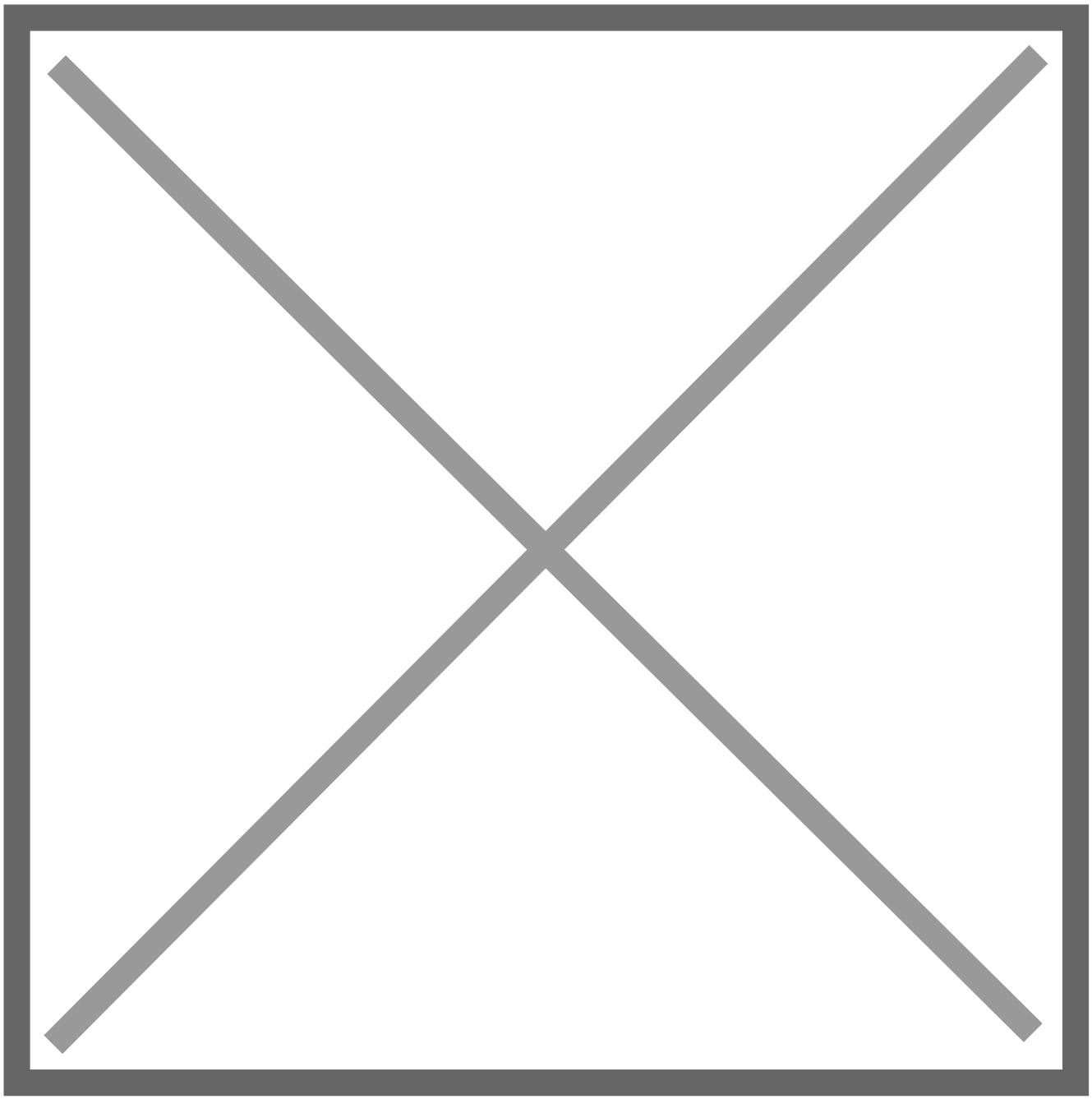
News



Members of the deacon formation class in the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, pray along with other Catholics and family members across the road from the Tyson Foods plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa, July 24, 2020, for workers who have died of COVID-19. (CNS photo/courtesy The Catholic Messenger)

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Columbus Junction, IA — August 10, 2020
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A small group of deacon formation classmates, parishioners and family members stood across the road from Tyson Foods pork processing plant in Columbus Junction July 24 and prayed Morning Prayer (Lauds).

"We did so remembering those who have been affected by COVID-19, those who have died and now those who return to work," said Kent Ferris, diocesan director of Social Action and of Catholic Charities. "While we prayed, a gentleman approached us. One from our group shared why we gathered. The gentleman responded, 'I assumed you were Catholic.'"

The safety and well-being of workers at meat-packing plants weigh heavily on the mind of Ferris and other Catholics in the Diocese of Davenport. They learned through a July 22 Des Moines Register story the "first confirmed coronavirus outbreak at an Iowa meat-packing plant was far more severe than previously known."

At a May 5 news conference, the state's health department reported 221 employees at Tyson Foods in Columbus Junction tested positive for COVID-19. The Des Moines Register learned through open records law that plant officials reported to the state's Occupational Safety and Health Administration that 522 employees had been infected.

"We're not currently aware of any active COVID cases involving team members employed at our Columbus Junction plant," Gary Mickelson, senior director of public

relations for Tyson Foods, said in a July 24 interview with The Catholic Messenger, Davenport's diocesan newspaper.

"Our top priority is the health and safety of our workers and we've implemented a host of protective measures at our facilities that meet or exceed CDC and OSHA guidance for preventing COVID-19," he said.

Representatives of the recently formed Iowa Council for Worker Safety say more needs to be done.

"Tyson employees across the state continue to report a confusing and cumbersome system to navigate the short-term disability program, and it's unclear what languages information about the pandemic is being translated into," said Jesse Case, a council representative. "The community has a right to protect itself as well as educate residents about threats to health and safety in our cities and towns."

Case added: "While Tyson can cite a list of pandemic responses that virtually every employer should be practicing, communities are still unclear on the overall strategy and have still not received a response to the information request that any good community partner should be willing and eager to share."

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The information request refers to a June 12 letter that the Iowa Council for Worker Safety sent to the plant manager of the Columbus Junction facility expressing concern about COVID-19 policies and procedures there. The Diocese of Davenport is among the letter's signers.

Loxi Hopkins, a diocesan volunteer, serves on the council. She also helped organize it. Members include representatives of faith groups, workers, immigrant and community organizations from Columbus Junction and Eastern Iowa.

"Workers at Tyson in Columbus Junction are our friends and neighbors; we care about their health and well-being and know that now, more than ever, we are all interconnected," the council wrote. "We have read your statements to the press and on your webpage that express your overall commitment to worker safety during this pandemic.

"However, we are also hearing a lot of community concerns and confusion about specific policies and responses. Your policies at this moment have health consequences far beyond the plant itself and are a matter of community concern," the letter stated.

The council sought information about social distancing in locker rooms, production and meal areas; safe transportation to and from work; modification of attendance or leave policies; access to restrooms, soap/water and hand sanitizer. They also asked about education and training for workers and supervisors about how to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, among other protocols; leave and pay policies; workers' rights and protection against retaliation; quality and quantity of personal protective equipment provided; and restroom use policies.

Council representatives said they have not received a response to their letter. On July 13, they launched a public petition calling on Tyson managers statewide to pay all employees who have missed work due to COVID-19 infection, exposure symptoms, quarantine or COVID-19 related child and family medical care.

"Tyson workers and their families across the state have raised alarming reports that many workers have struggled to survive without pay for weeks after being infected in COVID-19 outbreaks," the petition states.

"These reports stand in direct contrast to claims by Tyson that health and safety are their top priorities, and suggest that workers and their families are shouldering the physical and economic risks of Tyson's continued production in a pandemic that has infected tens of thousands of meatpacking workers nationally."

Mickelson shared a statement with The Catholic Messenger outlining about a dozen of the company's COVID-19 protective measures and policies, including formation of a coronavirus task force in January.

Among other measures, the company is providing and requiring surgical-style face masks; conducting wellness health screening of all team members each time they arrive at the facility, using infrared walk-through temperature scanners; has implemented social-distancing measures, such as installing physical barriers between workstations and in break rooms; and daily sanitizing of plant production areas.

This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.