



### About the Author

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### About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Stories are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the Vintage Voice! Send your submissions to [vintagevoice@cpf.org](mailto:vintagevoice@cpf.org).

# VINTAGE VOICE



## We Are All Immigrants of God

By the Rev. Thomas J. Buechele

All the recent news about immigration issues along the southern border reminds me of my days of ministering with migrant farmworkers.

Many of us, now retired Roman Catholic and Episcopal clergy, ministered to Latino farmworkers and immigrants across our nation years ago. Issues of social justice were always in the forefront. Migrant housing, health programs, kids working in the fields, meat packing, low pay in landscaping and the restaurant industries, and unionization — all were daily justice issues we confronted with those we served, often to the chagrin of our bishops and parishioners.

It is so sad to me that today we again confront these border issues: asylum seekers and the human rights related to the migration of peoples. Our ministry is never ending... maybe not requiring as much physical energy, but still performed with passion. In this way, one never actually retires. Instead, we redefine, reframe, redirect.

Thinking about all of this reminds me of an old friend, Juvenal García, who had told me his riveting story.

The cargo train slowed down for the Columbus Junction intersection. Inside one of the box cars was Juvenal, shivering violently as he lay. Realizing that this was his chance, he rolled to the door, struggled to slide it back, stood unsteadily, and leaped into the snow. He lay there for a just a moment before slowly rising to limp toward the highway. All he wore was a hoodie sweatshirt and a faded dark blue Cubs baseball cap with its bright red C.

As he approached the train crossing, a county sheriff's car pulled up alongside him. The deputy called out, "Hey, young man, you must be half frozen. What are you doing out in this cold?" Juvenal did not understand a word. He only spoke Spanish. He tried to pick up his walking speed, again limping badly. The deputy pulled up alongside again. "Come on, get in," he said.

As he swung open the passenger door, Juvenal could feel the warmth of the car, and so he slid into the front seat. He gasped and his head fell to his chest. The officer asked, "Are you OK?" Juvenal gave no response. He just began shaking. The deputy flipped on his emergency light, spun his squad car around on the icy intersection, and roared out on Highway 61 toward the hospital in Muscatine, IA.

Juvenal García was 20 years old and had crossed the border illegally near Laredo, Texas. He made his way to the train yard and thought he was jumping a train to California, where he had a number of friends from the small rural ejido in Guanajuato. Instead, he had gotten on one going north, not west. Exhausted, he had slept for a day in the boxcar, having no idea of his mistake. He didn't know where he was going and he was too afraid to try and get off. It kept getting colder and colder, and finally, he understood that he was in real danger.

At the hospital, he was rushed into the emergency room. When the doctors discovered that his feet had frozen, his toes black, they admitted him and called Sister Molly Muñoz. A nurse who spent her summers caring for thousands of migrants who came to work the Muscatine tomato harvest, she rushed to the hospital even though she was not on duty.

"¡Ay, Juvenal! ¿Qué pasa?" Sister Molly called out as she approached Juvenal. He tensed, then smiled slightly, and tears filled his eyes. Molly gently explained to him that his feet were in really bad shape and that the doctors had said that at least some amputation would be necessary. He pulled the covers up over his head and began sobbing.

Juvenal García spent weeks in the hospital, protected from deportation because his case was considered a medical emergency. After his toes and part of one heel were amputated, he began the slow process of healing, being fitted with special shoes, and learning to walk again. Arrangements were made for him to stay in an extra room at the home of the hospital's priest once he was discharged. Eventually, as he continued physical therapy and grew stronger, he found a job at a small local factory.

Every Friday after work, Juvenal, wearing his special shoes — his prized possession, would make his way to the bank and then on to the Western Union office. He would send \$200 to his mother in Guanajuato, Mexico, return to the priest's house, giving him \$50 for his stay, and finally pocketing just \$40 for the week. Eventually Juvenal moved into an apartment with a group of other young men. He never missed work and always showed up for church on Sunday.

One of those Sundays after church, he came up to Padre Tomás and said, "Padre, voy a mi casa. Regresaré a mi familia en Mexico." (Father, I'm going home. I'm returning to my family in Mexico.)

Juvenal García came as a whole young man and returned to his family a whole young man. He limped as he walked to the plane, but he held his head high. He was smiling as he waved goodbye, with tears of God's grace running down his cheeks.



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