

MOVIE REVIEW | 'SAINT OF 9/11'

The Gentle Life of a Priest, Made Famous in Death

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

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“Saint of 9/11” is a touching elegy for the Rev. Mychal Judge, the much-loved New York City Fire Department chaplain who was one of the first to die at the World Trade Center when debris fell on his head as he was following firefighters into the lobby of the north tower. Although the film makes tentative gestures toward being a full-blown biographical portrait, it isn’t that. Directed by Glenn Holsten and narrated by Ian McKellen in a stately, funereal voice, it is a tender memorial to a complicated man who devoted his life to service.

Its hushed, reverential tone is established early on with an image of Father Judge’s body being carried from the rubble while a talking head compares the picture to a Pietà. As the stories of his good deeds accumulate, he is remembered as a charismatic, down-to-earth man of the people who lived selflessly and joyously.

Father Judge didn’t achieve his state of grace without struggle. The movie delicately approaches his twin demons — alcoholism and homosexuality — but offers no stories of carousing or of sexual misadventure. If the film doesn’t state outright that he was celibate, it strongly implies that he was. By the time of his death, at 68, Father Judge had been sober for 23 years and had saved countless lives by taking people to Alcoholics Anonymous. One man remembers living in a box on the street until Father Judge found and rescued him.

His sexual orientation, which he acknowledged to friends but kept largely hidden from his colleagues at the Fire Department, led him to work closely with the gay Catholic organization Dignity and brought him into conflict with the conservative Catholic establishment. He marched in a St. Patrick’s Day parade organized by the gay activist Brendan Fay, a prominent talking head in the film and one of its producers.

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when even medical personnel were fearful of physical contact with quarantined patients, Father Judge ministered to dying young men at St. Vincent’s Hospital and physically embraced them. Even when he encountered hostility from patients who wanted nothing to do with religion, he discovered that rubbing their feet with holy oil before talking with them would usually break down their resistance.

He is also seen in 1998 on a peace mission to Northern Ireland with a paraplegic New York police officer, Steven McDonald.

Brought up in Brooklyn, the son of Irish immigrants, Father Judge barely knew his father, who died when he was 6, and he deeply regretted not having him to look up to.

The movie’s steadily elegiac tone precludes it from creating a more lively, idiosyncratic portrait of a man who, by many accounts, was a wonderful raconteur whose gift of gab was complemented by a rollicking sense of humor. All we see of his gifts as a speaker are excerpts from solemn public appearances.

In the film’s most resonant speech he offers comfort to the families of those who died in the crash of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island in 1996. Repeated by Mr. McKellen near the end of the film, they serve as a benediction:

“God is present, loving, smiling, having received our loved ones. They are in his presence, illumined by his smile, and warmed by his love. His kingdom is enriched this day, so enriched by so many beautiful souls, so much beauty.”

SAINT OF 9/11

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Glenn Holsten; director of photography, Christopher Landy; edited by Kathleen Soulliere; music by Michael Aharon; produced by Equality Forum and Brendan Fay; released by IFC Films. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 91 minutes. This film is not rated.