

Juan Romero, “UFW Civil Disobedience Campaign” 1973

A massive Civil Disobedience Campaign led by the United Farm Workers Union resulted in the arrest of between 3,000 and 2,500 striker farm workers and supporters, including 60 priests, nuns and religious brothers. Among those were Juan Romero, Director of PADRES. The following are Juan’s personal accounts of his imprisonment and release.

August 3, 1973 - 2:00 PM Fresno County Industrial Farm, Caruthers, CA 93609.

“I have been under arrest for 19 hours and just moved into new quarters – our third move. The spirit is high, and very beautiful strong, and confirmed in our direction and action.

When I joined the picket line yesterday morning, the line captains were very careful that we remained on public (state) property – from telephone post to telephone post outward toward the street – and that we do not trespass the property of the grower.

The line itself was well ordered and disciplined although “noisy”: HUELGA! VENGAN COMPANEROS – ESQUIROLES! CHAVEZ SI, TEAMSTERS NO!, etc.

The point of the pickets and gathering was precisely to challenge the injunction which is calculated to diminish the effectiveness of the strike.

Let me go over a little more chronologically the sequence of events:

1. Arrived from Puerto Rico enriched from the experience but frankly a little bored from eight days in the lush paradise of the flamboyant and coqui. It was a good time for reflection and prayer, but a little too disconnected to the reality I live. Dad picked me up Tuesday afternoon (July 31st) and took me to his seminary in Compton where I spent the evening.

2. Wednesday morning I heard about the arrests of the priests and nuns in Fresno, and called the L.A. UFW headquarters. The people who answered were happy and surprised to hear from me. They gave me a run down of the situation and asked me to mobilize people (priests and sisters) to go up to Fresno and/or send telegrams to the judge and sheriff who had the farmworkers, priests and nuns in jail.

That was the end of my leisure vacation with Dad before Las Hermanas meeting.

3. Spent much of Wednesday afternoon contacting people about the situation and urging telegrams, and preparing to come up to Fresno.

4. Contacted some sisters but didn’t get any to come with me. Only one priest – Ralph Luna – was interested, willing and able come up. We borrowed a car from St. Linus parish, and left L.A. about 8 p.m.

5. About 11:30 we arrived at St. John's cathedral in Fresno where one of our PADRES, John Esquivel lives. Earlier in the day he and Enrique (Abe) Lopez had visited the jail full of farmworkers, priests and sisters, and left with them a Spanish hymn book, which I had envied during my last visit in May.

John gave us a map and pointed out Parlier where the 5 AM rally was to take place at the park. We got up at 4:15.

6. It was a dark early morning ride to Manning Street in Parlier where the park is. Upon arriving we saw five sheriff cars before we saw any farmworkers.

7. In our borrowed, large blue station wagon, we parked next to a car in the parking lot in which were two local girls – young chicana women – from Parlier.

8. Shortly afterward Sister Pearl came by and introduced herself. She took our names and that of “next of kin” who should be contacted upon arrest. She is a nurse for UFW in charge of their clinics.

9. We saw Chris Hartmire and he was happy to see me and Ralph. He mentioned that Dorothy Day was present and that was a beautiful and pleasant surprise! She had been present since the day before.

10. Chris asked me to “MC” the morning rally, which I was very happy to do.

Towards the end of the Rally, Cesar Chavez arrived.

In his powerful and quiet way, Cesar can truly move a crowd. He is honest, tough, and straightforward. He spoke of the importance of unity and UNION, non-violence, giving it fight and spirit if they wished but in a non-violent manner putting Fresno on the map – asking for political recall of the judge and sheriff. He outlined the importance of asserting our rights here in Fresno where assembly and speech is unconstitutionally denied by unjust injunctions. He also asked: “What are you going to say when your children and grandchildren ask you were you on that strike; did you go to jail?”

By then, the hundred people or so, were ready to go to the picket line. Our car keys were collected and Ralph and I joined a car which contained a young Jesuit priest who is a new pastor at a parish in Spokane, a chicana Sister of St. Joseph of Orange, a farmworker Health Organizer (male nurse and clinic director), and Dorothy Day. In the car as she reminded me of Simeon – “I am so happy to have lived to see this day!” In her 78 years, she has always been a champion of the poor, living with them in a deeply Christian evangelical style of life. She was plugged-in to some of the early organizing efforts of farmworkers which failed here in California during the 30's. She has been in jail ten times, and on several long fasts in the path of non-violent, although sometimes “anarchical”

search for justice. The first time she went to jail, she was the youngest of the group – this time she is the oldest!

Dorothy had carefully brought her own portable chair, and sat at one end of our picket line. She was reading the New Testament (Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 5) while the rest of us chanted, cheered and invited: HUELGA, VIVA CHAVEZ, ABAJO LOST TEAMSTERS, VENGAN CON NOSOTROS!

We were in our places for a while and then began to walk in our orderly long rectangle, carefully keeping out of the private property. Dorothy had the day before, promised to return and read the New Testament to the sheriff's, but they were too far away this day!

Shortly after we arrived two large grey line busses, empty except for the driver, came and waited. A Spanish surnamed sheriff officer said he spoke in the name of the people of California, and through his efficient mobile loudspeaker system informed us that we were “AN UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY!” He did not explain why we were unlawful, just declared our gathering such!!! One of my fellow inmates, a young chicano who would like to study law, had a penal code book with him, and in the evening upon the visit of a UFW lawyer, showed me the definition of “unlawful assembly” – designated as “riot” and other things, which did not apply!

The arresting officers were super nice, which is a contrast to the style of previous arrests. They just loaded one large bus with the women, and the other with the men. The farmworkers were asked to put their hands up on the bus while they were searched. It's a scene I have often seen in East L.A., especially during the days of the Chicano Moratorium in August 1970.

When I came by, the officer kindly asked me if I had any knives or weapons. I wagged head in the negative and was asked to go into the bus. I didn't want clerical privilege so I just got in the line again. Another sheriff asked if I had been searched, and I responded, “not really” so, he, embarrassed a little, cursorily went through the motions.

We were first taken to the Industrial Farm where we arrived about 11:00 AM. We began our journey about 9:30 AM. The quarters were comfortable enough, bunk beds in a dormitory. It looked like an army camp. Before getting in, however, WE WERE BOOKED. The sheriffs seemed unorganized, obviously not used to such large mass arrests at one time.

We were herded into an auditorium-like room where waited a short time. Soon we were given a false start and asked to go into the next large room, and then told: ‘not yet!’ Finally we did go into the next room where the booking process was going on.

1. information sheet filled out and signed (or refused)
2. picture taken and numbered (MUG)

3. thumb prints taken

Upon reading the form which a courteous sheriff man filled out, I commented on the box "MEXICAN" which he had checked. I explained to him that I was BORN IN THIS COUNTRY, as were my parents, grandparents and ancestors for close to FIVE CENTURIES. I asked to be identified as "CHICANO" which I AFFIRM WITH PRIDE: LA RAZA NUEVA que se esta desarrollando.

During our bookings, the women arrived for the same procedure. They were warmly cheered – especially when Dorothy Day entered. After the bookings at the Industrial Farm, we were transferred on another bus to the Fair Grounds.

At our "home" we had one large room – bigger than a large auditorium. No beds, just mattresses on the floor. The men prisoners who had been arrested on the picket lines the day before had been at the Fresno County Jail and had just come back from their arraignment in court. It was a good feeling to be with a group of people which included about 25 priests among the 250 men.

WE LATER RECEIVED THE GOOD NEWS THAT CESAR WOULD COME WITH TWO PRIESTS TO VISIT US AT 9:30 a.m. Just that good news perked up the whole group. However, Cesar was detained with a telephone conversation with George Meany.

The jail authorities wanted to move us to another facility before Cesar came, but the common decision of the men was to stay there at the Fair Grounds (temporarily converted to a jail – no beds or shower facilities) until Cesar came. He finally did, AND IT WAS A GREAT JOY! He was accompanied by John Coffield and Chris Hartmire. CESAR SPOKE MOVINGLY, APPRECIATIVELY, AND GAVE SOME GOOD NEWS:

1. The whole world is watching, and there is great support!
2. Teamsters look like they want to back out!
3. George Meany is marshalling greater support!

From the Fair Grounds, some were taken back to County jail, and the rest of us to the Juvenile Hall (Youth Center of Fresno). Here there are showers and I'M GOING TO INDULGE RIGHT NOW: 7 p.m.

About an hour ago at the six o'clock news in Spanish, a good 10 minutes was dedicated to what is happening to us and the whole situation. It was with evident pride that the farmworkers were hearing themselves talked about on television.

In about an hour and a half we will celebrate the Liturgy. PADRES JOHN ESQUIVEL AND ENRIQUE LOPEZ of Fresno (John and Abe were with us in L.A. in October 1971 and Abe was with us in RUCSON in 1973. Father Woodruff who was at MACC 5 weeks this summer came here to visit us about 4:30. John returned later with the paraphernalia for the liturgy.

IT WILL BEA TIME TO CELEBRATE, PRAISE, THANK, FOR STRENGTH,
HEALTH, PERSEVERANCE, and VICTORY in the struggle – a FULLER SHARE IN
THE PASCHAL MYSTERY.

VIVA LA HUELGA
VIVA CESAR CHAVEZ
VIVAN LOS COMPEBINOS
VIVA LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE.

LOVE,

Fr. Juan

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