



## The Bicycle

People often become identified or tagged by association with some particular interest or activity. “Seen any good movies lately?” might be a conversation starter with an avid theater-goer. “Got your season tickets yet?” you might ask a big Twins fan. With me, it’s biking. I’ve enjoyed cross-country bike touring for many years. It’s also my preferred way of getting around town and around the parish. So, when I returned to Venezuela in 2019 after being away for 20 years, folks with long memories whom I came across at church or out walking, after asking how I was doing, constantly added, “and the bicycle?” After a few months I found and fixed up an old bicycle. People quit asking and just smiled as though things were as they ought to be...except, that is, when I decide to walk instead of biking, at which people inevitably return to adding, “and the bicycle?”

Prior to the pandemic I would walk or bike to meetings or bible studies in our barrios almost every evening. Folks were concerned for my safety and security. “Venezuela is not the same as before. It has become far more dangerous,” many told me, illustrating with accounts of people being accosted, losing billfolds, purses and cellphones. Back in the ‘90s, a couple gun-wielding fellows stole the pickup I was driving...we later got it back. Seven other priests and sisters in the diocese lost vehicles in the same way that year. Fr. Bob Hazel, who served here in the early ‘80s, told me of an incident in which three guys, one with a pistol, the others with a knife and a machete, broke in. While two ransacked the house, the guy with the gun forced Fr. Hazel to lie face down on his bed, holding the gun close to his head. When the guy became momentarily distracted, Fr. Hazel knocked the gun out of his hand and, using him as a human shield, forced the thieves out...for which he earned a reputation as someone not to be messed with. His Jeep was also stolen twice during the night. The thieves didn’t get far, thanks to a lock on the gas line, and the vehicle was soon recovered. During my time here in the ‘90s, months went by during which we had more funerals for people who were killed than for those dying from natural causes. So when told that Venezuela was now more dangerous, I took it with a grain of salt.

I know that theft and violence are, unfortunately, still all too common, but, thanks be to God, I have not experienced even a hint of danger since returning 18 months ago, for which I give credit in part to my getting around by bicycle. It affords me greater visibility which, coupled with my being a priest, results in my being better known by folks throughout our parish. As for the security of my bicycle, although my bikes were stolen four times during my years as pastor in Northfield (recovered each time, thanks be to God, attentive students at Carleton, and the police department), nothing of the like has occurred here in Venezuela.

It’s not that guys young and old don’t look longingly at my bike as I go by, kind of like teenagers in Minnesota might react to seeing a Corvette or Mustang convertible. In the US, this bike would not be worth much. It’s old, beat up, and not all the gears work. But here very few families can afford a bike, and most teens or adults who do have one get around on old 16” wheel kids’ bikes. So, it’s not uncommon, when I am out visiting a family or returning home in the evening, for neighborhood kids to gather and ask if they can take my bike for a spin. “Okay, but take turns and no more than to the end of the block.” Some of the older kids take charge, keeping track of who has ridden, yelling at anyone trying to sneak in a second turn or taking too long getting back.

There is a motorcycle-bicycle shop a mile and a half from our house. The owner is definitely a motorcyclist, a big hefty fellow with plenty of space on his big arms to display his tattoos. “Hello, Chief,” he always greets me. Nice fellow. Whenever I need special tools he lends them to me. Like everything else here in Venezuela these days, prices are in dollars, but it’s rare to see any currency lower than a \$20 bill, so I keep a running line of credit for the parts, tires and tubes I need to keep this bike and those of a few friends going.

Venezuela has been suffering from a severe gas shortage since November of 2019. When available, lines of well over 200 cars and waits of two or three days at gas stations are not uncommon. In such times, it has been a tremendous blessing to have a bicycle. “Do you have enough gasoline?” people frequently joke with me when hopping on my bike after a Mass or similar gathering. “My tank is full,” I respond, pointing at my stomach, bringing out many a laugh and smile, “thanks be to God.”

### Points to ponder

Have you ever experienced violence or had anything stolen? If so, how did it affect you and your family?

*These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at [ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*