



Jesus, the migrant farmworker

by Nancy Powers, Ph.D.

Picture Jesus, before he started his public ministry. What did he do? I share the hunch of a farmworker-turned-priest I know, who imagines Jesus as a migrant farmworker.

Certainly our God is fond of migrants — Abraham and Moses come to mind. God's son, too, was a migrant — exiled as an infant to Egypt.

And why not a farmworker? Jesus' teaching was full of vineyards and mustard seeds, of workers sowing, weeding, harvesting, tending animals and processing wheat. Maybe it was personal knowledge; maybe he was trying to speak to his audience's experience, but Jesus, the carpenter's son, told no parables about separating the knotty wood from the good, or paying the workers in the lumberyard.

Today, most Floridians lack any farm-labor experience. We live in cities and buy our perfectly shaped, unblemished produce at supermarkets. We ignore the price of perfection because we aren't paying it.

It's the worker in the sun-baked field who pays the price — covered in long sleeves and a bandana to avoid the pesticides that cover his clothing in a sticky film. It's the women picking ferns, frond by frond, under a black tarp that holds in the heat, who pay the price in skin rashes. It's the child, exposed to the toxins on a parent's clothes, and the people at risk of significantly higher incidences of cancer and reproductive problems who pay the price.

We also aren't paying for the sweat and sacrifice it takes to harvest our food. Retailers and food processors — not farmers or farmworkers — take the lion's share of our food dollar. A tomato picker must pick some 3,500 pounds of tomatoes in a day to earn \$50 (at the piece rate of 45 cents per 32-pound bucket).

The work is arduous. One typical citrus worker in peak season picks three-and-a-half tons of oranges while standing on a ladder that's leaning uneasily against the branches of a tree. Picking at this speed takes skill, agility and practice. Those who cannot keep up the pace will not earn minimum wage and they won't be invited back to work.

Although work is not available year-round, when it is, the hours can be long. There's little room for leisure when one returns from work at 9 p.m. and must get back on the bus to the fields before dawn. In a survey conducted in 2004 by pastoral staff in Quincy, for example, farmworkers were asked to describe what they did in their "spare time" and some said simply "clean the house" and "go to the Laundromat." In other words, what spare time?

Farmworkers are only paid when they work. When 2004's hurricanes Frances and Charley struck Florida's citrus groves, ferneries and nurseries, thousands of farmworkers

found themselves with severely damaged trailer homes and without any income or job prospects. Yet, due to poverty and immigration status, they were among the least likely to have insurance or to be eligible for FEMA cash assistance.

We benefit from farm labor not only because it provides our affordable food (Americans pay less of a percentage of their income for food than almost any country in the world), but because farmworkers sustain our entire state's economy. Agriculture is second only to tourism in its economic impact in Florida and our labor-intensive products — tomatoes, citrus, strawberries, and horticulture — depend upon some 200,000 workers, mostly Latin American immigrants.

Yet the laborers in the field are typically unseen and unappreciated. They work far from our suburbs and towns and often live in the most run-down and exploitatively priced trailer camps. Language and culture barriers augment the isolation. Fatigued migrant laborers have little time or money to get involved in the communities where they live, even as they contribute essentially to those communities' economic well-being.

As Catholics, we are called by our church's social teaching to "welcome the stranger," to notice the Lazarus at our doorsteps and reach out to the poor in our society.

In Florida, we celebrate Farmworker Sunday in November as a way to call our attention to the farmworkers we all depend upon but seldom see or know. The Florida Catholic Conference Web site (www.flacathconf.org) provides a vast array of information and ideas in English and Spanish. These resources include the Florida bishops' 2006 pastoral letter, "[Honoring the Dignity of Work: a Call to Solidarity with Farmworkers and Other Vulnerable Workers in Florida.](#)"

Knowledge and awareness are starting points. They then lead us to action. The place to start is with the farmworker ministry outreach of your diocese and with the dynamic and democratic organizations farmworkers have created for themselves. In our state, these are: the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the Farmworkers' Association, Farmworker Self-Help, and the United Farm Workers.

We can give farmworkers our time and talents. Farmworker organizations want support for their campaigns and they often need the skills of grant writers, translators, immigration attorneys, literacy and citizenship tutors, among others. In Tallahassee, the Big Bend Farmworker Alliance, which meets at St. Eugene Chapel, is a means to work with immigrant workers on projects from literacy to charity to advocacy.

The Florida Catholic Conference, too, [welcomes advocates for its advocacy network](#), to contact legislators and help in public policy campaigns that support the human rights and dignity of farmworkers.

We can also give our treasure. When work is slow and income is low, families may seek a bit of help from a Catholic Charities office or farmworker organization. Your donations of money or in-kind goods are appreciated.

But your donations can help promote justice along with charity. Farmworker organizations also welcome donations to support their Florida campaigns to improve wages and work conditions, AIDS outreach, pesticide safety training, investigation of forced labor and indentured labor situations here in Florida, literacy work, health education and many other activities that give farmworkers dignity and strength.

And, every day, we can pray. And teach our children to pray. "Thank you Lord for our food and for the people whose work brought it to our table. Let us never take this food, or the people who brought it to us — farmworkers and farmers — for granted." I think that's what Jesus, the migrant farmworker, would have us do.

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