



DIOCESE OF VENICE IN FLORIDA



Always Remember the Farmworkers

A Pastoral Letter to the Farmworkers and Their Families of the Diocese of Venice
from Bishop John J. Nevins, D.D.

January 14, 2007
World Day of Migrants and Refugees

As an expression of my gratitude to all those who have worked zealously throughout the years on behalf of the dignity and rights of the farmworkers throughout our beloved Diocese of Venice and State of Florida, and in humble tribute to my immigrant parents from Ireland who taught me by word and action to serve and care for the poor, I offer this letter on behalf of these good workers who pick the vegetables, fruits and sugar for our tables. They look to us with eyes of hope for the benefits of decent and just wages, safe and reasonably priced housing and health care for themselves and their family members. All of human creation depends on food and we are all connected through food — whether we harvest, prepare or consume. Thus, all of us, consumers, farmworkers, farmers and retailers, need to work together to ensure dignity for those who labor in the supply chain and for the common good of all.

They pray, and God willing, all of us pray with them, that they will not encounter the dangers of toxic pesticides or other chemicals, which are known to cause untold harm to individual pickers, and sometimes unwittingly passed on to family members. I can only hope that every effort is being made to obliterate these harmful ingredients.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

It is fitting that this Pastoral Letter is issued at the parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Immokalee, Florida. It was founded a half-century ago this year under the auspices of the Archdiocese of Miami, where I was privileged to serve as auxiliary bishop before coming to the Diocese of Venice. Most active Catholics in our nation honor the Virgin Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception, but in this part of our Diocese and in Latin America, where half of the Catholic population of the world resides, she is known as Our Lady of Guadalupe. Pope John Paul II, who appointed this servant as Bishop of the Diocese of

Venice, speaking to the Bishops of Latin America in 1992, stated that, “the appearance of Blessed Mary of Guadalupe to a simple peasant in 1531 greatly overflowed the boundaries of Mexico, spreading to the whole continent of America (including our nation), which historically has been and still is, a melting pot of peoples.”⁽¹⁾ He added that recognition of “the meztiza face of the Virgin of Tepeyac,” is an indication that the Good News of Our Lord cuts across all cultures of humanity.

We are still spiritually uplifted from celebrating Our Lady’s gift to us, the birth of Jesus Christ. I thought it proper to quote a famous author, Jim Bishop, who wrote *The Day Christ Died*. He described how the Jews of that day felt about the coming of the Messiah:

It was a joy beyond imagining, happiness beyond belief. It was comfort for the weary farmer’s bones as he lay in bed at night with his family, waiting for sleep. It was a dream of every gray-haired person. It was the thing a small child looked to a mountain to see. It was the hope of Judea in chains. The Messiah was always the promise of tomorrow morning.

Thanks to the Father and thanks to Our Lady of Guadalupe, our Messiah arrived among us over 2,000 years ago. The Good News that He spread is still relevant today. Yet, we find there are still a number of paths to be straightened out. Most certainly one of them pertains to our migrant brothers and sisters, and their respective families. All of us in our ten-county Diocese must recommit ourselves to Christ’s teaching, and especially His love for the poor.

Option for the Poor

There are some who judge the status of a nation on the basis of its technological advances or its rate of economic growth. Both are important. However, the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. Jesus reminded us that ‘whatever we do for the least of our brothers and sisters, we do for Him.’ We must look to our public social policies in terms of how they affect the poor. For a nation to pass the moral test there can be no losers, because deprivation and powerlessness wounds the whole community.

Pope Paul VI forcefully argues this point in *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*:

The Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due the poor and the special place they have in society: the more fortunate should . . . place their goods more generously at the service of others. (87)

The Church’s teaching on the “option for the poor” is not something new. Strong words were used by the Fathers to describe the proper attitude toward persons in need. For example, St. Ambrose, while addressing the more affluent members of his Christian community, stated:

You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have abrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich.⁽²⁾

St. Ambrose posed the following questions, questions that could be applied today to gauge whether we are giving preferential option for the poor. His questions are paraphrased:

Are we prepared to support, out of our own pockets, works and undertakings organized in favor of the most destitute? Are we ready to pay higher taxes so that the public authorities can intensify their efforts in favor of their development? Are we ready to pay a higher price for imported goods, so that the producer may be more justly rewarded? (47)

When we speak of “option for the poor,” it is not intended that there be divisions within our communities. It does not call for class warfare. The U.S. Bishops, in their pastoral letter of *Economic Justice for All*, explained that its purpose was to strengthen the whole community, to bring fairness among all of its members. I am confident you will agree that one of the major challenges facing our own Diocese is the disparity that exists among our migrant workers.

Promoting Peace and Justice

Catholic social teaching understands peace as a positive, action-oriented concept. It involves mutual respect and collaboration between peoples and nations. It is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon the right order among human beings and their social institutions. Peace calls for respect of each person’s moral, cultural and spiritual dimension.

St. Paul told the Galatians (3:29): “Among you there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ.”

Applying that teaching to our own setting today, we might say: Among us there are no residents or visitors, Floridians or foreigners, tourists or time-sharers, farmworkers or growers, elderly or young. We are all one in Christ!

Peace and Justice will be promoted when we remember that we are one family, when we view our responsibilities to each other as crossing national, racial, economic and even ideological differences. Our work for peace and justice encompasses our own Diocese, but it is also global. If we are to preserve the common good for all, we must also protect the rights of all the weakest peoples and nations. Each of the Holy Fathers, who served as Vicar of Christ in the last 40 years of the 20th Century, repeatedly pointed to the moral obligation that advanced nations have toward the underdeveloped countries of the world.

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

As mentioned earlier, the status of a nation's economy is one way in which it can be judged. As Catholic Christians, however, we must recall the social teaching of the Church, which also stresses that the economy is present to serve the people, and not the other way around. Pope Leo XIII made that clear in his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, and so have most of the succeeding popes. The Church insists that every worker has a right to fair wages, safe working conditions, and the right to security in case of sickness, disability, unemployment or old age. Workers also have the right to organize. In fact, the Church teaches that their organizing is an "indispensable" element in the search of social justice.

My dear people of the Diocese of Venice: The Church of yesteryear and today calls on us to make a difference. The message is very simple: our faith is profoundly social. We cannot be truly Catholic or Christian unless we hear and heed Christ's calling to serve those in need, and work for peace and justice. All of us, our Diocese and nation will be judged by how much we have concerned ourselves with matters of social justice and charity. Certainly, the plight of our farmworkers today remains one of the major opportunities and challenges that God has assigned to us. Let us continue to meet that challenge. We encourage all people to work in partnership with farmworker organizations and farmworkers in their quest for fair wages, safe working conditions and dignity.

Four years ago, I wrote a pastoral letter, *A Call to Courage, Justice and Love*. It was in greater detail and focused on Catholic Social Teaching. For those who desire to take action on some of the issues contained in this document, please refer to that pastoral, in which I provided a long list of action-oriented steps.

In conclusion, I repeat my final paragraph of the letter:

There was once a person who went to Church on Sunday and feasted on the Word of God. Every day that person prayed to God and felt the Peace of Christ. In the same neighborhood was a person who was dying of loneliness, or heartbreak, or isolation, or sin or hunger, or nakedness. So what happened? Did our protagonist help the other person? You tell me. You finish the story.

It is my fervent prayer that, when we Venetians, Southwest Floridians, Christians and all persons of good will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, our work among the farmworkers and their families will be remembered. I thank all the farmworkers who labor so hard to place food on our tables. I thank members of the industry who are most sensitive to their human needs. And, I thank each of our priests, sisters, the laity and so many people of other faith traditions, who have demonstrated their care for the farmworkers during my more than 20 years as the Pastor of the Diocese of Venice.

ENDNOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America (The Church in America)*, USCC, 1999, p. 20.
2. *De Nabuthe*, c. 12, n. 53.