

Bishop John Manz

When I was in college seminary we were assigned work details, so they put me in the kitchen. It just so happened that a year or two before, the diocese had brought up a group of Mexican religious women to do the cooking. So over the course of the next couple of years, they basically taught me Spanish and that started my interest. About the same time, I worked with a landscaping outfit in the summers to help pay my expenses, and a lot of the **men** I worked with were migrants, Mexican Americans from Texas or Mexico. The boss used to send me out with their crew, because I could communicate with them. They were a big contrast to the sisters. Their whole outlook on life and their vocabulary was very different, and that peaked my interest even more. So while I was still in the seminary, I started working at a parish **north of Chicago** that focused mainly on migrant workers. And in 1968, a couple of years before I was ordained a priest, at the height of the grape strike in California, I decided to join a group working with Cesar Chavez **in California**, who was a big hero of mine. They gave you room and board and about five bucks a week. But they ended up not organizing that much that summer, so I went to Texas and lived in **a border town and visited** migrant camps down there for a couple of months.

These kinds of experiences continued until I was ordained a priest. ***I have been working with immigrants/migrants since before I was ordained a priest and also for the ten years I have been a bishop. All three of the parishes I served at as a parish priest over 25 years were predominantly made up of Mexican immigrants.*** It started out on a personal level and gradually grew into something I felt very committed to, something I thought I could do to help out in some way. Once you begin to learn a language, it becomes no longer an abstract thing, and you get to know individuals, not just a social class of people. That's how barriers are broken down. We all have our

prejudices or stereotypes, but the only way to break them down is by getting to know the person. I am a big believer in a common humanity. But first I had to learn the language to communicate with those Sisters in the kitchen, and beyond that, it opened the door to another world.

When I came to Hartville, I walked around and went to several of the camps to visit with the migrants and talk with them. I introduced myself and invited them to come to the mass we were planning to have outdoors on the basketball court. We had arranged for a reception afterwards and some music during the mass. We were supposed to start around one o'clock or so, but by one-thirty hardly anybody was there, which was nothing new to me. You know you can't go into a place like that with a fixed sense of time. You have to be flexible. So by two-fifteen there were about fifty or sixty people, and we finally got started.

The best part of my work is meeting the people, talking to and listening to them. I've done masses like that many, many times. **As a parish priest**, we would have street masses usually every week in different parts of the neighborhood, many of which were still heavily gang infested. The people who lived on the block would kind of organize it. We would close down the street and have mass. **Normally**, we would get anywhere from a hundred to three hundred people. Often gang members would be on the fringes just kind of looking in and watching. We did that for years. I always found those masses enjoyable. It was kind of like taking it to the people. There would be little kids sitting on porch steps and running around. It reminded me of the kind of a thing I often saw in rural Mexico, where they often had mass outdoors, because the village church wasn't big enough.

Like the migrants, I too come from a humble background. My people are from farms and small towns. When I was a kid I spent a lot of time on the farm with my grandmother who was a very simple farm lady. Maybe it goes back to that. I learned

from her and from others in my family that this is the way you look at the world, and that the work you do is not better or worse than anyone else. It's hard to get an exalted opinion of yourself, working on a farm, when you are standing knee deep in manure.

When I started working with the migrants back in the mid-to-late 60s in Illinois, a lot of those people ended up staying there and becoming permanent factory workers. There have been efforts in different migrant **councils** and in some of the churches to help them form unions. The United Farm Workers, for example, accomplished a lot but then sadly got involved with intra-union conflicts. So there are still some very bad conditions for the migrants around the country. Many of the big companies will take terrible advantage of the migrants. They know these folks will work for anything, because whatever they're getting here is more than what they're getting where they came from.

As a parish priest, I've had many migrants come up to me and talk about their experiences. But most people do not want to talk about how they crossed over the border. Those who are un-documented don't volunteer that too often. Some of them have gone through some horrible things. There is a priest **in California** who developed a retreat for migrants allowing them to talk about their own experiences to try to expunge traumatic memories. **He regularly has weekend retreats during which people would tell their own stories of "crossing the border"**. Some of the stories are very terrible: women who have been raped; **men who have been beat up, robbed and treated as inhuman. These retreats are now conducted by former migrants who previously made the retreat and understand first hand what these folks have gone through. We need more of this kind of experience throughout the country to help migrants adjust to their new life.**