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St. Patrick Academy students go the extra miles in walking, praying for peace



ATTLEBORO, Mass. — While many groups have made pilgrimages to the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette through the years, none have been quite like this, and all in the name of peace.

After celebrating an early morning prayer service at St. Patrick Academy, about 100 students, faculty and staff set out on foot to make the 12-and-a-half-mile trek to the shrine which honors the Blessed Mother's appearance to two shepherd children in a small hamlet in the French Alps in 1846.

St. Patrick Academy's Campus Ministry Office organized the event, in which the students stopped at various churches along the way — St. Raymond in Providence, St. Cecilia in Pawtucket, Our Lady Queen of Martyrs Church in Seekonk and finally at La Salette — to celebrate prayer services, each led by students and focusing on one aspect of societal violence: school

violence, abortion, racial and ethnic violence, substance abuse and poverty.

Freshman Jon Otero, 15, has seen and experienced more than his share of violence growing up in his community of Central Falls, where he said the sound of gunfire is commonplace. In spite of all the violence that he has witnessed, and thinking about all who continue to die as a result of it, he found the walk to be very inspiring.

"I was beaten on and some of my friends were beaten on, so I'm doing this for them, not just for myself," he said during the trek.

"Every step I took I thought of all the violence in the world and how we could end it by doing this meaningful walk."

Classmate Adrian Medeiros said he often lulls himself to sleep at night as gunshots ring out in the area around his neighborhood in South Providence.

"In South Providence every time I go to bed I hear loud gunshots and it's very scary to think that I'm sleeping while all of this violence is going on," he said.



Medeiros was the first student to lead the group as it left St. Patrick Academy around 8 a.m. on May 23.

With temperatures hovering in the 90s the group embarked on their “Walk for Peace, Life and Justice,” winding its way through Providence and Pawtucket before crossing into Seekonk, Massachusetts on the way to Attleboro.

Along the way motorists showed their support, honking their horns and waving to the students, who wore their green and tan school uniforms, with some carrying signs invoking peace in the world.



It took the group more than six hours to reach La Salette, with some staff members following along in their cars in case students got tired or needed a break from the intense heat.

“It was super tiring,” Medeiros said. “I dumped a whole water bottle on my head to stay cool.”

Principal Bruce Daigle said he was proud of the school community and their determination to take a stand in the face of the various forms of violence that young people most grow up with today.

“What we’re trying to do is send a different kind

of message than what’s been out there, a spiritual one rather than a political one,” Daigle said. “We had a lot of public support.”

Father James Ruggieri, pastor of St. Patrick Parish, said that the purpose of the walk was to remind people that the power of God, through prayer, is the only power that creates a genuine ‘change of heart.’

“It was tough, but it was a good community work that brought us together and the cause was excellent: peace, life and justice,” he said.

“We just wanted to make a small difference, and through the sacrifices offered by all, I think it did. We might not see the difference, but the sacrifices do matter.”

As arduous as it was for many to reach there, the choice of La Salette Shrine as the terminus for the walk had special significance for the student movement.



“Social movements and political action can effect some temporary changes,” Father Ruggieri said. “But only the conversion of people’s hearts through the love of God can effect lasting, positive change. That was the message of Our Lady of La Salette and it is still as true today as it was then.”

Ashley Proulx was one of the staff members trailing the group to pass out water or offer a ride as a respite as needed. “I think it’s very personal,” said Proulx, who teaches 10th and 11th grade U.S. History I and II, as well as Holocaust Studies, of the student-led effort.

“It’s a message that they fully support. We need to end violence. They’re willing and they want to be active in bringing about peace and making the community aware that we’re all invited to the table and we’re all welcome and treated with the dignity and respect that we all deserve as humans.”