

N.Y. / REGION

Past Losses Echo as Long Island Grieves for a Fallen Officer

By AL BAKER MAY 7, 2015

SEAFORD, N.Y. — This is a place where the pews are filled with police officers.

They mix in the crowds at confirmations and communions, they celebrate baptisms and weddings and they stand solemnly amid the rows of mourners when death visits a policing family.

The pastor of St. James Roman Catholic Church here cannot always tell who among his flock is on the job in New York City, 30 miles west of his parish.

But the Rev. John Derasmo knows they are there. Sometimes, a church spokesman said, they approach the priest after Sunday Mass to say hello, to tell him of their work.

There will be no mistaking their ranks on Friday, when they converge on the church in a sea of blue to mourn Brian Moore, the New York police officer who died on Monday, two days after he was shot in the head, just as another generation of officers did 27 years ago when the St. James community grieved for Edward R. Byrne, a 22-year-old officer gunned down in Queens.

“It’s surreal,” said Lt. Tony Giorgio, the longtime leader of the New York Police Department’s Ceremonial Unit, noting the parallels of the deaths and burials nearly

three decades apart. “Same neighborhood; same church; same manner of death. This is a very strong faith community.”

The killing of police officers resonates widely. But the pain is acutely felt here and in other nearby Long Island towns that officers and retirees, their extended families and friends call home. Heading east out of Queens, all along the Southern State Parkway, the exit ramps lead them back to their families. The roads traveled in the 1970s and 1980s by mostly fathers on car pool rides to city precincts are taken now by sons and daughters who have pursued the same calling.

It was that way for Officer Moore, 25, who followed his father, Raymond, and an uncle onto the force, and lived with his father in North Massapequa.

Few residents, it seems, are without a connection to law enforcement.

As he ate breakfast at the Luxe Diner on Wednesday, just up the road from St. James, Paul Masi opened a newspaper to a photo of Officer Moore and told a waitress how the loss had hit hard.

One of Mr. Masi’s daughters, Kim, a parochial school teacher, is engaged to a police detective who works in Brooklyn and lives near Seaford. He could dream of no better partner for his child.

“They just go out and do their jobs,” Mr. Masi, 68, past president of the Nassau County chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America, said of officers who are neighbors, along with firefighters, federal agents and military personnel, too.

“I think anywhere in this country,” he added, shaking his head, “to be a police officer right now is very difficult.”

The liabilities of such work were exposed after Sept. 11, 2001, when news about those killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center traveled eastward, following the path of a reverse commute and turning local residents’ lives upside down.

As working-class communities of Brooklyn and Queens migrated to Long Island over the past half-century, the suburban towns filled with the mostly white, mostly

Catholic members of the city's uniformed services, said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University.

Today, 32 percent of the department's 34,752 members live on Long Island.

"After 9/11, it was the Catholic churches of Long Island which were the scene of many of the funerals," Mr. Moss said.

At the same time, the complexion of the force is diverging from its traditional Irish and Italian roots, with the ranks of ethnic minorities increasing. As of March, white officers made up about 51 percent of the force, down from 68 percent in 1996, departmental statistics show.

Officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, who were fatally shot in a patrol car in December, lived in Brooklyn, and were honored in services reflecting the city's complexities of faith, with Protestant and Buddhist prayers.

Sean Dolan, a spokesman for the Diocese of Long Island, said that though parishes like St. James still drew "a strong contingent of law enforcement," they tend not to single them out. If they do, it is usually for an annual or special "Blue Mass," he said, during which officers come together to pray.

"Many law enforcement officers look to their faith for support in the most difficult job they do," Mr. Dolan said, "to protect and serve the citizenry."

Outside St. James, the telltale markers of a policing life are hard to miss.

The road north from Sunrise Highway to the church is bisected with signs for those killed in the terrorist attacks nearly 14 years ago.

There is one for Kathy Mazza, a police captain at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; one for Patrick Lyons, a New York Fire Department lieutenant; one for Andrew Steven Zucker, a volunteer firefighter in North Massapequa.

There, the road leads to Plainedge High School, Officer Moore's alma mater. On Wednesday, three 11th graders walked across the school's parking lot, past a flag at

half-staff and a sign for the Edward Byrne Memorial Field, and spoke of the officers who lived nearby. One said he had a cousin on the job in the city.

“It makes you feel safer,” another said.

All three asked that their names not be used, expressing fear about any backlash from the antipolice sentiment swirling in the city and country.

Later, at St. James Church, as Lieutenant Giorgio and others walked through the parking lot to lay out the plan for the funeral on Friday, he paused to reflect on the one he had attended for Officer Byrne.

“We wonder and we sometimes ask, ‘Where do these police officers come from?’” said Lieutenant Giorgio, who has orchestrated hundreds of funerals in his career. “And it’s an easy answer. It’s from their moms and dads and from their faith that gives them the courage to be police officers and run into dangers.”

On nearby Hicksville Road, an off-duty city officer, assigned to Truck 10 of the Emergency Service Unit, walked on a grassy median with his 3-year-old son, pausing every few steps to affix another blue ribbon to another telephone pole.

His wife is an officer in the Midtown South Precinct. He worked with Officer Moore’s cousin in the 113th Precinct. His church in Massapequa draws numerous officers. But like those in Father Derasmo’s congregation, he said, he does not “advertise” his vocation.

“Just part of the community,” said the officer, who declined to give his name so as not to detract from Officer Moore. “Go about my daily stuff; go to work, come home, and live my life with my family same as everybody else.”

Without faith, though, he would be adrift in managing a job that presents a daily dose of moral puzzles, personal angst and life-or-death battles.

“I know that there’s something better after this life,” the officer said. “Something, someone or some being that’ll help me through the daily stuff.”

He lifted up his son. He grabbed a plastic bag filled with ribbons and walked on.

A version of this article appears in print on May 8, 2015, on page A18 of the New York edition with the headline: Past Losses Echo on Long Island.

© 2016 The New York Times Company