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Planting the seeds of change

Views differ on what's truly good for farm workers

Last week in a Hamlin field, 20-year-old Alex Lucas labored alongside his cousins and brothers to plant cabbage for Martin Farms. All residents of Mexico, the family members have also worked in Texas and California to plant and harvest crops that feed U.S. citizens.

"There's more work here," Lucas said when asked why he traveled so far from his homeland to labor. The other workers nodded their heads in agreement as they cooled off beneath a tree during their lunch break. Through a translator, they all noted that they are supporting their relatives back home or in nearby Brockport.

During a "Bienvenida," or welcoming, celebration in Brockport June 22, Tomas Paz said he has harvested apples in New York and oranges in Florida, and prefers the apple harvest.

It's easier to harvest apples than oranges, he said, even though he needs to pick more apples to make as much money as he would picking the same number of oranges.

"It depends on the farmer," he said of apple picking. "Some pay well, some don't."

GOD AND LABOR

Paz was among dozens of farm workers and their families, mostly from Mexico, who attended the June 22 Bienvenida. Speaking through a translator, Paz and the other workers said they have used the money they've made in the U.S. to support their families



Alex Lucas, a migrant farm worker from Mexico, helps plant a field of cabbage July 2 at Hamlin's Martin Farms.

back home and better their own lives through education.

The farm workers and their families attended Mass at Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, and then marched to neighboring First Baptist Church for dinner.

They ended the celebration with a festive dance at the State University of New York College at Brockport.

An annual effort of Brockport's Catholic and Protestant churches, the celebration is a recognition of the contribu-

tion farm workers make to the area, organizers said. This year's celebration also marked the establishment of a covenant between the Diocese of Rochester and the Western New York office of Rural and Migrant Ministry, an ecumenical organization.

The covenant pledges the diocese and the ministry to mutual support regarding advocacy for migrant workers, according to Sister of Mercy Janet Korn, social justice awareness coordinator for diocesan Catholic Charities. She and other diocesan officials said the two organizations will increase the cooperative efforts they have already undertaken in such areas as migrant education, recreation and social services.

A statement from Bishop Matthew H. Clark hailing the covenant was read during the Bienvenida Mass.

"The (diocese) has long worked to extend a welcome to our migrant brothers and sisters and to stand with them in their struggle for justice," the bishop wrote. "That is why we are both pleased and grateful that Rural and Migrant Ministry has expanded their mission into this region of Western New York. We welcome the opportunity to work with them on behalf all farm workers."

ON THEIR BEHALF

This year, diocesan social-justice advocates joined other Catholics from across New York to press the state Legislature for passage of the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act. The bill has passed the Assembly and has been referred to the Senate. It calls for the following changes in

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Story by Rob Cullivan • Photo by Karin von Voigtlander

