

living cond. / housing

Subject: Fruit of justice still eludes farmworker#
Date: Wednesday, 1 Mar 00 15:31:02 CST
From: <lbindx@utxdp.dp.utexas.edu>

Fruit of justice still eludes farmworkers. (living conditions of migrant farm workers in the US).

Copp, Jay

Migration World Magazine.

May-June 1996, v24, n3, p38(3)

in

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This harvest season, Maria Elena Lucas Rochel, 54, rose at 4 a.m. daily and picked strawberries, cherries, and apples into the evening. In a good week, the Texas woman brought home \$200 for her labors near Traverse City, Michigan. Her one-room wooden shack had exposed wiring and a temperamental refrigerator. Her bathroom was a dirty outhouse, and the hot water in the public showers ran out after just two people showered.

But at least this year she wasn't sprayed with insecticide. In 1988, she was the victim of a reckless pilot whose poisonous cargo almost killed her.

"It's shocking to go back to some of the places I was working and still see these same places. The conditions are deplorable," she told The New World, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Chicago, during a November 30-December 3 National Consultation on Migrant Farmworker Ministry in Techny, Illinois.

Ms. Rochel, a lifelong migrant farmworker who is Catholic, became a union organizer and farmworkers' advocate after years of such living. She wants people to know that these conditions are not from history books or grainy old TV documentaries.

The conference in Techny emphasized that migrant farmworkers play a critical role in keeping supermarkets filled with an Eden-like abundance of inexpensive fruits and vegetables. But conferees said the workers are poorly paid, harshly treated by growers, ignored by the public, and disdained not only by local authorities but also by some priests and other church leaders.

Sponsored by the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network, the meeting drew 80 participants from Ohio, Wisconsin, and New York, as well as Texas, Florida and California. Most were Catholics who minister to migrant farmworkers for dioceses or parishes.

"People want food at low cost, but they don't want to have anything to do with the people who bring them the food," said Holy Cross Brother James Albright of Adel, Georgia.

The quality of life is so poor that deeply religious Mexican farmworkers often are cut off from their own spirituality and unable to take solace in their faith, according to both ministers and farmworkers.

The plight of migrant farmworkers, described as a national problem, has been so dire for so long that proposed congressional budget cuts were seen as troubling but not out of the ordinary, they said.

"I want to see justice done," said Juan Duran, 50, who has been a

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Fruit of Justice Still Eludes Farmworkers

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migrant farmworker since he left Mexico for Texas at age 7. "I don't want to wait anymore. God wants justice for the poor."

"Why should we be treated like less than American citizens?" asked Duran, a veteran of heavy action in Vietnam. "Texas is part of the United States, isn't it? We get miserable wages."

Franciscan Sister Adela Gross, who coordinates migrant farmworker ministry for the U.S. Catholic Conference in Washington, said most migrant workers are legal permanent residents or citizens.

Ireneo Pena Jr., who works in outreach for the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas, recounted farmworkers' problems with local Catholic churches.

"The priests won't do baptisms until they <farmworkers> attend church for six months," he said. "They don't want anything to do with them. We're all God's children. <Priests are> so insensitive to their needs."

"In my experience we have the South and then we have the South-South," said Duran, a resident of Crystal City, Texas, who also picks crops along the Minnesota-North Dakota border. "They're rooted in prejudice and discrimination," added the advocate, who is a volunteer member of the National Advisory Council on Migrant Health.

For migrant workers, said conferees, faith is a struggle. "They're very religious, but they don't want to talk about it," Duran said. "Religion is something they can't touch. The poor have so many obstacles it creates a lot of weaknesses. The problems are so serious it overwhelms them. The faith is not able to come out."

Maltreated by growers, male migrant farmworkers take out their frustrations on the females, said Maria Rochel, noting that women must cook and clean after field work, while the men often drink too much.

Some husbands batter their wives. "In church on Sunday it's the pain of the women," she said. "They go to share their pain with God."

Ironically, rural areas where migrants have worked for years still cannot meet their needs. "The courts, jails, and hospitals aren't prepared to deal with Spanish," said Brother Albright. "People say if they come here they ought to learn English. You can't learn English overnight."

Asked to describe their ministry in one word, participants responded: "empowerment," "presence," "advocacy," "hospitality," and "antisystem."

At this first-of-its-kind meeting, they agreed to work for leadership formation among migrant farmworkers and within dioceses, to build bridges between local churches and farmworkers, and to increase cultural sensitivity to farmworkers.

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