

Mark R. Day 1967–1970

My Time with the UFW

I first met Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in Delano in 1966 shortly after I was ordained a priest of the Franciscan order. My classmates and I were taking a year of pastoral training under the supervision of Father Alan McCoy at St. Mary's parish in Stockton, about an hour's drive from Sacramento. Part of my duties at St. Mary's were to assist farmworkers on the islands of the San Joaquin River delta. This was my first encounter with the exploitation and dependency of these workers and the structured injustice of the labor contractor system.

At that time I had long talks with Fathers Tom McCullough and John Garcia, both of whom had done some pioneer work with farmworkers in the 1950s and 1960s. It was always the same story. As long as the church, meaning priests and nuns, kept quiet and did not create any waves, everything was fine. But when members of the church spoke out, they were attacked not only by the growers and their allies, but by church officials who benefited from the status quo. Such was the case of McCullough, Garcia, and Don McDonald. The last worked in San Jose and was a mentor to Cesar, introducing him to Fred Ross and the Community Service Organization. These priests clashed repeatedly with growers and with Archbishop John Joseph Mitty of San Francisco. They insisted that priests should stick to purely "spiritual" matters and stay in their sacristies.

Cesar and Dolores spoke highly of these men and others such as Fr. James Vizzard, a Jesuit, Fr. Keith Kenny of Sacramento, and Fr. Victor Salandini of San Diego. All had spoken out on behalf of the fledging union and were in turn disciplined by their superiors. "But most priests, including the pastor of our church in Delano, are against us," Cesar said. It was also true of most local Protestant pastors who refused to support the efforts of the California Migrant Ministry, headed by the Rev. Chris Hartmire. Cesar asked if I could come to Delano to work with the union. I passed his suggestion on to Alan McCoy and he said he would try to work out the arrangement with the local bishop.

I was fortunate to be a friar. In contrast to other Catholic orders and the diocesan clergy, the friars had an open approach to theology and a history of involvement in social action. At that time, the Franciscans were trying to return to their roots as a brotherhood committed to the poor and to downplay their membership in the clerical caste system. This often put us at odds with bishops and other priests. My superior, Alan McCoy, was a friend of Dorothy Day, a social radical who grew disillusioned with the Communist Party in the 1930s. She became a Catholic and a pacifist, nudging bishops and priests to leave their fancy palaces and rectories to become involved directly with the poor. Day left a legacy of dozens of Catholic Worker houses in all major U.S. cities.

McCoy encouraged us to stick our necks out on social issues. For many of us, the 1960s were times of euphoria and optimism. Great changes and reforms that came out of the

Second Vatican Council in Rome (1962–1965), the most important event to occur in the Catholic Church in the 20th century. As theology students, we pored over Vatican II's documents, including the "Constitution of the Church in the Modern World," which broke down the false divisions between church and world, saying that the "cares and concerns, the joys and sorrows of all men and women were the joys and concerns of the church as the People of God."

It all looked good on paper, but from the beginning the Vatican authorities, including the Roman Curia, resisted the changes. They preferred the traditional hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian model of the church to an open one in which the entire People of God participated as adults. The conservatives had their allies in Cardinals McIntyre of Los Angeles and Spellman of New York as well as with countless bishops, priests, and laypeople. I believe this resistance to change was responsible for the voluntary departure of thousands of priests and nuns who attempted to implement Vatican reforms and were stymied at every turn. The hemorrhaging continues to this day. Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI encouraged the open spirit of Vatican II, but Pope John Paul II has attempted to roll back many of the reforms of the council. His papacy has been a long march backward toward the Middle Ages and a monarchical model of the church. Fortunately, too many Catholics were awakened in the last four decades of the 20th century, and there's no going back to the status quo. The genie is out of the bottle.

The church was divided over Vatican II when I arrived in Delano with McCoy's blessing in 1967. I rented an apartment. I was only there a few weeks when Bishop Aloysius Willinger of Fresno sent word that I was to leave the area. Apparently, some growers had seen me on picket lines and complained about me. I decided to make a strategic retreat to our parish in Fresno and was told that Willinger was soon to retire. In the meantime, a seminarian and I worked on a raisin farm outside of Fresno. I wanted to get some idea of what it was like to do farm work. I never felt more fit and I lost about 25 pounds boxing raisins in 100 degree heat. In the fall, when Timothy Manning, an auxiliary bishop under Cardinal McIntyre in Los Angeles, replaced Willinger, I set out again for Delano. It was only a matter of a few weeks before Manning sent word to the friars that I had to leave Delano again. This infuriated Cesar, who had already seen several priests booted out of the area. This time, he vowed, the farmworkers would put up a fight. The church, he believed, belonged to the workers as much as the growers.

I knew that grower pressure was responsible for Manning's decision, but I wanted to hear it firsthand. So I called and asked for an appointment to see Manning. I was sure that Cesar and his advisors were going to make a move, but I wasn't sure what would happen. I had packed my car with all my belongings. My plan was to speak to Manning, then drive to Santa Barbara and stay with my sister and her family until I got another assignment.

Manning, a pale and frail man, was sniffing with a cold when I arrived. He was uptight. I told him that I had heard rumors about his decision that I should leave Delano, but I wasn't sure about the details. "Can you tell me what the verdict is?" I asked. Manning

stiffened and scowled at me. “Verdict?” he said sarcastically. “How dare you ask me what the verdict is? You are to leave Delano and await another assignment from your provincial superior. Another priest will be assigned to Delano.” I asked him what I had done to provoke his decision, but he refused to discuss the matter. Manning then looked out the window and turned even whiter than his characteristic pasty pallor. Several striking farmworkers, all women, were descending on the chancery office. “Did you have anything to do with this?” he asked, with a sweep of his episcopal ring. “No,” I said. “I know nothing about it.” With that I turned and bade him goodbye. “I literally skipped down the steps of the chancery office, some of the strikers passing me on their way up to see the bishop. I hailed them nervously, jumped into my car and headed for Santa Barbara.

When I got there, I called the farmworkers’ office in Delano. “Didn’t you hear the news?” said Jim Drake. “The bishop is allowing you to stay in Delano and work with the union.”

“What?” I asked in amazement. “How did that happen?” Drake, a member of the California Migrant Ministry, helped me piece together what occurred that day. It was a bizarre and dramatic story. The striking women had left the vineyards early that morning and drove to Fresno, an hour and a half north of Delano. Their mission: to pressure Manning into allowing me to remain as chaplain to the United Farm Workers union. Manning, accustomed to the deference that Mexican women pay to priests and bishops, ushered them into his office. He was convinced that he could give them a short exhortation and send them on their way.

That’s not what happened. The women wouldn’t take no for an answer. Manning was beside himself. He asked Father Luis Baldonado, a Franciscan priest, to speak to the women in Spanish, urging them to give up and leave. They refused. Then Monsignor Roger Mahony arrived. He tried to sweet-talk the women into giving in and leaving the office. Again, they refused to budge. “We were hungry, and all we had was one candy bar,” said Rachel Orendain, one of the strikers. “The bishop had left the office. Helen, Cesar’s wife, was sitting in the bishop’s chair. She took a knife, cut the candy bar up and divided it among the rest of the women.”

When Manning returned, he tried to exhort the women by pulling episcopal rank on them. “I am the bishop here,” he said. “And God speaks through me. It is my decision that Father Day leave Delano. We will get another priest to minister to the farmworkers.”

With that, Rachel Orendain stood up and faced Manning. “I’m just a poor farmworker,” she said, “but God speaks through me as well.” Manning was speechless. He never thought a poor Mexican farmworker would say such a thing. Actually, Rachel’s theology was quite orthodox. Nowhere is it written that God speaks uniquely through the hierarchy of the church. This would put a straitjacket on the Holy Spirit. There is, in fact, an old theological maxim: *vox populi, vox Dei*—“the voice of the people is the voice of God.” Manning, like his mentor Cardinal McIntyre of Los Angeles, attended the Vatican Council in Rome. But Rachel’s remarks were probably the first time he was reminded in a dramatic way that the

People of God have a voice, and that bishops should listen to them. I believe that much of the power and authority that most bishops wield is delusional. They don't believe themselves accountable to anyone. Only under extreme pressure will they set up commissions and committees to give the appearance of collegiality. And even then, they stack these bodies with "yes" men they can control. This is especially true of the current sexual abuse scandals. In any corporation, men accused of similar cover-ups would be fired. Not so in the Catholic Church. Some of the worst offenders in the hierarchy have been promoted to even higher positions (see www.bishop-accountability.org).

What made the Fresno sit-in effective was the threat that both the local and national news media would break the story. Friendly reporters were contacted and agreed not to release the story unless Manning turned down the requests of the women. The Rev. Jim Drake, Marion Moses, and LeRoy Chatfield helped coordinate press relations. They were in telephone contact with the women in Fresno. Suddenly, Manning's office was deluged with calls from the Associated Press, the network news stations, *The New York Times*, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Was it true, they asked, that Bishop Manning was expelling a priest for working with the union in Delano?

Manning and his assistants were frantic and withheld comment, aware that they couldn't stall the press for more than a few hours. Time passed, but the women refused to move. Mahony suggested that another priest could be sent to Delano. The women asked: "Why? What was wrong with Father Day?" Mahony didn't give them a straight answer. The women were adamant. Finally, Manning agreed to allow me to stay and work with the farmworkers. But the women wanted it in writing, and they wanted no conditions attached. After further delays, Manning put it in writing and signed it. I was allowed to stay indefinitely as chaplain to the United Farm Workers in Delano.

One condition I agreed to was to stay at Our Lady of Guadalupe, the local parish. The pastor, Father Alabart, was friendly, but it was clear that he was not supportive of the union. Within a few months, Alabart left and another Franciscan was assigned as pastor. I helped out in the parish on the weekends, but during the week I worked full time with the strikers. I would rise at 5 a.m. and accompany the picket lines to the fields. It was long and tedious work. Funds were scarce, and on Friday nights we would welcome delegations of trade unionists from Los Angeles and San Diego to Filipino Hall in Delano. These groups would donate food and clothing and funds to help strikers pay their rent. They were especially helpful at Christmas time when the strikers could barely pay their rent.

In the spring of 1968, the issue of violence or nonviolence took center stage with the union. Helen Chavez told me that the growers and foremen were beginning to use more violent tactics against the strikers—beating them up, harassing them, and tearing up their picket signs. The human response was to respond in kind. Others told me that some of the strikers were beginning to sabotage some of the grape farms and equipment. Cesar decided that it was time to do something strategic, so he began his 25-day fast. Helen was against it, but she knew that once Cesar made up his mind, nobody could change it. As Cesar's health

became more delicate, we celebrated mass each evening at a gas station at Forty Acres. The fast drew a lot of press coverage and farmworkers from all over the valley. LeRoy Chatfield, Chris Hartmire, and Jim Drake helped write statements about nonviolence that were widely distributed, especially the one read at the final mass at Delano's Memorial Park on March 11. Mass was held on a flatbed truck, and a weakened Cesar sat next to Bobby Kennedy. Jim Drake read the message: "...I am convinced that the truest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men."

Four months later I joined the farmworkers working in the Robert F. Kennedy campaign in East Los Angeles for the California presidential primary. We were waiting for Bobby Kennedy to join us in a ballroom at the Ambassador Hotel after his victory speech. We stood stunned when the news came of the shooting and later of Kennedy's death. A dark pall of silence hung over the strikers for more than a week after that.

Looking back on the three years I spent as chaplain of the UFW, I am grateful for the enduring friendships that I made, the struggles I participated in, and the valuable lessons I learned in organizing. Cesar's gift was to make the workers realize that they could move mountains if they stuck together and strategized a way out of their dilemmas. It didn't matter if they lacked formal education. They could change their own lives and the lives of others through committed, disciplined organizing. I witnessed people like Eliseo Medina, Maria Salgado, Juan Flores, Marcos Munoz, and many others go out to the boycott and reach thousands of people, persuading them not to buy grapes. They organized students, housewives, senior citizens, priests, nuns, ministers, and rabbis. It was fascinating to see them move out of their small towns and expand their horizons through contacts with churches, the press, labor leaders, and politicians.

I also got a lot of satisfaction performing sacramental ministry to the workers: baptisms, marriages, funerals and, at times, personal counseling. Another thing I remember well are the liturgies we celebrated with the farmworkers, sometimes on a crude table, oftentimes in their homes, other times on a flatbed truck after a rally. I recall having a Pentecostal minister on one side of me and the Rev. Jim Drake of the United Church of Christ on the other. We all read from the scriptures and made comments afterwards. There was nobody from the local chancery office breathing down our necks, saying that what we were doing was not orthodox. The workers took to it. They knew instinctively that the struggle for justice, better wages, and working conditions had a religious dimension to it.

I also enjoyed the organizing work, editing the farmworker newspaper, *El Malcriado*, and helping out on the boycott in places like San Francisco, Toronto, and Chicago. Churches, unions, and progressive groups in those places became valuable allies. I am convinced that without church participation on every level, the union might not have won the struggle for representation. A key part of this was role played by a national committee of Catholic bishops who served as mediators when contracts were eventually signed with grape growers in 1970.

Ever since Pope Leo XIII wrote his encyclical letters on the rights of workers in the 1890s, the Catholic Church has developed a strong case for worker organization. It repeated this message in subsequent papal encyclicals right up to the present. The problem is that these teachings were never emphasized in the seminaries and most priests and bishops ignored them. There is a price to pay when the struggle for justice takes place, and few priests and ministers were willing to pay it. To this day I never cease to be amazed at how irrelevant the sermons are at the Catholic churches I attend. It seems as though the gospel is preached in some fairytale realm that has little, if anything, to do with reality.

Looking back on those years, I now realize that during my stay in Delano, profound changes in the church were taking place in Latin America, especially among the rural poor—the cousins, if you will, of farmworkers in the San Joaquin Valley. Father Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian theologian, had just published his book *A Theology of Liberation* in 1968. That same year the Latin American bishops had produced some revolutionary documents at their conference in Medellín, Colombia. These bishops were impressed by the changes of Vatican II, but they saw them only as a beginning. They believed the real challenge to the church was to confront the growing gap between the rich and the poor. They saw the accumulation of wealth as a result of institutionalized injustice and “structural sin.” They said that the first duty of every Christian was to help close the gap between the rich and the poor. They did not draw their inspiration from Karl Marx, but from the Old Testament prophets and the teachings of Christ. As a result of the courageous words and actions of these bishops, including Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador, a vast persecution of the church took place. Romero himself was assassinated, probably with the assistance of the CIA. Priests and nuns were slaughtered all over Latin America, and the Vatican was attempting to silence some of the leading theologians of liberation, including Fr. Gutierrez and the Franciscan Father Leonardo Boff of Brazil.

One of the hallmarks of liberation theology was that the people themselves were reflecting on the scriptures and attempting to change their lives through nonviolent organizing. The other feature was the formation of small base communities that received guidance from, but were not controlled by, the clergy. Liberation theology took root and created monumental changes in church and society, especially in Brazil, where there was a chronic shortage of priests.

In many ways we were practicing liberation theology in Delano in the late 1960s. The best example of this was the lesson Bishop Timothy Manning received from the farmworker women when he attempted to remove me from my work with the UFW. There were countless other examples as well. From the 1960s to this day, scores of priests, ministers, nuns, and laypeople have helped empower farmworkers not only in California, but throughout the country. On several occasions they were arrested on picket lines. Recently, two outstanding farmworker priests passed away from heart attacks—Fathers Joe Tobin in Whittier and Bill O'Donnell in Berkeley. Hopefully, other young priests will follow in their footsteps, though signs are not encouraging. The new breed of priests today seems to

prefer to be hidden behind what Martin Luther King called “the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.”

In 1970, after three years with the union, I decided to leave to go to graduate school in journalism. Eventually, my journey led me out of the Franciscan order and into the classroom as a community college professor in Los Angeles. In the early 1980s I spent four years as a reporter and editor with the *National Catholic Reporter*, and later as a freelance journalist and television producer in Peru until 1990. I kept in touch with the UFW through reading the newspaper and visiting with friends still working as organizers. It saddened me to hear about the internal problems the union was experiencing, especially the halt in organizing and the resignations and purges of some of its finest leaders. Along with the valuable lessons in organizing over the years, we also learned about the pitfalls and limits of charismatic and authoritarian leadership. I don't feel qualified to analyze the mistakes of the UFW, but I'm sure those who do are writing about it in the pages of this book.

Despite these failings, though, Cesar Chavez and his union broke the back of the open shop in agriculture, improved the lives of countless farmworkers, paved the way for nonviolent change, and formed numerous leaders who went on to do outstanding work in many fields, including law, education, labor organizing, and human rights advocacy. On the whole, the balance is quite positive, and not too many groups can brag about such incredible accomplishments. I was glad to contribute to that in a small way, but I got back much more than I gave.

Today I look around and see that the power of agribusiness and the neo-liberal model of economic development are as strong as ever. One of the founders of the UFW told me that things are worse than ever for farmworkers. In one sense, that may be the case, but without the rise of the UFW in the 1960s, things would be infinitely worse. Where I live in northern San Diego County, farmworkers from Oaxaca live in squalor. Every year they are evicted from their shanties in time for Christmas. Local groups from churches have been fighting these evictions and eventually forced the city of Carlsbad to provide a shelter for local strawberry and flower workers. The struggle continues. Some veteran farmworker volunteers have been involved in this fight, including Dorothy Johnson of the CRLA, Jim Guerra, and Alfredo Figueroa of Blythe. We hope the day will arrive when these workers can be organized into a union. Ironically, one of the strawberry growers is the Giumarra Fruit company, which signed contracts with the UFW in 1970.

Since the death of Cesar Chavez, memorials in his name have multiplied and include special events, schools, parks, avenues, clinics, libraries, and community centers. Cesar deserves these, but I think he would offer a strong caveat to those who think this is the best way to remember him. Many people who organize and participate in these activities would never be caught dead on a picket line. Nor do they understand that social change only comes about through struggle and sacrifice, not by networking at cocktail parties and attending committee meetings.

I think the best way to remember Cesar Chavez is to do what he did best: grassroots organizing, forming new leaders, and making big sacrifices. “Forget about the parks and bridges and community centers,” he would say. “Get off your butts and organize. That’s the best way to remember me.” To that I would say, Amen, and *Viva la Causa!*