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Migrants

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and headed for a chuckle barbecue dinner across the small yard. They held plastic rosaries that were being distributed. A festive atmosphere unfolded among the many displaced hats and trailers — structures that serve as homes for the laborers who travel north each harvest season. Diocesan officials say that conditions at Sodoma are typical of farms employing Hispanic migrant workers across the diocese.

The workers, mostly Mexicans, labor from sunup to sundown for the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour or slightly more. Overtime pay is only a dream. Exposure to dangerous pesticides is a constant risk — but missed work time, due to illness or injury, could result in dismissal at many farms.

Migrant workers and their families are thousands of miles removed from their native land and customs. Most lack the legal documents to reside in the United States, so they live in fear of being nabbed by immigration authorities.

But the workers and their families endured problems long before they arrived in western New York. Driven from their native land by poverty even greater than they know here, many migrant workers sacrifice big chunks of their pay for intermediaries — known as "coyotes" — to get them across the border and find work for them.

And yet, if you regularly buy fruits and vegetables at area supermarkets, chances are that you rely on these troubled people without even realizing it, George Dardess maintained.

"We take all kinds of things for granted in our culture, including our food. At Wegmans we don't think about whose hands it has passed through," said Dardess, a parishioner at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church. Dardess, a third-year candidate in the permanent diaconate program, works with migrants in Wayne County as part of his field work.

Without migrant help, farm owners might have to "let the crops rot in the field,"



Elizabeth Jaso holds her daughter, also named Elizabeth, during a Mass that Bishop John Yanta celebrated at a migrant camp at Sodoma Farms in Brockport on Sept. 16.

said Holmes Carvajal, a volunteer with the Interdiocesan Hispanic Migrant Ministry in western Monroe and eastern Orleans counties. The ministry is a joint effort of the Rochester and Buffalo dioceses.

Bishop Yanta added that farm owners would be forced to pay higher wages in order to get employees other than migrants.

"The bottom line is — and this cannot be disputed — these people do the work that nobody else wants to do," Bishop Yanta remarked. "Here, the harvest is impossible without them. People think the Mexicans are here to take the work away from Americans, but I don't see Americans going for this kind of work."

10,000 and growing

According to Lourdes de Chateaufieux, associate director of the diocesan Office of the Spanish Apostolate, as many as 10,000 migrant workers labor in the Rochester Diocese during the peak season of late spring through October. She added that the volume has increased in recent years, and that there are literally hundreds of migrant camps spread across the diocese.



Edgar Chavez, 2, rests on a tent rope at the Mexican Fiesta in Sodus on Sept. 17.



Ivane Obregon (right), 16, of Brockport, dances at the Mexican Fiesta held in honor of Mexican Independence Day.

At this point, close to 90 percent of migrant workers in the diocese are Mexican, with a smattering of workers from Jamaica and parts of Central America. Since the mid-1980s, this population has replaced African-Americans and Puerto Ricans who previously did the bulk of itinerant farm work.

The Brockport area, Orleans County in the Buffalo Diocese, much of Wayne County and parts of Ontario and Yates counties are among the major sites for migrant work

in western New York. Most of the workers are seasonal, picking crops. The smaller number who stay year-round work in food-processing factories during the winter.

The Diocese of Rochester conducts ongoing ministries in each of these areas. And weekly Spanish Masses are offered year-round at St. Francis de Sales Church in Geneva, Church of the Epiphany in Sodus, and Church of the Nativity in Brockport.

Bishop Yanta spent his mid-September trip to western New York visiting migrant

Many miles from native land, youths face huge adjustments

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

One day, your parents announce you're moving to another country in search of a better life. After you're settled, you enroll in the local school.

But you have little or no knowledge of your new language and culture. Your parents are too busy working to learn the language themselves. Due to learning difficulties and social isolation, you run the risk of being taunted by schoolmates.

This is the plight of children who live in western New York year-round with their migrant-worker families. Though most of the workers seek warmer climates between the fall and late spring, hundreds remain in western New York through the winter months. Children of these workers, in attending private or public school, experience a tremendous culture clash.

Lourdes de Chateaufieux, associate director of the diocesan Office of the Spanish Apostolate, said that migrant children who stay all year are usually enrolled in public or private schools. That means they're required to learn English, even though it's a language their own parents will likely never pick up.

"It's hard (for the workers) to work 12

hours a day and then be in the frame of mind to be able to study," de Chateaufieux pointed out.

Thus, it's the child who must bridge the communication gap for his/her parents when interaction with the local community becomes necessary.

"It's a big responsibility for the kid. If they go to the hospital it's the kid who has to interpret," de Chateaufieux noted.

In many instances, de Chateaufieux said, teachers mistakenly think these Hispanic children have learning disorders. But the biggest problem, she said, is that "they don't have sets of reference" such as computers, television or even family members to help with homework.

Children are also prevented from assimilating because their parents require them to stay in the migrant camp outside school hours. If a family is here illegally, de Chateaufieux explained, "there's always the fear" that a child will get spotted in public by immigration authorities. The entire family would then be in danger of being deported.

Not all Hispanic children come to the western New York farms with their families. Many boys in their mid to late teens come here alone, strictly for work, even though they may still be of school age.

De Chateaufieux said that migrant



Mauro, a teenage migrant worker, helps Bishop John Yanta of Amarillo, Texas, wash his hands before the consecration.

work is attractive to these young people because they have few educational or employment opportunities in their homeland. "They don't have a future, they don't have a possibility of working," she said.

But this life is not necessarily a tremendous improvement for young migrant workers. In addition to being homesick, she said, their social outlets are extremely limited and they often turn to drinking

and fighting. De Chateaufieux said that diocesan migrant ministries attempt to provide healthy outlets, such as soccer games and spiritual events, to ward off the negative influences.

"You have to find good activities so they can exert their energy," de Chateaufieux remarked.

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Editors' note: On The Move will return next week.