Power walking along the river in the pre-dawn darkness of this November morning, I’m not looking at anything in particular, then my eyes focus then freeze on the body curled and covered against the wall of Milwaukee’s premiere downtown theater complex. Sadness sinks like a rock in my heart. The sight never gets humdrum familiar, thank God, I guess. I pray a quiet reflexive prayer, “Lord, bless this person,” as my sadness stirs into familiar thoughts sleepily forming around unfairness, inequality, and the plight of us fragile humans.

Suddenly the stillness is shaken by a long exhale from the dark sleeping form at least 20 feet away. “The breath of life,” I think. “Your spirit, O Lord, in this man,” I murmur.

And from this man lying on the ground, my mind’s eye soars up to the once twin towers of early bright dawn of September 11, and then by mid-morning, no towers—a black soot darkness falling on all of us—New Yorkers, Americans, civilized humanity. In some unhidden place deep within me, I hear this man’s breath of Spirit alongside the breath of Spirit of children, women, and men lying in a heap outside the walls of a once safe and secure world.

God breathes in, through, and out of the marvel of God’s own miraculous creation even when, and especially when, we, that creation, lie motionless in our pain and suffering. We breathe in God’s spirit when we feel weak in faith; we exhale God’s spirit when we feel strong in faith. As the psalmist measured the breaths of humans living in the Spirit, she or he could proclaim of God, “In you we live, and move, and have our being.”

And since September 11, breathing in God is perhaps more important than speaking of God. Words fall flat on the concrete of horrendously hard, emotionally flat, stone cold suffering. I try to go to the words in the New York Times in the unbelievably ordinary, yet believably extraordinary stories—maybe 10, 15, or 20 a day—each a victim. How can print hold so many thousands of them?

I go to that section of the newspaper entitled “A Nation Suffering” and then viscerally push the page away, as I see face after face, mostly young, staring out from a tragic stage where I and others will glimpse a scene in a life. And then I force myself, then get sad again, tears streaming and anger steaming, and then locked in shock in another day of despair.
Until I think of the ministry. Until I think of you. Until I think of the
good will of people — "God will" of people. Here is where the
breath of God is exhaling in what at first appears a lifeless heap of
suffering. And then holding and being held by the "God will" of
people I can let the goodness—Godness—of those stories touch me,
even when the sadness hurts.

So many of you have ministered directly to those in New York, New
Jersey, Washington, Arlington, and Pittsburgh—as neighbors and
pastors or as members of the Red Cross SAIR team. All of us have
ministered to those around us, looking up to us, looking up to our
Church, looking up to our God for consolation, for hope, for safety,
for reassurance, when the unthinkable came tumbling down in our
midst.

And all of us have been ministered to in the grace of inhaling and
exhaling God, a truth that we know deeply and experience regularly
in the heart of human encounter.

One such encounter was with Captain Ken Mekeel, the person in
charge at the Disaster Mortuary (D-Mort), at 30th Street and First
Avenue in New York City in early October. NACC CPE supervisor
Mary T. O’Neill had arranged for me to have a tour of the D-Mort
site because, as she said, “You need to see this operation.”

A block away from the intersection I heard the piercing scream of
sirens and saw the commotion at the crosswalk ahead of me. I
hurried curious as to what was happening. The ambulance was just
turning the corner and there lining the street on both sides were
police, fire, and military personnel standing still and solemn at
attention. The recovery people had found the remains of a firefighter.

Several minutes later the ambulance turned around and was exiting
D-Mort when I spotted Mary T. I was admitted through security and
was introduced to Captain Mekeel, who spent the next hour or so
walking us around the makeshift site on the street telling the stories
and introducing the people. He alluded to the departing ambulance
and told us that in this instance the remains were a clavicle and an
attached piece of material with the NYFD insignia. “We are finding
very few bodies intact, Father.”

A chapel tent stood at the corner of D-Mort with chairs set in rows
for worship, or just for workers to have a few minutes to talk with a
chaplain, or to find a quiet space and respite for themselves. I met a
priest who presided at Eucharist each day, twice on Saturdays and
Sundays in the tent, “packed full,” I was told by several bystanders.
Captain Mekeel walked us down to the hurriedly constructed plywood “walls” that cordoned off the street on the back side of this secure area. He explained that the day after D-Mort was up he noticed that someone had written a prayer in large letters on the wall. Pointing to this prayer, he paused, while we stood silently reading the words, actually praying the words, written by a rescue worker who in this instance is now a leader of prayer. He told us that a few hours later there was another prayer up there, then a poem. “I decided to let the guys do it. They needed this release.”

We walked quietly down the wall reading and praying perhaps 100 or more different expressions of hope, of faith, of love. A tear rolled down my cheek. Then another. “Today salvation has come to this house.” The spirit of Jesus echoes through the ages to the short man Zaccheus who climbed up in faith and down in hope. The faith and hope of these workers climb up and down the writings on these high plywood walls. Salvation has come to this house—a house holding the sacred remains of mortal life now immortal.

The quiet is broken by yet another siren signaling that an officer—fire or police—has been found. Captain Mekeel excuses himself and heads over to the approaching ambulance. I find myself parallel to the ambulance as the doors open and they lift out the gurney covered with a blanket with what little remains remain. I pray a commendation for the dead—for this dead person. Everyone has stopped, not just the saluting officers, but the lab techs and DNA people who have put down their saws and scalpels and looked up from their microscopes and charts, all of them pausing in a moment of silence.

Captain Mekeel mentions that this person’s remains will have a police officer assigned to it until the body part is tested and labeled and put into cold storage to await identification. I was incredulous. “You mean that an officer will be standing by those remains until they are stored?” “Yes,” he responds, “we do it out of respect for the police and fire personnel.”

Wouldn’t this be a place to pause for theological reflection with the question “What is your theology of bodily resurrection?” Or, “How does this vignette relate to the Church’s teaching on the dignity of every human person?”

The next place we go is what has become known as “Memorial Hall.” This is the size of a “basilica” next to the “chapel” I saw earlier. On one side of the hall are eight or 10 semi-trailers all filled with the remains of persons found at Ground Zero. The shock of this reality though becomes softened by the reverence of this church-like setting.
Portable wooden steps to the doors of each of the semi-trailers are lined with red carpets. At the side of the steps huge bouquets of flowers are set on stands. Memorial Hall is a cavernous section of D-Mort, open to the skies unlike the tents that canopy the work areas of this grim part in the recovering and identifying process from Ground Zero.

Until now Captain Mekeel has been able to give orders, answer questions, and solve problems with minimal interruption in our tour. He now needs to excuse himself; so the chaplains—now several have joined Mary T. and me—go to the lunch area. Even this area set up for the workers is impressive with all the donated foods, volunteer cooks and servers, and boxes and boxes of dry goods sent from schoolchildren around the country with notes and drawings of encouragement and love.

Before leaving, I seek out Captain Mekeel to thank him and say good-bye. I walk over and shake his hand. I say to him, “You know that I am a priest and that I have pastored parishes. Ken, I believe that you have been like a pastor in this setting. You have built a place where people can express their hope in writing, their faith in a chapel, and the love and reverence for the victims in a respectful ‘Memorial Hall.’ I have watched the way people interact with you. Your care for them is evident in the way they receive you.”

Tears well up in the eyes of this tough homicide detective from Queens. Though he is modest in brushing off the compliment, I think he has heard the words deep in his heart. He has heard them because they are true.

Lying in a heap of suffering, humanity is raised up from the ashes. Whether one individual human being above on a sidewalk, or thousands of human beings beneath three blocks of sidewalks, the breath of God can never be stilled. Watch not only the lingering smoke, but listen too for the living breath. We may lie motionless for a while, but not for long, and never forever.