

[Home](#)[News](#)[Viewpoints](#)[Spirituality](#)[Liturgy](#)[Entertainment](#)[Calendar](#)[Sports](#)

THIS WEEK'S HIGHLIGHTS

News

- [Thousands celebrate faith at National Catholic Youth Conference](#)
- ['The Lord is coming and we are happy'](#)
- [Simbang Gabi Schedule](#)
- [St. Joseph Center empowers individuals and families](#)
- ['Commitment to Life' weekend to be held Jan. 18-19](#)
- ['Early' deadline nears for Congress 2002](#)
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Friday, November 23, 2001

Grief and lessons in life at Ground Zero

By Brenda Rees

 [text only version](#)

As any parish priest will tell you, funerals can be emotionally draining experiences. But for Msgr. James P. Lisante, pastor at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in West Hempstead, N.Y., funerals have taken on special and unique meanings since Sept. 11.

"We lost 31 of our parishioners that day and most of them were young and in the prime of their lives. To put that in perspective, we usually had two or three young people die a year," explains Msgr. Lisante from his native New York City. "It's overwhelming and exhausting. One day, I spent from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. with funerals."



In addition to his own parish funerals, Msgr. Lisante estimates he has attended about 60 funerals for area firefighters, policemen and women and others killed in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Funerals, he says, have changed from being somber and traditional to being loud celebrations that are flooded with pain, tears and memories.

"Our funeral Masses now go on for two hours, sometimes more," explains Msgr. Lisante. "There is so much music, and five or six people will stand up for eulogies. There is humor, grief and celebration. They are intense and extremely poignant. These funerals are, in ways, teaching us how to be real for each other and what really matters."

Talking about and dealing with reactions to the terrorist's attacks has become a full-time job for Msgr. Lisante, who in addition to his duties at his parish, is the director of the Christophers, an organization that uses the media to spread the Gospel. He writes a syndicated column and has authored books on Catholic values and ideals.

He also hosts and executive produces an internationally syndicated talk show, "Christopher Closeup" that airs on more than 100 broadcast and cable outlets. Msgr. Lisante recently was in Los Angeles to tape segments of the show.

"We talked to various famous people, like model Kathy Ireland, Michael York, Dom Deluise, Lou Ferrigno and Art Linkletter about their experiences after Sept. 11," explains Msgr. Lisante. "Everyone was deeply moved by the horror and all shared in the need to do something in response."

Back in New York City, things are far from normal, according to Msgr. Lisante. "People are just waiting for the other shoe to drop and that makes us all on edge," he says relating a story of taping a special PBS episode with Bill Moyers. Msgr. Lisante was there with other clergy representatives when, at the end of the taping, the president of PBS came in and announced a bomb threat. Everyone quickly evacuated the building, but tensions were high.



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Past Issues



- [Cardinal meets with Buddhist leaders](#)
- [Regional News](#)

Viewpoints

- [Hope at Christmastime](#)
- [What kind of saints](#)
- [Truth-challenged](#)

Liturgy

- [We are called to wait and watch](#)
- [It is God who comes to us](#)

Spirituality

- [Where is Jesus being born in your presence?](#)
- [Haunting each others' dreams](#)

Sports

- [St. Bonaventure, Paraclete repeat as CIF grid champions](#)
- [Notre Dame hires O'Leary as coach](#)

Entertainment

- [Movie Reviews](#)
- [Christmas videos: What to watch with the family](#)

"Combine the horror of Sept. 11 with anthrax scares and general nervousness - we all want to know what repercussions will hit us next. We have this sense that we are up against enemies living in our midst and it's disturbing," explains Msgr. Lisante. "You can feel the heaviness here."

But life must go on, and as a pastor, Msgr. Lisante encourages his parishioners to sort out their feelings and find comfort in faith and God. There will never be any real "closure," he says, just an "evolution of grief. So many family members are still in shock, others have real anger. It's tough for the families who weren't emotionally intact before Sept. 11. They are all over the place."

Since the parish's usual bereavement groups are not designed to deal with the magnitude of pain, new groups are being formed -- one for those who have lost a young family member and another for those who lost a mother or father.



Even though citizens of New York City are deeply affected by the tragedy, Msgr. Lisante says that the universal connection is prayer. "I know a widow who was left to take care of her two autistic children," he says. "Even in her darkest moments, she says that she feels waves of prayer coming to her from across the country. What a wonderful image that is."

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[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Spirituality](#) | [Sports](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Liturgy](#) | [Viewpoints](#)
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