

## *Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness*

**The Saints Peter and Paul Peace and Social Justice Committee invites you to explore the relationships between food and social justice**

Ever wonder how the Peace and Social Justice Committee selects its focus topic each year? Well, first there are some sealed doors, then some top-sacred ballots cast, a few smoke signals, and finally, as eager parishioners wait on the ministry center front lawn... "habemus topic!" Just kidding. We nominate topics, (often via email ring) and then hold an utterly unceremonious vote. This year, one of the nominated topics was racism, specifically, the lingering and pervasive effects of slavery on African Americans in the United States. When food won the vote, we thought we would be dealing with a significantly less controversial topic. However, early in our research for this series, we came across the following painful reminder from the National Farm Worker Ministry: "Historically, agricultural workers in the U.S. have been imported from other countries with vulnerable populations....We can see this history of exploitative conditions in the events and policies that laid the groundwork for our broken agricultural system today." As it turns out, not only does our chosen focus topic fail to escape the legacy of slavery, it introduces a host of other controversial issues surrounding hired farm workers, like health care, the minimum wage, and—since it is estimated that over half of hired farm workers are undocumented—immigration.

It is tempting to avoid these issues by ignoring the sub-topic of hired farm workers, but Catholic social teaching obliges us to do the opposite—to pay special attention to these vulnerable individuals. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Hired farmworkers continue to be one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States." The Occupational Safety and Health Administration states that "Farmworkers are at high risk for fatal and nonfatal injuries, work-related lung diseases, noise-induced hearing loss, skin diseases, and certain cancers associated with chemical use and prolonged sun exposure." Furthermore, our labor laws do not afford hired farm workers the same rights and protections that they afford other workers. In 2003, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) published *For I was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers* in order "to address agriculture through the lens of our faith because so much is at stake in moral and human terms." In this document, the bishops clearly and courageously stated their assessments and positions regarding a number of issues faced by hired farm workers. Much has changed since 2003, but the bishops' calls for justice for hired farm workers have yet to be fully answered. Thus, they are worth repeating. Here, we reprint in full the section of *For I was Hungry and You Gave Me Food* entitled "U.S. Agricultural Workers":

*Farmworkers have been among the most visible concerns of our Conference. We renew the commitment to lift up their situation and to work to improve their lives and those of their families. They are among the most vulnerable and exploited people in our land. Their situation demands a response from people of faith.*

*Agricultural workers are low wage earners. The seasonal nature of their work and the inadequacy of the minimum wage keep most living in poverty. We affirm our support for an increase in the minimum wage for all workers. In addition, the hourly pay of agricultural workers should be increased, and enforcement mechanisms should be available to ensure that*

*they receive just pay and benefits. These agricultural workers, who work long hours during a seasonal period, should have overtime pay as a measure of justice. Payment methods such as “piece rates” should not be used to prevent workers from earning a just wage.*

*A living wage for agricultural workers could help their families live a just and decent life, help to stabilize the workforce, and stimulate rural communities without significantly impacting food prices domestically and internationally. Since most benefits generally are not available to them as part of an employment package, federal, state, and local laws should be amended to ensure that all workers are entitled to health care, unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation, and Social Security. In addition, agricultural workers’ low wages and the scarcity of affordable housing in rural areas make it essential that funding for housing be increased.*

*To participate fully in the community where they reside and work, farmworkers and their families need access to services and mobility in those communities. We are encouraged by the enactment of laws in several states, supported by many state Catholic conferences, that would provide to undocumented immigrants access to in-state tuition rates and driver’s licenses.*

*Agricultural labor involves some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, with workers exposed to harsh working conditions, pesticides and other chemicals, and long hours of labor-intensive work. Labor protections are currently inadequate; for those protections that do exist in law, enforcement is random and ineffective. Labor protections for agricultural workers should be guaranteed in law, consistent with protections for other workers in the country. The law must also be amended to allow workers to challenge in civil court employers who do not provide sanitary and safe working conditions, who violate wage and hour laws, or who use dangerous pesticides. Working conditions should be consistent with appropriate federal standards. Agricultural workers should enjoy the same protections as other U.S. workers, including the right to join together to have a voice in the workplace and bargain with their employers.*

***To be continued in next week’s bulletin or visit*** [sspeterandpaul.net/christian-service/peace-and-social-justice](http://sspeterandpaul.net/christian-service/peace-and-social-justice) for the complete article.

*In some cases, agricultural employers use labor contractors to hire workers with the intent of protecting themselves from liability for hazardous and unjust working conditions. Enforcement of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers’ Protection Act (AWPA) should be strengthened to ensure that both employers and labor contractors are held responsible for the treatment of workers. Nations should not seek a trade advantage by mistreating working people, including agricultural workers.*

*We renew our call for a comprehensive legalization program that would permit hard-working undocumented workers in agricultural industries to adjust their legal status to legal permanent residency. A legalization program would help stabilize the workforce, protect migrant workers and their families from discrimination and exploitation, and ensure that these workers are able to continue making contributions to society. It would also give them the opportunity to enjoy the benefit of labor laws and protections and to better assert their labor rights. We would support a legalization program that requires prospective employment in order to qualify for permanent*

*residency, provided that the work requirements are achievable and verifiable for all eligible laborers.*

*We have been skeptical of large-scale “guestworker” programs, such as the Bracero program, which have led to abuse and exploitation of workers. We recognize that, as an alternative to widespread undocumented migration, a just and fair legal pathway must be established that protects the basic labor rights of foreign-born workers. A temporary worker program must guarantee wage levels and benefits that are sufficient to support a family, include worker protections and job and benefit portability that other U.S. workers have, and allow for family unity. It also must protect domestic workers from job loss and grant workers the ability to move easily and securely between the United States and their homelands. This kind of program requires strong enforcement mechanisms to protect workers’ rights and to give them the option to become lawful permanent residents after a specific amount of time. A comprehensive legalization program and a temporary or migrant worker program that protects workers and gives them a path to residency would help reduce the number of undocumented agricultural workers and ensure that they are treated with respect and dignity. Legalization of current and future workers would also help reduce the incidence of smuggling and the deaths of migrant workers. We welcome the ongoing efforts of representatives of farmworkers and agricultural employers to seek common ground on these issues and to bring about legislation that positively impacts the lives of farmworkers and their families. For decades we have encouraged workable alternatives to the unjust status quo, which hurts both groups and diminishes us as a nation. We continue to oppose any program that lacks adequate, effective, and enforceable protections for workers and fails to give them an opportunity for permanent residency and an option for citizenship if they so choose.*

You might be wondering, “What are *piece rates*?” or “What was *the Bracero program*?” Fear not. You can learn more about the issues raised in the bishops’ statement above, and ways you can act and pray in solidarity with and support of hired farm workers, at the National Farm Worker Ministry’s website ([nfwm.org](http://nfwm.org)). Catholic Rural Life ([catholicrurallife.org](http://catholicrurallife.org)), and the USCCB’s Justice for Immigrants Campaign ([justiceforimmigrants.org](http://justiceforimmigrants.org)) are also valuable resources. We all eat, and with our social, civic, and economic choices, we have shaped the lives of the hired farm workers that feed us. With these same choices, we will shape their future.

Finally, if you want to help shape the Peace and Social Justice Committee’s future, don’t be shy. We are always looking for curious minds and open hearts to contribute to our discussions. Our next meeting is scheduled for May 17, 2016, and you (yes, you!) are invited. For more information, contact Deacon Joe Verdico at [jverdico@sspeterandpaul.net](mailto:jverdico@sspeterandpaul.net) or 630-718-2155. You can also visit us on the web at [sspeterandpaul.net/christian-service/peace-and-social-justice](http://sspeterandpaul.net/christian-service/peace-and-social-justice). As always, stay tuned to the bulletin for more information about how what we eat and drink joins us all in a struggle for true Christian justice.