

Accompanying the Farmworkers in Mecca, California

A journey to visit the region and listen to their stories

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Summary

A one-day visit with the farmworkers in Mecca, California turned into a heart-felt encounter in a community filled with hope. Beginning with my own personal transition driving from the San Diego coast, over the mountains and back down into the inland deserts where the farmworkers live. Such a change in topography and dwellings along the way. I met with many migrants in their place of work and learned the amazing story of their business founder. We drove on to lunch with a local couple and witnessed a parade honoring Our Lady of Guadalupe. All as I tried to listen and understand the complexities of the connections between the Hispanic culture, the community, and the church. Finally, the evening meeting with the migrant community, was a fitting culmination. The entire day was a transition into another world, and I felt so very privileged that they allowed me to participate in it with them for the day. The words below will try to convey the trip, but you must meet with the migrants yourself to truly appreciate the individuals, their community, and their hopeful message.

Traveling to Mecca

It's mid-morning on Tuesday, December 3, 2024, and I'm driving east over the mountains outside of San Diego, headed towards the inland deserts near the Salton Sea. I've been invited to join Father Tom Florek, SJ, as he visits with the farmworkers and offers his leadership group session to the community and church leaders in the town of Mecca, California.

I'd met Tom about a month before as he accompanied our Ignatian Wisdom Fellowship pilgrimage, across northern Spain and on to Rome. The group was sponsored by Loyola University Chicago Institute of Pastoral Studies, and Tom provided spiritual guidance along the way, offering mass most evenings. He also added some of his own personal reflections and knowledge of a few of the locations we were visiting, as he had been there himself in prior years.

Tom also mentioned he was director of the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network (CMFN) which seemed to align with my own interests in immigration. When he mentioned he was going to be near my home in Southern California on December 3rd, I was eager to hear more. Given my previous projects with the Hispanic culture in Guatemala and Mexico, I suggested that I'd be happy to help if there is anything I can do to assist CMFN. Tom suggested in return, that I should come to Mecca and meet with the migrants for myself. So, I'm off to Mecca today!

The drive over the mountains is spectacular, with winding roads that open up to vast panoramas of the inland deserts. I'm passing signs to regions such as Hellhole Palms and Eagles Nest, giving a sense of how remote and desolate the area is. As I leave the town of Ocotillo Wells, the highway becomes noticeably rougher. The highway sign says I've entered Imperial County, and it seems they don't fund highway upkeep the same as San Diego County that I'd been driving through.

Note, that a Google study of the California map also revealed the small town of San Ignacio, California, nearby. Which could be possibly named after St. Ignatius from our recent pilgrimage. It is on Camino San Ignacio Road which zigs and zags all around the mountaintops. And the road crosses a few other streets

with the names of Qawish Road and Tukwet Road - which sound more like Native American Indian. Clearly there was an interesting history to this region that needed more investigation. But not at the moment – I'm on to Mecca.

My travels eastward ended at the Salton Sea, where I turned north and passed near places aptly named Salton Sea Beach and Desert Shores. These communities are from bygone days, though. The Salton Sea was formed in the early 1900s to bring water to the agricultural sectors in the Imperial Valley. The Sea became land-locked and continued filling with agricultural runoff from the surrounding farms, resulting in an unsustainable environment. The toxic air quality continues to be studied for the health problems it causes those who live and work in this environment. With my background in healthcare, these health issues were one of the concerns that Tom wanted me to listen to the farmworkers about.

I drove north along Highway 86 within Imperial County past another distinct county line into Riverside County. There would seem to be a change in county regulations of some kind that encouraged agricultural activity in Riverside county to flourish. Lush, green blocks of land highlight the extensive use of water for irrigation to produce many crops. Including the palm trees along the road. We would be coming back to visit a date farm like those date palm trees that I was passing, and I would learn more about the workers and their processes.

Coming over the bridge in Mecca was an even more stark contrast. Like someone flipped the "green" switch on in the middle of the desert. Instant, bright green crops in the ground, and row after row of different types of date palms lining the roads. Complimented by various citrus trees. Clearly, this much agriculture took a lot of farm upkeep, and those were the workers I was here to meet.



I drove on to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, 65-100 Dale Kiler, Mecca in Mecca, California to meet with Tom and his friend Fr. Michael McAndrew, CSSR, who had driven up with him from Yuma, AZ, that morning. We'd both arrived about 1:00PM within minutes of each other and there was no time for formal, lengthy greetings. We joined with the pastor of the parish, Padre Rocendo Herrera, S.T. And the four of us were off to meet with some of the farmworkers.



Visit to Bautista Organic Date Ranch

After a short 10-minute drive, our group arrived at the Bautista Organic Date Ranch in Mecca. Before we could even get out of our vehicles, workers came out to greet us. All were so very friendly!



After some introductions, our group was escorted into the work area where the dates are processed and shipped. All of the workers were busy sorting and packing dates. But, as they looked up and saw us enter, they all smiled and took time out to greet our group.

Tom had explained to me earlier that most of the farmworkers in the Mecca area of California came from the Purepecha indigenous groups in the Michoacan region of Mexico. So, while they worked here in Mecca together, they also brought family members and friends to join them. And all were eager to talk about their experiences working on the date farm.



The date shaker removes excess debris from the dates prior to sorting and removing the pits.

Eugenia (not shown in the photos) escorted our group around to meet with workers at their different workstations. She explained that she had been working at the farm for about 12 years. And in asking other workers in the room, it seems several of them started about the same time. Eugenia said she was about 12 years old when she first started working at the Bautista Date Farm. She was young, but the need was there, and she was eager to do the work. Other people on the job told her to wear a mask. She thought it was to hide her youth from others, or perhaps the fact that she was a girl. She's not sure. It could also have been for health reasons, as the Salton Sea concerns with agricultural runoff and collapse of the ecosystem was just making headlines.

Just a few weeks after Eugenia started, the owners discovered her knack for numbers and asked if she wanted to do the office accounting for the workers. She was eager to learn the new skills! And continues to help with the business books to this day. She also works with the church books at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe for about 4 hours per day, Monday through Thursday. Fridays are off. She is very busy!

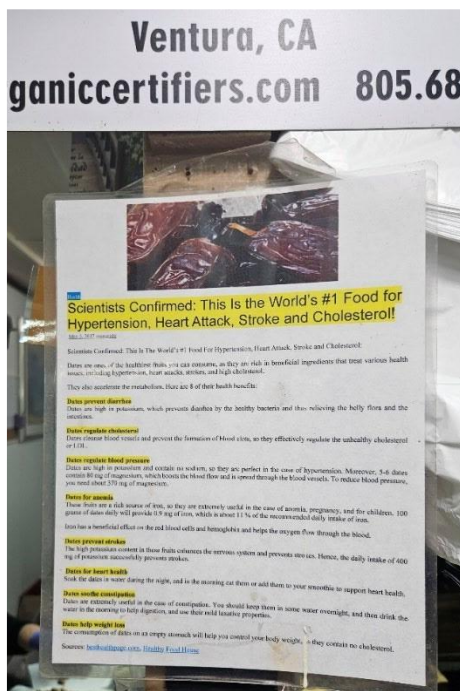


The dates are grown November through May, which is conveniently right over the holiday season. With our visit in December, we were right over the business and holiday rush. The workers explained that they have been growing their business online, and are proud to say they ship across the United States and internationally to Canada. They are limited by how long the shipping takes, so as not to impact the quality of the dates when they are received. The dates can only be in transit for 3-4 days. The work crew also proudly displays images on the wall of the seven types of dates that they ship out across the nation from right here in this room. The stacks of boxes on the table were part of their expanded shipping business.





The workers also speak enthusiastically of being an “organic” farm, explaining that they must use very strict methods to grow top-quality fruit without pesticides or other contaminants, to ensure compliance with their organic certification. (<https://www.organiccertifiers.com/>) This can be especially problematic as the dates become ripe - at a time when they are also tasty for other insects and birds to eat. The workers described how the farm uses a natural solution of “bagging” shown in the photo above to keep the insects away. In addition, all-natural cow manure is used to enrich the soil rather than store bought fertilizer.



Along with being an organic farm, the workers also prominently display a sign emphasizing how dates are the world's #1 food for hypertension, heart attack, stroke, and cholesterol. The migrants have many reasons to be proud of their work on the farm and the products that they produce.

Tom asked each of us in the room about our first impressions when we came into the work area – what resonated with each of us at the date farm. Most of the answers were in Spanish, so exact details were not available to me. But the smiles conveyed the message – it was a place of enjoyment and hope, where people could feel safe working together as they had been doing for years. My own initial perspective was of the generations that were working together, side-by-side, each doing their part for the company, and all sharing the pride of doing their part for the community. What a joy that would bring to the heart.

Most of the farmworkers in Mecca and the surrounding farms came from agricultural areas of Michoacan, Mexico. Michoacan is a mountainous region that has many natural resources of gold, silver, zinc, and iron. And the mountain minerals help to create the soil for high-quality crops such as corn, sorghum, strawberries, peaches, wheat, limes, sugar cane and mangos. However, the region is primarily known for its avocados. In fact, this region of Mexico is known as the largest producer of avocados in the world. So, it is understandable that the migrants who come to Mecca are adept farmworkers.

But it would also be interesting to know their perspectives on the organic-certified methods that are required in California. Do they share them with their friends and family who are still in Mexico? What about their international presence on the date market? Can their friends in Mexico learn to expand their market as well? The migrants' move to Mecca was more than traveling the miles, it transformed people and their lives. At the same time, they also brought their traditional culture across the miles, which includes strong family and community values. In some ways, they get the best of both worlds.

Another concern that Tom and I talked about was if the migrants understood the scope of the water problem in the United States. In particular, how the water rights from the diminishing Colorado River could impact their agricultural output, and even their livelihood to remain in business. As well as the problems with air quality from the Salton Sea impacting human health, as previously mentioned. There are many unknowns regarding the exact health impact but given the problem of reducing water supply and air quality around the Salton Sea are fairly well established, it has been a little concerning for Tom to hear of workers who are misled by false promises. How do they learn the facts of the problems?

Since working with the date palms is only keeping them busy for a portion of the year, I wanted to ask them how they balance their time throughout the year. Are there other crops they tend to when the dates are not in season? Perhaps the citrus can alternate with the dates? What does the bigger picture of their life look like throughout the year?



The Bautista Organic Date Ranch was purchased by Enrique and Graciela Bautista in 1999, after the original owners decided to retire. Enrique had already worked as the ranch foreman for many years, so he knew how to run it. And as the owners were retiring, they asked Enrique if he was interested in buying the Ranch he had grown to love. It was the offer of a lifetime. Now, his five children, Alicia, Maricela, Alvaro, Jaime, and Enrique Jr., would grow up on the compound which is just across the street from their own childhood home. And they would bring their own young families to the ranch.

However, in 2004, only five years after the purchase of the Ranch, Enrique had a bad accident that left him a quadriplegic, and with only the use of one hand to run his wheelchair. This was an obvious physical limitation, but it did not impact his spirit, his family connections, and his desire to run the Ranch! Our small group had the privilege of meeting with Enrique who was in the main house, just a short walk from where the dates were being sorted and shipped. It was 20 years after his accident, and still he had kept his optimism in life – how inspiring! And he had a radiant smile as he talked with us all. The priest said a special prayer for Enrique during our visit with him.

Today, most of Bautista Organic Date Ranch is run by Enrique's daughter, Alicia, and her siblings. Sadly, the family's matriarch, Graciela, died of COVID a few years ago. Still, the family is strong to continue on. In typical Hispanic culture, photos line the walls and tables throughout the home and Graciela is shown in many of them, sharing family moments. Along the way the business has grown to include twenty-three local workers. Most have been here many years, coming from the Michoacan region in Mexico, and many have had family and friends join them here in Mecca. What a great place to work with a thriving business to set an example.

On the Road to Lunch

After a delightful visit with the workers and the Bautista family, we were told we would be going to a parishioner's home for lunch. This certainly wasn't what I had expected! A home cooked meal.

Tom and I were in my Subaru, and we followed Michael and Rocendo in another vehicle, as we drove on down to North Shore to the parishioners' home. We could see the Salton Sea nearby. It was actually quite beautiful in the afternoon sun, with palms framing the great mass of still waters. Without the throngs of beach goers, boaters and fisherman that usually accompany a large lake in California, it was just a calming sight to see. But somehow eerie, just the same. And begging for the questions that look towards the future of the region. How will the communities surrounding the lake evolve?

Along the drive to lunch, the conversations between Tom and I shifted to the lack of healthcare for the farmworkers who have to be out in the poor air quality all day, and their struggles for the healthcare basics that most of us take for granted. What are their options if they become sick from the air contaminants, and cannot work here on the farm? As previously mentioned, many seem in denial of the scientific facts around the reduction in water coming from the Colorado River. Some believe that the aquifers under southern California will be sufficient for one hundred years of population growth and agricultural production. It would seem that bringing in expertise to talk about these topics first-hand might be helpful to share more facts on the situation. But who are the experts they would believe?

I had heard in the news that there were businesses interested in the lithium minerals found around the Salton Sea area. Couldn't this opportunity bring a boon to the local economy, if done properly? But Tom suggested there was opposition to the lithium mining from the local indigenous populations since many of the minerals are on indigenous lands. So, there are regulatory and legal barriers to overcome before any of the lithium businesses can move forward. Time will tell who, if anyone, prospers from it all. Not all commercial progress moves humanity in the right direction. It is somewhat heartening to hear the "pause" in the rush to profits.

Our afternoon meal was a special treat!



We were so very excited to pull up to the home of Lalo (short for Geraldo) and Maria, two members of Rocendo's church. Three of our group had already been travelling for many hours that day – myself from San Diego, and Tom and Michael from Yuma. It was around 3:00PM and we had not yet eaten for the day. Getting out of the cars, we could already smell the aromas wafting from the home – something tasty was inside!

Maria had been preparing an amazing culinary phenomenon that included her own recipes for a chicken and shrimp dish, beef and broccoli, vegetables, rice, salsa, and so much more. In the photo she is preparing handmade tortillas, freshly pressed and cooked as we arrived. They disappeared quickly, and she made more. Maria also offered a traditional natural hibiscus-flavored drink with the meals. So much flavor from so much

food! We were so grateful for the sharing of good food and being in such good company.



Mision Catolica San Juan Diego

After the amazing meal with Maria and Lelo, our group stopped by the Mision Catolica San Juan Diego on the way back to our evening meeting. This building was being prepared to support Rocendo's Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Rocendo strolled around the surrounding area of the building, and all seemed to be trimmed and well-maintained. Inside, the facility seemed ready to serve the community. Rocendo explained that there were some nuns who were assisting in the clean-up and transition of the church property. In addition, the nuns visit the workers in the fields to help with their needs. The mission truly seems to be filling the needs of the community already.



Rocendo stood at the pulpit of this newly renovated mission that was prepared to bring hope and assistance to his community. He seemed ready to make it happen. The photo behind him was the namesake of the mission, Juan Diego, along with another picture of the Blessed Mother to the left. Tom noticed me studying the two photos on the wall, as I was not familiar with who they were or what their significance was. Tom was happy to fill in some of the story.

On December 9, 1531, Juan Diego had seen the Blessed Mother Mary in a vision that requested him to build a shrine on a hill near current day Mexico City, where she could bless those who came to visit. However, when he shared his vision with the local bishop, the bishop demanded proof. Juan Diego struggled on how to provide proof of his vision to the bishop, trying in vain over several visits.

As Juan Diego returned to his hill once again, he noticed roses were blooming there – though it was almost winter. He picked some of the roses and brought them back to the bishop. The bishop recognized that the roses were not only out of season, but they were cultured roses from Spain that were not grown in this region of Mexico. In addition, as the roses were revealed, the image of the Blessed Mother appeared on Juan Diego's cloak. The Bishop was convinced to build the shrine as Juan Diego's vision had requested.

From this early date, Juan Diego's group in Mexico was the first indigenous population to embrace Catholicism in the New World. Juan Diego would continue to serve in the shrine, living modestly near it, until his death in 1548. In 1990 Juan Diego was canonized by Pope John Paul II.

Tom added that flowers, and roses in particular, are used today to symbolize the event and honor the Blessed Mother. This photo displayed in the Mission, just to the left of the photo of Juan Diego, shows the image of the Blessed Mother surrounded by the roses that Juan Diego picked on the hill. Flowers have a much bigger significance to Catholicism and greater spiritual meaning than I had previously imagined.

As we were coming out of the mission, the sun was setting against the mountains in the west. The panorama included a view of the Salton Sea. This serenity provided such a peaceful backdrop to the serious issues that the migrants face today in this small community and beyond. But here, in this Mission, the locals can connect, share their hopes and dreams, and help each other in the community. This Mission has such a contribution to make.

Locals paying tribute to Our Lady of Guadalupe



We traveled on to the location where Tom was to give his class to the local migrants. But as we pulled up, it seemed another event was gathering on the street right outside of our meeting building. Many locals had gathered to pay tribute to the Blessed Mother, whose beautiful image was on the trailer, wrapped in white and gold fabrics, elegantly draped on all sides. Of note are the oversized flowers that were held by everyone. Most were white, and together they cast a soft light from within the crowd.

As the sun set, the lights of the trailer created their own luminous glow over the Blessed Mother. Special announcements were offered for the event. Most were spoken in Spanish. And while I understood some of the words, the message of hope for the community was evident on the faces. Meanwhile, I was also busy connecting and sharing smiles with those I stood next to in the group. No translators were needed. The yellow jeep began pulling the trailer and the procession started to move forward. The contrast of the ancient-held beliefs vs. the modernized methods of

transportation did not seem to distract anyone. Prior processions could have been just as easily been

pulled with donkeys or burros. However, from my previous experience with Hispanic cultures, they are experts at combining the best from all worlds.



The procession traveled on down the street, following the yellow Jeep pulling the Blessed Mother. I struggled with wanting to be a part of this incredible journey down the road, and the desire to go inside the building where Tom and his group were preparing for the community meeting at 6:00PM. The locals had been very receptive to include me in their ceremony. I felt as if I was abandoning them at this important step of the journey. But not knowing where it would lead or when it would return, I felt obligated to stay with Tom for the community meeting. This had been one of the original intents of my visit.



Father Florek's Community Meeting

I joined the group inside the small building, and we began setting up chairs in a circle, so all in the group setting could see and talk to each other. As we prepared the room, Rocendo explained that the building we were in was being renovated to become a children's music room, using funding from local donors. And any work needed would be coming from the community. All were supporting the joy of children learning to play musical instruments, which could in turn be shared with the community and beyond.

The people began to arrive for Tom's meeting around 6:00 PM, and he started the discussion with about sixteen people. However, other people continued to arrive as they were able to. Seated members quickly gathered more chairs and scooted around the circle's perimeter to make room for additional seating - again, and again! Our final meeting attendance was about twenty-four people.

Tom introduced himself to the group, along with his friends Michael and Rocendo, who most attendees already knew from his church, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Tom added that he is director of the Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network, which is why we are all gathered here tonight. The Network's mission is to promote the formation of welcoming church communities, and to advocate for social justice, dignity and respect for the workers and the community. Tom said his group is currently in about fifteen states, including Wisconsin, Oregon, Washington, Virginia, New York, Michigan, California, Florida and more. He is seeking to build a national network of farmworkers, where local churches will accompany migrants in the fields and help to meet their needs. The farmworkers' power comes from being united.

Tom then asked the members present to speak about what inspired them to come here tonight. Who was an inspiration in their life? What could be learned from each other, and shared with the group?

The individuals in the room were quite responsive to the query and even though the replies were in Spanish, the emotions were very telling. I knew some of the sacrifices that the family members had been through to get here – yet here they were in the U.S., sharing their journey with others who had made it. That accomplishment in itself is a wondrous achievement. Now they had to find a way to stay here. What were their barriers to staying in the U.S.?

A church deacon sat next to me in the circle of attendees and provided some translations of their narratives. He added that virtually all the migrants they worked with were undocumented, which only adds to the levels of insecurities. And to the complexities to resolve the problem. I can see Tom's purpose is strength through unity. But the flip side of coming together includes the fear of being tracked as part of the networked group.

The final session of Tom's meeting included having the members gather in groups to discuss recognizing important inspirational people in our lives, or the world. Who would that be, and why were they so inspirational?

As we were wrapping up the meeting, I learned that the one young lady who stood up and spoke passionately for several minutes on a topic of concern to her, was actually already a group leader. She worked to get healthcare appointments for the migrants at the local clinics. This healthcare is very important for the reasons discussed earlier about the poor air quality in the region. In particular, the women and children are suffering from respiratory problems and do not know how to get help.

The young woman's group understood the workers' health concerns, and they put processes in place - so before any student meets with a patient, they have lessons on understanding culture and the belief systems of the indigenous population. And her group ensures someone from the Purepecha culture escorts the individuals to their healthcare appointments, promoting trust in the clinic services. There are language barriers as well, but with patience and a little assistance, they can be minimized.

What I found amazing about this group of farmworker leaders who were gathered here tonight is that they looked like any other group of people in the United States. They were from all walks of life, different in how they dressed and spoke. Some were sure and self-confident, while others more reserved. But I think they all shared a conviction to give back to their community and help others. And you could hear that sense of duty as they spoke.

What does giving back look like? For some, helping others meant assisting with the newly forming mission they were establishing in the community. Others can cook meals and deliver them to those who are doing the work. There is an opportunity for all to contribute according to their means and skill sets. We just have to be flexible and receptive to what people are able to contribute, and where the needs are.

Spending the Night in Coachella, and the Drive Back

My trip was intended to be for a day – and I had expected to either stay in a local motel or attempt the 2-hour drive back to San Diego the same evening, depending on how late Tom's meeting went. However, others in the group had something else in mind, and had made arrangements with a couple at the meeting for me to stay at their apartment unit, attached to their home in Coachella. I was really overwhelmed with the generosity that they were willing to allow me into their home for the night,

after just meeting me a few hours before. But it showed the open arms of the community. And I found I could not refuse the offer. It was such a wonderful experience of hospitality.

I left early the next morning to return to San Diego, and the drive back was surreal looking at the sunrise against the mountains I was driving into. It was a fitting vision of the perpetual hope I'd seen the day before. The sun rising, lighting up the landscape for the migrant's day to begin in their community filled with "hope." Their community has all the potential in the world for them to sculpt it into whatever their needs are.

However, is there cause for concern for the migrants? Of course, we are all struggling to find our place in a world of extremes. But the Catholic social teaching can provide a moral foundation for solidarity and identifying the common good. My own ethical background suggests that for any social problem we learn the most from those who are marginalized, where people are suffering and struggling. What are their barriers to leading a more interactive and hope-driven life? How can we act to help them overcome those barriers? What are their needs to achieve their goals? We should not assume to know what they've gone through. We must listen to their stories and learn from them. Ask them. Help them achieve their goals.

I arrived home and still found myself at a loss for words to speak about it all. Fortunately, I had taken many photos throughout the day and used those as a visual aid to frame the story for this writing.

I believe that His Holiness Pope Francis said it best in preparing for the 2025 Jubilee. He wrote that the Jubilee will be centered on the theme "Pilgrims of Hope." His Holiness so beautifully expressed: "We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us, and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and far-sighted vision."

<https://www.peterboroughdiocese.org/en/get-involved/jubilee-year-2025-pilgrims-of-hope.aspx#>:

Resource Links Bautista Organic

Dates

<https://bautistaorganicdates.com/>

<https://bautistaorganicdates.com/story.html>

Catholic Migrant Farmworker Network <https://cmfnsebrador.org/>

Lithium on Indigenous lands

<https://www.eastcountymagazine.org/local-tribal-members-join-stand-against-lithium-mining-arizona-and-salton-sea>

Mass Deportations history <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/03/trump-mass-deportation-plan-1930srepatriation-program> <https://www.history.com/news/operation-wetback-eisenhower-1954-deportation>

Salton Sea

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salton_Sea

Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe <https://www.sbdiocese.org/parishes/Parish.cfm?id=19432>
<https://www.sbdiocese.org/parishes/parish.cfm?id=17331>

<https://www.facebook.com/SantuarioDeNuestraSenoraDeGuadalupe/>

<https://discovermass.com/church/sanctuary-of-our-lady-of-guadalupe-mecca-ca/>

<https://www.nationalshrine.org/blog/st-juan-diego-and-the-miracle-of-our-lady-of-guadalupe/>