

Bodies Delivered Over

Exodus 24:3-8; Hebrew 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16, 22-26 (Corpus Christi)

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Farm products, in the United States, are cheap because they are harvested and processed by “illegal” hands. Fruits and vegetables can’t be harvested by machinery; they need skilled human hands to gather them. The care of animals, cattle and chickens for meat, cows for milk, horses for riding— these too demand “illegal” hand labor. And one has to say, in fidelity to truth, that no North American worker is interested in laboring in these ways.

But this is why the population of North America has access to such foods at low cost. Agribusiness gets juicy federal subsidies to make up part of the difference between the profits they demand and the actual costs of the food. (Small county farms do not reap those benefits, however.) Migrants themselves make up the rest of the difference. They are a cheap labor force, without legal protection, without organizing experience, and without support structure— it is this “subsidy” which is **the key to keeping product costs down**.

Shoppers who go to supermarkets to buy farm products never think about the bodily energy and physical wear-and-tear on the people who harvest the goods they buy. Migrants’ stories are neither told nor heard inside the supermarkets. Yet those stories refocus for us the theological elements developed by the Feast of Corpus Christi to capture the salvific dimension of that Body delivered over and of that Blood poured out....

A person laboring on farms and fields in this country has a very short work life. If we assume that the farm worker population is very young to begin with, they cannot work productively beyond ten years. You meet people with premature health problems provoked by the rhythm and type of the work they do. Those twenty-year-old workers who deliver themselves over to agricultural work are convinced that by working hard they can save up a good sum of money. That’s why you meet young migrants working ten to fifteen hours per day, without proper time for rest and recuperation. They are forced to endure exposure to the various chemical compounds used in the fields— not to mention the stress that overwhelms them because of their legal status and because of culture shock. There isn’t time or energy for personal development in other areas. No time for study, no time for participation in the community. Time perhaps just for distractions, often not healthy ones.

Put simply, we’re talking about hand laborers now unemployable in poor countries, we’re talking about prisoners of globalization, about people forced north across the borders by the destructive effects of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) on farmers in Mexico, Guatemala, and even farther south. These men and women understand fieldwork. They have an ingrained feel for the earth and for the care of animals, and they do this labor with a will. But they haven’t the least idea of how their labor— within a cycle of injustice and exploitation— is providing nourishment to millions of people. Their daily physical effort isn’t expended just so their own families might live and survive. Their bodies, delivered over daily to hard labor, make possible the life of a “First World” country— a country that has practically forgotten how field produce is harvested and yet could not survive without the migrants’ labor.

One migrant, Antonio, puts it this way: “We work from sun up to sun down, we do the heaviest and riskiest jobs. We have to work seven days a week...just to survive. We are the most vulnerable...living constantly with the fear of being arrested by the police or by ‘la migra.’”

In a parallel situation, Jesus took a bit of bread and some wine and transformed them into a symbol of his self-giving.

When I think about the twelve million “illegal” people in the US doing such exhausting physical labor, I recall the prayer usually said in silence that Bishop Oscar Romero used to say aloud after the Eucharistic consecration of the bread and wine: “May this body delivered over and this wine poured out inspire us to hand over our own lives in order that the Kingdom of brothers and sisters be realized.”