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“TEACHING THROUGH MINISTRY”

Ministry to Farm Workers: Experiences in Advocacy

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I

I put out my hand to receive a UFW banner and join the march of about 60 to 70 pickets. Farm workers and supporters were walking single file on the north side of half of the dirt road going through the grape fields of one of the ranches which the Teamsters were claiming. On this very hot early morning of May 18, 1973, in the California Coachella Valley, lines were drawn; confrontation was in process. The thin rectangle of people walking stretched about five hundred feet between two banner-carrying farm workers. It was especially good to greet and see other priests and sisters with farm workers and supporters as the living lines revolved, singing and chanting, “Chavez Si! Teamsters No!” and other slogans and songs.

Things shortly got hot. One large man with a white T-shirt bearing the blue label of the Teamsters Union chided that I was supposed to be for *all* the people. He demanded that I talk to the people in the fields now, and challenged the others: “How many of you worked in the fields here?” Several of the farm workers signified that they had come out of those very fields. Tension was high and the temptation to violence great. The large, blond teamster organizer taunted us across the way. Monitors on this side tried to keep the chanting and walking orderly and in line, but on a few occasions the line came close to moving in anger across the middle of the road. “Ha, they are nonviolent!” mocked the teamster.

I alternated between fear and confidence and felt the two emotions simultaneously: fear that the ideological, political-economic, jurisdictional, legal-moral conflict would erupt into a confrontation beyond words. The confidence came with the presence of the clergy as witness to nonviolence, and with the strong discipline of leaders and monitors well schooled in the powerful tool (philosophy-tactic) of nonviolence. In the later morning, Cesar came to join the line and his words and actions gave us further strength: gentleness and toughness in the stress of confrontation.

II

Because of the struggle of the United Farm Workers Union in the fields of California and the boycott cities of this nation, there is emerging among poor people in general and Mexican farm workers in particular a new consciousness that *Si, se puede!* They can be

masters of their own destiny and bring about a change in those socioeconomic and political structures which hold them in bondage.

Migrant families are among the 198,000 Mexican-American and Indian farm workers who flow in and through 47 states following one of the three main streams of migration in search of employment. In their jobs, the accident rate is three times higher than in jobs of the rest of the population. Pesticides and other factors make the incidence of the respiratory and digestive maladies among farm workers three times higher than for other people. Federal per capita medical expense for the average American citizen is \$200 which contrasts with the \$7.50 per migrant for medical care and consultation. With as many pounds overweight as he has years, a typical 35-year-old farm worker is technically starving. With his 11 cents per day spent for food, he has milk two or three times a month, green or yellow vegetables eight times a month, and meat on an average of two times a month. In spite of healthy looks and relatively young age, he will very likely be dead within 10 years. Migrant average life expectancy is 46 years.

Last July I had the good fortune to follow the migrant stream from "El Valle" in south Texas to an area about 30 miles north of Madison, Wisconsin. I visited with some of the migrant families and spoke with the team of priests, sisters, seminarians, and lay people who were working with the migrants during the summer. Let me paint for you in broad strokes the picture of a typical young migrant whom we will call Pedro. He is a 17-year-old native of Monterrey, Mexico, who was invited by his sister and brother-in-law to accompany them for summer work. The family, living in Weslaco, Texas, was going to Illinois with their three children in search of employment. From there, they would go to Lake Mills where they would join six other families also from Weslaco; some were cousins and aunts and uncles. All together they would be working on the sod farms, and taking care of the mint, potatoes and carrots. Some of Pedro's cousins would be in the canning factory and not in the fields.

Pedro's nieces and nephews range from the ages of two to five. Sometimes he or one of his cousins watches them while their parents work in the fields, and sometimes no one watches them, Pedro's cousins with him in the fields range from nine to 18. The younger ones had to leave school in Texas a month before the school year ended because the migration begins in April. They leave school early and will not return to Weslaco until a month after school has resumed. Some of their friends in Brownsville have been lucky enough to go to a special migrant school which honors this time schedule. None of Pedro's teenage cousins who have been in the migrant stream went to school after the sixth grade, but he got to finish *colegio* in Mexico.

The field workers usually work nine to 13 hours daily, and this last summer they worked even longer hours in an effort to make up for the late start. Unusually wet weather put back the normal time for picking the carrots and potatoes. Pedro does not speak English, but there does not seem to be much need of it since almost all around him are Mexican immigrant workers who also speak Spanish. The dropout, or better "push out" rate of the

migrant child is twice as high as the national average. Ninety percent of migrant adults reach only the fourth- or fifth-grade level of formal education. Before dropping out altogether, Pedro's teenage cousins often did not go to school because they did not feel well or because they had to help out with other work. Nutritional deficiencies are a real factor in poor school attendance. The lack of vitamin *A* is greater among migrant children than that of the 10 most developed nations combined.

Pedro's aunt is called "Panchita" by her husband, but Pedro respectfully calls her *Tia Francisca*. He likes to visit her and just talk. She was telling Pedro one day that she is getting tired. "Fifteen years coming and going; *ni tengo casa aqui ni alla, y todavia me duele mucho esta pierna.*" The anonymity of being rootless and somewhat lost is weighing heavily on her, as is the pain of her leg broken two years ago, and never properly taken care of. Panchita, even if she wanted to and was feeling all right, probably will not be returning. She has noticed that the Lake Mills population was less than the previous year's. Some stayed in Welasco, others returned to Mexico, and others went to the large cities. The potato-picking machine is doing the job now faster and cheaper than she was doing. Technology, automation and mechanization are steadily and quickly replacing the farm worker who has begun to outlive his/her usefulness after 74 years of working to feed the people of this country. There is talk that only the men will be allowed to return to the camp next year because it costs too much to house and feed families, although the net income of agribusiness is steadily growing. The temporary structure of the migrant stream is strongly contrasted with the stable future of agribusiness.

III

At first glance, the situation of the migrant worker seems clearly to be a rural problem. However, many of the injustices of which he is a victim have their solution or at least their source in the cities. This is where important decisions are made and where political and economic power of agribusiness is focused. My own experience as a priest of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and then later as the executive director of PADRES and a board member of the National Farm Worker Ministry, bears out the fact that migrant ministry is carried on as much in the cities as in the fields.

In 1965, while on my first parish assignment in a very large Mexican-American parish in East Los Angeles, and during the height of the black civil rights movement, I was challenged by a friend to "Go to Delano." The challenger was Father William DuBay, a somewhat prophetic and highly controversial young priest who was an intellectual and social activist. He proceeded to inform me about the struggle of the farm workers to form their own union, and told me about the leadership of Cesar Chavez. The headquarters of the fledgling movement was in the little town of Delano in central California. After the conversation, I returned to my parish where I continued in traditional, but very intense, parish ministry. After about a year in my second parish in Santa Barbara, I was invited to San Jose, California, for a Catholic church meeting which was going to direct itself to needs of the Spanish-speaking people on state and national levels. It was mostly priests who

were present for this meeting at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, but some laymen were also there-among them Cesar Chavez.

This was the first time I had met Cesar, and was greatly impressed with his style, firmness, soft-spoken manner, and the way he very directly challenged church people to be present in the struggle of the farm worker. He chided us for our noninvolvement, and he held up to us the efforts of the Protestant Church as an example and model. The California Migrant Ministry, predominantly a Protestant organization, had been in the forefront of church support in the farm workers' struggle for justice, although most farm workers are Catholic at least by culture. About six months later, I met Chavez again, and this time at the Franciscan seminary in Santa Barbara where he was recuperating from his 25-day fast. He had undertaken this fast as a sacred discipline for himself, to affirm his own commitment to nonviolence, and to be an example to his fellow *campesinos*. It was by no means a show, but a genuinely religious act.

Shortly afterwards, I heard the Rev. Wayne C. Hartmire speak to the Franciscan seminarians. He spoke in a very interesting way about what he called "priest-workers." From my own seminary reading, I recalled the priest-worker movement as it existed in both France and Germany, and which tried to reach the masses of working people in Europe who had been alienated from the Church. Upon listening to Rev. Hartmire, I thought how ironic it was that priest-workers in the United States were neither priests in our usual understanding nor were they even Catholics. They were Protestant ministers who took seriously the challenge of the Gospel, and patterned much of their own life and ministry after the "noble experiment" of the priest-worker movement.

Later, I was to come to know Chris Hartmire well and respect him much. He is the director of what is now the National Farm Worker Ministry which grew out of the California Migrant Ministry. While in Santa Barbara, my most direct involvement remained supporting the grape boycott and trying to help raise funds for the farm workers. By 1970, I was in an affluent parish of north Orange County where only 20 percent of the population was Spanish-speaking. Nevertheless my involvement with Hispanic ministry in general and the farm-worker ministry in particular deepened.

I mysteriously received an invitation to the Episcopal ordination of Patrick Flores in San Antonio, Texas, on May 5, 1970. I was very happy to make arrangements to be present for that wonderful occasion which began my association with PADRES. From its beginning four years ago, PADRES has not been only a supporter of the farm-worker movement toward justice through self-determination, but also an advocate for *la causa*. On the part of the PADRES, there has been deep concern because of the *campesinos'* humanity, their Catholic religion and Mexican heritage. Several of the PADRES, including Bishop Flores, were themselves, together with their parents, migrant farm workers. Bishop Flores came to southern California in December, 1970, for the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In a previous visit to the West Coast, in August, he had wanted to visit with Cesar Chavez, but did not have the opportunity. This time Cesar was in jail, having

knowingly and willfully broken an injunction which he deemed immoral and which was later declared illegal. After arrangements were made, four PADRES accompanied Bishop Flores to visit Cesar in jail. Three of us remained two days in order to take part with the people who were keeping a 24-hour vigil outside the jail in San Jose. Daily evening Mass took place there, and we had the opportunity to share in some of those very meaningful pre-Christmas celebrations.

After this I became much more directly involved in the ecumenical dimensions of the farm-worker ministry. I was asked to work with the Interfaith Committee to Aid Farm Workers. Most large cities have such a committee, and the one in Los Angeles had been particularly active. The role of this committee is not only to be a mediator between the interests of agribusiness and those of union organizers, but to serve as advocates for farm workers in their working toward justice. It is no longer sufficient for Church people to try to straddle a middle course, but it is necessary to advance the concrete application of the principles of justice.

As a member of this committee, I joined members of other faith communities in the visitation of managers of various chain stores. We did this when full-time workers for the union were refused an appointment. The purpose of these meetings was to appeal to the moral consciousness of store managers, and to try to point out to them that their responsibility was great than narrow fidelity to the axiom of "The best product for the lowest prices." We spoke of the impact that they could have in helping to bring justice for those who produced the food in addition to being concerned for the customer and their own profits.

In the spring and summer of 1970, the grape boycott was at its height. It was making great headway in most of the large cities throughout the country, but was far below par in Los Angeles. L.A. had been considered "unorganizable" and a nightmare for anyone who tried. LeRoy Chatfield, a former Christian Brother from Bakersfield, California, was one of Cesar Chavez' principal organizers. He was asked by Cesar to see what he could do with Los Angeles. The Jesuit priests in Hollywood were sponsoring a series of adult education lectures, and had invited Bishop Hugh Donohoe of Fresno to be one of their principal speakers. Bishop Donohoe had taught sociology and the social teachings of the Church as a seminary professor some years back, and was currently on the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Farm Labor. His topic was, "The Church and Farm Labor." I felt moved to promote that particular lecture and invited many fellow priests to come and remain for a meeting with LeRoy Chatfield right afterward. A concrete result of the meeting with LeRoy was the appearance of a paid advertisement (we did not get a clergy discount) in the archdiocesan newspaper, *The Tidings*. The advertisement affirmed the right of workers to join a union of their choice, the right to strike, and endorsed the grape boycott of the United Farm Workers Union. It was signed by over 80 priests of the archdiocese.

Within the parish, I was able to encourage some people to actively engage in support of the boycott. On a few occasions, I leafleted in front of stores myself, but felt uncomfortable in

doing so. Some parishioners who were unhappy with this and related activity complained that I was “neglecting their spiritual welfare” which was a translation of their opposition to my involvement with the farm-worker struggle.

Through PADRES’ membership in the National Farm Worker Ministry, I have had several opportunities to meet with Cesar Chavez. The NWFWM had its board meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1972, in order to focus on a recent Arizona law which was aimed to destroy the effectiveness of the lettuce boycott. To protest this and the many other unjust aspects of this “law,” Cesar Chavez chose to undergo another long fast. A repressive law which would curtail the boycott is obviously geared to emasculate the only nonviolent tool that farm workers have for building up and organizing their own union. With broad support from many people of the community, the farm workers initiated a recall of the governor of the state. The political complexion of Arizona will never be the same.

Agribusiness interests in California followed the poor example of Arizona and put an initiative on the ballot for November 1972, called Proposition 22, which would have repressive effects similar to the law of Arizona. The “No on 22” campaign was initiated by a press conference at the Placita, Mexican national parish in the heart of Los Angeles, at the end of the summer. An ecumenical Hispanic group charged that the proponents of Proposition 22 were engaging in fraud. Another tactic which proved effective was the Interfaith Committee’s visiting the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. The committee asked for, and later received, a newspaper editorial calling for the defeat of Proposition 22. The 52 percent NO vote on Proposition 22 bespeaks the hard work of the farm workers and the good organizing of all involved. A significant amount of credit goes to the church people, including the Los Angeles Priests Senate Subcommittee on Farm Labor.

A year ago last April, 30 religious leaders from across the country were asked to take an informal survey of farm workers in the Coachella Valley. I represented Bishop Flores in this effort to get a pulse of the wishes of the workers themselves. In teams of two or three, almost one thousand workers were interviewed by the clergymen of various denominations. In the course of the day, this question was asked: “Which union do you prefer: UFW, Teamsters, or no union?” Our informal survey revealed that 795 workers in the field preferred the UFW, 80 the Teamsters, and 78 no union. In spite of the evident will of the workers, once again agribusiness interests made contracts with the Teamsters.

Last August in Fresno, this tension with the Teamsters finally broke out in violence which had been threatening for five months. An injunction had forbidden picketers to come closer than one hundred feet to each other, and had forbidden the use of the bullhorn on the picket line for more than one hour. These kinds of restrictions would severely hamper the effectiveness of the picket line. Similar injunctions had already been declared illegal in the Coachella area because they were contrary to the freedoms of speech and assembly. On July 31, the feast of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuits were having a large retreat in San Francisco at which were present priests and sisters from all over the country. They decided to observe the feast of St. Ignatius by lending their bodies in support to the picket line in

the Fresno area at the risk of being arrested for challenging the morality of the injunction through civil disobedience. A total of 60 clergy and religious, men and women, Catholic and Protestant, were to join 3,000 striking farm workers and their supporters in jail.

I had just returned from Puerto Rico where I had been participating in a symposium on Hispanic ministry. Upon learning of what was taking place in Fresno, I contacted Chris Hartmire who asked me to notify other priests of the events and encourage them to come. The only one who was ready and willing to accompany me was Father Raul Luna who had recently returned from a five-month pastoral institute in Latin America, and is now working with the Mexican American Cultural Center and with PADRES. We drove from Los Angeles to Fresno where we stayed overnight with one of our fellow PADRES. Early the next morning we drove to Parlier Park where a rally was held with Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day, together with many *campesinos*, priests, sisters and ministers from all over the country. In his powerful and quiet way, Cesar can truly move a crowd. He was honest, tough and straightforward as he spoke of the importance of unity, union and nonviolence. He underscored the importance of asserting our rights here in Fresno where freedom of assembly and speech is unconstitutionally denied by an unjust injunction. He also asked: "What are you going to say when our children and grandchildren ask you, 'Were you on that strike?' and 'Did you go to jail?'"

When I joined the picket line on the morning of August 2, the line captains were very careful that we remain on public (state) property – from telephone post to telephone post outward toward the street – and that we not trespass the private property of the grower. The line itself was well ordered and disciplined, although noisy: *Huelga! Vengan companeros! Esquiroles! Chavez si, Teamsters no!* The point of the pickets and gathering was precisely to challenge the injunction which was calculated to diminish the effectiveness of the strike.

Shortly after we arrived, two large gray line busses, empty except for the driver, came and waited. A Spanish-surnamed sheriff's officer said he spoke in the name of the people of California, and through his efficient mobile loud-speaker system informed us that we were "An unlawful assembly!" One of my fellow inmates, a young Chicano who would like to study law, had a penal code book with him. In the evening upon the visit of a UFW lawyer he showed me the definition of "unlawful assembly" which included "riot" and other things which did not apply. The legal system can be effectively used to thwart the organizing efforts of the farm workers by hampering their right to free assembly and free speech through this kind of illegal, immoral and unconstitutional injunction. By nine o'clock that morning, most of us were arrested, and by 11 o'clock were booked and jailed. Our stay was unexpectedly prolonged for almost two weeks which became a time of prayer and literal fasting for many of us in order to cast out demons of injustice and oppression which are still the lot of many migrant farm workers in our land.

Migrant ministry involves trying to meet the religious and spiritual needs of those who work so hard to feed the people of this nation. Full service tries to meet in a specific way those important human needs which allow someone to be more a person. Advocacy of justice for farm workers through a prayerful strike and boycott is a significant ministry which affirms the human dignity of migrant farm workers.

At the most recent board meeting of the National Farm Worker Ministry, which recently took place at the headquarters of the United Farm Workers in Keene, California, representatives of major religious denominations were planning how to obtain the greatest support of the boycott from the constituents of their various faith communities. Last November in an unprecedented action, the American Bishops endorsed the boycott of non-UFW head lettuce until such times as secret ballot elections be held.

The nonviolent tool of the boycott can be very effective to change the oppressive situation in which the majority of farm workers live. Support of the boycott of non-UFW head lettuce, all table grapes and Gallo wine affirms the human dignity of farm workers in their struggle toward full and authentic liberation.

The Church has traditionally shown its interest and official pastoral concern for people who migrate, but rarely translated that into political action for the benefit of migrants. Policies which favor those economic interests which exploit human beings by treating them as cogs in the machine-pool of temporary cheap labor, only to be discarded when no longer useful, are directly against Gospel values of justice and the dignity of the human person.

It is time for the Church to boldly assert its prophetic mission on behalf of the poor and oppressed who in this country are largely migrants. The job is to support, help and push the autonomous organization of migrants that they may achieve self-determination and truly become subjects of their proper destiny.

It is not sufficient to denounce the unjust injunctions forbidding lawful strikes and pickets, inequities in migrant school systems and inadequate migrant health care. The Church must affirmatively announce the way to full and authentic liberation which will come through effective organization. The Church's ministry to farm workers must include her moral support in their struggle, contributions of resources in money and manpower, and advocacy among those people who have the power to change our society into one much more just.