

Lady Madonna, cyclists at her feet

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The Rev. Dennis Parker, center, and the Rev. Brian Heron, right, lead prayers during the dedication ceremony for the new Madonna del Ghisallo Portland Bicycle Shrine at St. Stephen's Episcopal Parish. (RNS/Fredrick D. Joe/The Oregonian)

PORTLAND, ORE. -- Reflections of blinking white bike lights danced up and down the organ pipes inside St. Stephen's Episcopal Parish here on a recent Monday night. On the north wall, Lady Madonna had 35 bicyclists at her feet.

Pushing their bikes inside the church, the riders had escaped the autumn chill of downtown Portland. They had come to watch the Rev. Dennis Parker bless the nation's first known church shrine honoring the Madonna del Ghisallo -- patron saint of cyclists.

"Creator God," Parker said as he bowed his head in a corner of the sanctuary that held four long pews, "we ask that on this day you be with us in our travels."

Like any priest of an urban parish struggling to attract new followers, Parker wouldn't normally be thrilled about tearing seats out of his sanctuary.

But in a city where the U.S. Census Bureau says 6.4 percent of commuters go by bike, Parker said the shrine ultimately will be more welcoming than the pews it replaces.

An entire section of the 83-year-old, wood-and-stone sanctuary has been set aside for bike commuters to contemplate their travels and remember those who have died while cycling.

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A painting of the Madonna del Ghisallo by local artist Martin Wolfe hangs above a tree of candles where cyclists can park and sit in reflection.

Visitors, Parker said, can offer prayers in whatever spiritual tradition is most comfortable for them. "The shrine and blessings are not limited to Episcopalians or Christians," he said.

Bike blessings are nothing new at Portland area churches. Around the country, churches also hold ceremonies for other forms of transportation. Recently, a Catholic church in San Francisco splashed a long line of taxis with holy water from a specially sanctified plastic bucket.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce's American Community Survey and information from the U.S. Census, bicycling as a mode of commuting has jumped 275 percent in Portland since 1996. At the same time, driving has slowly declined. Public transportation and walking have increased 25 percent and 15 percent, respectively, according to the data.

This year, there have been three cycling fatalities on Portland streets. In 2008, there were none. But 2007 and its six cycling deaths is one of the deadliest years on record.

"I really believe cyclists here need a place that respects their often-dangerous individual journeys," said Wolfe, the commercial artist behind the shrine's 3-foot-by-3-foot painting of the Madonna watching over a ghost-like riderless bike.

In 1949, the Catholic church officially recognized the Madonna del Ghisallo as the saint of cyclists because of stories and legends crediting her with miraculous interventions in which cyclists were kept safe from harm.

Parker said he was unable to find another church shrine dedicated to bicyclists or the saint.

Some cyclists at the ceremony were obviously moved by the prayers and Parker's blessing of every bike with a few drops of holy oil squirted onto the chains.

"From a welcoming perspective," said avid cyclist Mark Reber, who attends Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Northwest Portland, "it seems quite appropriate for the church. No matter who you are or how you get there, there's a place for you."

After the blessing, the Rev. Brian Heron, pastor of Northeast Portland's Eastminster Presbyterian Church, said a prayer for all commuters, asking that they share the road.

"We are one," he said. "We are one."

Joseph Rose writes for The Oregonian in Portland.

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