

# **Migrant Faith**

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### **DEDICATION**

Migrant Faith is dedicated to those who risk all by leaving their country of origin because of war, natural disaster, religious oppression and economic desperation, in search of a better life.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I thank those who encouraged me to write about my experience in migrant ministry. I especially appreciate the Extraordinary Ministry Council for the Diocese of Fresno, California. They take the message of God's love to people in isolated communities, farms and dairies. I thank those migrants who welcomed me into their homes and families, sharing with me their hopes, their dreams, and their faith. I thank my religious congregation, the Redemptorists, for freeing me to dedicate my ministry to people often on the margins of the Church. And this book could not have been completed without the editing and translating contributions of Maria and Raul Moreno. May the Lord bless and protect migrants and immigrants.

## **Introduction for Migrant Faith**

In an address to representatives of the media on March 16, 2013, Pope Francis explained his decision to take the name Francis. He said that during his election, “Cardinal Claudio Hummes, a good friend ... When things were looking dangerous, he encouraged me. And when the votes reached two thirds ... gave me a hug and a kiss, and said: ‘Don’t forget the poor!’ And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars ... Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi. For me, he is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation; these days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we? He is the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man ... How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!” (Audience to representatives of the communications media, March 16, 2013)

In his initial days, in his actions, Pope Francis showed the intimate care of Christ and the Church for the poor. “Migrant Faith” is the reflection of a Redemptorist missionary on twenty-three years of walking with migrants, discovering the faith, hope, and love of people who have left their native lands in search of a better life for themselves and their families.

There is a saying for members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer which says that Redemptorists are called “to evangelize and to be evangelized by the poor.” It is easy to identify the responsibility of religious men to evangelize, but to experience evangelization by the poor is challenging and humbling. Migration today is a global reality affecting all nations. On every continent there are nations that send and receive people. As people leave nations torn apart by wars, natural disasters, or lack of economic opportunity, migrants seek a better life for themselves and their families.

When I began to learn Spanish, Fr. Enrique Lopez, C.S.S.R. said, “I hope you are not one of those who thinks that once you learn Spanish you know all that you need to know to work with Latinos. You need to know the customs, the faith, and the struggles of my people. If you will not walk with my people, don’t bother to learn Spanish.” My walk with migrants began over twenty years ago. The migrant is the model Christian. The migrant is one who seeks a better life with trust in God, even in the most difficult of times.

Ministry with migrants exposes the minister to profound faith if the minister is open to recognizing the faith of the migrant. Migrants may stumble with expressions of doctrine and church teaching, but their faith flows from the heart. Where there is love, there is God. “Migrant Faith” invites people in ministry to appreciate the faith of people who unfortunately are often on the margins of the Church. May the Church realize the hope of Pope Francis, “How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!”

## Chapter One: Discovering the Faith of Migrant Workers

When considering the campesino, the migrant, the immigrant, the undocumented, the illegal, the foreigner, we need to remember these words that Jesus said: “*As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me*” (Mt 25:40). In the parable of the final judgment Jesus identifies himself with the poor and the outcast. In over twenty years working in Hispanic ministry, the faith of Latin American migrants and immigrants has dramatically touched my life. My ideas and my passion for migrant ministry have been formed principally by a North of the Border experience in a variety of apostolic endeavors.

In January 2007 I had the opportunity to take a sabbatical. My Provincial superior told me to “rest, play a little golf and don’t work for six months.” This sounds like the easiest act of obedience I will ever be asked to do. I immediately left for a five-week tour of Mexico. I did not worry about housing because people have often said, “Padre, tienes tu pobre casa en México...” (Father, you have a humble home in Mexico...). I love to tell people that I took the vow of poverty and became the richest person on earth because I truly have more homes than anyone I know. I went to visit my homes in Mexico in ten different communities from the beaches of Puerto Vallarta, to villages in Jalisco, Michoacán, Guerrero, Durango and Coahuila, to Mexico City and Cuernavaca. I stayed in homes receiving the hundred fold promised by Christ to his disciples.

I listened to people’s hopes and dreams, to their stories of crossing into the United States, and to their heartache at being separated from loved ones by the experience of migration. I went to Mexico hoping to challenge, modify, and deepen my ideas about immigration.

I traveled Mexico by bus to let the reality of the other side of the border touch me. I enjoyed walking Mexican beaches for the first time in my life, participating in the pageantry of a religious feast at one of Mexico’s shrines (Nuestra Señora del Rosario in

Talpa de Allende, Jalisco), living in rural towns deeply impacted by migration to the North, and listening to people tell their stories of crossing and working in “el Norte” (the United States).

Upon returning to the U.S. and sharing the stories of people whom I met, many have said, “I hope you write about your sabbatical experience.” The stories that I tell are not verbatim interviews; they are told through the ears of the listener rather than from the mouth of the speaker. I warn the reader that my translations of what people told me are the interpretations of a priest from the North. Still, I hope that my interpretations convey light and understanding on the complex realities of migration and ministry to the migrant. Many people, mostly Hispanic, but some non-Hispanic Americans and immigrants, have informed and formed my understanding of seeing Christ in the “least of my brothers and sisters”.

There are many scholarly theological and sociological studies of Latino faith and spirituality. Such scholarly treatises can be found in Latino studies programs at the Mexican American Catholic College in San Antonio, the University of Notre Dame, Boston College and many institutes and universities. My study of the faith of migrants was a journey of experience rather than a scholarly endeavor. My concern was directly pastoral in asking the migrant farm workers about the experience of the Church in their faith journey. I have witnessed the struggles of migrant workers to survive and thrive in the United States. I have worked in youth and parish ministry, preached parish missions, and addressed issues of justice and peace with migrants. I have celebrated wonderful moments of joy and hope with people, have heard the hardships of separation from families and have witnessed terrible abuses and tragedies in the lives of migrants.

My concern is pastoral care, bringing the grace of Christ to the migrant worker through the ministry of the Catholic Church. The Church has an important role to play in letting Christ touch the lives of migrants. The Church needs to work for justice for the immigrant by advocating for just and moral immigration laws and

by protecting immigrants through health care, education and social services. The Church works in advocacy for the rights of workers, for their economic interests and for their safety. And the Church works to bring all peoples together that we may be one in Christ. All these ministries care for the migrants' social wellbeing, but how do we nurture their faith and let the grace of Christ touch their lives?

### **My first experiences in the life of the migrant farm workers**

I spent four weeks during the summer of 1998 with migrant farm workers in The Dalles, Oregon during the cherry harvest. Lovina Pammit and Israel Martinez, two lay missionaries, accompanied me. Each evening we celebrated Mass in different orchards. Before each Mass, I would hear confessions while the lay missionaries prepared the community for the Mass. During the Mass, Lovina and Israel took the children for liturgy of the Word and I spoke with the adults. They would bring the children back for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After the Mass, we visited with the migrants and learned about their lives.

On several occasions, I asked people what they needed from the Church. A few spoke of the need for advocacy on the issues mentioned above, but over and over people asked for reassurance of God's presence and love in their lives. They asked for prayer, religious instruction and for someone to listen to their pain over their separation from their families. Many asked for the grace of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist for their children. One woman said, "Father, we do not need you to be our lawyer or social worker; we need you to be our priest."

Israel Martinez observed that while many people attended our Masses, very few received Communion. He began to ask them why and found that many had never received their First Eucharist. Many of the young people said that they were Catholic but had never been taught the basic teachings of the Church. When we asked why, parents and young people gave us a glimpse into their

experience of the Catholic Church in the United States. Many said that they had asked parishes in California where they lived about preparing their children for First Communion. Often they were told that classes begin in September and end in May. Some lived in communities that had programs that lasted two or more years. One parish that had several thousand Mexican families had placed a limit that only 100 children per year could take part in the First Communion program. Many children were placed on waiting lists. For many migrant workers it was simply not possible for their children to attend such programs as they worked the fields and followed harvests. Many children were baptized, but few received their First Communion.

That summer my relationship with migrant farm workers began. One of the highlights of the summer took place during the second week of the harvest. I celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a priest. One of the crews took a day off and prepared a fiesta. The men prepared birria and carnitas, while the women prepared the beans, rice and salsa. It was a Sunday and after the 6:00 p.m. Mass, nearly 300 migrant workers came to the fiesta. A group of troubadours went around singing at each table for entertainment. There is no better way for a missionary to celebrate his anniversary.

After two summers of celebrating Masses in migrant camps, I presented a plan for a program of preparation for First Eucharist to the pastor of St. Peter's Church and to the Bishop of Bend, Oregon. That program, The Cherry Harvest Mission, was so successful that it completed its thirteenth summer in 2010. Over those years there were 900 First Communions, over 400 Confirmations, 160 Baptisms and six marriages. The mission allowed me the privilege of gaining a unique entry into the world of the migrant farm worker. More about this mission is found in chapter ten.

## **“Accompanying migrants” rather than “working for” the migrants**

One of the greatest blessings of my 2007 sabbatical was to enter the world of migrant workers. For four months I traveled with workers, at times living in migrant camps and picking cherries. Some of the time I would stay in rectories learning of the outreach of parishes and dioceses in Oregon, California and Washington. I was able to simply be with the workers rather than do something for them. Often when doing something for someone, we do not recognize that our service places expectations on those we serve. We do not think about how those expectations can burden the poor whom we wish to help.

There are many hardships that migrants encounter. There are forces that crush the spirit of people on the move. There is the experience of separation from loved ones. There are feelings of guilt when the migrant is unable to be present with a parent or relative when they are ill or dying. Many migrants are separated from their spouses and children for long periods of time, even with doubts that they will ever see each other again. There are temptations to forget why they work in a foreign land. The presence of alcohol and loneliness lures people away from their values and crushes their dreams. The search for a better life for themselves and their families can change to materialism. First one buys a new pair of boots, a belt buckle, clothes and then a truck, stereo and television. Casinos appear to be everywhere in more and more rural communities. The lure of individual wants and desires erodes the dignity and traditional ties of the migrant.

In the midst of the hardships and suffering, one still finds great hope and joy in the migrant community. The work is hard and workers endure many hardships to make a better life for their families. Yet, there is always a reason for a fiesta. And if there is no reason for a fiesta, one will be made up. Among themselves, workers speak of the blessings they receive from God. Religious practices are a mix of traditional and charismatic spirituality.

At times one will encounter a cynicism about religion as people express their frustration with religious leaders whom they accuse of hypocrisy. Under the surface of that cynicism is a combination of frustration with the lack of feeling welcomed in Catholic churches in the United States and a sense of unworthiness. Many tire of the combative comparisons made about Catholic and Protestant religious teaching. The cynicism is expressed in ideas, but the emotion comes from the heart.

The faith of the migrant is found in the heart, *el corazón*. Faith is part of the identity of the migrant. It is deeply intertwined in all of their relationships. It is expressed in culture, music, family and patriotism. The *grito* (rallying cry) of Mexican independence includes the identity of being Catholic. “*Que viva la raza, que viva la patria, que viva la Virgen.*” That rallying cry comes from the heart of people who see their social, political and religious identity as the foundation of their human dignity.

## **Walking with Migrants**

When I first began studying Spanish, Fr. Enrique Lopez, C.S.S.R., told me, “I hope you are not one of those American priests who thinks that once you learn Spanish, you know everything that you need to know to work with Mexicans. You need to learn the culture, the history, the feasts and walk with the people. If you will not walk with my people, do not bother learning Spanish.” His advice was harsh, but I cherish his words and have sought to walk with the migrants. Three years later he asked me to preach a parish mission in his parish.

At one point, there was a parish in the diocese of Fresno with no priest. The pastor needed help at first because of illness, and later he retired. For ten months a few priests helped the parish on weekends for Masses. I celebrated Masses in that parish about ten times. The Dean of that region met with the people before assigning a new pastor. One Mexican woman said, “Why can’t you send us Fr. Mike?” The Dean asked, “Why do you want Fr.

Mike?” She replied, “Fr. Mike is an American. Not only did he learn our language, he also studied our history and loves our religious practices and feasts. When he explains the story of conversion in Mexico, we leave Mass, proud to be Catholic.” She continued, “Unfortunately other preachers chastise us, and we leave sad. Please, send us Fr. Mike.”

## **Ministering to the migrant**

As a seminarian I spent two summers working with priests in migrant farm worker camps. Conditions of workers and the patterns of life for migrant workers have changed over the years. Issues of immigration, health care, education and workers conditions are always a concern of the Church in serving the needs of migrant workers. There are great challenges facing our Church in the ministries of Catholic Charities and Peace and Justice Ministries in addressing needs of migrants. Yet the priority of all ministries is evangelical and sacramental.

Migrant Ministry needs to focus on welcoming the migrant into our Catholic communities and to make the sacramental presence of Christ available to the People of God. A migrant woman said, “Father, we need you to be our priest. We need you to baptize and teach our children. We need you to show us how to follow Jesus.” In my work as coordinator for Campesino Ministry, I am often asked about issues of immigration, housing for the workers, issues of justice and economic needs. Yet I remind myself often of this woman’s words, “Be our priest”. Collecting clothing and food for the poor is part of the charitable outreach of our church. Working for just immigration reform and working to protect workers’ rights are an important part of migrant ministry, but none of the issues of justice can be more important than what this woman asked, “Teach us and bring us the love of Christ.”

We need to honor and recognize the depth of faith within the campesino community. The faith of migrants is tested by life in a foreign country. The rules of many parishes deny access to many

farm workers and their children to the grace of the sacraments. Many farm workers come from a Catholicism rooted in popular religion. While they may have had little formal instruction in the faith, they are firmly established in their Catholic faith through devotions outside the sacramental structures of the faith. However the faith of many farm workers and their children is tested when the rules of many parishes deny them access to the grace of the sacraments.

When existing programs of sacramental preparation are unable to accommodate the faithful who approach a parish with the proper request to receive the sacraments, pastoral agents must look for alternative approaches that make the sacrament available. Alternative programs need to experiment with scheduling, materials and location for such activities. When an alternative program is successful, the established programs may find themselves challenged to improve their own methods.

The campesino asks the Church for a blessing, the reassurance that the person is right with God. The experience of migration erodes the sense of dignity and self-respect of the person. The migrant is humiliated in many ways as they lose their own identity having to live with false identification, lying and losing oneself to the system of immigration. Furthermore, since the work is difficult and often inconsistent, there is little security and stability in the migrant's life. And too often when going to church, the migrant experiences chastisement.

Too often, parish sacramental programs for migrants and their children are full of rules that they find difficult to fulfill because of work and the uncertainty of their lives. At the celebration of a birthday for an infant, a worker told me, "Church rules here form barriers that prevent migrants from receiving the grace of the sacraments." He was speaking about many obstacles that migrants face in bringing children for First Eucharist and Confirmation.

## **Extraordinary ministry – a challenge to the ordinary**

The history of the Church is filled with creative zeal from the time of the Apostles to the present day. St. Paul took the message of Jesus to the Gentiles. He struggled with those who wanted the converts to first get circumcised before they could be received into the Church. His message was out of the ordinary for the early followers of Jesus.

Later, the founders of religious orders formed communities of dedicated people to address needs of people who were not being served in the ordinary experience of the church. Saints Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola, Alphonsus Liguori, Rose Philippine Duchesne, Damien of Molokai, Teresa of Calcutta and many others saw people on the margins of society and experience of the Church who needed to be evangelized and touched by the love of God. In the beginning these founders of religious orders and others made people around them uncomfortable as they met spiritual needs of people whom the ordinary ministry of the Church not only failed to serve, but also failed to even see or acknowledge.

In 1983, in an address to CELAM (Episcopal Conference of Latin America), Pope John Paul II called for a New Evangelization: “Evangelization will gain its full energy if it is a commitment, not to re-evangelize but to a New Evangelization, new in its ardor, methods and expression.” He called on the Church to recognize the changing circumstances of the people whom we serve. The message of the gospel is dynamic. Evangelization is not static. When there are circumstances that need a *New Evangelization*, new methods are necessary. “New methods” in evangelization do not condemn past methods of catechesis, but rather call on people to be open to the changing reality of the People of God.

Evangelization is not indoctrination. While doctrine is an important part of growing in the faith, the desire to know more about the faith flows from the experience of an encounter with the divine, an encounter with God. In *Disciples Called to Witness*, the

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) states, “The New Evangelization seeks to invite modern man and culture into a relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church” (Disciples Called to Witness, p. 6). It is witness that fosters this relationship as Pope Paul VI said, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 41).

In literature about the New Evangelization many express concern about the lack of regular attendance at Sunday Mass. A great majority of Catholics in the United States do not participate regularly in Sunday worship. It is more complex than simply attributing this lack of regular attendance to secularization, materialism and individualism. The impact of declining vocations to priesthood, the quality of preaching, and the response to scandalous behaviors of clergy contribute to alienation from the Church. The analysis of participation of Catholics in the Church is not complete if we fail to consider how evangelization is presented.

The Conservative-Liberal polarity of society has badly served us in reflecting on the Pope’s call to New Evangelization. New methods are neither liberal nor conservative. We need to free ourselves to analyze the pastoral realities that we face and seek responses that meet the needs of those asking for God’s blessing. Witness and new methods of evangelization will challenge the status quo of parishes unwilling to enter into frequent evaluation of methods employed in catechesis.

My hope is to invite people in ministry to appreciate the faith and dignity of migrant peoples. I invite the reader to see the migrant not so much as people who need to be evangelized but to be welcomed and to allow them to evangelize us with their faith and hope that has survived such hardships and duress. When we allow ourselves to enter the lives of migrants, we meet them in their needs and allow them to show us the face of Christ. As Jesus said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25:35).

## **Chapter Two: Meeting Christ in the Migrant – South of the Border**

My sabbatical in 2007 began in Puerto Vallarta while visiting American friends at their home on the beach. It was a good way to obey my superior's instruction to relax. One day while walking on the beach, I met Jonatan from Mexico City. He was in his late twenties. In his youth, he had had an idea that if he could learn English well, he could find a good job in a resort on Mexico's beaches. Therefore, he went to Detroit, far from the Mexican border with hopes of learning English. He lived in Detroit for ten years. He said he worked for auto companies, but when describing his wages it sounded like he worked for a subcontractor who did non-union work detailing cars and cleaning autos on lots. He never earned more than \$8.50 an hour.

He spoke English well for only having studied in community English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. He returned to Mexico believing that with his English he could hustle work in a resort community. He found a job at a large hotel and said he made \$400 his first week. When I met him, he had only been in Puerto Vallarta for ten days. He said he was Catholic, but was not active while in the United States. He said that although he was productive while in the United States, he was not really happy being away from home. When I asked him of his hopes for the future, he said, "Padre, in five years I will be managing this hotel." He was young, fluent in English and full of confidence that he could do well in the resort community of Puerto Vallarta.

The main purpose of my trip to Mexico was to meet the families of those whom I have come to know in migrant work in the United States. Through their hospitality I was introduced to many in their communities who had stories to tell about migration to the U.S. I stayed in their homes, ate wonderful food and was welcomed as part of their families.

I spent two days with the sisters of a migrant I know in California. Beginning with them and their friends I began asking many people, “How has migration affected Mexico?” The insights of people were always well thought out and it was interesting to note when certain patterns began to develop. There were some unique differences when speaking with priests and religious on their impressions of migration and the views of lay people. There were very different views presented when speaking with those who had been in the U.S. and those whose knowledge of the U.S. only came from relatives or friends.

When questioning priests and religious the responses formed a pattern. The first response to the impact of migration on Mexico was almost always, “*La desintegración de la familia,*” the disintegration of the family. This disintegration has greatly impacted communities in Mexico as men went to the U.S. because of economic desperation with the hope of providing for their family or the hope of eventually taking the family to the U.S. Money sent home from workers in the U.S. provides basic needs for family members in Mexico, but at times with the money comes the temptation to more and more materialism. Thus, along with more money in the Mexican home, one may encounter divisions in families based on economics.

Padre Jose Guadalupe (Lupe) said, “The negative impact hurts in many ways. The sad fact is that there is opportunity on the other side. The money earned, while not a great amount by U.S. standards, is so much more than is possible here.”

Padre Lupe continued, “A second sadness is how often the separation is permanent. Some return in boxes (coffins), others never return. Too often families do not know if their children arrive or not. When they hear that a son or daughter has crossed, there is happiness in their safety, but uncertainty of when or if they will ever see them again. Many young families, wives and children, live in doubt of when or if their family will be united.”

Padre Agustín said, “Puerto Vallarta is not affected as much as other parts of Mexico because there is work here.” I spoke in

his Confirmation class and only two of thirty students had a brother or sister or parent in the U.S. These students were in high school or college. It was much different in rural Mexican communities. In rural communities, most of the young people whom I met had either been in the U.S. or were making plans to go. In the rural community there was much less opportunity to attend high school, let alone college.

While priests, religious and community leaders appeared to place most of the blame for the difficulties caused by migration on the lure of life in the U.S. and the difficulties of the border that cause separation of families, the poor and the Mexican middle class did not place blame on one group or another. I did not hear anger or blame towards the Mexican government for their problems or anger at the indignity suffered by people at the U.S. Consulate. There was simply an extreme sadness that people in Mexico were so desperate. Those people who blamed others for the problems or expressed anger were almost always those with more education and opportunity in their lives.

One afternoon I spoke with Petra P., her son, Javier and her granddaughter, Samantha. Petra has a son in Oxnard, California. He has been away most of seventeen years. He returned for his father's funeral and on his return to the U.S. was caught and kept in jail for over a month and then released in the U.S. Petra spoke of the pain of separation and doubt about the security of her son and about a granddaughter she has never seen. She hopes to get a chance to visit her son and granddaughter, but she was denied a tourist visa earlier that year.

Samantha asked, "Why do Americans hate Mexicans?" It was a question filled with pain and simply not understanding the animosity of so many Americans. People in Mexico interact often with Americans in the work of tourism. They perform the work of hospitality and wonder why Americans do not treat workers in the U.S. more civilly and generously. Samantha and Javier wondered why they could not visit America. They do not want to live there. They simply want to visit their relatives.

## Talpa de Allende, Jalisco

After spending time in Puerto Vallarta, I went to Talpa de Allende, Jalisco. Talpa has one of the shrine churches of Mexico, Nuestra Señora del Rosario of Talpa. Some 20-30,000 pilgrims were present for the feast of the Presentation of Jesus on February 2. Many of the pilgrims walk to the shrine from more than ninety miles away.

The pageantry of the fiesta was a special sight for an American tourist. At the fiesta, I asked many people about the impact of migration on Mexico. One woman from Tepic, Nayarit said her son left seven years ago and she had not seen him since. She wanted to go to the U.S. to see her grandchildren, but could not get a visa. Rather bitterly she said, "Why don't Americans respect us? We receive them regularly and graciously here." She worked in the resort industry.

A woman from Colima said that those who go north and come back for visits come back changed. Some come back as Protestants, some are very materialistic and they are strangers to the family. She added, "They talk more and listen less."

When I left Talpa, I had to change bus stations in Guadalajara. On the way, I had an interesting conversation with a taxi driver, Salvador. He worked in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas to pay for the construction of a house for his mother and to raise \$25,000 to pay for a taxi and license. He did not intend to stay in the U.S. and because of the racism he experienced, he could not wait for the day he could leave. He hated being in constant fear of *La Migra* or of someone getting jealous and reporting him. The idea of staying in the U.S. never crossed his mind. Ten years ago he returned to Mexico, bought his taxi and married. He said, "I am very happy at home in Mexico. I am not rich, but I have good work with my taxi."

## **Galeana, Michoacán**

In Michoacán I wanted to see the effects of migration on Galeana, a town of 7,000 people. When I arrived in the town of Puruándiro, I went to a small convenience store to make a phone call to friends in Galeana so that they could come for me. While in the store, the manager told me about Galeana. He said, “Galeana is known for its Catholicism and pretty girls.”

Photo:3 When I took this picture, the two girls told me, “You don’t want our pictures, we’re ugly.” I said, “I have a smart camera. It only takes pictures of beautiful people. If it takes your picture, then you are beautiful.” I do have a smart camera.

Galeana is situated in a beautiful valley. The streets are mostly paved and the houses are more modern and beautifully cared for than one might have expected. Yet soon it is obvious that the town’s beauty is maintained by money from *el Norte* (the north). The people are proud of their town and work hard to keep their town from becoming a ghost town as can be found in other parts of Mexico. It is a town typical of its region, with its young people going North to find work. For many years young men from the community went North to work in the fruit and vegetable harvests of California, Oregon and Washington. Today they may be headed to Florida, Georgia and many other parts of the U.S. to work in agriculture and in construction.

In the Catholic grade school of Galeana, I asked the 150 children, “How many have a parent, brother or sister working in the United States?” All but two children raised their hand. The opportunity for education is one of the greatest pulls on families in this community to move to *el Norte*. Only recently a junior high school was built in the town. There is no high school. When young people finish school, they either have to move to a larger city or go to the U.S. for both education and work.

By the end of my time in Mexico, I found Galeana to be an unusual rural Mexican town. A significant number of its people return to Galeana each winter. Many stay for several months from November to March. There is a special love for this town among those who have gone North. Most of those who return and have legal entry into the U.S. gained their residency during the Amnesty program of the late 1980's. Some have been regularized through a parent or relative. Some of the youth were born in the U.S. while their parents worked in the fields. Those who are documented are the lucky ones.

Still, there are many who are undocumented who return every November. They come home each year even though the border has become more difficult and dangerous. They take the risk of not being able to reenter the U.S. because they want their families to remain in their beloved Galeana. Most of the undocumented who return each year are men who are separated from their wives and children eight months of the year. From March first to November first, Galeana is a town of women, children and the elderly.

The forces of desperation in the community come primarily from a desperate lack of employment and opportunity for education and advancement of the children. Jose Medina has worked in harvests for over twenty years in California, Oregon and Washington. His daughter was seven years old. He applied for residence for his wife and children to live in the U.S. He said that he would rather live in Mexico and continue to go to the U.S. for seasonal work, but his daughter is a bright student and he wants her to have an opportunity for education that she could not realize in the town. If the town had a high school he would not leave his hometown.

Another man, Ramón, told his story of crossing the desert with his friends, and being robbed and beaten by bandits. One friend was seriously injured in the beating. Ramón and two others carried the man for a day trying to get to a highway for help. Their friend died less than a mile from the highway. The peril of

crossing the desert is very real in this town as two from this town died in the desert in 2006 and 2007. Still, people make the crossing each year to seek work for the sake of their families.

While staying in Galeana, I heard that twenty-two young men were leaving on Monday to cross into the U.S. Four of the men had legal entry as residents or as U.S. citizens. The others would attempt to make the crossing through the desert. At the close of the Mass that I celebrated on Sunday, I invited everyone to pray for the safety of those heading for *el Norte*. I simply prayed for their safety and invited those present to come forward for a blessing. After the Mass one woman said, “Padre, our men have been going north for many years and this was the first time a priest invited us to pray for them at Mass. And the priest is an American. Thank you.”

The men at the Mass invited me to have dinner with the group in the evening and to bless the others. That evening, twenty of the men gathered at one home. All gathered around a large table. On the table were a bottle of Tequila and a mountain of tamales. The men who had crossed the border before began telling their stories of crossing. The stories brought many laughs, yet there was seriousness about the gathering. They were heading north with the hope of finding work, sending money home to take care of their loved ones, and the hope of being able to return to their home in Galeana. There was a sense of anxiousness, excitement and fear. Most importantly, there was a sense of hope that fear could not suppress. The image that I saw in these young men reminded me of the sacrifices of families gathering as a young person goes off to war in the military.

I asked people what they wanted changed in the migration reality between the U.S. and Mexico. Many parents said, “Father, all we want is safe passage for our children.”

## **Desperation and hope in rural Mexico**

After a week in Galeana, I spent time in other parts of rural Mexico in the states of Guerrero, Durango and Coahuila. The reality of many small towns was disintegration. There were towns with many of the homes boarded up or falling down in ruins. In Guerrero, I was shown photos of a town that once had a school and the amenities of a small town of 800 people. Today, all the buildings are in ruin and only a dozen or so elderly people continue to maintain homes in the town. Trees and brush grow in the middle of what was once a school.

A priest told me, “People do not leave Mexico because of poverty, people leave because of desperation. People who are poor can still find food to eat, but when a person has no work and loses his dignity as a person, he will move and do whatever it takes to restore his dignity. Migration is the human fight for dignity for the desperate person.”

In the poverty and desperation that one could find in rural Mexico, one can still meet people of joy, hope and dignity. In a small town outside of Iguala, Guerrero, young people displayed an incredible zeal in caring for the poor. Tavo Martinez and his wife Marilu volunteer as catechists in the Church and guide a youth group. While I was there, their youth group assisted an elderly man who lived in an abandoned building. The elderly man had spent a long time in jail and was now free, but was unable to take care of himself because of Alzheimer’s disease. The youth group organized some twenty or more people to take turns bringing the elderly man food each day. They bathed him and washed his clothes a couple times a week. Each Sunday, people took turns at taking the man to Mass. It was difficult entering his living space because of the smell. Watching Tavo bathe and clothe him to prepare him for Mass was one of the most moving moments of my time in Mexico. Tavo sang Mexican ballads while he bathed the man and treated him with care and dignity.

Visiting rural Mexico was like seeing rural America in the years of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. The difference is that for Mexico this reality has been going on for generations. The movement of people to the North has been a part of rural Mexico for so long that migration is simply a fact of life.

### **Life in Mexico City and the larger cities of Mexico**

Most migrant farm workers come from rural areas of Mexico, but on my sabbatical I did visit former migrant workers in Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Torreon and Durango. The people I visited returned to Mexico for a variety of reasons. The economy in the cities is better than in rural Mexico for those who can find jobs. While the income is less than they can make in the U.S., many have an opportunity to purchase a home because of some recent government housing programs.

The government housing projects in the larger cities are impressive. The communities are well planned with easily accessible public transportation. In each community there are schools, supermarkets, drugstores, clinics, playgrounds, churches and other services that support a community. The program provides rather low-income workers with the opportunity to own a home. These government housing projects are allowing a large group of young workers to become homeowners, to form a new middle class in Mexico.

The people whom I met in these government housing developments were more optimistic about Mexico and their own personal future than people in rural areas. Martin and Rosa Leal spoke long into the evening about their hopes and dreams for their two children. Martin said, "When I was in the U.S., I made more money than I can make here, but I do not know if I could provide a better life for my children. Here I can earn about one third of what I earned in the U.S., but I only pay \$180 a month for housing, and I will own this home in thirty years. The last apartment I rented in 1994 in the U.S. cost over \$650 a month. There I had to drive to

any activity, while here our children walk to school and the supermarket is two blocks away.” Martin wants to be able to visit the U.S. to see his friends and relatives. Rosa would like to visit the U.S., but has no desire to live there.

## **Return to el Norte**

Some Americans will be skeptical of my observations of the migration of people from Mexico because my visits were so positive. I went to visit people whom I had met in religious programs in Oregon, California, Kansas and Colorado. They are hard working people with dignity and values based on their faith. They are the same people whom one meets in so many of our churches, schools and neighborhoods.

My sabbatical study continued when I returned to the U.S. where I would spend four months working and living with migrant workers in California and Oregon. My question in Mexico was, “How has migration affected Mexico?” I now wanted to learn how migration has affected those who came to work and live in the United States.

## **Five years after my sabbatical**

Sadly, conditions in much of Mexico have deteriorated with the impact of violence and the drug cartels of Mexico. There are some aspects of progress still in Mexican society, but violence and the threat of violence escalate the instability of Mexico. Many people in the United States are fearful for the safety of loved ones in Mexico. Many feel guilty for not being able to protect their families. There are no easy answers to the conditions on the other side of the border, but we need to be aware of the stress that these tensions place on the lives of migrants in the United States. As the United States economy slowed down in recent years, the attraction of jobs in this country have less “pull” on Mexican society, but the

violence and instability caused by drug cartels creates another “push” for people to come to “el Norte”.

### **Chapter Three: In the Field with Migrant Workers**

In ten years offering catechetical programs for farm workers in migrant camps in Oregon, I had learned much about the lives of migrants. I saw the work and the living conditions and I visited with many farm workers, yet I had never worked on a farm or in a harvest. During my sabbatical in 2007, I spent three months following workers from Stockton, California to Oregon and Washington. Part of that time, I lived and worked with migrants picking cherries in Stockton. In other places I stayed in rectories. I visited work sites, camps and ministries offered by the local churches in California, Oregon and Washington.

I made arrangements with a contractor in Stockton to live with workers in a camp, picking cherries with a different family each day. As I worked I could chat and learn about their lives as migrant farm workers. I lived in the migrant camp. I worked to get in tune with the lives of the workers, sharing what I had with others as so many shared with me. I bought necessities in town with other workers, kicked around a soccer ball, played some basketball and learned card games that I had never known. I got into the routine of a migrant camp.

My first day in the orchard, as I picked cherries, those in the orchard who did not know me asked, “*¿Quién es el gabacho trabajando con nosotros?*” (Who is the American working with us?) Many found it hard to believe that I was a priest. At first, there were some who were not comfortable with my presence. Some would end the day with a beer and try to hide it when they saw me. The second day most were more comfortable and would ask how many boxes I had picked. Several offered me a beer.

There are aspects of migrant life I could not share. I was not working for my survival. I did not have a family depending on me.

I was secure as an American. I knew that I could leave at any time, and as my arrangement with the contractor was that I would not be paid, I had no pressure on how much I accomplished in my work. The boxes of fruit that I picked were credited to people with whom I worked. The third night, I declared that the next day I would “qualify”. One needed to pick twelve boxes of cherries to make minimum wage, and I had been working up to that. The workers did not want me using a ladder. They worried that I might fall. I insisted on learning how to work in an orchard. The fourth day, I learned how to use the ladder and began to get a better rhythm in picking the cherries. At the end of the day, Joaquin cried out to me, “Padre, How many boxes did you pick today?” I responded, “Fourteen.” All applauded. Then I asked Joaquin, “How many did you pick?” He responded, “Forty two.”

There were some surprising blessings working under a tree focused only on picking fruit. The worries of the world outside go away as one gets into a rhythm picking the fruit. The sounds of the orchard include the birds and distant radios with Latin music. There is a sound of accomplishment as the cherries fall into the bucket. Plunk, plunk, plunk! It is good news when one hears the cries that the *lonchera* (lunch truck) has arrived. Work stops for a time while food from the “*lonchera*” is purchased and consumed. The workers visit and talk about their families and hometowns.

The cherry harvest ends around 2:00-3:00 p.m. The heat of the sun comes over the orchard and people return to their housing. Some return to town to stay with friends or relatives in homes, some in housing provided by orchardists, but many stay in tents under trees in an orchard.

After living two weeks in Stockton, I went to The Dalles, Oregon for the catechetical program that introduced me to migrant farm workers. Some of those with whom I lived in Stockton also went to The Dalles. Some went in other directions to follow different harvests. The experience of picking cherries opened many doors for me with migrant workers. Some found it hard to believe that I actually picked cherries. One man in The Dalles would not

believe it until I told him the name of the contractor and described the orchard where I stayed. He was convinced when I described the orchard, especially when I said that the workers and I had to bathe in the creek as there were only two showers for nearly 100 workers.

### **Variety of work done by migrant workers**

After a harvest, workers often travel with other family members heading in several different directions for the next job. Some leave The Dalles, Oregon to pick cherries in Washington or Montana while others go to California for peach and plum harvests. Others go for harvests of pears, nuts, onions, tomatoes, berries, grapes, and other vegetables and fruit. Each harvest demands different skills. The living conditions vary from one place to another.

Temporary farm workers take a day or two to get into the routine of work in a new place. They get to know the work and the work place. Their attention is to setting a routine that includes taking care of the necessities of life. Sometimes the work is more physically exhausting with the heavy weight of the crops, such as pears and apples. Sometimes the work is difficult because of having to bend down and working the soil. Sometimes the crop is uncomfortable because of dealing with irritants like peach fuzz. Some tasks are more mentally exhausting as the people must count the plants they harvest at a nursery. It is mentally challenging when the counting of plants goes into the thousands.

Migrant workers live in the moment. Their lives are mobile as they go from one job to another. They are always working, but never stable in their employment. The contact with family is strained by distance and long periods of absence. Their religious practice is private. When they do attend Mass, they often feel out of place and rebuked for their irregular attendance. They hear lack of respect from the voices of hate in the media and can lose a sense of their human dignity.

Deep down, migrant workers know that they put food on the tables of people all around the world. It is hard work, often done in very uncomfortable conditions. Migrant workers deserve our respect. I regularly invite people to pray for our harvest workers. I do so now with a tremendous respect and love for those who bring food to our tables.

### **Migrant workers are people of hope**

When asked why they do migrant work, those who are parents say that they work to give hope and opportunity to their children. The unmarried say they work to help their parents in California or Mexico. At times, parents wonder if emigration to the United States is worthwhile. They fear the loss of traditional values of work, honesty, faith and family. They worry about the lure of drugs and the fascination of the children for luxuries discovered in the United States. Most of the workers come from rural areas of Mexico, have very little formal education and have few options for other types of work. Many young people and children live in situations that deprive them of quality educational opportunities. Often, they move with their parents from harvest to harvest. At masses in labor camps, it was often difficult to find someone to read. It appeared that many adults could not read.

There are many men who come from Mexico and spend several months each year following different harvests. The ones with documents return to their families in Mexico once or twice a year. These migrants experience the loneliness of separation from their wives and children, yet they believe it is better that their children grow up in their homeland.

There are many young men in the camps. Some are with their families and work to help the family. The ones who have attended school in the United States talk about the work as a summer job before going back to high school or college. Many of the young men have come here from Mexico to live with older brothers and sisters or relatives or friends from their hometown.

Some have the guidance and support of older siblings and uncles, but others live in groups with friends. They say that they are here because of the economic crisis in Mexico. Many send money home to help their families. Some come for the adventure and the hope to find a better life in the United States.

There is not a lot to do in the camps after work. Many of the young men walk into town in the evening. They go to play soccer, or basketball, or to find a place to hang out. In their loneliness and boredom many seek the comfort of alcohol. Alcohol is a serious concern as it is so obviously present in the camps. Most go to bed early because of tiredness and to be ready for the next day's work.

In every camp there are young people with grand aspirations and hope. They face difficulties reaching their goals, but they seek to learn English and get an education. The good students may face discrimination by their peers or may be laughed at for trying to get ahead. There is little time free for studies, and it is hard to find the quiet needed for study in the camps. In each camp there are young people with hopes and dreams and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to follow their dreams.

### **Wanting and Receiving Respect**

At the end of the day, all are tired, but life has a special joy as workers see the results of their work. Closeness to nature and the camaraderie of the camp unites people. Workers speak with pride of putting food on the tables of the world. There is genuine appreciation of owners who treat them with respect and dignity. Many orchard owners show genuine interest in their employees. The abusive employer is an embarrassment to the good orchard owners.

Still, many workers do not feel respected. Several speak of being treated rudely in local stores. They are happy that more of the stores provide Mexican foods than in the past, yet they often believe that they are watched and not trusted. The feelings of lack

of respect do not apply to one local community but to a general experience in many towns. There is sadness about the treatment of migrant workers in the U.S. One man said, "Padre, my family has been doing migrant farm work in this country for over fifty years. I just wish more people appreciated it."

## **Chapter Four: Who Is the Migrant?**

"My father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:5). This identification of the descendants of Abraham in Deuteronomy was a reminder for the early Jewish community of their roots as migratory people. Today we live in a time of vast world migration. There are many causes of this mobility. It may partially be attributed to greater ease of travel, but often it is due to instability in many nations of the world. This instability may be traced to economics, violence and wars. Pope Benedict XVI writes that as a result of mass migration "we are facing a social phenomenon of epoch-making proportions that requires bold, forward looking policies of international cooperation if it is to be handled effectively" (*Caritas in veritate*, 62, June 29, 2009).

In response to Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, the Secretary General for the International Catholic Commission on Migration (ICMC) wrote:

*ICMC* is pleased to read how the new encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, embeds the migration issue in the request for a fundamental change in mentality, whereby higher levels of conscience and responsibility are repeatedly emphasized. Migration is indeed much more than just another specific and distinct societal challenge: it is about a sea wave of change within our societies, politics, cultural identities and religions. It is not simply another humanitarian issue calling only for direct assistance to victims; rather, it remains a still insufficiently defined model of change in existing global

relations. Migration affects the concept of sovereignty, and highlights the need for international thinking in terms and concepts of global governance. Migration is about transition, and is fundamental to our global future (Geneva, July 21, 2009).

Migration is a global reality that challenges leaders in the world of politics, economics, social justice, education and religion. In past migrations, the journey was difficult, but there were few regulatory obstacles once migrants arrived. Migrants encountered different climates, different cultures, different diet, and conflicts with the local peoples, but there was often land, opportunity and even at times, they were welcomed in their new home.

### **Choosing to migrate**

A migrant is someone who has chosen to leave his or her native land and has not yet established a chosen homeland. The migrant leaves because of danger, economic hopelessness or for the promise of opportunity. Often the migrant has hope and intention of returning home. The migrant is mobile, as he or she seeks to settle in a new land. Even with stable employment and established residence, one may never sincerely feel at home in the new land.

In 1960, my grandparents celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and the children got together to buy them tickets to Ireland to see the land and families that each had left almost sixty years before. Grandpa had tears in his eyes knowing that he could see his beloved Ireland, but Grandma refused to go as she said, “Why would I want to go there? I left and have no desire to go there.” They never went to Ireland. Grandpa was the “migrant”; Grandma, the “immigrant”.

People have a spectrum of feelings about their native homeland and their new homeland. For some, the new land is the “promised land” where the migrant quickly establishes ties to the new home. This is the immigrant. Others struggle with customs, culture and the way of life in the new land. Emotionally they

remain people without a home, “migrants”, the “wandering Aramean.”

Comparisons of the migration of people today with past migrations are helpful, but there are unique factors at work in society that Pope Benedict XVI called to our attention in “*Caritas in veritate*.” Evangelization and the teaching of the Gospel are and will be affected by this migration. Ministry to people of mobility is both challenging and life giving.

### **The place of migration in Judeo-Christian history**

The identification of the author of Deuteronomy with his ancestor Abraham being a “wandering Aramean” identifies the human search for God, for meaning, for security, and for a place to call home. The location of the development of Judeo-Christian faith is centered in the Middle East, in a part of the world where trade routes between Asia, Africa, and Europe crossed. The exposure to people of different race, history, custom, and religious expression had a significant influence on a region of the world that became the birthplace of Judaic, Christian, and Muslim faiths.

The foundation of the faith of Israel from the story of Abraham to the establishment of the Kingdom of David is the story of itinerant people moving towards God and a place where they could worship in peace. Abraham received people of different faiths with dignity and respect as he welcomed visitors and prepared meals for them so that they would spend the evening with him. On one occasion three stayed with him and as they left, they prophesied the birth of a son to him and Sarah in their “old age.” He welcomed Melchizedec, the priest, to pray with him. Abraham was open to learn about the “One God,” and became known as our father in faith.

From the Kingdom of David to the birth of Jesus, through prophets and teachers there was the development and codification of faith begun in the people of Israel. The development of the Old Testament took place in one nation, but it was a nation influenced

by interaction with various cultures and people. There were migrations in the dispersion of people of this Jewish tradition because of conquest, exiles and trade. The authors of Scripture, the prophets and teachers, wrote the story of the development of faith based on a confidence in the relationship of God and humanity. The promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

At the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus are told to “make disciples of all nations.” The Apostles and early disciples set out as itinerant preachers, spreading the Good News. St. Paul took the Good News throughout the region of the Mediterranean Sea. The Church spread as missionaries continued to evangelize and bring people to Christ and the Church.

The Council of Nicea (325 AD) declared the Church to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” The apostolic or missionary thrust of the Church spread Catholicism throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. There are apostolic roots to Catholicism in India. The message of Catholicism was to announce salvation to the whole world. The Church itself was mobile, it was missionary.

The identity of the Church as “catholic” has to do with the universality of the Church. It was a Church with aspiration to reach all corners of the world. Today the Church is present in all nations, but we have a long way to go in realizing unity in the midst of the diversity of peoples.

### **The Catholic Church in America, a story of migration and conversion**

There are significant differences in the experience of Catholicism in the United States and in Latin America. The Catholic Church in the United States is deeply impacted by the experience of immigration. It has grown in an environment of religious liberty not experienced in other parts of the world. The

story of the Catholic Church in Latin America is one of missionary evangelization and conversion.

### Catholicism in the United States

When the United States began, there was a lack of trust in the loyalty of the “papist”, the Catholic. The Irish, Italian, German and Polish immigrants were targets of great discrimination for “clinging” to their religion. Many Catholic immigrants from Europe gathered in certain neighborhoods in the cities. Especially in Eastern cities, there were ethnic enclaves and many of the churches, often served by priests from the homeland, were identified with one ethnic community. Rural communities tended to receive many people from one nation or another. One town was German, another Russian, another Portuguese, and another Irish.

Catholic schools played a significant role in the “melting pot” experience of American society. Masses were celebrated in Latin. After Mass was over, the adults gathered: Italians with Italians; Germans with Germans; Polish with Polish; and Irish with Irish. The young people went to the same schools, spoke English and mixed with other groups in sports and in the work place. A new unity was emerging. People from various ethnic groups fought together in World Wars and formed relationships that crossed ethnic and religious lines. Mixed ethnic and mixed religion marriages became common.

U.S. Catholicism and American pride were alive and vibrant at the time of the Second Vatican Council. The American Catholic with European heritage built the Catholic Church in much of the U.S. As migrations came from Latin America, Asia, Africa and all parts of the world, the exposure to cultural expressions of faith that did not find their origin in European Catholicism challenged the Catholic Church in America. The number of migrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America increased greatly at the same time as changes were taking place in the Church after Vatican II.

In the U.S., difficulties in the unity of the Church in the diversity of global migration are tied to American struggles with

race and culture, yet that does not explain the entire struggle. The decline of Catholic schools, celebrations of Masses in the vernacular and significant growth of the Catholic populations from the migrant and immigrant populations have challenged methods of evangelization and catechesis. New methods of evangelization and community organization are necessary for the future of the Catholic Church in the United States.

### Catholicism in Latin America

It is popular for people disenchanted with the Catholic Church to critique Latin American evangelization in the political history of Central and South America. There is reason for some of that critique, but it lacks the nuance needed to understand and respect the faith of migrants. Catholicism arrived in Central and South America after conquests of Spanish and Portuguese invaders. Missionaries arrived at times with mixed zeal. Many came to serve the needs of the conquerors, yet some arrived with genuine apostolic zeal to go to the native people to evangelize. Missionary methodology varied from one region to another and from one religious congregation to another. What developed was a Catholicism that was neither European nor indigenous. As missionaries learned to communicate in native languages, they encouraged values and traditions that were not in opposition to Catholic teaching and taught the story of salvation in Christ, sacrament and the lives of the saints. The faith was nurtured by a variety of popular devotions. In various nations of the Americas, there developed a “mestizaje,” a mixing of cultures, an inculturated expression of faith.

Pope John Paul II emphasized the importance of the Latin American experience of bringing cultural expressions together in the conversion of Latin America. He appreciated the evangelization found in the stories of Juan Diego and the Apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At the canonization of Juan Diego, Pope John Paul II said, “In accepting the Christian message without foregoing his indigenous identity, Juan Diego

discovered the profound truth of the new humanity, in which all are called to be children of God. Thus, he facilitated the fruitful meeting of two worlds and became the catalyst for the new Mexican identity, closely united to Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose mestizo face expresses her spiritual motherhood which embraces all Mexicans” (Homily for the Canonization of Juan Diego, July 31, 2002).

In 1992 in Santo Domingo, Pope John Paul II declared that Our Lady of Guadalupe and Juan Diego are “a model of perfectly inculturated evangelization.” He said, “The apparition of Mary to Juan Diego at the hill of Tepeyac, in 1531, had a decisive repercussion for evangelization, not only for the nation of Mexico, but reaching out to the entire Continent.” From this time on, we begin to hear in the Church that Our Lady of Guadalupe is patron of the Americas and Juan Diego is the model for us of what it is to be evangelized.

The story of Juan Diego and the Virgin of Guadalupe as “a model of evangelization” is more than simply a story of the events. *The Nican Mopohua*, the earliest text about the story of Juan Diego and the Virgin, presents the foundation of Latin American faith. It presents a message of faith consistent with the tradition of the Church. Within the *Nican Mopohua*, there are profound teachings of the relationship of the People of God to salvation. Juan Diego is a seeker of the truth who experiences disillusionment, obstacles, surprise at the blessings of God, and a profound sense of being loved and chosen by God.

The notion that the teaching is “perfectly inculturated” indicates that the message was particularly for the indigenous people. It contains symbols known in the indigenous culture. The Virgin is dressed in native garb, she is dark skinned and she spoke in Náhuatl, the Aztec language. This message was to convince people who had no experience of Christianity of the truth found in Christ.

Popular religious devotions in Latin America are more than simply religious exercises. They teach and evangelize. Religious

art, symbols, and practices bring people into a relationship with God. Unfortunately, many outside the world of the poor can judge harshly the popular religiosity of Latin America. Some expressions have at times distorted or confused the Church's message. The blessing of symbols, music, dance, and art is that they touch the person of faith as encounters with the presence of the divine.

There are aspects of Catholicism in Latin America to admire and emulate. There are aspects that need correction. The call of the Church to a New Evangelization needs leaders in the Church to develop new methods of evangelization that build on the best practices of popular religious practice and improve those aspects of religious practice that need refining. The key to this effort is respect for the faith of poor people.

### **Global migration and the Catholic Church in the United States**

Migration is complex. Today's migration has significant differences from past migrations. Prophetic words have come from Church councils and documents of Episcopal Conferences over the past fifty years, but they often fail to receive attention at the level of ordinary ministry within the Church.

U.S. migration is global, but most political and ecclesial attention has focused on Latin American migration. In past U.S. migrations, people clustered in barrios and ghettos of various ethnic groups. Parishes were organized based on ethnic groups. Today, parishes are larger and composed of several ethnic and cultural groups. There also may be significant social class, cultural and educational divisions. Parish unity is difficult to attain or maintain.

Today it is common for communities to have a diversity of migrants from totally different regions of the world. A parish may have members from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and Europe. It is not surprising that

parishes struggle with these realities. “Unity in diversity” sounds great, but it is difficult to accomplish.

Celebration of Mass in the language of the people cannot be done in all the languages present in many communities. English may unite the majority of people, but there are migrants in American communities from all parts of the world. It is common to have many languages spoken in the homes across America. This is no longer only the experience of large cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Houston. Great diversity is found in Omaha, Minneapolis, Fresno and Little Rock. In Liberal, Kansas, we identified eleven languages spoken in homes within one parish.

Global migration has made it common for one neighborhood to have people from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East living side by side with Americans several generations removed from their immigrant roots. While it creates a challenge for communities and for church leaders to develop programs that create the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” Church, this great diversity reveals the tremendous love of God for all people.

The United States has been the Grand Experiment in migration. The Statue of Liberty proudly proclaims:

"Give me your tired, your poor, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

(The New Colossus, Emma Lazarrus, 1883)

The challenges that the Church in the U.S. faces are opportunities rather than obstacles in our life of faith. The tired, the poor and the huddled masses are just those of whom Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” (Mt. 25: 35-36).

## Chapter Five: Who Is the Campesino?

"June 1998: It was 4:15 a.m. in The Dalles, Oregon, when I went with seven migrant workers to begin the harvest. We rode in an old jeep, seven in the jeep, two on the hood. The mayordomo (supervisor of the orchard) was at the wheel. At the top of the hill the workers got out to begin the harvest. The mayordomo said, "Vamos a volar." ("Let's fly"). Then we took off to pick up more workers. The Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland is nothing to compare with this. We made three more such trips. Other workers were walking up the hill to begin work. By 5:00 a.m., the hillside was alive with the cherry harvest.

There were many greetings, "*Hey, Padre. ¿Dónde está su balde?*" (Where's your bucket?) When light finally filled the hillside, I began to take photos. From the middle of trees laden with cherries, workers cried out, "Padre, take our picture." Many were whistling or singing softly while they picked cherries. I came to this valley as a missionary to give hope to migrant workers, yet as each day passed I gained respect and love for these workers."

(from personal journal)

It was 1998 when I had my introduction to migrant farm workers during the harvest in The Dalles, Oregon. Nine years later, in 2007, picking fruit and living with migrant workers was part of my sabbatical study. My first day picking cherries in Stockton there were people in the orchard who asked, "*¿Quién es el gabacho trabajando con nosotros?*" ("Who is the American working with us?") Many could not believe it when they were told, "He is a priest."

I have preached parish missions in rural communities in fifteen states since 1996. Often the missions were presented for one week in English and one week in Spanish. I spent five years working in the Redemptorist Hispanic Initiative in the diocese of

Dodge City, Kansas. For two years, I preached parish missions almost exclusively in Spanish in California and Oregon. On May 1, 2009, I became the Director for Multicultural and Campesino Ministry for the diocese of Fresno.

Campesino Ministry offers unique challenges to the ministry of the Church, but it also offers great blessings. My background is as a religious educator, a mission preacher and youth minister. My greatest joy came in organizing a sacramental mission for migrant workers in The Dalles, Oregon. Each year that mission prepared children for First Eucharist, youth and young adults for Confirmation and Eucharist. Couples prepared for the convalidation of their marriages and the baptism of infants.

### **Campesino – one who works the field**

Fifty and sixty years ago the face of the “campesino” was identified with the “migrant” who followed the crops from the South to the North and back to the South. It was easy to identify the migrants. They worked the fields. They lived in groups at camp housing or in tent cities on farms. They were in a community for a specific period of time. When the harvest ended, they moved on. Communities adjusted to the flow of workers during certain times of the year. There were priests and religious who followed some of the workers, but by and large the migrants were invisible to many of our church communities.

Changes in agriculture have reduced the number of people who continue to live in the mobile manner of migrants in the past. While some continue to live working “la corrida,” (the circuit), most live in homes on farms or in small towns and even large cities. In the fruit and vegetable industry, they tend to work within fifty miles of their homes. Their work is often temporary, involving a variety of crops and a variety of skills. Many are uncertain about how long they will remain in a place. They live in the moment. Things outside their control in the forces of climate, economics and political realities form the fluidity of their lives.

Agriculture is an essential human service as people dedicate themselves to the production of food and necessities of life. Modern society often takes agriculture for granted and looks down on it as unworthy of its energy.

Farm work is a noble work as Gerardo E. told me. Gerardo came to the U.S. in the 1970's, and spent five years working the fields in California, Oregon and Washington. In the 1980's, he moved to Los Angeles and worked first as a mechanic and later became the manager of a tire store. He worked behind the desk and was making more money than he could ever make in the fields; however, he experienced some uncomfortable changes in his personality. He would lose his temper and he was irritable particularly with his family. He finally told his wife that he was unhappy in his work and that he missed working the fields. They moved to the Sacramento area and he returned to harvest work. With pride Gerardo said, "Padre, today we sent forty tons of cherries to the packing house. Soon these cherries will be on tables in San Francisco, Chicago, New York and London. And tomorrow we will pick another forty tons." Gerardo said that at the end of the day he leaves the orchard with a belief that he has done something good for the world.

#### 1. "Skilled Agricultural Workers"

Counter to myths in the news/entertainment industry and in political circles about the migrant as an "unskilled worker", agriculture needs a work force that has a significant variety of skills. It takes training to properly produce and harvest crops for the marketplace. The work done by these workers is a trade and it is wrong to identify trade skills as unskilled labor. In an interview with Mr. Bob Bailey, CEO of Orchard View Farms in The Dalles, Oregon, Mr. Bailey consistently called his workers, "my skilled agricultural workers." Migrant farm work needs to be viewed as a trade, a learned skill.

Harvest work demands a variety of skills. Beginning workers may be untrained, but soon they must learn how to pick

the fruit without bruising it, and how to pick the fruit properly so as not to damage the tree which affects the future production of the tree. They learn the art of placing a ladder. An untrained cherry worker may pick twenty buckets of cherries in a day, while a skilled worker picks fifty or more a day.

When an owner hires a worker, a skilled worker is important since the skilled worker picks fruit with minimal impact on the tree and will pick what two or more untrained workers may produce. With patience, an owner recognizes that an untrained worker needs experience to learn the trade, but the owner needs a healthy percentage of skilled workers to have a profitable orchard. With workers who are less skilled, one needs more workers and there are the additional costs of housing, ladders, supervision, accounting, bookkeeping and other expenses.

## 2. Mobility.

Migrant workers are mobile. They follow the crops when they are ready. When the harvest comes, they move in to pick the crop until finished and then move to the next harvest. A good harvest for the worker is measured by the number of days worked and the number of buckets they pick. A good harvest for the owner is measured by the quantity and quality of the product.

For many, the image of a migrant worker can be seen in Luis H. Each year Luis comes to the U.S. in March to begin his work in California. He spends several weeks trimming trees and vines. He moves with each crop to different sites on the West Coast. In May and early June, he picks cherries in Stockton, and then goes to The Dalles, Oregon for more cherries. From there, he follows the cherry, pear and apple harvests in California, Oregon and Washington. In November, he returns to Mexico to be with his wife and children. He hopes to make between \$15,000-25,000 during his time in the U.S. He says that he averages making about \$100 per day. Some harvests pay more than others. He hopes to work 200 or more days in eight months. In 2006, he worked 210 days. He is not here for tourism or vacation, but to make a living

to support his family and allow him to build a home in Michoacán. For many people, Luis is the image of a migrant worker.

While the cherry harvest in The Dalles has a traditional appearance, there are few workers like Luis among the migrants with whom I have worked. More are like Alberto who lives in a town near Fresno. Alberto does the exact same work as Luis, but with the exception of picking cherries in The Dalles, his work is found within sixty miles of where he lives. He spends several weeks harvesting a variety of fruits during their seasons and spends the winter pruning trees and vines. His life appears stable as his children attend school in the town and he returns to his house each evening.

Still, Alberto is a migrant worker whose stability or instability in life is directly affected by the mobility of his work. Many workers in the situation of Alberto are as uncertain as Luis of where they may be in the next month. The nature of migrant life is to be mobile, the work is temporary and the worker has multiple skills. The instability of the worker is complicated when the worker or one of his family members lacks legal documents. Local action taken by Homeland Security, rumors and fear keep families in a constant state of insecurity. This insecurity keeps many from establishing ties with local churches, schools and community organizations.

### 3. The faith of migrants

Agricultural migrant workers are ordinarily Catholic. They tend to come from rural Mexico and Latin America. Their faith is deeply rooted in family expressions of faith. Devotional prayer, celebration of feasts and devotion to the Virgin nurtures the faith. Few have received significant catechetical instruction. Still, the migrant worker is profoundly Catholic and lives that faith in a simplicity that can inspire those with higher levels of education.

In 2007, I visited a gentleman in Michoacán. He worked nearly forty years picking fruit in California, Oregon and Washington. Each year, he returned to his beloved town of

Galeana. At age 62, he stopped coming north for the harvests. When I entered his home, he kissed my hand and said, “Padre, it is a blessing that you enter my house.” He then fumbled under his shirt and pulled out a cross that I give to workers at the end of our migrant camp Masses. It is a simple plastic cross that reminds people of the blessing given to the workers of the cherry harvest. He said, “I have two more in my room. It was such a blessing to have Mass in our orchard.”

The Masses that I offered in the orchards of The Dalles, Oregon are a small act of grace received by the workers, but their gratitude over the years has always humbled me. After thirteen summers of offering Masses in camps during the cherry harvest and eleven years of running a catechetical program for children of migrants preparing for First Communion and Confirmation, the depth of Catholic faith found among people who are at the margins of our church amazes me.

There is a discouraging aspect of the faith of migrants in how deeply they are aware of unworthiness. There is a profound sense that they are not good Catholics. They have been lectured continually on their unworthiness because of their lack of regular attendance at church, their lack of catechesis and the irregularities of marriages. Many internally believe that they are “bad people.” It is difficult to guide them to trust in God's mercy and love. For example, twelve men that live on a sod farm have no vehicles and live several miles from the closest town. They work under a contractor for ten hours a day, seven days a week. They are paid minimum wage, no overtime. They live in housing provided by the farmer, and they pay \$12.50 per day for food that is provided at the camp. With no transportation and a work schedule that never gives them a day off, they obviously cannot attend Church regularly. Yet if they are asked to be a godparent for a baptism, local churches give them a hard time or refuse to let them be a “padrino.” People in ministry need to walk with migrants and understand the life that they live.

#### 4. Working Conditions and Wages

The living conditions, treatment and pay of migrant labor vary from one location to another. The disparity of working conditions again makes generalizations difficult. The living conditions that I experienced in Stockton, California were dramatically different from what I experienced in The Dalles, Oregon. In The Dalles, the owners are present in their orchards and are “hands on” in the work of the harvest. They mingle with and know many if not all of their workers. In Stockton, I did not see a similar contact of the owners with the workers since many orchardists employ contractors. It is the contractor who has direct contact with the workers.

Wages are not the only consideration of the migrant worker in seeking work in a particular orchard or farm. The worker considers what it will cost to live in the area during a harvest to determine the value of going to one harvest or another. In some communities, the orchardist or farmer provides housing. In other areas, people need to rent lodging or sleep in tents at the back of an orchard. One worker said of his work picking cherries in both Stockton and The Dalles, “I make more money in Stockton, but I take home more from The Dalles because of the housing offered by the orchard owner.”

The problem of low wages is the reality of agricultural economy. The wages of the migrant worker are modest, but when workers are able to minimize their expenses with housing and with consistent work, they can make a reasonable living. Harvest workers look for a good number of full days of work. When the migrant comes to a community, he is looking for steady work that makes the sacrifice of being away from home worthwhile. He is not looking for days off.

Workers are paid the minimum wage mandated by state law for agricultural workers by the hours worked. In many harvests, there are incentives for higher production. With incentives in those harvests, workers may make between \$10-20 per hour. Unfortunately, not all agricultural work has incentive levels that

raise the pay sufficiently. The threshold for reaching incentive levels in the cherry harvest in a normal harvest situation is fairly easily attained and workers may double or even triple minimum wages in the cherry harvest. I visited a nursery in northern California that had incentive levels that very few workers could attain. So basically, workers could make no more than minimum wage. In some agricultural work, workers are paid simply by the hour. Minimum wage rates for migrant workers simply do not provide for the needs of a family.

Sometimes there is a quota of how much fruit or product may go to a packing house in a day. If the quality of the fruit coming to the packing house is low because of rain damage or such, the packing house may place limits on how much fruit may be processed. If the workers reach the limit early, the workers may only get in three to five hours of work. This lowers their income for the harvest season. Obviously, weather, quality, and quantity of the fruit affect the harvest.

Unfortunately, there are times when an orchardist or a contractor may have too many workers so that the work day ends early as a block of trees or a field is finished in less than eight hours. Workers understand when an orchard has limited work because of the nature of agricultural work. However, there are hard feelings when the work is limited because of having too many workers.

In those agricultural jobs that pay only by the hour, there are some serious problems. Many workers are pushed to work extremely long hours, from ten to twelve hours per day and they are working six and seven days a week. They are not paid overtime while working sixty or seventy hours a week. Long hours are especially common in dairies and feedlots.

Contractors provide workers for a specific work or harvest. They are a layer of administration between the owner and the worker. This may provide a convenience and protection of the owners from U.S. government regulations on immigration and workers protections, yet some contractors take a bite out of the

income of the workers. Contractors can manipulate their workers to work more hours by using the desire of the worker for more income and by intimidation either by threats about immigration or by threats that someone else will take the job.

## 5. Avoid stereotyping

There is neither a stereotypical farm worker nor a stereotypical contractor or farm owner. I present observations about workers, employers, and contractors with a conscious awareness that all are about the business of agriculture. The conditions of workers vary in many situations. In some cases there are injustices, but my overwhelming experience with people in all aspects of agriculture is that they are good people, putting food on the tables of the world. Those who administer their workers and farms poorly cause grief for the many conscientious people in agriculture. Difficulties in the lives of farm workers come from many sources.

## **No easy answers**

The complexity of the lives of migrants and the realities of migration call for a comprehensive approach on the political issues around migration. The same is true in matters of faith. We need a comprehensive approach to evangelization and the outreach of the Church to the migrant. Simplistic answers to complex problems will leave society and the Church divided and unhappy with unworkable solutions.

Migrants are hardworking, hopeful and faithful. With a little attention on my part, they have taken me in as their priest. Their love is genuine and humbling. My hope is that others may love them and care for them both in our society and within our Church.

## **Chapter Six: Appreciating Culture, Popular Religion and Inculturated Evangelization**

In a Confirmation class in The Dalles, Oregon, students were asked to tell the story of Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe. The students floundered as they tried to tell the story. Many professed devotion to the Virgin, but were unable to say why. All of the young people had taken part in celebrations and processions. Many wore medals of Guadalupe; some had the image painted on their cars. Some even had tattoos of “la Virgen.” For most, this was simply a symbol of la Raza, a symbol of Mexico. There was little religious significance.

On the feast of Guadalupe we hear in the song, La Guadalupana, “Desde entonces para el Mexicano, ser Guadalupano es algo esencial” (From this time on, for the Mexican, to be a Guadalupano is essential.) The importance of Our Lady of Guadalupe is part of the Mexican identity and that means part of being Mexican is to be Catholic. The fact that young people know so little of Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe shows how separated they can be from the source of their dignity, their faith and the culture that supports their values.

For many reasons migrants and their children have little knowledge of the context of conversion in Latin America. The migrant community has little formal education in the history of their nation and less education of the religious history and culture that forms the basis of their values. Many of the young people in our programs were either born in the United States or they came to this country at a very young age. For many young people, Mexico and other countries of origin are practically fantasy lands. There is very little taught about Mexico and Latin America in U.S. schools. If religious thought and values are tied to history and culture, our young people from Latin America have very little foundation on which to build their understanding of God and religion.

In religious formation programs, brief attention is paid to cultural expressions of faith. The integration of those expressions

of faith with religious doctrine and liturgical worship are only superficially addressed. Telling and retelling the story of salvation is the foundation of the Gospel of Jesus. The methodology of the early church was to draw connections between the experience of the listener and the message of salvation. In the same way, we need to connect the student with the story of salvation in Latin America. Telling and retelling the story of conversion in Mexico and in Latin America raises the sense of dignity of the Latino not only in the Church, but also in all aspects of life.

### **The importance of knowing Latino religious history**

The basic parts of the story of Juan Diego and the Virgin are well known, but many fail to reflect on the story and its part in the conversion of Mexico. While many Mexicans know the framework of the story of Guadalupe, few have studied the Nican Mopohua. The story of Guadalupe is so entwined with the Catholic identity of Mexico that it should be studied as a resource for evangelization today.

As American parishes recognize the Hispanic faithful, parishes celebrate cultural feasts of the immigrant community. Many parishes organize celebrations of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Posadas, Pastorelas, the Day of the Dead and other cultural celebrations. In many communities, there are triduums and novenas to educate the faithful on the importance of these celebrations. These programs are good attempts to invite the community to reflect on the significance of these devotions of popular religion. Still, on the feasts the majority of people who attend have not participated in the triduums and novenas. The lack of reflection on the significance of the feast often leads to a lack of connection of the celebration to the ordinary practice of the Catholic faith in liturgy and sacrament.

The goal of religious education is that faith becomes an essential part of the life of the candidate. The story of Juan Diego is the immersion of the indigenous person into the life of faith. We

need religious education and all ministries of the Church to hold higher esteem for the culture of religion that forms the basis of Latino spirituality.

### **A culture of faith**

One must enter into the imagination, symbolism, music, dance and art of the Hispanic religious experience to grasp the importance of culture and history in the Hispanic experience of faith. The heart plays an important symbolic and profound role in the development of Latin American spirituality. Values, morals and identity are shaped within the context of family and faith. The identity of the Mexican is to be devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe. This is not only seen in expressions of religious belief, but even in reflections on one's national identity.

I will not forget the first Mass I celebrated in a dominantly Mexican parish in Denver. It was on Mexican Independence Day, Sept. 16, 1991. At the end of the Mass, I was told to do the traditional Grito before the closing song. So after the final blessing I shouted, "¡Qué viva la raza!" and the congregation responded, "¡Qué viva!" I continued with, "¡Qué viva la patria! ¡Qué viva la Virgen!"

It immediately impressed on me the importance of the Catholic faith as part of Mexican identity. To be Mexican is to have a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. This devotion is part of the Mexican identity. This does not come from academic study of religious doctrine, but comes from the sacred that is passed on in the midst of family and community celebrations of faith. It is reinforced by music, dance, pilgrimages, mandas, mañanitas, serenatas and processions. Catholicism is deeply rooted in the Mexican identity. It is part of the self-esteem of the Mexican.

Popular religion is more than religious practices. It is a way of organizing religious identity. Participants in expressions of popular religion may or may not find themselves comfortable in the institutional practices of the Catholic Church. It is common to

have people whose only attendance at church is at times of popular feasts and celebrations of events such as Baptisms, First Communion, quinceañeras, etc. These may be the only events that some people find as familiar in the faith. The heartfelt, emotional acceptance of faith does not always translate into an institutional commitment to the Catholic Church. This is especially true when the person finds Catholic churches in the United States cold and unfriendly. The challenge is how to make those that are only comfortable with popular religious practices feel at home in the church in the United States.

### **Relationship with the Divine Presence**

The primary concern of “inculturated evangelization” is one’s relationship with God, not one’s membership in an ecclesial community. It is the relationship with God that leads one into the community of believers, the Church. In verse 10 of the *Nican Mopohua*, Juan Diego asks himself if he is in the presence of God as he recognizes the presence of the divine in the singing of the birds and the beauty of creation. The core of Latino spirituality is found in creating a relationship with the divine presence. Awe and mystery surround this experience.

The intense desire to have a relationship with the mystery of God may explain the attraction of spirit filled religious expression in the Latino community. There is a tension within Latin American Catholicism and the academic presentation of theology and Church practice. This tension can create the appearance of disunity in the People of God.

### **Integration of culture and doctrine in catechesis**

The actual bringing together of culture and doctrine is not difficult. The most crucial element is holding culture and doctrine in high and equal respect. Too often the ecclesial structures of the Church appear to hold cultural expressions of faith as limited or of

diminished importance in Catholic spirituality. In Catholic missionary tradition, missionaries often used traditional cultural religious expression in Catholic worship to introduce native populations to the evangelization of the Church. In using indigenous customs in liturgy and paraliturgical expressions of faith, the Church welcomes communities.

In the canonization of St. Juan Diego, the liturgy began with an indigenous “limpia” or cleansing of Pope John Paul II as part of the penitential ritual of the Mass. The “limpia” done by native dancers at the ceremony incorporated cultural tradition that the Pope made even clearer in his homily when he spoke of Juan Diego. The Holy Father said, “Juan Diego, receiving the message of Christianity without renouncing his indigenous identity, discovered the profound truth of the new humanity, in that all are called to be children of God in Christ.” The Church has a long history of incorporating the spiritual realities of native cultures when those practices and beliefs are consistent with the teaching of the Church.

When studying the *Nican Mopohua* as not simply a history of the miraculous events around Our Lady of Guadalupe, but as a document of evangelization that is consistent with Catholic tradition, one gains a greater respect for the intimate relationship of the Latino person of faith with Mary, the Mother of God. Catechesis that includes teaching of the culture of faith can lead candidates to a faith that integrates their human dignity with the pursuit of a relationship with God.

## **Chapter Seven: Ministry and Services Offered to Migrant Workers**

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” Mt. 25: 35*

In ministry with migrant workers, one cannot overestimate the importance of welcoming the stranger. For a number of years, I participated in a ministry of welcome for young people in Denver, Colorado. The Redemptorists opened Casa San Alfonso, a “house of welcome” for youth in 1991. There was a very active youth group at St. Joseph Church in Denver, but the young people seldom came to drop in on priests at the rectory. Two other Redemptorists and I moved to a house seven blocks from the church. We told youth that there were beans on the stove and tortillas in the refrigerator, “Our house is your house.” The beauty of the house was that young people took us up on our offer and many gathered at the house each evening.

At first we did not know who would take up our ministry of welcome, but soon it became clear that Spanish-speaking youth made the Casa their home. Many had arrived recently from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Most of the youth were in their teens and twenties. Many worked in restaurants, hotels, maintenance and construction. Their hours were inconsistent. They were hopeful migrants struggling to make it in a new world.

We often said that for every ten phone calls at Casa San Alfonso, nine were in Spanish and the other was a wrong number. The Casa was the location for many celebrations, and some called the house, “Casa de las Fiestas” (Home of parties). The Casa gained a few youth for singing in choirs and played a major part involving youth in the celebrations of the feasts of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Posadas, Lenten celebrations and Holy Week, but we

did not immediately see a lot of growth in religious education and formation.

After six months, some questioned if the welcoming community would ever become a serious ministry, bringing young people into a deeper commitment to Christ and the Church. Then in the spring, a young man was killed in a car accident. Several other serious situations involving young people in the community took place, and it was the ministry of the welcoming community that became central in responding to crises in our youth community. Youth began to trust Casa San Alfonso as the place to go for support in difficult times. Youth began to open themselves up to our community, and the ministry of Casa San Alfonso became more effective. Trust was earned.

Since the ministry of Casa San Alfonso was indirectly attached to the parish of St. Joseph, the ministry had to define itself in new ways. In some respects it was a social justice ministry, addressing needs of youth. It also was a center for spiritual guidance of youth. It was not defined in traditional ways of ministry in a parish with emphasis on sacraments and religious education. It was a ministry of interaction between religious men and young people who were adjusting to life in the United States. The religious men were involved in a ministry that did not fall solely in the realm of religious or social justice ministry. The overlap of the religious practice and the issues of poverty, legal status and self-esteem introduced the religious men in the community to a dynamic group of young men and women looking for direction in their lives.

The greatest asset of the Casa San Alfonso ministry was listening and observing young people, primarily migrants looking to the Church for guidance. The ministry demanded flexibility of its leaders to enter the lives of the people rather than set a list of qualifications to receive attention. As with many experiments in ministry, certain aspects began to take precedence. Retreats and mission preaching began to take up the attention of the religious community. The ministry evolved into the formation of a

preaching team that involved Redemptorists and lay missionaries offering bilingual missions in Colorado and later in other states. The Casa San Alfonso community did not continue after 1996. For those of us who lived in Casa San Alfonso, it was a ministry that allowed the poor to “evangelize” us and to give us a perspective into the lives of migrants that is hard to replicate.

### **Importance of first impression**

One of the first lessons I had to learn at Casa San Alfonso was how to answer the telephone. Often we Americans answer the phone immediately taking care of business, “Hello, what can I do for you?” Worse is when one says, “What do you want? What do you need?” I was unaware of how offensive that can be to the Latino sensibility. I had to learn to respond by entering into a brief but comfortable exchange before getting down to business. For example, when answering the phone, I would say, “Hello Teresa, how are you today? How is school going? How is your family? Good. How can I help you?” It may take a minute or so, but it allows the person to sense your care.

Once I was speaking with people from three different continents: Asia, Africa and Latin America. We were speaking of phone etiquette. They were not speaking only about churches, but about making phone calls in a variety of circumstances. Each was saying how rude Americans are. Each came from poor nations and they believed that all Americans care about is what they get done. Taking a moment to speak in a familiar way with people can open doors for letting the grace of Christ touch the lives of the poor.

When a person comes to a church asking for the grace of Baptism, Confirmation, First Eucharist or Marriage, he or she needs to hear a message of welcome from the priest or the parish staff. When someone asks to have a child baptized, the proper response is: “Of course we will baptize your child. What is your child’s name? What a beautiful name for such a beautiful child. How old is your child?” Then one can begin to gather information

about the child and the parents' participation in the life of the Church. It is a moment of grace, a moment of evangelization.

When questioning people about their participation in the Church, it should be done in a way that invites the person to feel at home in the Church, not in a way that introduces shame to the discussion. The moment of sacramental grace is a time to invite the person to a deeper walk in the faith. Questions should only be asked if the one asking is willing to do what is necessary to regularize the irregular status of people's involvement in the faith. It is not appropriate to ask about one's marriage status if the minister is not ready to say, "Since you are not married in the Church, what can we do to help you have your marriage blessed?" Those not married within the church already feel embarrassed about their marriage situation. The effective minister not only does not scold them for their status, but rather invites them to the grace of sacrament. In this way, they are more likely to seek a deeper contact with the faith community.

Much of what I have said so far is common sense pastoral practice, but it cannot be overemphasized in its importance. Too many migrants and immigrants have experienced abrupt treatment by people in ministry in the Catholic Church in the United States. After making people feel welcome, there is plenty of time to gather the information needed for church records. The Church needs to recognize the importance of welcome, especially for the poor and marginalized in society.

### **Discernment of Needs**

One migrant couple arrived in a southwest Kansas town knowing no one in the area. They stayed the first couple days in the home of a Protestant family that insisted that they attend their church as they looked to get established in the town. They were told that there was no Catholic Church in the town. It was the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe when they asked a cashier at a local Mexican restaurant if there was a Catholic Church in the area. The

cashier told them of a parish a short distance from where they were staying. They went to the parish and met the Sister that was preparing for the Mass and fiesta for that evening. When their hosts found out that they went to the Catholic Church, they were kicked out of their lodging. That evening, they went to the Mass. Someone in the community offered them a place to stay. When the celebration ended, the husband picked up a broom and helped clean up after the service. A parishioner told him that he was our guest; he did not need to do that. Nonetheless, he would not let go of the broom. His wife also helped wash the dishes. They were giving thanks to the Virgin for finding their home in the Catholic Church in the town. Soon the wife joined the parish choir and from then on, she and her husband were at church activities regularly.

The social and physical needs of the poor can tax community resources, but more importantly, the poor need to be recognized and treated with dignity. When the poor person is demanding of services, it can be unsettling, but we need to recognize that the demanding person is one who has already lost so much in ways of self-respect. The poor are often not as easy to help as the couple above, but those in ministry in the church need wisdom and patience to make the burdens of the poor a little lighter.

Many ask for blessing of a home or of a car or of religious articles. These blessings can be time consuming and appear insignificant, but they are ways that poor people recognize the presence of God and God's blessing in their lives. These blessings can be moments to educate and to invite people to a more active role in living their faith. Often, those unable to participate in the sacramental life of the Church are the ones asking for a blessing. They may never have received First Eucharist or Confirmation, or they may not be married in the Church. In the midst of poverty, loneliness and even desperation, they seek the presence of God in their lives. At times, the request for a blessing may come at an appropriate time to begin reconciliation with the sacraments, but at

other times it is simply best to give the blessing and wait for a more appropriate time to address other sacramental issues.

At times, there are unhealthy aspects in the religious lives of people who lack religious formation. Some have entered cultic religious expressions that focus on the dark side of human experience and even the satanic. Popular religion of Latin America has part of its heritage in cults that bargain with the powers of good and evil. This can confuse and leave the poor vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Kindness and gentleness need to be shown to invite people into a relationship with a loving Savior who shows one a different way than the darkness of the cults.

No priest wants to simply become a person who doles out blessings without inviting people to a deeper reflection on their Catholic heritage. For this reason, there is a necessity for discernment on the part of the minister of when the person is ready to learn a lesson of faith. There are some aspects of religious piety in the Hispanic world that are troubling. Often, the priest confronts them at inconvenient times when there is no time for proper reflection and teaching. Sometimes the priest should resist the need to correct the person, and instead offer a prayer or blessing, and note that at a future time the problem can be addressed. The most important aspect for the priest is to welcome the person who comes seeking attention from a person of the Church.

### **“The human fight for dignity”**

Earlier I quoted a priest from Mexico who said, “People do not leave Mexico because of poverty, they leave because of desperation. People who are poor can still find food to eat, but when a person has no work and loses his dignity as a person he will move and do whatever it takes to restore his dignity. Migration is the human fight for dignity for the desperate person.”

The fight for human dignity is the noble effort of people with few options in their lives. Throughout history, heroic people have resisted the urge of simply giving in to the desperation of their lives. People respect the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President Nelson Mandela, Cesar Chavez and Archbishop Oscar Romero who rose above the desperation around them to stand up for the dignity of all peoples. Unfortunately, many along the way have their spirit crushed and give in to ways to escape the pain. When a person enters this country, there are pressures to leave behind everything that pertains to “Latino” identity. Undocumented people are forced to live under false identification, to hide information about themselves from employers and others in society, to live in denial of who they are and where they come from.

An intrinsic element of the identity of the Latino world is faith in the context of the Catholic Church. The “grito” of independence in Mexico ends with the phrase, “¡Viva la Virgen!” This identifies the Mexican as Catholic. The Church plays an essential role in the human dignity of the Mexican. Unfortunately, there is an erosion of this identity in the United States today. As the migrant struggles with issues of personal identity and human dignity, many insignificant aspects of the religious life of the Church push the migrant away from this source of self-respect.

Practices of “Popular Religion” may be “clung to” by some as a way of maintaining their dignity in a foreign world, but often for young people it is just such practices that are an embarrassment and separate them from all that is part of their heritage. Many young people have clothing with images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, medals, tattoos, and rosaries hanging from the mirror in their cars, but they seldom reflect on these items as having to do with faith and a relationship with God. They are symbols of “la raza” rather than symbols of faith.

The search for identity is a strong force moving people in the migrant community. In the sacraments, the Church has marvelous tools for supporting and raising a sense of worth and dignity in the

community. These tools need to be focused on extending the grace and presence of God in the Latin American community.

## **Chapter Eight: Sacramental Preparation for Migrants in the U.S.**

### **¿Reglas o Barreras? – Rules or Barriers?**

Migrants find rules in the Church in the U.S. confusing and inconsistent when asking that their children receive the sacraments of initiation. One migrant worker said, “*Las reglas de la Iglesia aquí forman barreras que separan a los migrantes de la gracia de los sacramentos.*” (Church rules here form barriers that prevent migrants from receiving the grace of the sacraments.)

For ten years I have heard an amazing assortment of difficulties experienced by migrant families in getting their children into programs of religious formation. One parish administrator said, “What do you want? Quality or quantity?” People in that parish found the programs to be of long duration (two years for First Eucharist and two years for Confirmation) and having rigid attendance rules that were simply not possible in the context of migrant farm work. Unfortunately these rules produce extreme hardships on migrant workers. Many migrant families see these requirements as punitive for their inability to participate regularly in church activities. Rigid rules do not provide “quality” when so many hard working poor people are excluded from the programs.

The issue is not a choice between quality or quantity, but rather a question of making the grace of sacrament available to the people of God. Rules for good order can never be allowed to form barriers to the participation of Catholics, especially the poor. Placing heavy obligations on the poor is not good catechesis. Rules are necessary for good order in the administration of the sacraments, but all rules should be sufficiently flexible to meet the

pastoral needs of people who have little control of the time they have available for worship and church participation. To best use time, space and personnel, parishes establish programs for sacramental preparation. As the parishes establish these programs they place expectations that are extremely difficult for migrants. Migrants have little control of their hours of work. Their jobs are temporary and insecure. Many programs are rigidly administered and little is done for those unable to fulfill all the requirements.

### **To whom did Jesus proclaim the Kingdom of God?**

Bishop John Steinbock of the diocese of Fresno spoke to these issues in his address to the diocesan convocation on Jan. 25, 2010:

Jesus was found mostly amongst the poor, the sick, the lame, the suffering, the oppressed, the marginalized, the leper, tax collectors, those looked down upon and despised by the upper class. It was to these especially that He proclaimed the Kingdom of God, and manifested God's love. Who are these people in our present society, and those within our parishes? They are the poor, the homeless families, the farm workers and their families, the migrant, the undocumented, the sick, the imprisoned. The vast majority of these people rarely come to Mass.

These reflections are speaking of those that live on the margin of the Church, living in cars, in labor camps, in isolated clusters of homes, and those that work on the farms and dairies found throughout our diocese, so often without the luxury of transportation and of living a normal scheduled life. We should be pastoral, especially to those that our Lord loves in a special way. It is just such as these that the Kingdom of God is comprised.

“Proclaiming the Kingdom of God”

Bishop John T. Steinbock,  
Fresno Diocesan Convocation, January 2010

This pastoral letter of Bishop Steinbock to the clergy of the diocese of Fresno captures the relationship of the Church to the people on the margins. The example of the needs of farm workers is just one example of people with extraordinary needs. Truckers, nurses, entertainers, restaurant and hotel employees and many others work long hours on weekends. For many such people, there is extreme hardship in trying to attend Sunday services.

Flexibility in preparing people for sacraments is not simply a problem for the poor. Do the poor get as much understanding of extenuating circumstances as others in society? In my first assignment as a priest from 1974-1977, I had the privilege of preparing three minor league baseball players for marriage. They were fine young men whose travel as baseball players made marriage preparation very inconvenient. It was difficult working around their schedules for travel, practice and games. Most of the preparation was done individually without the presence of both the man and the woman. No one would question the individual attention that was needed in preparing these athletes for marriage. Yet, do we consider giving individual attention to migrants that work temporary jobs and find it difficult to attend sacramental programs in our parishes?

It is important to remember that the more rigid the rule, the more liberal we must be in granting exceptions to the rule. Creating alternative programs that address the needs of those whose schedules make it difficult to participate in the ordinary programs of a parish is not convenient, but we need to develop a missionary attitude that welcomes people into the loving presence of God. Our parishes need to be welcoming communities for migrant believers.

## **Invitation or obligation**

The migrants' sense of obligation is overwhelming. Heavy burdens have been placed on people that lead to an intense sense of unworthiness. These burdens are laced with disciplines that deny people access to the grace of Eucharist and Reconciliation. This is not to trivialize proper attitudes necessary for receiving the sacraments, but we need to reflect more on the letter of the Apostles to the Gentiles, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too, not to lay on you any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary" (Acts 15:28).

One couple who had been married civilly for seven years and have two children were misinformed by a priest that they could not be married because they had not been Confirmed. When they asked what they needed to do to receive Confirmation, he said they could not enter the Confirmation classes because they were living in sin and not married in the Church. This would appear humorous if it were not so tragic.

It is important to establish basic requirements for marriage. The requirements need to reflect the life situations of people of faith. They should not become obstacles to migrants looking to receive the gift of sacrament. Consideration is needed for the difficulties of long hours of work, the inconsistency of work schedules, and the mobility of the migrant worker. Often parishes provide very limited opportunities for preparation classes or options for those unable to come at the times that programs are offered.

It is quite common to meet couples living in committed faithful relationships that simply have not been recognized by the Church. For many such unions, it is difficult to find church ministers who help them regularize their marriage in the Church. They often are denied access to take part in activities of the church such as being godparents or sponsors for sacraments because they are not married in the church, yet when they seek sacramental

marriage, they experience barriers to regularizing their marriage in the Church.

The minister in the church needs to view each contact with the migrant as an opportunity to invite and welcome the person to the grace of Christ. It is wrong to ask people if they are married in the Church if one is not ready to invite them to regularize their union in the Church. The minister should not ask the question if he is not ready to say, "Since you are not married in the Church, what can we do to regularize your union?" Then one needs to be willing to walk them through the process to get married in the Church.

When they are able to attend Mass, many migrants hear sermons that heap shame and guilt on them. They are told that they are not good Catholics because their attendance is irregular or because of some other lack in their lives. Migrants live a hard life, separated from family and friends. They work long hours, and they live in a foreign environment that calls them unskilled and uneducated. Moreover, from the pulpit they hear that they are unfaithful. Yet, they are Christ, "When I was hungry you gave me to eat....." (Mt. 25:35ff).

Listening to migrants tell their stories makes one marvel at the attachment of the poor to the Catholic faith. With questionable catechesis, poor pastoral attention, barriers to receiving the sacraments, the Catholicism deeply rooted in the migrant community is amazing.

### **The right to receive the sacraments**

*Canon 213 says, "The Christian faithful have the right to receive assistance from the sacred pastors out of the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments."*

It is a "right", not a privilege to receive the sacraments. This is a right rooted in Baptism. It is not a privilege granted by Church authorities, but a claim rooted in the action of Christ. In the former code of Canon law, this was presented as the only "right" directly

stated for laypersons. The Second Vatican Council called for these goods (word and sacrament) to be made available in abundance.

*Canon 843* addresses the responsibility of pastors: “*The sacred ministers cannot refuse the sacraments to those who ask for them at appropriate times.*”

A pastor has the duty to see that the person is properly prepared to receive the sacrament. Also, the canon calls on the pastor to make the grace of sacrament available. Responsibility in this canon refers to the activity of the pastor, not the petitioner. To fulfill this requirement, pastors oversee programs of formation in their parishes.

Administrative and pastoral guidelines for reception of the sacraments can be found in Canon Law, diocesan practices, and common sense rules developed at the local community. On all levels, it is important to remember that the sacraments are the sign of Christ's love for his people. For this reason, Canon Law covers many situations that demand discretion. When a person with special needs asks for the grace of sacrament, if there is any doubt that the person is able to understand the sacrament, the Church opts in favor of the person. See *Canon 913*. We need to develop practices around the sacraments that correspond to the realities in the lives of the people whom we serve. Rules are important, but the example of Jesus' compassion for the sick, the blind, the lame and the outcast reminds us that ministry witnesses the love of God for the poor and most abandoned.

### **No program serves the needs of all**

Every parish needs alternatives for those unable to take part in the ordinary parish programs. No program serves the needs of all Catholics within a given parish. Even the most wonderful of programs are unable to be attended by significant numbers of people in any given community.

As pastor in rural Kansas, I insisted that we have a summer school program for First Communion for children unable to attend

during the school year. Although some felt that the yearlong program was available to all and such a summer school was unnecessary, thirty-nine children from third to seventh grade entered the program. Over half of them came from farms and dairies outside of the town. Parents expressed gratitude that their children had an opportunity to receive their First Eucharist. It was difficult for them to bring their children into town during planting and harvesting. Also in the winter there would always be a couple of snow days. We had an unusual experience in the attendance of the young people at the classes. The two-week program was for three hours each day, five days each week. All the students in the program had perfect attendance. Thirty-nine children having perfect attendance in a religious education program shows the gratitude of those families for this opportunity.

### **Rules, not barriers**

From the earliest days of the Church there was a need for the initiation of new people into the faith. Hearing only the Sermon of Peter, 3,000 were received into the community on Pentecost. They were baptized and welcomed for the breaking of the bread.

St. Paul asked several men if they had received the Holy Spirit. When they said they had been baptized but did not even know of the Holy Spirit, St. Paul laid hands on them and they received the Spirit.

In the early Church, the Council of Jerusalem addressed the problem of bringing Gentiles into the Church. There was the question of whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised as Jews in order to be baptized into Christ. At the end of the discussion, Paul and Barnabas were sent to preach to the Gentiles. The Apostles sent along a letter that said, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too, not to lay on you any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary" (Acts 15:28).

In the early Church, the catechumenate developed as more people entered the Church. Rites of initiation developed as ways

of welcoming people into the life of the community. There have been developments in religious education and formation from the beginning of the Church.

In the development of programs of formation, rules are established for the good order of a community. The methods of the programs form an orderly entrance into the life of the community for new members. Well-administered programs of Rite of Christian Initiation create wonderful experiences of welcome into the community for those able to participate in the experience. Yet life is filled with unexpected dilemmas in the lives of ordinary people. Programs that require attendance at certain numbers of classes or an extended period of time of preparation must address special circumstances.

Illness, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, family crises, and other events enter the lives of ordinary people. No matter when a parish sets a schedule for classes, some people will not be able to attend the "ordinary" program. The poor, the migrant and young workers have very little control of their hours of work or the stability of their lives. Flexibility is necessary to respond to all of the instability in the lives of the People of God.

## Chapter Nine: Keys to Effective Alternative Sacramental Programs

*"Pastors of souls and the rest of the Christian faithful, according to their ecclesial function, have the duty to see that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by the necessary evangelization and catechetical formation..."* (Canon Law 843,2). Parishes and dioceses develop programs of sacramental preparation to aid in preparing people for reception of the sacraments. These programs have a variety of timelines and approaches. Unfortunately, there are winners and losers as one or another catechetical philosophy wins the support of a community. Parishes invest in certain catechetical models without considering those who are motivated by other means.

The poor, the homeless, the undocumented, the migrant, the children of divorce, and people in abusive home situations fail to receive the attention that they need to prepare to receive the grace of sacrament. Those charged with providing access to the sacraments for those on the fringes of society experience great resistance to extend the care of the Church. Alternative programs specifically designed for special needs face excessive scrutiny and often are forced to put into their programs exactly what has prevented the poor from participation in the "ordinary catechetical programs".

No program can serve the needs of all people as the Spirit of God moves in each one of us at different moments of our lives. The Church needs to provide the grace of sacrament in a timely way and to create effective ways to prepare people for the reception of God's grace in the sacraments. In any parish, the dreaded commentary on any program, ordinary or extraordinary, is when a priest or bishop says, "These children did not appear to be well prepared for the sacrament." This may be said of First Reconciliation, First Eucharist, or Confirmation. Unfortunately, some people make an assumption that alternative programs are inferior to ordinary programs. My experience leads me to be an

advocate in this area, and it also leads me to make sure that the programs make effective use of the time available for migrants.

## **1. Timeliness of program ---“You only have the time that God gives you.”**

My first exposure to migrant farm workers was in The Dalles, Oregon. When I spoke with Bishop Robert Vasa, of the diocese of Baker/Bend, Oregon, he made what I consider a prophetic response to my concern that during a short harvest, “how could I possibly prepare youth adequately for Confirmation?” He said, “You only have the time that God gives you. You prepare them and I will confirm them.” There were two important parts to his message for me. The sacrament is the work of God, and the best we can do is sufficient. I assure you that in the nine years that I ran the Confirmation program for children of farm workers in Oregon, the quality of our program improved.

A shorter time frame for sacramental preparation presents obstacles and blessings. A short program focuses the message and lends itself to intensity in the religious experience. Creative use of retreats, the participation of parents in the catechetical experience, and days of intense preparation rather than months of preparation can effectively prepare candidates for First Eucharist and Confirmation.

## **2. Listen to the people**

A variety of models may be developed, but essential to all models is to enter into a dialogue with workers, owners and local leaders to discover the moments of opportunity. There are windows of opportunity that are often of short duration to prepare people on the move and the poor for reception of sacraments. Programs need to be close to where people

reside and scheduled according to the availability of the candidates and the volunteer catechists.

### **3. Teach the liturgy**

The most important part of preparing children for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist is “how to participate” in these sacraments. The participation of the children in the weeks and months after the classes indicates the effectiveness of our religious education programs. A sacramental preparation program seeks to provide a foundation for the faith of the children, but its primary goal is that the children have a good experience when they receive the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

To develop an ongoing relationship with Christ and the Church, the children primarily need to learn how to participate in the Mass and how to go to confession. There are obstacles in the celebration of First Eucharist when the children are dressed up for their First Communion and some parents are more worried about pictures and making sure that rosaries and prayer books are blessed rather than about the actual reception of the sacrament. The real test comes when the children receive their second communion. How reverent are they at the Mass? Do they respond to the prayers? Can they make a proper examination of conscience? Do they understand that in the sacrament they are encountering Christ in Eucharist or Reconciliation?

### **4. Involving parents in the life of faith**

It is wise to assume the good will of the parents rather than take on society's harsh judgment on migrants. We should welcome them and invite them to deepen their own understanding of faith and prayer life. Farm worker programs in Fresno have more than 70% participation in

adult formation classes for parents at the same time as the children's classes. The most effective of the campesino programs invite but do not oblige parents to attend the classes.

A legendary Redemptorist missionary, Fr. Jimmy O'Connell, said of migrant religious education programs, "Children of parents whose marriage is blessed in the Church are more likely to continue active participation in the church than those not married in the Church." Parents not only need religious education, but also preparation for their own active reception of the sacraments. Religious education programs need to develop preparation and support for marriages in programs of sacramental preparation for children.

There is much more to developing effective sacramental programs, but most important is the belief that it is the mission of the Church to extend the love of Christ to all people. We are a church that cares for those most in need. We need to joyfully receive people where they are at in their faith and allow ourselves to learn from each other the mystery of God's love.

### **Chapter Ten: "You only have the time that God gives you." Summer Mission in The Dalles, Oregon**

The cherry harvest mission in The Dalles, Oregon, from 1998-2010, introduced me to people of mobility. The timing of the harvest, the town of The Dalles, the support of the local church, and the welcome of the owners of orchards provided seminarians, lay missionaries and I an opportunity to touch the lives of many workers at the margins of the Church. This remarkable team of lay missionaries and seminarians created an effective ministry model for people of mobility.

Sadly, the mission never became integrated into the ministry of the local parish. It was different than the ordinary programs of

sacramental preparation and was seen as being primarily for the seasonal workers coming into the community for the harvest. While a few people from the parish took part in the programs, those that participated were mostly children of the hired hands and of the farm owners. As long as it was only for migrants, it was acceptable that the program was of shorter duration and followed norms appropriate to the special needs of people of mobility.

Tensions developed when people of the parish began to ask that their children take part in the programs for migrants. Instead of looking for lessons in “new methods” of sacramental preparation in these extraordinary catechetical programs for migrants, some people considered them a threat to the established programs of sacramental preparation in the parish. They considered the condensed time frame for the seasonal program as a way to avoid established rules of the parish for sacramental reception instead of a way to reach people that had not been able to participate in established parish programs. When a new pastor arrived in the parish, he opted to discontinue the program.

We learned valuable lessons in the cherry harvest mission. The mission responded to specific needs of one identifiable group of people, people of mobility. It welcomed them to a relationship with Christ and the Church. Programs of shorter duration with greater intensity provided enthusiasm for reception of the sacraments, especially for those who were older than the normal age for sacramental reception.

**“You only have the time that God gives you...”**

The cherry harvest mission began after I had spent two summers saying Masses in migrant camps during the harvest. I invited lay missionaries and seminarians to spend one month on mission to provide catechetical instruction for children of migrant farm workers. The mission teams included priests, seminarians and lay missionaries. Some of the lay missionaries were experienced catechists and teachers. Others were young people

discerning vocations in religious life. All were abundantly qualified to work in ministry. The mission was an adventure that demanded flexibility and spontaneity to respond to the needs of people of mobility.

In June 2000, our first mission team arrived in The Dalles, Oregon. The team included three lay missionaries, a seminarian, Fr. Robert Simon, CSSR, and I. Each evening the team divided into two groups and celebrated Mass in different orchards and camps. We spent the first ten days registering children for First Eucharist and visited twenty more camps outside of those where we celebrated Mass. We held the classes in an old barn at one of the orchards. The classes were from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. and after the children departed, we would leave to celebrate Mass in more camps. In four weeks, we celebrated Mass in over thirty-five camps. Thirty-one children received First Eucharist after two weeks of classes. Shortly before the end of the classes, we celebrated Mass at a camp that we had not visited before the classes began. After the Mass twelve young people, from ten to eighteen years of age, asked us to give them classes. It impressed us that the young people asked for the classes, not their parents. We extended our stay for one more week and prepared those young people for three hours each day for six days before they received their First Eucharist.

The second year, the cherry harvest mission built on the experience of the first year, made adjustments and improvements in the program. Thus, the experience helped establish a better relationship with orchardists in The Dalles. Two teachers from Mexico joined the mission team. One was a psychologist from a Catholic school in San Luis Potosi, and the other had been a teacher for eighteen years at the same school. Along with three lay missionaries, they prepared a specific program of catechesis geared to the special needs of children in the camps.

At the close of the mission, the team visited Bishop Robert Vasa of the Diocese of Baker/Bend. The professionalism of the team impressed Bishop Vasa. He said that he wished to celebrate

the Mass for the First Communions the following year. When we told him that half of the students were fourteen years old and older, he said that they should also receive Confirmation. When we informed him that we only had two weeks of classes, he said, “You only have the time that God gives you. You teach them and I will confirm them.”

His statement became an important reflection for our ministry with migrants. The people we served live in the moment. We needed to do the best we could in preparing the young people for the sacraments, but we had to do it in a limited amount of time because of their mobility. For eleven years, the cherry harvest mission in The Dalles offered migrant farm workers the opportunity to receive the grace of sacrament in the Church.

The first two years the mission team included only people with solid credentials as catechists and teachers. In the years that followed, I began to invite young men and women who were migrants. Some lacked formal education and legal status in the United States. They were vibrant in their faith and were leaders in youth ministry programs in southwest Kansas. Many were talented in music ministry. Music and youth retreats became an important part of the mission. These young people had an “*inquietud*” to serve.

The Spanish word “*inquietud*” may be translated “restlessness,” but it is much more significant than it implies in English. It is the desire to do something special with one’s life, to make a difference. The *inquietud* of youth is what calls one to vocation. It is a “restlessness” of spirit. That “restlessness” is needed in considering ministry in today’s Church. Several of the young people who served on mission teams in The Dalles have entered religious life. Many are lay leaders and catechists in their communities today.

## **VER: Sacramental mission for the cherry harvest in The Dalles, Oregon**

After the summers of 1998 and 1999, simply saying Masses for workers in various orchards, I realized that seminary training and ordinary parochial ministry had given me little preparation to understand the dynamics of mobility. The joy and the faith of migrants shown at the camp Masses that I offered created in me an “inquietud” that I needed to do something to bring this group of faith filled people to the blessing of sacrament. The brevity of the cherry harvest and the situation of workers in The Dalles were a window of opportunity to touch this traveling band of farm workers with the grace of God.

The harvest period in The Dalles lasts from four to eight weeks depending on the orchard and the varieties of cherries an orchard contains. Over 6,000 workers and family members come to The Dalles for the harvest. The harvest begins in the middle of June. Most of the orchardists provide housing for the workers and their families. The local community provides impressive educational and health care services for the migrant workers.

The workers who come to the area for the harvest are almost entirely of Mexican heritage. Many workers arrive in family groups, uniting family members who may not see each other except during this harvest. After the harvest half of the workers return to their home communities to work in agriculture near where they live. The other half of the workers continue to follow a variety of harvests of cherries, apples, and pears in Oregon and Washington before returning to California for the winter.

When I arrived, the orchard owners, both Catholic and Protestant, received me graciously and welcomed the celebration of Mass in their camps. Most of the camps and orchards were close to the town. The Catholic Church was easy to locate for the workers and had facilities available for our use.

The cherry harvest day began at sunrise, 5:00 a.m. While parents were in the orchards, children attended migrant education

programs offered by the school district. It was possible to begin religious education classes at 4:00 p.m. after the children finished school and the harvest ended for the day. The cherry harvest was during the longest days of the year. With the added daylight, parents were happy to have something for their children to do. In normal harvest situations, classes could be presented in the time from June 20-July 8. While the dates fluctuated depending on the timing of the harvest, ordinarily we had a week to enroll children for the classes. We provided a program for two weeks and concluded with First Eucharist and Confirmations on the first weekend of July.

### **JUZGAR: Specific program for sacraments in The Dalles**

The cherry harvest mission began each summer with the arrival of the mission team as migrant workers began showing up in The Dalles. Our team would arrive at the parish of St. Peter, unpack our vans and cars, and celebrate Mass at one of the orchards that already had migrants arriving. Immediately we would announce our schedule and begin registering people for the classes. Each afternoon for the next seven to ten days, the team visited housing sites to sign up children and post information of the classes and the schedule for Masses in the camps. Each evening there would be Mass at one of the camps. After the Mass in a camp, a few families offered a meal for the missionaries. Sometimes it was a fiesta for the entire camp, especially in 2003 and 2004 when we had an extraordinary musical group on the mission teams.

The mission team began each day with Morning Prayer and a review of the previous day's events. The team organized class registrations and prepared materials and classes for the coming days and weeks. This routine included visiting orchards and packing houses to see the work of the harvest. The first week was especially important in training and formation of the missionaries.

The second year we moved the classes from a farm to St. Peter Catholic Church. The first two years we prepared children for First Eucharist and provided for Baptisms of infants. Beginning the third year, students over 14 years of age also received Confirmation. Each year the program developed a little more.

Choosing texts was a challenge for the catechists for several reasons. Our student group had a very diverse educational history. Reading levels and educational discipline were inconsistent. Students came from families with very different levels of participation in the life of the faith. The challenges were a regular part of the evaluations of each day for the mission team. We had to allow ourselves to question our motives, goals and practices in preparing children and youth to live their Catholic faith.

There was a gradual movement in this mission to emphasize teaching children how to receive a sacrament and to focus on reverence and respect for the faith of their parents. Doctrine and religious instruction needed to intimately involve the students in religious practices of their families. Teaching the story of the *Nican Mopohua* and religious traditions of Latino faith held equal importance to learning from a catechism. The rosary needed to be taught as a means to pray rather than a trinket hanging from the mirror of a car.

We discovered that two weeks for classes was an advantage rather than an obstacle. Experienced catechists on our mission teams were excited that a student would remember what they had been taught the previous day. The intensity of the program offered over a two-week period allowed for reinforcement of teaching and created enthusiasm in the students for reception of the sacraments. There were limits to the program in the amount of material covered in the classes, but the students' enthusiasm made up for those limits.

For the young people receiving Confirmation, there was an evening retreat on one of the Saturdays. It began at 4:00 p.m. It had to end by 8:00 p.m. as workers would have to work the

following day. The retreat was important for the young people to focus on discipleship and Christian vocation. It was always a highlight for the students.

**ACTUAR: *Flexibility and spontaneity* in responding to people of mobility**

The most important aspects of this mission were *flexibility* and *spontaneity*. Each day of the harvest mission, we needed to respond to situations that challenge the organization of any program. On several occasions we would begin classes and find that some students were unable to attend or arrived quite late. It sometimes happened because workers were kept late at a certain orchard. On more than one occasion word went out that immigration agents were patrolling roads in an area. A variety of fears and crises come up in campesino ministry without warning.

The story of Juanita illustrates spontaneity and timeliness of ministry. Juanita came to me on the second to the last day of our Confirmation program to ask, “Padre, what do I need to do to receive the Body and Blood of Christ?” It was not the normal way a person may ask for First Communion. I told her that our program was for people like her, but it was the second to the last day of class and could not take on new people. She began to cry. I asked her to sit down and tell me her story.

Juanita explained that her family had arrived the night before and she found out about our program from her cousins who were in the class. She told of having lived in 10 different towns in eight years, having three times entered First Eucharist classes but never completed the programs. Each time she had to begin again. I asked her questions of faith. It became clear that she was well informed on Catholicism. I asked, “How is it that you know so much about the Church?” She said, “Father, we go to Mass on Sundays. We are Catholic. We are just migrants.” There was no doubt that she would continue to grow in her practice of the

Catholic faith. I welcomed her to the class. Four days later she received Confirmation and First Eucharist.

### **Rewards of the ministry**

It is not easy to structure programs with the diverse needs found in the agricultural community. The actual program of catechesis used in the cherry harvest mission developed and changed from year to year in response to the situations we encountered. The key element was offering an experience of evangelization for people on the margins of the Church. We used the time that God gave to us. People experienced a moment of grace.

Recently I asked a young woman preparing for her marriage where she had been baptized. When she said, “The Dalles, Oregon,” I looked up and asked, “And I did your baptism?” She said, “Sí, Padre.” When I baptized her, she was only eleven years old, and I did not recognize the young woman before me. Many question the efficacy of programs for people who are unable to attend Mass regularly. Seeing this young woman, so proud of her faith eleven years after her reception of the sacraments of initiation, is the greatest reward of campesino ministry.

## **Chapter Eleven: Allensworth, California – Mission to a Forgotten Community**

Allensworth is a town that was founded in 1908 by Colonel Allen Allensworth and four other African American settlers. The original town is commemorated in the foundation of Allensworth State Park. The park is a tribute to the story of Buffalo Soldiers and former slaves who came to an isolated spot in the southern San Joaquin Valley to build a place of their own. South of the park is

the unincorporated community of Allensworth. In the town there are a grade school, a small community center and a Christian Church, but there are no gas stations, stores or post office. It is even difficult to see the town from the highway as railroad tracks block a view of the village. The population of the town is 90% Hispanic and 10% African American.

The Catholic population of Allensworth asked for help organizing a base community to support their faith with at least an occasional. Before setting up a Mass in the town, I called the pastor of the closest parish in Earlimart, and he said, "Allensworth is not part of my parish, it belongs to Corcoran." The pastor of Corcoran said it belonged to Delano, and the pastor in Delano said it belonged to Earlimart. I had informed all three pastors and went to discover this isolated community of Allensworth. After the Mass on July 12, 2010, people asked, "Padre, can you come and say Mass for us next month?" The town has had a monthly Mass since that time.

After three months, I was invited to a town meeting to address some community hopes and concerns. The entire meeting was conducted in both English and Spanish. Every statement made by a person in either language was translated, and then the next statement was made and translated. Having often found such meetings filled with tension and impatience as people wait for translations, I was impressed with the patience and respect that all participants gave one another. The experience of seeing a community of nearly 100 families show this respect of one another was impressive.

After the meeting, Pastor Melvin of the non-denominational church told me, "Brother Mike, I am happy that you have come to offer services for our Catholic brothers and sisters in our community center. But there is only one house of God in this town and I invite you to feel free to offer services in my church." The following month I said Mass in his Church. We were very grateful but returned to the community center, as it was larger and more comfortable for the people.

Allensworth is an isolated community with few conveniences. It has had to struggle with authorities on the level of the state and county for services and zoning concerns. It is a town forgotten by the state, the county, and the Church. Yet, its people are proud of their little community. This town, over 100 years old, is known as “the town that won’t die.”

### **First Eucharist in Allensworth**

After a few months, parents asked that their children receive First Eucharist. There were many children from eight to fifteen years old who had not received their First Eucharist. The town is thirteen miles from the closest church. While Earlimart is the closest parish, the town is more identified with Delano. Most of the children were baptized in Delano. Most of the workers are in agriculture. For reasons of poverty, hours of work and immigration issues, there is great difficulty taking children into town for religious education programs. For this community, ordinary parish programs were expensive because of the amount of travel required, and they were burdensome due to the timing of the classes. Very few children in the town could meet the demands of the parishes.

I met with the parents twice to show them how to teach their children prayers and the basics of the faith. I promised the community that during the summer, I would have a group of seminarians offer a two-week summer school and that the children would receive their First Eucharist at the end of the program. Most of the families and the children attended the monthly Mass. I used the Masses to teach and remind parents of their heritage of faith from Latin America. Celebrations of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Christmas, Ash Wednesday and Easter allowed for teaching moments in the community.

Five Redemptorist seminarians joined me in June of 2011 for summer apostolic work that included two weeks of classes at Allensworth. There were forty-three children in our classes. The

classes were held the last week of June and the first week of July on the grounds of a small horse ranch. Each class was from 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. It was hot and dusty. While the children had class, many parents stayed. Some helped with the classes and others discussed with me the challenges that they faced as migrant farm workers.

The text used for the classes contained twenty lessons and the seminarians established a lesson plan that had the children moving in three groups for three forty-minute sessions. Two sessions would be on the text and one session on liturgy. In the liturgy session, the children learned how to pray, participate at Mass and go to Confession. While the doctrine of the lessons was important, one of the great benefits of the program was the development of reverence for prayer and sacrament.

There were remarkable experiences for the seminarians as the children prepared for First Eucharist. Each evening we would arrive in the town an hour before the classes to have dinner with one of the families and we would see children walking to the classes from up to two miles away in over 100 degree temperatures. After classes were over, many had to walk home. The conditions were difficult. We provided water and we had to move around for shade as the sun moved. The movement from class to class helped maintain attention and provided breaks for water. The classes had nearly perfect attendance over the ten days and the children grew in enthusiasm for their First Eucharist.

The daily preparation for confession and for attending Mass was effective. On the day of First Confession, there was little nervousness and the children were ready. One of the best comments about the children's reverence came six months later at the Mass for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A mariachi group played for the Mass and after the Mass one of the musicians said, "Father, I have been playing at Masses for 25 years. I have never seen children so reverent at Mass as here." He observed how the children approached to receive communion.

## **Improvements for the second summer**

In isolated communities such as Allensworth, there is a great deal of mobility and instability. One year after our classes twenty of the children from the first year's program no longer lived in Allensworth. Such is the mobility of migrant communities. A second session for First Eucharist took place in the last two weeks of June 2012. This time there were fifty-one children in the program. The children's classes were only slightly modified, but each evening there was a class for the parents. I asked the parents to attend the first evening and said that the next nine evenings were optional, but that I would offer an adult formation class on the Catholic faith. The program was not only about what the children were receiving, but also to address issues of faith, scripture, liturgy, marriage and teaching values to children. While insisting that the program was optional, thirty to forty adults attended each evening from the twenty-five families in the program.

At the end of the program I wrote an article for the National Catholic Rural Life Magazine about one of the families. One family touched all involved in our program. This family's story is why ministry must be flexible and allow for the spontaneity necessary to meet the extraordinary needs of people on the margins of church and society.

## **The faith of migrants: First Communion for seven children of migrants**

For thirteen summers I have run summer First Communion programs for migrant farm worker children in Oregon and California. Each year several Redemptorist seminarians and lay volunteers have accompanied me in orchards, vineyards, dairies and isolated communities, providing access to sacraments for children of migrants. In the summer of 2012, our Redemptorist summer migrant mission team celebrated First Eucharist with fifty-one children and teenagers in Allensworth, California. The classes

were for ten evenings with classes for the children and for the parents. This year was exceptional with almost perfect attendance of not only the children but also the parents.

Each year three or four families leave lasting impressions on the mission teams. One family touched us in a special way. This family ministered to us more than we ministered to them.

### A Migrant family's journey of faith

Pompeyo and Elia have been married for thirty-eight years. They have two sons and ten grandchildren. In 1999, they came as a family to work in the U.S. Pompeyo, Elia, the two sons and their wives, and two infants arrived in Arizona looking for work in whatever opportunity they could find. In the first twelve years in the U.S., their search for work took them to nine states: Arizona, California, Texas, South Dakota, Kansas, Georgia, Nevada, Maryland and Mississippi. They moved over fifteen times ending up back in California in 2009. Eight more children were born to the two sons. They always stayed together as a family in their journey.

As with many Catholics, there was a time when Pompeyo and Elia found their practice of the faith lacking and inconsistent. They wish that they had been better examples for their children, but they grew into more consistent practice of their faith as their children grew into adulthood. All ten grandchildren were baptized, but only the oldest received her First Eucharist. Mobility, poverty and heartache were among the reasons that none of the others received First Eucharist.

In 2009, the family experienced the first of several life changing challenges. The wife of the older son died suddenly leaving him with five children from two to fourteen years old. The grandparents took on more responsibility. Then in 2010, the other son and his wife were taken in a work place immigration raid and were deported, leaving the grandparents with their five children. In April of 2011, the widower son was also deported.

Hardship brought the family to a deeper bond with each other and a desire to be closer to God. Pompeyo and Elia taught their grandchildren values, courtesy and discipline. They offered stability to children who had lost one mother to death and their other parents to deportation. Pompeyo, Elia and their sons struggled with what was best for the children. The parents wanted their children with them, but feared that they could not take care of them in Mexico. In all of this, the grandparents presented stability, love and strength to the children.

### Disillusionment with the Church

In all the movement, the children lacked the opportunity to receive their First Eucharist because they were not in one place long enough to complete any catechetical program. In their last move, Pompeyo and Elia were told that the children needed to be in a two-year program and no exception could be made. They were saddened as they were discerning whether to go to Mexico to reunite the family or continue to struggle to make a home in the U.S. They were discouraged with religious leaders and priests for not working with them to make sure that the children received the sacraments.

Pompeyo and Elia heard about campesino programs in other communities that offered programs more in sync with the lives of farm workers, but those programs were not in the area where they lived. They heard of a missionary who had a team of seminarians and lay people who offered a summer school for children, but they had no idea where or who to contact. Pompeyo said, “I assumed it was just a myth.” Then, at a prayer meeting they heard that a missionary was starting a program thirteen miles from where they lived and the next day was registration day. They registered seven children from eight to sixteen years of age.

## Uncomfortable moment in the classes

The first day of classes there were forty children. Eight more came into the class the next two days. On the fourth evening, two mothers came asking that their three children enter the class. I balked and told them that since they were from a town, not living on farms and that it was the fourth night, we could take no more into the classes. I was uncomfortable watching the women leave. I told the class that I needed to speak with the two mothers. Pompeyo said, “It was like he left the ninety-nine...” A few minutes later we welcomed them to the group and sent the children to join in the classes. Pompeyo said, “I saw you struggle with what to do, and you did the right thing.”

## Placing confidence in God

On July 1, fifty-one children received their First Eucharist. Several parents had begun preparation to regularize their marriages. All the families brought food for a potluck celebration after the Mass. Several had celebrations with their families in the afternoon and evening. The mission team went to several celebrations, but it was very special with the seven grandchildren. The joy of seven children and their siblings was obvious. Two of the children showed off their accomplishments from school as they took first and second place in public speaking competition for migrant education students in the state of California. One took first place and the cousin took second place for seventh graders. The best laugh came when the children told the one who took first place to not forget that she is the dumb one in the family. She got a “B” on her report card. The others had straight “A’s”.

On Friday after the First Communions, Pompeyo, Elia and the ten children went to Mexico to be reunited as a family with the parents of the children. Pompeyo said that for a time they thought of only sending the children, but the children said, “You can’t leave us”. For a moment they considered him staying to send

money home, but Pompeyo told me, “Father, in thirty-eight years we have never been separated. Now is not a time to start.”

Never underestimate a family of faith. This is only the story of one of the migrant families I have had the privilege of knowing. These are people on the margins of society that need our attention.

### **Allensworth: one of many isolated communities**

The successful story of a mission in Allensworth is a great blessing, but there are hundreds of isolated communities in rural California with Catholics needing attention. Taking the message of the Catholic Church to these communities is not an easy task. The most important message of these reflections is that we need to be open to presenting “New Evangelization” as called for by Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

## **Chapter Twelve: New Evangelization – New Methods**

*“The commemoration of the half millennium of evangelization will gain its full energy if it is a commitment, not to re-evangelize but to a New Evangelization, new in its ardor, methods and expression.”*

John Paul II, Address to CELAM, 1983

Thirty years ago Pope John Paul II called the Church to a New Evangelization, “new ardor, methods and expression.” This call was made in the context of looking forward to the 500th anniversary of Columbus coming to America. Pope John Paul II was concerned about youth, addressing the challenges of the modern world, and the migration of peoples particularly in turmoil of wars, natural disasters, and economic hardships. The address

was particularly focused on Latin America, appreciating the faith of Latin America, and its economic and political hardships.

The call to New Evangelization by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI has generated more consideration in recent years. Meditating on the prophetic voice of the two Popes, we need to evaluate actions taken to generate a New Evangelization and to recognize that our efforts have not always produced the results expected. There have been many experiments in catechesis, youth ministry, programs of evangelization, and movements in the Church over the past thirty years. Some programs meet needs of communities and continue giving life. Other experiments create events and moments of blessing. Some new methods lose their energy. There is danger when a particular method becomes the only program. No program serves the needs of all.

The Church's option for the poor calls for "new methods and expression" of the love of God for those on the margins of society. Bishop John Steinbock of the Diocese of Fresno said, "Are we so caught up with those that belong to the parish, those that come regularly on Sunday and support and take an active role in the parish that we forget to reach out and proclaim the Kingdom of God to God's poor and the marginalized? They are loved by the Lord in a special way, and we have a responsibility to proclaim that love to them" (Fresno Diocesan Convocation 2010).

People living in the shadows of bad immigration policies and in grinding poverty need ministry that is timely and raises their sense of being loved by God and the Church. Chapters ten and eleven are the stories of two successful migrant ministry programs. The programs responded in a timely manner bringing people to the grace of sacrament. It is easy for leaders in religious education to see the need for timeliness in religious programs for harvest workers who move from crop to crop. Still, leaders in the Church need to walk more closely with people whose time is limited by circumstances of the modern world.

## **Walking with the people**

Redemptorists have a saying that we are called “to evangelize and to be evangelized by the poor.” I have found that in working with the poor, I always receive more peace, joy and hope than I may bring to others. I have been blessed with the opportunity to see the eyes of faith amongst many who live in the shadows of society and our Church. We are told, “Be not afraid.” Taking the message of Jesus to the unrecognized in our communities, to those on the margins, is a great blessing.

For many years, I have been involved in extra-ordinary ministry in the Church, beginning with my work in the inner city of Denver, preaching parish missions, and working with farm workers and other migrants. People ask, “Father, where is your parish?” I have not been attached to a parish for a long time. It confuses many church members. Yet, it has given me a perspective of being an outsider to the ordinary ministry of the Church.

Studies indicate that less than 30% of American Catholics regularly attend Sunday Mass. Certainly there are many reasons for this. It is wrong to berate and judge those with irregular Mass attendance as being “lukewarm or lax”. It is much more complex. There are people of great faith who need understanding and love when they come to the Church for attention. It is a privilege to walk with people unable to get personal attention of a priest. Lack of personnel and resources make it difficult to provide personal attention to the People of God, but priests and leaders in ministry need to develop ways to walk with people.

There are so many people who need personal attention. In the Diocese of Fresno there are 200,000 agricultural laborers who face challenges because of the nature of the work, issues with immigration, and a fragile economic market. We have dedicated volunteers in this extraordinary outreach of the Church. Often extraordinary needs are unrecognized in parish offices. The Council for Extraordinary Ministry in the Diocese of Fresno

arrived at the following principles for evangelization designed to meet needs of migrants and immigrants. Many of the principles are common sense, but others call attention to disturbing misinformation and practices that fail to welcome the migrant.

1. **Receive the person with love and dignity.** It is important to receive the person kindly and with patience. Many people are confused by requirements for sacramental reception.
2. **Assure the person that they will receive assistance.** The sacraments must be given in a timely manner according to the request of the person. A family entered a Campesino Ministry program because in their parish their child was put on a waiting list for over one year. When the parents went to the parish a year later to ask for two children to receive their First Eucharist, the religious education director said that there still was no place for their children. There should be no waiting lists to receive the grace of sacrament.
3. **Guide people in what is necessary to receive Eucharist and to exercise full participation in the Church.** Misinformation about requirements for reception of sacraments is common. When adults who have not been married in the Church ask for the sacraments for their children, we not only prepare the children, we invite the parents to regularize the status of their marriage. Those already living in a civil union are introduced to preparation for Marriage. Those who have not received First Eucharist will do so at the time of the Marriage.
4. **Only ask for documents that are absolutely necessary.** A person must be baptized in order to receive the other sacraments, so there must be a proof of Baptism. A certificate is the safest proof of Baptism. A recent copy is desired for the sacraments of Marriage and Sacred Orders as proof of freedom to enter those sacraments. Yet, at times it is necessary to seek

alternatives for proof of Baptism when unable to obtain a certificate. The inability to obtain a baptismal certificate should not prevent a person from receiving a sacrament. It simply means more work for those in the Church, not the candidate.

5. **The stipend is a free will offering.** While a donation may be made to help cover religious education expenses, there is no charge for the sacrament and no one is denied for financial reasons.
6. **The time of preparation is accessible according to the person's circumstances.** The preparation needs to be accessible to those limited by circumstances of economy, work schedules, immigration, and human justice. In one recent campesino program, 25% of the children in the program lived separated from one or both parents because of deportations. We are called to care for these victims of the broken immigration system of the U.S.
7. **The process includes the family when possible.** This is simply a statement of the reality of the present programs of Campesino Ministry in the diocese of Fresno. In almost all programs of preparation for the children, the parents have a concurrent class that speaks to issues of catechesis, parenting and marriage. We have very high attendance in these programs as parents show their interest in learning about their own faith and traditions.
8. **The sacraments are given in proper order.** For people who live together, marriage is the first concern to be addressed. If they have not received First Eucharist, the couple prepares to receive both marriage and First Eucharist together. The preparation must be done in a timely manner according to the circumstances of their lives as indicated before. If they have

not received Confirmation, that is part of the preparation for marriage, but received after the marriage is blessed.

### **Successes and failures in mission**

As a child, I learned a great lesson from my father when I learned to ice skate. I was six years old when my father took me skating. I was hooked immediately. One day I came home from skating very proud of myself. I told my father, “Dad, I skated for two hours and did not fall once.” He simply said, “It is too bad that you did not learn anything.” From that moment, I learned that it was okay to fail if one learned from the experience.

When called to create new “methods” for evangelization, we need to recognize that some programs will be more successful than others. Evangelization requires evaluation, change, and improvements as we bring the message of God’s love to people on the margins of the Church. It is important to remember that the success of the mission is not ours alone. The Spirit can accomplish more than we imagine if we listen and observe the response of those whom we serve.

Often when innovation takes place, the innovators are scrutinized. For some religious educators who fail to see the needs of people of mobility, our extraordinary sacramental programs are considered “too brief.” Without even asking the poor what the experience has meant to them, the programs are judged inadequate.

Timeliness is essential to welcoming the migrant to the love and mercy of God. The migrant is one who lives in the moment. Time is defined by the availability to find work, complications of migration, and a history of mobility. We “only have the time that God gives us.” There will be successes and failures in the ministry, but we learn from the people as we go about the ministry.

## **Live today, dream for tomorrow**

We are on the path to salvation. The migrant is the living embodiment of what it means to be a follower of Christ. The migrant leaves all behind to begin a journey of hope to find a better life. While the end is not in sight, the migrant walks with hope. As Christ took the path that included death on the cross, we follow on a journey of hope for new life. Following Jesus is our path to hope and new life.

### **Closing Reflection: Developing Right Relationships with Migrants**

My closing thoughts on migrant ministry are summed up in an article that I wrote for the National Catholic Rural Life Conference magazine in 2012 about having a right relationship with immigrant farm workers. While the article is particularly about respect for farm workers, it can apply to all migrants and immigrants.

#### **Right relationships with immigrant farm workers**

*(Submitted for January 2012 National Catholic Rural Life Magazine)*

A migrant farm worker at the end of a day said, “Padre, today my crew picked forty tons of cherries. Tomorrow these cherries will be on tables in New York, London, and San Francisco. We have done something good for the world and tomorrow we will pick another forty tons.” This man’s pride in putting food on the world’s tables speaks to the purpose of agriculture.

A farmer speaking of his workers seeks to draw attention to the respect owed to those who work in his orchard by always speaking of them as “my skilled agricultural workers.” He says this to respond to the rhetoric of the anti-immigrant groups

insulting the immigrant worker as “unskilled labor.” There is an art to picking fruit properly, not bruising the fruit or damaging the tree or vine. He says, “I need skilled workers, not everyone can do this work.”

In 2012, Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) raided a migrant farm worker community at 3:00 a.m. Six women and twenty children saw their husbands and fathers taken away in chains. The men were deported within a week. No provision was taken by authorities to protect or care for these children. Local churches, schools and community services stepped in, but they were ill equipped to address their needs sufficiently the needs of the children.

The situation of the immigrant farm worker is a complex reality of concerns involving economics, environment, labor negotiations, safety, immigration, politics, and mobility. In a letter to immigrants on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe the Hispanic/Latino Bishops of the U.S. stated, “The economic crisis has had an impact on the entire U.S. community. Regretfully, in reaction to this environment of uncertainty, some people show disdain for immigrants and even blame them for the crisis. We will not find a solution to our problems by sowing hatred. We will find the solution by sowing a sense of solidarity among all workers and co-workers —immigrants and citizens—who live together in the United States” (USCCB, Dec. 12, 2011).

## **Respect for Workers**

The fundamental path to right relationship with those who work the fields is **respect**. There is a lack of respect in American society for the work, the worker, and the immigrant. Lack of respect hurts the worker, the employer, the environment, and all of society. In the end, all are victims of this lack of respect. The noble work of planting, cultivating and harvesting food is undervalued.

The worker and the farmer are caught in pressures that strain their relationships. The great cloud over right relationship with the immigrant farm worker is the injustice of a broken system of immigration. There are no easy answers. Family unification and the protection of children require courage and compassion in American society.

Our Catholic response to promoting right relationship with farm workers begins with a profound commitment to respect. We say casually, “Respect Life.” We need to personalize that respect. The workers in the field or vineyard, “respect them.” The children lacking many of the necessities of life and human dignity, “respect them.” The farmers struggling in today’s economy trying to make things right for their workers, “respect them.” And when you sit down to a meal, say a prayer thanking all who provide food for the world.

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