



Fr. Brian Daley speaks with two airline employees after they prayed at Our Lady of the Airways, a Catholic chapel at Logan International Airport, in Boston on Friday, Aug. 29, 2025. (AP/Giovanna Dell'Orto)

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Boston — November 25, 2025

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With peak holiday travel starting just after the [government shutdown's flight restrictions](#), hope for a moment of peace at an airport can feel like a wing and a prayer.

But quiet and worship are just what airport chapels have provided for decades to travelers and to the airport workers that many were originally designed for.

"I love seeing travel bags and workers' outfits. It gives hope that you're ministering to a need," said Fr. Brian Daley, one of the priests at [Our Lady of the Airways](#) at Boston's Logan International Airport.

Built in the 1950s so that airport employees could attend Mass right in their sprawling workplace, it's widely considered the first airport chapel in the United States. It's also among the last to still function as a Catholic church instead of an interfaith space — though Muslim prayer rugs discreetly placed on the rear pews show it welcomes a variety of believers.

Midday on a Friday, a man rolling a carry-on suitcase prayed for a few minutes on a rug in the back of the brick-faced chapel on the cavernous ground floor of Terminal C. Donning reflective vests, a sprinkling of airline employees also darted in, knelt in the pews and hurried back to work after making the sign of the cross with blessed water.

"I come here almost every day to pray for a few minutes," said Brian Babcock, a Southwest Airlines baggage handler who stopped by Boston's chapel in his orange vest at the beginning of his shift. "It's awesome that I have a chapel within walking distance of where I work."

Workers' chapels open at airports

The mid-20th-century impetus behind constructing Our Lady of the Airways — as well as the two other Catholic chapels that followed at what's now New York's JFK and Chicago's O'Hare airports — stemmed from the church's desire to reach the faithful at their workplaces.

Earlier, Pope Leo XIII had published the [document Rerum Novarum](#), which was an inspiration for [the current, first U.S. pope](#) to adopt the name Leo XIV and focused on social doctrine and workers' rights. Inspired by it, church leaders such as Boston's

Cardinal Richard Cushing started building chapels at train stations, on fishing docks, in downtown commercial hubs, and at airports that were expanding into commercial aviation.

"He really had a program for establishing chapels for working people," said James O'Toole, professor emeritus of history at Boston College. "Boston's Catholicism was overwhelmingly a working-class phenomenon."

Thousands of people worked at Logan, often on 12-hour shifts that could fall on Sundays or holy days when Catholics have an obligation to attend Mass, so Our Lady of the Airways was built to accommodate them.

Even when offering six weekend Masses, it became so popular it quickly outgrew its first space, so the current, larger chapel was built in 1965. Up front is the original metal statue of the Virgin Mary, her feet resting on a globe as three airplanes fly around it.

"You couldn't get in there," recalled John Cappucci, who started attending the packed Mass as a child. More than 70 years later, he's now among a few dozen weekly Mass-goers because he likes the streamlined worship style.

"It's quiet and peaceful," he said.

Among nationwide [declining religiosity](#) and a [shortage of priests](#), only one Mass is now celebrated at Our Lady — on Sundays, by the pastors responsible for a nearby parish that covers two churches and another Marian shrine too, but who still want to preserve the airport outreach.

"They need to be reached in the secular world where they are," Daley said of the travelers and workers, Catholic and not, he ministers to at the airport.

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From chapels to interreligious meditation spaces

Protestant and Jewish faith leaders also established chapels at U.S. airports in the 1970s and 1980s, offering quiet space for individual prayer rather than organized services like their Catholic counterparts.

Over the past 30 years, most U.S. airport chapels have turned interfaith, with removable symbols of different religions — or none in the newer "meditation spaces" that have been created, said Wendy Cadge, president and professor of sociology at Bryn Mawr College.

"I'm not aware of any that have been built recently that are anything other than kind of warm waiting rooms," Cadge added.

Tucked behind baggage claims or above food courts, chapels are idiosyncratic, influenced by the local history and demographics, as well as sometimes tensely negotiated arrangements between local faith leaders and municipal and airport authorities. These range from rent, which is often nominal, to whether worship services can be announced over the PA system.

While it's unclear how many people use the spaces across the country, much of the more religiously observant demand recently has come from Muslims, Cadge said.

Interfaith worship among taxiing planes

Printouts of the Muslim prayer timetable and the 2025 Catholic and Protestant Christmas season Mass and worship service schedule are tacked by the door of the chapel at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, where about 50,000 people work and 80 million annually fly in or out.

Chaplaincy at O'Hare started in 1960 when Catholic workers asked a nearby parish priest to come celebrate Mass. The first "chapel" was a United Airlines training room, then the faithful gathered in a basement space they called Community of Our Lady of Loreto, with makeshift furniture from airport concessionaires and up to eight Masses each weekend, according to diocesan histories.

In the 1990s, a few years after the current chapel was established on the mezzanine above the check-in counters at Terminal 2, it became an interfaith space. Its glass walls open to a view of taxiing planes, a compass rose on the ceiling shows the direction to Mecca, and a small light stands by the tall tabernacle where the consecrated host is kept for daily Catholic Mass.

"Everybody is grateful to have a quiet place to pray," said Fr. Michael Zaniolo, the Catholic priest who is administrator of the Interfaith Airport Chapels of Chicago. "Our first customer is the airport worker. The traveler is the frosting on the cake."

He said the airport badge he wears on his clergy apparel is an "instant conversation starter" for those he encounters at the terminal. He hears confessions almost daily, even as Mass attendance has shrunk in the 25 years he's been at O'Hare.

Zaniolo hopes the chapel won't turn into a generic meditation space, both to honor the Catholic roots of what's now the [pope's hometown](#) and to serve the faithful of different religions.

Back in Boston, two Catholic JetBlue gate workers shared the hope that Our Lady of the Airways can stay open for the blend of nervous flyers and employees of different faiths they see daily among the pews.

"We come every day to pray before our shift starts, to get some guidance," said Manuel Tejeda Pimentel. "It's a little escape."