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Missouri priest to cross country on bicycle for poverty awareness

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NCR Today

PORTLAND, Ore.

The day before the Catholic Charities USA 2009 Annual Gathering opened Sept. 24, there were the usual pre-convention leadership meetings ? and a bicycle ride through Portland dubbed the ?Cycling for Change? Fun Ride.

One of the cyclists, Jesuit Fr. Matthew Ruhl, is a more serious biker. One of the purposes of the Sept. 23 ride was to publicize the priest?s plan to cycle across America next summer ? from Seattle to Key West, Fla. ? to draw attention to CCUSA?s efforts to cut poverty in half in the United States within the next few years.



Ruhl, 50, is pastor of St. Francis Parish in Kansas City, Mo. ? home parish of

NCR?s editor-at-large Tom Roberts, he quickly pointed out in an interview Sept. 24.

He told NCR that in 25 years as a Jesuit, he has spent 10 years in pastoral work in North St. Louis, Mo., and East St. Louis, Ill., and three years as a missionary in Belize, a poor country in Central America. ?So

I've seen poverty up close and personal for about 13 years of my life," he said.

He said he has been training in distance cycling for about four years and has recently been riding about 125 miles a week to build up to the challenge of going next summer "a little over 5,000 miles" an average of about 67 miles a day between Memorial Day, when he plans to leave Seattle, and Labor Day, when he hopes to arrive in Key West.

"If you want to get to the inspiration for this thing, it was the Catholic Charities poverty paper, which was the boldest position paper I've seen in my 25 years as a Jesuit," he said.

That CCUSA paper, released in January 2007 by the organization's president and CEO, Fr. Larry Snyder, declared a goal of cutting poverty in America in half by 2020.

Ruhl said major cities on his route from Seattle across the country will include Portland, Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis, New Orleans, Mobile (Ala.) and Miami before riding across the Florida Keys to Key West, the southernmost point in the continental United States.

The widespread poverty in America "is too big for any one group or one institution or one one person" to solve, he said. "This is going to be a huge national endeavor, and that's why we're going across the nation."

Throughout the trip Catholic Charities agencies in the dioceses he crosses through will organize news events to publicize the fight against poverty and will arrange for things like food and lodgings, he said. "This is a very organized trip."

Ruhl said so far eight other cyclists have committed to accompanying him on the entire trip "and we're willing to find seven more if they're interested."

He said although the trek is Catholic sponsored, anyone interested in fighting poverty is invited, and local cycling clubs throughout the route have been involved in promoting local participation. Hundreds of other cyclists have indicated they will join the cross-country trek for the local part of the journey, he said.

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"As Catholic as this is, we're inviting anyone who's interested in issues of poverty to join," he said.

Jerry Filteau, NCR Washington correspondent, is in Portland covering the Catholic Charities USA national gathering for NCR Sept. 24-26. He will be providing further reports on the meeting online in coming days and in NCR's next print edition.

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