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Riding shotgun

(<http://www.suntimes.com/news/transportation/442099,CST-NWS-shotgun25.article>)

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Zaniolo, 48, has been chaplain for the Interfaith Airport Chapels of Chicago since 2001.

Who comes to the airport chapel?

At a place like O'Hare, there are 40,000 people who work here. At Midway, it's between 5,000 and 10,000. These are all people working here at odd hours. So for them, this becomes their parish. We also have some regular business travelers, and sometimes at night, we have a few stranded travelers . . . [and] homeless people who spend the night.

Every now and then, we'll have a celebrity that comes through.

So, just about every day, I'll see someone who'll say, I didn't know we had a chapel here. But I also see a lot of the same faces. It's stable in a transient way.

What's your typical day like?

I walk around the airport a lot. I'm dressed like this, so everybody knows I'm not your ordinary traveler. Once people find out I'm a priest, they'll say, 'Father, can you pray for so and so.'

I'll go and visit the workers in the terminals, and I'll go to all the nooks and crannies that people don't really notice.

I also get calls on different types of emergencies. I remember once a teenager committed suicide and her parents were on their way to Hawaii. I had to deliver the bad news and comfort them until they could find a flight to send them back home. Once a flight attendant's eighth grader got hit by a train while the flight attendant was on a plane. They always call me for those things.

How does being an airport chaplain differ from a job at a regular parish?

I hear confessions every day. It's something that people usually don't do every day, but for some reason, over here at the airport. . . I hear them regularly. For the travelers, I'm sort of like an anonymous priest, so they can really unburden themselves. I'm not a familiar priest that they see every Sunday.

The nice thing about being an airport chaplain is that it really allows me to be a priest. I do have a lot of administrative things to do. . . but I also have more opportunities to hear confessions and to give some advice and counsel to people.

What's your busiest time at the chapel?

Ash Wednesday. We have 14 different services, and the chapel is jammed with people.

Not every airport has a chapel. How did O'Hare and Midway get theirs?

In 1960, police and firemen had 24-hour duty and weren't able to go to church on Sundays. And Chicago, being at that time an overwhelmingly Catholic town, they wanted a priest to come out and say mass for them. So they got the priest from the neighboring parish to come here, they got to like him and they petitioned the Cardinal to assign him full-time. That's how the chapel became established.

What made you go from electrical engineering to the priesthood?

When I was in high school, like any 17-year-old, I wanted to get married, have a family and make money, and I was interested in building things and designing things, so that's why I decided to study engineering. Then as I was working, I started to get all the things I had wanted, [but] I felt a spiritual emptiness. The more I prayed, the more I kept sensing and hearing, 'I want you to be a priest.' And I kept telling God, you've got the wrong guy. Finally, I said to the Lord, OK, if this is what you want me to do, I will explore it.

I could not have designed a life better than the life I have now.



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