NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Caring about workers through our food choices

Carol Meyer | Feb. 15, 2011 Eco Catholic

I wrote a previous blog about how we can opt out of factory farm animal cruelty by becoming a vegan. We can also opt out of cruelty to slaughterhouse workers by this choice. Cruelty may be a strong word, but when you look at the facts, that is truly what it is. In spite of the extreme secretiveness of slaughterhouse practices, the stories and data have leaked out anyway. And as Christians who are taught that what is done to the least of our brothers and sisters is done to Christ, we should care deeply about the welfare of the workers there. And especially when we are benefiting from their exploitation by eating cheap meat.

Some 5000 operating slaughterhouses in the United States employ half a million workers in one of the most dangerous jobs on the planet. We normally think coal miners, fire fighters, and the police have the highest risk to their safety or lives. Yet slaughterhouse workers have nine times the injury rate of coal miners in Appalachia. Some 36% of workers incur serious injuries compared to 10% in other industries, making killing and processing the flesh of animals the most hazardous job in America.

Why is this? As always, because of greed and profit. The assembly lines are made to go faster all the time, nearly twice as fast as plants in Europe, in order to reduce costs. Workers have to deal with sharp knives and powerful saws, and the speed renders them deadly weapons to themselves as well as to the animals. The work is repetitive and back-breaking, producing fatigue and mental strain through super-vigilance against accidents, but they still occur regularly.

A high incidence of disease, rashes, and antibiotic-resistant infections afflict the workers as well. In spite of improved conditions, the work is highly unsanitary, as workers constantly deal with blood, urine and feces on the ?kill floor? and throughout the dismembering process.

And let?s not forget the emotional and spiritual toll this takes on the workers. Slaughterhouses are places of death, fear, noise, and violence. What does it do to the soul to have to constantly kill terrified animals, and in far too many cases (some estimates are 15 percent), skin or scald them while still alive? One worker had this to say, ?I?ve taken out my job pressure and frustration on the animals, on my wife, and on myself, with heavy drinking.? I?ll spare you the details of how he says he purposely tortures the animals when he is pissed off.

There is more. The basic dignity and human rights of the workers are routinely ignored. Mere machines themselves, they have to stay on the assembly line even when they are sick or needing to go to the bathroom, are paid very low wages, usually aren?t provided with medical insurance, and nor given adequate medical attention for injuries. Because of the high turnover, most are not trained well.

No one wants to work in these horrendous conditions, so you can guess who the laborers are?mostly immigrants, undocumented workers from Mexico, the under-aged, and those desperate for any job. The turnover rate is from 59 percent to 150 percent. The workers, mere expendable cogs in a vast machine, are used up and spit out in under a year. And the cycle continues. That is, unless we protest, and unless we stop being a party to this oppression by moving to a plant-based diet.

Paul McCartney said, ?If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would go vegetarian.? They can have glass walls for us as we learn what goes on inside these death houses. We can let the reality touch our deepest being, evoking compassion and conviction to take no part in this dirty business. Jesus insists that we side with the poor and marginalized. We can and should do this by withdrawing our financial support for this violent and unjust industry by adopting a vegetarian/vegan diet.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/29/2014 - 17:36*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/caring-about-workers-through-our-food-choices