

# Cardinal calls attention to Canada's migrant worker tragedy

Canada's migrant worker problem matters to Pope Francis and the universal Church because it's a global problem and a moral problem, said Canadian Cardinal Michael Czerny.

"It is tragic that this is coming to public attention in Canada because some migrant farm workers have died from COVID-19," wrote Czerny in an e-mail.



Cardinal Czerny

The Jesuit cardinal co-leads the Vatican's Migrants and Refugees Section, part of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development. Responding to questions from Canadian Catholic News, Czerny said Canadian face a moral choice.

"We should ask, what will guide our actions in the future? Will it be the values of our best selves or the meanness of our selfish wallets?" he wrote.

In response to a May 1 video sent to him by migrant farm workers in Italy, Pope Francis urged that forgotten, invisible and abused farm labourers should become the "centre of our concern," Czerny pointed out.

"It is true that the current crisis affects everyone, but people's dignity must always be respected," the Pope said May 6 in reply to the video. "That is why I add my voice to the appeal of these workers and of all exploited workers. May the (COVID-19) crisis give us the opportunity to make the dignity of the person and work of the centre of our concern."

“Centre of our concern? Most of us don’t even see them,” Czerny said.

“If they are responsible for our fruits and vegetables and the prosperity of our agriculture, then we’re responsible for their health, dignity and hope. And if it is uneconomical to treat them according to minimal Canadian standards of labour, health and safety, then it is the economy that has to change.”

It also as Pope Francis added “Comfort of Migrants” and other Marian titles to the *Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, more commonly known as the *Litany of Loreto*. The litany, which begins by invoking God’s mercy, then turns to Mary, asking for her prayers.

The problems migrant farm workers face in Canada are repeated in countries around the world, Czerny said.

“Cultivation and harvesting can be very labour-intensive. Everyone needs food, but also wants to have money for lots of other things,” he said.

“So societies and corporations meet their farm labour needs as cheaply as possible.

“At worst, workers who are desperate can be manipulated into slave-like conditions – conditions that ignore ‘the dignity of the person and of work,’ as Pope Francis put it.”

Conditions migrant workers face in Canada are parallel to those faced by mafia-controlled immigrant farm labourers in Italy, including overcrowded bunkhouses, pressure to work while sick and the absence of personal protective equipment in the midst of a pandemic, Czerny said