

Essay-in-Progress

The Clerical Prophet of Dissent

Born in Arkansas, ordained a Roman Catholic priest for the Diocese of Little Rock, awarded a doctoral degree in theology from The Catholic University of America, completed post-doctoral studies in moral theology at Academia Alfonsiana in Rome before accepting an appointment as associate professor of theology at Mt. Angel College in Oregon. Who could have predicted this 37-year-old priest would assume the role of a prophet by publicly challenging the teaching magisterium of his church? Or who could have foreseen that this young activist theologian would play an important role in the history of the farmworker movement?

Joseph Henri Biltz and I were contemporaries; he was born in 1930 and I in 1934, but unfortunately, we did not meet until 2004, 17 years after he suffered a fatal heart attack while walking on the grounds at St. John's Seminary in Little Rock. Our eventual meeting was quite by accident.

Pouring over more than a thousand photographs relating to the farmworker Documentation Project, I saw the name BILTZ lettered on a farmworker picket sign underneath the pen and ink sketch of a man characterized by an oval-shaped face with black hair, bushy eyebrows, horn-rimmed glasses, and long sideburns. In another photo, a nun carried a picket sign that read FOR FATHER BILTZ. Finally came a photo of a man who looked like the portrait on the picket sign – the glasses and sideburns were the giveaway – this must be Father Biltz; he was dressed in a dark suit and tie and was speaking to an audience from behind a lectern. Who was this priest? Where did this event take place? What was the controversy? Why had the United Farm Workers organized a protest demonstration on his behalf? Why the suit and tie?

Even without the answers, I recognized his clerical prophetic role. Perhaps it was the way he presented himself to his audience, or the deferential respect his listeners paid him, or the look of determination on the faces of the farmworker volunteers as they marched with their picket signs in protest. Or it might have been the not-so-subtle anti-clerical statement he made by wearing a suit and tie instead of the customary Roman collar. Maybe it was

none of these, but the simple fact that if the farmworkers were marching in support of this priest, he must have publicly challenged the establishment by supporting their cause.

The photographs that introduced me to Father Biltz belonged to a colleague of mine, a former UFW volunteer, Nick Jones. Now retired and living on the Big Island, he had responded to my call for primary-source accounts and documents that related to Cesar Chavez and the farmworker movement by sending me more than 1,500 35-mm photographs. These photos were a personal chronicle of his volunteer work with the cause of the farmworkers, 1965-1975.

These photos were not professional quality, far from it, but they were historically important and absolutely critical to the success of my project because Nick had taken photos of strikers, strikebreakers, labor contractors, field workers, grape harvest work, police presence, union meetings, boycott picket lines, marches and demonstrations, farmworker rallies, volunteers, staff meetings, union field offices and boycott houses, religious services, Cesar Chavez, and many other subjects related to his day-to-day decade-long work. For the most part, thanks to my own involvement during that era, I had little trouble identifying the year, the place, the subject matter, and many of the people shown in the photographs, but the series about Father Biltz had left me puzzled and curious. I was determined to know more about him.

Googling FATHER BILTZ led me to the Website of the Arkansas Butler Center Manuscript Collection and a seven-page listing of the archival papers in the Rev. Joseph H. Biltz collection. Box 1 – Biographical Materials and Correspondence; Box 2 – Aging, Central and South America, Civil Rights, Crime and Punishment, Economic Justice, Handicapped, Health Care; Box 3- Labor Relations, Mt. Angel, Oregon, Office of Justice and Peace, Peace Movement, Refugees, Religion; Box 4 – Social Action/Social Justice, Women's Issues, Talks, Sermons and Prayers, Miscellaneous Programs, Brochures and Mementos, Photographs; Box 5 – Publications on Economic Justice; Box 6 – Books and Quarterlies; Box 7 – Oversize; Box 8 – Audio Cassettes (28 items).

I knew it! Inside these eight boxes, which had been gathering dust for 17 years, I would find a goldmine of primary-source materials, which had

belonged to a modern-day Catholic theologian who, because he had publicly challenged the leadership of the hierarchy of the church about their lack of support for the cause of farmworkers, civil rights, and other social justice issues, had been censured and removed from his theological teaching post at Mt. Angel College by Archbishop Robert Dwyer of Portland, Oregon. I couldn't believe my good fortune; even from such a distance, I felt honored to meet this clerical prophet.

The decade of the 1960's was a time of change, empowerment, expectation, and hope – the peace movement, civil rights movement, farmworker movement, free speech movement, women's movement, and the start of the anti-war movement. People, especially young people, felt they could make a difference. No, more than that, they thought they could change the world, and countless numbers dedicated themselves to that purpose.

The Catholic Church, too, was caught up in its own movement for change: Vatican Council II. Pope John XXIII likened the change needed to that of opening a window to let the light and the fresh air into a church mired in the scrupulosity of the law and the benign neglect of social justice for the poor. Yes, the window opened, but only part-way. The high hopes and expectations, especially of priests, religious nuns, and brothers worldwide – the role and aspirations of church laity were not much more than a theoretical consideration – were raised to feverish levels, only to be doused with the cold water of papal authority bolstered by the claim of infallibility – what the pope teaches cannot be in error. It is true, Vatican Council II promoted some changes in the church, especially in the public celebration and the performance of liturgy (native tongue would be used instead of Latin, and increased vocal participation from those in attendance was to be promoted); some deference was paid to the social injustice of the world's poor (a relatively innocuous statement, “preferential treatment of the poor,” was the strongest moral statement on the subject); and there were some modifications of minor moral prescripts such as “no fish on Friday” and fasting for Lent. But the major doctrinal and policy issues of the century were left basically unchanged and unruffled: the teaching collegiality of the bishops versus the unilateral and regressive policies which emanated from the teaching magisterium of the papacy; the emphasis on regulating, controlling, and punishing human sexuality, especially the issue of birth control; the status of marriage, including the role of divorce; the definition of the church itself; the

role of celibacy in the priesthood; and church teaching about economic and political systems that resulted in systemic social injustice and enslaved hundreds of millions of people. Such matters were not seriously debated, discussed, and resolved in council sessions. The light and fresh air streaming though Pope John XXIII's open window would be soon snuffed out by the politics and the authority of the church establishment.

In the mid-1960's, as a response to the many inadequacies of Vatican Council II, there followed a large defection of priests, religious nuns, and brothers from the church that would last almost 15 years. New vocations to the priesthood would fall to historic lows, and religious orders depleted because of the lack of new recruits would be left to wither and die a natural death when their remaining members were laid to rest. Many professed religious, including priests, felt called by the challenge of the 1960's to change the world and to make a difference, but when expectations about Vatican II were never close to being realized, it became evident by the end of the decade that the teaching magisterium of the church would continue its policies of non-engagement with the movements of the world.

In the decade of the 1960's Father Joseph Biltz became an unbridled and full-throttled activist both within the more narrow confines of his church and in the trenches of the social justice movements. Within the Catholic diocesan church of Arkansas, Father Biltz played the role of a traditional, middle-class social activist, with emphasis placed on meetings, dialogue, and moral exhortation. He was appointed dean of students and head of the theology department for the seminary, where he became a popular teacher, especially in courses relating to the principles of social justice. He also served as a member of the steering committee for the Little Rock Conference on Religion and Race and was an active representative of his church in the Little Rock Diocesan Ecumenical Commission, the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, and the Little Rock Catholic Interracial Council.

But he was equally comfortable in getting his hands dirty. Even though born and raised in the South – or was it perhaps because – he actively participated in the civil rights movement. He marched with Martin Luther King, he attended movement conventions and workshops, he lectured and preached publicly about civil rights, he rallied support among the clergy for the civil rights movement, and he harbored and stood with black families who risked

their lives by moving into all-white neighborhoods of Little Rock. In 1967, after he was appointed professor of theology at Mt. Angel College, Oregon, he took up the cause of the striking farmworkers and their grape boycott. He demonstrated and picketed at supermarkets with United Farm Worker boycott volunteers, he said mass for the striking farmworkers and their supporters, he lectured and preached about the rights of farmworkers to strike and boycott for the sake of collective bargaining, and he sponsored on-campus public forums for representatives of the United Farm Workers to enlist others in their cause. Father Biltz was one of those rare religious leaders who felt comfortable in both arenas: the more traditional church role of go-slow educational versus the active and direct confrontation of the picket line, the store boycott, and publicly showing personal solidarity with those fighting for equality and justice.

In 1968, another dimension to Father Biltz's life began to manifest itself – the role of prophet. During Vatican II in the early 60's, he had been assigned to the Redemptorist university in Rome for post-doctoral studies in moral theology, and his presence in Rome gave him the opportunity to meet theologians from every country and culture. Like other church representatives, official and unofficial, who were gathered for the historical conclave, he participated in the after-hour debates and gossip about the major issues confronting the church: the role of bishops and the papacy, human sexuality, the moral leadership of the church in the world, clerical celibacy, liberation theology, and so forth. Those two years at the Vatican were filled to overflowing with the expectation and promise of change; this young, 33-year-old priest and theologian found himself on the cutting edge of church history. By 1968, viewed from his teaching post in Oregon, working under the jurisdiction of one of the most conservative Catholic archbishops in the United States, he realized that whatever changes might have come about because of Vatican II were mostly cosmetic, not doctrinal. He observed firsthand and spoke publicly about the grand exodus of professed church clergy and religious because of their disappointment and feelings of helplessness. Father Joseph Biltz understood very well the reasons for the defections, and he empathized with those who made this choice, but for his part, he had made another choice: he would remain in the church, both as priest and theologian, expressly for the purpose of challenging the teaching magisterium of his church. On February 4, 1969, Father Joseph Biltz delivered a public lecture at Mt. Angel College entitled "Dissent in the Church." By

speaking out publicly, he put on the mantle of a prophet, and for this act he would pay dearly.