

Upstate New York parish raising funds for statue of gay '9/11 saint'

by [Sean Kirst](#) in the [September 6, 2011](#) issue

Like most Americans, Brother Edmund Dwyer was stunned by early coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C.

As he struggled to grasp the scope of the carnage, scrolling type along the bottom of his television screen announced the death of Mychal Judge, a legendary New York City fire department chaplain.

For Dwyer, the vast tragedy became painfully real. "He was a saint," said Dwyer, 90, a retired Brother of the Christian Schools who resides at Christian Brothers Academy in DeWitt, New York.

He worked closely with Judge during the 1980s, when both men comforted dying AIDS patients in New York City. Judge was killed by flying debris at the World Trade Center.

"He always wore his Franciscan robes, and he had a smiling face and a beautiful manner," Dwyer said, recalling how Judge spent hours with young men who felt abandoned.

As a tribute to his friend, Dwyer is serving on a committee at All Saints Church in Syracuse, which intends to honor Judge with a memorial. Fred Daley, pastor at All Saints, intends to ask local firefighters to attend the dedication.

While the memorial will honor those killed on September 11, Daley said the way Judge lived his life carries special meaning for the All Saints congregation.

Mychal Judge—like

Daley—was a Catholic priest who acknowledged publicly that he was a celibate gay man. In June, after months of discussion, parishioners at All Saints voted 256–3 to offer a statement of welcome to gays, lesbians and transgender men and women.

Daley said the vote meshes with his beliefs on what it means to be a Christian. "More and more, I've been called in my spiritual life and in my heart to identify with the powerless and with the broken, and I think some of that comes from my own journey as a gay person," Daley said.

The Catholic Church

teaches that homosexual acts are inherently wrong. While a new state law has legalized same-sex marriage in New York, the church does not recognize those ceremonies. Yet officials with the Diocese of Syracuse say that inviting gay men and women into a parish does not contradict church teaching. "Our hope is that all parishes are so welcoming, and it's certainly in line with who we are as Catholics," said Danielle Cummings, a diocesan spokeswoman.

Paul Lawrence, 76, an All Saints

parishioner with a gay son, said family experience taught him a simple truth about the gay community: "Once you meet these folks, you wouldn't say they were gay or not gay," he said. "You'd just say they were awfully nice people."

Meg Ksander, a staff member at All Saints,

said the journey toward the monument began last December with a series of talks by parishioners who at some point felt excluded by the Catholic Church. The congregation was especially moved by the stories of several gay men and women who spoke of how they'd spent their lives feeling ostracized.

As a result, Ksander said, a parish committee came up

with the statement of affirmation—and with the idea of a statue. "The parishioners were talking about how our young gay folk so often had no role models until recently, and [we] saw Mychal Judge as both an

interesting person and the ultimate example of a role model," said Daley, who seven years ago decided to reveal that he was gay.

He

went public as a means of support for young people struggling with their own identity, he said, and to underline that gay priests are not the cause of the child abuse scandal in the church.

"I was a Buddhist

for many years, and now I'm a returning Catholic, and that's because of the message of [All Saints] which is so pure, so beautiful, so tolerant and so spiritual in the grandest sense of the word," said Michele Mosca-Wells, a gay member of the parish.

She's also moved by the

plans to create a statue of Judge, who to her symbolizes the mission of the church. "It's a wonderful affirmation," she said, "of being an authentic Catholic community that embraces all and loves all." —RNS