

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## Farm workers, church workers rally for rights

By Rob Callivan  
Staff writer

Almost 200 people, including representatives of the Diocese of Rochester, participated in a Fairport march and rally for farm workers' rights May 2, and secured a politician's promise to help them.

The marchers, many of whom were Mexican or hailed from other parts of Latin America, took their case to New York state Sen. James Alesi, a Republican who serves on the Senate's labor committee and chairs its Committee on Commerce, Economic Development and Small Business. After meeting at nearby Fairport United Methodist Church, the marchers walked to and then rallied in the parking lot outside his second-floor office in Packett's Landing, which houses several offices and shops.

They carried signs emblazoned with such slogans as "Even God Had A Day Of Rest," and asked Alesi to support omnibus legislation removing legal exclusions that deny farm workers the rights granted to other workers in the state. Those rights, farm worker advocates said, include a right to a day of rest each week; the right to overtime pay; and the right to organize and bargain collectively. Activists have routinely pointed out that farm workers generally make about \$6,000 a year in New York, and are among the state's lowest-paid workers. Things have improved slightly in recent years, according to *The Voice Of Farmworkers*, a journal produced by union and migrant-ministry activists. The journal noted that minimum-wage legislation for farm workers passed last year with the support of farm owners.

The activists distributed a resolution asking Alesi to support the omnibus legislation, which has been passed by the Assembly two years in a row, but is stalled in the Senate. The resolution was endorsed by several community groups and churches, and its supporters included the dioceses of Rochester and Buffalo; Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes; the New York State Catholic Conference; the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition; Pax Christi-Rochester; a Catholic peace group; the House of Mercy and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, two Catholic shelters in Rochester; Catholic Family Center of Rochester and of Wayne County; and parishes and religious orders in the Buffalo and Rochester dioceses.

"You should have good working conditions," Alesi told the marchers. "You should have a day of rest."

The marchers chanted Alesi's name, and many expressed gratitude for his willingness to hear them.



Protesters chant for the rights of farm workers outside the Fairport office of state Sen. James Alesi May 2. Below, Aspacio Alcantara (center), lead organizer of the farm-workers' union CITA, speaks to the crowd, as Alesi (left), interpreter Betty Garcia-Matthewson and CITA organizer Salvador Solis look on.

In an interview after the rally outside his office, Alesi said he sympathizes with the workers' desires expressed in the omnibus legislation, but added that the activists would be better off working exclusively for collective bargaining.

"It's the difference between what is doable and what isn't doable," he said, noting that including multiple provisions to protect farm workers in one bill might ensure its defeat by opponents reluctant to grant farm workers all such rights. He said collective bargaining is the tool farm workers could use to get what they want.

"(Collective bargaining) is not a Republican versus Democrat issue," he said.

Following the rally outside Alesi's office, the marchers then walked to Kennelly Park across the street where they heard speeches, said prayers and were entertained by Mexican dancers.

Although farm workers would prefer the passage of omnibus legislation, any type of legislation to help their cause is welcome, according to Aspacio Alcantara, a Dominican immigrant farm worker and the



lead organizer of CITA — Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agrícolas (Independent Farmworkers Center) — a statewide farm workers' union. At the Kennelly Park rally, Alcantara said the union

has about 1,500 members and that he has had to risk his own safety to organize them.

"There was one occasion when the (farm owner) was going to hit me with a stick," he said, noting he got in his car in time to get away.

He added that it can be difficult to organize farm workers.

"The No. 1 obstacle is the fear of losing their job," he said in Spanish as his words were translated by Minerva Moya, of Rural and Migrant Ministry Inc., an interfaith group based in Poughkeepsie. He added that farm workers here illegally also fear deportation.

Farm workers need a guaranteed day of rest and better living conditions, according to Sister Judith M. Justinger, SSJ, director of Interdiocesan Hispanic Migrant Ministry for the Rochester and Buffalo dioceses. Farm workers would be less likely to turn to such unhealthy activities as drinking excessively to deal with stress if their lives were better, she noted.

"There's a sense of somehow being less than human, of being unequal," she said.

## Resign

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The changes in diocesan policy also have affected two other priests, Father William Lum and Father Thomas Corbett, who were both accused of sexual abuse during the 1990s (Father Lum pleaded guilty to one count of third-degree sexual abuse in 1997). The diocese at that time had found the allegations against them to be credible, and both men were placed on administrative leave. They also lost their faculties as priests and could not return to ministry. After a time, they were both reinstated to non-ministerial, administrative positions in the diocese's Pastoral Center, Father Lum as a judge and Father Corbett as a judicial assistant for the Diocesan Tribunal. Diocesan policy no longer allows them to continue in those roles, and the bishop asked both Fathers Lum and Corbett to resign, which they did May 2.

"We found it did not rest well in the community," Bishop Clark said of employing Father Lum and Father Corbett. "It did not leave people at peace. I'm just

judging now that it wasn't a wise decision to keep them."

The diocese continues to investigate two allegations of abuse by priests. These abuse reports were received in March and relate to incidents alleged to have taken place more than 10 years ago. Last week, the diocese received a new abuse allegation against another priest, which it is beginning to investigate, Bishop Clark said.

Bishop Clark stated adamantly that all six men removed from priestly ministry should be held accountable for their actions, and that he laments the harm they have done to the alleged victims as well as the grief they have caused in their parish communities. Even so, he said, they are all still priests of the diocese, although they can no longer function as such. Noting that members of the diocese are like a family, the bishop observed that when one member offends, the others are unhappy, and the offenders must bear the consequences.

"But families generally don't amputate their members," the bishop pointed out. "You don't cast people out like pariahs with whom you no longer have respectful contact."

Since they remain priests of the diocese, Bishop Clark said he still has a relationship with them. He also continues to consider them friends, since he has been able to see the good they have done over the years in addition to the abuse they are alleged to have perpetrated.

"I think what they did was inexcusable and terrible and deeply damaging," Bishop Clark said. "I also know there is more to them than that."

As bishop, he also has an obligation to be concerned with whether these priests have a dignified existence, he added. Each priest has a different set of financial circumstances, and many are close to Social Security eligibility. And they are all entitled to diocesan pensions when the time comes, he said.

"That is part of the reality of it — they are priests of the diocese, although not in good standing, and they are entitled to certain benefits that we will honor," Bishop Clark said.

In addition to caring about the healing of victims and the future of the alleged abusers, Bishop Clark said he also is concerned about helping the grieving parishioners of St. Mary Our Mother, St. Pius

Tenth and St. Paul. On May 4 and 5, he sent priest delegates to the three parishes to read letters of support from him during weekend Masses. On each of the next three weekends, the bishop will celebrate Masses at one of the three churches and talk to parishioners. He has also sent a letter to all diocesan parishes to make them aware of what has transpired.

"We're trying to be as helpful and supportive as we can. I'm sure there is a great deal of suffering among (parishioners) just now," he said.

Sister Elizabeth Meegan, OP, superintendent of schools for the diocesan Department of Catholic Schools, is in the process of helping students, parents, faculty and staff at St. Pius Tenth and St. Mary Our Mother's schools deal with the situation.

"The kids will have questions," Bishop Clark said. "They deserve an answer."

The bishop said the diocese is also in the process of finding replacement priests for each of the churches and working to appoint interim pastoral leaders. A number of priests have stepped forward, offering to provide sacramental ministry to the three parishes.