News



Fr. Scott Connolly, pastor of Assumption Parish in Bellingham, Washington, celebrated Mass at a migrant farmworker camp Aug. 8 in Sumas, Washington, with Fr. Francisco Cancino, priest administrator of St. Joseph Parish in Lynden, Washington. (Northwest Catholic/Stephen Brashear)



by Dan Morris-Young

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Editor's note: *The Field Hospital blog reports on parish and other grassroots efforts across the U.S. and Canada to accompany those on the margins. Pope Francis said he sees the church as a "field hospital" that labors "from the ground up" to "heal wounds."*

Nearly 350 people, a large number of them farm workers, took part in an Aug. 14 memorial Mass celebrated by the Seattle Archdiocese's three bishops for Honesto Silva Ibarra, a 28-year-old agricultural laborer from Mexico who died Aug. 6 after becoming ill picking blueberries at Sarbanand Farms in Sumas, Washington.

The father of three, Ibarra had been complaining of headaches and was taken to a Bellingham, Washington medical clinic on Aug. 3. He was transferred to Seattle's Harborview Medical Center in Seattle where he died.

About 70 temporary farm workers were fired when they went on strike over working conditions at Sarbanand after Ibarra's death.

Federal and state agencies are now investigating. The Consulate of Mexico in Seattle has also become involved, and helped transport Ibarra's body back to Mexico for burial, it was reported.

"Cliff Woolley, chief administrative officer for California-based Munger Farms, which owns Sarbanand Farms, said the company is cooperating with the agencies," reported the Bellingham Herald.

"Ibarra was among 600 workers hired by the farm through the federal H-2A program, which allows foreign agricultural workers to work seasonally in the U.S.," the newspaper added.

Woolley denied workers' accounts of farm management ignoring their complaints about working conditions, including meals paid for by deductions from their pay, it was reported.

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An exacerbating factor mentioned in news reports is the heat wave impacting the Pacific Northwest at that time along with poor air quality resulting from wild fires in British Columbia. Sumas sits on the Canadian border.

"We are very much suffering with this terrible tragedy with the death of Honesto," Seattle Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo said following the Mass at Bellingham's Assumption Parish, reported Northwest Catholic.org on Aug. 15.

Elizondo told Northwest Catholic reporter Mary Louise Van Dyke that his Spanish-language homily reflected on the plight of farm workers and of Ibarra's wife and young children in Mexico.

Celebrating with him were Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg and Fr. Scott Connolly, pastor of Assumption.

Connolly had offered Mass at a make-shift camp Aug. 8 in Sumas with Fr. Francisco Cancino, priest administrator of St. Joseph Parish in Lynden, Washington, wrote Van Dyke. Terminated workers had been invited to stay on land owned by a Sumas couple.

Financial, logistical and additional support for the displaced workers and other laborers has come from several sources including Catholic Charities and the archdiocesan Missions and Pastoral Care offices.

Following the Aug. 14 Mass, workers and supporters "sat down to a meal of tamales and rice," reported Van Dyke.

Worker Oscar Ivan Andrade told the reporter, "I want to thank all the people who helped from my heart. We did not expect all this support."

"We are going to fight for what is just," Andrade said. "For the rights of farm workers to be respected."

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