

# On the road for religious freedom, again

The rhythm, routine and Providence were similar, but this religious pilgrimage was also a bit different.

Father Jack Lombardi and friends began another Religious Freedom Pilgrimage June 14, albeit without the fanfare and media attention that accompanied the Pilgrimage of Love and Mercy he led from Baltimore to Philadelphia last September to see Pope Francis.

There were no interviews from The NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt or local media for that matter. With Catholic schools already closed for the year, nor were there hundreds of children cheering pilgrims on, such as the send-off we received at St. Ursula School in Parkville last September.

As Father Jack and 14 other pilgrims make their way from Annapolis to Ocean City, however, there is still an abundance of devout witness, prayer and song – and not just hymns.



I spent pretty much all of June 15 with the pilgrimage, starting with 8 a.m. Mass at St. Mary in Annapolis, in the church adjoining the school which had provided them shelter the previous night. The kids and adults were still raving about the Italian dinner a parishioner had provided when we strolled over to Main Street and breakfast at Chick & Ruth's Delly. Father Jack had negotiated a discount for our waffles and eggs and pancakes and bacon, but then two Good Samaritans stepped up and picked up the tab for the entire party.

Scott and Barbara Millar are parishioners of St. Dennis, in Galena. That's in Kent County, just north of where the pilgrimage was headed. They've got a son at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and were on their way to visit their day-old grandson, Anson. He was born June 14, which happens to be Barbara's birthday, so she was serenaded with the Happy Birthday song.

Chick & Ruth's is around the corner, literally, from the Maryland Catholic Conference, where Mary Ellen Russell, executive director, took time to visit with the pilgrims, many of whom walk in objection to the HHS contraceptive mandate. She briefed them on the MCC's ongoing success in fighting the legalization of assisted suicide in Maryland.



It's a short walk up Francis Street from MCC headquarters to the Maryland State House, where pilgrims got a quick reminder of the state's significance on the religious freedom front, including mention of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The pilgrims had walked from St. Mary's to Sandy Point State Park June 14. After lingering in Annapolis the morning of June 15, a four-vehicle caravan crossed the Bay Bridge in a driving rain. Just as we began to start walking from Kent Narrows, the rain stopped and the sky began to clear. We made new friends in Grasonville, where lunch at Ewing Pond Park was provided by St. Andrew by the Bay Parish in Annapolis, courtesy of a group headed by youth minister Christine Lamolinara.

Crossing Route 50, past the outlets at Queenstown, we found some nicely shaded roads, then returned to Route 18, where the road to Centreville was lined with farmland that whetted the appetite for Eastern Shore produce and reminded us that we're still a ways off from local corn.



It was good to see old friends, such as Martin Webbert, a young parishioner of St. Ursula who's headed to Archbishop Curley High, and Paula Tiller and her youngest children, James and Philomena.

It was also good to make new ones, such as Judy Dudich, who like, Paula Tiller, is the mother of 10. She had Grace, Mary and Joseph along for the walk. They're also parishioners of Father Jack's, at St. Peter in Hancock.



All told June 15, we walked close to 15 miles. The pilgrims spent the night at St. Benedict's in Ridgely. They'll rely on the kindness of other Catholic churches and schools in the Diocese of Wilmington through June 22, when they'll dip their toes into the Atlantic at Ocean City. Then they'll hustle home for the priestly ordination of Deacon Michael Rubeling, whose siblings Tim, Emily and Claire are pilgrims, once again.