

Fr. Curtis Miller

September 9-10, 2023

Homily for the 23rd Sunday in O.T.

Will Jimeno was born in Colombia in 1967, and immigrated to the U.S. with his parents when he was only two. In his early years, he served as an altar boy in New Jersey. His parents raised him with a deep faith and an abiding gratitude for the opportunities in their new county. Will wanted to give back. After high school, he joined the Navy. But his real dream was to serve as a police officer back home. After his tour of duty, he went to the police academy, graduating in January 2001 and joining the Port Authority Police Department of New York and New Jersey. He had only been serving nine months, still a rookie cop, only 32 years old, on September 11, 22 years ago this week. When Will and his fellow officers heard that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center, they rushed to the scene to rescue victims. As they arrived, Will and the other officers were shocked at the scene of carnage: civilians burned, bloodied, and covered with ash, papers raining down from the sky, and then they began seeing people jumping from the floors above the burning hole in the building. Will later said it was like Armageddon, the end of the world. In all the chaos and confusion, they didn't even know that a second plane had already hit the other building over their heads. Will, his Sergeant, John McLoughlin, fellow officer Dominick Pezzulo, and a couple other officers went into the building to collect some fire fighting and rescue equipment stored there. But only a few minutes later, with a roar like a million freight trains, the South Tower collapsed above them. They ran for cover into an elevator shaft, but were buried by debris. It all happened in about ten seconds. Will and Sergeant McLoughlin were buried in the rubble, while Officer Pezzulo was able to free himself. Two other officers had been killed instantly by the collapse. Pezzulo wanted to climb out and look for help, but first he tried to dig Will out from under the slab of concrete that was pinning his legs to the ground. It was agonizing. But several minutes later, with another roar, the second tower collapsed. More shifting debris fell and Pezzulo was struck. "Willy, don't forget I died trying to save you guys." Will said he would never forget. Pezzulo fired his gun in the air in a last-ditch effort to alert someone to their location, then slumped over and died.

Will and McLoughlin, also buried several feet away, passed the time yelling to each other, making sure they both stayed conscious. Will looked up at a narrow slit of daylight, 30 feet above him. As the hours passed, the daylight faded to darkness and so did any shred of hope of rescue. The darkness was only punctuated by fireballs flashing through the debris, and the silence replaced by the eerie beeping of the fallen firefighters' equipment.

Will thought about his wife, Allison and young daughter Bianca. His wife was also seven months pregnant with their second child. He prayed, making his peace with God, thanking Him for the time he got to spend with his wife and daughter. Will asked God for only two things: that from Heaven he would be able to see his second child born and for a sip of water. He closed his eyes, resigned that he was going to die. After some time, Will saw "a Person walking toward me with a glowing white robe, no face, brown hair to the shoulder... This peace came over me... What does He have in His hands? A bottle of water. I knew at that point that it was Jesus... I woke up out of that vision...with a resurgence of fighting and hope." Will was closer to the hole to the surface and knew that if he gave up, there would be even less hope for McLoughlin. So he began to yell for help. After several hours, a couple ex-Marines, searching the rubble for survivors, heard his cries. They climbed down and spent another three agonizing hours digging Will out, and then McLoughlin. They were two of the last people recovered alive from Ground

Zero. But they were just barely alive. In the hospital, Will underwent several emergency surgeries, flatlining twice. They had to literally vacuum dust from his lungs. Two months later, still in a wheelchair, Will had the joy of seeing his daughter, Olivia, born on his own birthday.

But that was not the end of Will's story. He was devastated to learn that dozens of his friends from the police department had been killed. He struggled with survivor's guilt, sadness, and anger. This once easy-going, happy man, now had an explosive, hair-trigger temper. One day, Will flew into a rage when he couldn't find the tv remote, and was about to throw a shoe right at his wife. He had never raised a hand against anyone before, let alone his wife. Shocked, he dropped the shoe and went for a drive. Another day, his daughter spilled a drink and he grabbed her by the shirt and screamed in her face. Will was devastated to see who he had become, even with his second lease on life. He knew that he needed help. "That's when I realized," Will reflected later, "if I'm not a good husband, a good dad, a good example, then the terrorists win." Will sought counseling. It took several attempts before he found a therapist who was a good fit. He was diagnosed with PTSD, and he learned ways to cope with his anger and control his outbursts. Will says that he knows he will never be completely cured, but he finds ways to manage his symptoms through deep breaths, exercise, and prayer. Though he had to retire from the police force, Will now travels the country, speaking at schools, churches, prisons, and drug rehab centers about his experiences.

No one would dispute that Will Jimeno is a hero (except perhaps Will himself), but he still had his struggles with demons he had to confront. Each of us has to have the courage, humility, and honesty to face our own sins and problems. We can't point fingers at anyone else. That never helps. We have to take responsibility for our own actions and decisions. Only when we have removed the log from our own eye, as Jesus teaches, will we be able to help remove the speck from our neighbor's eye. And that is essential in our vocation as Christians. We can't just ignore the sins of others, the behaviors that harm themselves and others. Sure, it can be awkward and uncomfortable, but if we really love other people, then we need to love them enough to gently but firmly correct them when it's necessary.

Will's vision of Jesus amid the wreckage at Ground Zero wasn't the only time Jesus came to save him. Jesus came to Will in the loving support and challenging tough love of his wife, family, friends, and therapist, who pushed him to get the help he needed and to make the necessary changes. Now he has another chance at life. We, too, must be that supportive but challenging voice to our neighbors and loved ones. And if we've first done the work of recognizing and repenting of our own sins, going to Confession, asking forgiveness, then we will be more credible, more humble messengers of the need to turn away from sinful habits. We will be able to step aside with our pride and judgments, or desire to puff up our egos by putting others down. Instead, we will be able to humbly help others hear the voice of Jesus, calling them out of the darkness and rubble they are buried under, into a sunrise of new life.