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**2017 Day One - Saturday, 6/24 -Manchester, St. Bridget to Hartford to St. Mary’s Parish, Branford**

This year's ride was going to be different.

Bob informed us he would not be participating.  John Ryan decided he would do Support this year rather than cycle. We had three new cyclists who responded to our bulletin inquiry. And, we were struggling to get enough Support folks for each day of the ride.

Plus, the Archdiocese Pastoral Planning changed our itinerary at the last minute and effected some of the parishes we would be visiting as their pastors would have been relocated before we arrived. And, some of us really had not trained all that much. So, we did not know exactly what to expect.  We just had to trust in the Holy Spirit!

It's Saturday, June 24, the first day. We began arriving at St. Bridget parking lot around 5:30 - 5:45 am.  I had cycled from home (2 miles) to get to the church by 5:45.  I left my house in a rush as I was running late.  I had been searching for the cross I usually wear on these rides but could not find it and left without it.  I was a bit bummed but decided it would have to be.

When I arrived at St. Bridget and encountered Wendy she came over and said she had something for me.  It was a small green marble looking cross she purchased for me for the ride. I was blown away because of her generosity and caring and by the fact I had given up on wearing a cross around my neck for this year's ride.  This was the first "Holy Spirit" moment of our 2017 poverty awareness bike ride around the state.

I gave Wendy a big hug.  I was so happy.

We all began getting ready for our cycling into Hartford. We had Wendy and Bob Sardo, Joan and Mary Breen, and John Ryan with Johnnie F's sister-in-law, Marie for Support.  The bikers, me, Pam, Eric, Lauren, Maureen, and Johnnie F check our bikes one last time.

It looked like it was going to rain but we all hoped it would hold off. Luggage, sleeping gear, coolers, etc. were strewn about the parking lot waiting to be put into our support vehicles.  We had three Support vehicles, John Ryan's van, Bob Sardo's SUV, and Johnnie F's SUV which would carry as many as 6 bikes if need be.

We were 6 cyclists beginning the ride to Sparrow Ministries at the South Congregational Church on Main Street in Hartford. We were off by 5:55.

It started to rain almost immediately once we were on the bikes.  We all know we were going to get a bit wet but the temperature was not uncomfortable.  Anyway, what is feeling a little uncomfortable for us when people in poverty are uncomfortable almost 24/7.

We cycled on without any incident until Johnnie F got a flat tire on Piken Street in East Hartford.  Johnnie F's first flat tire on his new bike.  So, some of us knew we were going to be a little late arriving at Sparrows.  I advised Wendy to gt to the church with the rest of support so they can begin serving.

Johnnie fixed his flat pretty quickly and we got over to the church as soon thereafter.

We were soaked by the rain and knew we would be quite chilly in the church due to the air-conditioning just as we experienced last year. It was cold.

I kept trying to serve my coldness up to the poor but heard that voice in the back of my mind saying 'but I'm cold".

I kept trying to serve it up, but heard "I am cold".  A little battle going on in my mind.

So I decided to interact with some of the clients rather than serve the food. I talked to Vicki Silva and she was good with the number we had serving breakfast so I felt I could do what I felt I had to do.

I wandered around the room for a bit and decide where I would sit.

I engaged two men sitting at the same table but not really interacting with each other.  I thought maybe I could make something happen.  The first man, Oberto, was a recovering drug addict trying to get straight.  He had lost everything, including his wife and two sons and readily admitted this problem was self inflicted.  All he wanted now was to get better so he could have a relationship with his sons.  It was a sad conversation and he teared up as he related to me. So many people here but not all were drug addicted or alcoholics.  Most could be you or me but for the grace of God.

The second gentleman named Armando, told me he had worked at Pratt and Whitney for 16 years and made a good salary.  I asked him how he got to coming to this soup kitchen.  He said he had been laid off from Pratt and the spiral downward began.  He lost where he lived, used up his saving and found himself frequenting soup kitchens for his meals.  He has been out of work for over two years.  There may be more to his situation but I did not want to pry any further.  He was grateful when I extended my hand to introduce myself.  I think it was unexpected but we exchanged hand shakes. I also did so with Oberto.  I just felt it was a sign to show them some respect and a feeling of dignity to do so.

Gary later related his encounter with a young man named Ben who came into the soup kitchen soaked to the skin. Obviously he had spent the night outside and was now trying to enjoy some of the comfort of Sparrow Ministries offered.  He was freezing. But, nothing helps like a warm pancake breakfast.  His shelter last evening was on the side of a gas station tucked under the overhang as best as he could to keep dry and comfortable.

He, too, was an admitted drug addict trying to better himself.  He had been living with his parents who eventually got tired of his not trying to get better and kicked him out.  Talk about tough love. He know they did the right thing and that kind of got him going in the right direction to get better.  He openly mentioned how difficult it was to get straight.  The system works against you.  Well, at least he was trying to get better.

Claire and Gary and his friend Brian all met us at Sparrows.  We would now be 9 cyclists going to Branford and St. Mary's parish.

We all gathered at our bikes which were leaning against the stage.  We could not leave them outside for safety reasons and besides it was still raining. Someone was going to take our photo.

We were waiting for Wendy who was having a "Holy Spirit" moment with Rich, one of the organizers of Sparrow Ministries as they prayed for Wendy's sister which he had remembered from last year's visit.  I know that was comforting for Wendy.

Speaking about Wendy, she had pulled together all the Support comings and goings, who would be here or there and when.   Awesome work which I could not do.  I am so grateful for her presence here and her devotion to Brake the Cycle.  Could not do this without her!!!  Thank you, Wendy!!

Finally it was time to leave for Branford.

The ride to Branford went very well. The Cue Sheet was very well done and the ride itself was very pleasant.  Claire was very pleased and voice that pleasure to Maureen and Pam who prepared the Cue Sheet for Day 1.

Very few hills, nothing grueling.

I was the sweep, last rider in line.  I followed Claire the entire way.  Just before we got to Middletown she rode over some glass.  She noticed it too late.  Ten minutes later she had her first flat tire.  I fixed it for her and tried to pump up the tire with the gas canister method but I failed to inflate it fully so with Eric's help we got her bike over to the Support folks and used a regular pump.  All was well.

About our pumps, we usually keep one pump in each Support vehicle.  When we were at Sparrows I found out that they had decided not to bring my pump.  I "need" my pump to service my bike.  I made Joan drive all the way back to St. Bridget to get my pump.  The team made me feel guilty for doing so and I would take abuse for the rest of the ride.  I later apologized to my wife.

As we approached Branford we stopped in North Guilford at Quonnipaug Pond recreation area for lunch.

It was beautiful and restful and had restrooms.  We stayed there for over an hour and just relaxed.  This was going to be a 50 miles ride.

After feeding ourselves with Subway grinders and other food supplied by our Support team, we began the remaining part of our ride into Branford.

We enjoyed the rest of the day and got to St. Mary's well in time for their 4:00 pm vigil mass.

We even set up the presentation in advance.

As we arrived at the church, Eric noticed his back tire was lacking some air and we figured it was a slow leak.  We would fix his flat after mass and after the presentation.

Three flats in one day.  We had not had a flat tire in the past 4 years!!!

After we settled in with all our gear in the church hall, we all went into the church proper for mass.  We were still in our biking gear.  We had a reserved section in the front couple of rows.

Mass was good with Fr. Matt Gworek presiding.  His homily was very good and this would be his last mass at St. Mary's parish as he was moving on to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Hamden and chaplain at Quinnipiac College due to the Pastoral Planning process of the Hartford Archdiocese. We were lucky to still be visiting this parish with all the changes going on at this time.

After mass we gathered in the hall and hoped as many people as possible would wander over from mass to attend.

We only got around 15 folks for the presentation but they were engaged and the presentation went well.  It was the first time we would be doing our new revised presentation which incorporated the 7 themes of Catholic Social Teaching.  It went well, better than expected. We hoped we touched at least one person in attendance.

Fr. Keefe was there for a while but left half way through. He would be the pastor remaining with the merged parishes and forming St. John Bosco parish.

As we completed our presentation and came to the spot where I tell listeners how I met Jesus, I could not get the words out.  Too emotional.  I have told that story 100's of time and this time for whatever the reason I had a hard time.  Maybe it was the tiring day, maybe it was because of the passion of the other team members testimony in their part of the presentation.  Whatever it was, it was hard for me to get the words out.  Regardless, it was effective I am sure.

Those in attendance expressed their thanks for our being there and we felt very appreciated and that our essage of poverty awareness got through.  We were so grateful for the opportunity to present.

Shortly after we shut down, Fr. Matt and Emily, the Administrative Assistant for the parish, began putting our supper together.

The food was great.  We all had our fill. Jim Clifford from several years ago joined us for the rest of the ride.

It was getting late and we wanted to do "the word of the Day".

All got ready for bed, air mattresses blown up, all of us spread around the church hall.

Here are our words:

**John:**  Easy/Comfortable - All Day!

**Maureen:** Sparrow, from the soup kitchen but als from today's gospel reading.

**Pam:** Community; ours as well as what she saw in the soup kitchen

**Lauren:** Retreat; this ride is a retreat; a disconnect form technology

**Gary:** Water; the rain and Ben

**Jim:** Reconnected - parish community

**Claire:** Bad decisions - those in the soup kitchen, many made bad decisions and found themselves there

**Lou:**

 Pump/Cross

**Eric:** Passion

**Johnnie:** Togetherness

**Wendy:** Faith - getting to today; in life; Rich at Sparrows

Done by Lou