

# ‘A CLEAR DAY ... THE MOST TERRIBLE DAY’

by Ed Wilkinson, Editor Emeritus

WINDSOR TERRACE — Sept. 11, 2001, was the worst day I ever spent in The Tablet office.

As I approached 310 Prospect Park West where our offices were located, I heard the news on the “Imus in the Morning” radio show. Bulletin — a plane has crashed into the World Trade Center.

I figured it was a two-seater with an amateur aviator gone wrong.

After I parked my car, I walked to the Prospect Expressway overpass and saw one tower ablaze like a Roman Candle. This was serious. I could only think about my sister who worked on the 82nd floor of the Trade Center, although I did not know which tower.

I hurried to our fourth-floor space and found those who had already arrived watching through the back window as the tragedy unfolded. TVs were clicked on. I called another family member about my sister. No one had heard anything from her.

And then the people in the office cried out that another plane had hit the building, and we all began to realize what was happening — we were under attack.

It was a Tuesday — a beautiful, clear fall day — our weekly deadline day. Most of the paper had already been made up. We began immediately ripping it apart and preparing for new stories. This was going to be a day like none other.

Nothing was going to get done for a while. We had to find out exactly what was going on. Since we had a clear view of Lower Manhattan, photographers were dispatched to the roof to capture the iconic towers on fire. The wind was blowing from Lower Manhattan towards our location in Brooklyn. Amidst the smoke were pieces of paper — and only God knows what else — blowing aimlessly in the sky.

On TV came the first notices that something bigger was taking place. Another plane had flown into the Pentagon in the nation’s capital. All planes across the country were being ordered to land immediate-

## Editor recalls what it was like working at The Tablet on that ‘day like none other’



ly. A plane crash was being reported in a field in Western Pennsylvania. The country was under attack.

At the Chancery at 75 Greene Ave., Bishop Thomas V. Daily was meeting with Msgr. David Cassato to tell him that he was being moved from pastor at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Williamsburg, to pastor of St. Athanasius, Bensonhurst. When the bishop was informed about the disaster taking place in the city, he sent an email to all pastors asking them to keep all churches open so that the faithful would have a place to console themselves and pray.

Bishop Daily then left his office and headed to St. James Cathedral-Basilica in Downtown Brooklyn to offer the televised noon Mass for peace and for the victims of what was transpiring.

Msgr. Cassato, who was a new police chaplain at the time, headed for Manhattan to see if he could be of service.

In his homily, Bishop Daily said he was “stunned” and that the events taking place were proof that “evil does lurk around us.”

As people of faith, he said, “perhaps all we can do is hold a crucifix in our hands, look at Jesus, and talk to him for consolation.”

He also suggested that special Masses and prayer services be scheduled around the diocese so that parishioners “may come together in community to seek our Lord’s help and grace during this crisis.”

Back in the office, we still had a newspaper to publish. Where were the stories for us?

Msgr. Guy Puglisi, the diocesan Superintendent of Schools, was teaching a class at Bishop Ford High School when he was informed about the attack that was underway. He immediately went to the school’s chapel and led students in prayer.

He also issued three emails: all schools were to be kept open until a parent came to pick up his or her child; all schools would be closed on Wednesday, Sept. 12; and special arrangements were to be made for students who had family members working in the World Trade Center.

He then visited four schools: St. Francis Xavier and St. Saviour’s, both in Park Slope; Sacred Hearts-St. Stephen, Carroll Gardens; and St. Charles Borromeo, Brooklyn Heights.

“Everything in these schools were in the best of order,” he reported, adding that he had seen pandemonium in the streets of Downtown Brooklyn where soot-covered people were making their way across the Brooklyn Bridge to escape Manhattan. Good Samaritans were offering coffee and water along the way, he said.

About noon, I received a call saying that my sister had made it out and was working her way up through Manhattan streets. She had walked down the stairs of the Trade Center and was in a stairwell when the second plane hit. She later recalled that

all she remembered was the smell of jet fuel. Members of her firm who had exited through a different staircase all were killed.

In our diocesan building at 310 Prospect Park West, Msgr. John Bracken, the Vicar for Temporalities, called for employees to assemble in the chapel where he celebrated Mass. Instead of a homily, he offered a few words, saying it was time for reverent silence.

Our Lady of Perpetual

Help Basilica, Sunset Park, and St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Flatlands, were designated as crisis management centers, where the public could go for counseling and other help.

Word began to spread that Brooklyn priest Msgr. John Delendick, a chaplain with the Fire Dept., had not been heard from and was feared dead. It wasn’t until hours later that he finally surfaced alive. As the Towers began to crumble, he was nearby in the streets. He escaped by jump-

ing into the back of a FDNY EMT unit that whisked him away.

The Tablet’s editorial for that Sept. 15 edition declared, “It must be noted that we all have lost more than loved ones. In a very real sense, we have lost our innocence. We have lost our way of life. We have lost the feeling of security within our borders. Our ability to regard our neighbors, especially those different from ourselves, with openness and trust has been compromised.

“Let us pray then that we will soon see a

day where we are united in understanding with all our fellow inhabitants on this planet. Only then will we forgive each other our real or imagined trespasses.”

Ironically, page 10 of that edition contained a photo from the Great Irish Fair that had taken place the weekend prior. Next to Bishop Daily was FDNY Captain Timothy Stackpole, who returned to work after a lengthy medical recovery on Sept. 10 and was killed at the Trade Center command post on Sept. 11.

Our front page, which began arriving in mailboxes two days after the tragedy, showed the Twin Towers with smoke pouring out from their tops. The headline read, “Let Us Pray.”

For the next three months, our banner on Page 1 contained the American flag. It wasn’t replaced until December when Advent candles took its place.

Our edition the following week chronicled the prayers and remembrance that were taking place in our parishes. The lead headline read, “Response to Terror — Flag Waving and Prayers.” Catholic Charities posted services that were available at its offices. The Knights of Columbus established a “heroes fund.” Tablet reporter Roger Payne penned an open letter to his two-month-old nephew, Evan, in which he hoped that the World Trade Center tragedy would turn out to be “the flashpoint that empowers world peace.”

There was also the obituary of Fire Dept. chaplain Father Mychal Judge, OFM Cap., who had been a concelebrant at the Mass in Brooklyn only days before at the Great Irish Fair.

The world has not been the same since 9/11. The aftershock of that day is still being felt around the world. For weeks, The Tablet told of tributes to those who had lost their lives and the acts of heroism that were taking place by those who were left behind.

As we left the office in the evening of that fateful day, we found our cars covered with a light gray powder that had floated across the Harbor and dropped in Brooklyn to remind us that we were all part of this horrific event.

I ended my own column in the Sept. 15 issue with these words: “It’s been a terrible day here at The Tablet — indeed in the nation. When I arrived this morning, I had no idea what I would write in this space this week. I wish I didn’t have to write what I have written.”

