

# Exhibit: The golden cage beyond the border

By Beatrice Parwatikar

The *Golden Cage* was an art exhibit on display last year at the Vermont Folklife Center in Middlebury, Vermont. It was an exhibit of photographs by Caleb Kenna and interviews by Chris Urban of Mexican Migrant Workers and Vermont Dairy Farmers in Addison County. The Addison County Farmworkers Coalition supported this exhibit and hosted an opening for the exhibit. Before the exhibit, Kenna and Urban assisted the farmworkers, spending time as teachers of English and translators, among other things.

*"Well I walked; a lot of us came from my town, about twenty. We walked two days and two nights."*

~Interview by Chris Urban of a Farmworker

In the last ten years, there has been an influx of migrant workers coming mainly from Mexico to work on dairy farms in Vermont. They are mostly young men between the ages of 19-30. There are some women and some families. There are both documented and undocumented workers. They usually try to stay for a few years, sending money back home.

They live very isolated lives on the farms. They usually work two to four together. They do not have transportation, their main entertainment is television and they get paid from \$7-10 dollars an hour.

*You know, it's a nice time in Mexico, but here, we're just here looking out the window. We watch TV, get bored, sleep a little, go to work again, come back and that's it.*

~Interview by Chris Urban of a Farmworker

The Addison County Farmworkers Coalition (ACFC) offers help with the many problems faced by farmworkers. The ACFC is a coalition of different organizations--health, community, legal, churches, education, advocates and willing volunteers. I became involved through an invitation from a Pax Christi member, Emilie Rasmussen. Emilie was asked to provide music for the Spanish Mass and to do some translation.

The leaders of the ACFC are Cheryl Mitchell and Cheryl Connor. Mitchell is a community organizer and college professor. Connor is dairy farmer, Catholic and public health nurse. Connor saw a need for her own workers to attend Mass and went about getting one started, starting out with a Mass once a month followed by a meal. She also saw a public health concern and a need for medical care for the migrate workers.

As needs are determined, ACFC tries to find ways to respond to them. This diverse coalition of agencies, groups and individuals work together to change things for farmworkers. They have worked on health issues with assistance from many contributors. University of Vermont Medical School students especially work on issues of preventative health, Open Door Clinic covers on-going health needs, local hospitals provide help when needed.

We have also had the help of local lawyers when needed. One important accomplishment was establishing a policy whereby the Middlebury Police will not ask for immigration status, for example if someone is getting a traffic tickets. ACFC is working to get the state police to establish the same policy.

In conjunction with the Golden Cage Art Exhibit,



MIGRANT FARMWORKER WITH CALF, part of the Golden Cage exhibit at the Vermont Folklife Center. (photo by Beatrice Parwatikar)

many different types of community activities were created to inform people and to create a more sympathetic environment for farmworkers.

A driving force behind the ACFC are Middlebury College students and faculty. The students take on a great portion of the work. They are there to assist at public clinics and the consulate visits for translation. They operate a translation hotline for assistance to medical personnel. They help transport the workers for events. They take charge of coordinating jobs, like contacting people who are to bring food for the children's playgroup.

We have many more things to accomplish but with the compassion and the talent of this group, I believe the Addison County Farmworkers Coalition will prevail in its work.

Beatrice Parwatikar is a Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace.

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I learned how to organize my experience and present it. Soon after I came back from Peru I spent a month at Retiro, our contemplative house of prayer, reflecting on my experience and preparing a retreat where I could share it. There was a very fine older priest there who looked over the outline I developed and gave me feedback. This is the framework I'm still using, scores of retreats later, and the one I used in the book.

*How do you keep it new for yourself?*

It doesn't get old. It just keeps expanding. I start fresh with each day's outline and apply it to the current reality. The nuances of my political reading of the Gospel change with new realities. I'm always going back to the well, getting back in touch with the Gospels and with my own experience, and I think it's still getting deeper.

The newest piece, for me, is the ecology piece. I feel like I still have a lot to learn in that area, but this also connects straight back to the incarnation. If we believe that God became one of us, then he was a part of nature, then nature takes part in the divine essence. Even after almost 800 years, we Franciscans still have a long way to go in plumbing this mystery and learning what it calls us to.

*We all grew up with a lot of emphasis on sin, and some sermons deplore our having lost our sense of sin. You define sin differently.*

Yes, I grew up in the old school too. The broader definition may have come through hearing confessions and realizing that the sacrament is bigger than the trivial "forgot my morning prayers" kind of sin. The great insight of Medellin was the concept of institutional sin, SIN in capital letters. It's what I saw when Jose's parents went looking for justice, or at least a decent funeral for their son. So two realities

met: That what we have been calling sin often isn't worth the name, and that there is huge social sin all around us. When I hear confessions I invite people to be sorry for Darfur, and for the war in Iraq. Just one time, I heard a spontaneous mention of institutional sin from a woman who worked for a realtor. I was amazed and impressed that she saw it. That was a wonderful moment of grace.

*Institutional grace?*

Absolutely. This is an insight I gained from a great Jesuit: that grace does move against all these dark areas. The Holy Spirit gifts us with an antidote. That inspired me to look for examples everywhere, and I found them. Just one example: Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, a lay Catholic from Argentina, a sculptor, who started his own human rights effort. He went to the Bishops' conference, he created an international movement to shed light on the "Dirty War," and he went to jail because it was right, because he was a believing Catholic Christian.

*A few things have shifted for "the empire" since you wrote this book. Does that modify anything you said in the book? What changes do you foresee?*

Well, the empire is tottering. We may be seeing its final days. I pray for our nation to be brought to its knees and become a sister nation in this world. I pray a lot about our future. Another empire may rise up, and the last may be worse than the first. I don't hold out hope for a real conversion any time soon unless it comes from the outside. We're probably not very likely to self-correct.

*A lot of immigration issues surfaced in the election, didn't they?*

Yes, I work with Hispanics in my parish in Arlington.

Northern Virginia is a hard place for them. Even documented immigrants are afraid. We hear stories all the time of really mean-spirited acts. I worry that the declining economy may come down on the immigrants. Last week the Gospel spoke about taking care of the aliens among you, because you yourself were an alien. Why aren't we hearing that command from the pulpit? The churches are not fulfilling our vocation to preach justice.

*My favorite line from the book was "Hope is the future tense of faith." What gives you hope?*

It is a great line, and I wasn't the first to use it. Certainly the turnaround in the Latin American church. The institutional church turned around from pathetic and sold-out to a preferential option for the poor. There was a moment there, and it lasted for a while. If there can be a Vatican II, and a Medellin, there is practical hope for the future.

As I get older, I also take hope from eschatology. The Resurrection has happened. It is accomplished, and it will prevail. It is assured.

On an everyday level, I draw hope from the little victories, the great people we sometimes take for granted, the cloud of witnesses. Look at Marie Dennis, who has had many vocations in sequence. When I first met her she was a suburban housewife with six gorgeous kids, a lovely home. She started to ask questions. She took a step, and then the next step. It wasn't easy, and her book, *Diversity of Vocations*, tells the hardest parts too. She emphasizes the importance of listening, and of "taking the next right step." Maybe that's all any of us needs to do to follow Christ: just do the next right thing.

Engaged Spirituality: Faith Life in the Heart of the Empire by Rev. Joseph Nangle, OFM is available through Orbis Books, [www.orbisbooks.com](http://www.orbisbooks.com). Rev. Nangle is a Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace.