

## **Bishops Tasked with the Pastoral Care of Migrants Issue Statement in Support of Migrant Farmworkers During the Coronavirus Pandemic**

April 28, 2020

WASHINGTON— “We urge our political leaders and policymakers to consider the realities and emerging, pressing needs of the farmworker communities across the country during this time of the coronavirus outbreak. To defeat the virus, no one must be left out,” said a group of four U.S. bishops tasked with the pastoral care of migrant populations.

The bishops put forth a statement in support of migrant farmworkers during the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez of Philadelphia and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of Yakima, chairman of the Subcommittee on Pastoral Care of Migrants, Refugees and Travelers (PCMRT), Bishop Oscar Cantú of San Jose and PCMRT’s episcopal liaison for migrant farmworker ministry, and Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville, auxiliary bishop of Washington and chairman of the Committee on Migration.

The statement of the four bishops follows:

“The coronavirus has changed life for most of the planet, as billions of people experience social isolation and quarantine. Here in the United States, it is estimated that close to 95% of Americans have been impacted by some form of stay-at-home order. For those who are under such stay-at-home mandates, we thank you for doing your part in following the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and social distancing recommendations of your dioceses, state, and local governments to curb the spread of this pandemic.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude and prayers for the many essential workers throughout the country, helping us receive our medicines, groceries, and other fundamental needs during this difficult time. We would like to highlight the reality of migrant farmworker communities and honor their heroic role amidst the many challenges they face during this crisis.

More than a million farmworkers across the United States are regarded as essential workers, critical to keeping the nation fed during this pandemic. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that roughly half of these farmworkers are undocumented, while other observers suggest figures to be much higher. Like so many mobile and itinerant populations, undocumented migrant farmworkers are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the coronavirus outbreak. Many migrant farmworkers lack access to health insurance, medical treatment, and sick or paid leave options; farmworker housing conditions are often overcrowded with little opportunity for social distancing, including transportation to and from work, and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is not always available. Additionally, conditions of their immigration visas can make them unwilling or unable to speak out about a need for protection due to the threat of losing their job.

Along with these challenges to healthcare access and community mitigation during the outbreak are economic consequences of the pandemic that are having devastating effects on these communities. With disruption and layoffs due to the COVID-19 virus, many farmworkers are finding themselves without income for their families for the foreseeable future, and others who would otherwise stay at home for health concerns are risking going to work during this time as

essential workers. Childcare for families with school closures is another area of related concern, as families may be at a loss for affordable, viable, safe childcare options. The realities of financial instability, increased stress, and anxiety during this time may also contribute to an increase in cases of domestic violence and labor exploitation.

Add to these many challenges the fear of immigration enforcement action which may deter someone from seeking necessary medical attention or speaking up about forms of abuses at home or the workplace that occur during this time.

Because of these many, grave concerns for this community, we urge our political leaders and policymakers to consider the realities and emerging, pressing needs of the farmworker communities across the country during this time of the coronavirus outbreak. To defeat the virus, no one must be left out. The COVID-19 virus teaches us we are one human family, says the Holy Father. ‘We can only get out of this situation together, as a whole humanity.’

Despite these concerns, there are signs of hope in the agriculture industry across the nation. Many growers and farmers are doing everything possible to protect their workers and ensure awareness and social distancing guidelines and measures are communicated and implemented. We extend our sincere gratitude to these businesses and implore that this trend is executed across the country for the basic protection, safety, and wellbeing of all farmworkers and their families.

We offer the following recommendations:

- Recognize that all workers need access to free testing and care related to the COVID-19 virus
- Ensure that all housing and transportation for farmworkers complies with current CDC guidelines
- Provide information on proper health and hygiene that is easily accessible in multiple languages and infographics for illiterate workers
- Ensure access to proper hygiene and safety protections at work sites, including hand washing facilities/stations, and masks and/or other PPE
- Have an emergency health plan in place to ensure care and protocols when a worker contracts the COVID-19 virus; and
- Honor the dignity of the work of farmworkers and make sure that they are paid a livable wage as well as be eligible for other benefits to help protect their health and the health and safety of their families at this time.

We pray for all farmworkers facing difficulties and challenges related to or exacerbated by the COVID-19 virus. We pray for their protection and safety as they provide for the needs of the country; we pray for all workers currently unemployed, that the Lord will accompany them and see them through. During this challenging time, it is good to remember the words of St. John Paul II: ‘We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song.’ May the risen Lord send His peace and grace to be with you and your families. We turn to Our Lady of Guadalupe, asking for her intercession and maternal protection for the end to the coronavirus.”