

YEAR of SAINT JOSEPH



“Show yourself a father, and guide us in the path of life”

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St Joseph the Migrant Worker

Have you ever imagined St Joseph as a migrant worker? Would he have taken with him as many tools of trade as he could carry when he fled with Mary and the child Jesus into Egypt? What would it have been like for him trying to find work in a foreign land to support his family? Would anyone help them, or would these ‘outsiders’ be exploited or left to fend for themselves?

During the COVID-19 pandemic temporary seasonal workers have had a very difficult time. Many came to Australia for jobs that disappeared because of the pandemic. None the less, these workers found themselves ineligible for the Jobseeker allowance. Many could not go home. They became stranded in Australia because of closed borders. Without work or access to government support, they were forced to rely on charities.

Those who did find work were often exposed to risk of infection with the virus – for example in the coronavirus outbreak that centred on the meatworks in Colac in mid-2020, or in food delivery or cleaning.

Sadly, the exploitation of migrant workers is not something that only happens in other countries.



Before the pandemic, over a million overseas workers on temporary visas came to Australia each year. Even in the best of times, temporary seasonal workers are more vulnerable to exploitative working conditions than workers who have Australian citizenship. FairWork Australia says that “employees under the [Pacific Labour] Scheme have the same workplace rights as other employees in Australia”. But temporary seasonal workers might not know that. They are less likely to know what their rights are, and to be able to effectively assert them. It is not uncommon to hear stories of unreasonable accommodation charges and other levies being imposed. There have even been reports of passports being held by employers.

Migrant workers often lack friends and allies who can help them.

Can we see in the faces of temporary seasonal workers the face of St Joseph, seeking work in a foreign land, trying to support his family? Can we see migrant workers as our sisters and brothers in need of our care? Can we welcome them into our homes, communities and churches and defend their dignity and rights?

Let us entrust temporary seasonal workers in Australia to the protection of St Joseph the Worker.

Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv is Bishop of Parramatta and chair of the Bishops Commission for Social Justice, Mission and Service

