



## LENTEN FARMWORKER REMEMBRANCE

March 7 2007  
Raleigh, North Carolina



Urbano Ramirez came to N.C. to support his family living in poverty in the mountains of Guerrero. One of his greatest dreams was that his children be able to go to school. When he complained of symptoms of heat stroke, the supervisor told him to go rest under a tree, and was forgotten when the crew moved on. Two weeks later, his decomposing body was found under the same tree. For more information, see [Urbano's Song: A Discussion Guide](#).

On March 7, national and state religious leaders gathered in Raleigh to denounce the tragic deaths of farmworkers like Urbano Ramirez in the fields of North Carolina. They also called for action to end the deaths, abuse, and exploitation of farmworkers. The church leaders all emphasized two points:

- Farmworkers are children of God, and the tragedies and abuses that they suffer reflect of all of us as fellow children of God.
- People of faith have a moral obligation to act in the name of God to make sure that fellow children of God are treated with love and peace that God intends for all his creations.



FLOC members holding crosses with the names of farmworkers who have died in the fields of North Carolina and black FLOC flags to express their mourning joined church leaders and FLOC supporters for the event.

Denise Cumbee Long, representing the North Carolina Council of Churches, opened the event with a reminder of the deaths and other tragedies suffered by farmworkers while coming to North Carolina to produce food for the American society.



Retired Bishop Joe Gossman of the Diocese of Raleigh led a prayer for us all to "see Your face in all of Your children". He stated his belief that in this life we are obligated to realize God's vision on earth, and that this is what we will take with us to heaven.



Dr. Robert Edgar, of the National Council of Churches and a former U.S. Congressman, called on everyone to repeat "We are the leaders we have been waiting for". Who else will follow the call for God's justice if we do not? He emphasized that farmworkers are the ones who provide food for Americans, while Americans are waging war rather than peace and justice in the world. He closed a Franciscan Benediction:

May God bless you with DISCOMFORT...  
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,  
So that you may live deem within your heart.

May God bless you with ANGER...  
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS...  
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their pain into JOY.

And may God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS...  
To believe that you can make a difference in this world,  
So that you can DO what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.



Sergio Sanchez, a FLOC Associate Member who worked in the tobacco fields of North Carolina as a child, read a poem reflecting the experiences of farmworkers. The full text can be seen at [A Short Tobacco Day](#).



Virginia Nesmith, of the National Farmworker Ministry stated that “Justice calls for us to stop these deaths... Farmworkers, growers, and corporations must have common talks so we all can be at peace.” She then led a lighting of candles to remember the tragedies suffered by farmworkers.



Dr. Joseph Keeseker, of Agricultural Missions, led a prayer calling on the “God of love and peace, Who has set His work before us” to work for justice. He closed with “We leave our thanks and hopes before You” as we continue the struggle to realize God’s standards for our fellow humans beings.



FLOC President Baldemar Velásquez was then introduced as a man of faith who has lived the struggle for farmworker justice most of his life. He began by thanking Lynn Williams representing the Mt. Olive Pickle Company and her CEO Bill Bryan for being present. He thanked the leaders of Mt. Olive and the North Carolina Grower’s Association, with whom FLOC has labor contracts, for their courage and leadership in working with FLOC. He compared the grief caused by the recent deaths of the Bluffton College baseball players to the grief and disruption of the families and communities of Mexican farmworkers who have died in the fields of North Carolina. He stated that we must hold accountable those who allow these tragedies for profit and gain. “The battle is not against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities”, the rich and institutions who profit from the suffering of others. He stated that when we see the truth of why men die, we should pray for those responsible, because the oppressor is also bound by God and His word. (To see the complete text of Velásquez’s presentation, go to [Let Them Not Be Forgotten](#)).

The Rev. Nelson Johnson, of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro N.C. led a closing prayer with "We salute the efforts of hope and possibilities". Referring to the slavery suffered by African Americans in the South to enrich a few, he prayed that "when we die we go to heaven free". He closed for all with a call for action, praying for "hope and the power of witness" [in our actions].



Following the public event, FLOC President Baldemar Velásquez talked with some of the church leaders. He emphasized that "FLOC is here to stay". He stated that FLOC is trying to replicate the model in the South that has proved successful in the Midwest, and noted that the whole industry benefits when workers are treated right. "Why, in the greatest democracy in the world, are workers afraid to ask for water in the fields in a heat wave?" He said that there will be justice "when workers feel free to speak", and told about one case where a grower fired a worker who took a break for water but was forced to reinstate him when the other workers in the crew walked out.

Velásquez noted that there was a labor shortage in agriculture. Since most of these workers are immigrants, he said that conditions back home are what draws them to work here... but then they are punished again here. Legal status and higher wages will attract the needed workers.

In discussing immigration policy, Velásquez said that the one-liners by news commentators and anti-immigrants distort the picture. Citing the cry that legalization "rewards people who break the law", he said "Yes, it's the American tradition!", as we can see among the rich and among political leaders.



As always in public events, there are those who have worked hard behind the scenes for months to coordinate all the arrangements and to make the materials which ensure the success of the action. We would like to thank Lori Fernald-Khamala and Alex Jones of the National Farm Worker Ministry, Michael Hale and the staff and Associate Members of FLOC.

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