Opinion

Guest Voices



A large mosaic of Our Lady on the exterior of Notre Dame Parish in Michigan City, Indiana, greets riders at the end of the 100-kilometer Pat Mac Pack Ride fundraising ride to benefit those with pediatric brain cancer. (Mark Piper)



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A few weeks ago, I joined about 230 others on a 100-kilometer (62-mile) fundraising bike ride, called Pat Macs Pack Ride, to benefit pediatric brain tumor research, riding from my parish, St. Barnabas Church on the South Side of Chicago, to Notre Dame Parish in Indiana.

The ride is in honor of Patrick McNamara, a St. Barnabas parishioner who was diagnosed with a brain tumor at age 2. For more than 10 years, Patrick endured more than a dozen brain surgeries, chemotherapy and countless radiation treatments. I did not know Patrick, but for those who did it's clear that he never lost his spirit and love for family and friends. After Patrick died at 13, his parents, Tom and Dee McNamara, organized the bike ride to raise funds for pediatric brain tumor research. This year's was the eighth ride to Notre Dame in Michigan City.

Pat Mac's Pack Ride also provides assistance directly to young cancer patients and their families. In addition, the foundation works to raise awareness about this devastating disease.

Paraphrasing Venerable Catherine McAuley, "Very little good achieved or evil avoided without the aid of money." Now that the 2022 ride is complete, $1 million has been raised for this cause since its inception. Thanks to a whole host of dedicated volunteers and sponsors, every dollar raised by the riders — more than $280,000 this year alone —goes directly to research and families. Again, this is only possible due to the time, talent and donations of so many local families and businesses — the community — standing compassionately with the McNamara family and covering the expense of the ride and after-party so that 100% of the rider-raised funds go where intended.



Participants in this year's Pat Mac’s Pack Ride are (from left) Mark Battaglia, the author Mark Piper, Pat Tierney and Joe Stoiber. (Courtesy of Joe Stoiber)

After a personal invitation from someone who had done this ride, I decided to participate and began training, although I had never been on a ride longer than 30 miles. We left St. Barnabas at 6 a.m. when I crossed the finish line at Notre Dame, 6 hours and 1 minute and 72 miles later (I made two wrong turns, turning the 100K into a 115K), I was exhausted, my quads felt as though they were on fire and yet I was elated. And that was before the delicious post-race meal with both hydrating and dehydrating beverages. The stops along the way were also well stocked with water and delicious snacks. I fear I may have eaten more calories en route than I burned under the sun.

The ride was taxing, but eminently enjoyable. The mix of conversation at the rest stops and silence among the miles on the Erie-Lackawanna and Calumet Trail

facilitated a meditation on the grandeur of creation; about beauty and pain. Other moments of meditation focused on the innate relationship we humans have between our individual efforts and that of the groups or community to which we belong. Had I not been trying to keep up with others, or receiving a little encouragement especially in the final few miles, I likely would have slowed greatly and not finished as strong. It seems much easier to go through and finish difficulties in life when we're not alone.

Right before crossing the finish line, I passed a large mosaic of Our Lady on the exterior of the church, depicted in the orans position, a posture of prayer. It made me think of the unserious (*Oh, God, not 12 more miles*!) as well as serious prayers (May this ride bring solace to families suffering with pediatric brain cancer by our presence and the research it funds) that I said in silence. I also thought of the most serious prayers that must be said by children with cancer and their families.

Prayer, I believe, is an expression of hope: hope that God hears us; hope that our request or plea or intention is worthy of being made real, hope that God's will and ours overlap; hope that children need not suffer the inexplicable cruelty, immense pain and loss of life by pediatric cancer.

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This image and its accompanying thoughts reminded me of how the race began 70 miles west. Before the 6 a.m. departure, in the care of a police escort through some very busy Chicago streets, we riders were reminded why we signed up for this ride: to come together as a community to honor Patrick McNamara and be in solidarity with his family and others whose children are battling cancer — some of these families were present at the sendoff. Before the bagpipes blared and we turned unto Longwood Drive to commence the race, the pastor of the parish reminded us that our coming together, through the prayers and material assistance raised for these families, was community at its best. And he ended his blessing by inviting us all to recite the Hail Mary.

While sitting down at the post-ride party my mind drifted back to that mosaic and reflected on my first, but certainly not last, Pat Mac’s 100K ride. Although not draped in piety or devotions, or having any sacraments administered, this ride, by bringing us together and building community, exhibited a holiness in the world that perhaps

enlivened Gospel service.

During my six hours on the bike, and a few more under a tent filled with food, stories and friendship, I certainly experienced church, being church and being church for others. May Our Lady, in Italy, Spain, France or Michigan City, Indiana, watch over us, keep us safe and hasten the day when pediatric cancer research brings forth a cure. Until this hopeful prayer is granted, I look forward to this bicycle ride and seeing that mosaic of Mary, at prayer herself, at the finish line.