

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

KC Priest turns love for biking into a cross-country cause

by Bob Merrigan

FR. MATTHEW RUHL, S.J. IS NOT EASILY INTIMIDATED— and certainly not by exercise. In 2004, he and a long-time friend Allan Burroughs kayaked down the Missouri River on a 61-day trip that was as much mission as adventure.



Now, the 50-year-old Jesuit has set his sights even higher. Not just the physical challenge, but especially the financial one.

Fr. Ruhl is about to embark on a 5,000-mile bike ride across America, a public pilgrimage to highlight local poverty issues along the route and to raise money to benefit poverty-reducing programs.

"I was riding on the Katy trail one day and thought, 'How much fun would it be to ride across the country?'" he explains.

"I knew I had a sabbatical coming," he continues, "and it just popped into my head, 'If the right thing came along, you could raise a lot of money for a worthy cause.'"

It took a few months, but the right thing did come along. While at a Social Ministries luncheon, Fr. Ruhl heard Michael W. Halterman, CEO of Catholic Charities of Kansas City-St. Joseph, give a presentation on poverty in America.

Halterman introduced the *Campaign to Reduce Poverty*, a sweeping indictment of the impacts of poverty and an aggressive commitment to cut poverty in half over the next decade. The paper had just been released by Fr. Larry Snyder, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA).

"It was the boldest position paper I've seen in my 25 years as a Jesuit," Ruhl says. "I was hooked."

"This is it," he said to himself. "This is why I'll make the ride."

On the eve of its 2010 centennial, CCUSA, the largest network of social service organizations in the nation, initiated a multi-faceted approach to reduce by half the number of people living in poverty in the United States by 2020. The campaign stresses the need for businesses, faith-based organizations, government and individuals to come together to address the systemic causes of poverty in this country.

It's an aggressive goal. By federal counts, 40 million Americans are in poverty and 15 million are unemployed. Last year, Catholic Charities agencies in the U.S. served 8.5 million people.

"I believe we do have the resources in this country to succeed," Ruhl is quick to point out. "What we need is to find the will to do it!"

He's convinced this ride can serve as a catalyst for the cause. And others agree. Over the past two years, a full-fledged ride—*Cycling for Change*—began to take shape.

This summer, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, a dedicated team of at least a dozen cyclists will travel from Cape Flattery, Wash., to Key West, Fla., to promote the Campaign to Reduce Poverty. Thousands more are expected to join the ride, either as weekly segment riders or those participating in single-day events.

Ride organizers are working with Catholic Charities agencies in dioceses across the country to promote the ride, according to Suzanne Cronk-hite, Cycling for Change coordinator. They're also reaching out to schools, cycling enthusiasts, and other interested groups along the route.

A number of those agencies are already planning local events as well. Each local group is organizing news events to publicize the fight against poverty in its area and planning activities to raise money to fight it.



Cycling for Change | Fr. Matt Ruhl will lead a team of cyclists who plan to make the entire trip from Cape Flattery, Washington to Key West, Florida.

Cronkhite emphasizes the grassroots nature of the event. Funds raised in a given diocese or “market” will stay in that community and be used to address the face of poverty as it appears there.

“Catholic Charities has a 100-year history of helping the poor,” she says. “And it’s not just Catholics, it’s everybody.”

The structure of the ride encourages

grassroots communications, too. A number of the local agencies have set up Facebook pages, Web sites, blogs and other social media tools to allow supporters to help spread the word. These will be supplemented by helmet-cam videos and other from-the-road communications through the training process and on the ride itself.

The ride will travel through Kansas and Missouri from July 11 through July 28 and will include a three-day stop in Kansas City starting July 17. Among the events planned are a fundraisers including a social service fair and community dinner.

More special rides are planned in the region, including a segment from Colorado across Kansas, a ride from Atchison down to Kansas City, a circuit ride through the Kansas City metropolitan area, another across Missouri and one from St. Charles into St. Louis.

Daily liturgy will also be a part of the ride.

“One of the things that excites me about this endeavor is that I get to ride from coast to coast telling people about the beauty of the Gospel,” Fr. Ruhl muses. “And people want to hear it. They’re hungry for that Gospel message.”

“We need this,” he says, even though you’ve already been convinced. “We need this for our health. We need this to express our faith.”

Of course, he is keeping his health in mind. Throughout the winter, he walks

three miles every morning, spends about 50 minutes riding his trainer, and has a regimen of calisthenics, with core work on alternate days.

“As soon as the weather gets nice, we’ll start riding outdoors; probably 125 to 150 miles per week,” he said.

“But Lent is really going to help my fitness,” he adds, with that patented Matt Ruhl twinkle. “I’m giving up beer and chips.” **I**

Bob Merrigan is president of Merrigan & Co., a strategic messaging and writing firm and proud supporter of Cycling for Change.

Cycling for Change’s KC Stop Will Benefit Caritas Center



As Fr. Matt Ruhl raises awareness about poverty and advocates for the poor in cities across the country, his stop in Kansas City, MO will benefit Catholic Charities of Kansas City – St. Joseph’s Caritas Center.

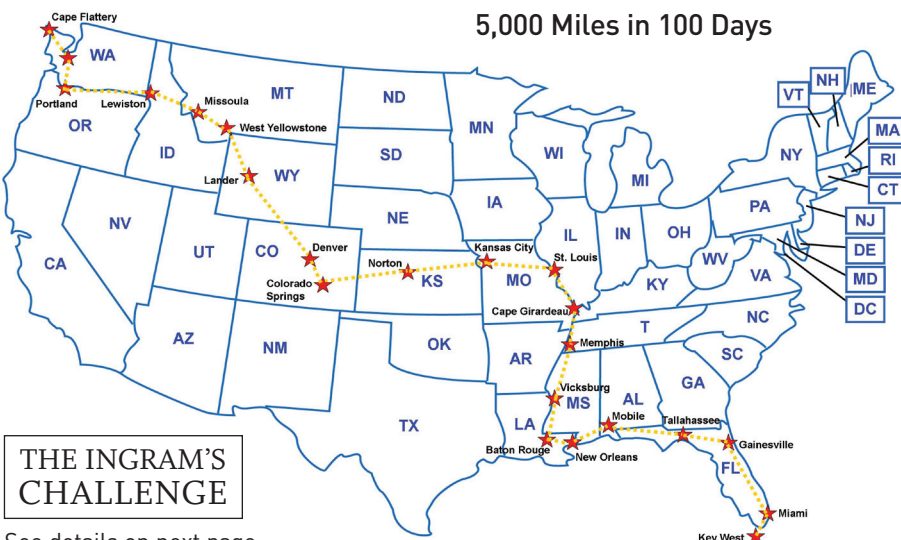
The Caritas Center is a pivotal part of the local diocese’s plan to address the root causes of poverty by providing a blend of key services all in one location. Programs at the Center help families reach economic stability through mental health counseling, providing employment resources, financial literacy training and education in wellness and health.

Funds raised in support of the Caritas Center will help expand critical programs currently in place, such as:

- Homeless Prevention
- Foreclosure Intervention
- Economic Security Development
- Healthy Lifestyles

Catholic Charities of Kansas City – St. Joseph hopes to eventually expand the services and programs the center provides to meet the growing need in our community.

To learn more about the Caritas Center and discover how your organization can support Catholic Charities of Kansas City – St. Joseph’s efforts to reduce poverty, contact Kathie Conwell, Manager of Marketing and Communications at kconwell@ccharities.com.



THE INGRAM’S CHALLENGE

See details on next page.