

helping PEOPLE help THEMSELVES

break the cycle of poverty

CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

CENTRO CAMPESINO PROVIDES A VOICE FOR MIGRANT FARM WORKERS IN MINNESOTA

BY CHRISTOPHER C. KELLY, CCHD Volunteer

Every morning from April until November, well before the sun rises, Efrían Durán brings his three young children to their day care center a few miles from Owatonna, Minn. For the next 12 hours, as Durán picks rocks from the fields in a local tree nursery and his wife puts lids on vegetable containers in a nearby cannery, they know their children will be cared for in a safe and respectful environment. The center is air-conditioned, brightly painted, and carpeted, with plenty of supplies and a reassuring staff. But what sets this day care apart is its location, inside a cinderblock hut in Durán's migrant farm worker camp. Organized and run by the farm workers themselves, the day care represents yet another victory by the members of Centro Campesino.

Founded in 1998, Centro Campesino (Farmworkers' Center) addresses issues that affect the lives of its members, including inadequate wages, dangerous working conditions, a lack of affordable housing, and expensive or nonexistent day care. "Our mission is to help get a better life for migrant workers and a stronger Latino voice," said Victor Contreras, a migrant worker for 17 years who helped found the organization. Since 2001, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has awarded annual organizing grants to Centro Campesino, enabling its 800 members to receive training, leadership development and community organizing skills.



Photos courtesy of Centro Campesino

Forty Centro Campesino members walked 70 miles in June to call attention to the important contribution immigrant workers make to Minnesota's economy and culture.

Suzanne Belongia, CCHD coordinator for the Diocese of Winona, has been impressed with the faithfulness to their mission. "They've worked hard to build positive relationships with those who have false impressions about the Latino community," she said. "The grants have helped build their capacity; they've been able to expand their base, and their membership has grown. All this is key to their success."

Each spring, up to 35,000 migrant workers and their families, the vast majority of them permanent legal residents who pay steady taxes, leave their homes in the border towns of southern Texas and travel 1,800 miles north to Minnesota for another season laboring in the fields and canneries. Another 4,000 live in Owatonna year-round. It's difficult employment for \$7 per hour,

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friend of CCHD:



The year holds many opportunities for families to gather and celebrate. We recently celebrated Thanksgiving and look forward to the festivities of the Advent and Christmas seasons. More often than not, our celebrations gather loved ones around tables filled with food that has been lovingly prepared and presented.

The bounty of the table, at holidays and every day, arrives through the work of many hands: farmers who grow the food, workers who pick the crops, and those who make, ship, and sell the food that we enjoy. In this newsletter, we share with you the experiences of some who are part of this “food chain”: the members of **Centro Campesino** who leave border towns in Texas to work in the fields and canneries of Minnesota for several months each year, and **Francis Goodman** the outgoing co-chair of CCHD’s Advisory Committee and a family farmer from Wisconsin who encourages stronger connections between consumers and farmers.

In the recent pastoral reflection *A Place at the Table*, the bishops of the United States stressed that, “As Catholics, we must come together with a common conviction that we can no longer tolerate the moral scandal of poverty in our land. . . . Our faith teaches us that poor people are not issues or problems but sisters and brothers in God’s one human family.” With poverty rates in our country on the rise, we are increasingly grateful for your support as we help people across our nation break the cycle of poverty for a lifetime. May God continue to bless you and those you love.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Rev. Robert J. Vitillo
Executive Director

INVEST IN PEOPLE HELPING THEMSELVES

You can donate your time, talent, and treasure to CCHD in many ways. Our annual parish collection is the Sunday before Thanksgiving in most parishes. You can support the work of CCHD with a cash or check donation. You can also support CCHD with a stock donation or a matching gift from your employer. Consider a lasting legacy to help people help themselves—remember CCHD in your estate planning. For more information about CCHD, contact Mary Mencarini Campbell at 202-541-3365/mcampbell@usccb.org.

WHAT IS CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed more than \$260 million to more than 4,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective and so that CCHD’s investment will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between the poor and non-poor.

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but twice what they could earn back home in their native countries. The shifts are long and the dangers ever-present: in the fields most work 10 to 12 hours per day, seven days a week, and are exposed to pesticides, the hot sun, and the effects of dehydration. In the canneries, which remain open around the clock, workers must deal with excessive noise and hazardous machinery.

Life inside the camp is also difficult. Most families live in employer-owned cinderblock housing units and bring their household goods with them each season; the employer typically provides only beds and tables, and each unit has a sink with running water. Everyone must use the communal bathroom in a separate hut. The units themselves are often excessively hot during the summer months, and the camps are typically located far away from health clinics, courts, and schools. There is an isolated existence, and many experience limited opportunities, racism, and discrimination.

In his Labor Day 2003 statement *Recommitting to Justice for Farm Workers*, Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick spoke on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops when he noted that the plight of the farm workers in America remains a serious concern. “Our conference has long stood by farmers and farm workers in their struggles to live with dignity and make a decent living for their families as they provide affordable and plentiful food for us and our families,” he said. “Catholic teaching on the dignity of work . . . supports the right to decent and fair wages, health care, and time off. Workers, including agricultural workers, have a right to organize to protect these rights and to have a voice in the workplace.”

This right became a reality in 1998, when Centro Campesino’s leaders formed committees in the housing camps to call attention to issues affecting them. They initially focused on the need for day care and improved education programs for their children. “We organized petitions and held meetings with local religious leaders,” said Katheryn Gilje, another Centro Campesino cofounder. Successful negotiations with the employer followed. “Life before day care was extremely difficult and expensive,” said Durán, the father of three who also serves on Centro Campesino’s Board of Directors. “My entire paycheck went to day care. Now it is less expensive and the people who work there are respectful. There was a lot of suffering involved with getting the day care, but we did it by meeting as parents and through Centro Campesino.” Today the day care supports 25 families with round-the-clock coverage for their children.



“OUR MISSION IS TO HELP GET A BETTER LIFE FOR MIGRANT WORKERS.”
—VICTOR CONTRERAS

Additional victories followed: the employer agreed to install stoves for cooking and hot water heaters for washing dishes inside each cinderblock hut. New partitions went up inside the communal showers, allowing privacy for men and women. And a new storm shelter has been built to provide cover for the workers when needed.

To help improve education and social opportunities, the members created Club Latino, an after-school program for 90 children. Jesus Garza, 18, is one of Club Latino’s 20 youth leaders. His migrant farm worker family moved to Owatonna permanently in 2000.

“You develop yourself as a leader, and where [Centro Campesino] used to help me, now I help others,” Garza said. He hopes to go to college and study business, and to return one day as an organizer himself. “You don’t see many young people involved in social justice issues,” he pointed out. “For me, being involved is very important.”

In recent months Centro Campesino’s leaders have joined a coalition of groups working to support just immigration policies. On June 24, 40 leaders participated in a 70-mile walk to the state capitol to bring attention to the need for dignity and respect for immigrant workers. Their spirits remained high—along with the temperature and humidity—three days later as they arrived in St. Paul, where they joined a statewide rally and march for immigrant worker rights. Their historic walk recognized the contributions made by thousands of migrant workers in Minnesota fields and factories, and in the words of Cardinal McCarrick, reminded us once again of “an old test for our nation and Church: How do we treat those who harvest and prepare our food?”

POVERTY IN AMERICA. WE CAN END IT. AND EVERYONE CAN DO SOMETHING TO HELP.

Many Americans don't realize the magnitude of poverty in this country, nor is it easy to understand the complex reasons why people are poor. That's why, in 2001, CCHD received national designation for the month of January as *Poverty in America Awareness Month*. This January, in addition to raising awareness about the extent of American poverty, CCHD encourages people to get personally involved in breaking the cycle of poverty.

EDUCATE yourself and others about the true state of poverty in America.

- Take the virtual poverty tour on www.povertyusa.org.
- Talk with your family about what it would mean to live below the poverty line (for a family of four, this would mean \$380 a month per person for all expenses). Try to live within this budget for one month. Talk about the sacrifices you make.

ADVOCATE for social justice, economic opportunity, and freedom from poverty.

- Sign up for a legislative action alert mailing from your diocesan office or state Catholic conference.
- Visit your state capitol and talk with policy makers and the media about poverty in your community.

COLLABORATE with community members to bring a lasting end to poverty.

- Become a member of a community-based, self-help project and work together with low-income people to break the cycle of poverty. To identify local organizations, contact the CCHD Director in your area (www.usccb.org/cchd/director.htm).
- Invite a guest speaker to your parish to talk about the causes of poverty, its effects, and what Catholic social teaching tells us about appropriate responses.

PARTICIPATE by giving a portion of your time, resources, concern, and compassion.

- Volunteer your time and talent with a community organization working for social justice.
- Give to the annual CCHD parish collection.

ORGANIC FARMING: IT WORKS!

An interview with Francis Goodman

HOW DID YOU BECOME AN ORGANIC DAIRY FARMER?

I graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Platteville with a degree in agriculture during the dawn of the chemical age. I put what I learned from the university to practice and it worked. Cows gave more milk; ours was the tenth highest [producing] herd in the state. But gradually the weeds were getting worse and antibiotics didn't heal disease.

My wife, who was a nurse midwife, was a big influence on the farm becoming organic. [She believed that] nature works. God made things to work without a lot of intervention; better to try to work with nature than to overwhelm it and work against it. Organic farming is the realization that we are strangers and guests on the land. We are cooperating with God.

So we stopped using chemicals and antibiotics. We cut some of the

work down because we pasture the cattle and rotate our crops. We don't have to spend time spraying. If you work with nature, it works with you. Our yields now are as good as anybody's.

WHAT CONCERNS YOU ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS?

The connection/dependence on people has been lost in my lifetime. Little towns and rural areas were mostly dependent on farmers and stores, and farmers were dependent on them. This social structure has been destroyed. Now we have factories where people work at minimum wages; people are off the farms. Food is highly processed, denatured. The consumer is far removed from the people who produce the food. What needs to be done is build an urban-rural community and strengthen the relationship between the farmers and consumers.

HOW DOES CCHD HELP THE FAMILY FARM DEFENDERS?

We were able to start a project where milk from small local farms is processed into cheese. The small family factory sells it to consumers at a price that reflects the true cost of production. By bypassing the middle man, they can still sell it cheaper and more money is returned to the farmers. The contact between farmers and consumers [is strengthened]. We also formed a marketing co-op for dairy farmers [that] started with 16 farmers, and now is up to 120.

