral care and patient relations, answered phones, listened, prayed, and extended sympathy, all with a characteristically Vincentian blend of affective and effective love. Employees testified to the spirit of compassion, professionalism and service embodied in their co-workers and supervisors. Regardless of shift, people reported for work and got busy doing whatever needed to be done. Even though it was 11 P.M. before most of the staff reached home the night of 9/11, they were back early the next day.

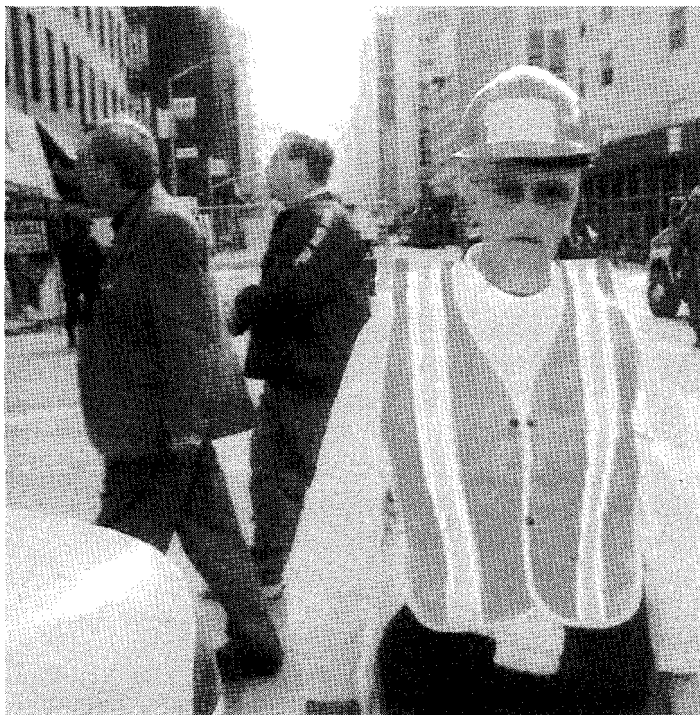
**Sean Nagle**, from S.V.M.'s ethics and palliative medicine department, saw the hospital's values – respect, integrity, compassion, excellence – come to life. He wrote, "An ambulance pulled up dragging a 25-foot metal extension from the rubble that had latched onto the undercarriage of the ambulance.... The people saving the victims were becoming victims themselves.... The symbiotic nature of this effort is indescribable. A cop is looking for his unit and can't find them – a nun grabs his hand and shows him the way.... I felt truly impressed and proud to be a part of this 'institution' – now become an extended family as the day went on."

### *Staten Island, New York*

Across New York harbor on Staten Island, Saint Vincent's and Bayley Seton Hospitals<sup>4</sup> mobilized as well. Elizabeth Seton had spent summers at the Staten Island cottage of her father, Dr. Richard Bayley, while he cared for sick immigrants in his role as health officer of the port of New York. Today Bayley Seton, a 400-bed community hospital,

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<sup>4</sup> Both hospitals are now part of the Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers system. Saint Vincent's Staten Island was opened in 1903 by the Sisters of Charity of New York. In 1980 the Sisters assumed sponsorship of the former U.S. Public Health Hospital on Staten Island and renamed it Bayley Seton.



Sister Maureen Skelly, S.C., just days after the tragedy and blocks from Ground Zero.  
*Courtesy of the author*

stands on the site of the quarantine station that he opened in the early 1800's in the Saint George–Tompkinsville section, near the ferry terminal where thousands of workers commute daily to jobs in lower Manhattan.

**Sister Margaret O'Brien** (S.C.–N.Y.), then senior vice president for mission, was in her second floor office in Building 7 at Bayley Seton. Other senior administrators of S.V.C.M.C.'s Staten Island service division were at an early morning meeting in Manhattan. From the floor above her, the unfolding horror at the World Trade Center was clearly visible. With several colleagues she raced to the main campus at Saint Vincent's Staten Island and started to organize a command center. Emergency plans for Y2K came in handy as they struggled to set up communications, keep people calm, stock supplies for triage stations, and organize staff and volunteers who were already streaming in. Sister Margaret remembers thinking, "Thank God I have *something* to do to contribute."

**Sister Kathleen Byrnes** (S.C.–N.Y.), S.V.C.M.C. coordinator of community outreach on Staten Island, was one of those who staffed 24-

hour phone lines, covering the 10 P.M. to 3 A.M. shift. She fielded seventy calls that first night, "as if it were the middle of the day," calls from embassies, foreign countries, firemen's wives. In the chaos, master lists of victims and hospitals where they were being treated were makeshift. As frantic relatives called for information on loved ones, Sister Kathy recalls, "We were a listening presence when most other phone lines were busy, and that gave people a sense of connection."

Phone duty was frustrating, Sister Margaret found, because information was scarce and few matches could be made. When she identified herself as "Sister," callers spoke more openly of their fear, panic, and grief. To each, she promised, "We're praying with you."

Firemen on a truck from Rescue Company 5 raced by Immaculate Conception School on Targee Street en route to the disaster scene, and waved to **Sister Mary Richard Rowley** (S.C.-N.Y.), who works in the rectory. Before the day ended that firehouse was to lose half of its men. Many Staten Islanders work as New York City police or fire personnel. As casualties mounted, the borough bore a heavy burden of loss. Out of 343 firefighters killed, over 180 were from Staten Island. 307 Staten Island children lost at least one parent; one parish lost thirty-eight parishioners.

### *Emmitsburg, Maryland<sup>5</sup>*

Six Ladies of Charity, including **Alma Arredondo**, national President of the Ladies of Charity (L.C.U.S.A.), were just leaving Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, on the morning of 9/11. They had spent several days visiting the shrine of Elizabeth Seton after their annual assembly. When they heard that a plane had crashed into the Pentagon, just paces away from the hotel where they had met a few days earlier, they turned back to the Valley.

That evening sisters at the Provincial House quickly organized a prayer service. In her reflection **Sister Betty Ann McNeil** (D.C.), Emmitsburg archivist, noted that Elizabeth Seton had also known fear in times of uncertainty and violence.

The Daughters of Charity provided sanctuary, time and space to pray, grieve, wait. The women remained for a week, volunteering their services around the Provincial House, until airports reopened. The hotel where the Ladies of Charity had gathered subsequently served as mission control center for rescue efforts at the Pentagon.

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<sup>5</sup> Sr. Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., e-mail (edited), December 14, 2001.

*United Nations Building, New York City*

The Sisters of Charity Federation has Non-Governmental Organization (N.G.O.) status at the United Nations (U.N.). **Sister Marie Elena Dio** (S.C.–Hal.) serves as Executive Director. The following is edited from her e-mail, November 21, 2001:

15 liaisons of the Federation N.G.O. were attending the annual U.N. N.G.O. conference. The U.N. was closed at 10:20 A.M. on the 11th. For about a month after that the streets and First Ave. leading to the U.N. were blocked off by sand trucks – no traffic permitted and no visitors nor N.G.O.'s inside the U.N. either. The visiting Sisters were stationed all around New York City – all returned home safely. Some drove, leaving immediately on the 11th before noon. Others drove a day or two later and some were able to obtain delayed flights as late as the following Saturday. We watched the “horror” on the U.N. TV’s that morning.

Among the Federation liaisons evacuated from the U.N. was **Sister Sheila O’Friel** (D.C.). She joined the crowds walking uptown on Third Avenue, fleeing the disaster. By the time she reached the New York Blood Center on East 67<sup>th</sup> Street, lines of prospective donors were already stretching around the block, five abreast.

*Greenwich Village, New York City*

**Sister Carol Barnes** (S.C.–N.Y.) looked out the window of Seton Center, the historic brownstone on Washington Square North that is home to four local communities of Sisters of Charity, and saw the Twin Towers burning. Sister Carol spontaneously headed for nearby Saint Vincent’s Hospital, hoping to help. She met the C.E.O.’s administrative assistant whose husband, a firefighter among the first at the disaster site, was missing. Sister Carol waited with her at the firehouse until his death was confirmed. “It still feels like Ground Zero in my heart,” said Sister Carol, months later.

As soon as word of the attacks reached the Convent Station, New Jersey, campus of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, bells began to toll, calling people together at the motherhouse, college and academy to pray. Near the New Jersey Transit railroad station that borders the campus, medics set up an emergency tent and waited for survivors to arrive, wounded but alive. Few came on the trains that usually pumped commuters like lifeblood to and from the heart of downtown New York. As day lengthened into evening, someone wondered why so many cars sat empty in the station's parking lot. All along the suburban corridor between Morristown and Summit, people asked the same question, then realized with a chill that most of the owners were probably deep in the huge pile of debris that had been the Twin Towers.

### III. "An Amazing Grace to Continue to Say Yes": The First Endless Weeks

Members of the Vincentian family of Charity attended and prepared countless memorial services, funerals for friends, parishioners, current and former students, co-workers, and their relatives. Others attended rallies, interfaith services, and prayer vigils for peace held in their parishes, places of ministry, and neighborhoods. The Elizabeth Seton Women's Center on West 70<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan held a Peace Gathering a week after the attack. Women from different cultures, including Israel and Ireland, attended. A retired sister sewed a block for a national Memorial Quilt sponsored by the Heart of America project.

People gathered at motherhouses, provincial houses, colleges, seeking comfort in praying together. Typical of the sentiment is this statement from a rally held by the Northwest Bronx Clergy and Community Coalition, New York: "In this time of mourning we know that we must come together as a community to seek healing and justice rather than vengeance. We will not allow fear or prejudice to divide us from each other. We do not wish the destruction of more innocent lives, instead we seek to emulate God's mercy." One sister summed up a universal sentiment: "Not only I but many others are so tired of crying."

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<sup>6</sup> Sr. Rosemary Moynihan (S.C.-N.J.), phone conversation, July 19, 2002. Chartered in 1900, the College of Saint Elizabeth was founded by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth as the state's first four-year Catholic college for women.

*Vincentian Fathers and Brothers, Eastern Province*

In a letter of October 1, 2001, **Reverend Thomas F. McKenna** (C.M.), provincial, shared with the Eastern Province a comprehensive summary of the work of the confreres in response to 9/11. It is quoted here in full.<sup>7</sup>

Dear Confreres,

In a time of national disaster we have Saint Vincent himself as a wonderful example of how to respond. During two civil wars he acted decisively and effectively to help the devastated victims, certainly with physical aid but also spiritually. He not only put his organizational hand to relieving the civil terror, but rode out to the war zone himself to meet the refugees and see firsthand to their care. In these past weeks Confreres from around the Province followed Vincent's example in their different responses to the World Trade Center disaster.

I've gotten word from houses outside of New York that they immediately organized prayer services, collections, and counseling opportunities for the people in their care. Our Lady of the Valley (Gloverville, S.C.) opened its church doors all day; Saint Mary's (Greensboro, N.C.) celebrated Mass for over 400 very ethnically mixed parishioners. Hispanics, Vietnamese, Montagnards, African-Americans and others prayed in four languages and then attended a parish picnic to extend the fellowship through the afternoon. Saint Lazare's in Spring Lake held prayer services and counseling sessions for both staff and retreatants. Some there sought out spiritual direction to diffuse the anger and somehow use that energy in a positive way. The Confreres in Germantown, including those from St. Catherine's Infirmary, held prayer services and, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, celebrated a special mass in the Community Chapel, which many of the employees attended.

At Niagara there were many prayer gatherings,

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<sup>7</sup> Used with permission. The author wishes to thank Sr. Joan Keating, D.C., for her assistance.

including Masses and candlelight vigils. The campus bells rang out on the National Day of Prayer. **Joe Levesque** sent out letters to the parents and faculty explaining how New York State will be helping the families of victims and how Niagara intends to take part in that project. Confreres walked through the campus, attending to anyone who wanted to talk about the tragedy. University departments responded, running such programs as *"The Basics of the Islamic Faith"* and *"Stress Management in Time of Crisis."* In addition, there were many fund-raising activities held on campus.<sup>8</sup>

Closer to the tragedy itself, the Confreres in New York did what they could to respond. At [Saint John the Baptist] Parish in Bedford–Stuyvesant, staff members were alerted in case they had to leave for affected loved ones and because the subway system had been shut down. A hospitality room was set up so people could speak with staff or find some shelter. Crisis counselors came on call for distressed people walking in off the street. Because there was a clear view of the towers from the upper floors of the school, members of the parish team spent most of the day counseling the children and their parents. Confreres visited the local fire station on DeKalb Avenue to speak with the firemen who had lost three of their brothers in the collapse. For Sunday liturgy on September 16<sup>th</sup> the church was entirely filled. The Confreres remembered the dead and missing during the Prayer of the Faithful, using candles lit from the Paschal Candle. Members of Saint John the Baptist lost at least six relatives. Later, when celebrating the Feast of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Confreres unveiled a shrine created around the crucifix so people could offer prayers as well as write in the names of their loved ones.

Saint John's University was particularly affected. As of now there are over fifty alumni missing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Editor's note:* Three Niagara alumni and three family members were killed.

<sup>9</sup> *Editor's note:* The final count was seventy-two alumnae/i and thirty-six family members of students and staff.

Confreres joined in the effort on campus to counsel the grief-stricken. The classes and dormitory residents at the new Lower Manhattan campus were transferred to Jamaica. Since then, at [President] **Don Harrington's** urging, confreres have been attending very many funerals and memorial services for the victims. In addition, they presided at special liturgies and candlelight vigils sponsored all over campus by the Office of Campus Ministry and various student organizations. Four confreres were involved in counseling people connected with Cantor Fitzgerald, the firm that lost 700 of its 1000 employees located on the top of Tower One. **Ken Slattery, Steve Denig, Bernie Tracey and Tom Casella** traveled to the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan to minister to them.

Two confreres in particular were in the thick of things. Two days after the bombing **Art Kolinsky** and **John Carney** went into Manhattan to offer their services. First traveling to St. Francis' Church on 34<sup>th</sup> Street (where Father Mychal Judge had lived) they went on to the Armory on 26<sup>th</sup> Street where grieving relatives had gathered. They spent two full days there, serving especially the Spanish-speaking. The next week Art Kolinsky received credentials from the city and from FEMA to work in the Ground Zero area and was asked to go to the temporary morgue. Art blessed the remains of the deceased as the body bags were brought into the Medical Examiner's tent. He also ministered to the rescue workers who spoke of horrible moments digging in the wreckage. Art is presently trying to make contacts so that other Vincentians in New York can gain entry to the area and be of service.

I write this to let you know all the good the confreres have and are doing. And in the midst of that work, all of us are also praying for the nephews of **Ken Slattery and Paul Murphy**. I don't think I have met anybody who does not at least know a family of somebody involved in the tragedy.

There's hardly a more graphic scene of the reason for the Congregation's existence than the calamitous



images of that week. Vincent gave his life to overcoming the yawning gap between Jesus' world of mutual concern, compassion for the poor, truth and deep peace and the societal one of deprivation, indifference and out-and-out evil. The great surge to the churches last week and the stripping away of superficial matters speaks of the quick recognition most everyone has of the need for that deeper core of life, which Vincent preached as Jesus' Kingdom. While a terrible event, the tragedy brought to the fore our fundamental calling to bring the Lord's Good News to this age.

I thank all the confreres for their spontaneous Vincentian response to the tragedy. For brevity's sake, I left out many other services our men provided. In the name of the Province, I thank all who jumped in so generously. You give us a glimpse into Vincent and how he'd be building the Father's Kingdom in this day and age. I count, too, on your continuing prayer and effort to bring about that redeemed world.

Fraternally in Vincent,  
Tom

*Saint John's University*

The University offered its new Manhattan campus site to city officials for use as a round-the-clock respite center for recovery crews. 200 Red Cross workers staffed the center for sixty-nine days, serving more than a half million hot meals. **Reverend Art Kolinsky (C.M.)**,<sup>10</sup> wrote:

My first day at the [temporary morgue] site, some of the recovery workers invited me to lunch with them. They said there was a building where they were serving food to the workers. We walked down the West Side Highway, past all the rubble and trucks in the streets and went to Murray Street.... It was a surreal sight to see persons covered from head to toe in yellow hazardous material suits lining the entrance to the

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<sup>10</sup> Edited from the Congregation of the Mission Eastern Province of the USA website, < <http://www.cmeast.org/pagesFeatures/056f.html> >

building. They were hosing the boots of the workers that were covered with mud and soot from the pile....

After we went through the line, we entered the building.... I stopped in my tracks when I was struck by the enormous banner on the back wall facing us. There was the image of St. Vincent de Paul with his arms outstretched as if to embrace all those who entered the building.... I felt very proud to be a Vincentian. I began telling the workers who invited me to lunch that St. Vincent de Paul founded our Order and that the building belonged to St. John's, a Vincentian institution.

...How appropriate that these good and generous people from all over the country were being fed under the image of St. Vincent.

After a memorial Mass at the Jamaica, Queens, campus honoring the 108 alumni and family members killed on 9/11, Saint John's president **Reverend Donald Harrington** (C.M.), said, "We educate working-class students and the children of immigrants. They get degrees and join the fire department and police force. Some go into business."<sup>11</sup>

*Fresh Kills Landfill, Staten Island, New York*

**Sister Maureen Skelly** (S.C.–Hal.) continued to keep her sisters posted about the crisis. These excerpts from her e-mails and letters provide a riveting, reflective commentary of the first harrowing weeks. "Wednesday [September 12] both Grazyna and I were assigned to two different posts on Staten Island for Grief Counseling purposes. Thursday, Manresa was designated a center for both fire and police persons relatives." She wrote of feeling such fear during a "lockdown" that day, when no one was allowed to enter or leave the island, that she had to force herself to keep listening to the person with her. "There are things I could almost not hear, they were so horrific. One policeman said what shook him the most were the empty shoes found all over the ten block area."

"It is an amazing grace we receive to continue to say yes. I see it in the firemen and women, the police, the people of New York, and in us,

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<sup>11</sup> "St. John's starts afresh near ground zero," *National Catholic Reporter* (January 11, 2002).

the chaplains. I am also deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve as a Sister of Charity." Sister Maureen regularly wore a T-shirt displaying the words, "Standing in the Fire of Charity," the logo from the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Halifax congregation in 1999.

"On Sunday I have been asked to go at 2:00 P.M. to Ground Zero with Rabbi Berkowitz (head of chaplains) and have asked **Sister Kathleen O'Donnell** [S.C.–Hal., also a police chaplain], on the Rabbi's request, to go to the 8:00 P.M. shift. S. Grazyna will come with me too. So, Ground Zero will be covered by the Sisters of Charity, Halifax. How fitting that as one stands on the shore line, you first see [Mother Seton's Shrine at 8 State Street] and then the empty smoke filled space. She is still leading her people."

Two weeks later, Sister Maureen gave an e-mail update on work at the retreat house, "meeting people where they are and leading them to the God Who loves them. [Manresa] has become what we are called to be – a place of hope for the day." She wrote: "For the last two weeks we have been a center for fire, police and EMS. We have been with people almost 24/7. Today there will be over 40 detectives and EMS workers with whom we will be working as Manresa has become the center to collect DNA samples. Both Fr. [John] Ryan, S.J., and I are chaplains so it made sense to open our doors – we have the space and God knows the call to the poor. I ask your prayers for all of us."

The Fresh Kills landfill off Arthur Kill Road on Staten Island used to be a dump for tons of garbage from New York and New Jersey. A few months before the attacks it was permanently closed, only to be reopened to sort, examine, and dispose of debris from 9/11. At the landfill, less than thirty miles from Ground Zero, Deputy Police Inspector James Luongo oversaw hundreds of workers and volunteers from the New York fire, police, and sanitation departments, F.B.I., and C.I.A. **Sister Grazyna Michniewicz** (S.C.–Hal.) ministers at the high school where Inspector Luongo's son is a sophomore. She described a visit to the landfill on October 24:

As the rubble decreases at Ground Zero it increases at the landfill. I saw some toys today among the rubble. On the landfill sits a rather large refrigerated trailer. It is the morgue. The commander told us that there are presently 2000 body parts in there, 1000 of which are identifiable and will bring some sense of closure to the loved ones. We prayed there. How ironic that what

once was referred to as the “dump” has now become “sacred ground”!

After visiting the landfill on November 1, **Kathy Moloughney** (S.C.–Hal. Associate) wrote of seeing personal effects, even “an occasional wedding band.” In her e-mail to the sisters she reflected:

The sadness that permeates this area is as heavy as the dust that constantly swirls in the air. There is reverence here. This is truly holy ground. Everything is sifted, raked, sorted, and looked at, not by machines but by men and women. I ask you to pray for these people. They have looked at death and destruction all day, they see it, they smell it and they inhale it. They leave this site with stooped shoulders. Please pray for these workers and their families. I know that none of them are bringing home smiles or laughter. Their spirits have been damaged. Pray that they find rest from their labors.

That same day reporter **Maria Giura** accompanied Kathy and Sister Maureen to the landfill. She listened as Inspector Luongo praised the workers who dealt with nine to ten thousand tons of debris brought there each day, then recorded the conversation that followed:

“Today’s All Saints Day. Tomorrow, All Souls. There’s gotta be some significance in that as we stand among all this,” [Luongo] recounts for us, his light-colored eyes squinting from the sun. “The saints are here,” Sister Maureen says quickly, looking directly in Jimmy’s eyes. He looks at her sheepishly the way most of us do when we are acknowledged as doing something holy, somehow uncomfortable with, unwilling to be holy – even though it is our calling.

We continued to talk – actually Sister encouraged him to do most of the talking – about such things as horror and spirituality and the work at hand. As our exchange came to a close, Sister Maureen asked Jimmy if he would like to be blessed. He bowed his head.

Walking past the rows and rows of car skeletons

stacked one on top of the other... we ran into another group of souls, six people about my age in their early thirties. They are all Youth Ministers in their parishes from or near Dorchester, MA, who drove the five hours to help cook and serve meals to the workers. They heard about the opportunity from another Sister of Charity in the Boston area who put them in touch with Sister Maureen....

As we walked through the muck and mire, as Sister and Kathy blessed the workers we met and I, who observed more than I spoke so much, sat side by side. Piles of the towers' mangled steel next to car skeletons, conveyor belts next to tents, an Inspector next to his workers, life and death, heroism and terrorism, connection and detachment, and side-by-side feast days commemorating souls who have made it and the many more, like us, suspended between two worlds.

Sister Maureen commented on the landfill as "a very sacred space. The gentle way the FBI [sifted the debris] was moving, gently handling each piece of material that came into their hands and placing it down with reverence." To her eyes, "It was Calvary again – the crucified were dust and ashes, the crucified were the relatives of all, the Crucified Jesus again, in all of us once again, on a hill overlooking the City – not Jerusalem but New York. As of last Monday, Oct. 22, the WTC was still on fire, down so very deep that molten lead was being carried out by cranes." On November 1 she reported, "Ground Zero is almost flat while the landfill has grown and the twisted steel of what was, sits in silence overlooking our wounded city."

Among the things that kept Sister Maureen focused, she wrote in November, were the words of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz in 1943: "I believe in God and I want to be there right in the thick of what people call 'Horror' and still be able to say 'Life is Beautiful.' I am not afraid to look suffering straight in the eyes." Sister Maureen added, "Because there I see the face of Christ."

For her compassionate, professional service Sister Maureen received several awards, including recognition as New York Police Chaplain of the Year.



A solitary figure stands before The Wall of Hope and Remembrance, Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, Manhattan. Our thanks to James F. Leach, Saint Vincent's Hospital Archives, and Tamra Walker.

*Courtesy of the artist and Saint Vincent's Hospital Archives, New York City, New York*

*Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of New York*<sup>12</sup>

**Daughters of Charity Ann Shea and Joanne Dress** were asked by New York Catholic Charities to coordinate the efforts of its fifteen offices to respond effectively to the needs of families affected by 9/11. A social worker with over forty years experience, Sister Ann was preparing to begin a new ministry to the elderly as director of senior services at the John Paul II Apartments in Harlem when the more urgent need arose. Sister Joanne has been serving the needs of those in rural Sullivan and Orange counties through the Catholic Charities office in Newburgh, New York. Together they were responsible to see that relief funds were fairly and accurately disbursed to thousands of families, and for coordinating services such as housing and resettlement, emotional and psychological counseling and support, and funeral expenses.

For the significant role that she played in the relief effort, Saint John's University honored Sister Ann, January 31, 2002, with its Caritas Medal, given for outstanding service to the poor and suffering.

*Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, Manhattan (S.V.M.)*

As S.V.M. became the focus of intense international media atten-

<sup>12</sup> Excerpted from the Daughters of Charity Northeast Province newsletter, *Northeast* (September/October 2001 and March/April 2002).

tion, a media village sprang up across Seventh Avenue from the emergency room entrance. Newspapers, magazines and television networks from around the world followed the unfolding events through the eyes of staff and physicians. Saint Vincent's Manhattan came to symbolize New York's emergency response to the disaster. Letters, gifts and calls of support poured in from people all over the world.

The sophomore biology class at Mother Seton High School, Clark, N.J., wanted to send notes of appreciation to emergency personnel. Assistant principal **Sister Jacqueline Balasia** (S.C.-N.J.) suggested a "Charity connection" with S.V.M. Cards were sent to **Sister Marian Catharine Muldoon** (S.C.-N.Y.), a retired nurse and patient representative who saw that they were distributed.

The south wall of the hospital became a Wall of Hope and Remembrance covered with photos of the dead and missing. Flowers, candles and tributes gave silent witness as the magnitude of the loss unfolded.

Local and national media coverage recognized the outstanding service rendered by Saint Vincent's. **Sister Elizabeth Vermaelen**, president of the Sisters of Charity of New York, expressed gratitude to all at S.V.C.M.C. for carrying out the mission of Charity "with personal commitment and resolve." In solidarity with the mission of Saint Vincent's and aware of the probable financial impact of the disaster on hospital revenue, the S.C. Ministry Foundation of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati sent a substantial donation to be used for S.V.M.

In the first ten days, 479 people went through S.V.M.'s emergency room, with another 263 taken to S.V.C.M.C. hospitals on Staten Island and in Brooklyn and Queens. In all, Saint Vincent's Manhattan treated 673 victims of 9/11, including 197 emergency service and military personnel. Of the more than 6,000 victims treated in area hospitals, the S.V.C.M.C. system treated 1,038.

One S.V.C.M.C. employee, a security manager who was also a New York City firefighter, was killed in the disaster. Twenty-nine employees lost immediate family members, while hundreds lost extended family or close friends.

#### *Immaculate Conception Parish, Staten Island*

From the waterfront near their Staten Island parish **Sisters Mary Richard Rowley** and **Marguerite McGilly** (S.C.-N.Y.) had watched black smoke cover the city on 9/11. Sister Richard described the ensuing weeks:

Soon the area became a shrine – pictures of the lost, flowers, candles and a constant flow of heartbroken people. We went down there each day after school – just being there for and with those who were hurting so deeply.

[We] found out that they [fire and police rescue workers] could not go home to their families because of the contaminants on their clothing. We got T-shirts, socks, etc. to help supply their needs as well as bringing a few good meals. One firefighter looked up at me with weary, teary eyes and said, “Sister, just listen to me – please just listen” – and for days we listened, cried, prayed.

I am 56 years in the Congregation and never before have I realized the impact the presence of a Sister of Charity could bring. Each day we’d hear, “Hey, guys, look, the Sisters are here.” The strength and courage that got us through those days was the knowledge that each Sister was bearing our burdens and that the love we were able to give flowed from all.

### *Chatham, New Jersey*

Two-thirds of the 2000 families in Saint Patrick’s parish<sup>13</sup> are young professionals under forty-five. Many of them work in the financial and business firms of lower Manhattan. Among the eleven victims from Chatham township, Saint Patrick’s lost five. 700 people attended an 8 P.M. Mass hastily arranged on 9/11. “Everyone knew someone who died,” said **Sister Barbara Garland** (S.C.–N.J.), parish coordinator. “For days after, people kept coming into church to pray, many of them men hand in hand with their sons. No one knew what to say.”

The first memorial Mass was for a young man from Cantor Fitzgerald. In the eulogy, his brother, a Marine in full dress uniform, encouraged those present to write down all the stories they could remember about the deceased, so that his six-month-old daughter could learn about the father she would never know.

The signs of 9/11 endure, etched in people’s lives, bodies, and choices. A bereavement counselor on staff conducts a weekly group.

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<sup>13</sup> Around 1888 the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth started Saint Patrick’s School, and the parish followed. The Sisters remained until 1946.



After the trauma of September, the family minister has had to deal with several late-term miscarriages and stillborn infants. A parishioner decided to resign from his high-paying job in New York City to spend more time with his children. Another parishioner organized a community-wide outreach to victims: young people are available to mow lawns and shovel snow, seniors to baby-sit, professionals to offer legal and medical advice.

The parish staff were called to minister not only to those who grieved lost loved ones, but to those troubled because they were elsewhere on 9/11 instead of at their World Trade Center jobs. A Sunday babysitting service was set up, but families now are less likely to leave their children. "They want to sit together," Sister Barbara said. Uncharacteristically, "the parish is almost in silence at Sunday masses."

#### *Sisters of Charity Hospitals, Staten Island*

By week's end, the two S.V.C.M.C. hospitals on Staten Island had treated about 200 people, mostly fire and rescue personnel. Counseling services, on site and through a mobile crisis unit, were in great demand for the many workers in Manhattan's financial district who live a short ferry ride away on Staten Island.

A few nights after 9/11 Bayley Seton nurses responded to a call, thinking they were needed at Ground Zero. Instead they were asked to accompany exhausted rescue workers on their ferry ride back home. One nurse told of a man who sat in silence while she bathed his eyes. Finally, he stammered, "Can I talk to you?", then choked out between sobs: "Body parts don't bother me, but when I turned over a piece of concrete and saw a head with no neck, squashed, I couldn't touch it for a long time." Another man could not talk at all; a firefighter, he had lost most of his company.

The caring spirit at Bayley Seton was typical of the beyond-the-call-of-duty response everywhere. Some staff stayed on site all week. Administrators walked the halls asking, "How are you? Your family? Do you need to talk? How can I help?"

#### *Paterson, New Jersey*

**Doctor James Pruden** was chair of the emergency department and of the disaster committee at Saint Joseph's Regional Medical Center, Paterson.<sup>14</sup> He was called to Ground Zero with 150 other professionals

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<sup>14</sup> Founded by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Convent Station, New Jersey, in 1867, Saint Joseph's is an 800-bed tertiary care facility and trauma center.

from the state's Urban Search and Rescue Team and spent ten unforgettable days there.

Even for an experienced emergency medical professional, the impact was "intense, unforgettable. No words can describe the roller coaster of emotions." Yet amid unspeakable destruction, Doctor Pruden found moments of inspiration, beauty, even poetry. On day eight, he remembers, his spirits lifted when the first bird reappeared, followed the next day by a whole flock. He was heartened to witness his group becoming welded together as a working team. At first the work of street sweepers, raking bottles and snack food wrappers left by rescue workers, seemed incongruous against the backdrop of such vast devastation. He soon began to understand it as a symbol of the slow but certain return of order replacing chaos.

As he brought his medical expertise to this emergency, he praised his colleagues back at Saint Joseph's: "I never felt so grateful for the prayers, good wishes, and outpouring of support from the institution. I was torn because I was away from my responsibilities at the hospital during this disaster. But administrators and staff alike told me not to worry about a thing. Everyone asked, 'What can we do to help?' Saint Joseph's mission – to provide care regardless of need and ability to pay – is ingrained in people here," he said with quiet pride.

#### *Jersey City, New Jersey*

The tragedy affected low-income workers and high-salaried professionals, residents of city tenements and suburban commuters alike. Counselors and therapists were in great demand. **Sister Jacqueline Carey** (S.C.–N.J.), then principal of Saint Mary's High School, Jersey City, asked **Sister Rosemary Moynihan** (S.C.–N.J.), a social worker currently on her congregation's leadership team, to speak with students in the aftermath of the attack. Saint Mary's serves many minority students with family members who worked in and around the World Trade Center. In groups, students shared their memories of waiting all night for a cousin who never came home, of the awful smell that drifted across the river, of these scenes of violence as close as their backyard.

Sister Rosemary, with **Sister Patricia Mennor** (S.C.–N.J.), also gave several briefings on crisis counseling to mental health professionals in the Morristown area at the request of a local mental health center.

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**Warren Ververs** is program coordinator of Saint Mary's Hospital Behavioral Health Program,<sup>15</sup> a Sisters of Charity hospital in Passaic, ten miles from Ground Zero. Contacted on 9/11 by the state Division of Mental Health, the agency sent staff to the family assistance center set up at Liberty State Park. A volunteer firefighter himself, he helped debrief rescue workers who raced to Ground Zero. After twelve or more hours they needed "a chance to vent, so they could go back." Ververs also counseled corporate workers temporarily relocated from Manhattan across the Hudson River to Fort Lee, Weehawken, and Jersey City. They were trying to hold their companies together while watching smoke billowing and buildings collapsing outside their windows. Over and over he heard survivors wondering where they would be if they had not taken the day off on 9/11, overslept, or were delayed as they dropped their children off at the daycare center. Many who had escaped had little thought for their own trauma, but wanted desperately to help others worse off.

The relationships that he and his staff maintain with community, religious, and cultural organizations helped them to get the word out that help was available. They went to area schools to help children deal with their feelings. "We wouldn't let anyone down," he said. "We would hand deliver them, hook them up to ongoing services." "Our agency was wonderful," he said, "a tremendous community of caring."

### *Manhattan*

Many psychologists, psychotherapists, counselors and spiritual directors volunteered their time. **Sister Jean Flannelly** (S.C.–N.Y.) counseled families of victims at New York City's emergency family center on the 54<sup>th</sup> Street pier, and **Sister Vivienne Joyce** (S.C.–N.Y.) gave education sessions to clergy of different faiths on responses to tragedy. Sisters cooked and served meals for firefighters and rescue workers, offered help to the Red Cross and Salvation Army, and brought clean supplies and encouraging words as workers at Christopher and West Streets changed shifts.

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<sup>15</sup> Saint Mary's Hospital is a 200-bed community hospital founded by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth in 1895.

*Catholic Charities, Diocese of Brooklyn*

North Queens Catholic Community Center in Astoria, Queens, is one of four family centers sponsored by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Brooklyn. **Sister Mary George Barlow** (D.C.) then program director of the Family Center, reported that Astoria received about 100 calls a day and distributed about two million dollars in the first weeks after 9/11. The first level of disaster victims were the “proud poor,” she said, like the Egyptian hotel worker whose job was cut to two days. With a wife and four young children to support, he reluctantly sought help, no longer able to make ends meet. In the six months following the attack, the Family Center served 3000 families.

In the same center **Sister Aileen Holleran** (S.C.–Hal.) is program director of “Flowers With Care,” a program that teaches the florist trade to adolescent dropouts. When the program went into lockdown on 9/11, Sister Aileen was faced with sixty to seventy teenagers frantic with worry about relatives and friends. In the days afterward, she filled in for other staff members who lived some distance away. She reflected, “It was the spirit of charity that called me to come in to work, even if only to coordinate the phones.”

Long-standing Charity networks were readily activated. **Sister Sheila Ferraz** (S.C.–Hal.) organized a collection in Blessed Sacrament parish, Valley Stream, Long Island, which she sent to **Sister Barbara Buxton** (S.C.–Hal.) at the Glendale Mental Health office of Catholic Charities.

*Riverdale, New York*

The College of Mount Saint Vincent<sup>16</sup> is about fifteen miles directly north of the World Trade Center in the northwest corner of the Bronx, on the banks of the Hudson River. Classroom windows look out at a serenely beautiful scene of river, trees, and the ancient Palisades cliffs of New Jersey. On 9/11 an ecumenical prayer service with psalms and hymns of lament, compassion, and hope was held in Immaculate Conception Chapel. Three days later sisters joined students, faculty and staff in a procession to the campus’ main gate where they kept a silent candlelight vigil with the theme, “The darker it gets, the brighter our light shines.” As cars paused for the traffic light on Riverdale Avenue, many drivers signaled support.

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<sup>16</sup> The college was chartered in 1911. It began as an academy for girls founded by the Sisters of Charity of New York in 1847.

Sisters and staff living nearby gave hospitality to faculty and staff who were unable to return to their homes in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens for several days.

*"But We Go On": Another Tragedy*

Barely two months after the attack, tragedy struck New York again. On November 12, 2001, American Airlines flight 587 to Santo Domingo crashed in Rockaway, Queens, soon after taking off from J.F.K. It was the same waterfront, blue-collar neighborhood where many fire, police and rescue workers had made their home. The churches of Rockaway, Bellmore, and Belle Harbor had held post-9/11 funerals and memorial services with numbing frequency. It was the fifth airline crash for **Mary Birmingham** (S.C.–Hal. Associate) who worked at a hotel near the airport. She e-mailed the sisters, "I'm never more proud to be an Associate at times like this, when my little contribution can ease someone's pain or burden. I feel Elizabeth [Seton] alive in me during these tragedies."

A student at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in Riverdale, who had lost her brother on 9/11, lived on the block where flight 587 crashed. Three other students lost close family members.

#### IV. Charity Connections:

##### Vincentian Family Collaboration and Intercommunity Networking

Within minutes of the attack, congregations and provinces reported receiving calls, letters, and e-mails from members and friends and professional colleagues all over the world, expressing concern, prayer, and solidarity.

Two congregations of Sisters of Charity in Canada immediately responded with grace when called into service.

**Halifax, N.S.**<sup>17</sup> – About 200 passengers from Lufthansa Flight 422 have been housed by the **Sisters of Charity at Mount Saint Vincent Motherhouse** since the wee hours of September 12, 2001.

The Sisters made the offer to their local EMO contact to house stranded passengers early in the day on September 11 and they received their guests just be-

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<sup>17</sup> Congregation press releases, September 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> 2001, courtesy of Susan Cornig, director of communications, and Sr. Joan Verner, Congregation Secretary.

fore 2 A.M. on September 12. The Boeing 747, originating in Frankfurt and destined for Boston, contained citizens from Germany, the USA, as well as various other countries.

**Nadine Boutillier**, Cafeteria and Catering Supervisor at the Motherhouse, was one of the volunteers called in.... Her response was typical of dozens of Motherhouse staff who went out of their way... to help, both during their shifts and in volunteer time afterward.

'I just felt I should be doing something to help,' said Ms. Boutillier. 'It didn't matter what time of day or night.'

**Paula Ringuette, P.B.V.M.**, President of the Presentation Sisters, Fargo, North Dakota, had been vacationing in Nova Scotia with family when the attack closed borders and halted travel. She asked for hospitality at Mount Saint Vincent, Halifax, and found herself among the stranded passengers from Germany, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and other places. She later wrote to her congregation about the Sisters' hospitality: "An Islamic woman had to be coaxed out of her room by one of the sisters with the promise that she was safe. As one elderly gentleman said: 'I couldn't have made it through this without the kindness of these sisters.' Wrapped in love by the sisters, each person felt the peace and security of this place at this critical time. Their kindness took root in others. Cultural and language barriers disappeared and people were reaching out to each other."

About the difficult "next step" of forgiving enemies and working to create a just world, she wrote: "The lesson from the Sisters of Charity is a good place to begin. In the midst of chaos they opened their doors and their hearts to people in need. They offered hospitality, but were never intrusive. They were sensitive to the needs of people from different cultures. Respect was the order of the day. 'What good will that do in the face of this tragedy?' you say. I say, 'It can't hurt.'"

When U.S. airports closed down on 9/11, more than twenty large international flights from Europe found themselves re-routed to Moncton, New Brunswick.<sup>18</sup> A government minister called the

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<sup>18</sup> Phone interview with Sr. Aurea Cormier, N.D.S.C., then serving with the Sisters of Charity Federation staff at the United Nations N.G.O.



In the days following September 11, crowds gather at a wall of remembrance circling Saint Paul's in lower Manhattan.

*Public Domain*

generalate of Les Religieuses de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur, also members of the Sisters of Charity Federation. Good listeners were needed who could empathize with distressed people. Many sisters in the Moncton area, including **Sister Aurea Cormier, N.D.S.C.**, responded.

Donning Red Cross jackets they waded into the crowd at the central location where passengers had been taken. They found wheelchairs for the elderly and food for the children. Sister Aurea's knowledge of French, Spanish, English, and German proved especially helpful. Mostly though, the sisters just listened and offered a calm, reassuring presence.

The people of Moncton transported passengers to their own homes for a shower, a meal, and a night's sleep. For a month after, the Moncton papers printed thank-you letters from grateful travelers, some of whom collected and donated money for scholarships for area youngsters.

#### *A "Simple, Sacramental Act"<sup>19</sup>*

Through their Crisis Response Initiative (C.R.I.), the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Ohio, sponsored a team of sisters and laywomen who

<sup>19</sup> Edited from Sr. Mary Lou Knapke, S.C., letter to Motherhouse Sisters and Sisters of Mother Margaret Hall (November 18, 2001); Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati newsletter, Mary Kay Gilbert, "Responding to the Needs," *Intercom* (December 2001); Eileen Connelly, OSU, "Crisis team treks to Manhattan," *The Catholic Telegraph* (April 19, 2002).

traveled to Manhattan in late March 2002, to minister to rescue workers. Among them were Cincinnati **Sisters of Charity Ramona Chisholm**, a psychiatric nurse who performed reiki, a mode of healing touch, **Martha Walsh**, a nurse and member of the congregation's leadership team, and **Mary Fran Davisson** and **Mary Lou Knapke**, both licensed massage therapists.

Sister Mary Lou had traveled to the site of the 9/11 tragedy on two previous occasions in November 2001 and January 2002 as part of the Ohio Massage Disaster Relief Teams. For a week at a time, round the clock, they listened, massaged, touched, and comforted. Sister Mary Lou, who believes that "massage therapy is a human ministry to human exhaustion and human pain," discovered that the exhausted rescue workers were deeply grateful for "the simple sacramental act" of human touch.

Sister Ramona, who gave reiki to the rescue workers, said they appreciated having "someone touch them, listen to them, and experience the healing power of Christ," amid their powerful emotions of anger, sadness, and confusion. Many of the workers she massaged, said Sister Mary Fran, would talk at first "but then go into a quiet and reflective space, which is what they needed."

Sister Mary Lou was surprised to find that "the New York police and fire departments are 95% Roman Catholic. Once these very tired, but gentle, disciplined police men and women and fire personnel discovered I was a Roman Catholic sister, they would brighten, rise to their feet, take my hand, and say: 'Sister, what are you doing here? Why did you come all the way from Cincinnati?' Imagine, they responded to me that way, because of all the ways that Sisters have touched them in their lives. We can be deeply proud of that."

Sister Mary Lou gave Mother Seton medals to rescue personnel, asking police to put them in their cruisers, or firefighters to place the medal on the streets near Ground Zero, "so that as [they] rode by, or walked near, [they] would know that Mother Seton was there for [them]."

Returning to Cincinnati after her November tour of duty in New York, Sister Mary Lou approached the congregation's leadership council for support for a return visit. They fully agreed that this response to these difficult times fit with their mission, and instituted the C.R.I. (Immediately after 9/11, the congregation had sent significant contributions to Saint Vincent's Medical Center, Manhattan, and other relief agencies.) Sister Martha, who had been in New York attending the Sis-



ters of Charity Federation N.G.O. meeting at the U.N. on 9/11, commented, "The Twin Towers were close to where Mother Seton lived, so returning to New York was a reminder of our roots."

In the fall of 2001, the massage therapists worked out of two locations: St. Paul's Chapel, adjacent to Ground Zero, and the Washington Square United Methodist Church, one mile away. They stayed in a homeless shelter run by the Church. In March of 2002, working with local agencies, they ministered at three sites: the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island where debris from the W.T.C. was being taken, and two sites for police and fire personnel and their families.

Sister Mary Lou was very aware of the spiritual and emotional support of her congregation. "While there I felt a solid grace within myself, and I moved calmly, surely, and confidently, always realizing that an entire community of strong, wonderful women was holding onto me and to the entire team. I am happy and proud that I am a Sister of Charity. I represented us as very best I could, in a deeply human, deeply chaotic, deeply humbling, deeply graced situation."

*Silent, little handprints reach out to strangers*<sup>20</sup>

The handprints that comprise the giant flag in the gymnasium at Saint Gregory Barbarigo School [Stony Point, New York] look like stars and stripes from a distance.

Each of the more than 450 prints comes from a student or staff member at Saint Philip Catholic School in Crafton, Pennsylvania, about 50 miles from the site where a hijacked plane crashed near the Somerset County, Pennsylvania, airport.

"They wanted to do something to show they were caring and praying and concerned about the loss of life" at the World Trade Center, said **Sister Geri Marr** (S.C.-PA), Saint Philip's principal....

The flag is a gift from the children of Saint Philip's to their counterparts in Rockland [a county within commuting distance of Manhattan] – and through them, to those in New York affected by the disasters of September 11, Marr said. [A 1982 alumnus of the school died in the Trade Center attack.]

[When the flag arrived in mid-October of 2001, Saint Gregory's principal, Sister Kathleen] Gorres had it hung in the gymnasium and told the students the flag's story. She let each "child come up and touch

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<sup>20</sup> Edited from a reprint in *Newsletter*, Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania (October 19, 2001); originally appeared: *The Journal News.com* which originates in Westchester, Rockland, and Putnam counties, New York.

one of the handprints and try to match hand to hand.”

...Gorres said, “These little kids were feeling so helpless. You hear about connections being made and we try to impress upon the kids what we do, what we feel, what we think doesn’t just stay with you alone, it touches others. This is an expression of sorrow, of empathy.

“Their request was that, whatever school it went to, that the kids go up and match their handprint to one of their hands: ‘That way, we really would have touched you,’” Gorres was told.

...Students at both schools have touched the flag in awe and something like reverence, their principals said. When the flag was first displayed in front of Saint Philip’s school, the children stood before it in silence and many bowed their heads with clasped hands.

“It was almost a sacred thing, a prayer experience,” Marr said. “It was beautiful.”

#### *Saint Vincent de Paul Society (S.V.D.P.)*

The Vincentian Family (Eastern US) collaborated in a pre-Thanksgiving day of prayer and fasting to support the annual program of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society to feed the hungry of New York during the holidays.

At the Vincentian Family Leadership Meeting held in Princeton, New Jersey, in mid-October **Vincent Reilly**, executive director of the New York City Council of S.V.D.P., spoke of the Society’s urgent need for funds. The tragedy of 9/11 had lowered the amount normally coming from the Wall Street financial community at a time when demand had dramatically increased. Typically, the Society serves approximately 10,000 poor and hungry people at its annual Thanksgiving and Christmas meals.

**Reverend Thomas McKenna** encouraged their effort in a November 1 letter sent to Vincentian Fathers and Brothers of the Eastern Province.

#### *Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania<sup>21</sup>*

**Sister Thomas Joseph Gaines** (S.C.–PA), a member of the National Association of Catholic Chaplains, responded to a call by the Red Cross to join a team of clergy trained to provide spiritual care, grief and bereavement counseling to victims of disasters.

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<sup>21</sup> Edited from the *Newsletter*, Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania (December 7, 2001).

A SAIR (Spiritual Aviation Incident Response) team is comprised of up to eight individuals who provide management, leadership and guidance to the local clergy at the scene of a disaster.

Sister dedicated her service in memory of Todd Weaver, who died September 11 on the 94<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center. Todd was the son of a dear friend.

### **V. Inventive to Infinity: Charity for the Long Haul**

*Society of Saint Vincent de Paul responds to victims of terrorism<sup>22</sup>*

**International** – The International Council President, **Jose Ramon Diaz Torremocha**, and members throughout the world, expressed their solidarity with those affected and the Vincentians aiding the victims and their families. The International Council assisted the United States Council by putting information and appeal letters on the Ozanamdesk Website.<sup>23</sup>

**National** – The Council of the United States, through National Disaster Chairman **Sam Carocci** and the National Office Staff, attempted to contact the affected Council areas (New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania) immediately to advise them of the support available from the National Disaster Fund. \$125,000 was sent to assist the individuals and Councils in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut areas.

Messages of solidarity and prayer were sent. Messages were sent to National Officers and Regional Chairs to join in prayer with the Mass of Frédéric Ozanam that was offered at the National Office. A National Appeal Letter from President **Eugene Smith**, and a press release, was posted on the National Website and sent to Councils throughout the United States internationally challenging them to raise \$1,000,000 to assist those in need. Press releases were sent to Councils and to U.S. national media outlets inviting all concerned to join the Society in its support of the victims.

**Regional** – **Ray Sickinger**, Northeast Regional Chair, and **Pete Jeffrey**, Eastern Regional Chair, contacted the affected Councils and expressed the solidarity of their respective regions with the Councils affected by the disaster. Each worked with the Councils and the National

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<sup>22</sup> Reported on < famvin.org >, the Vincentian family website, October 15, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> < www.ozanet.org >

Disaster Committee to ensure funding for any initial requests for financial assistance.

**Councils** – The Diocesan Council of Rockville Centre [New York] immediately mobilized a response to the disaster by contacting their conference members needing assistance and / or funds. The Council prepared and distributed a resource manual to assist Vincentians helping those immediately affected by the disaster. A Disaster Task Force Group of seven was established to work together to coordinate the response and distribution of diocesan disaster funds.

The Archdiocesan Council of New York, Diocesan Council of Rockville Centre, Manhattan District Council, and the Brooklyn District Council began the first of many meetings to coordinate their response to the disaster. Planning meetings continue to occur with Catholic Charities, various Dioceses, the United Way and agencies of the Health and Welfare Council.

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Bethpage, a suburb of New York, is raising money to assist families who, in addition to the loss of loved ones, are expecting a financial crisis following this terrible tragedy. The heavy rise in unemployment will be devastating – just in the World Trade Center alone there were 50,000 jobs. The money will be distributed through the Society's network of volunteers. All contributions will be used exclusively to assist families affected by this disaster regardless of their race, religion, or nationality.

The Council of Washington D.C. began its response to the disaster at the Pentagon, working closely with Catholic Charities USA that is headquartered in the area.

Because the fourth plane crashed southwest of the Altoona-Johnstown Council area, they began a creative response program to assist the 44 victims of flight 93. Using proceeds from its seven Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Thrift Stores as a base, the Council organized a fundraising campaign that will send the collected funds (from the stores, from local Vincentians and from the public) to the Councils that will be assisting the families of these victims. The Society's seven Thrift Stores contributed all sales proceeds for one week in October. Together with cash contributions from the Society's volunteers, it was expected that this initial funding will raise \$25,000.

Councils throughout the United States began contributing to the National Disaster Fund to help ease the pain of thousands of fellow Americans affected in so many ways by this indescribable tragedy. The National Council received over \$350,000 during the first month of the

“Attack on America SVDP Campaign,” significantly helping to reach the \$1,000,000 goal.

**Conferences** – Conferences in the affected areas are responding at a very personal level. Their works include home visitation and caring support, direct food and financial assistance to victim families and the many individuals and families displaced by the disaster, as well as burial assistance.

In New York, Council President **Ed Keane** serves on the New York Police Department and is directly engaged with victims and their families at the disaster site.

It is anticipated that the disaster relief and recovery effort will require Vincentian service and significant financial assistance for a long period of time. **Jim Dilts**, Executive Director for the Diocesan Council of Rockville Centre states, “Some basic facts have already become evident. We must defer to and refer to the first response agencies, namely the Red Cross (by Congressional mandate), FEMA and VOAD. They, as well as state, city and Uniformed Services funds, are currently providing food, shelter, utilities, bereavement counseling and day-to-day living expenses. It is expected that six to eight weeks from now the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul will see a surge in requests for assisting families of the deceased as well as a significant number of job-displaced individuals that may last for a number of years. Sam Carocci, National Disaster Chair, reported at the recent National Meeting in Detroit that, as history shows, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul will be present and very visible in the secondary stages of recovery and when all possible assistance has been completed, the Society’s volunteers will be the very last to leave. The commitment and generosity of our members and those who join with us in this work will continue to be challenged.”

### *Small Miracles*

**Patricia Cooney Devaney** (S.C.–N.Y. Associate) was captured by the bittersweet stories of widows expecting babies after the deaths of their husbands on 9/11. Pat asked in the *Associate Newsletter*, Sisters of Charity of New York, April 2002, “Could we, Associates and Sisters, do more than just give a donation? Could we carry our charism like embers to these women about to give birth while dealing with grief and uncertainty?” Working closely with **Sister Mary Gallagher** (S.C.), and members of the congregation’s Associate Relationship team, Pat and her husband Frank formulated a concrete response, a program

they dubbed *Small Miracles*.

With the help of twenty Associates and several Sisters, Pat contacted the widows / expectant mothers to determine if there were needs that could be addressed in a personal way. Her letter read in part: "This letter comes to you from a group of women, Associates and Sisters of Charity, to offer congratulations on the birth of your baby and condolences on the loss of your husband. It comes to you – a special person – a new proud mother who has experienced the joy of a new life, a small miracle, in the wake of tremendous loss and pain."

Sixteen new mothers responded and were paired with an Associate or Sister, a phone mentor to determine ongoing needs and provide support. Where appropriate, mentors visited new moms and babies at home, bringing handmade afghans, blankets, sweaters, stuffed animals, and a willingness to listen. The program continues to be in contact with about forty widows on the mailing list. To Pat, the babies are "small miracles, proof that life, like the embers and the Charism of Charity, goes on."<sup>24</sup>

#### *Changing Hearts and Minds through Education*

Colleges and universities founded by the Sisters of Charity and the Vincentians made trauma counseling, grief support, and spiritual direction available, held liturgies, candlelight vigils, prayer services, and fund-raising events, and sponsored lectures and programs to help students explore theological, political, historical, and psychological issues raised by the events of 9/11. Among the many campus events were the following:

- **The College of Mount Saint Vincent, Riverdale, New York**, held several forums, including one on "God Then and Now: God's Presence in the Tragedies and Joys of Life." In his Christmas message, President **Charles Flynn** wrote, "At the Mount, we work, not only to open professional opportunity for our students, but also to show the sustaining embrace of faith. The world needs what we seek to offer, and we need each other.... We will make this a better world."

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<sup>24</sup> For more information, e-mail Patricia Cooney Devaney, S.C., at <pdfmd@aol.com>

- At the **College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey**<sup>25</sup> students provided child care services for neighbors who lost a spouse at the World Trade Center. A wall of remembrance was placed in the student center for those wishing to leave a message about the tragedy. Special panel discussions and "Writing Through Grief" workshops were held. Special outreach was made to Muslim students on campus. **Sister Francis Raftery** (S.C.–N.J.), college President, wrote, "As a Catholic college, we remind every member to guard against feelings of prejudice or fear toward any ethnic, religious, racial, or national group. The terrible crimes we have witnessed have given us even stronger resolve to be people of peace and solidarity with our sisters and brothers all over the world."
- The father of a staff member at **DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois**, died in the attack on the Pentagon. Todd Beamer, one of the heroes of flight 93 that crashed in rural Pennsylvania, was an alumnus of the graduate school of business. He was honored at DePaul's 2002 commencement. The university was closed on 9/11 in the wake of rumors that Chicago's Sears Tower was also a terrorist target. That evening, more than 500 attended an unannounced memorial Mass at Saint Vincent's church. Special efforts were made to ensure the safety of Arab and Muslim students on all campuses.
- **Sister Deborah Humphreys** (S.C.–N.J.) taught a Human Diversity class at **Rutgers University** ("the most culturally diverse campus in the nation"). She led students to reflect on the lessons of 9/11, "from our limited knowledge of other cultures... to the [discrepancy between] compensation for the one who eats at Windows on the World [the famed restaurant located at the top of the Twin Towers] and the one that cleans the dishes."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Excerpts from a report of February 25, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> E-mail, dated May 9, 2002.

The 2001 topic for the ongoing theological reflection process of the Sisters of Charity of New York was scheduled to be "Church." In the name of the congregation's theology advisory committee, **Sister Theresa Capria** (S.C.-N.Y.) wrote,<sup>27</sup> "As ecclesial women invited to be attentive to the signs of the times, we could not ignore the events of September 11, 2001, and so we added to this segment on Church a theological reflection on the World Trade Center disaster using material provided by [the Intercommunity Center for Justice and Peace, New York]." The I.C.J.P. booklet was titled "Sifting Through What We Are Left With." Sister Theresa's letter invited a contemplative re-reading of Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World against the background of 9/11. Participants were asked to visit Ground Zero in spirit, in the company of Elizabeth Seton who lived near there. "How would she feel looking at the steeple of Saint Paul's [Chapel] as the World Trade Center collapsed behind it? What would she say to us? What does it mean to be ecclesial women and men in a country and world reeling from a day of terror?"

### *Systemic Efforts*

Among others, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, Halifax, set up a fund to help a sister receive training in bereavement counseling, to seek counseling for herself relative to the attack, or to help a sister's work situation if it had lost funding in the aftermath of 9/11. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, New York, created a fund for immediate local needs, with special concern for those who might fall between the cracks and be unable to access other sources of help. Through the efforts of **Sister Kathryn Anne Connelly** (S.C.-Cin.), then superintendent of schools in the archdiocese of Cincinnati, ninety schools raised almost \$90,000 to cover the tuition of students who lost parents or whose parents lost their jobs as a result of the tragedy. The money was sent to **Sister Dominica Rocchio** (S.C.-N.Y.), superintendent of schools in the archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. Commented Sister Dominica, this Charity connection was "an example of how relationships (and Elizabeth Seton was one for relationships) are points of grace... in ways that we can never predict or imagine."

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<sup>27</sup> Letter of November 2001.



The economic aftershocks from the September 11 disaster will only intensify the hardships faced by America's working poor, and will be felt far beyond the epicenters of the terrorist attacks, testified Catholic Charities USA on October 15, 2001, before the Senate Finance Committee's Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy. **Sharon M. Daly**, vice president for social policy, said it is more important now than ever for Congress to take steps to aid the working poor. "These domestic needs [an adequate minimum wage, more childcare assistance, affordable housing, and health care for the millions of uninsured] will be exacerbated by the economic downturn that appears to be deepening since the September 11th attacks," she said.<sup>28</sup>

## VI. Theological Reflections

"Saint Vincent de Paul lived in a period of war and strife. He knew the motivations for war from his relationship with both the French royalty and the poor, the consequences of war in the demands of the suffering, as well as the human goodness generated by war."<sup>29</sup> Vincent's prayer could well be ours in the aftermath of 9/11: "Make me hold my own in the face of adversities, without trying to escape or evade the difficulties of life in this world."<sup>30</sup> He also tells us:

We must hold ourselves prepared for any event. When we are suffering, let us hope that God will deliver us; when God gives us consolations, let us lay up a store of gentleness and patience to make good use of later trials.

Pray that God will unite hearts. War on all sides; misery on all sides....

The alms, which thanks be to God and your kindness, have been sent to this province and which have been distributed so impartially by your delegates, have

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<sup>28</sup> Reported on < famvin.org >, the Vincentian family website, October 15, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> This and the concluding quotes are from a prayer card created by the Vincentian Center for Church and Society, Saint John's University, courtesy of John Freund, C.M.

<sup>30</sup> Conference #208, in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920-1926), 12:286. Hereinafter cited as *CED*.

given life to millions of people reduced to direst poverty by the calamities of war. The people feel humble gratitude for your goodness.

**Robert P. Maloney** (C.M.), Vincentian superior general, wrote that he had decided to use peace as the theme of his Advent 2001 letter even before 9/11. Excerpts follow:

Now, after the hijacking of four airplanes, the brutal killing of more than 6000 innocent people,<sup>31</sup> the collapse of the Twin Towers, the destruction of a large portion of the Pentagon, and the crash of a final plane near Pittsburgh as its passengers struggled with terrorists – events witnessed on television by people throughout the world – the theme of peace imposes itself. Somehow, as I write, I fear that reflections on peace may sound hollow this year, that the angels' song may seem only a dream, almost an idyllic fairytale. So many conflicting emotions fill our hearts. In the face of such terrible violence, we instinctively feel compelled to protect the innocent, even with force, and to assure that lives will not be so senselessly destroyed in the future. An innate human longing for justice urges us to find and punish those who plotted to take human life so callously or helped others to do so. Confronted with what so many describe as “unthinkable” and “incomprehensible,” we yearn for a restored sense of security....

.... The question that keeps popping into my mind in these days, and that I ask others too, is: “What would you do if you were the decision-maker who had to formulate an effective response to terrorism right now?” I do not profess to know the answer to that question, but I ask the Lord to give wisdom to world leaders, and to us, that we might choose paths that respect innocent human life, even though much inno-

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<sup>31</sup> *Editor's note:* the final estimate of fatalities, as of September 2002, ranged from 2,800 to 3,000 people.

cent human life was brutally destroyed on September 11....

.... What does our Vincentian tradition teach us about peace and peacemaking? Three levels are evident in Saint Vincent's life and works:

1. Personal. Saint Vincent holds up gentleness to his followers as a key missionary virtue. He tells the rather combative François du Coudray that the conversion of others is possible only through gentleness, humility and patience.<sup>32</sup> He assures another priest of the Mission that we can win the poor over only by gentleness and personal goodness.<sup>33</sup> He insists that personal peace is essential to good judgment. "I think," he writes near the end of his life, "that the ability to discern things is granted only to those who are gentle."<sup>34</sup> Vincent's life matched his words. Abelly tells us that many regarded him as the gentlest man of his time.

2. Relational. Saint Vincent encouraged the members of the Congregation of the Mission to work at healing broken relationships. One of the goals of "the mission" was reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> Actually, missionaries frequently reported to Saint Vincent about their success in settling quarrels. It is clear from his letters that Vincent himself attempted to mediate many disputes in his lifetime among the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and others whom he counseled.

3. Societal. In the wars that afflicted France during the mid-17th century, Vincent worked actively as a peacemaker. He witnessed the ravages of violence firsthand and saw the grief that war brought to the poor especially. Around 1640, during the civil strife in Lorraine,

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<sup>32</sup> CED 1:66.

<sup>33</sup> CED 4:52.

<sup>34</sup> CED 12:190.

<sup>35</sup> *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, 11:8.

he went to Cardinal Richelieu, knelt before him, and pleaded for peace. Richelieu refused, responding that peace did not depend on him alone. In 1649, during the civil war, he left Paris quietly, crossed battle lines and forded a flooded river (at almost 70 years of age) to see the Queen and beg her to dismiss Mazarin, whom he regarded as responsible for the war. He also spoke directly to Mazarin himself. But again his pleas went unheeded. Mazarin, in return, noted in his secret diary that Vincent was his “enemy.”

This Vincentian tradition poses three questions for us at Advent time:

1. Are we peaceful ourselves?
2. Do we attempt to heal broken relationships?
3. Do we work in some practical way toward world peace? How?

As this Advent begins, under the shadow of violence, I think of the words of a Jewish philosopher: “Every moment can be a small door through which the Messiah can enter.” The Lord comes not just as the Rising Sun. He often arrives in the night, like a lover. At this time of darkness where there are “wars and rumors of war,” I encourage you to be at peace and to seek peace.<sup>36</sup>

All genuine peace is built on justice as its foundation. When Isaiah envisioned the Messiah he wrote: “Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.”<sup>37</sup> Is that too just an idyllic dream? Meister Eckhart, a 13th-century mystic, said that God is bringing the world to birth, but that every birth is painful. This Advent we surely recognize how painful the coming of the Lord in his fullness is. But, with you, in spite of the darkness, I believe in the Lord’s coming and in his gift of peace.

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<sup>36</sup> Mt 24:6.

<sup>37</sup> Is 11:5-6.

**Sister Betty Ann McNeil** (D.C.) reflected on the lessons of Elizabeth Seton's faith during a lifetime of trials and reversals.<sup>38</sup>

Elizabeth learned from her childhood to trust God firmly. At that time she first knew the terror of uncertainty. In her journal, *Dear Remembrances*, she wrote about an incident that had stayed with her since she was twelve years old, "a night passed in sweat of terror saying all the while OUR FATHER." The circumstances of this incident are unknown but prayer was Elizabeth's source of strength and consolation as it must be for us today....

Elizabeth looked beyond the pain of her immediate situation and tried to view it in light of eternal life with her loving Creator. She is a model for us on our journey of faith. Her example invites us to be ever conscious of the unending care of Divine Providence. "How little is all that passes with this life," Elizabeth advised Cecilia O'Conway, the first Sister of Charity, reminding her that "we must be so careful to meet our grace. If mine depended on going to a place to which I had the most dreadful aversion, in that place there is a store of grace waiting for me." Elizabeth invites us to acknowledge our fears in the face of threatening situations and events. In all circumstances there is a mysterious potential of grace. As people of faith, we know that God is always with us.

Many of Elizabeth Seton's words speak to us in times of tragedy. From the Staten Island quarantine station where her physician father treated sick immigrants embarking from ships, she wrote to her sister-in-law and confidante Rebecca Seton, "I cannot sleep – the Dying, and the Dead, possess my mind... my side window is open and wherever I look there are lights – tents are pitched...."<sup>39</sup> On the day her husband died in Italy, after she prepared his body for burial, she wrote a telling

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<sup>38</sup> "Sweat of Terror," excerpts from an unpublished essay.

<sup>39</sup> [July 1801], CWI: 181-182; original in Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, Maryland (hereinafter ASJPH), 1-3-3-8:52.



*Saint Elizabeth and Figure* by Sr. Margaret Beaudette, S.C., sculpted in bronze, 1983, for Bayley Seton Hospital, Staten Island, New York.

*Courtesy of the author and artist*

journal entry for Rebecca: "Oh Oh Oh what a day... and at night crowded with the whole sense of my situation – O MY FATHER, and MY GOD."<sup>40</sup>

To the question, "Evil has shown its face in all its ugliness: what can we learn?," **Sister Jean Flannelly** (S.C.–N.Y.), a parish director of faith formation, offered three responses: "Evil, in whatever form, does not have the last word... We belong to each other – we are community.... We are vulnerable creatures whose security rests in God alone."<sup>41</sup>

At a forum at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in February 2002, campus chaplain **David Gallo**, A.A., and professor of religious studies **Sister Eileen Fagan** (S.C.–N.Y.) sounded similar themes:

September 11 rubs our nose in the ultimate reality of every human existence – that each of us, not just those in planes and towers, is going to die in a way and at a time not of our own choosing. God on September 11 was exactly where God always was. God in Jesus takes on the powerlessness of each human being in the face of evil and death.

God remains in the agony of the families who lost loved ones; he is with the families who still cling to that hope that some remains of their loved ones will be found; he is present to all those workers who still labor at Ground Zero; and he helps all of us as we struggle to make sense out of this tragedy.

**Sister Gertrude Foley**, major superior of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, Pennsylvania, reminded her sisters, "Excessive nationalism could destroy compassion, overshadow wisdom, and find meaning only in our own kind of violence." She urged that "during these days we be especially watchful of any attitude that might block us from our mission of revealing the reality and beauty of God's Love to our world."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> CWI: 275; original in Archives of Mount Saint Vincent, Riverdale, New York, N/P 110:M, II, 12.

<sup>41</sup> "Faith Notes," Saint Andrew Avellino parish, Flushing, New York, September 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Letter to her congregation, September 19, 2001.

This article has been an attempt to bear testimony to some of the ordinary and extraordinary responses of the families of Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louise de Marillac and Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton to the crisis of September 11th.

Elizabeth Seton's underlying faith in God sustained her through every difficulty. As she told Julia Scott, "God will provide, that is all my Comfort never did that providence fail me."<sup>43</sup> **David Campbell**, President and CEO of Saint Vincent's Catholic Medical Centers of New York, commented, "Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton gives us words of hope, not words of despair. What has happened in our city may indicate God is about creating something new. But God does not choose to create alone, which is why he created men and women. We bear testimony to this."

In his 2001 Christmas message the president of the College of Mount Saint Vincent, **Charles Flynn**, commented, "Grief signifies the powerful beauty of the gift of life and of love. The risk of love is frighteningly great. And in grief, the Christmas message can be intimidating: that hope and love alone hold the promise of transforming our lives together."

Each person, group, or institution whose story has been told symbolizes dozens of others. May their simple, humble acts of charity and courage remind us to trust in hope and love, and to know that God is indeed always creating something new, as we act in communion with each other, in service of those in need.

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<sup>43</sup> December 15, 1813, ASJPH 1-3-3-6:100.



**The spirit of God urges one gently to do the good that can be done reasonably, so that it may be done perseveringly and for a long time.**

**(Saint Vincent de Paul,  
letter 58, To Saint Louise, Beauvais, 1630)**