



**We are Called**  
**TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.**

## Team Reflection

### **No. 9 The Pandemic's Impact on Agricultural Workers**

Maria Guadalupe recalls praying for her daughter to live because she could not take care of her two grandchildren. Maria fell ill with COVID-19, spent two days in the hospital, and upon her return, found her daughter in the bedroom of the small apartment they shared with worsening symptoms herself. Her daughter spent twice as long in the hospital and returned home, where they recovered together. Living in Imperial County, Calif., where Maria worked for four decades in the farm fields, many of their friends and family had similar stories. Others did not survive. The juxtaposition is stark. As the executive director of a food bank explained, "We are the winter salad bowl for the country, and we grow so much food for the country. Yet, we have one of the highest food insecurity rates." [9.1]

Food insecurity in a region with a large Hispanic population and undocumented legal status workers represents just one social condition impacting individuals' health. It is a factor that limits the ability of many to fully flourish.

A food and agriculture dashboard created by a professor at Purdue University in Indiana, in collaboration with Microsoft, logged more than a half-million COVID-19 cases in the U.S. among agricultural workers as of mid-March 2021 [9.2]. In some areas, as many as 40% of workers had contracted the virus. These represent known diagnoses. Many feared being tested as a positive test result reported to their employer, or even known to co-workers, results in two weeks of unpaid leave to quarantine and recuperate.

Farm and agriculture workers have reason to worry. The primarily white farmers and growers were slow to provide PPE for predominately Latino and Latina workers. Researchers found that pandemic-related deaths in California for adults 18 to 65 were greatest among essential workers, particularly in food, agriculture, transportation, facilities and manufacturing sectors. Workers experienced 20% greater risk during the pandemic, which doubled at the state's reopening. When the researchers stratified the data by race/ethnicity, mortality was exceptionally high for Latino, Black and Asian workers. Latino food/agriculture workers experienced a 59% increase in mortality, the largest of any group in the study. [9.3] The excessively high per-capita mortality is due to historical structural inequities and low-wages, which also impact housing options. Workers commonly live in multi-generational crowded spaces and temporary housing



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that perpetuate household transmission. As seen throughout the pandemic, where and how we work plays such a critical role in our well-being. It impacts our own lives and the lives of our families and loved ones.

The modern Catholic social justice movement has deep roots stretching. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII decried the conditions experienced by workers as the industrial age ballooned. St. Pope John Paul II wrote that human work is likely the essential key to the whole social question. [9.4] His vision was that work serves the individual and their families so that the individual is first and takes precedent over capital and profits. This vision is difficult to realize in the complexities of our social and economic structures. Yet, striving for health equity entails more just systems in our workplaces. The pandemic has shown us that essential workers, especially those in agriculture and responsible for our food supply, are among the most vulnerable. When we are given the privilege of serving and caring for them, may we offer the most loving care to these cherished brothers and sisters.

### Consider

- A common table blessing begins with "Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts ..."  
All produce in supermarkets must be labeled with their country of origin. How mindful are you about how these gifts — all of the gifts and ingredients in the meal — arrived at the table to be placed before you?
- What do you know about your organization's efforts to address food scarcity and hunger for the people who seek care in your emergency departments, physician clinics or even those with whom you work who suffer hunger?
- What can you do to honor the dignity of food service workers and those who help to feed the residents in your health ministry?

### Let us pray,

*Creator God,*

*By the labors of men and women, you guide the work of creation closer to your loving reign. Give all people work that enhances their human dignity and draws them closer to*



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*one another in service of their sisters and brothers. We entrust this to your divine love and goodness, which lasts forever and ever,  
Amen.*

[9.1]: <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/nation/2020/10/21/covid-how-virus-racism-devastated-latino-farmworkers-california/5978494002/>; and <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/01/us/coronavirus-vaccine-farmworkers-california.html?searchResultPosition=1>

[9.2] <https://ag.purdue.edu/agecon/Pages/FoodandAgVulnerabilityIndex.aspx>

[9.3] Yea-Hung Chen, Maria Glymour, Alicia Riley, John Balmes, Kate Duchowny, Robert Harrison, Ellicott Matthay, Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo. "Excess mortality associated with the COVID-19 pandemic among Californians 18–65 years of age, by occupational sector and occupation: March through October 2020." medRxiv 2021.01.21.21250266; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.01.21.21250266>  
<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.01.21.21250266v1.full>

[9.4] St. Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*: Encyclical Letter On Human Work, §3.