**Return to the Vincentian Migrant Mission of 1979-1990 in Kalamazoo, MI**

by Father Steve Grozio, CM

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On June 29th, San Felipe de Jesus Church in the Diocese of Kalamazoo celebrated the 40th anniversary of its dedication by Bishop Paul Donovan. That event recalled to mind the Vincentian Migrant Ministry of our province in that diocese.

**Background**

In the late 1970's, the Eastern Province had been exploring the possibility of establishing a work in Spanish for the underserved poor. The Diocese of Kalamazoo seemed like the perfect choice. Each summer, over 20,000 migrant farmworkers of Mexican descent and their families traveled there to harvest a wide variety of crops in the counties on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. A good number of those families were beginning to "settle out," that is, to remain in the area throughout the winter and become year-round residents of Michigan. Because the diocese had few Spanish speaking priests and sisters, an agreement was reached for the Vincentians to establish a ministry to migrants and at the same time to attend to the needs of the resident Hispanic Catholics.

**The Ministry**

In 1979, Frs. John Kennedy, CM, Art Kolinsky, CM, and Tom Hynes, CM, brought their vast experience from Panama to Southwestern Michigan, where they were joined by Sr. Rosemary Tierney, CSJ, a Sister of St. Joseph of Nazareth, who had just returned from Peru. Together they formed not only a Hispanic ministry team for the diocese, but also the Bishop's Committee for Migrants.

The residential ministry served the entire western half of the diocese, celebrating Mass and sacraments, forming lay ministers, networking with community organizations, and developing outreach programs.

The migrant ministry faced the herculean task of visiting the farmworkers who lived in 240 camps. Daughters of Charity and Vincentian seminarians joined the team each summer, and along with volunteers from the resident Hispanic community and even migrant farmworkers themselves were formed into teams which visited the camps each weekday evening.

A unique Vincentian aspect of this ministry was that one or two of the Vincentians were migrating priests. They traveled from North to South each winter to visit with and minister to the farmworkers and their families in their parishes in Texas and Florida and even to their small villages ("ranchos") in Mexico.

Our official ministry in Kalamazoo ended in 1990 when Fr. Morrie Roche, CM, the last confrere assigned there was withdrawn, although Art Koinsky and some confreres from Panama continued to spend some summers there assisting the diocese.

**Since 1990**

Confreres often wonder what will happen when the province withdraws from a work. Will it continue to grow? Will it die off? There is good news to report from Michigan. The ministry to the residents is still growing. Where we only had three Sunday Masses for the residents in the western part of the diocese during the winter months, now there are at least seven. However, there is a concern about the lack of priests, especially ones who speak Spanish. Fr. Evelio Ramirez of San Felipe Parish is the pastor of three parishes, two of which have Spanish Masses, and Fr. Jacob Thomas who celebrates the Spanish Mass in Hartford is the pastor of two parishes. With so few priests, several Hispanic deacons have been ordained, and many lay ministers are well trained and active in each church.

The outreach ministry to migrant farmworkers also continues. The Aleman Center responds to the basic needs of food and clothing, and each parish has a team which is trained and formed to go out to the farmworker camps. In fact, on Tuesday, August 4th, I accompanied the parish team to celebrate a Mass in a migrant farmworker camp in the Fennville area.

The one area which has not continued is the accompaniment of the farmworkers to their home villages in Texas, Florida, and Mexico. Nevertheless, that outreach is still fondly remembered by the people. For instance, one couple approached me after Mass in San Felipe Church. I had officiated at their marriage forty years ago in the city of Matehuala, San Luis Potosi in Mexico. Then another woman remembered that when I visited her town of Villa de Ramos (also in San Luis Potosi), a short circuit in the Christmas decorations had sparked a fire in their church and the building was destroyed. She recalled that I celebrated the Sunday Mass on the steps of the burnt out church and preached a message of hope which inspired the saddened congregation.

Click **here** to view pictures of the ongoing ministry today.