

Floridians hit the road, make parish pilgrimage for religious freedom

By Tom Tracy

Catholic News Service

KEY WEST, Fla. – Like on any true pilgrimage, a group of Floridians met strangers along the way and were greeted by local people as well as travelers doing things both secular and recreation on a sunny summer Saturday in the Florida Keys.

They sang hymns, prayed part of the Divine Mercy, read a pilgrim prayer and recited the rosary. They prayed the Stations of the Cross, heard reflections from the nation's Founding Fathers, stopped to admire sacred artwork, stained-glass windows and historic grottos, and walk through an elaborate prayer garden.

For the fourth year in a row and as part of the nationwide U.S. bishops' Fortnight for Freedom effort, a small group of South Florida Catholics embarked June 27 on a daylong pilgrimage to the five Catholic parishes in the Florida Keys.

The fortnight event is a call to U.S. Catholics to defend their freedom of religion and monitor ongoing threats against religious liberties that impact church entities nationwide.

Adding urgency to the Floridians' fortnight conversations this year was the fact that just one day earlier, on June 26, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the Constitution guarantees a nationwide right to same-sex marriages, prompting further concern that the federal government may interfere with long held religious beliefs and marriage traditions among faith communities such as the Catholic Church.

In several places, the majority decision recognized the role of religious beliefs with regard to same-sex marriage, saying that "it must be emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned."

But Catholic and other religious leaders said that distinction is too narrow and seemed aimed more at protecting the free speech of faiths that support traditional marriage and oppose same-sex marriage, rather free exercise of religion.

Deacon John Kirk of San Pablo Parish in Marathon, who led the Keys pilgrimage, began the day at St. Justin Martyr Parish in Key Largo by reading Miami Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski's statement on the court's ruling.

The statement notes that losing the understanding of marriage as a conjugal union of a man and a woman in a permanent and exclusive commitment conducive to welcoming and raising the children born from such a union weakens the family as the basic cell of society and imperils the human flourishing of future generations.

"Allowing 'an act of the will' to be substituted for 'legal judgment' is a recipe for tyranny," the archbishop's statement said.

Deacon Kirk reminded the pilgrims not to lose heart and to remember that "God is in charge," so that no one should be ashamed if they can do nothing more than pray for the nation and religious liberties in the days leading up to Independence Day, the final day of the bishops' Fortnight for Freedom. The observance, which began June 21, has as its theme this year "Freedom to Bear Witness."

Besides same-sex marriage, other threats to religious freedom seen in the U.S. include the federal contraceptive mandate forcing most employers, including religious entities, to provide coverage of contraceptives and abortifacients even if employers morally oppose such coverage. Many of the affected employers also object on moral grounds to the government's provision to opt-out of the coverage.

"In the many centuries since Jesus we have seen great things happen where great leaders and great men show us the way," Deacon Kirk said, noting the examples of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher from 16th-century England. Both were executed by King Henry VIII for their Catholic beliefs.

Also referencing the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Deacon Kirk said, "We can't be halfhearted Christians, we have to be 'all-in.' There is truth or untruth, so our job as Christians and Catholics is to follow the dictates of our conscience and to make sure our conscience is formed correctly."

"If you can do nothing else pray for our nation, pray for our leaders, they need our prayers," the deacon said.

The Keys pilgrimage was coordinated by the deacon's wife, Mary "Sis" Kirk, as well as Sue Palguta, a graduate of the Miami archdiocesan school of lay pastoral ministry and an extraordinary minister of holy Communion at San Pablo Parish.

Mary McFadden, a New York native and Keys resident since 2006, said she didn't necessarily want to give up her Saturday to journey through the Florida Keys from north to south but that she felt obligated by conscience to participate.

"You have to do something and there was the opportunity and to shun it would be wrong," McFadden said. "You can't sit and make comment about what's going on in the world if you don't do a little bit of something."

New Jersey native Martin Pfeifer, who owns a marine business in Marathon, said likewise he would normally be out snorkeling or fishing on a Saturday but that he was inspired to make this year's Keys pilgrimage even before the court decision.

"I thought the (Supreme Court) decision would be at the end of June so now it feels

like a full throttle (urgency)," Pfeifer, who is a member of San Pablo Parish. "It is a sacrifice for me today because there are no winds, so normally I would be out scuba diving but this is more important. It is only through prayer and fasting that we can move mountains, so to speak."

At San Pedro Parish near Islamorada, the pilgrims were greeted by a local Catholic woman presented the travelers with small bottles of holy water that were decorated by local Catholic children. They also ran into a group of tourists making a scavenger hunt.

In Big Pine Key, Father Randal Musselman, pastor of St. Peter Parish, came out to greet the fortnight pilgrims, as did Father John Baker in Key West's Basilica of St. Mary Star of the Sea, which was preparing for a Saturday afternoon wedding.

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