

## JUSTICE FOR FARMWORKERS

**A scholar-priest and a union president** will share the 2012 St. Thomas More Lecture at the St. Thomas More Catholic Church and Newman Center in Eugene. The theme of the lectures is Social Justice for Farmworkers.

On January 26 at 7:00 p.m. John Morris, a Dominican priest and professor at St. Mary's College in California (Moraga), will offer an overview of Catholic teaching on social justice, highlighting the church's teaching about labor unions and immigration.

At 7:00 the next night, January 27, Ramon Ramirez, co-founder and president of Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), will describe the lives of northwest farmworkers, the issues involved, and the role of the union. He will also assess the future of the union and leadership development among the members.

After his talk, Ramirez and Morris will make summarizing comments and then open the discussion to the audience. Finally, Xavier Lara, the union's volunteer coordinator, will invite the audience to help the farmworkers finish construction of their leadership training center in Woodburn.

The two-night event will be held in the church of St. Thomas More at the Newman Center, 1850 Emerald St., Eugene. There is no admission charge, but donations are welcome.

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Born and raised in East Los Angeles, Ramon Ramirez was inspired by the work and example of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, co-founders of California's United Farm Workers, and as a teen he got involved with the Chicano and farmworker movements.

In 1985, Ramirez and his friend Cipriano Ferrel took the union movement to the northwest, founding the first union of farm, nursery and reforestation workers in our region. Ferrel became the first president of PICUN and after his sudden death in 1995, Ramirez accepted the leadership role--but reluctantly. Ramon says he doubted he had what it takes to be president of the union, but over time he has discovered that, "by involving and relying on my fellow workers and leaders, by challenging others to assume their share of responsibility," he can lead. Accordingly, Ramirez has become a strong believer in the leadership capabilities of the ordinary worker, given the training and support that frees and nurtures that potential.

In 1991, before he became its president, Ramirez led PICUN through the first union-organized strike in the history of Oregon agriculture. And in 1998, soon after he took over leadership, Ramon signed collective bargaining contracts with three different growers--another first in Oregon's agricultural history. Since those days, PICUN has made collective bargaining agreements that ensure its members such benefits as

protection against discharge for other than just cause, a grievance procedure, paid breaks and overtime, union recognition, and others no less important.

None of these gains was required by Oregon law. State and federal collective bargaining laws do not apply to farmworkers.

For the future, at the top of the president's to-do list is "the implementation of a collective bargaining process for Oregon farmworkers." To this end, it is significant that the state's agribusinesses have publicly given up their long-held rejection of farmworker collective bargaining rights--which gives Ramirez and the farmworkers hope that large-scale bargaining is, as he says, "no longer a far-off dream."

John R. Morris studied engineering at the University of Washington and upon graduation became an aeronautical engineer for the Boeing Company. As a preliminary designer, he found his work intellectually and creatively stimulating. However, as a university student he had participated in the Dominican-run Newman Center and its associated parish, and as a young professional he continued to be attracted to the Dominican life-style and intellectual approach to the Catholic Christian tradition.

So, after a time, Morris joined the order, eventually completing a doctorate in theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. He then taught theology at St. Albert's College, at St. Mary's College in Moraga, and finally at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome. At present, Fr. Morris is again teaching at St. Mary's, and studying and writing about topics in Liberation Theology and Catholic Social Justice, among others.

He says that when his teaching career is over, he "would like to devote more time to pastoral work, especially with the Latinos."

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