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Catholic Courier

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For the following article, the Catholic Courier interviewed migrant laborers who work on farms and in factories in the dioceses of Rochester and Buffalo. Since the workers interviewed were in the United States illegally, the Courier agreed to use their first names only and to not identify where they worked.

Four Mexicans — all in the United States illegally — recently told the Courier how much they liked working on farms and in food processing factories in the Diocese of Rochester.

The pay is good, they said, certainly much better than anything they'd make in Mexico. They added that a local Catholic parish has extended an open hand to them, regularly giving their families and friends clothes, food, hospitality and spiritual sustenance.

They attend a weekly Mass in Spanish the parish provides, the Mexicans noted. But, they added, a recent spate of raids on area farms by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service checking workers for documentation has scared some illegal aliens away from Mass.

When asked why they don't obtain the proper documents to work here, the Mexicans said to do so in Mexico took anywhere from one to two years, and costs several hundred dollars in fees, time and expenses. They added that they must also pay for their transportation around the United States, which also cuts into what little money they have.

Junior, 21, said he had a simple dream: Marry his girlfriend — a U.S. citizen, with whom he shares a daughter — and become a resident alien. But for now, he's waiting to hear whether or not he'll be deported this month. While he was waiting for a ride on the side of a road recently, a police officer had stopped, questioned him, realized he was an undocumented worker and turned him into the INS.

Fear of the INS and of police keeps many migrant workers from venturing out too often into the communities in which they

work, he added.

"I know a lot of people who don't get out of their houses because they're really, really afraid," he said.

Meanwhile, Jose, 42, said he didn't have the money to obtain a proper work visa in Mexico. He added that he works in a factory, and sends money home to his family.

Alex, 22, said he makes about \$30 a day picking apples. He also sends money home to his family, he said.

And Jesus, 33, said he's college-educated, but lost his job with the Mexican government. So he came to the United States to work. Like Junior, he is fluent in English, a plus when he's out in public, he said.

"I can be camouflaged because I am able to speak your language," he said.

Unwelcome at the table

Next week, as diocesan Catholics celebrate Thanksgiving, they may partake of food harvested by someone who's no longer in the United States — because he or she has been deported for working here illegally.

The recent series of INS raids on farms in the dioceses of Rochester and Buffalo resulted in the arrests of 120 farmworkers, who came here illegally from such countries as Mexico and Guatemala.

Meanwhile, tensions have grown after a Genesee County farmer claimed he heard shots and that INS agents admitted to him they fired at migrant workers who had fled them. The INS has denied its agents shot at anyone, and INS officials say that hunters have acknowledged firing shots around the time of the alleged incident. The INS is conducting an internal investigation of the allegations.

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