

WITNESS TO WAR: WORLD TRADE CENTER BOMBING

The following is a statement written by Catholic League president William A. Donohue:

On September 11, the Catholic League staff looked out the window and saw the World Trade Center's Twin Towers collapse right before our eyes.

It was October a year ago that the Catholic League's national headquarters was relocated to 450 7th Avenue in New York City. We are on the corner of 34th Street and 7th Avenue. East of us across the street is Macy's department store; south of us across the street is Penn Station. Because we are on the 34th floor of a 45-story building, we are able to look down at Macy's, Penn Station and Madison Square Garden (located above Penn Station).

Some of our offices face north to Times Square; some face east to the Empire State Building (two blocks away); some face south to the downtown area. My office looks south and west.

I open the office early each morning. As I enter my office, I look out the window and see the World Trade Center right in front of me; our view of the Twin Towers is unobstructed.

Just before 9:00 a.m. on September 11, some of our staff members drew my attention to something unusual. There was a big hole in one of the World Trade Center Towers, not too far from the top. Reports quickly surfaced that a plane had hit the tower. Visibility was fantastic that day thus making it implausible to believe that this was an accident. Flames were gushing out and so was some debris. Then the other tower was hit (some saw the plane go through the building). I looked out the window and saw an enormous ball of fire go sailing into the air. We now knew that this was deliberate.

The office quickly gathered and watched the tower that was just hit crumble right before our eyes. It imploded, going straight down, almost as if pancakes fell one atop the other. Then there was an incredible sight—a gargantuan explosion and burst of smoke filled the air. It reminded us of a World War II movie.

Still standing was the first tower that was hit. At this point we just stared out the window, hardly speaking. But it didn't take long before we saw the tower collapse. It was like a replay of what we had just witnessed.

Then we learned that the Pentagon had been hit and that a plane crashed near Pittsburgh. We knew we were at war and braced for the worst. Perhaps the Empire State Building just two blocks away would be next. And then, who knows?

Manhattan was closed so we couldn't get out. Right below us we saw a mass of humanity trying to get out of Penn Station. But it was too late—the police had sealed it off for security reasons. We tried to call our loved ones but the phones were down. Even cell phones failed to work.

As noon approached I did something to break the prisoner-like condition we were experiencing. I said we were going to lunch. So we walked to 38th Street and went to Lazzara's for pizza.

Lazzara's had a TV on so we couldn't escape watching the event continue to unfold. As the waiter came to our table, I had already begun to say a prayer; he joined us. After lunch we went back to the office. Then we learned that some trains were running, so we took a chance and left. Eventually, we all made it home safely.

When I got home, there was a message on my answering machine from a reporter calling for a comment on the terrorism. I simply erased the message.

The next day I was at work at my usual time. The trains were

mostly empty but I saw no reason to close our office; some made it in, others did not. Looking out the window was more smoke. But there were no Twin Towers.

Our hearts go out to all the surviving members of those who perished. We are especially grateful to all those police officers, firefighters and ironworkers who worked so bravely and so tirelessly to clear the debris and rescue those trapped below.

Many of these courageous people are often smeared because of a few bad apples in their ranks. It is time we realized that most of them are among America's greatest heroes. That they are overwhelmingly Catholic is something we're proud to note.

The terrorists want to paralyze us. But they just don't get it. They can change our skyline but not our deadlines. As long as we are guided by what Pope John Paul II has said many times—"Be Not Afraid"—the bad guys will never win in the end.