

COMMENTARY

The Little Things Count, Too

When the big guys on Wall Street decide to do something — well, they do have the wherewithal to bring a proper grandeur to the job.

And so here we were yesterday afternoon, in the Italianate elegance of the Regent Ballroom, just down the block from the New York Stock Exchange.

Two huge generator trucks were rumbling outside. Hundreds of cops, sanitation workers, utility technicians and construction trade people were performing a thousand minor and major tasks, delivering a hobbled Financial District almost fully back to life.



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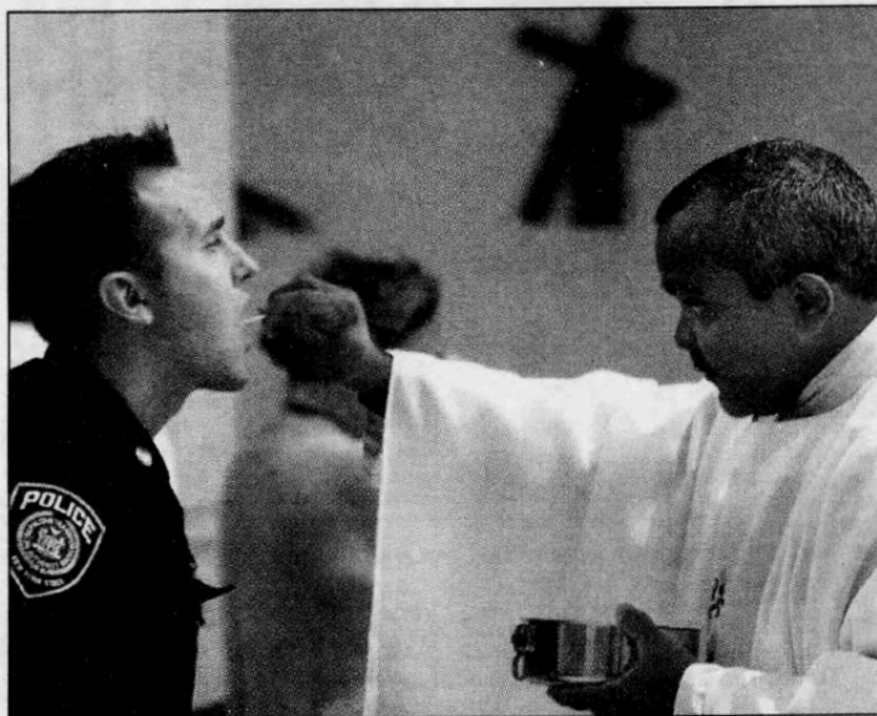
This was a hugely important symbol of New York shaking off this terror. It had to proceed at once.

One orange-vested crew was hosing a greasy layer of film off the sidewalk. A second crew was hauling off the plywood sheets that had been laid across the subway grates to keep debris off the tracks. There were systems to be tested, supplies to be delivered. There was self-confidence to be rebuilt.

And all these workers, many of them volunteers, were growing hungry and tired and, much as they tried to shake it off, in undeniable need of rest and relief. For five days and counting, at sites all over downtown, they'd been getting by on stolen moments in doorways, on little catnaps on dusty benches, on lukewarm coffee served in paper cups.

Well, not here. Not yesterday.

Inside the heavy doors of the ballroom, the crown jewel of the Wall Street Regent Hotel, the whole room was swaddled in a restful hush. No breathing masks were needed in here. The air was constantly filtered. The



AP Photo

Metropolitan Transit Police Officer Dan Jagiello, left, receives communion from the Rev. Martin Betances-Torres yesterday at The Church of Our Lady of the Rosary in Battery Park.

food and the drink were tasty and plentiful. The buffet was impeccably laid out.

Eggs and bacon and cereals and sausages and juices and croissants and coffee that didn't taste like Wednesday afternoon.

"Silver service!" marveled Roneil Sampson, a subway-station cleaner who'd been pulling grit, grime and garbage out of the Wall Street station. "We're a long way from those Red Cross relief trucks you usually get at emergency scenes."

"We could get used to this," agreed his partner, James Gaines.

Now this was a room truly fit for a hero.

The Corinthian columns. The lofty

arched windows. The Botticini marble floors and walls. The 70-foot elliptical domed ceiling, featuring the largest Wedgwood panels in the world. They depict the 12 signs of the zodiac and the four points of the compass.

Cots on the mezzanine. Bathrooms with attendants. Marble everywhere.

Who says these sweating men and women didn't deserve this kind of treatment? Who says dirty workboots can't be rested on a plush floral carpet?

No one yesterday.

A young cop, washing up in the men's room, had that unmistakable candy-store look in his eyes.

"I'll never see the inside of this place again in my life," he said.

Maybe he will. Maybe he won't. But yesterday, he had the run of the place.

Thankfully, these elegant little touches — I dare you to call them unimportant — have been popping up all over downtown, as the city grandly pulls itself together.

Yesterday, the Eden Day Spa on Broadway was offering free massages to tired rescue workers. The New York Health & Racquet Club, just north of Battery Park, was offering showers and cots.

They're little things. Sure they are. But at times as trying as these are, little things do matter.

The Rev. Martin Betances-Torres made a point of that, as he said his midday Mass at The Church of Our Lady of the Rosary. This is the Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint, and the tiny church is located in a white-column house at the top of Battery Park.

The priest apologized for rushing through the liturgy. He said he had several other Masses to say.

But still, he slowed way down when it mattered.

At the Prayers of the Faithful: "Remember all the men and women who have died in the catastrophe at the World Trade Center."

At the Sign of Peace.

And for a rousing recessional song — "America the Beautiful" — that was nowhere to be found in the hymnal.

"... from sea to shining sea."

Finally, Father Betances-Torres strode to the back of his miniature church. He hugged or shook hands with every last Mass-goer. Then he grabbed a large white bullhorn and headed off to the World Trade Center.

"I have permission to say Mass at the site," he said.

It was a small series of gestures, I guess.

This quick Mass. This tiny church. This last cheery song.

But I dare you to call of any of it unimportant.