

The Confessions
Of the Tortilla Priest

Victor Salandini

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To my beloved parents, John and Giovanna Salandini

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Foreword: Steve Allen

Even the casual student of social history eventually wonders how long the same story will have to be told, over how many centuries, in which a brave reformer, acting either lone or with a relatively small group, speaks out in opposition to segments of society that, for purely selfish reasons, subjugate the poor and powerless. On precisely such subject matter, hundreds of stories, books, essays, editorials, documentaries, films and television dramas have been based. In some of these, the underdog finally triumphs, though never without a long, exhausting struggle. In other instances, the social critic goes to his or her own grave before the scales of justice are more reasonably balanced. And, in other instances, alas, history has not as yet seen a final resolution that would satisfy the saints./ Such a reformer, to get to the point, is Father Victor Salandini.

In the context of the struggle for social justice for America's farm workers, Father Victor's name is not nearly as well known as that of the courageous leader of the United Farm Workers Union, Cesar Chavez, but it might be of some slight comfort to the priest that he has not been subjected to nearly as much criticism as has fallen on Chavez.

Being personally the product of a lower middle-class Catholic background, I am perhaps something of a relic of a day when, at least in the Catholic community, the words and works of priests were accorded a certain degree of respect. This is not to argue that the clergy, of any faith, are or ought to be immune from criticism. Both their personal lives and their political and social views are as properly the object of critical analysis as those of any other citizens. But it initially came as a shock to me, nevertheless, to notice — as I first did in the 1960s — that the degree of contempt heaped upon the liberal clergy, almost invariably by their fellow Christians, was far more extreme than it had been 30 years earlier. This ugly reality first impressed itself not only on my own, but on the national consciousness in the context of such public dramas as civil rights marches in which, along with Protestant and Jewish clergymen, many nuns and priests took up their posts in picket lines and protest demonstrations, appealing for no politically radical solutions whatever but simply speaking up for that minimum of social justice that one might even expect for animals. But for making even such modest demands and — well, actually, for exposing the ugliness of the systems of exploitation, privilege and cruelty that for centuries have kept the powerless subject to their masters — they were treated with the sort of both private and public scorn that might make an observer wince even if the victims were convicted criminals.

Civil rights marches through overwhelmingly Catholic neighborhoods in the 1960s, for example, led to the shouting of obscenities at Catholic nuns and priests, not excluding the casting of vile sexual aspersions and the shouting of suggestions that if a white nun and a black man happened to be marching side-by-side, it was to be assumed that they were sexual partners. It is hardly surprising that such "Christian" crowds also threw the proverbial sticks and stones. The hurling of weapons, some of them capable of causing death, was only the last visible outbreak of a viciousness of mind that was the far greater sin. As one man sadly commented at the time, after a particularly vile attack at the hands of fellow Catholics, "It's sad to think how poorly we must have taught them."

I have known Father Victor since 1967, though I'd first heard of his help to farm workers two years earlier when he made the national news for supporting a tomato workers' strike in the border community of San Ysidro, California, near San Diego. I later made mention of this in my book *The Ground Is Our Table*. I had also read in Cesar Chavez's newspaper, *El Malcriado*, that Father Salandini was lobbying for Chavez' then fledgling new National Farm Workers Union (NFWA).

Father Salandini brings a unique background of experience to the writing of this book, that of trying to implement the Catholic Church's teachings on social justice during his more than 40 years as a priest. The purpose of his book is not to criticize the Church, but to explain his social gospel ministry in light of the mandates of the papal social encyclicals. One of the highlights of his ministry to the farm workers was the instance in which he was suspended (that is, his powers of the priesthood were taken from him by his Bishop). At that time, the courageous Dolores Huerta, the first vice-president of the United Farm Workers, said, "No other priest has ever lost his priestly powers because he helped the farm workers." To this day no other priest except Father Victor has been suspended for helping the United Farm Workers.

The tragedy of this highlight in Father Victor's life is that his suspension from the priesthood, in July, 1971, has only been rescinded in theory. It is true that it was removed after some two weeks, but, in reality, since 1971 Father Victor has never been given any responsibility in the Church. This is compounded by the fact that he has much to offer the Church, yet is placed on the back burner, so to speak, because he has had the courage to be a prophet in speaking out and trying to do something practical about farm worker problems in California.

At a time when vocations to the priesthood are dwindling, and few priests are prophetic, Father Victor's book can be an inspiration to America's youth, some of whom may see the priesthood not as a challenge but as just another job. Perhaps no other priest knows better what is going on in our public high schools. Since 1983 he has dealt with the problems of high school youths. Throughout the high schools of the San Diego area, Father Victor is known to thousands of young people. They are aware of his work with the farm workers, know that he went to jail with Cesar Chavez, and that he has been arrested several times. During the last eight years Father Victor has helped many students to find a purpose in life and to get off drugs and alcohol, having the same sort of influence with high schoolers as Mr. Escalante of Garfield High School in Los Angeles who received a great deal of publicity in the film *Stand and Deliver*.

All readers, whatever their bias, will be enlightened by Father Salandini's story. On the farms and fields of California, where for decades most of the back-breaking labor has been done by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, those who suffered were an almost totally Catholic constituency, a fact which accounted for literally nothing whatever so far as their continuing abuse at the hands of usually Christian employers was concerned. When the showdown came, it turned out that the enemies of the farm laborers were motivated by the idol they truly worshipped, the dollar sign. They were not in the least civilized by the other symbols, the crucifix, to which, on Sunday morning at least, a good many of them paid lip-service.

April 24, 1992

Foreword: Cesar Chavez

This is a book about Father Victor Salandini's exemplary priesthood, now in its 41st year. Before the beginning of the grape strike in September, 1965, when very few recognized our struggle for the farm workers of California, Father Victor was with us.

I first met Father Victor in August, 1965, about a month before the union I started, the National Farm Workers Association, (NFWA) went on strike in Delano in September, 1965. Brother Gilbert Chatfield, a Christian Brother, from Bakersfield, California, introduced Father to me. During a period of some two days in August, 1965, I sat down with Father Victor and related to him what the NFWA was trying to do. I explained to him the history of the union and I emphasized among many things that the union was more than just a union. I explained to Father Victor that the NFWA was a social movement that was attempting to give to all farm workers, not just Mexican farm workers, the power to better their lives by helping them to get better wages, better working conditions, housing and all the things necessary to live a decent life. I especially emphasized to Father that the union was organized by family units—father, mother and working-aged children were all members of the union.

The farm workers and I have always been amazed at his courage. He proved his courage in a very dramatic way when he went to jail in 1966 with me and ten farm workers. Father Victor was the first of very few priests to go to jail with me in the history of our union. This was the first time that a Catholic Priest stood up for the workers and was willing to go to jail so that they could be paid a decent wage and be provided decent living conditions.

Later, we were transferred to the lockup in San Diego. At the jail, we perceived the first sign that a most uncommon Priest walked among us. We were marched out of our cells to go to our first meal...the meal tables were placed in the center of a big communal room which served as the eating center for the jail inmates. We walked in with Fr. Victor in the lead. Instead of the usual noisy mess room we entered into a strangely silent room. All the prisoners waited silently standing against the walls. Not a drop of food had been eaten. They waited . . . They had heard that Father Victor, the first priest of the workers, was in jail. Upon our entrance, the prisoners began clapping in unison greeting Father Salandini. This was to be a day that would forever be etched in their minds. They sensed and knew that Father Victor was an uncommon man . . . one who walked with God.

On our August, 1965, visit Father Victor told me he was leaving in a few weeks to study for four years at Catholic University, Washington D.C., for a doctorate in labor economics. We needed someone to lobby for us in the nation's capitol. I gave Father Victor authorization to lobby for the NFWA.

Father Victor officially represented the NFWA for two years in Washington, D.C., from the fall of 1965 to the fall of 1967. Since Father had a heavy study schedule, from the fall of 1967 to June of 1969, he continued to help on a part-time basis by lobbying, picketing, and organizing in Washington, D.C. While in the Capitol he started the Washington D.C. Huelga Committee. He recruited for this committee many influential

people who helped to support the grape strike and boycott. Among them was a former leader of the United Auto Workers, Esteven Torres, who is presently a U.S. Congressman.

After his work in Washington D.C., Father joined the staff of the union full-time from June 1969 to June 1971, when he was research director of the union. During these two years, he worked in Delano, San Diego, and Escondido, California, Montreal and Toronto, Canada, New York City, Baltimore, Maryland, together with side trips to other cities and states.

During these two years Father Victor was threatened with arrest and harassed by police on picket lines in these various cities. Once, in Montreal, Canada, he was arrested by the Mounted Police because he was thought to be a member of a revolutionary group that was using violent means to overthrow the ruling government in the province.

Father Victor related to me that on one occasion in Montreal he was scheduled to speak at a Catholic University on the grape boycott. A few days before his scheduled talk he was informed that his talk was postponed to another day. A few days later the building where Father Victor was originally scheduled to speak was bombed on the very day his talk was originally scheduled. Fortunately, no one was in the building at that time.

After his two years full-time with the union, Father Victor became a university professor for eight years, then a high school teacher for nine years. During this time Father Victor continued to help us.

During the past two years, Father Victor has been teaching full-time as well as involved with our union. He hopes that when he retires at the end of the year, he will be able to devote time to the union.

Father Victor Salandini may not be popular with Bishops, but to thousands of farm workers, especially Mexican farm workers who still slave in the hot sun of California agricultural fields, he is a prophet. Since the grape strike in 1965, he has marched and picketed with farm workers arm-in-arm in farm communities throughout California. He has carried the message of the farm workers cause to customers at supermarkets throughout the United States, to all congregations — Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant. Because of his activism, he courted arrest many times and has been arrested on various occasions.

On more than one occasion in the past when I have spoken to farm workers, I have compared Father Victor to Father Hidalgo who, in 1810, led the Mexican people in revolution against an oppressive Spanish regime. Father Victor, like Father Hidalgo, was abandoned by his church and bishops. Father Victor follows in Father Hidalgo's footsteps in leading the farm workers to dignity and justice. It is unfortunate that more priests have failed to heed the prophetic voice of Father Victor.

May 31, 1992

Foreword: Bob Howarth

My earliest memory of Fr. Victor is as a young priest, newly ordained and earnestly working at his first assignment in Old Town, San Diego. As I recall, Victor was shy and quiet, much more so than now. He had been a student at the nearby diocesan St. Francis Seminary. The pastor at Immaculate Conception — Fr. Victor's boss — was Fr. Leo Davis, immediate past-rector of St. Francis.

Fr. Davis had instructed Victor at the seminary and as pastor at Immaculate Conception continued to guide and counsel him in his work. Indeed, Davis served as spiritual advisor to Victor throughout much of his career. The atmosphere at Immaculate Conception was convivial, active, and ecumenical throughout Davis' tenure. Sharing it was an enriching experience for all, and much was absorbed by Victor and the rest of us. Camaraderie, good will, and salutary humor permeated the place.

Fr. Davis was the leading Young Christian Workers (YCW) chaplain in the San Diego area and his parish was the hub of activity for the YCW, the young Christian Students (YCS), and the Christian Family Movement (CFM). These groups were referred to as "Specialized Catholic Action" in the literature of the time.

A year or so before meeting Fr. Victor, I had joined the YCW cell in El Cajon at St. Mary's, where Fr. Davis had been pastor just prior to his post at Immaculate Conception. By the time our paths crossed in Old town, Fr. Victor was already active with a YCW group there formed from locals, mostly Chicanos. He and others active in and/or supporting the specialized groups recognized the need for a meeting place, a place for housing and distributing the new literature they were reading and putting into practice. They had by this time outgrown the parish facilities generously offered by Fr. Davis and his parishioners. The upshot of this was the founding of the Cardijn Center as a headquarters for the groups. It also served as a lending library, a bookstore, and a Catholic Action information center open to the general public. Fr. Victor was one of the prime movers in the founding of Cardijn Center.

Commencing about mid-1956, all the San Diego area YCW groups started cooperating in preparations to send a delegation to the International YCW Pilgrimage to be held in Rome, Italy, in August, 1975. It was during the Rome Pilgrimage that more of Fr. Victor's resourcefulness and versatility became evident to me. He, along with Fr. Jim Anderson, also of San Diego, participated in all aspects of the pilgrimage, made many new friends, and poked around catacombs, Vatican offices, hostels, and various restaurants — usually in the company of YCW'ers of all nationalities — American, German, South African, Japanese, Indian, Nigerian, French, Belgian, English, and others. All in all about 90 countries were represented among the 30,000 YCW pilgrims. It was after this heady experience of 10 days in Rome, followed by a nine-country bus tour of Europe visiting local YCW sections, that Fr. Victor began his fund drive.

During the trans-Atlantic return flight to the U.S. he quietly went about collecting over \$700 from the American YCW contingent for the benefit of some of the new YCW friend we had met in Rome. Thus began the post-Rome international sharing program between our San Diego groups and several overseas YCW groups. This program was

actively pursued for some three or four years in the form of letter writing, exchange of news bulletins, and some personal visits.

Involvement with migratory farm workers throughout the United States and parts of Canada and Mexico has been the dearest passion of Fr. Victor—indeed he relishes his title as “the Tortilla Priest.” Starting with his early experiences picking oranges in Escondido, California, with mostly Mexican farm workers, and influenced greatly by the compassionately just example and practices of his rancher father, Victor has persisted in his support and advocacy for the United Farm Workers Union and for farm workers in general. This he has done to the detriment of his own career within the institutional church, numerous times having been removed from a parish for his outspoken advocacy of justice for the farm workers and for redress for their plight. While critics charge rashness and imprudence of him, Fr. Victor has clearly seen the injustices and moved against them through marches, picketing, boycotting, legislative lobbying, peaceful resistance, writing, teaching, celebration of the Mass, and preaching.

On balance, I believe that the position Fr. Victor has contributed to the Church and to our society far outweigh the negatives attributed to him from critics. I wish him well and Godspeed in his future endeavors, and I look forward to learning more of his story in reading *The Confessions of the Tortilla Priest*.

May 21, 1992

Foreword: Sister Margaret M. Castro, SFCC

I have known Father Victor Salandini since I was about eight or nine years old. He had come to Old Town, San Diego, to Immaculate Conception Church. My first recollection of Father Victor is of meeting him as a young priest who came to Old Town one summer. Father Leo Davis was pastor of the Immaculate Conception Church.

Miss Shannon, a lay woman whom God brought to Old town, purchased a house where the second Cardijn Center was established. In that house, Miss Shannon and the Holy Family Sisters would gather all the Mexican-American children of Old Town for our religious education classes. It was great having Miss Shannon and the Holy Family Sisters there to answer our questions.

It was fun knowing Father Victor because he had an old pick-up truck in which he used to ride us all around Old Town and to Mission Beach. Although he was quite shy yet, he was willing to allow us poor Mexican-American kids to have a good time. There were times after his ordination that he would gather with us, collar and all, at Fremont Elementary School, where we would play a little baseball or basketball. As you can tell, most of the girls were a little tomboyish. It was an inspiration to have a priest right there among us. Knowing that Father Victor was just one of us encouraged us to participate at church on Sundays. In other words, he brought the church to us and encouraged us to be full members of it. Just by sharing and laughing with us he made the church seem real. And we respected him as our priest.

My own vocation began to develop because of the inspiration of Miss Shannon, the Holy Family Sisters, Father Victor, Father Davis, Father James Anderson and the thirteen years I spent with Mother Teresa in her work in India. They nurtured the call of God. Each one of them helped water the seed.

By the time I was fourteen, the Young Christian workers and the Young Christian Students had been formed at Cardijn Center on San Diego Avenue. There we learned about social action: 1) Observe 2) Judge 3) Act. We learned scripture and how Christ was a total part of our lives. It was so beautiful to be able to solve problems at school using Christ as our model. Those were beautiful, inspirational times in my life, times I will never forget.

I can remember going to El Centro with a group of young people—all of whom were young Christian workers—to visit Father Victor. Father Davis wanted us to be among the poorest of the poor and see if we could talk to young people of the area who might be interested in forming the Young Christian Workers or Young Christian Students in El Centro. Father Victor had gotten a small group of youth to meet with us.

It seems to me that Father Victor was always there for the downtrodden, oppressed people, those who needed a voice and wanted to be heard. He was willing to take the chance and suffer the consequences like Christ.

The farm workers movement has given Father Victor the opportunity to express his vocation in the way he felt called to serve the Lord. He has been criticized by many, but he is a man of great sensitivity. He has suffered greatly. One has to admire a person who

says, "Yes, Lord, I will answer your call to do whatever may come." As an adult, I appreciate Father Victor more because he has stayed faithful to what he believes.

I'm grateful to God for the Young Christian Students and Young Christian Workers movement that brought this wonderful priest into our lives. I appreciate Father Victor's response to Vatican II for his love, dedication, and perseverance to the farm workers movement.

May 27, 1992

Foreword: Paul Majkut

Sometimes Victor Salandini and I disagree, sometimes see a different world. I no longer share his faith in Catholicism, and it is difficult in these new dark ages to share his perennial hope in things to come. But the very persistence or stubbornness with which he holds to his convictions on the role of his Church on questions of social justice and the future ability of organized labor to have a positive impact on these violently “gentler” and viciously “kinder” times is impressive. No matter that you agree or disagree on minor points. No matter that your style is different from his. The man’s stick-to-itiveness is alone something admirable.

There are those who think that Victor’s steadfast commitment to the United Farm Workers and his friend of many years, Cesar Chavez — despite the poor treatment Victor has received at the hands of bureaucratic Church officials and their secular equivalents — makes him the Captain Ahead of the labor movement here in California. Herman Melville’s portrayal of Ahab in *Moby Dick* depicted a man with a fixed idea — to kill the great White Whale that had snapped off his leg years earlier. Melville saw Ahab as a monomaniac who would do anything to achieve his goal.

Victor’s Great White Whale is social injustice. Specifically, the California growers who will not fairly share their great wealth with their workers in the fields. Victor’s White Whale of injustice also includes much of the leadership of his own church in the San Diego Diocese, above all those bishops who talk out of the sides of their mouths when they claim to uphold Catholic social teachings on the rights of workers and, at the same time, hire non-union contractors for church construction.

Victor’s character is marked by intense loyalty, one that has again and again been tested on countless picket lines, in face-to-face debate with his superiors in the church, with government officials, with friends over coffee. I have seen leaders come and go in various progressive social movements, and we are all too familiar with labor leaders who sell out their principles and workers and end up little different in attitude and appearance from the management who sat across the table. And all the while, Victor was on the picket line getting proud blisters on his feet. Not in the air-conditioned offices of union leaders, but on the line at noon in the California desert with a bunch of guys who were worried about bosses. Anglos, and how to pay next month’s food bill at home for their families.

Sometimes Victor and I disagree, sometimes we see a different world. Sometimes we shout and get pissed off at each other — though his style is much more meek than mine. But, though people call him stubborn, self-centered, and driven, I have heard one thing a lot of regular people around the state also say: “When I was down and out, Victor was still there.”

May 28, 1992

Orange Picking

In a way, this is a story about orange picking. It also deals with the priesthood, with grapes, with getting busted in the company of Cesar Chavez, with union organizing, with my father and his death, with a dead bishop named Charles F. Buddy, with a dead priest named Leo Davis, with other priests and bishops, with ladies in mink who crossed picket lines in New York City, and with St. John Bosco. But mainly it is about orange picking. You know the orange: a very refreshing item, particularly when chilled.

For ten years, I was the champion orange picker of San Diego County. I used to pick oranges during the summer in the orchards around Escondido, where I grew up and where my father grew grapes for the wine industry. In those years, from 1942 to 1952, Escondido was still a small, self-contained farming town, all hardware stores and guys in straw sombreros and Chicanos slinking off very humbly into the shade along the adobe walls. By all rights, I should have evolved into a grower, a man of means who ran whole squads of *braceros* and Chicanos, who put the stoop into stoop labor. Something must have gone wrong up there in the orange trees. I became a priest. Not just a priest, but a labor priest—an advocacy about as popular and encouraged in the conservative priesthood of the Diocese of San Diego as male stripping. But, with a touch of racing luck, as the son of a landowner I could have been worth millions today in land alone. San Diego county, after all, is the heaven of real estate developers. Something must have gone wrong up in the orange trees. I started looking for another kind of heaven that wasn't of this good earth.

Here's how it was, picking oranges in San Diego County when I was a teenager. A good man could pick maybe 50 to 70 boxes a day. He got 11 cents a box and another penny a box if he lasted out the season. Most of the pickers were Chicanos (Mexican-Americans) or else *mojados* ("wetbacks") or *braceros* (farm workers with work cards), who had come across the border, legally or not, and got paid commensurately less. *Mojado* or wetback is the rude term popular among *gringos*, another less than gracious term. It comes from Texas, where workers crossed to El Norte by wading across the Rio Grande. Unfortunately, this Texan lingo migrated to San Diego along with other racist values and can still be heard in the rural parts of the county.

Back up the tree. All you really need to pick oranges is a 20 ft setting ladder, a pair of clippers, and *muchos cojones*, the last a precious anatomical and psychological attribute common among people who do dangerous tasks for a living. Let's just say it means *courage*.

The trick is to get the best trees first so you can clip off lots of oranges with the least amount of ladder shifting. I was bigger and younger and healthier than most of the Chicanos — six-foot-two and about 140 pounds and full of competition — and I rarely picked less than 100 boxes a day. That works out to more than \$12 for a nine-hour stint.

You got there at seven, when the fog was still boiling on the ridges of the coastal range, and you left at five, when the last drops of moisture were only a memory under the

still threatening green thorns of the orange groves. You always wore a long-sleeved shirt. There were ants in the orange trees, and you got to feel them crawling in your armpits and up your legs and into your ears. If you really wanted to make it as an orange picker, you had to run from one set to the next, your ladder over your shoulder, and stay ahead of the crowd.

Shortly after I started working in the groves, the Chicanos started calling me *El Bicicleta*, “The Bicycle,” for my speed and dedication to the art of orange picking. I even had a guy who modified my clippers for me, bending the handles that were strapped into the palms of the hand so that I could clip quicker. At the end of the day, we all looked like we had put on black faces. The insecticides sprayed on the trees would stick to the face and hands and clothing like so much blackstrap molasses. Gooey business. Quite literally, as we have come to know since that time, a very *sickening* sort of work. How many farm workers suffer cancer today because of prolonged contact with these deadly toxins will never be known. It is a hidden cost of this work that was never passed on to the consumer, but paid by the workers and their families.

I still remember how the workers would sing their Spanish love songs, their high, hard voices erupting from the greenery — sad meadow larks, the cheerful clicking of their clippers a rhythmic counterpoint accompaniment to their singing. *Canciones de amor*. Songs of Love. They sang the sweetest when the groves were poor. “*Tu, solo tu,*” they sang. “You, only you. In order to forget you, I turn to drink.” How do you like your orange juice, Mr. and Mrs. Anglo?

Sometimes during the long descent from the trees, I decided to change my profession, and years later I was ordained a priest. I do not know how these things happen, but I am told that it is called having a vocation or a “calling,” and that’s fine with me. After all, it’s not so much *why* a person does what he or she does, but what they do with their lives.

Solemn Beginnings

For the reception after my first Solemn Mass, I invited a number of my orange-picking buddies and some of my Anglo friends to a get-together. My Anglo friends considered me a bit of a freak, especially since back in those dark ages there wasn't a lot of mixing, and I was crossing ethnic lines *and* class lines. It was just very difficult for my Anglo friends to understand. My orange-picking buddies still called me *El Bicicleta* and I've been freewheeling ever since. Once I incurred the anger of one of the bishop's close confidants, a certain prominent monsignor, who at the time was my pastor. He told me not to waste my time with the "dirty Mexicans." That's what he said. "Don't waste your time with those dirty Mexicans with long hair — just like you. And don't start spending time with Negro people either."

"But Monsignor, they have souls, too!" I said naively.

"Look, Vic, if you keep hanging around with and listening to men like Leo Davis instead of men firmly committed to their faith—and I don't mind admitting that I read the straight and narrow—you'll never get ahead in this diocese. Keep your nose clean. I'm giving you good advice. Keep to the straight and narrow and you'll end up with a good parish. Keep away from those dirty Mexicans and Negroes."

"They have souls, too, Monsignor." I repeated. It wasn't a very original reply, and the response wasn't very original either. I went into my first exile, sent to the Siberia of the San Diego Diocese, Amboy. I was expected to learn the right answers, to follow the example of my fellow priests. With one exception, I found that impossible. I hadn't done the right thing because I was very naïve. Later I learned to strengthen my naivete with convictions that were as solid as the experience from which they arose. Allow me to tell you about that one glowing exception to the rule of bigotry and narrow-mindedness that overcast the minds of my fellow religious workers in San Diego in the 1950's and, regrettably, still lingers like a dirty halo around many of the priests in the diocese today.

Father Leo Davis

I first met Father Leo Davis when I enrolled at St. Francis Seminary near San Diego in September, 1945. I had entered a seminary in April of that year, near San Jose, California and transferred in September to St. Francis Seminary because geographically (and probably socially as well) I belonged to the diocese of San Diego. Davis was to have as much influence on my life as anyone I know, and his lonely example in the hard-faced crowd of priests that are my brothers has served me well through the years. I do not know if I would have despaired without his role model to guide me, but I do know that many times after his death in April, 1988 I have asked myself, "What would Leo have done in this situation?" Teaching by example is stronger than teaching by words, and if that is the case, Fr. Davis was a full and distinguished professor of the spirit. What good is it, after all, if a man learns all the books in the world and cannot put that knowledge into practice?

During the Chrome Age of the 1950's, when I entered St. Francis, there were only about a dozen students. As a consequence, we received a lot of personal attention from the four priests on our faculty. I first met Father Davis, rector of St. Francis seminary, when I transferred there in the fall of 1945. As I look back on those first two years at St. Francis with Father Davis, I realize now that he was no ordinary academic leader. He was trying to revolutionize the archaic life-style prevalent in Catholic seminaries in those days. He was trying to open a dialogue with the students, and in many ways he was a precursor of the changes that were to sweep the church in the early 1960's, when Pope John XXIII convened Vatican Council II. Davis, in his own way was beginning a renaissance of learning in San Diego. For example, he would call me into his office and question me.

"Say, Vic, do you think we should have fewer study periods?"

"Say, Vic, what do you think about Marty? Do you think he might be a good priest?"

This confidence inspired us all, but above all left an impression on me that is still deep today. Dialog works. At the time, such open discussion and respect was unheard of in the hierarchical church. Davis was democratizing the church. Later, I came to learn that there has always been a lay movement in our church from the earliest of times, and that there have always been lay leaders who have struggled against priests who would exclude the laity from decision-making in the church. From Fr. Davis I learned that priests must take direction from the laity, that we are servants, not leaders, that our church is a church of the people, not of priests and bishops and popes only or primarily. All of this spun my head around and around. For the first time, I felt that I was a part of a whole no longer *above* the people I was to serve but *with* them. And I learned of the angry irony behind the often repeated remark, 'Even a priest can go to heaven.'

Father Davis was a priest who never took anything for granted. I remember one Christmas vacation he asked the students of St. Francis to do one thing during their two

weeks at home. He asked all of us to go off alone some place for a half hour or so and ask ourselves only one question and try to find the answer. The question we were to ask ourselves was simple. *Why do I want to become a priest?*

That Christmas vacation I recall that I climbed the mountains above my father's grape ranch and, while sitting on a big, flat rock on top of the mountain, I pondered the question.

"Why do I want to become a priest?"

After an instant or a millennium of mountain time, which cannot be measured by quartz watches but only in monumental granite, there, in the solitude of the scene, I came to a simple conclusion. I wanted to be a priest because I wanted to help people.

Most of the answers I have found in my life have been very simple ones. Though I have continued my studies all my life, even completing a doctorate in economics, still it seems to me that eternal truths are very easy, and that questions about what I should do with my life are simple. You may need a book to fix a car. You may need a book to learn history. You may need a book to pass a test. But on all those important questions of life, questions about doing right and wrong, you don't even need to know how to read, and, I am sorry to say, I have seen many intellectuals let their book learning cloud their vision and get in the way of their heart.

I wanted to help people.

The next question came immediately without any help from Fr. Davis, and it came easily because he had set me on the right track. It was: *Where do I begin?*

I had worked with migrant workers during my years in high school and I wanted to do something to help them. Of course, I wanted to help anyone in need, but above all, migrant worker because it was their plight with which I was most familiar due to my own work in the groves. I was one of them. Presumptuous as it sounds, I wanted to be like Christ, a man who went about doing good. My good fortune was that the work I needed to do was all around me and I didn't need to go off to some strange land to help. My work was a gift from God, and I am thankful to this day that I did not need spend years, as many good people have had to do, agonizing over where to fulfill their vocation.

After two years as rector of St. Francis, Father Davis continued to have an influence on my life as my economics teacher for another five years. A further lesson I learned from him was the spiritual necessity of the study of economics.

During these five years the seminary enrollment increased to around sixty students, and at least half attended Father Davis' class in economics. It was because of him that I first became interested in economics. In his lectures, Davis always encouraged us to find answers to economic problems. He never said, "This is the answer." Instead, he would say, "I think that this is a possible solution to the problem." In those days it was unusual for a priest to study economics, and David had pursued an M.A. in economics. Everyone enjoyed his classes because they always brightened up our week. Davis made everyone feel relaxed. He made the study of economics enjoyable. His classes were never without laughs.

One day in class the subject came up about the amount of money involved in the manufacturing of clothing apparel for both men and women. Somehow, there was a digression about a certain part of a woman's clothes. Davis, knowing that I was somewhat shy, said, "If anyone doesn't know what *falsies* are, you can ask Vic." The whole class

roared with laughter. I didn't think it was so funny because I didn't know what *falsies* were. I guess there's a little devil even in saints.

Davis was a man of medium height, blue eyes, broad shoulders, slightly balding. The thing that was outstanding about Davis was his contagious enthusiasm. When you were talking to him, he made you feel like you were the most important person in the world. Indeed, you were! We used to always kid him about his balding head. There was a priest known as St. Ubaldus, one of those rare and charming creatures of medieval hagiography who might just as well have arisen from a fanciful *Bestiary* as *The Canon of Saints*, and on his annual feast day we used to say *happy birthday* to Father Davis. Seminary life can be very sheltered not only physically, but socially as well, and what we came to regard as near slapstick humor would, I am afraid, be considered rather corny in the real world of work.

Davis had a great weakness for horse racing. When I was assisting him at Immaculate Conception Church in Old Town, the part of the city where San Diego first began under the Spanish, he would check the papers every day to see which horses were running. Often, he would get everyone at the rectory to bet fiver or ten cents on each of the six or seven races that day. Like addicted though novice ace fans rushing to their bookie, we experienced the emotions and foibles of the real world in this sheltered setting, and in our eyes a nickel became a fortune. Davis was the kind of guy who guided without being obvious, who was unafraid to show his human weaknesses. I'd bet my last nickel he's in Heaven today, talking in his very loud voice to latter-day saints about the spirituality of economics.

And Davis had a *very* loud voice. And a loud boisterous laugh. Every time he laughed, the whole rectory felt it. He was a great one for jokes, every day with a new one to tell, usually at the evening meal when all the parish staff was there, the housekeeper, the janitor, myself, and the other resident priest, Father James Anderson.

Invariably, after he would tell his joke, I would say, "I don't get it." This would set Father Davis off laughing uproariously, and the rest of the staff would laugh along, and I would wonder why they were all laughing. I still don't know.

Life for me with Father Davis was like a continual merry-go-round. Since he knew me to be shy and reserved, he used every opportunity to bring me out of myself. One day, he asked me to evaluate a young lady he was considering for a leadership position in the parish. After quizzing me on her leadership abilities, he asked, "How does she look?"

"She's built like a brick house," I replied, trying to show my worldly wisdom but still remain within the bounds of decorum. Another volley of boisterous laughter.

In July, 1952, I had the good fortune to have Father Davis as my first pastor. Six months after ordination, I was assigned as assistant pastor to Father Davis in a former Franciscan parish inn the Old Town section of San Diego, famous for its many historical monuments. I was destined to be with Father Davis for two beautiful years that I will never forget because of the great influence they had on my life. What priests are beginning to do in the church today, forty years later, because of Vatican Council II, Father Davis was doing in the Old Town San Diego in 1952. I can't begin to recount the many things I learned from him, the many things I did, and the many people I met in Old Town. It would take a book of its own to review those times at Immaculate Conception Church in

San Diego. A typical week will give you the flavor of life in this pre-Vatican II revolutionary parish. Remember, this was during the McCarthy Era, and that McCarthyism was as much a thing of and in the church as it was of the Congress and country.

We started the day off with an early Mass either at 6:30 or 7:30, followed by breakfast. Breakfast and other meals in most rectories are usually eaten alone or comply with diocesan regulations that priests remain aloof from the laity. This was never true at Immaculate Conception. Someone from the parish was always stopping in for meals. Once, a young worker I was trying to get to know better was invited to breakfast in order that we might discuss some problems before he left for work, and breakfast became another organizing occasion, and organizing, more and more, became the essence of my spiritual calling.

After breakfast, the morning was filled with a variety of activities that could include taking parish census, visiting the sick, trying to find a house or apartment for a poor family, giving spiritual, psychological, and economic advice. The afternoon was equally filled with another round of activities that sometimes found me in the presence of a municipal judge asking permission to sponsor the probation of a young Chicano who, during a drunken spree, had ripped off a liquor store, attending the sick, giving religious lessons to children. Many late afternoons before dinner I spent playing basketball with the local kids or taking them swimming at the beach nearby. Evenings were also jammed with instructions of converts, marriage instructions, and meetings of various kinds — Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, and various clubs.

Each week I had a day off, but even this day was not wasted. We used to spend our days of relaxation with potential parish leaders. Wednesday was usually my day off and I would, typically, plan to take Sam and Maria with me to our youth camp in the mountains about 40 miles from San Diego. Sam, an African-American, worked the night shift at a neighboring meat-cutting plant, and Maria, a young Chicano girl, worked in a neighborhood laundry: two people that I tried to give a good time on my day off so that I could better win their confidence. Yes — *confidence*. As I have said, I was beginning to understand that organizing was my spiritual mission in life, and organizing must begin with friendship, respect, and confidence.

July, 1952 to July, 1954 was an intense period both personally and nationally. What we were doing at Immaculate Conception was running very much against the grain of the times, those awful days when witch-hunting was legally licensed and had become a national sport. My life at Immaculate Conception for two years with Father Davis can easily be summed up. It was a virtual revolution in a city parish, a time when intense love between the people of the parish, predominantly Mexican-Americans, many of whom had been farm workers, and the two priests, Davis and me. Father James Anderson was another assistant priest in residence in the parish who was teaching in a Catholic high school. The people of the parish knew that the rectory was always open to them. Father Davis taught me and the congregation to put into practice an old Mexican saying, *Mi casa es su casa* (My house is your house). The rectory was a Grand Central Station from early morning until late in the evening. Everyone was invited to a perpetual open house party. Over coffee and home-baked cookies, we discussed in a leisurely and sometimes raucous fashion the events of the day, problems in the parish, and future plans. The thing I remember most about

these bull sessions was the laughter and general spirit of relaxation which Father Davis inspired. All day long the rectory roared with the booming laughter and playful spirit of this original merry prankster.

Unfortunately, I was always the subject of horseplay. A subject of horseplay at the rectory was my extreme shyness.

One day Father Davis and I took a day off together at our Young Christian Workers Camp 40 miles outside of San Diego. A group of some 6 or seven parish leaders were invited to come on this occasion that Fr. Davis chose to cure my shyness. This is how he did it.

I had just converted to the Catholic Church a beautiful English war bride, Mrs. Norah De La Cruz, who presently is my secretary. She was one of the leaders invited on this occasion.

Fr. Davis had planned at the end of our day off to leave us alone at the camp. At leaving time, he faked some emergency situation and everyone left suddenly and I was left alone with Mrs. De La Cruz, a young, beautiful blonde.

Incidentally, Fr. Davis and the gang had driven a block down the road, abandoned the car, and were hiding behind trees near the camp watching.

When I noticed that Mrs. De La Cruz, or Norah, and I were alone, I said, "Well, I guess I'll have to take you back in my car. You can't ride in the car with me because it is against diocesan regulations. You will have to ride in the trunk."

"No way."

"Then what you can do is lay down in the back seat the while 40 miles to San Diego and don't lift your head."

Some joke!

When a beautiful girl would come to see me, the housekeeper would answer the door. The girl might say, "I want to see the young priest, not the old one." The housekeeper, a work-worn old French woman with a hot spark of fire still burning in her eyes, would return to the dining room and report to all in attendance, shaking her hips, "Miss So-and-So wants to see the young priest, not the old priest!" The dinner table would shake with laughter.

During those two years at Immaculate Conception, I found myself. I met people from everywhere, people attracted by Davis' great zeal and enthusiasm, people from all over the United States and abroad.

It was at Immaculate Conception, my first assignment, with the proper guidance and inspiration of Father Davis that I resolved to do something more for Mexican-American farm workers. Even though Immaculate Conception was a city parish, many of the Mexican-Americans there had formerly been farm workers. So, from the very start of my priesthood I was still with farm workers. To do my work I realized that I needed to find an organization.

The organization closest to my heart at Immaculate Conception was the Young Christian Workers (YCW), the group with which I spent most of my time, a movement that is an international organization of young workers numbering in the many thousands. It was with YCW that I began to learn various organizing techniques. More of these techniques later in this story.

After I left Immaculate Conception, I always kept in touch with Father Davis. He was a second father to me. In the summer of 1962, it was Davis who encouraged me — when the then-bishop, Charles Buddy, ran me out of El Centro — to return to school and study economics. He encouraged me to work toward a doctorate in economics, and, above all (because it was to change the course of my life), he encouraged me to meet a little-known organizer of the time, Cesar Chavez. Davis, in fact, advised me to work full-time with Chavez.

My Car Is Stolen

I was naïve.

“Vic, we must both look for leaders among the kids. Through these leaders we can reach the kids,” Father Davis told me one day in the summer of 1952. Organizing workers was a technique invented by the Jocist Movement in Europe, an organizing method also used by the Young Christian Worker Movement, as it was known in the U.S. Both Davis and I had studied this technique and knew its potential.

A week later, I noticed a young man by the name of Johnny who came to Mass every morning and volunteered to serve with me during Mass several times. I remarked to Father Davis that I thought I had found our leader. Little did I know that our leader had a police record a mile long, though all the other kids knew.

One day after he had served Mass with me each day for a week, Johnny asked if he could wash my car.

“The car doesn’t need washing, Johnny.”

“Come on, Father. Let me wash your car.”

I gave in and let him have the keys, putting it out of my mind, writing it off to youthful enthusiasm. “OK, but get it back in two hours, Johnny. I’m alone here and might need it.”

“OK, Padre.”

When noon arrived, Johnny and, more importantly, the car had not returned. I called his home and asked his mother where he was. She said he was washing the car and would return it in a few minutes.

Two in the afternoon arrived and ambled off into the past.

Three in the afternoon arrived, yawned, and slipped into eternity.

Four in the afternoon arrived. By that time the hours were announcing themselves to me loudly, urgently.

By 10 that evening, when Father Davis arrived, I was agitated.

Instead of bawling me out for my naivete, Davis burst out in laughter. “Don’t worry, Vic. Johnny will return the car tomorrow. Don’t report it! If we report the car to the police, the kids will think we are working with the police. Our efforts will be ruined. “The Franciscan priests who formerly staffed the parish worked very closely with the police in our very high-crime area, and this connection destroyed the people’s confidence in them.

Three days went by. Still, Davis and I did not report the theft of the parish car. I found out from Johnny’s friends that he was driving around the beach area with his girlfriends. I tried to recruit Johnny’s cousins to help me get the car back, but they were in cahoots with him riding around and wouldn’t help. Since nearly everyone in the Mexican community there considered themselves to be in one big extended family, all cousins, Davis and I had to be careful not to offend anyone.

On the fourth day after we consulted community leaders, we decided to report the car as stolen. Fortunately, before the police found the car, John's sister called when he was taking a shower. I went over with a couple of other kids and had a long talk with him. He promised to pay for some minor damages to the car, and he did. Unfortunately, I don't think he ever straightened out.

I learned a valuable lesson. It isn't easy to find an honest leader of men. This incident was to have a great impression on me, and years later when I met Cesar Chavez it helped me to recognize him as an honest leader.

First Exile: The Amboy Story

My seven-month stay at Amboy, California, a small salt-mining community on Route 66 in the Mohave Desert, was my first exile. I lived there during the hot season, from the beginning of April, 1956 to the end of October. During those months, the temperature ran about 120 degrees in the day. There was a slight cooling in this doorway to hell in the early morning hours and evenings. It was as close to hell as I hope to come. Priests who had been sent into this and similar desert places of exile by our bishop often ended up leaving hope behind, and, despairing of the clerical advancement to a good, middle-class parish or a promotion in the chancery hierarchy, became bitter, hopeless creatures. I had other thoughts.

Amboy, I figured, presented me with an excellent opportunity to organize those Mexican-American migrant farm workers who had left the fields seeking a better life. Whether they found a better life in the salt mines of Amboy is questionable. Life in Amboy seemed worse to me than work in the fields and groves. The dehydrating sky, the thirsty earth, and the extreme heat, these seemed meant as nature's revenge, and the farm workers transfer to this Hades from the green groves of Arcadia a step down. For me it was an opportunity. I thought of what Saul Alinsky replied when told by an anti-union, Christian fanatic that his organizing efforts in Chicago would land him in hell. "Is it organized?" he asked.

The guys in the salt mines worked sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, for a dollar an hour. This totaled a little over \$100 a week, which looked like a lot of money to a priest and to many in the city, but these workers most often had many children. Four men I knew had ten children each. From their \$100 they had to pay rent to live in cracker-box dwellings without running water, without inside plumbing, without dignity. Food in Amboy could only be bought conveniently at a company store that charged exorbitant prices. Food available at normal prices was at least 50 miles away in Twenty-Nine Palms or 80 miles away at Barstow — one way! These men sang the workers' blues on paydays, but they sang it discreetly, out of earshot of the bosses. They sang with greater conviction than Ernie Ford ever imagined.

My first visits to the homes of the Chicano families in my parish were depressing. I soon made the circuit of homes in Amboy and had dinner with all the families. The squalor in which my people lived was unbelievable, and once again I saw that I had been given another wonderful opportunity to do the work that God wanted of me. I figured myself a lucky fellow. Again, what I needed to do was simple. I didn't need to squeeze my brain wondering what my vocation asked of me. Up the orange tree, down the tree, in the seminary, on the mountain to question my commitment, in the desert. These events unfolded like a well-made story in which I was a character who already knew his lines. Or most of them.

In Amboy, the wind blew constantly. It was a hot, dry wind coming off the mountains that pounded against houses and souls like the back of a hard hand. The salt mines were located in a large valley surrounded by high mountains. Anything not anchored down blew away.

Once, when an outhouse was knocked over by violent winds, soiled toilet paper whipped around the workers living quarters like a parody of a Broadway ticker-tape parade.

Because of my close contact with these people, visiting them at work, eating in their homes, taking their children swimming two or three times a week, I was able to win their confidence. I picked out two young men among them who appeared to have leadership qualities. I indoctrinated them on the necessity of organizing workers into a union. Through these two men, it wasn't difficult to get the workers to think in terms of a union. They were already fed up with the way they had been treated for so many years in the fields. In Amboy, the hell to which they had come seeking a better life, they found they were just as exploited, just as discriminated against as they had been as farm workers. They did all the back-breaking labor — cleaning salt ore, loading box cars, and all the other impossible jobs in the process, but Chicanos who had worked in the salt mines for more than a decade never had a chance at the high-paying jobs. Drag-line operators, guys who drove the large equipment that excavated the salt ore, for example, received as much as a thousand dollars a month, but this position was not offered to Chicanos. And the workers did not like the long hours they put in with only two days off each month. They were disgusted with the cracker boxes the company called homes, sheds for which they had to pay up to forty dollars a month in rent.

When I reflect on my work at Amboy, I realize now that I used the same tactic that Mac and Jim used in John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*. Mac and Jim were two organizers sent to organize California apple pickers during the depression. The first thing they did was to help deliver a baby for the daughter of one of the pickers who was the natural leader of the men. This act helped them to win the confidence of the workers, and the birth of the child was the birth of the union, and started things moving.

Of course, we were living in the age of electricity, and I didn't know a pelvis from a plumber's wrench, so one of the first things that I did when I arrived in Amboy was check out the workers needs in terms of electricity. The nearest movie house was 50 miles away and, since Amboy was below sea level, TV reception was impossible. The only recreation the Chicanos had was to drive over 100 miles round-trip to a movie each week. It cost them a small fortune in gas and wear-and-tear on their cars. During my first few days I arranged to get a current movie played in Amboy each week. I arranged for a rich café owner to pay for the rental of the movie. I changed a nominal admission fee.

Another incident that helped me to win the confidence of the people was the occasion of the burning down of one of the homes. Overnight a young couple lost all their furniture, and their cracker box was not even insured by the company. I held a parish fiesta and, against diocesan regulations, handed over the 400 dollars we raised for the couple to buy new furniture. Mr. and Mrs. Ruben Carlos started life again. God spare them future blazes.

And there were difficulties as well.

Beer Mugs, Mugs, and Mugging

Showing weekly movies was a great idea, and it introduced me to the power of using entertainment and, later, entertainers to promote various causes, to help in organizing. Later, in another place of exile I was to develop this tool, to sharpen it. Unfortunately, the best of plans go awry, and there were a few problems with the weekly movies.

There were two groups that attended the weekly movies in the little hall where we showed them. Chicanos and Navajo Indians. I had allowed the quite illegal selling of beer at the movies because it was a way for raising a little more money for the work I was doing and because, what the hell, I saw nothing wrong with a beer or two after a hard week's work in the salt mines. In fact, it seemed stupid and arrogant to forbid beer to these hard-working men who were just trying to relax.

And I was impressed with the enthusiasm shown by the Chicanos who volunteered to help as ushers and attendants at the showings. I was so full of self-pride with my organizing efforts that I was blinded by my ignorance.

After a few beers, some of the Navajos, dizzy from a combination of hard work, heat, and alcohol, would wobble out of the hall only to be mugged by a few dishonest "ushers," who would roll them for their work's pay. I learned the hard way the importance of the wisdom carried in the famous expression: *Two steps forward, one step back.*

Another Exile: Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, El Centro

In November, 1957, I arrived in El Centro as pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, a Spanish-speaking parish in a rich agricultural area of California, Imperial Valley. The day I arrived I was so full of enthusiasm that I couldn't wait to start work. The first day at any new parish assignment is one of nervous excitement for any priest, but for me this was truly the first ordinary parish assignments I had been given. I was up half the night planning, fretting, and daydreaming about how I was going to spend my time in my very own parish. I thought to myself, "At last, I'm my own boss! Finally, I can begin to really work with people and not be doing the stupid things that some incompetent pastor on the gravy train orders me to do. At last, I will have a free hand to really help the poorest of God's poor, the Mexican-American migrant worker of Imperial Valley!" I was exuberant.

In fact, I exaggerate. I had not come to our Lady of Guadalupe Church to be the official pastor of the parish, but as an administrator *pro tem* with the specific assignment of caring for the spiritual needs of the over 6,000 *braceros* working in the vicinity of El Centro. The bishop was not so foolish to give over to a Mexican-loving, labor-organizing radical priest the unfettered control of a parish, even though that parish was far from the power center of the diocese. The unadorned reality was simply that Our Lady of Guadalupe was another exile, but as I have said before, my sense of reality differed sharply from that of the bishop and his chancery coterie.

Braceros were, at that time, Mexican nationals contracted by the U.S. government to work for a limited amount of time under contract in the United States. The word *bracero* is interesting. It comes from "arm" in Spanish and refers to someone who works on but does not own the land. *Farm worker* is the beset and most usual translation today, but the feudal term "sent" really implies more accurately the bondage these workers were held in by California growers. In a way the serfs of old had it better off than the braceros because, like tenant farmers of the Old South, they were at least attached to a piece of land. Imported Mexican field workers were allowed no such roots in California, but instead were moved from field to field and owner to owner, alienated from the land they worked here and alienated from the land that had been promised but never given to them by the Revolution of 1911 in their own country.

Bracero: Peón que se emplea para cavar o trabajar la tierra.

The use of the term *bracero* or "arm" for field workers is interesting and so accurate and descriptive that I hope you won't mind if I put in a little digression here. In the fine film, *El Norte*, the story of a peasant brother and sister who escape the murderous dictatorship of Guatemala to come to the land of milk and honey where the immigrant dream streets of Southern California are paved with gold and there are toilets *in* the homes.

The image of arms opens and closes the story. The father, before his murder by plantation thugs employed by the growers of his country, says to his son: "We are only arms to them [the owners], nothing more. But this is our land. We were born on it."

My job, I knew, was to organize the arms. I knew it as clearly during my first days in El Centro as I knew it in Amboy, as clearly as I knew it in the seminary. The trees I climbed down from taught me.

The reader must forgive the anger that sometimes animates these memories, but to this very day, as I approach retirement, I cannot change the abiding anger that burned early on and still burns. We have had and we continue to have a situation where the demigods of the upper middle class and rich live next to, yet ignore the wretched of the earth who are their neighbors. My time is limited. How much longer must our brothers and sisters who work the land be denied a decent living, security and respect. I have been told so often by church leaders to be patient that I no longer believe that these words of advice are said in good faith, but are rather used to distract, delay, and deceive. This is not right, but these church leaders will have their own answers to give elsewhere. My job was to organize arms.

I knew that the Bishop had sent me to El Centro as an administrator *pro tem* because I was a thorn in his side. After my run in with a certain prominent monsignor a few years before, and my organizing efforts in Amboy, this second assignment in the desert was probably given with a great sense of irony on the part of the bishop's office of the chancery.

'He likes Mexicans, does he now?' I can hear the Irish mafia of our diocese saying. The double irony is that, in fact, I considered the assignment to work with the braceros in the Imperial Valley a well-timed gift. Maybe the bishop wasn't about to trust me with a "real" parish, but his sense of reality and mine were as different as night and day. I continue to thank him to this day — even though I am sure many priests must think I am being sarcastic. I am not. The assignment to El Centro allowed me to continue the vocation I knew that I had, the organization of workers into self-help groups, their organization into effective labor unions, and the implementation of the social teachings of the Catholic Church, a church that, despite its hypocrisy and corruption, will remain my church until the day I die. I made a promise when I was ordained, one that I intend to keep, bishop or no.

As administrator *pro tem* I did have all the powers and privileges of a pastor. Despite my Bishop's lack of full confidence in me, I was determined to give the poor Mexican-Americans of El Centro my very best.

I set right off to work by caring for the spiritual needs of the braceros. Three or four evenings a week, I visited their work camps to say Mass, hear confessions, and counsel them.

"Confess me, Padre. I have sinned." The genuine feeling of the man would be plainly visible. I have never been one to make too much of a man's past, unless it was necessary in order to understand a problem, and my general idea has been that if a man or woman says he or she is sorry, I should trust the sincerity of that confession and not pry into meaningless details, which many priests believe is their job. The sincerity of this man was obvious.

At the time, *Time* magazine did a story titled “In the Nuts” on me that was never published because of pressure from Bishop Buddy. Buddy, I later discovered, had in turn been pressured by someone in the General Motors hierarchy who demanded that the article not be printed, though the *Time-Life* headquarters in New York had already approved it. You know, one hierarchy to another. Let me explain the title. When the reporter from *Time*, Robert F. Jones, interviewed me about the youth in the parish and whether or not they practiced their faith, I replied that it was very difficult as a practical matter because these people were so much on the move. I told him that during confession I asked the routine question, “When was your last confession?” Instead of answering ‘two or three months ago,’ which would be a usual reply, they would invariably say, “It was in the grapes” or “in the apricots” or “in the nuts.” Bishop Buddy was infuriated at the catchy title that headed the article in *Time*. It was becoming easier and easier for me to get into trouble. It seemed as though I couldn’t keep my big Italian feet out of my mouth. Now, I didn’t even have to try. Trouble came to me.

Danny Thomas, the well-known comedian of the time, helped me to raise nearly \$10,000 at the time. I spent it to cover parish expenses and install refrigeration in the church. It was a lot of money, but not enough to cover the expenses of building a gym. Later, I will explain how another entertainer, Bing Crosby, was involved in this incident.

Shortly before the Thomas Benefit, an organization known as the Community Service Organization (CSO), a community-based effort started by Saul Alinsky, published a misleading story about the money I raised with Bing Crosby. The El Centro chapter of CSO asked where the money was, and wrote a letter complaining to the bishop. This letter implied that I had misused the money raised from Hollywood.

I discovered that one member of the CSO chapter in El Centro, one of the loudest in the campaign against my efforts, was reputed to be a Communist organizer. Today, although I can’t say I’m proud of what I did at the time without reservation, I retaliated to these lies being told about our parish work by calling the four FBI agents in El Centro—which caused the banning of the local CSO chapter. The word of my anti-Communism got back, of course, to Bishop Buddy, and, as a result, he praised me throughout the diocese as the priest who cleaned out the vipers’ nest of Communists in the Imperial Valley.

I was fairly well acquainted with the bracero problem before coming to El Centro. I knew that these workers were being exploited and treated worse than animals. I was determined from the start to organize and help “the arms.” Drove of these poor men came to me each evening when I visited the camps, often in friendship, more often seeking help. My own questions for myself were: *What can I do for them?* and *How can I do it?*

How could I get them immigrated?

How could I check into this bracero’s complaint that he was cheated in his pay check?

How could I see to it that another bracero received proper medical treatment for an injury?

The truth of the matter was that in reality there was little I could do to help them. True, I could send them to the Mexican Consul, but what could one man do for 6,000 workers? Since the bracero problem was a good way for officials on both sides of the

border to make some extra cash, very few were zealous in trying to do anything to correct injustice.

During my first year in El Centro, I worked especially hard to try to help the arms. On many occasions, I helped two men from the State of California Department of Justice who were secretly living in Imperial Valley. They were investigating abuses in the bracero program. Since they could not speak Spanish, they asked me to come at night with them to a bracero camp to make a so-called pay-roll checkup. The particular camp they had in mind was one that I did not frequently visit for Mass and confessions, so I felt I could take the chance. I would be unknown. If there were complaints about a priest working with state officials, the growers would be unable to trace them to me and report them back to the bishop, who, undoubtedly would remove me immediately. I did not want to jeopardize the other work I was doing, and the bishop had eyes everywhere. To avoid recognition I wore some old clothes that made me look like a farm worker. I talked to over two hundred men in this camp and discovered, after studying their paycheck stubs, that they were being routinely cheated.

According to federal law, they were guaranteed about forty hours a week of work. In reality many didn't even have enough money at the end of a week's work to buy a meal. I have kept photo-static copies of checks for less than ten cents. This dime sometimes represented a man's total weekly earning after room, board and "miscellaneous" costs were deducted.

One of the State Department of Justice men frequently came to my rectory to inquire about the bracero camps. He knew that I visited them each week and had first-hand knowledge of how the workers were treated. He told me that he was trailed by spies of the grower-owners when he visited my rectory. To avoid getting me in trouble, he used to speed around and first lose his pursuers before coming to the rectory. Had the henchmen of the growers discovered that I was giving information about the work camps to the state police, they would have reported this to the Bishop who, in turn, would have rebuked and probably transferred me from my precious work. Or maybe something worse: make me a Navy chaplain!

The church had received hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations from the rich farmers of Imperial Valley. Antagonizing them would lose the church the opportunity of receiving future large donations.

Periodically, the Bishop, Charles F. Buddy, sent a representative to my parish to investigate how I was caring for the *braceros*. The representative always arrived in a late-model, top-of-the-line car, once rolling up in a cloud of dust to visit my parish in a big, Lincoln Continental. He reminded me that I should only involve myself with the spiritual needs of the arms (*braceros*). Under no circumstances, he told me, was I to get involved in the material needs of the workers.

"Yes," I lied and would lie again to this day over three decades later.

The Bishop's representative, an influential Monsignor, was a wealthy man who had no concept of what the *braceros* were going through. One of the sermons which he gave was to a church full of *braceros*—many who saw him drive up to the poor church in his Lincoln.

His sermon went something like this:

“My dear children in Christ, you must put your trust in Our Savior. He will take care of you. Just as Christ was poor, you are poor. You must work hard. You earn very little, but be patient. God will provide....”

I looked at the faces of the *braceros* during the monsignor’s sermon and I could see cynicism written all over them: *Sure, Monsignor, it’s easy for you to talk about poverty. You talk about poverty, yet you drive up to visit us in a ten-thousand dollar car.* As his sermon progressed I had all I could do to keep from laughing. Even the two teenage boys who were serving my Mass were giggling in their sleeves because what the Monsignor was saying to the *braceros* was so obviously irrelevant and ridiculous.

Some years later, I met one of the kids who had been one of the altar boys. We were in Fresno. He remembered the incident clearly. He was then a Brown Beret, the Chicano equivalent of a Black Panther. “It was a turning point for me, Padre. It’s when I first realized that the big shots in the church don’t even know what’s going on with the little guys.”

Despite the fact that my bishop wanted me to care only for the spiritual needs of the *braceros*, I felt that as a Christian and a priest I had to do much more. I got people in the city of El Centro to give me discarded clothing that was still in good condition. For a nominal fee of five to ten cents I would sell this clothing to the *braceros*. It’s always better to have people pay a little for what they get. It’s a matter of pride and respect. I found from experience that it was best to charge a little because in this way the *braceros* felt that they weren’t just receiving a hand out. To the many *braceros* who didn’t have even five or ten cents, I would give the clothing they needed as a gift. I once told Bishop Buddy that the *braceros* were in dire need of shoes. He sent me some 100 pairs of new work shoes mostly in sizes from 10 to 12. For months after that farm workers in Imperial Valley with shoe sizes of six and seven were seen wearing shoes much larger than their small feet, flapping around in the dust of small desert towns with shoes so big they looked like clowns.

Another service which I provided for the *braceros* was to show sound movies in some of the bigger camps several times a week. Bing Crosby, the famous singer of the time, helped me to buy a new portable 16mm movie projector. I trained some of the teenagers to run it. I did this because I found that the men were having to pay as much as two dollars to see a movie, one for the cab, one for the movie. A lot of money in those days. To walk would be an average 15-mile round trip, give or take a blister. I was able to rent good Spanish films at a reasonable rate, as a result, made a little extra income for the parish. Most important of all, I was able to provide good recreation for the farm workers who didn’t have to leave the camp to see a good movie.

Another important service I provided for the *braceros* in my visits to the camps was to send money for them to Mexico. I discovered in my conversations with the *braceros* that many of them had given to a foreman as much as \$500 they had managed to save from their meager earnings over a period of five months labor in other picking and harvesting jobs in northern and central California. The foreman or labor contractor promised to send the money to Mexico, but never did. The labor contractor simply kept the money himself. When the money never arrived in Mexico, the *bracero* inquired of his labor contractor the reason. The labor contractor assured him that he sent the money but that the check had been stolen in the mail and that he was not responsible. I explained to the *braceros* that it is

not possible to steal or to lose money sent to Mexico if it was done properly. I told them not to entrust their hard-earned money to a complete stranger. I explained that money sent via a check from the Bank of America would arrive safely in Mexico, and if the check were stolen the money could be recovered.

Every week after an evening Mass at a camp (and as many as three times a week in the evenings during the winter lettuce season from October to March), I would collect money from the *braceros*, \$200 from one, \$50 from another, sometimes even as much as \$500 from a *bracero* who had been saving the money for three or four months. Many evenings I left a *bracero* camps with as much as ten thousand dollars in cash. The next day I would make out the checks at the Bank of America and mail them to Mexico. The following week, when I returned to the camp, I gave the men the receipt for the checks sent. I kept a record of the *bracero's* receipt number in case the check was stolen in the mail. I told them to write to me if they found their checks had been stolen or did not arrive at their destinations. A number of checks were, in fact, stolen, but in a period of several years I always managed to recover stolen money for the *braceros*. I have a number of beautiful letters sent to me by *braceros* who, when I recovered stolen money from them, were grateful. I think I must have recovered over \$3000 in stolen checks within a two-year period.

Braceros needed information, and I introduced an information part to my weekly evening sermons because I could be sure that this was the one time when almost the entire camp was together. On Sundays I said Mass at the parish, but during the weekdays I celebrated Mass with the farm workers at various camps. In one large camp where I went regularly for Mass, confessions, and movies, I would have as many as 700 men gathered together.

“Avoid buying clothes from the vendors who sell outside the camp gates,” was a typical remark I’d make at these evening gatherings. Although that may seem trivial, the bishop and his spies considered such remarks as anything but trivial. It was considered inappropriate. It was not the position of a priest to dirty his hands with such earthly matters.

“The clothing out there looks good, friends, but all that glitters is not gold. That stuff is really inferior. It’s better for you to buy your clothing in the city because there the clothes are government-inspected.”

The little buzz flies who surrounded the bishop loved to snitch. Their fondest occupation was spreading rumors, and I was an easy target because I left myself wide open by talking so much non-spiritual talk. I was often warned to keep my sermons on the straight-and-narrow path.

“Besides, if there’s something wrong with the clothing you buy at a department store, you can return it and get your money back or replace the item with another that isn’t defective.”

Rumor, chitchat, and gossip was a daily routine in the bishop’s chancery office, where spite and back-stabbing was a habit of life barely hidden under a veneer of self-righteous spiritualism and prayers, but all the grandiose prayers in the world couldn’t change the simple fact that the *braceros* were cheated by camp-gate vendors.

A *bracero* held out with great pride a gold watch he had purchased for fifteen dollars from a camp-gate vendor. “Padre, everyone will think I am a very rich man when I show

them this beauty. Look! A gold watch—just like the rich man's! America is a great country. I could never have bought this watch in Mexico," he said extending his arm.

I could tell at a glance that the watch wasn't worth more than two or three dollars. I didn't know how to tell him his watch was worthless. "Yes, Juan, it is truly very beautiful. Very beautiful. But, you know, you should shop around before buying here in America. America is a great country, and if you take your time you can get even better prices? I know a place in town..."

And there were other problems that ran through my sermons like a broken record.

Sometimes Chicano juvenile delinquents waited for a *bracero* walking to a movie alone with a pocketful of cash the evening of payday. The youths would ambush him give him a good beating, and steal his money. "Don't go alone to the city. Always travel in bunches to avoid being attacked."

Depending on whether or not there were any stool pigeons present, such as foremen or labor contractors, I would advise the men to keep track of the boxes of tomatoes or lettuce they picked and the number of hours they worked. "If you don't keep a proper record of your work, do you think your boss will?" The foremen were constantly fudging, not giving proper credit to the men in their paychecks.

The difficulties came from all sides, from the growers and their foremen, from the government, from the church, from the Chicano community that considered the *braceros* country bumpkins. For six months of the year, I had the souls of over 6,000 workers to care for, worry about, and manage. The church did not want me to get involved in the real issue, the exploitation of immigrant workers by *everyone*. The farmers didn't want me to be too zealous for the welfare of the *braceros*.

About a month after arriving in El Centro, a national magazine wanted to do a story on *how well* the *bracero* was treated while doing farm work in California. During my Mass at one of the biggest camps, housing one-thousand men, I was photographed copiously, and fifty dollars was slipped into my hand at the end of the Mass by the rich farmer who owned the camp. Today, this would be called a photo-op. Interestingly enough, it was this same rich farmer, Danny Danenberg, who, because of a remark I made to him a few weeks later, stopped all donations.

It so happened that one day two of my brother priests from San Jose, California, came to El Centro to speak at a Senate hearing dealing with the *bracero* program. These priest friends of mine gave the rich farmers of Imperial Valley a real tongue-lashing and rightfully blamed them for the many abuses the poor had to suffer there. The evening of the same day, the priests testified at the Senate hearing I happened to be saying evening Mass at Danenberg's *bracero* camp.

"What right did those priests have to speak to us about how we take care of the *braceros*? We take good care of them. What do those priests know about our problems? They should stay in church and tell people about God," Danenberg said to me after Mass.

"Danny, the Church does have a right to speak out against injustice," I replied, and with these few words the line was drawn. These few words were a guarantee that my work with the *braceros* would never receive another donation from him or any other rich Imperial Valley grower.

Danenberg, during the next few days, cried on the shoulders of other priests in Imperial Valley. They assured him that he was right and that priests who meddle with farmers' problems were "communist agitators." A few months later the neighboring priest who let Danny Danenberg cry longest on his shoulder received a check for \$1,500 from Danenberg, and this same priest received donations from many of the other farmers who exploited *braceros*. He always sided with the farmers and told them that they were treating the *braceros* with tender care. This 'saint' was successful in building a \$200,000 church and paying for it before it was finished. He added a large girls' high school to his parish plant and was able to make a profit from the high school. All this was done with money he received from the growers who, in turn, had made it by exploiting *braceros*.

I have mentioned these details because it was this experience that convinced me of the built-in-futility of my work. On the one side, I was trying to help. The *bracero*. On the other, the Church itself was telling me not to do anything outside of the spiritual. The growers used their influence on the Church to silence any priest who interfered with their exploitation of the *bracero*. I decided to change my tactics. I could be more effective in the Mexican-American community of El Centro if I put my emphasis on the local people, the Mexican-Americans of El Centro. I came to this decision after my first five months in El Centro. After concentrated efforts on behalf of the *braceros* (from November, 1957 to March, 1958), I had little to show except for feeling good and helping the *bracero* was like trying to help all the Mexicans in Mexico. I needed another way to organize. My youthful enthusiasm had, truth be said, done little. So, when the *braceros* left in April 1958, not to return again until October that year, I began to focus my efforts on the local Mexican-American community.

It is not that in my first six months in El Centro I did nothing with the locals. I had been working with them all along. I had been working with two juvenile gangs in the parish, the Cherries and the Sinners.

Ganglandia

The Cherries and the Sinners were composed of Mexican-American boys from my Spanish-speaking parish, ages 16 to 20. The gangs were rivals always at sharp knifepoint with each other. The Cherry Gang was composed mostly of dropouts from high school. By and large they had police records. This was the gang I decided to concentrate on, perhaps because they aroused something in my Italian blood, perhaps because, unafraid of the mafia, I could not be frightened by teenage hoods. I went to their meetings, took them swimming at a nearby lake, showed them movies, and took part in other gang activities—all legal.

The Sinners were just as tough as the Cherries, but they had an aura of respectability because hardly anyone in their group had a police record.

An incident that happened shortly after my arrival in El Centro involved the gang rivalry, and almost resulted in my losing the parish. The incident occurred during Midnight Mass, Christmas, 1957. During the Mass, members of the Cherry Gang entered the car of the leader of the Sinner Gang, who was attending Mass at the time, and damaged his automatic transmission. As a result, during the Mass a fight took place between the two gangs on the church grounds. There was rock and brick throwing. After Mass, I spoke at length with the leader of the Sinner Gang, naively believing all he told me.

“What happened, Johnny?”

“Berto screwed up my car, Padre. He screwed it up real good while I was in church at Mass, Padre. He did that and I busted him in the face.”

“Look, Johnny, you guys have got to stop this rivalry. We have a lot to do in the parish and all this just means that we don’t do anything positive. Now, I want you two guys to make up. and set a good example, shake hands.”

“Like hell, Padre!”

I decided that the best way to solve the immediate problem was to take Johnny, the leader of the Sinner Gang, home with me for a day’s vacation in Escondido. This I did, but when I came back to El Centro and talked to the leaders of the Cherry Gang, I learned a different story. The so-called dilemma was solved when I had a mechanic look at the automatic transmission.

“Padre, that transmission couldn’t possibly have been damaged by hand within the last few days. The damage happened months ago. I think Johnny is just looking for a trick to get his transmission fixed by blaming it on the Cherry gang.”

Because of the mechanic’s decision, I told the leader of the Sinners that I did not believe his story. This, of course, enraged him—and his father, a very erratic and impulsive

man, who, because he once helped border patrolmen, felt that he was an unofficial police officer from the east side in El Centro, where most of the Chicanos lived.

A few days later, while I was showing a movie to about 20 members of the Cherry gang in the Church hall, Johnny Rodriguez, the Sinner leader, sent word that he wanted to see me. He was outside, a few hundred feet away at the entrance of the Church hall. He was a young man of medium height who was built like a gorilla. His father was of the same height and build. Johnny had a large baseball bat with him and had been drinking.

“I’m gonna beat the hell out of every Cherry,” he slurred.

“Alone?”

“Yeah, Padre,” he said swinging the bat wildly. He began to yell and the commotion brought out the Cherries. In a few seconds, Johnny was surrounded by 18 Cherries, me in the middle trying to tell Johnny how foolish it would be to take the whole gang on single-handed.

During that tense moment, while everyone hesitant, trying to figure out what to do next, Johnny Rodriguez’ father appeared on the scene. He drove up to the front of the Church and came running out brandishing a pistol. Later we learned it was a toy pistol, but we didn’t know at the time.

“I am the law in this neighborhood,” he shouted. At the sight of Johnny’s erratic father, most of the Cherries ran behind the rectory. I ducked behind a car parked by the Church.

From their safe places, the Cherries started throwing rocks at Johnny’s father’s car. It rained down in a torrent of stone that drove Johnny, cursing under his breath, and his enraged but frightened father to their car.

They drove away.

“Bye-bye, Sinners!” the Cherries chanted. Little did I dream that this was not the end of the story.

The next day, the Auxiliary Bishop of San Diego, Richard J. Ackerman, came to El Centro to conduct a workshop for the priests of the area. During this workshop, he called me into his office and gave me a tongue-lashing. That morning the gun-toting father of Johnny Rodriguez had been in to see him.

“I am going to sue Fr. Victor for \$25,000 because he came to my house and told my son, Johnny, that he was a liar because he told a lie about his car’s transmission. My wife got so upset she had a miscarriage.”

In the office with me, Bishop Ackerman did not bother to ask what really happened. He believed Johnny’s mentally-disturbed father. Ackerman gave me stern advice.

“Remember, Padre,” he told me, “Mexican’s are like little children. You cannot reason with them. You have to treat them like children. Treat them with kid gloves. I will have to report to my superior, Bishop Buddy, about your lack of good judgment in this case.”

Needless to say, Ackerman’s accusation almost cost me the parish. Fortunately, some community leaders contacted Buddy and supported me. I remained in the parish where I had been for less than a year. My relationship with the chancery was proving to be a roller coaster of ups and downs. I was lucky this time—and happy that my efforts would

not be cut short. But I knew that the winds were carrying nothing good for a labor priest taking the side of the oppressed. I knew that I needed to learn to play politics, to learn diplomacy. Tactics, I was beginning to understand, were as important as principle. I was determined that the efforts of my one-man show would not go in vain. Tactics, politics.

A couple years later, when Ackerman again visited my parish to administer the sacrament of confirmation, I had the opportunity to redeem myself in his eyes. A few days before he came down, I invited my mother to visit from Escondido for a few days because I knew Ackerman loved to speak Italian.

The day Ackerman came for the confirmation, he was two hours early. I invited him into the rectory and introduced my mother. The two immediately began to rattle off in Italian. I excused myself with a manufactured emergency. I was beginning to learn to play politics. I asked the bishop to excuse me for an hour because I had to go to the hospital.

When I returned, he filled me with compliments. "Padre, your mother has been telling me all the wonderful things you are doing in the parish. She says you work from dawn to dusk. Padre, take it easy! But congratulations on your good work!"

I had learned to play politics.

At the confirmation service to an overflowing congregation, the bishop again repeated these accolades about me. From that day on, I rated high in his book. I suppose these tactics again show my Italian blood at work. The old Sicilian saying goes, "The mafia never loses. It only wins." I was pleased that I was learning the game of church politics so well.

But not well enough.

Dorothy Day Visits El Centro

One afternoon at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church a marvelous woman came for a visit. This visit and my subsequent reading of her ideas became another significant influence on my life. Dorothy Day, along with Peter Maurin, was one of the founders of the Catholic Worker's Movement, often very unfairly referred to by its enemies with the smear of 'Catholic Communists.' Dorothy Day came in the winter of 1961 to observe the lettuce strike in Imperial Valley that had aroused national attention.

Before her visit, she had been on the west side of the railroad tracks at St. Mary's, literally the *other, rich side of the tracks*, where many wealthy growers attended Mass. Most of the big growers, by the way, were Catholics. Of course, they were opposed to unions.

By the time Dorothy arrived at my parish, she was enraged. A sign on the door of St. Mary's read: "Any striker who needs food go to the police station." She told me the sign was stupid not only because the police were arresting the strikers and openly on the side of the growers, but because it was intended as an obvious insult to the workers. Just the sort of 'cute' humor at others' expense that the wealthy delighted in and passed off as wit. If the workers went to the police they would be arrested.

When she came into the rectory she cooled off a little and we chatted over a lunch my mother had prepared for us.

We had a long talk during lunch. I told her I was supporting the strike but that my support was secret. I told her that if I came out openly I would be transferred immediately, and that I could be more effective this way. There was a small silence.

Jet planes regularly flew loudly over El Centro. There are some large military testing grounds and air fields out there in the desert. A number of them flew over as we sat in silence waiting for their noise to pass.

"One of those planes could accidentally crash at any moment," Dorothy said, perhaps in oblique response to my last remark. "If it crashed that would be the end of someone's life. It could happen to anyone at any time."

There was another pause, then she said, "I wonder if the rich farmers have thought of that."

I regret that later, in 1970, when I worked on the boycott in New York for a year that I did not spend as much time with her as I should have.

In 1973, Dorothy was arrested on a picket line during the massive strikes in the San Joaquin Valley. On this occasion I visited her and she told me that I needed to persevere in my work with the farm workers. She told me that she had visited Father Donald McDonnell, the priest who had discovered Cesar Chavez in the early '50's and indoctrinated him in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. She had visited him a few

days earlier in San Francisco, just before she went to the strike area. She had questioned him about Chavez and the problems of the farm workers. Oddly, she said that McConnell was not interested and spent the afternoon showing her his new parish and the new Stations of the Cross. She then explained the dangers of burnout.

Also, in 1973, she told me about the two priests, the brothers Phil and Dan Berrigan, who were active in the peace movement. She said that Phil lost his credibility when he married Sister Mary McCallister.

I learned two lessons from Dorothy in my friendship with her.

1. Be careful about burn-out. Without patience and persistence, the fire that catches an organizer's soul will burn him out

2. Protect your credibility. Without credibility an organizer is not effective.

My Father and How He Died

My father had a great influence on my life. His influence came in phases, some immediate and direct, others prolonged, latent and subtle. His loving and firm guidance during childhood, youth and early manhood, from the time of my birth to 1961. Second, the lasting influence that has remained with me after his untimely death in 1961, an influence that will live with me as long as I continue to haunt my church, that is, until I too die.

My father was an Italian immigrant born in San Paolo, Brazil. When he was 10 his parents returned to Italy and, alone, he came to America. He was twenty-two, poor, and didn't know English. My father first came to Washington state where he worked. At that time, the Northwest was as yet untamed and, perhaps because of its frontier wildness, a place of tremendous opportunity for those willing to put in the hours, effort, energy. In 1927, the year I was born, my father was 27. He suffered from an enlarged heart caused both by injuries he suffered while in the Italian army in World War I and the hard work he had to do in the lumber camp where he supported the family. When he first came to Washington, he was recruited to dig ditches and construct roads in Port Angeles, Washington.

At the advice of his doctor in 1936, when I was eight, my father, together with my mother and two sisters, moved to California — my little sister was born in 1943. Through hard work my father had saved \$5,000 from the blood, sweat and tears of his labor, and the frugality of his household while in Washington, and with this he bought a wine vineyard in Escondido, California. I started working in my father's vineyard when I was eight.

There was much to learn on our vineyard — a place I recall as a heaven on earth. People who think heaven is a place where the reward for the good is that they don't have to work don't describe the image of heaven I have in my mind. My heaven is a place where people are fulfilled through their work, where men and women enjoy their labor because it is theirs and because it is not alienated from them like something you buy and sell. With my father, of course, work was a form of love. Love of other workers, love of the land, and love of the constructive accomplishment of the work itself.

Father taught me to prune vines, cultivate them, sulphur them, and pick them, and I learned to make wine. As a boy, I never saw my father go to church, but he was a deeply religious man. He loved people. I never saw my father mistreat the men who worked for and with him, though I know more than one Italian farmer in Escondido who made a fortune exploiting Mexican farm workers. The past was forcibly brought back when I visited a former partner of my father in the grape business who died a number of years ago. In the 30 years I knew this man, no farm worker had ever spoken well of him. He was

worth millions, and his great wealth was accumulated by profiting on the labor of these farm workers. This man pointedly didn't love Mexican farm workers. My father did because he honored work.

Strange as it may seem, my father was against my decision to enter the seminary after I finished public high school in Escondido. He didn't favor my becoming a priest, but he never did anything to oppose my decision. On the second Sunday of each month he faithfully visited me at the seminary. Maybe some of the spirit rubbed off.

When I was ordained a priest, my father was the happiest man in the world. After my first solemn Mass, he told me, "When Monsignor Hurd (the preacher at my First Mass) was talking about you, Vic, my head felt like it was going to bust." Monsignor Franklin Hurd was the rector of the seminary at the time.

I owe my concern for people and my love for people to my father. He truly loved people and was sensitive to their needs. I learned to love others from my father, and, because of this influence, I became a priest.

For the first nine years of my priesthood until 1961, my father was a true friend. Wherever I went as a priest, no matter where I was assigned, he was always available to help me. Even a few hours before his unexpected death in May, 1961, he had been helping me for a week to remodel the rectory in El Centro, where, as I have mentioned, I was serving as pastor of a Mexican-American parish.

It was not until after my father's sudden death that I realized how much good my father had done for people. I cannot begin to recount the many stories people have told me about him since he died.

A few months after my father's death, I ran into a man who had formerly been our neighbor when my father was a grape grower. Now, this man is a successful businessman in Escondido.

"Say, Father, I was sorry to hear of your father's death. You know, I have no particular religion. In fact, I don't even believe in God, but, you know, your father was the best man I ever met. Once, Father, years ago, when I was barely making a living and lived below your father's vineyard, I went to ask him a favor in a particular emergency. You see, one of my uncles died in Texas and I needed some cash money to go there right away. I asked your father for a hundred dollars and he gladly gave it to me and told me to pay it back whenever I was able. Your father did not want a receipt or any proof that he gave me a hundred dollars. I gave your father the hundred dollars back about six months later and, you know, not once in those six months did he ever remind me that I owed him a hundred dollars. Father, never in my whole life have I ever met a good man like him."

At a sermon in 1966, one which gave great offense to Escondido farmers, I stated emphatically that it was my father's life that inspired me to be a priest.

I recounted that my father was an honest man who treated his farm workers like human beings and not like animals—as the majority of growers in the area did and still do.

In my homily, I mentioned that three weeks before he died, my father went to visit a former partner, another Italian immigrant, who had just suffered a heart attack. He told me that when he rang the doorbell of the house it was like opening Pandora's Box. Shortly, I will recount the entire incident, but suffice it to say that this incident left a deep impression on my ethical development.

Another phase of my father's influence on my life came after his untimely death, but before I tell you about that influence, the spiritual one, let me give a brief account of how my father died. That event has had a lasting impact on me.

The week before my father's death, I had invited him and another Italian friend, Joe Zanella, to El Centro to paint my rectory. A hell of an invitation, I know, asking people over to your place to work, but, remember, work was something my father truly enjoyed, and helping me and helping the church were added incentives. We always had a good time when we worked together.

My mother came along to keep house and do the cooking. My father, mother and Mr. Zanella had come on a Sunday and had planned to stay until the following Sunday. However, after four days of hard work my father and Mr. Zanella had finished the painting and, in addition, some general repairs. All week my father had been worrying about his avocado trees back in Escondido, and the hot weather that was beginning to set in made it a little uncomfortable. Besides, father had to sleep on a couch in the living room and that was uncomfortable, too. I had offered him my bed, but he was always forgetful of himself and did not want to inconvenience me.

After attending Mass on Friday and eating a hurried breakfast, my father and Mr. Zanella left for Escondido. With a quick good-bye to my father and blessing his car as he drove away, I little realized that this would be the last time I would see him alive.

About an hour and a half later, after I had returned from visiting the County Hospital and as I was about to have breakfast, the phone rang. Joe Zanella's voice was on the line and he said, "Your father had a heart attack. He is dead. I am here at Pine Valley. Please, come right away."

I told Joe that I would be right there.

My mother called out to me, "Who called?"

I said, "Joe called and said that Papa had a stroke at Pine Valley. There was no accident with the car, but before having the stroke Papa pulled over to the side of the road and stopped the engine. He is okay now because they brought him to a nearby hospital. Let's go and see him."

I couldn't tell my mother my father had died. I just couldn't, and, besides, I didn't know how to, and my own heart was numb. I'm sure that telling her would have given her a stroke, too. Within ten or fifteen minutes, my mother and I left and I drove at a neck-breaking speed over country roads to get to the place where my father died. I was hoping as I drove that the coroner and the hearse would not be on the scene when we arrived.

During the hour and a quarter of driving to the scene of my father's death, I kept telling my mother not to worry, that everything would be okay. I kept telling her that my father would be okay. That she would be okay. At the same time, I said that even supposing he should die, all also would be okay. I was trying to prepare her gently for the reality that I would tell her and she would face head-on when we arrived at the hospital. My own heart was twisted with sorrow.

Fortunately, when we arrived at the scene of my father's death, the hearse had just gone around the corner. The coroner was still there. I stepped out of the car and talked to the coroner briefly. He told me that my father's body had just left for the county morgue, where an autopsy would be performed the next day. The coroner said that he had notified

the priest near the morgue of my father's death. He said that priest would administer the last rites to my father when he arrived at the morgue.

When I stepped back into the car, I told my mother that my father was at a hospital near San Diego. I went through the motions of going to and into the hospital, then, still trying to figure out how to handle the situation, I returned and told my mother that my father was transferred to another hospital in San Diego, and that everything was okay. Dad was okay. Mom was okay. I was okay. Everything was okay.

Nothing was okay.

The idea occurred to me of taking my mother to the rectory of the church near the county morgue and have the pastor there gently break the news to her. I did. To this day she is grateful that it happened this way. The shock would have been too great for her to bear.

Later that day, after I brought my mother home to nearby Escondido, I phoned the Bishop and told him of my father's death. The Bishop gave me his condolences and said he would offer some Masses for my father's soul. In the same breath, the Bishop asked me if I would consider a change from El Centro.

"I'll give it some thought, your Excellency. Right now, you understand, I am not able to concentrate very much."

"Well, Victor, take a few days off to bury your father. But before you return to El Centro, go visit Oro Grande and see if you like the parish there," he said in a quiet, determined voice.

I was silent for a moment, thinking, trying to think. "Excuse me, Bishop, do you think it would be possible if you could come to either my father's rosary or his funeral?"

"No, Victor, I can't make either because I have a broken ankle. I broke it recently and am in a wheelchair."

It was this conversation with Bishop Charles F. Buddy, the bishop who ordained me a priest on February 2, 1952, that the second phase of my father's influence on me began.

My father, when he was alive, had taught me to detest any lack of sincerity of truth. And I thought after my conversation with the Bishop that I detected in the Bishop both a lack of sincerity and truth. First, how could the Bishop be truly sincere about my father's death and yet in the same conversation ask me to consider taking over another parish? And, again, it seemed that the Bishop lacked truthfulness when he said that he could not come to my father's rosary when all along I knew that he would be in Escondido that very night for the investiture of a pastor with the robes of a monsignor.

To add injury to insult, I phoned the pastor of my hometown, Escondido, to ask him to help me to get the Bishop to my father's rosary on Sunday night since he would be there for his investiture as a monsignor. The pastor would hear nothing of it. "Sunday night is my night! I am becoming a monsignor and I will not let it be spoiled by the Bishop attending your father's rosary."

My father died on a Friday and I buried him three days later on Monday morning. On Monday afternoon I decided to visit the parish in Oro Grande, about 120 miles away, to see if I liked it. I took my mother and my elderly uncle who lived on our ranch along for a ride. After visiting with the pastor of Oro Grande, I decided not to accept the parish. My

decision was based on the fact that I preferred El Centro and, since I had been given the choice, I decided to remain in El Centro. Since I knew that the Bishop that very day was in the neighboring city of San Bernardino for the investiture of another monsignor, I thought I would stop by for a minute and tell him that I did not want the parish at Oro Grande.

When I arrived in San Bernardino, I left my uncle and mother at a restaurant and I went to the investiture alone. I arrived in time for the dinner, which lasted over two hours—one half hour of eating and almost two hours of speech-making. It was during the speechmaking, basically a lot of fancy rhetoric without sincerity, that I realized something I never realized before. The thought struck me like a bolt of lightning.

“Who’s kidding who?” The Bishop told me he had no time to come to my father’s rosary and no time to come to my father’s funeral because — with a broken ankle — he was in a wheelchair. Yet, the night of my father’s rosary, here he was in Escondido for the investiture of a monsignor, and, again, the day of my father’s funeral, he had plenty of time to travel 120 miles to the investiture of another monsignor and listen for over two hours to a lot of rhetoric. I thought to myself that if the Bishop knew my father was worth a little money, you could bet your boots he would have traveled the 30 miles to Escondido that morning to assist at my father’s funeral, wheelchair or no. It was right then and there I vowed that from that moment on I would be fearless in my pursuit of social justice. Never again would I be afraid to speak out openly for social justice, to do something for the migrant farm workers of my parish in El Centro. I resolved then and there that I had enough of my Bishop’s and church’s hypocrisy. I had always been a zealous priest concerned about people and social justice, but every time I had tried to do something to help the Mexican-American farm worker.

Now, in the wake of my father’s death and all that empty rhetoric, I resolved to go back to El Centro and start the real fight in earnest.

Growing Up With My Father

One outstanding quality of my father's personality was his generosity. My first home in Port Angeles, where I was born, was a Mecca for everyone. Anyone in trouble came to my father's house. He and my mother would help them. My parents' generosity is exemplified in the way they cared for Louie, an Italian immigrant from northern Italy who was an ex-boxer in Canada. His name was Louie Bianchet. My mother says that Louie's wife, Bepa, helped her when she first arrived in Port Angeles from Italy. After a few years she died suddenly and Louie turned to drinking. My father considered him like a brother and helped him in all his difficulties. He got him out of jail several times, saw that my mother changed the bed sheets, and cleaned his little bungalow near our house. To show appreciation to my parent's concern for him, Louie showered me and my two sisters with generous gifts. He would treat us to candy and ice cream and take all three of us to the afternoon movies on Saturdays. He would buy himself a bottle of whiskey and drink it during the movie. After a few minutes, he would be fast asleep. We kids would see the movie at least twice and we liked that a lot, but when we didn't get home on time, my mother would get worried and send my father to get us. My father knew what the problem was. He knew Louie was drink and sleeping in the movie house so dad would come put Louie over his shoulder and drag him home and put him to bed.

My godfather lived next door in a house my father owned and rented to him. My godfather, whose name was Dominic Baseggio, was single. He was not single by choice. His fiancée, also an Italian immigrant, was taking care of her aging parents, so she kept delaying the marriage. My godfather ate often at our home and was part of the family. My father also considered him a brother. Santo, as we called him, had a car and he and my father drove to work each morning to the same lumber mill where they worked. My father could not drive a car at that time. My uncle, my mother's brother, also lived with us and he was part of the family.

My dad loved to play cards with our entire family, Santo, my uncle Martin, and their friends. I still vividly recall lively card games at our house where the wine flowed and the men's loud voices prevailed.

For my father, his family was the big thing in his life. I remember my father playing with me and my sisters. He took us for walks in the nearby woods, to homes of Italian friends, and to Italian weddings.

I recall that most of our friends were Italians because many Italian families lived near and around us. The Anglo families who lived near us were always welcome in our home. My father spoke English remarkably well because he had come to Port Angeles two-and-a-half years before my mother. At work he was constantly using English. He learned to read English fairly well on his own without formal schooling. He told me that he learned English by going to movies often and by speaking it every day at work, not at school. The

irony of it is that I have supported myself for the last few years teaching English to new arrivals, primarily from Mexico. What goes around comes around.

Our home in Port Angeles was like a little farm. We had all kinds of fruit trees that my father had planted: apple trees, cherry trees, plum and prune trees. WE had lots of chickens and a huge garden in which both my father and mother worked. The one thing that my father did not like was the cow on our little farm. The reason was that he hated to milk it. He would do anything, but he hated to milk the cow. Either my mother or uncle did the milking. Only when my mother or uncle couldn't milk the cow, my father would.

Before the day of television, we children enjoyed going to movies with our parents some Saturday evening—not, of course, if we had been to the matinee with Louie. After the movie, my father would buy us large ice cream cones. In those days they cost a nickel each. On cold evenings, we get under my dad's long overcoat on the long mile walk home from the movie.

In 1936 we moved, as I've said, to Escondido, when my father bought his 40-acre grape ranch. It was in the middle of the depression, the American economy had ceased to exist for many, and this sad state of affairs hit farmers especially hard because people lacked the money to buy what they grew.

My sisters, my mother and I were accustomed to going to Mass on Sunday, but when we moved to our ranch, about five miles from the Church, we seldom went because half the time my fathers car was out of order or he had to work on Sunday to make ends meet.

During our first year in Escondido, my father had to work ten hours a day chopping down trees for 25 cents an hour: a \$2.50 day! Our nearest neighbor, Mr. Somebody, who lived a half a mile from our ranch, was not very friendly. He managed a 500-acre farm which bordered our vineyard. It was a highly successful ranch with many acres planted in oranges, lemons, avocados, and grain. His seven sons and his wife were friendly to us, but he was a confirmed racist and a die-hard teetotaler who hated my father because he made wine. During our first year on the ranch, we had a big Italian celebration with fifty or more Italian relatives and friends from San Diego and as far away as Los Angeles. An uncle from Los Angeles played his accordion as loud as he could on that cool summer evening, many sang, and the wine flowed freely. In the middle of the gaiety, the county sheriff's paddy wagon pulled up in front of our ranch house and a country sheriff approached my father.

"Mr. Somebody, your neighbor, doesn't like all the noise," the sheriff said apologetically. He sent me here to tell you. He complained that you and your friends were disturbing the peace."

My father, ordinarily a very calm man, lost his temper and cursed, running into the house to get his shot gun. He came out with the gun and told the sheriff in no uncertain terms that this was his property and he could do what he wanted on it. The sheriff knew my father was right and left immediately, apologizing over and over again.

On another occasion, my father hired one of the older sons of Mr. Somebody to disk our forty-acre vineyard with his tractor because my father didn't have one. After his work, my father paid him the wage agreed upon and gave the son five gallons of his homemade wine as a bonus. The son loved my father's wine. Shortly after the son left, Mr.

Somebody came to visit my father and bawled him out, shouting that he was an agent of the devil for having given his son wine. My father calmly listened to him and told him to get off his property. Mr. Somebody promptly did.

In Escondido, as in Port Angeles, my father's generosity always stood out. He was always willing to help people who were less fortunate. His generosity also manifested itself during the prosperous war years when he and other grape growers hit the jackpot because they received a very good price for their wine grapes. From the summer of 1936, when our family arrived from Port Angeles to live on our grape ranch, until about the fall of 1939 things had gone from bad to worse. That bad spell ended in the fall of 1939 when my father decided to move back to Port Angeles. He left the ranch in the temporary care of my uncle, and got his old job back at the lumber mill in Port Angeles. His return to Port Angeles was not something the doctor who had suggested he move to California liked. The doctor, a long-time resident of the Washington area and good friend of my father, had said dad needed a milder climate because he had an enlarged heart.

My father put his health in second place, after his family. He had little confidence in doctors and believed that since he had made it through 1939 in good health he would not have any more health problems. My father never cared about himself. His only concern was always what was best for the family.

The family stayed in Port Angeles for three years. There my father's health was good. Financially, we prospered. He remodeled our home and rented it for a good price before we returned to Escondido. I was 14 years old then and had completed my first year of high school in Port Angeles. I was tall and strong and worked with my father after school and in the summer. All of the family worked during the prosperous war years and helped my father pay off debts on our farm and acquire more property. As a result, my father bought ten more acres of a good vineyard and a large apartment house in downtown Escondido.

During the war years, my father's generosity showed itself again and again. During those years, my father and another Italian farmer had a monopoly on all the vineyards in the Escondido area, no small undertaking for an immigrant of two decades. What my dad's colleague did not own, he and my father rented. They made money by hiring workers to cultivate and harvest the grapes that they sold to area wineries. During these prosperous and exciting years my father and his colleague had an opportunity to buy or rent many vineyards in the Escondido area.

My father's colleague took advantage of cheap Mexican labor. My father did not. He did not take advantage of this opportunity because it meant hiring Mexican workers at low wages and exploiting them. My father really resented his colleague's business tactics, a widespread practice in the valley. They would hire illegal farm workers for a month or so on credit, provide them with a little to eat each day, and sometimes give them a place to sleep. Then, when payday came at the end of the month, they would notify the Border Patrol that the farm workers were here illegally, and the workers would be immediately deported, their labor for the growers free.

My father didn't accept this exploitation of farm workers by his partner and he broke up the partnership after they had been together for only a few years.

After my father broke up with his business partner, the partner, also an Italian immigrant, went on exploiting Mexican farm workers. With the money he acquired he bought up a lot of the beset vineyards in Escondido and became as rich as a king. His relatives are wealthy to this day. I am very proud that my father broke up with his partner. Had he not, he could also have been a multi-millionaire.

I hope my father's generosity and integrity rubbed off on me. I wanted to be a good man like him. He inspired me to do something useful in my life. I felt that the best way to be like him would be to do something for him that would please him.

My father always had a dream of renovating the old winery on our ranch which was at one time the first winery in the Escondido area. One day, I told him that would finish high school and go on to college to become a chemist so that I could make good wines and establish a new winery on our ranch. This pledge made my father very happy and I was well on my way to achieving it when something happened to change me.

A few months before graduation and my departure for the University of California at Berkeley where I would major in chemistry, I began to have doubts about whether or not I was doing the right thing. Since I was 12 years old back in Port Angeles, where I attended a Catholic parochial school, I had aspired to be a priest, but my parents did not approve. When the family returned to Escondido when I was 14, I laid the thought aside of becoming a priest. During the busy years of working on my father's ranch and attending High School, I forgot my desire to be a priest. But at the end of my senior year, the aspiration to become a priest again came into my mind and soon began to plague me day and night. It was only after I had been at the University for about two months that I finally decided to enter the seminary.

The decision came as a great shock to my parents, but especially to my father. He had a low esteem for the priesthood because he had witnessed so much scandal in the Church when he was a boy. Because of the many clerical abuses among priests he knew, he strongly believed that they just used and exploited people. Priests didn't preach to their flocks, he believed, but fleeced them.

Nevertheless, my father tolerated my decision to study for the priesthood. Still, in subtle ways, he continued to dissuade me from becoming a priest. He offered to lend me his car any time I was home for summer vacation or any other vacation. A real test to pursuing my studies occurred during the last two years of my studies when my father's health failed him and he was having some bad luck in his farming ventures. After spending \$5000 dollars to dig a new well on his property, he still lacked sufficient water to irrigate several acres of newly-planted avocado trees. At this time, my father tried to convince me that my place was on the ranch helping him. He offered to give me the ten acres of grapes he owned in downtown Escondido. If I had accepted my father's offer, I would today be the owner of prime business real estate in downtown Escondido and would have been worth millions. True, but that's not what I wanted. It hurt me to see that my father needed my help and I couldn't help. Yet, I felt called by God to become a priest. I believed I had to respond to this calling.

I will never regret my decision. Oddly enough, considering the pressures from my father, a wonderful thing happened. A few months after I was ordained, my father sold our

40-acre grape ranch which was no longer profitable for a good price, and he invested in two pieces of valuable property in another part of Escondido.

Earlier in this narrative, I mentioned that when I was ordained a priest my father was very proud of me. True to form, he wanted to help me. Again, his generosity showed. In every parish that I was assigned to in the first nine years of my priesthood, my father would always come to volunteer his services. He could afford to do this because he was, by that time, doing well and not obliged to work every day. He enjoyed hosting dinner for my priest friends and people of all kinds at our avocado ranch in Escondido.

On one occasion, after I had been three years in my farm-worker parish in El Centro, my mother remarked to my father, "How come our son is stuck in a poor Mexican parish? Why, he was one of the first priests ordained in San Diego. He should be at least a Monsignor and have a good parish in San Diego."

"You shut up. You don't know what you're talking about. If our son saves one soul in El Centro, it is as well-worth a dozen of those la-de-dahs in San Diego."

My father never thought of himself as I remember—except for milking the cow. He always put his family first. He never bought anything for himself. He only owned one overcoat in all his life and when he died I inherited it. And, he never bought anything he could pay for in cash. If he did not have cash for something, he didn't buy it. He didn't believe in credit.

He bought only one new car in all his life and that was the same car he died in. He bought a Ford Falcon in 1961. He paid about \$2500 for it. My father had the money and paid for it in cash, but still as a child of the depression he worried about spending so much money on a car. He felt maybe he could have used the money to better advantage. When I assured him that the car was a good buy, he felt good. I think he stopped worrying about it, but maybe not.

He loved his grandchildren and could never spend enough time with them. My father had many charming habits, and, remembering him, they stick in the mind. Whenever we traveled together as a family by car and we needed a snack, he would always buy two things: bananas and chocolate candy. He loved bananas because he was born in Brazil and had lived there until he was ten.

My father loved children. During the last three years of his life he couldn't do enough for his grandchildren. He especially loved Mario, a beautiful little blond boy who was the first child of my sister, Mary, who lived in Long Beach, about 100 miles from Escondido. No month passed by without my father driving up to Long Beach to see Mario. My oldest sister, Louise, had her first two children, Paul and Julia, in the last three years of my father's life, and he visited them and took them out every day to play.

An incident which my father told me about three weeks before he died stands out in my mind as one of the best examples of his character. As I mentioned before, it is an incident that I later recounted in a sermon I gave in my hometown, Escondido, and for which I was greatly criticized by the growers in the area.

My father related to me that he visited his former Italian business partner (the one he broke off with because he treated Mexican farm workers unjustly) one day because he heard that he was recovering from a severe heart attack.

My father rang the doorbell and waited for a quarter hour outside his friend's door. While he was waiting, he struck up a conversation with one of his partner's workers. He asked him how much his friend paid him. He told my father he was paid \$120 a month for 30 days work. Four dollars a day. This was 1961 and such a wage was well below the minimum. My father found out that this worker had ten children and a wife in Mexico and the low wages he received were not sufficient to make ends meet. The worker also said that he never got a day off. My father asked him where he lived. He pointed to a shack behind the house. My father exclaimed: "My chickens have a better place to live in!"

His former partner finally came to the door and explained that the reason he had kept my father waiting was that he was checking his avocado grove to see if the underpaid worker was doing his work. When my father heard this, he went into a rage. "You are not a millionaire, you are a multi-millionaire! One of the richest men in this city! And you got the gall to treat this guy like this? You should be ashamed of yourself. Don't you have any pride in being an Italian?"

Father and the Feds

Back in 1936, during the Great Depression when many people were out of work, a ton of grapes sold for about nine dollars and it cost about eleven dollars for labor. My father made wine out of 40 acres of grapes instead of letting the grapes rot on the vine. My father, mother, myself, my two sisters, together with my uncle who lived with us picked all the grapes. My father made nearly three thousand gallons of wine. We had plenty of 50 gallon barrels to put the wine in because our ranch had had an old winery on it when my dad bought it.

One day, two federal agents stopped by our ranch and discovered that my father had made the wine without permission from the U.S. Department of the Interior. A person was only allowed to make 200 gallons per family each year without permission. My father was not aware of this fact because he had just arrived from Port Angeles. The Federal Agents were very upset with my father and said that he would have to pay a fine of \$200 for having made so much wine without a Federal permit. \$200 dollars in depression days was something like four months wages at 25 cents an hour. My father had only \$50 in cash at the time and he gave it to the Feds. The Feds insisted that he give them more. My father said it was all he had. The feds were upset and kept insisting. My father got out his shotgun and demanded that they get off his property. They left promptly like a couple of scared rabbits. About two weeks later, the same two Feds came back to our ranch and returned the \$50, saying, "Mr. Salandini, you are the only honest men in this area. Here is your money back." They gave him his money back because they said that he did not intentionally break the law. Other grape growers in the area hid their barrels of wine in cellars and other secret places to avoid paying taxes. The Feds did, however, warn my father not to sell the wine. I know that my father did not strictly adhere to the law. We had to sell some of the wine to buy food. In those depression years every wine-grape grower had to break the law a little to feed his family.

My Father's Parable of the Two Farmers

My father used to tell the story of two farmers—one farmer, John, and another farmer, Tony:

John and Tony decided to plant potatoes. One day when they were planting potatoes, a stranger passed by and started questioning them.

“What are you doing?”

“Planting potatoes,” farmer John replied.

“Why are you planting so many acres of potatoes,” the stranger asked.

“My wife’s sick and I got a lot of children to feed,” John said.

“If you have a good harvest, what will you do with all your money?”

“I’ll get a good doctor for my wife who will help her get better. And I’ll see that my children have enough food in their bellies and enough good clothing on their backs. If I got money left over I’ll help some of my neighbors. They got a rough time these days, too!”

The stranger moved on until he came to Tony. “What’re you doing, friend?”

“I’m planting as many acres of potatoes as I can to take care of my wife and children,” Tony said.

“What’ll you do if you have a good harvest?”

“I’ll take care of my wife and children and save the rest under my bed.”

“What about your less fortunate neighbors?”

“What about them?” They’re all a bunch of lazy bums. To hell with ‘em.”

The stranger left the farmers to do their work and went on his way.

When harvest time came, farmer John had such an abundant harvest that he was able to take care of his wife and get her a good doctor. And he was able to provide well for his children. With his excess money, he went out of his way to help some of his less fortunate neighbors. As a result, he was well-liked by his neighbors. His good deeds helped to create a sense of community in the neighborhood.

Farmer Tony had a very poor harvest and he was not able to care for his wife and children. If it had not been for the generosity of farmer John, Tony would not have been to provide the bare necessities for his wife and children.

My father would always conclude this story by trying to impress upon me not to be selfish like farmer Tony, but to learn to share with others the things we have.

The stranger, he told me, was Christ, who can appear at any time in any race, color or creed.

My Mother

My mother was born in a village in northern Italy a few miles from Venice. She was born on May 14th, 1899, one of five children. A younger brother and sister died of influenza when they were very young. An influenza epidemic was raging over northern Italy at the time. Of the five children in that family, none are alive today but her. Her youngest sister, Louisa, died an early death at 22 years of age, and her older brother, Martin, my beloved uncle, lived with us on the ranch till he died in 1968 at the age of 77. He died in 1968, never having married. He had lived with mom and dad for years.

My mother worked all her life. She started working in a textile mill near her home in northern Italy when she was 12. She told me that she used to work eight hours a day at the mill—this was just after the Socialists had by their strike action won concessions for an eight hour day. But even an eight-hour day is a long one for a child who should be out playing and enjoying youth. There's a greedy subtext in those numbers. A company has no soul and although it may be a "body" or "corporation," even treated as a "person" in the eyes of the law, that merely says something about the eyesight of our legal system. When people ask me why I have for so long continued organizing and fighting the establishment the way I do, like some damn fool pounding his head against a stone wall, against the "rock" that is my own church, I think of my mom. That's one I owe you, I sometimes think. One I owe the corporations that continue in the name of free enterprise to misuse people. I know that sounds like mafia vendetta and maybe it is. But no damn company is going to exploit mom and get away with it. And the company is going to exploit mom and get away with it. And the company is really the system, and it's the same company then as it is now. It's the same company that ripped off my mom and today rips off the Mexican farm workers in California, the United Auto Workers at Caterpillar who have nobly resisted attempts to be marginalized, the diamond mines in south Africa who treat black Africans like dogs, the iron heel military in Chile....On and on. Yes, we Salandinis never forget. When I think about a kid like my mom working those long hours in bad conditions it makes my blood boil.

Imagine starting at twelve years of age. She worked eight hours in the office of the textile mill. Then she worked at home on her own doing seamstress work because she had learned to be a seamstress when she went to school and she was very good at it. She still is a seamstress. She can sew, crochet, and knit. She's just an expert at this trade, a higher skilled worker, like so many women, whose labor was never given its due. She worked eight hours a day for fifteen years in that factory — until she moved to America, where she rejoined my father. My father came to America when he was 22 and married my mother in Italy before coming to America. My mother was twenty-three at the time of her marriage. After a few months in Italy my father was contracted to do work in Washington, so he left my mother there and sent for her two and a half years later.

My mother has told me about the horrors of war. When she was 18, she had to flee her job in the factory in northern Italy because of the war. She and her family had to flee their village because the Germans were coming, were taking over. She lived for about a year in Assisi, which is in central Italy, in a Franciscan monastery. She has told me that she spent her time making robes for the monks. While there, her ability as a seamstress was recognized, and she even worked for others while a refugee in Assisi. There's nothing like having a trade to fall back on, and I learned that from my mother.

After the war was over she got her job back in the textile mill. My mother came from a very devout Catholic family. Her parents went to mass every Sunday, and her father, Angelo was especially devout. He never missed mass on Sunday, and he was the only man in town that the nuns trusted. He took them to the market every week in his horse and buggy.

My mother tells me that Angelo, her father, had great devotion to Saint Anthony. She has told me a story. My mother, like yours, has many stories, I am sure. Once, when Angelo was doing construction work, there was an accident on the roof. The roof caved in and two men were killed, but he survived scratch-less. He was thankful for not getting hurt, and he attributed the saving of his life to Saint Anthony. My mother said that as a result of this incident her father made a pilgrimage of about forty miles, barefooted, to Padua to give thanks to the saint.

When my mother was 26, she rejoined my father in Port Angeles, Washington, and there she gave birth to three children: my older sister, Louise, me, and my second sister, Mary. My third sister Rosie was born a number of years later in 1943 in Escondido, California. My mother's life was centered around her husband and her children, around the family, and that's just the way it was in those days in families that came from the old country, whether Italian or Chinese, whether Catholic, Protestant or Jew. Her life was all for her family. A lady with a lot of initiative, she was the financial head of our family. My father always relied on my mother for all financial decisions. Sound familiar? She was the keeper, you might say, of the purse. She was industrious, and I first saw that in our home in Port Angeles. She raised chickens and sold the eggs. She would butcher her own chickens, and we had rabbits, and she butchered them, too, and she cooked them so tender that I just knew that the rich couldn't eat as well.

My father didn't like to milk the cow. I'm not sure that my mother liked the job, either, but she did it and she didn't complain. She always milked the cow unless she was sick. Then dad did it.

She was everything. She was a gardener, a Jane of all trades, a great asset to my father and the children. It seemed like there was nothing she couldn't do. Even in her broken Italian she was nobody's fool. Once, she rented our barn to a friend to store his equipment and he didn't keep his end of the bargain. He thought he could take advantage of my mother because she was a foreigner and didn't know the laws. But my mother, as I say, was nobody's fool. She went to the county courthouse, to the judge, and she was able to sue this guy for not paying us for the use of our barn. She forced him to pay for the rental of our barn.

My mother learned how to read by herself and she knew what was going on. On one occasion, just before the "Bank Holiday" in 1930, she read in the paper that the banks

were in jeopardy—sounds like the recent Savings and Loan fiasco, doesn't it? She hounded my father to take the money out of the bank and put it in the post office. My dad kept saying, "You're crazy. You're crazy. You don't know what you're saying." But she kept nagging him and three days before the banks closed or "went on holiday," he took the money out — about \$3,000 — and put it into the post office. The very next day the banks closed and people lost thousands and thousands of dollars. My mother's initiative saved the little nest egg we had in the bank.

I can't say enough good about my mother. She has always been a strong supporter of me, my priesthood, and my causes. I couldn't ask for a better mother. In the seminary, she was more supportive of me than my father. When I did become a priest she was my backbone on many occasions. In all my conflicts with my bishops, she always backed me up. And she would always say, and says so to this day, "You have done nothing wrong. There is too much politics in the church."

One day, she said that she was going to write to the Pope and complain. I don't know if she did or not, but if she did, the Pope didn't listen. My mother has always been a devout Catholic. She always went to Mass when she was able on Sunday. She prays the rosary every day, and like all Italian peasants in Italy, she learned all her prayers in Latin. To this day she says the rosary in Latin, the "Litany of The Blessed Virgin Mary" in Latin, and all her other prayers in Latin.

My mother has a tremendous memory. At 93 her mind is as sharp as when she was a young girl. She has a great love for her children, a love she proved shortly after my dad died by giving my dad's substantial wealth to my three married sisters. She left some to me, too. Not much because I felt I didn't need it as much as my sisters.

Presently, my mother is in a convalescent home in the Escondido area, needing 24-hour care that my oldest sister, Louise, can't give. Fortunately, mom is covered by Medicare and Medicaid and is happy there. She's been there two years, and there she participates in all activities.

She loves to read and is, in fact, an avid reader. She reads *Reader's Digest* and two Italian papers every day. She loves to watch TV and she continues to crochet day after day. Right now she has become popular with the nurses for whom she crochets little items.

Here's another tidbit I'd like to share about my mom. It's something that happened one day when my mother was helping me in El Centro. Once I was ordained a priest my mother was always generous with her time, especially when I was a pastor in El Centro, where she came down periodically to help me. She spent a lot of time with me there. The reason I had her down frequently was to help her get more Social Security. She came from time to time for a few months. When I was stationed in Palm Springs, the pastor's housekeeper was away for a while, and mom helped out for about a month. I mention this because she was always generous with her time when I needed her to help me with my church work. The day before my dad died, she was down with him and another Italian friend working in my parish in El Centro, remodeling and painting my rectory. That day before he died my mother, who has always been a go-getter, fixed a particular piece of broken tile in my bathroom. There was nothing my mother couldn't do. She could do anything. So she concocted something made of a piece of an old tile. She cut it the right shape and fit it into a corner of the bathroom where a piece had broken and it was a

professional job. My mom can do anything. She called my dad into the restroom to show him how she had fixed the tile.

“By God! That’s a wonderful piece of work.” Then he said to her, “You certainly have enough merit to go to heaven for having done that!”

And my mother yelled back, “Well, you can go to heaven, I’ll go to hell.” That’s an Italian expression. She says, “You can go to heaven and I’ll go to hell.” And, of course, the very next day my dad died. I’ll always remember that.

She was the financial person in the family, the keeper of the purse. My dad made no financial decisions without asking my mother because he knew although her English was broken she knew a lot. She was self-taught.

My mom was always doing favors for other people. Because of her financial smarts, she was able to get my uncle his social security, something she did for other friends as well. She read the paper and she kept up with things. When she went for her citizenship papers she surprised the judge because she answered all the questions that he asked her. During the war years it was really tough, especially on Italians since Italy was with Hitler, to pass the citizenship exam. My mother and my dad went to night school for a year or so. My mother got to go more than my father. She had a tremendous memory and she memorized all the questions and she knew them cold turkey. She told us children when she came home that when she went in front of the judge he couldn’t stick her on anything. She had the answer and she knew everything. She was so proud when she passed, and so were we kids. According to my father, who went along with her, the judge said, “Gee, this is another Mussolini.” He got a big bang out of it. In short, whatever my mother did she did in a grand way.

Fighting Back

After my father's death and the shabby way I and my family were treated by the bishop, I had decided to fight back. I started in the only way I knew how.

In 1959 Bing Crosby, perhaps the most famous singer of his era and a man known for his charitable work for the church, made a personal appearance at my parish while premiering his new movie, *Save One For Me*, in El Centro. The Crosby benefit was designed to build a gymnasium for the parishioners, but Bishop Buddy reallocated the \$7,000 we made to the parish debt. Buddy's high-handed and arbitrary action antagonized the community. Imperial Valley churchgoers were rightfully infuriated. The Imperial Valley community, including the wealthy farmers who contributed to the premier, were also rightfully infuriated. Again and again we were expected to work our tails off for various purposes, and again and again we were treated indifferently by the hierarchy. The Bishop's move caused Crosby to withhold future help for my parish, although he had previously planned to follow up this appearance with a network TV show which could well have netted \$50,000 for the parish.

A few days after my disappointment with Bishop Buddy I returned to my parish and went to work trying to implement my resolution to overcome the obstacles put up by the diocese, organize the field workers, and work out and implement some plan for the poor of the area to fight against their poverty. Because the Bishop had allocated the gymnasium money to the parish debt and Crosby, as a result, had refused to continue to help the parish, I had to turn to another source. If I could get someone as popular as Crosby to visit my parish, I could get national publicity for my parish. In turn, I thought, this would lead to receiving donations from all over the country. I decided to try two other sources at the same time: *Time / Life* and Danny Thomas.

I was successful in 1961 in getting Danny Thomas, a nationally-known comedian, to make a personal appearance at a benefit dance in El Centro. Several months before the opening of *The Danny Thomas Show*, I notified both *Time* and *Life* magazines of the upcoming event. *Life* wrote that it was not interested.. *Time*, however, sent one of its reporters on two different occasions to write up the parish. I now understood that to play politics I needed to understand how to use the media for our ends. Politics was difficult to learn, but I took to organizing media events like a bird to the sky. It was fun and exciting, and it seemed like a short cut to get where I wanted to go. Effective organizing meant effective politics, and effective politics meant effective use of the media. But, I was soon to learn, others had learned these lessons before I had, perhaps better.

The *Time* reporter, Robert F. Jones, wrote a story that was approved by the Beverly Hills office. The story was stopped by the New York office because of the conservative attitude of the religious editor of *Time*. Bishop Buddy also played an important role in

stopping the story. Although I will never know the full details of what happened, here's what I guess happened according to what was told to me later.

It is the policy of all publications, including *Time*, of course, to verify the facts of any story it prints. A *Time* magazine stringer from San Diego was sent to Bishop Buddy to verify the contents of Jones' story. Since the story put Buddy in a bad light, he denied it. The Bishop told the stringer that he would sue *Time* if the story were printed.

After meeting with the stringer, Bishop Buddy phoned me. So many years ago, but clear to this day. The phone rang at precisely three-thirty, the very time that Danny Thomas said he would contact me when he arrived in El Centro. I picked up the phone.

"Hi, Danny!"

The voice on the other side was not the Lebanese-American comic. "This is not Danny! This is the Bishop!"

"Sorry, Bishop, I was expecting a call from Danny Thomas. He's doing a benefit for the parish, you know, and he'll be arriving momentarily."

In a rage, the Bishop continued. "You know, Padre, you should never talk to *Time* reporters. They cannot be trusted. One of them has written a vicious story titled, 'In the Nuts.' Did you tell him all those things?"

"Well, Bishop, yes, I told him some of those things, but most of what he wrote is pretty well-known by the community here." This answer further provoked the Bishop, who became even more enraged. He repeated, "Never, *never* ever talk to a *Time* reporter again."

I copped out, "Yes, Bishop." But I didn't mean it. Then the Bishop asked about Danny Thomas. "What's this about Danny Thomas?"

"Oh, Bishop, I was going to tell you later. Danny Thomas is helping with a benefit to put refrigeration in the Church."

The Bishop was silent and then said, "Okay, but be certain it is used for refrigeration." I guess he learned from the Crosby show.

I didn't hear the end of this story for months to come. The "In the Nuts" episode was told over and over again by the Bishop at priest's meetings. He couldn't get it off his mind, and it's not a good thing to occupy so much of a bishop's waking time. A special directive was released several weeks later, together with other directives, informing the clergy of the San Diego Diocese that absolutely and under no circumstances was any information ever to be submitted to a magazine or any other publication without the approval of the Bishop.

In taking on the bishop I was fighting back, but so was he. Round One: Bishop. I needed to learn more from books and life.

Education and Related Experiences

My best friend for 36 years, Father Leo Davis, often said to me that I was a permanent student because I had spent so many years of my life studying. After graduating from Escondido Union High School in January, 1945, I entered the University of California at Berkeley as a chemistry major. I remained there only about six weeks. During that time I decided to enter a seminary to study for the Catholic priesthood. I had been thinking about being a priest since I was twelve, but hadn't gone into a seminary because my parents were not in favor of my becoming a priest. Once I was away from home in Berkeley, a town that brings out the best in many people, I finally made up my mind to become a priest.

I was accepted at a nearby seminary a few weeks later and stayed there for three months before transferring to the San Diego Diocesan Seminary in El Cajon in the summer of 1945. I studied there for seven years and was ordained a Catholic priest on February 2, 1952.

From 1952 to 1962, as I have already highlighted, I was active in various parishes and was the pastor of a Spanish-speaking parish in El Centro for almost 5 years. I returned to formal study in September, 1962, because Bishop Buddy, the man who ordained me, recommended that I pursue further studies in order to develop a more balanced understanding of farm-labor problems in California. In other words, because of our many disagreements, and especially because of my involvement with the lettuce strike in El Centro in 1961, I was sent into another sort of exile: academia.

Before going on to further study, Buddy suggested that I teach at University Boys' High School, a Catholic school, for a year. I did, using this time as a preparation period for entering a M.A. program at St. Louis University in Missouri. Teaching high school in the day, I attended evening courses at San Diego Evening College each weekday. I found, to my surprise, that I liked teaching. Maybe Davis had been right, and maybe the Bishop had made an inadvertent mistake. I was still committed to organizing, and I knew that the best place to organize was the place you were in at the time, so organize I did.

I entered St. Louis University in June, 1963, and remained there for a year and a half, taking an M.A. in economics. The topic of my thesis was *The Imperial Valley Lettuce Strike of 1961*, my participation in which was the exact reason why I lost my parish in El Centro and ended up at the University. The coincidence was more than ironic. It was purposeful. Exiled into education because of my work in a strike, I continued the same struggle on another level—the academic replaced the actual. This was Round Two, and it had yet to be decided.

All during this period my head was full of the memories of my father, the advice of Fr. Davis, and thoughts of swelling orange trees, the odor and experience of going up and down those ladders picking oranges so many years before in the groves in Escondido.

Of necessity my thesis had to be an objective economic analysis of the 1961 lettuce strike and I was careful not to mention my personal involvement. This involvement, however, was publicized in two national publications, *America* and *Commonweal*, both Catholic magazines. Since I had written neither piece nor contributed to their writing, and since both were Catholic publications, the Bishop could do nothing to me except suspect involvement. His loud rage had become a silent one, an anger waiting its time.

At St. Louis University, a Jesuit school, I took courses in economic theory, labor economics, collective bargaining, and the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. I put in long hours of study each day and was able to maintain a "B" average. In order to help pay for my expenses, I did part-time work in a wealthy parish and in a Catholic hospital. My parish work made me very aware of the racial problems that existed all around the area of the university, which was situated in a black ghetto. I observed that the average white Catholic priest in St. Louis was prejudiced against the black population of St. Louis. At the time there were only a handful of black Catholic priests in the city.

The racial problem really came home to me one afternoon when after class one of my white classmates was murdered a few blocks from the university by a black gang. About that same time, the famous John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me* spoke at the University. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend a day with him. This was 1963 and Mr. Griffin at that time predicted the riots that occurred 5 years later in many major U.S. cities.

After my stint at St. Louis University, my new Bishop, Bishop Francis J. Furey, appointed me to teach math at Marian High School while I was in residence at St. Rita's Church in Chula Vista, a city adjacent to San Diego. I helped part-time in parish work.

At St. Rita's the pastor asked me to give some sermons on the social doctrine of the Church. This I did. During a sermon on farm-labor problems in the area, I antagonized a wealthy parishioner who operated an agricultural packing shed. He complained about my sermon and I was transferred from my high school assignment and St. Rita's parish, and sent to a parish in a nearby agricultural border town, San Ysidro, which is located on the border with Mexico.

In San Ysidro, I got involved with the farm workers of the area in their attempts to organize a union. When the workers went out on strike during the tomato harvest in June of 1965, I was removed from the parish because the Catholic farmers in the area put pressure on the Bishop. The incident once again projected me into the national news and Bishop Furey, taking up where Buddy had left off before his death, thought it best for me to take the rest of the summer off and make preparations to return to university studies back east. They were finding it easier in San Diego to have me out of the diocese, the farther out the better. Again, what they didn't understand was that to me, although I suffered some pangs each time I was moved because I had formed friendships and made plans, it didn't really matter. My vocation was to organize, and organizing would take place wherever I was and I would be a part of it. The ivory tower was no more alien to me than

the tomato fields. There are many roads to heaven, I had been told, and most of them, I knew, were rocky.

As a result of the controversy in San Ysidro, I was again sent off “in exile” for further studies. Again, the deciding factor was my involvement in a farm-labor issue. But there was a catch this time. Although I had the permission of my Bishop to pursue further studies, and the “permission” was, in fact, an order, I had to finance my own education. Fine. Although priests don’t make much money....Let me correct that: although *some* priests don’t make much money, *some* priests don’t spend much either, and I fit into that group. Indeed, early on I realized that with the difficulties I was having with my church leaders it was essential that I be financially independent, for to be dependent on the diocese would give the bishops tremendous power over me, a power that, considering my semi-open warfare with the hierarchy, I could neither allow nor afford. I have seen good men ground under by the bishops’ control over their livelihood. What the bishops couldn’t understand was that there are some things for some people that money can’t buy, that you can’t put a price on. The Gospels, by the way, taught me that. Allow me to digress.

Part of the problem in America, as everyone knows but doesn’t know how to resolve, is that we are a materialistic culture and society, and my bishops have repeatedly shown that their bottom line is financial, not spiritual. I know they have a very difficult job managing the day-to-day matters of a large diocese, and that these concerns are to a great extent matters of money. But there are some things money can’t buy, and perhaps because of their constant work in fund raising they come to think that money can solve any problem. What they don’t understand is that for everyone there is something for which the price is insignificant, something for which a human will pay any price.

I chose Catholic University in Washington, D.C. to pursue a doctorate, and the bishop approved of my choice. I spent four full years at Catholic University, from September, 1965 to June, 1969, when I graduated with a doctorate in economics.

About a month before arriving at Catholic University, I had spent a week with Cesar Chavez in Delano, California, just before the grape strike began in September, 1965. Chavez had authorized me to lobby for his union, at the time known as the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). In the university, I spent all my spare time lobbying for Cesar Chavez. I had contact with Bobbie and Ted Kennedy, Walter and Victor Reuther, and a host of other Congressmen, including Estevan Torres. I met with Willard Wirtz, the Secretary of Labor, and Jack Henning, the Under-Secretary of Labor, with Senators George Murphy and Alan Cranston of California, and many political, religious, and business leaders. The many contacts I made in Washington not only helped the farm workers, but also helped me to do important research for my doctoral dissertation, *The Short-run Socio-Economic Effects of the Termination of the Bracero Program on the California Farm Labor Market for 1965-1967*. I was fortunate to have received a \$13,000 Manpower Grant from the Department of Labor to finance this research.

Some of the highlights of my lobbying for Cesar Chavez are memorable. I appeared on national TV with Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Walter Reuther, the well-known president of the United Auto Workers. On another occasion, I offered a protest Mass with six other priests on an open-bed truck in front of the Supreme Court.

Another time, I participated in a protest rally in front of the White House followed by an outdoor Mass celebrated at the Sylvan Theater at the foot of the Washington Monument.

I also spent a lot of time visiting all the religious houses of studies around Catholic University, an area known as "Little Rome." I recruited young seminarians to help me picket stores and supermarkets in the Washington D.C. area. Some of those seminarians were later ordained priests and continued to support the farm worker cause.

The “Tortilla Priest”

Nationally, I have been known both as the “tortilla priest” and the “farm worker priest.” In fact, when I first became known as the tortilla priest in 1971 it became a *cause celebre* because in the summer of 1971 I made every newspaper in the country, *Time* magazine, and *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. I was interviewed by the major networks, even by the British Broadcasting Company.

People ask me why I said Mass with tortillas? To answer this question one has to ask the question of why I became a priest. I had thought of becoming a priest ever since I was twelve years old. I always wanted to be a priest. I was planning to go to the seminary when I was fourteen, but my parents at the time were not in favor.

The idea of becoming a priest stayed with me all through public high school. It’s true that when you are young you don’t know exactly what it means to be a priest. You realize you want to do something for people and you feel that a priest should be concerned about everyone, especially the poor. At least I did. The reason I decided to become a priest was not to run away from life, a kind of spiritual escapism, but to embrace it more fully. It is precisely because I know that becoming a cleric is for many this sort of escapism from the everyday world into a semi-cloistered, protected religious environment that I have always tried to remain active and committed to those issues that affect people, particularly those who endure the harshest treatment of an uncaring society, the poor. I know that I could have been a success at any life I had chosen if I had not decided to be a priest. My Italian pride demands as much. Sometimes I fantasize that if I had not decided to become a priest, I would today be a millionaire. *Hell, since fantasies are free, a multi-millionaire, even a billionaire.* I think of my father’s business savvy and, when I was a boy, how he already owned several properties in Escondido before it became a booming suburb of San Diego. He had offered me ten acres he owned in what is now the city-central business district of town if I would forget about being a priest. At the time, those acres were planted in wine grapes that I had cared for when I was sixteen.

My father trusted me to prune all those acres. *If I had not become a priest, I would now own that land in the middle of the business district. I could name my price for such land! And I would travel and live the life of a country squire, reading, playing with my middle-class toys, and, perhaps taking part in some community events such as* But it is harder to face the world than create it, and even as a boy—and to this day, at 64—I have always felt that being a priest is the most important thing I could do. I don’t regret that I could have been a rich farmer, though in my heart, as Jimmy Carter used to say, I fantasize.

How do these fantasies tie up with being the “tortilla priest”?

My whole priesthood, in a sense, from the moment when I was ordained as a priest to the present, was a preparation for something. Saying Mass with tortillas. Going on a picket line. Organizing parishioners. Gong on another picket line. Fighting with, lying to,

circling my bishops carefully, going on the picket line again. Endless conflicts with bishops. Conflicts that underline the need to do what conscience demands.

As a priest I always felt that I tried to follow my conscience by doing what I was supposed to do—help and defend the poor and oppressed. Previous to saying Mass with tortillas, my struggles had made the news, which had played up my conflicts with two Bishops and spotlighted my removal as pastor at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in El Centro because of my involvement with the striking lettuce farm workers.

A wonderful woman and revolutionary inspired me to form my conscience and take a stand with the farm workers in the lettuce strike in Imperial Valley in 1961. That woman was Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement. I asked her point blank when she visited me during the strike in 1961 if I should stand with the workers. She didn't tell me what to do. She said, "Father, do what your conscience tells you to do. Don't worry about what the Bishop is going to do if you support the workers."

I took Dorothy's advice and my conscience dictated that I support the striking workers in opposition to my Bishop at the time, Charles Buddy, who supported the rich Catholic farmers of Imperial Valley who were, of course, opposed to the strike.

On another occasion, my name hit the newspapers when I went to jail with Cesar Chavez in the summer of 1966, the first priest to be so imprisoned. My jailing and consequent court trial made national news during the summer months of 1966. Here's what the *Time* piece (7/26/71) had to say about that Mass with tortillas.

Lately wearing a sarape with Chavez's stylized eagle emblazoned on it, Salandini has been saying Mass on an ironing board in front of the Palm City house of grower Robert Egger, a key figure in a farm labor dispute. He had refused repeated orders from San Diego Bishop Leo T. Maher to wear vestments other than the sarape and to stop using corn tortillas as Communion bread (Wheat tortillas would apparently be acceptable under recently authorized changes in the Mass). Maher, who has backed workers' rights to organize but pledged church neutrality in the conflict, ordered Salandini suspended.

This article in *Time* does not tell the reader the entire story. The article fails to inform the reader that Mr. Egger to that day remained one of the richest Catholics in the San Diego area. It is a well-known fact that the Egger family donated the land on which Marian Catholic High School is situated. Later, in 1982, when I applied for a teaching assignment at Marian High School, I was informed by the vice-principal at the time that I was too dangerous a person to hire because I had supported the farm workers in the 1971 strike against Mr. Egger. I was told that since Mr. Egger's grandson was attending Marian at the time, there was a danger that my presence as a teacher might offend Mr. Egger, which in turn might lead to the school not receiving continued generous contributions from him. In the fall of 1988, I reapplied for a teaching position at Marian and was again informed by the principal that I was too dangerous to hire because I would still offend the Egger family and other wealthy farmer families who contributed to Marian and whose children attended Marian. The church has a long memory and the punishments for activities it does not endorse, officially or unofficially, whether these are for doctrinal reasons or the whims of a particular individual church leader, can be severe. In my case, this originally took the form of exile, but over the years has gradually assumed the form of medieval shunning. The church rewards only those activists its leaders deem worthy.

Father Edward Kaicher, a very vocal anti-abortion, pro-life activist, was vigorously supported by Bishop Maher because the abortion issue is non-economic and there is not a lot of money involved. When Kaicher, a very pleasant if naive young enthusiast, was arrested, the bishop hailed him as a martyr. On the other hand, the farm-worker issues in which I and others are involved are economic issues. The institutional Church in this area stands to lose lots of money if it openly speaks out in favor of the farm worker. Hence: silence. Since there are many wealthy Catholic farmers in the diocese of San Diego, bishops feel they have to pledge neutrality in any farm-labor dispute. If they don't pledge neutrality, the church will lose the generous donations of these Catholic farmers. Hence: silence. Following the example of their bishops, the majority of priests in the San Diego diocese, while helping the farm workers in their spiritual needs, are hesitant about supporting them with their real economic needs—just wages, decent working conditions, decent living conditions, and so on. However, the spiritual cannot be separate from the physical except at death, when such a parting is natural. To separate the spiritual and the physical during life is unnatural makes men into zombies, into the living dead in the most literal of senses. These zombies have come to dominate our social structure in America. Is this separation of spirit and body really what my church, my bishops, my brother priests and sister nuns, not to mention the laity, really want?

I can sympathize with my fellow priests in San Diego because I realize their need to be careful about biting the hand that feeds them. Most of them cannot come out openly in defense of farm workers rights because they cannot stand on their own financially. They are not “tent makers” as the great apostle St. Paul was. I am a tent maker. By that, I mean I am financially independent, partly because of the circumstances that forced me to be, partly because I foresaw the wisdom of that independence. I can stand on my own feet because since 1971 I have been a teacher in various universities, high schools, and adult schools. Even now, a year before retirement, I teach in public high schools, where I am accepted without difficulty. I am shunned by Catholic schools and am still not allowed to have a parish that I could use as a pulpit for social action.

I don't rely entirely on the diocese of San Diego for my support. Let me emphasize that being financially independent alone will not dispose a priest to defend the rights of farm workers in this area. Most priests in the diocese do not have the proper background to take up the farm workers' cause. They have never experienced the fields. They have never studied the problems. Put simply, they lack the proper awareness that would predispose them to espouse the farm workers' cause. The respected Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, called this awareness *conscientizacon* in his book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Thank God I was given this awareness of workers' plight and struggles because I experience it myself picking oranges and lemons in North County to help pay my expenses and to finance my seminary tuition for seven years. Other priests in the San Diego diocese didn't have the opportunity to learn from farm workers as I did by being a field worker myself for ten years.

Up to five months before I was ordained at 24 years of age, I had been picking oranges with farm workers the entire summer. For 10 years I had experienced the injustices of being paid low wages, lacking proper drinking water, and lacking proper toilet facilities.

The reader may wonder why I went to the trouble of getting a Ph.D. in economics. I did so, as I have said, because of the influence and guidance of my former rector at the seminary and my mentor for 36 years, Father Leo Davis.

Davis encouraged me to follow the mandate of Pope Pius XI, who said to priests in 1937: "Go to the workingman, especially where he is poor, and in general go to the poor. Let our parish priests, therefore, while providing for the normal needs of the faithful, dedicate the better part of their endeavors and their zeal to winning back the laboring masses to Christ and His Church."

Note that the Pope asked priests to spend the greater part of their time and energy fighting for the rights of workers. Because of this Papal mandate, I have for the 40 years of my priesthood been one of that small hand of priests known as "labor priests" in the United States and have fought for the rights of workers, especially the farm workers. This is the reason I earned a doctorate in economics.

I feel I am being faithful to my conscience when I defend farm workers' rights. I expect opposition from my bishop because the farm-labor issue is an economic issue and this means money.

When I was suspended from my priestly duties in 1971 for saying Mass with tortillas, the tortilla was not really the issue. The article that appeared in *Time* in 1971, in its last sentence, stated, "The tortillas evidently were too much to swallow." It was clear that the issue was not the fact that I said Mass with tortillas, but rather that I sided with the underdog, the farm workers, while the Bishop sided with the rich farmer, Mr. Egger.

I'll digress here and explain the events that led to my suspension.

The *Time* article stated that I said Mass in front of the home of Mr. Egger. True. Shortly after saying my first Mass in front of Mr. Egger's house, I was summoned to a visit with Bishop Maher.

"A man's house is his castle, Victor. One should not disturb another's castle."

"That's not the reason you're suspending me, Bishop, and it's not tortillas, either. It's not true. Mr. Egger informed you that if I continued saying Mass and working with the farm workers he would stop his donations to the Church. You know that's the truth and so do I."

"It's not true. You are arrogant and headstrong. I hope you are also not disobedient."

"With all respect for you and your office, Bishop, you are not telling the truth and you know it. We are mean here. I know the situation and so do you. We both knew the economic realities and we are on different sides."

"I will suspend you if you say one more Mass in front of Mr. Egger's house. I think we are having trouble communicating, Victor."

"We are not having any trouble communicating at all, Bishop. We understand each other perfectly. Our communication is fine. We just don't agree, and I will say Mass for certain at Egger's house tomorrow, so, therefore, you had better suspend me right now. The Mass is already announced and planned by us, the strikers and me, and I'm not backing out now for hell or high water."

"You should be careful about making such slighting references to hell, young man."

“To hell with that, Bishop. You are not telling the truth and there are men and their families’ livelihoods and well-being at stake here, not some damn money for a new office at the chancery or new auditorium or....You might as well suspend me now, Bishop”

“I will suspend you when I see fit, and that will be the next Mass you say in front of Mr. Egger’s house in a *serape*.. Mind yourself and remember your vow of obedience.”

We argued for almost an hour, then the Bishop excused himself. That same day he left for a vacation in Hawaii and I didn’t hear from him for three weeks. The next day and for a week or so I continued to say Mass in front of Egger’s home until I was arrested a week later. Meanwhile, since Bishop Maher hadn’t suspended me, I notified United Press International news service that the Bishop had threatened to suspend me. I could care less about the outcome of the fight with the Bishop. I was looking for an opportunity to bring out the real issue to the public, the real issue being the fact that he was siding with the rich Catholic growers, the real issue being the struggle the strikers were having with the growers.

One day by accident I ran out of Mass hosts, so I announced to the workers that there would be no Mass. I tried to borrow some hosts from the neighboring Catholic Church, but the pastor informed me that he supported his parishioner, Mr. Egger. He would not lend me any hosts.

“Father, why don’t you sue tortillas for the Mass?”

“We don’t sue them because the Church doesn’t allow anything for the Mass that has yeast in it.”

“Tortillas don’t have any yeast in them, Father. Tortillas are made of just flour and lard.”

Good enough for me since, in fact, it wasn’t a very important issue at all. I said Mass that day with wheat tortillas. Maher came back from his Hawaii vacation and read that I said Mass with tortillas. When interviewed by the press, he said: “Thanks be to God that Father Salandini said Mass with wheat tortillas instead of corn tortillas because the Mass is still valid. Had he said the mass with corn tortillas the Mass would be invalid.”

When I read the Bishop’s comment in the paper, I decided to say Mass the next day with corn tortillas in order to bring out the point that the tortillas was not the real issue. The next day I was suspended from my priestly duties.

The real issue was social injustice. I would use this trivial matter to get attention in the press for the poor and oppressed farm workers. The Bishop could side with the rich, with the Catholic growers, with Mr. Egger.

Cardijn Center

The Cardijn Center is an organization of the Catholic laity (some members are not Catholic) that is dedicated to implementing the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Membership is not restricted to Catholics, and there are a few non-Catholic members, but essentially it is a movement within the Catholic Church. I have been involved with this movement since its beginnings in San Diego, when Fr. Davis and I co-founded the Center. In 1953, I mentioned the need for such an organization in San Diego to Davis. I told him that the members of my Young Christian Workers group wanted some place to meet and have social events. A few weeks later, I rented a storefront building a few blocks from the rectory of Immaculate Conception Church in Old Town, San Diego, and Cardijn Center was born. We were the first American Cardijn Center, though another was also in Milwaukee, around the same time. It was closed in the late 1960's. Our San Diego chapter continues.

The Center was named after Father Joseph Cardijn (later Cardinal Cardijn), the Belgian priest who started the Young Christian Workers movement (YCW) in the early 1900's. His intention was to show young workers how to christianize their work and their fellow workers. Father Cardijn's technique was to organize small groups of workers and develop leadership in them. With the help of these workers, he would pick out leaders from among the young and train them to be effective leaders at the work place and in the community. He developed a technique known as "observe, judge and act." Workers were taught to observe problems on the job, judge them in the light of the gospels, and then try to resolve the problem with a Christian solution. Finally, after deciding on a solution, the workers would act. They would go out and do something about the problem. Over the years that Cardijn Center has existed, Davis and I and a few other priests were able to use Cardijn's technique not only to change the lives of young workers, but to successfully affect the lives of young students, married couples, and others.

The early years of Cardijn Center's existence from 1953 to 1962 were especially difficult years because it was doing things in advance of the reforms of Vatican Council II, when the entire church underwent an upheaval so enormous that until this day its full effects have not been played out and are still being felt in areas like liberation theology in Latin America. The Catholic community in San Diego looked upon the members of the Center as mavericks who were more communist than Christian. A typical conflict in these years was an incident that occurred in 1961, one that projected Cardijn Center into the limelight.

It so happened that in 1961 the Center sponsored a series of lectures by very progressive Catholics such as Gerald Sherry, a prominent liberal Catholic journalist, and others on such volatile subjects as the United Nations and needed reforms in the Catholic Church. When these lectures were publicized, the John Birch Society, a group of dangerous

fanatics among whom are many right-wing Catholics, made several hundred phone calls to Bishop Buddy protesting the lectures. Buddy ordered the lectures cancelled. Cardijn Center complied with the Bishop's orders, but the incident got wide publicity in prominent Catholic publications such as *America* and *Commonweal*, both publications noting that Cardijn Center had started a precedence of allowing the laity to stand on its own feet and do its own thinking without censure from bishops. Father Davis often said, "The lay people have been so brainwashed by the clergy for centuries that is very difficult to get them to speak up and change things without waiting for the bishops."

In 1953, the founders of the Center were drawn together by a common desire, the desire to apply the principles of the papal social encyclicals to the problems of the day. Papal encyclicals are letters or pronouncements from the pope on social, moral, and theological doctrine.

We were all conscious of the shortcomings of an economic and political reality that permitted the perpetuation of great extremes of wealth and poverty, that condoned a segregated society which effectively kept minorities from entering the mainstream of American life, that kept the Church confined to the sanctuary on Sunday with the shibboleth that religion and morality must be kept separate from politics and economics. The Cardijn Center members were deeply concerned with the vision of the American promise held up before the world and the actuality of the situation.

For example, how could a religiously motivated person receive Communion on Sunday and cross a picket line on Monday? How could a person profess a belief in the brotherhood of man and actively oppose integration or — as it was known at the time— "open-housing" legislation? How could such a person say he believed in the Beatitudes— *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God?* — and then condone war as an instrument of national policy? These were the questions that agitated the members of Cardijn Center when it started four decades ago, and these are the questions that still agitate Cardijn members today.

In 1953, Cardijn Center subscribed to the famous epigram of the British writer, G.K. Chesterton, who wrote that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting — it has been found difficult and never tried." We were and still are acutely aware of the tremendous gulf that has always separated theoretical Christianity from practical Christianity. The task of bridging that gulf, the avowed purpose of the Center, was never an easy one.

Every week, every month, every year of the Center's existence was a struggle to remain alive — often against those in our own household, the household of faith. Again, as an example; we often hear ringing condemnations from our pulpits on the evils of artificial birth control, but how often have we hear sermons on the need to provide decent, low-cost housing for the families of the poor who are crowded into the slums and ghettos of our cities?

Today, one might well ask, "So what else is new?" The Center still fights the daily battle for survival, and the question before the membership still remains: Shall we continue to shall we call it quits? Whatever decision is made, I believe we can take justifiable pride in the positive contribution that Cardijn Center has made to the Church and to the community over the past thirty-nine years. Our long advocacy of a more meaningful

liturgy, our commitment to social justice, our work to reform existing institutions (both ecclesiastical and governmental), our battle against racial discrimination in employment and housing, our stands on all the basic issues have been vindicated by the second Vatican Council. However, if we have learned anything from the past, it is the fact that it is one thing to have your stand vindicated but quite another to have the stand implemented. So the battle for a more human, more Christian society goes on. That is no reason to despair, for struggle is a prerequisite for change just as change is necessary for growth. When we stop growing, when we become complacent in the face of social injustice, then I believe we have lost the true meaning of Christian existence. From defeat to defeat to defeat to victory.

“Ecology” is the new and important word in our vocabulary, just as “progress” was the motivational word of the past. We know, however, that so many sins have been committed in the names of progress, science and technology that a feeling of revulsion has set in. What we are now witnessing is not only a revolt against institutional forms, but a revolt against technology itself.

Today Cardijn members are not content to accept conditions as they are. We are acutely aware of the shortcomings of a society that condones war, that destroys the countryside in the name of progress (a word that has come to be no more than another euphemism for “profit”), that cements over irreplaceable agricultural land with proliferations of subdivisions that benefit no one but the developer and the land speculator while the core of our cities, where the people really need housing are left to rot. We are aware of the billions that are spent each year on smog-producing freeways while our basic need for economical, public transit systems go ignored.

A wise pope, Leo XIII, once said, “The tragedy of the 19th century was the loss of the working class to the Church.” I feel that the greatest tragedy of the 20th century will be the loss among today’s youth to the Christian version of peace and brotherhood. Without that Christian vision, the youthful stirrings that we are witnessing all over the world could very well degenerate into chaos and anarchy, and worse, the organized anarchy of the corporate state or fascism. I don’t think they will, but the danger is always there.

We have been told those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. In that vein I can see a parallel between today’s protest movements and nascent Christianity. Today’s jails and prisons are crowded with persons who have followed the dictates of their conscience just as the dungeons of imperial Rome were crowded with the Christians who could not in conscience give their assent to a system they considered immoral. In addition there are a great number of people in prison today who have given up and are disillusioned about society. In the long pull of history, I think the Berrigan brothers, the two priests who have been so socially active over the last twenty-five years, will be ranked alongside those early Christians. Again, we must go to the Beatitudes: *Blessed are those who suffer persecution for justice sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

So, there are the past challenges and the challenges of the present and the future that face us as individuals and as members of Cardijn Center and as members of a greater society, a society that unites us all in the community of faith.

Religion, Social Justice, and Cesar Chavez

Although these are my confessions, at this point I need to talk a little about a man whose life has been so intertwined with my own that I cannot tell my own story without telling something of his life. That man is Cesar Chavez, the inspirational leader of the United Farm Workers. Most of my adult life has been spent as a foot soldier in the cause with which his name has become synonymous, and it was a great fortune that his movement started when it did, for it gave a home to my own ideas and hopes. It gave me a place to organize. It gave me comfort and hope to be with so many others who shared my own vision of social justice.

In all the years I have known Cesar Chavez, there has been more than ample time to observe him and his behavior both in public and in private. He is one of the most remarkable people I have ever met.

One way to evaluate a person is to describe various aspects of his or her personality. Allow me to try such a description of a man who has become my friend, Cesar Chavez. First, above all, he is a devout Catholic. The influence that his religion has in his life cannot be underestimated. Raised a Catholic, Chavez was influenced by a deeply religious mother and by a Catholic priest, Father Donald McDonnell.

McDonnell had a great influence on his religious life primarily because he was the first person who first told Chavez about the Catholic Church's social teachings by encouraging the idealistic young man to read the Church's social doctrine enunciated in the various social encyclicals.

It was through Father McDonnell that I first heard of Cesar Chavez. In the early 1950's, I had visited McDonnell and spent a week with him to observe how he said Mass for the Mexican nationals then-known as *braceros*, farm laborers with work permits. In one conversation he mentioned a young man who was helping him with his work with the *braceros*. He remarked that the man was interested in what the Catholic Church taught about the rights of workers.

At one of the first Masses I celebrated for Chavez and several hundred farm workers in Borrego Springs during the strike there in June, 1966, he asked me to give that is called "general absolution" to the workers during the Mass. About an hour before Mass started, a number of workers asked me to hear their confessions. Within an hour, I had heard a dozen confessions, and when it was time to start Mass a long line of workers were still waiting.

"Father, we need to start Mass now," Cesar said.

“There are still a lot of confessions to hear, Cesar. I can’t turn these men away. It wouldn’t be right. They don’t get the chance to go to confession often, and they’ve been waiting a long time. Besides, it’s my duty as a priest.”

“Can you gibe them a general absolution” he asked.

“Well, Cesar, the Church doesn’t often allow general absolution.” General absolution in our church is a way of forgiving someone’s sins without listening to penitents individually and privately. Instead, a person confesses directly to God and then in the presence of a priest tells God he sorry. Then the priest forgives the entire group. The Catholic Church allows general absolution in emergency situations, during war or natural calamities, but not when private confessions can be heard. For example, before they go into battle, a priest may assemble an entire contingent of soldiers, ask them to tell God they are sorry for their sins, then give the entire group the pardon of God for all their sins. Some of our Protestant brethren today, and the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages and during the time of the early “primitive” church, had such a practice, but it has been in decline for centuries in the Roman church.

“OK,” I said. It seemed like a reasonable request, and if going to war can be an acceptable reason for a general absolution, then going to work, taking part in a movement for social and economic justice, is surely a good reason for general absolution of those involved in that struggle. A strike situation, as many of you know, can be every bit as dangerous as war. My bishops, I regret to say, have not held the same opinion.

In my years with Chavez, I have always been impressed by the fact that he insists that important events in the farm worker movement—marches, demonstrations, conventions—begin with Mass. Since 1966 to the present day, whenever I have said Mass for Cesar and the farm workers, I always give general absolution, even though no Bishop in the United States permits such absolution. Cesar is always happy when I give general absolution. I believe that I am not breaking any law of the Church in giving general absolution because all farm workers, whether on strike or not, are always living in an emergency situation, a situation in which they are exploited and discriminated against.

It has often been said by historians of the labor movement that the most dangerous place to be in a labor dispute is on the picket line. A few years ago a young father of five children was picketing in front of a textile mill in Kentucky. A goon hired by the mill got out of a passing car, came up to the man on the picket line, fired a double-barreled shotgun into his head and killed him. The hired gun had no grudge against the young father of five. He was simply hired to kill a striker. Since the young father was at the head of the line of strikers, he killed him.

I do not compare my efforts to those of the young father who, among many others, gave his life for the cause of social and economic justice. Some of the men I have known and picketed with on UFW lines have been killed, more beaten, and many intimidated. I have picketed with Chavez many times over a period of more than a quarter of a century, on picket lines in front of grape vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley in Central California to as far north as Montreal, Canada, where I walked with Cesar in front of Dominion Stores, a large Canadian chain. I have marched with him in Washington, D.C., in New York, in San Diego, and other places. With great pride I can truly say that I, as a priest, have probably walked more picket lines and participated in more labor

demonstrations than any other priest inn the United States. Each time I have picketed with the farm workers over the past 27 years. I have put my life on the line, and I have knowingly done so because the others that were there long before I arrived were risking their lives for the benefit of others and no less should be expected of a priest.

Marines, Bishops, and Cesar Chavez

I take pride in the fact that my most important involvement with Chavez has been on the spiritual level. In my long association with him and his union, my most important job has been to say Mass, hear confessions, and counsel workers.

After I received my doctorate in economics from Catholic University in Washington, D.C., I worked full-time for nearly two years with the United Farm Workers, from June, 1969, to June, 1971. First, I served in Delano, in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, where the grape strike started in 1965. I moved on to Toronto, Canada, then, Montreal, and, finally, New York City. From July, 1970 to December, 1970, I worked for Chavez in San Diego's north county. Later, in early 1971, I worked for the UFW doing research at Fresno State University while I was teaching courses on the Mexican-American experience and farm labor. Towards the end of 1971, I joined Chavez on the tomato strike in the San Diego area.

I have many fond memories of these years, especially one occasion when I preached a sermon about the conditions of the farm workers at Camp Pendleton, large Marine Corps base north of San Diego. In the sermon, I suggested that a very practical way that all present could support the farm workers' cause would be to boycott the non-union lettuce being sold on the base—as well as boycotting non-union lettuce sold at the Alpha Beta supermarkets near the base.

During my sermon, a very distinguished man walked out of the Church in protest about my remarks on the farm workers. The next day, I was informed by the Bishop's number two, the Chancellor of the diocese, that the person who walked out was the commanding officer at Camp Pendleton. He had phoned Bishop, Leo Maher, and complained that I had spoken against capitalism and that the remarks I had made were unacceptable. The Chancellor conveyed to me my Bishop's anger at my sermon, and I was told never again to say Mass or preach at Camp Pendleton. To make matters worse, the Catholic chaplain who had invited me to say Mass at Camp Pendleton wrote me a very nasty letter because the commanding officer had called him on the carpet for inviting me on the base. The editor of the newspaper of the UFW union, *El Malcriado*, wrote an editorial defending me. The editorial, "Give Me That Good Old Time Religion," made it obvious that the chaplain was more concerned about his retirement being placed in jeopardy than whether or not the Gospel should be preached.

Shortly after this incident, some farm workers and I were picketing the chapel at Camp Pendleton because the base was buying non-union lettuce. As a result, we were arrested by the military police and banned from entering the base. To this day, I am not allowed to enter Camp Pendleton.

Part of The Family

In my long association with Chavez, he has remarked on more than one occasion that I am part of his family, an extended family of which I am proud to be a part. Among the many children of farm workers I have seen grow up, I have been especially close to Chavez' children. I performed the marriage of his oldest son, Fernando, in 1972, and baptized two sons of his marriage. I also performed the marriage for one of his older daughters, Anna, in 1971, and married his second oldest son, Paul, in 1985, besides marrying his nieces Becky and Susan. Yes, over the years I have felt close to Chavez' family. Once, in 1971, Cesar told me that he hoped one of his sons might someday become a priest. He confided in me that he hoped his sons might get interested in reading the Bible.

On one occasion I took Chavez' two younger sons out to play softball. I bought the younger son, Antonio, a bat. I bought Paul a mitt. Maybe I let Cesar down by buying his younger sons baseball equipment instead of Bibles.

Association with Cesar has not always been a bed of roses. On two occasions my life was threatened. But we lesser lights were only threatened a few times. Cesar's life has been threatened many times. Once, a few days after I was arrested and imprisoned with Chavez in the summer of 1966, both my Mom and uncle received threatening phone calls from a person who wouldn't give his name. These cowards have been legion in the history of labor, and threatening and intimidating family members is the lowest of their altogether low lives.

The threatening voice simply said, "Tell your son, the priest, that if he comes back to the strike in Borrego Springs we will shoot him." When I learned of these phone calls from my mother, I immediately notified a local TV station in San Diego and they, in turn put it on the wire. Within a few hours, the U.P.I. wire appeared in newspapers nationwide. Consequently, I returned the next day to join the picket line in Borrego Springs confident that I was no longer in danger because too many people now knew my life had been threatened. About this same time, an Italian man, who shall here remain anonymous, phoned me from Los Angeles. He said that he was a good friend of my later father. He asked me to come to see him at night at a certain address in Los Angeles. The stranger said he had some inside information that would help to settle the grape strike in Borrego Springs. He also insisted that I come alone and only at night. I told the stranger that I would try my best to come but that I could not promise him I would come. Meanwhile, I checked with Chavez and other members of the union and they warned me not to go. They said that it appeared like a perfect set-up to hurt my reputation as a priest. The stranger, they told me, would probably dope me, put me in a room with a woman, and take pictures in order to discredit me and, by extension, the farm worker movement. This may seem fanciful to you, but those who remember what happened to farm workers, civil rights

workers, and other activists in the '60's, when government, business, and military lies and misinformation and dirty tricks were commonplace, can tell the others that this was not mere paranoia.

Chavez' Life Style

Chavez' dedication to the cause of the farm workers is all-consuming. He has literally given his life over to the well-being and advancement of the workers whose interests he serves and protects. Yet I have observed that his dedication is a balanced one. Chavez likes to relax and let his hair down, playing baseball with his family and staff for hours at a stretch. Over the years I have relaxed with him on many occasions at dinner, fiestas, baptismal parties and softball games.

One warm afternoon in September, 1991, I played softball with Cesar for a good three hours. He pitched during the game and it was obvious he really enjoyed himself.

Countless people who have been associated with Cesar over the years especially admire one outstanding quality about Cesar Chavez: that he is truly a servant to other people—just as Christ our Savior was. *The son of man has not come to be served, but to serve.* Over the years that I have known Chavez I have noticed that he is truly a servant because he never asks anyone to do something unless he first does it himself. Cesar, like a true servant, sets the example by doing first himself what he wants you to do. Back in June, 1966, when I went to jail with him, I was inspired because he himself was willing to go to jail. He set the example for me and for others. Because he was willing to go to jail, we followed his example and also went.

He works without stopping day after day. He works long hours. No one in the union works harder than he does. At the day-long 10th Constitutional Convention of the UFW at Forty Acres in Delano on September 2, 1990, another priest and I offered Mass at 7:00 a.m. for Cesar and several hundred farm workers and friends. The Convention started promptly at 8:00 a.m. and ended about 5:00 p.m., and Chavez was there every minute it was in session. His staff told me he arrived before 6:00 a.m., and when I left at 8:00 in the evening, he was still around mingling with members. In calls I always tell my Chicano students that they need to be servants like Cesar Chavez.

Because Cesar is a servant to all, especially the farm workers, he can rightfully demand that churches and others also try to be servants to people. Here is what Cesar once said about churches: "We don't ask for bigger churches or fine gifts. We ask for the Church's presence with us, beside us, as Christ among us. We don't ask for words. We ask for deeds. We don't ask for paternalism.. We ask for *servant-hood.*"

It would take me many, many pages to list the many other good qualities of Cesar Chavez, but I will limit myself to only one more example, one outstanding quality that puts Cesar in the same camp with Martin Luther King and Gandhi—his belief in non-violence.

From the beginning of the grape strike that started in 1965 and continuing to the present, Cesar has insisted on nonviolence. In order to prove to the farm workers, the growers, and everyone involved that he is serious about nonviolence, Cesar Chavez has undertaken many fasts with the objective of preventing violence. His first fast in 1968

lasted 25 days, and it was successful in reducing violence during the first grape boycott, a struggle that was ultimately won in 1970. Since 1968 Cesar has undertaken many other fasts. They have always been successful in reducing violence. He deserves our admiration. Each time he underwent a fast he risked his life. All of his fasts were life-threatening. His most recent and longest fast of 36 days, undertaken in the summer of 1988, was effective in focusing national attention on the third grape boycott. I sincerely believe that this longest fast proved beyond a doubt his dedication to nonviolence and his spirit of servanthood. Here's what he said in 1968 when he ended his first fast:

When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life.

I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest 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!

¡Que Viva Cesar Chavez! Hooray for Cesar Chavez!

When I said that Chavez spends long days at work, I am not talking about ten or twelve hours. His second oldest son, Paul, told me last year, 1991, that since 1980 Cesar has only gotten about four hours of sleep every night. He retires about midnight and gets up at 4:00 a.m. in the morning. In a long conversation I had with Cesar in June, 1991, he told me that he gets up early because he likes to use this time to meditate and think about what he is going to do during the day. He said he also likes to walk for a while in the morning while he plans his day. When I question Cesar about his health, he always says that he feels strong physically. He attributes his good health to the fact that he follows a combination of a vegetarian and grain diet. He told me that at one time he used to eat a lot of fruit, but now he only eats fruits occasionally because they contain a lot of sugar. He can get along with only four hours of sleep, he said, but during the day he takes short catnaps while working at his desk.

Chavez' Character

In that long conversation in the summer of 1991, we reminisced about different priests, nuns and volunteers who have been associated with the union over the years. Some, he admitted only used the union to their own advantage and betrayed the cause of the farm workers. I observed that the infidelity of former volunteers and colleagues had not daunted his spirit. This, I believe, is a true sign of a man of genuine character.

Over the years, Cesar has been consistent in what he does, and consistency is the mark of true character. We all admire and trust a person who is consistent because we can predict what that person is going to do. Over the years, Cesar has always believed that one should not personally benefit from helping others. Cesar has lived up to this conviction. It is a well-known fact that leaders of many unions draw annual salaries that are in six digits. Cesar receives a salary of only about \$5,000 a year.

Another quality of Chavez' character that I admire is his sensitivity to anything that might give the public wrong ideas about the farm worker movement. This sensitivity is well demonstrated by a lengthy article that appeared about Chavez in 1975 in *Penthouse* magazine. I was included in the article. In case you're wondering neither of us was the centerfold.

The background of how Chavez was interviewed for this article was related to me by one of his former aides, Carlos LeGerrette. It so happened that a writer for *Penthouse* asked Chavez for an interview and Cesar readily accepted because he was under the impression that *Penthouse* was an intellectual magazine along the lines of the *Atlantic Monthly*. When the article was published and appeared as the cover story, Chavez was very shocked and a little ashamed. He actually did not know that *Penthouse* was a "girlie" magazine in the same class with *Playboy*.

Another outstanding quality of the man is the courage he has displayed over the last Quarter century—this under the pressure of having to constantly worry about the threats made on his life, intimidations, slurs, and gossip.

I was privileged to have been at the site where a serious threat on his life was made in 1971. The scene was a large public park in Santa Maria in Central California where over a thousand workers were gathered for an outdoor field mass. I was scheduled to say the mass at 10:00 a.m. When the time arrived, Chavez did not. I waited and waited and when he failed to show, I finally started the Mass at 11:30 a.m. The next day I was informed tht the reason he did not come was because a paid assassin was present at the Mass with plans to kill him. Because of the many attempts made on his life, from that day forward the farm workers have been careful that Cesar has proper security protection when he appears in public. Cesar himself doesn't make a big issue about his personal safety, but he respects the wishes of the arm workers who are concerned about his safety.

Another good quality of Chavez' character is his refusal to be swayed by gossip. I recall on one occasion that someone had circulated some gossip about me. When I discussed the malicious gossip with Cesar, he believed me and disregarded the falsehood.

The Mexican Experience

I have to backtrack now. I think you're getting a general picture of where my life was headed at an early age, and I've taken you through a couple of the stages of my life by highlighting them, but there is always more to say, and so much that is unsaid, and so many worthy people unmentioned, and so many villains left in their hiding places under rocks.

Mexicans working in California have shaped my life completely. Their culture, their religion, their food, their ways have become me, and I owe as much to Mexico as I do the United States.

My first intense experience with the Mexican people, as I mentioned earlier in this confession, was in Amboy, California. The desert. My desert exile. Let me go back and remember more to fill out these earlier experiences. Recall that I was sent to this remote parish in San Bernardino county as a punishment. Recall, I was sent there twice in two years because I had trouble with my first Bishop. I first went there in 1954. I was there about six weeks; then, I was back in 1956 for seven months. I forget the particular reason I was sent there the second time—the bishop was pissed off for some damn reason—but, in short, it was a valuable experience that I had in Amboy.

The parish consisted basically of about four or five Mexican families that had about ten kids each. That was about half of the parish. Then there were single people and a few weird Anglos. I think that counting the children and adults together, there were about one hundred and fifty souls. Amboy is approximately seventy-eight miles from Needles, about eighty miles from Barstow, and just around the corner from hell. It's in the Mojave desert. It's a God-forsaken spot surrounded by salt mines.

A very humorous thing happened to me there because my parish was about fifty miles long and it consisted not only of the nucleus of the hundred and fifty Catholic souls (and about hundred or so non-Catholics) who haunted the salt mines, but others who lived in a number of railroad section houses. Section houses were where the Navajo Indians lived while working on the railroad.

I remember that about eight miles from the church and rectory the first railroad station was called Baghdad. The particular café there looked like something out of India. There were ten Navajos there. The foreman was a Mexican that took care of them and supervised them. About eight miles further down the road there was another section house. Again, ten Navajos and a Mexican family that supervised them. That place was called Klondike. Eight miles more down the road there was another section house and that was called Siberia. Siberia, Russia. An old salt's sense of humor. The bishops always got a hell of a laugh out of these names. Priests like me didn't think the names were so funny.

The person who named those section houses certainly had a sense of humor. This was what my desert parish was. It was not the place to send a young priest, one full of zeal

who wanted to do things. But I made the beset of everything and I began, as I said before, to work.

I went to work. I made a point out of eating with all the Mexican families and getting to know them. I started to work on activities with the kids. I found out that they didn't know how to swim, so I got one of the parishioners to help me and we drove them to the nearest swimming pool that was in Twenty Nine Palms at the Marine Base, fifty miles from Amboy. I taught a few of them how to swim. Sometimes, we played softball. The kids liked me and I did a lot with them. They liked the fact that I took them on hikes around Amboy and also played softball with them—so much so that Mrs. Staples, the wife of the manager of the salt mines, wanted to help. She happened to be on the school board and was a new convert to the church. She was the one who got the Bishop to build a new church out in this remote area, and, because I took an interest in the kids, she arranged for me to be the coach at the public school across the highway from the church.

I didn't immediately accept the job. I said that well I had better check with the Bishop. "I need to check with the Bishop, Mrs. Staples, to get permission to be the coach in a public high school."

"I'm sure there won't be any problem."

She didn't know my bishop. I called the Bishop's number two man, Monsignor Booth, and told him about the fact that they wanted me to be the coach at the public school there.

"That would not be possible," Booth said.

"Well, just ask the Bishop and see what he says. Can I call you in the next couple of days?"

"Fine."

A couple of days later I called back and Booth said that the Bishop was tickled to death. Knowing that I would be paid to be the coach, he was extremely happy that I would want to be the coach, so he said *fine*. The school was happy to hire me and only required that I not wear my collar when I coached. Everybody was happy, but no one was happier than I was. I was *damn* happy.

I took the job and what I did, basically, was come in about an hour a day and coach the kids in different sports. I got two hundred dollars a month. At that time, 1956, no pastor in the diocese was making a salary of \$200. In fact, I had become the highest paid pastor in the diocese. When the Bishop heard that I would be getting \$200 a month for coaching, he preached all over the diocese that we needed more priests like Father Salandini. He told other priests at meetings. He told lay people everywhere he went. "Gee, I send a priest out in the middle of the desert and there is nothing out there and he gets himself a job as a coach. That's great you know."

Great is a relative term. The life of the people who worked the salt mines wasn't *great*. *The exploitation of these workers wasn't great. The only thing my bishop could see as great was green*, printed on paper, and sought-after.

While I was there, I tried to do something to help the Mexican miners who worked in the salt mine. I discovered that they were working sixteen hours a day for about a dollar an hour. Even in those days that was slave labor.

And they didn't get any breaks.

I told them what to do.

“You know,” I said, “the best thing to do?”

There was a pause

“You know I don’t think it’s fair that you work for low wages, so every opportunity you have, take a break. So long as the boss isn’t around.”

I also told them that they should take the opportunity of getting gas from the company because they were not being paid a decent wage. “There is a gas station on the site of the salt mines. If you have any great necessity, I mean, don’t hesitate to get the gas there because you are being paid so poorly.”

“Tell them you have to take your wife or your auntie to the hospital or something. I don’t care if you are taking your kids to the movies in Needles.”

The person in charge of the gas pump was an elderly man, the father of the man who managed the salt mine, and he was a little bit senile, so he always believed what the Mexican workers said. I felt that was just. I felt that it was only just compensation. The workers deserved to get free gas since they were making such low wages. It gave me a *great* joy to give such advice. By the way, I got free gas, too.

Another thing I did for the workers was to help them with any of their problems. I remember one day a young couple came to Mass. While at Mass their cardboard shack burned down and they lost all of their furniture and possessions, which amounted to about four hundred dollars. So, the very next Sunday we had a big fiesta and we made four hundred dollars in the name of the church and gave it to them. Of course, that was taboo in those days. The Bishops didn’t allow priests to have church functions to benefit families. But who was going to find out way out there in the middle of the boondocks? And even if they did? What punishment could be *greater* than hell?

Another thing I did out there in Amboy was to try to start a union. Because in my training as a young priest, and under the influence of Father Davis, who taught me economics for many years and had convinced me that a priest must help the workers, I knew that the best way to help the workers was to start a union. So, during my seven months there I tried to look for leaders. I found one particular leader, a young man who was serving as an altar boy for Mass on Sunday. I think he was around twenty or so. I trained him and taught him about the necessity of starting a union at the salt mine. I got help and counsel from union leaders in Barstow and tried to educate this one young leader. After a number of months, after many intense discussions, I got him trained to conduct the first meeting.

In order to get the workers to the church hall for this meeting to determine who wanted the union, I used an incentive. It’s really hot in Amboy. From about the first of April to about the end of October, it is about 120° day and night. It never lets up. It’s like living in a furnace. I remember it was impossible even to get television because you were well below sea level — and we could only get radio about two hours in the morning. It was really hot!

Usually on a Sunday, when the workers didn’t work, they spent the day drinking cold beer. In order to get them into the church hall, I bought a couple of big crates of ice-cold beer and put them in the church hall as an enticement for the workers to come to the meeting. Of course, I wasn’t at the meeting because I didn’t want them to know that I was

behind it all. I let the young leader that I trained call them to the hall. I was watching the proceedings from the church sacristy. I told the young leader that if there was any problem to just come and see me, but only in an emergency, of course, because I didn't want the workers to know that I was the one behind starting a union. I knew that if the manager of the salt mine or any of the company men found out, they would report me to the Bishop and I would be out of the parish.

Anyway, all of the men came to the hall. I forget how many. Probably at least thirty. After they had their beer, my young leader said, "We're going to have a secret ballot election to see who wants a union." It so happened that one of the workers there was a stool pigeon. He actually was a son of one of the foremen who was being manipulated by the company. This was part of the problem. And he got up, of course, to argue.

He had had plenty to drink, but he still knew what he was doing. He stood up and said, "Well, my vote is going to be public. I am against the union."

Now that would have been OK if he had just said that and sat down, but when Mexican's get mad and start calling into question the purity of the mother of the person whom they are mad at, all hell breaks loose. This particular stool pigeon made the mistake of using a bad name against the mother of my leader, and it so happened that this young leader had four brothers present at the church meeting, each bigger than Samson. They were over six-foot and weighed about two fifty each. Real husky lads. The name-calling triggered a kind of bar room brawl and the next thing I knew I could hear from the church beer bottles flying all over the hall and the hall windows breaking. There was a fight going on, so the young leader came to the sacristy. "You'd better come and stop the fight, Father, because the stool pigeon is about to be killed by my brothers." I went out and stopped the fight. Luckily the stool pigeon was so drunk he didn't know I had stopped it. I think he had to get about five hundred dollars worth of dental work after that. The brothers knocked most of his teeth out of his mouth.

Shortly after this incident I was removed from the parish. A couple of years later, however, probably because of this first attempt to start a union, a union did finally get in. A few workers ratted, but most were loyal, and that, I believe, is the essence of good organizing: loyalty. And loyalty is a two-way street.

Another service that I provided was that I showed movies. The nearest movies were about fifty to eighty miles away. Through help of some friends, I was able to find out that if you lived in a remote area where the nearest competition is fifty miles away, you are able to get first-run movies at a real saving. I was able to get a rich man who was a non-Catholic, and who ran the big gas station in Amboy, to pay for the rental of the movies. I would get the movie on a Friday night and he would show the movie in his house and then I would have two showings of the movie for the parishioners on Saturday and Sunday. I made a lot of money. In fact, I made so much money that I was able to take care of all the parish bills.

Of course, as you know, I had this salary for being a coach. I made so much money that I remember that once when I was late for a priests' meeting in San Bernardino, one of my priest friends asked me, "How come you are late for the meeting Fr. Victor?"

"Well, I had such a large collection it took me a long time to count it."

"Huh?" one priest said.

“You’re some joker, Victor,” another said, scratching his chubby palms, a cross between greed, envy, and curiosity. “The sun must be baking your brain out there in the desert.”

“No.”

I just mention that for that it’s worth. I was able to put the parish in good financial standing by the showing the movies, and I was able to support myself by being a coach, and other priests just couldn’t understand how I did it — so blinded were they be avarice.

The most important lesson I learned from my seven-month stay at Amboy was that Mexican people need a lot of help because over the years they have been so exploited and discriminated against. I was very happy that in my seven months there I was able to do something in a practical way. I was not trying to get them to go to church, because they couldn’t go to Mass — they had to work most Sundays.

I tried to take care of the kids, tried to keep their kids happy. Tried to keep them busy by sports. Tried to give them decent entertainment. Tried to be a friend to them, and not preach to them about going to Mass. Happily, some did come to Mass, but I felt deep down inside that the institutional church wasn’t really interested inn them.

One thing the workers didn’t like was that they *had* to give money to the church every month. I tried to stop it. The priest before me had arranged that out of each paycheck each worker, whether he liked it or not, had to give something like ten or fifteen dollars to the church. I thought that was very unfair. I tried to stop that, but I wasn’t able to because the Bishop wanted it that way. That was not the way for the church to endear itself to the workers — to force them to give money to the church every month. I thought that was very unfair, especially in light of the fact that they made such a low salary.

El Centro Revisited

Let's go back to my experiences in El Centro, back to the Imperial Valley, about 100 miles from San Diego, back to the past. It's a very rich agricultural area, one of the richest in the world. The reason it is such a rich agricultural area has something to do with a flood that occurred there in 1904. The Colorado River broke loose and brought a lot of sediment to the Imperial Valley. The water all ended up in the Salton Sea which, in fact, was formed by the flood. If you go to the Imperial Valley you can see big gullies around El Centro and Brawley that were formed by the flood. There is very rich soil there because of the sediment brought down by the flood. Just to give you an idea, the land is so rich that there are nine cuttings of alfalfa a year. That's practically a cutting about every six weeks! In most agricultural areas you only have maybe three cuttings of alfalfa a year.

My parish in El Centro was Spanish-speaking, a church on the East Side made up predominantly of farm workers and other Mexicans in low-paying jobs. Something like six hundred families. Besides them, for about six months a year I had to take care of between six to ten thousand farm workers, *braceros*, who worked in El Centro during the winter season picking lettuce, the biggest crop, and other vegetable crops.

It was ridiculous to expect one priest to do everything that needed doing there. I only had two hands and two feet, but I was responsible for six hundred families and all their problems, plus between six and ten thousand migrant workers six months out of the year. It was an impossible job. The neglect of the hierarchy of my diocese was immediately evident to me. Again, it was a glaring example of the attitude of the Diocese of San Diego towards the Mexican people. If the church had cared about its poorest, it would not have assigned all this responsibility to one lone, relatively inexperienced priest.

Before I was sent there, I had a few talks with some other priests.

"I guess I'd better start some night school classes in Spanish now," I commented one evening during a relaxed chat in San Diego.

"Learn Spanish? Don't be foolish, Victor."

"Huh? I have to, Father Do-Well. Most of the people in the parish out there speak Spanish. Many of them, I understand, don't speak English at all."

"Listen, Victor. I'm going to give you some good advice. You're a young man now, full of piss and vinegar. But things change, things you can't control. You've got to think about yourself. If you learn Spanish, the bishop will keep you in Mexican parishes the rest of your life!"

"I don't understand."

"Father Do-Well is right, Father Victor. For God's sake don't learn Spanish. It's the kiss of death!" said Father Do-Better.

"I don't see the difference, Father Do-Better. All men have souls."

“Don’t learn Spanish, Vic. I’m your friend and I’m trying to help you. God! I think I’m more on your side than you are! Wake up! If you learn Spanish you’ll get caught in a poor Mexican parish.”

“That’s not the idea a priest should have. I am very happy to have my own parish. In fact, I asked for the assignment. If nobody wants it, so much the better for me. I accepted the parish because I want to do something for the farm workers.”

I left the lazy room full of the abundance of Fathers Do-Well and Do-Better, and slipped out into the garden, where I conversed with the moonlight.

There were many routine problems every day in El Centro. So much to do that I didn’t know where to start. I didn’t know what was going to happen from day to day. Up at six in the morning, seven o’clock mass, a little breakfast, something to drink and maybe some fruit. Doing the morning rounds and visiting families and usually stopping at the county hospital.

I was in charge of pastoral services at the county hospital. I would go there to visit because so many Mexican people were there. They couldn’t afford to go to the regular hospital. The county hospital is for the poor. I would usually have my one big meal up there. The staff would always welcome me because no other minister went up there. Most of the doctors and staff thought I was part of the staff. I always used to have a good meal there. I used to eat early in the evening, around five, because most of the year I had to go out and say Mass for the farm workers in different camps. At that time, priests had to eat around three hours before saying Mass. That was the rule. I would eat between four-thirty and five. A big meal with the doctors and staff, then back to the rectory, some odds and ends, then leave for one of the camps around seven.

There were a lot of camps to visit. I would say at least two Masses a night, hear confessions, and consult with workers about their problems. In order to get the men to the Masses in the camp mess hall, I would show movies. I was able to get good movies for a reasonable price from Hollywood and I would make a little money, too, by charging a few cents. If they couldn’t afford it, I just let them come in anyway, but most of the guys were pretty good about putting something in for the rentals.

The movies made a little extra income for the parish, and everyone enjoyed good and decent entertainment — and it was also a good way to get them to come to Mass. Some people would say it was bribery and maybe it was, but I wasn’t there to be just an usher in a theater. I was dedicated to improving the spiritual lives of my parishioners—by hook or crook.

I set up the movie showing from *a* to *z*, a regular Father Sam Goldwyn although the films were from Mexico. I would usually have some altar boys help me set up and run the projectors, and the movie was a good gimmick to get them to the Mass.

Another thing I found working with *braceros* was that the foremen would often take advantage of the men. Indeed, not only the foremen, but everyone in the community would take advantage of these workers — especially in regard to their money. Farm workers would come to me when I was there for Mass at the camps, and tell me, “You know, I gave two hundred dollars to the foremen to send to my wife in Michoacan and the money never got there, and he says he sent it.”

I kept hearing all of these complaints about foremen. After a little investigation I found out that many of the foremen who were given money by poor farm workers — sometimes as much as five hundred dollars — to send to Mexico would go out and get drunk on this money for a couple of days. It was a horrible kind of sin that cried to heaven for vengeance. I'm Italian. For my last few years there, I would tell the farm workers, "Well, if you have any money to send, don't give it to the foreman to send." I'd look around at the Mass to see that no foreman was there. "If you're going to send your money to Mexico, don't give it to the foreman or some stranger. I'll collect your money after the Mass and I'll send it. And the best way to send it is through the Bank of America. If your money doesn't arrive in Mexico — and I know that the mail is tampered with in Mexico, often checks are stolen — don't worry. If I send your money through the Bank of America and if your check is stolen, the bank will take a picture of your check and they will recover it for you."

Many times after Mass I would leave a particular camp (some of these camps had a thousand men in them) with ten thousand dollars in cash. Some of these men had just come back from other areas in California where they had saved five hundred dollars or more. Some of them had been saving for five or six months. Many times when the people of the Bank of America saw me coming they would run because I would be at the counter for a half hour to forty-five minutes with all the money, fifty dollars here and five hundred dollars there. The next week when I came back to the camp, I would give the men their receipts. I also kept a record of their receipts in case they lost their money. In a period of three years, I recovered thousands and thousands of dollars because lots of times a lot of this money wouldn't get to Mexico. They would write to me in El Centro and I would notify the Bank of America and, I am proud to say, in every case the money was recovered for them. I was very happy to see that the farm workers were not exploited.

One of the highlights of my stay in El Centro was the fact that I was able to generate money through Hollywood. I was lucky in 1959 to get Bing Crosby down for a big benefit and was able to make quite a bit of money for the parish. I made all that money with the support of the community. But, the Bishop took most of the money to pay the parish debt. I didn't think that was fair. It caused a lot of difficulty in the parish. The money had been planned to build a gym.

Time found out about this injustice and wrote a story, a story that the bishop had suppressed.

My involvement with the big strike in 1961 was the height of my experience in El Centro, a climax to the work I had been doing for the farm workers. Briefly here is what happened.

When the strike occurred in the spring of 1961 I got up in the pulpit and I told the people of El Centro that I supported the strike. I felt that there was a just reason for the strike. There were two or three growers in church that heard my sermon and took it down almost verbatim. They sent it to Bishop Buddy the next day. He was really upset because the day before I gave the sermon he had gone on television and said that he didn't support the strikers. He supported the farmers. The Bishop, it spears, lied. Two priest friends of mine who came down to El Centro to speak at the union hall to support the strike went first to see Bishop Buddy. He gave them permission to come down and talk to the strikers.

The growers got really mad at the two priests for supporting the strike. They complained to the Bishop. The Bishop went on television and denied that he had given permission to the priests to support the farm workers, and to speak at the strike rally. The strike went on for four or five months. I supported the strike completely and that eventually led to my being removed from El Centro. I'm proud of that fact because I am labor priest. I became a priest to do things for the workers because I felt that it as the most important job of a priest. As Pope Pius XI said, priests must go to the working man, go the poor. He said that even though a priest has to spend important time with duties like teaching catechism and saying Mass, he should, nonetheless, spend most of his time trying to get justice for the workers.

The experience with the Mexican people at Amboy and El Centro that I have recounted in this book prepared the way for me to get more involved with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers. It was in El Centro that I first heard about Cesar Chavez and he had heard about me. A few years later, before he started his strike in 1965, he had asked me to come to see him in Delano. I spent a couple of days with him and he asked me to be his legislative representative in Washington, D.C. It was my experience in El Centro that prepared me to do more for the farm workers in the future.

The lettuce strike in 1961, which became the topic of my master's thesis, inspired much of my consequent actions. When I got involved with Cesar Chavez, many people felt that I was a mixed up priest and was getting too involved in politics. I understand how they feel, but the reason they feel this way is that they don't realize that a priest has to do more than say Mass. It he is really going to help people. he has to get involved with them. He has to help them economically. I remember that I converted only one farmer to the Catholic Church when I was in El Centro. I remember that at his last instruction he said, "Father, I understand that you are going to give me an instruction on social justice."

"Yes, and after I give the instruction you probably won't want to become a Catholic because I'm going to talk on the necessity of supporting the workers and the unions."

"Let me hear it."

I told him about how the church believes in the rights of workers and has a doctrine on social justice. He accepted it, but as soon as I got involved with Cesar Chavez a few years after leaving El Centro he wrote me a nasty and said that I should be ashamed to be associated with a communist.

In other words, he believed the lies that were going around in the newspapers. He didn't understand what a great man Cesar Chavez was and what he was doing for the farm workers. The irony of all this is that one of his sons entered the seminary. I went to see his son in the seminary about 3 years ago. He is also prejudiced against Cesar Chavez. However, the good news is that his son decided to leave the seminary after a short stay. If his son had become a priest I can assure the reader that I would have had more than one verbal battle with him.

How I Got Busted With Cesar Chavez – And Loved It

Cesar Chavez undoubtedly had a great influence on my life. I first met him in August 1965, a few weeks before the grape strike started. I had heard quite a bit about Cesar Chavez before I met him. Cesar had also heard about my work in El Centro, especially the incident of the Bing Crosby show. Cesar's path and mine had almost crossed in 1961 when, as a national organizer for the C.S.O. (Community Service Organization), he came to my parish to investigate a complaint by the local C.S.O. chapter of El Centro in regard to the Bing Crosby benefit.

Brother Gilbert, a Christian Brother from Bakersfield (now Leroy Chatfield, formerly one of Chavez's key lieutenants) was instrumental in my making contact with Chavez. I had met Brother Gilbert at a Catholic Social Action conference in Omaha, Nebraska. At a workshop on the problems of migrant workers, we agreed on the necessity of organizing. He told me about Chavez and invited me to Delano. A few weeks later I drove up to Delano and spent two days with Cesar. I had some long talks with him and he explained to me the whole purpose of this union, known as the National Farm Workers Association at the time (NFWA), then an independent union. The AFL-CIO affiliation would not come until much, much later.

Chavez knew that I would start studying economics at Catholic University in Washington D.C. in September so he asked me to lobby for the NFWA in the capital. I spent several hours with Cesar and Dolores Huerta getting advice on who to see and who not to see among U.S. Congressmen. Good guys and bad guys. Good guys: Bob Kennedy, Henry Gonzalez of Texas, Jeffrey Cohelan and Philip Burton of California. Bad guys: George Murphy, George Murphy and George Murphy, then a senator from California. Murphy was often called "Gorgeous George". He had once been a song and dance man in Hollywood. I recall that I interviewed "Gorgeous George" for my doctoral dissertation which was about the termination of the controversial bracero program. I spoke about an hour with the senator who, being a Catholic, always addressed me as "Father" during the interview. Incidentally, the Senator allowed me to tape him and the tape is now at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan in the labor archives. I remember the senator saying to me: "You know, Father, Cesar Chavez thinks he can organize the farm workers by marching throughout the state of California with a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe". The senator was referring to the long march of the farm workers in 1966 from Delano to Sacramento, some 300 miles, in order to publicize the cause of the farm workers. This march got tremendous national television coverage for the farm workers and resulted in the signing of the first wine grape contract with a large corporation known as Schenley.

I mention this remark of the senator because in making such a remark the senator revealed his total ignorance of Mexican culture. The truth of the matter is that it was precisely by marching throughout California with a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe that Chavez organized farm workers. Because as Chavez marched from Mexican community to Mexican community in the 300 miles from Delano to Sacramento he made contact with all the political bases he had developed over the 10 years when he was a community organizer for the Community Service Organization (CSO). The march was an astute political move by Chavez, a move that any clever politician makes in any campaign — namely, makes contact with political bases. I also need to mention here that Senator Murphy had been quoted in the press as saying the Mexican farm worker is a good worker “because he is built close to the ground”.

As a full-time graduate student my time to help Cesar Chavez was rather limited. However, I managed to do something at least once each week: visit congressman, attend meetings with Chicanos, organize a Huelga (Strike) Committee.

Christmas of 1965 was the next time I saw Chavez. I flew home for a few days vacation, ostensibly in Escondido. Actually, I went up to Delano and spent three or four days with Cesar. Even though the farm workers movement was small then, I could see that Chavez possessed the leadership I and other labor priests had been seeking for many years. Since my seminary days and my first assignment with Father Davis, I had been involved with the Young Christian Workers movement. Other priests and I were always searching for people with leadership ability who could implement the Christian social action so sorely needed.

I observed Chavez’ Christian leadership during the first summer of the grape strike, the summer of 1966. I had just arrived home in Escondido for summer vacation when Cesar asked me to come to Borrego Springs to help him with his organizing efforts. Borrego Springs is a few miles from Escondido, about an hour’s drive. One evening we had an open-air meeting of workers in a park near the large DiGiorgio vineyards. At this meeting Chavez told the workers about their responsibilities as Christians to be concerned about their fellow workers. He told them that it is necessary to sacrifice oneself for the good of other farm workers. He told them about the 300-mile march that April from Delano to Sacramento. This march had as its theme penance. The march was undertaken to do penance for the rich farmers of California who, for so many years, had exploited the farm workers of California, predominantly Chicanos. Chavez told the workers of the Delano Plan.

The Delano Plan is a statement of what the grape strikers intended to do. The Plan stated that the strikers were engaging in a social revolution that did not advocate violence, but rather non-violence. Cesar told the workers that I would offer Mass for them and speak to them about the social encyclicals of the popes.

When I first heard Chavez speak in Spanish to these field workers about Christian social action, I could hardly believe that it was true. I kept thinking to myself, “Is this man for real?” I was to learn in the years to come that Chavez was for real and what he said was not just words.

A few days later I witnessed Chavez in action and then I knew what he said that hot windy night in the desert was not just words. Two days after Chavez’ talk he called a

strike and the ten men who went on strike were immediately fired. These ten men wanted to return to the DiGiorgio camp to retrieve both their belongings and their checks but were afraid to because of the armed guards that DiGiorgio had placed at the entrance to the camp. It should be noted by way of background that during the two weeks that Chavez was organizing in Borrego Springs, DiGiorgio did everything possible to deter his workers from joining the union. Chavez' organizers were prohibited entrance to the camp, the workers were intimidated by the foremen and warned that if they joined the union DiGiorgio would never again hire them. It is not surprising that only ten workers out of over 200 joined the union, though the vast majority were sympathetic to Cesar. They needed the money and were afraid of losing their jobs.

The ten workers who were fired came to Chavez and asked him to accompany them back to the camp to retrieve their belongings. Chavez and two others of us agreed to go with the men despite the fact that we would be guilty of trespassing if we entered the DiGiorgio property. Chavez didn't have to go with the workers and court arrest, but he realized that if ten workers lost their jobs because they believed in his union, he too must take risks for these men. This, in my mind, is Christian social action.

As soon as we set foot on DiGiorgio turf, the thirteen of us were accosted by four goons armed with pistols and rifles and accompanied by two police dogs. We were placed in a closed truck and kept there for three hours. During these hours we were carted around to various places within the ranch while DiGiorgio's supervisors tried to decide what to do with us. When the workers saw that Chavez and a guy with a Roman collar had been arrested, they were infuriated and a riot almost broke out.

After having been held captive in the truck for those three hours, we were taken to the county sheriff's office where we were stripped and handcuffed. Because I had my collar on, the sheriff's deputies refused to strip me and handcuff me. I insisted, however, that I be handcuffed with the rest, but the sheriff's deputy said he refused to handcuff me unless I took my collar off. I asked Chavez what I should do. "Keep it on," Chavez suggested.

Before we left the deputy's office, Cesar asked me to lead all of us in a little prayer. I led the men in the *Ave Maria* in Spanish. The thirteen of us were transported in two station wagons to the San Diego county jail, about ninety miles away. Except for me, all the men were chained together. Along the road Cesar told me how wonderful it was that I was willing to be arrested with him and the workers. He said that this action would be great for *La Causa*. In the years since the arrest, whenever Cesar introduced me to a group of workers he repeatedly referred to my arrest. On several occasions, he extolled my courage in insisting that I be handcuffed and chained with the workers. "He was busted with us," Cesar says.

After a two-hour drive, we arrived at the county jail in San Diego. A battery of TV cameras and newspaper reporters were there to meet us. At the jail, we were first stripped, searched, and then clothed with prisoners' pajamas. Here the Roman collar held no magic, and I was given no preferential treatment. After pictures, fingerprinting, and the rest of that malignant business, we were all put behind bars where we remained until 11 a.m. the next morning. When we left the sheriff's office again, we were met by TV, radio, and newspaper reporters, both local and network coverage. The one thing that I recall was Cesar Chavez'

presence of mind in the face of all this notoriety. Cesar was master of the situation and dead cool as he explained to the major networks why we were arrested. Over and over again in the future I was to witness this mastery of a situation which Chavez possessed: the charisma to handle danger with ease.

Sour Grapes in Manhattan in 1970

“Are you a Catholic priest?” the woman asked me as she accepted one of my leaflets outside the gourmet food store on Manhattan’s East 60th St. I assured her that I was. She looked disdainfully at the pickets carrying signs: *Don’t Buy Scab Grapes! And Help the Farm Workers Win Their Fight for Justice*, and her eyes shot back to me with a look of disbelief in them. She threw back her head, clutched the collar of her lustrous mink coat, and defiantly entered the store.

It was early April. A bitter wind, punctuated by rain squalls, whipped our faces. We had been picketing the store and handing out leaflets for more than three hours. The sights, sounds, and smells of the warm, well-lighted store served to increase my discomfort, and suddenly remembered that I had skipped breakfast that morning in my eagerness to be on the picket line by the time the store opened.

The day before, the boycott schedule had called for picketing and leafleting at a neighborhood fruit store in the Bronx, but I was called away to attend a meeting of the boycott coordinating committee. In my absence an ugly incident developed. The angry store owner started haranguing the pickets, many of whom were long-haired high school and college students, calling them “hippies,” “Commies,” and “bums.” When his vituperation failed to evoke a response — the picketers had been made to realize the importance of applying the Gandhian principles of non-violence — the store owner suddenly grabbed one of the students by the collar and slammed him against a brick wall. The student did not retaliate, although he was badly shaken up and had an egg-sized lump on the back of his head to show me when I got back. I could not let such behavior go unchallenged. Entering the store, I could sense the owner’s anger.

“I am Father Victor Salandini,” I said, trying to keep Cesar’s sense of cool in crisis, “and I am in charge of the grape boycott operations in this area.”

“And I’m Mario Rizzuto, in charge of this store. I pay rent for his store, I pay taxes. I work ten hours a day, go to church and send my kids to Catholic school. So wadda ya want?” he interrupted.

“I am not here to discuss your spiritual or personal life, Mario. You roughed up one of the young fellows who is legally picketing this store. You are lucky, Mr. Rizzuto, that the group outside is firmly dedicated to the principle of non-violence. But I would like to warn you that many diverse elements have joined the boycott effort — and not all of them believe in non-violence....”

He interrupted me again. “Wadda I supposed to do? Watch dose bums ruin my business and not do nuttin? I’ll tell ya one thing — if the church don’t care if its priests go around getting’ mixed up widda bunch of dirty Commies, it don’t need my support. And it ain’t gonna get it no more.”

I tried to explain to him patiently — as I had done to store owners and managers dozens of times before — that it was not the Church that was on trial here. It was his own conscience. Earlier in the season, I told him, we had approached the farmers and all attempts to win even a little social justice for the farm workers had been rebuffed by a combination of powerful forces that respected only wealth, power and privilege.

I explained that the strike by the grape farm workers had been ruthlessly broken by the importation of foreign strike-breakers from Mexico. I told him that our strike leaders were thrown into jail on trumped-up charges, pickets were run down by guards in company-owned trucks. I said that laws were in the books that denied farm workers the basic rights enjoyed by workers in every other field of endeavor. As a result, farm workers who perform the most onerous and the most vital jobs are even today the lowest paid and the most exploited group in America.

The grape boycott was the only weapon, the only recourse left to the farm workers in their struggle for a decent life, I explained to Mario. It was an appeal to the individual conscience of the buyer and seller alike to refrain from buying or selling a product that had become a symbol of human greed and exploitation. Three years before, we had demanded a boycott of all table grapes. The boycott had been successful enough to induce some growers in the Coachella Valley to break the once solid grower ranks and sign union contracts. Now store owners who had previously complained that if they did not sell grapes they would lose their customers no longer had that excuse. There were now enough union-produced grapes on the New York market to satisfy their needs, and the difference in price was only a few cents a pound. In many cases, however, the consumer continued to pay the same price for grapes, whether they were union or non-union, and the dealer pocketed the extra few cents a pound he made on the sale of “scab” grapes.

I don't know whether I ever got through to Mario Rizzuto, but I told him that as long as he continued to sell “scab” grapes, the Boycott Committee of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee was determined to oppose him. If persuasion, reason and appeals to conscience failed, they were prepared to resort to economic means — to hit him in the pocketbook.

That's why, I told him, the picketers and leafletters were outside his store that morning.

But that was yesterday. Today, I was part of the picketing team outside one of Gristede's chain stores on Manhattan's East 60th Street in the so-called “silk stocking district,” a traditional Republican stronghold. Here the stakes were a bit higher, for Gristede's was the only major chain store operation in New York City that adamantly refused to discuss the grape issue with the boycott committee. We knew that all the other retail stores were watching the situation closely. If Gristede's could flaunt its defiance of the grape boycott and prosper in the process, then the entire farm workers' cause in New York would be jeopardized.

At the Coordinating Committee's meeting the day before, news was received from the Farm Workers' headquarters in Delano that eight more grape growers in the Coachella Valley had signed contracts and that the vast Roberts enterprise, the largest grower of fruits, nuts and vegetables in California, was ready to sign a contract covering the 4,000 to 5,000 workers it employed at peak harvest periods. To all of us involved in the long,

grueling and often bitter struggle to form a strong farm workers' union, this was heady news. But it also made us realize that 1970 would be the year of decision, and it would be our efforts on the picket line and our success in arousing the conscience of the consumer that would turn the tide.

The Gristede store that was our target for the day was in a rather genteel neighborhood, and the manager of the store was too sophisticated to engage in the sort of outbursts that were common at the smaller neighborhood stores.

Besides, the manager was merely following orders and had no voice in the decision to sell "scab" grapes. It was the job of the Boycott Committee and the picketing teams to get the message across to the Gristede management that selling such grapes was bad business, and the only way we could do this was through picketing and leafleting to convince the chain's customers of the justice of the farm workers' cause.

For one who had been actively engaged in the long, grueling fight to organize workers in the fields in California, my present task of supervising the pickets and handing out leaflets outside a high priced food store in Manhattan's "silk stocking" district was extremely frustrating. Young passers-by, I observed, would accept handouts from the student pickets, but older persons, especially women, would ignore their offerings but accept the leaflets I held out to them. Invariably they would engage me in conversation. Their questions were always the same:

"Are you a Catholic priest?"

"What is a priest doing on a picket line?"

"Don't you think it's undignified for a priest to be engaging in this sort of activity?"

I answered their questions as succinctly as possible, but I knew that whatever I said would not alter their preconceived, stereotyped notion of the priesthood.

I did not argue with them, for I was in the classic situation where I could easily win the argument but lose a friend. And, if our efforts were to be successful, I realized we needed all the friends we could get. Besides, how could I get angry with them, when some of my fellow priests and even my ecclesiastical superiors, who certainly should have known better, were constantly asking the same questions.

The Saints Come Marching In

As I reflect on sanctity in the world today, I realize more and more that we must rub elbows with Saints every day. We have saints living among us just as in the early history of the church, some of them even walk picket lines. When we read the lives of the saints, one thing always impresses me. Saints were often considered crazy. St. Peter wanted to be hung on a cross with his head down because he denied Christ three times and felt that he was not worthy to be crucified right side up, as Christ was. Was he crazy?

The purpose of every man in every walk of life should be to become a saint. Yet, how many people work at it each day? The world needs saints today as much as it did in the days of Diocletian. Maybe more because these are the days of supposedly *just* wars, genocide, and extreme exploitation of man by his fellows.

I am convinced that there are many good people in the world today, people who have the qualities of which saints are made. Within my life, Martin Luther King had his jaw blown off by a sniper's bullet and many people just said, "Ho hum." I believe that when Doctor King was assassinated in April, 1968, a saint was assassinated. How great it would be if the Catholic Church would canonize Doctor King! If Doctor King were canonized, many, I am sure, would have greater faith in the Catholic Church and in the greater truth of God's love.

In my life as a priest, I have had three favorite saints to whom I have prayed quite a bit: St. Anthony of Padua, St. John Mary Vianney, and St. John Bosco.

I was attracted to these saints because I had something in common with all three of them. I, like them, came from poor parents and worked hard in the fields.

St. Anthony, a Franciscan monk, who lived in the 13th century, appealed to me because he is the saint one prays to when one loses something. To this day my mother swears she has never lost anything because she always prays to good old St. Anthony, the famous finder of lost articles. Cesar Chavez works for the betterment of the Chicanos. The Chicanos, too, are lost articles of a sort.

St. John Mary Vianney, often known as the *Cure of Ars*, always had a special attraction for me. I have been attracted to the *Cure of Ars* because he encountered as much opposition in his priestly life as I have. I don't want the reader to think that I am a saint like Vianney, but I want you to understand, rather, that one who seriously strives after sanctity is bound to encounter opposition.

I well remember the first months of my priesthood. I was determined from the outset to set the whole world on fire and to help everyone in need. In very short time I saw that all priests did not have the same determination. I saw that many older priests were merely playing a game. I saw that they were concerned more with what the Bishop thought should be done rather than concerned about what had to be done.

John Mary Vianney was the type of priest who did what he felt had to be done regardless of the consequences. He would sacrifice himself for his people. If a hardened sinner refused to amend his life, the Cure would abstain from food and offer extra prayers for the soul in question.

It seems to me that when a priest does what he knows to be the right thing, he experiences a peace of mind and a satisfaction that nothing else can give him. After I was arrested with Cesar Chavez, I experienced such great joy that I wanted to go out and yell what I had done from the top of a mountain. I remembered Father Davis' assignment in the seminary, and I remembered the mountain on which I had dedicated my life to God.

In studying the life of John Vianney, I noticed that the secret of his success was found in his intense prayer life. People must have seen Christ in John Vianney because hundreds of thousands came from all over France to confess to him. For 35 years he heard confessions 17 hours a day.

The example of this great saint, the patron of parish priests, encouraged me to turn to God in all the difficulties I have encountered in the priesthood. Because of my own prayer life, I am still in the priesthood today. Otherwise I might have dropped out.

The saint I have admired the most in my priesthood is St. John Bosco. I guess one thing that endeared me to him from the start was that he is from north Italy, the birthplace of my mother. *Paisano!* Another thing that attracted me to John Bosco was his physical strength. Since I was always active and strong, his physical strength attracted me to him.

John Bosco dedicated his life to caring for young, abandoned boys. He built schools and community centers for them throughout Italy, and after his death his work for youth spread throughout the world. John Bosco, like anyone who dedicates himself to an unprofitable cause, met much opposition. In fact, on many occasions his life was threatened. But John was such a strong man physically that he was always able to give his pursuers, no matter how many, a good thrashing.

John Bosco did have a valuable friend in the form of a huge dog who came from nowhere one day and wanted off several men who had thrown a sack over Bosco's head and were in the process of beating him. This dog stayed with the saint for many years. He was always at his side and saved the saint's life on many occasions.

Being an Italian and of Latin blood, I was especially thrilled in reading Bosco's life. It happened once that John Bosco was encountering so much opposition in his work that he became deeply depressed. He then resolved to leave the priestly ministry. So he packed his bag and set out. After a walk of a few miles he decided that maybe he ought to go to confession. He stopped at the hut of an old priest and confessed his discouragement. The old priest listened and said simply, "Have confidence in god, my son." These words of advice from the old priest were sufficient to bring John Bosco up from his knees and back to his vocation. His work prospered and eventually he became a saint. To my knowledge, John Bosco never picked oranges. Then again, I don't own a dog just yet.

Complaints, Transfers, Incidents, Removals, Threats, and Exiles: A Brief Summary

Liberation Theology has been in the news quite frequently of late, increasing during the 1970's and 1980's. Liberation Theology is a theology that is being preached in Latin America and has been around for about twenty years. In brief, this theology teaches that the Catholic Church should show preference for the poor as God did in Judaic times and as Christ did when he was on earth. In my forty years as a priest, I have always tried to show preference to the poor. As a result, I have been unwelcome in many parishes over the span of those years. I know of no other priest in the San Diego diocese who has been transferred as many times as I have and who is as unwelcome as I am in many parishes. I recall that when I was refused tenure at San Diego State University and fired in the fall of 1978, I was not able to get into another university. I went to Bishop Leo Maher to ask for an assignment. He said that if any pastor would hire me, it was okay with him. For about a year I went from parish to parish and none of my colleagues would hire me. Finally, I listened to my mentor, Father Davis: "Vic, they just don't want you. Stop trying to get back into parish life. It will only discourage you."

After spending two wonderful years at my first assignment at Immaculate Conception Church in Old Town, San Diego with my best friend, Father Leo Davis, whom I have spoken of in this book before, I was first transferred to St. Joseph's Cathedral in downtown San Diego. I only lasted there three months because I got too involved with the disadvantaged youth of the parish.

After a dance one Saturday night, my pastor called me into his office and told me that my youth group had left the parish hall in a mess. He said that he was most disturbed because Mexicans and Blacks had attended the dance.

"Father you are spending too much time with the dirty Mexicans and Blacks."

"But, Monsignor, they also have souls." A few days later I was transferred.

From the Cathedral I went to Saint Jude's parish in the Logan Heights area of San Diego, a high-crime city area populated mainly by poor Mexicans and a sizable number of other minorities, Filipinos and Blacks. I lasted there about a year and half and, while there, I devoted most of my time helping Mexican families. I visited many homes, had dinner with them, took their kids on hikes and swimming, and taught the kids catechism. Many of these kids today are important leaders in the community — judges, lawyers, teachers.

Today I am teaching in the public school system of San Diego with teachers who once were the kids I instructed in religion and played softball with in Barrio Logan.

While at St. Jude's, I was almost successful in starting a Federal Credit Union. I had the help of many people and the cooperation of many members of the parish who saw the need of being able to save money and borrowing it at a low rate of interest. With the permission of the Bishop, I started the credit union and collected several thousand dollars from members of the parish. Then, abruptly, the Bishop changed his mind because he was pressured by my pastor who was more interested in the poor people of the parish saving money to give to the Church rather than to better their lives. The Bishop ordered me to return the several thousand dollars I had collected and to dissolve the credit union. I did, but I didn't feel right about it and told the Bishop so.

Within a few days I was transferred to a boy's school in Banning, California, which is near Palm Springs. I lasted there about two months because I tried to help the disadvantaged boys in ways besides teaching academic subjects. This did not meet with the approval of the older priest in charge. I was soon dismissed from this assignment.

I next went to Amboy, which I have already discussed. Amboy was an assignment a priest received when the Bishop was thoroughly disgusted with him. From Amboy I was transferred to Mercy Hospital in San Diego because the Bishop felt that I had suffered long enough in the hellhole of Amboy with its 120-degree heat from April 1st to the end of October. I was in Amboy during those seven months.

I was about four months at Mercy Hospital and I was very happy there. I was changed to Our Lady of the Rosary parish from Mercy Hospital not as a punishment but because the Bishop felt that I would be happier and more effective among my own people, the Italians. The Bishop was mistaken because I am of Venetian Italian descent and Our Lady of the Rosary parish is predominantly composed of Sicilian Italians who do not care for Northern Italians. In other words, I was not accepted by most of the parish. I tried to work closely with the youth to bring some vitality into a conservative Italian parish, but this incurred the wrath of the elderly Italian Monsignor who got rid of me after three months.

From the Italian parish I went to a wealthy parish in downtown Palm Springs and again I lasted only seven months there because my boss was an old conservative Irish pastor who believed a priest should stick close to the Church and rectory and not mix with the people. I did not follow his advice and, since he was senile, I took advantage of his senility and got involved with helping people with their needs. Each day my pastor said he was going to report me to the Bishop for being an activist, then he would forget about what he said an hour later. Day by day I was living in a tightrope. I recall one day that one of the wealthiest parishioners, an oil man, invited me to dinner with his family in order to get my advice on what to do with \$50,000 he had decided to give to charity in order to get a tax write off. He asked me if I would suggest a charity to give \$50,000 to. I told him not to give the money to the parish because the parish was very wealthy and I suggested giving the money to the African missions. The wealthy parishioner followed my advice and gave \$50,000 to the Catholic African Missions. A few days after my senile pastor found out that I advised our millionaire parishioner to give all this money to Africa. I was called into his office.

“You stupid idiot! You should have told him to give the money to the parish!” he shouted in a fury. Tomorrow I will report your stupidity to the Bishop and have you transferred.” An hour or so later he forgot what he had said. I did not remind him and business went on as usual.

Even though my pastor’s senility worked in my favor, his housekeeper and other people in the parish who objected to my liberal ideas and my activities with the underprivileged in the parish saw to it that I was transferred. In short, this was my seventh transfer within five years and my Bishop was entirely disgusted with me. Therefore, I came to my own rescue and suggested that my Bishop send me to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in El Centro. No one wanted this poor Mexican parish anyway and there was a need for a Spanish-speaking priest who could administer to the needs of some 600 Mexican families and some 6,000 farm workers who spent six months of each year working in the El Centro area.

The Bishop was glad to get me off his back and so he agreed to let me go to El Centro. I remained in El Centro for almost five years, from November, 1957, to the summer of 1962. While I was at El Centro, I got involved in the lettuce strike of 1961, which eventually led to my removal from the parish.

Because of my involvement with the 1961 strike, my Bishop exiled me to teaching at University Boy’s High School in San Diego during the school year 1962-1963. My Bishop felt that if I taught high school and attended night classes at San Diego Evening College, I could well prepare myself to attend St. Louis University within a year in order to have a broader and more well-balanced understanding of the farm-labor problems in the area. My Bishop felt that I tended to see only the farm workers’ viewpoint and needed to understand better the viewpoint and problems of the farmers. After a year of High School teaching and night classes, the Bishop gave me permission to attend St. Louis University for two years provided I would pay for my own expenses. Since I had some savings set aside and since I worked in a Catholic Hospital while at St. Louis University, I was able to finance my education without being a burden to the Bishop.

After two years at St. Louis University in St. Louis, I was awarded a Master’s Degree in economics and, when I returned to San Diego, I was given an assignment teaching at a Catholic high school in San Diego while living in and helping out at a nearby parish, St. Rose of Lima. I only lasted one semester at both Marian High School and St. Rose of Lima because I was more interested in farm labor problems than I was in teaching. Therefore, I did a poor job as a teacher and was fired. Because I was outspoken in my Sunday sermons on the farm-labor issue, I gradually incurred the wrath of some parishioners in the parish who had farming investments. One particularly wealthy farmer in the parish put pressure on the pastor to get me transferred. He was successful. The irony of the matter was that my pastor had encouraged me to give a series of sermons on the social doctrine of the Church since I had studied the Church’s social doctrine extensively at St. Louis University. However, when my social doctrine sermons offended influential contributions to the parish coffers, the pastor sided with the hands that fed the parish generously rather than with the advocate of the social doctrine of the church.

I next went to Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish in San Ysidro, a predominantly Spanish-speaking parish on the Mexican border, seventeen miles from San Diego. I was in

San Ysidro only six months because I helped to organize the farm workers into a union known as AWOC, Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, an AFL-CIO affiliate. At that time Chavez' union was not active in the San Diego area. Because of my organizing efforts with the AWOC union, I was involved in a tomato strike which received national attention. My involvement with this farm workers union and the tomato strike in 1965 again incurred the wrath of the farmers of the area, and once again they successfully put pressure on the Bishop to transfer me from the parish.

The Bishop at the time of the tomato strike was Bishop Francis J. Furey. He was very upset with my activist role with the farm workers and threatened to suspend me if I continued helping them. He sent me to Escondido, my hometown, for the remainder of the summer of 1965, allowing me to help in the Escondido parish.

Since I was a thorn in Furey's side, he gladly consented to exile me to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., for four years to pursue a doctorate in economics. He was especially pleased that I volunteered to pay my own expenses.

Before I left for Catholic University in October, 1965, I began to get involved with Cesar Chavez. I had spent a week or so with him and he had asked me to lobby for him during my stay in Washington, D.C.

During the three summers of the four years that I attended Catholic University, I devoted a lot of my time working with Cesar Chavez' union. Further, I did research for my doctoral dissertation on California Farm Labor Problems.

As I have mentioned, in the summer of 1966 I was arrested and went to jail with Chavez. My arrest and imprisonment with Chavez projected me into the national news. I was one of the first priests in the United States to go to jail. I went to jail even before the Berrigan priests, who later received national publicity for burning their draft cards to protest the Vietnam War. My arrest with Chavez in June occupied most of my summer because the subsequent jury trial continued for two months. This trial gave me national publicity and the final verdict was that I, Chavez, and a Presbyterian minister, Chris Hartmire, were placed on probation for two years for trespassing. We were fined \$1000 each.

It should be mentioned that while helping Chavez in the strike in Borrego Springs I was also helping part-time at my home parish in Escondido. Because of sermons I gave there on social justice and the farm workers on Sundays, I incurred the wrath of Catholic farmers who attended Mass at my home parish of St. Mary's.

One sermon I gave about the farm labor problems caused one wealthy grower to complain to the pastor. After Mass, this farmer confronted me in the sacristy, shouting, raging, ranting.

“Father, why don't you preach the Gospel?”

“That's what I'm trying to do.”

“You know, Father, you don't truly understand the problems in farm labor. The Mexican farm worker is not interested in a union. All he is interested in is working to make enough money to buy liquor and get drunk. If the Mexican worker had any initiative he would go out and make something of himself like I did. Look at me, I came here a few years ago from Holland and now I'm a millionaire. I even have my own dairy.”

“There is only one big difference between you and the Mexican farm worker. He has a brown skin and you have a white skin. Because he is Mexican, not too many doors open to him.”

The farmer stormed out of the sacristy and went to see my pastor. The next day my pastor called me to his office and angrily told me that I had alienated one of the richest farmers of the area who had just given \$20,000 for the building of the new church. He said that because of my lack of tact I would not be able to say Mass anymore in Escondido.

“I don’t care if he gave \$100,000 to the Church. That means nothing to me. If I’m not on the altar next Sunday, I and some Mexican farm workers will picket the Church.”

A few days later, after checking out my threat, the pastor changed his mind and allowed me to continue saying Mass in Escondido. A few weeks later, when I was arrested with Chavez, the scenario changed and the Bishop assigned me to the Cathedral in downtown San Diego — where he could keep an eye on me while I attended my two-month long trial as a result of my arrest with Cesar Chavez in 1966.

In the fall of 1966 I returned to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and spent three more years completing my doctorate in economics in June of 1969. In the summer of 1967 and 1968 I continued helping Chavez and did research on my doctoral dissertation.

In 1969 I asked Bishop Furey for permission to work with Chavez and the farm workers. He gladly gave me permission because he was happy to get rid of me. As a result, I was one of the first priests in the United States released for full-time work with the farm workers. Cesar Chavez made me his research director, another first. For two years I held this position. So, from June 1969 to June of 1971, I worked full-time with the United Farm Workers promoting the grape boycott in Montreal, Canada, New York City, in San Diego County, and in Fresno, California.

During the two years I worked full-time with the farm workers, I helped on the lettuce boycott in Escondido, my home town, and in north San Diego County. I incurred the wrath of both farmers in Escondido and also the Japanese-American farmers of the north part of the county. For four months I lived at a Benedictine monastery in Oceanside. At the time, and even at present Japanese-American farmers have a near monopoly of the farming operations in that area. They complained to the Abbot of the monastery about my activities on behalf of the farm workers. The Abbot, who received all of his fruits and vegetables for the monastery from these growers, was upset and told me that I had to keep it a secret that I lived at the monastery or otherwise I would have to leave.

Another incident that occurred at this time also disturbed the Abbot. I was invited by a priest friend, as I mentioned earlier, to say Mass at Camp Pendleton, a Marine facility near the monastery in North County. One Sunday I preached on the farm labor problems in the area and recommended that those present help the farm workers’ cause by boycotting lettuce. During my sermon, the top man on the base, a big-bird colonel, walked out and phoned the Bishop complaining about my sermon. He notified me and the Bishop that I was never allowed to say Mass again on the base. A few weeks later, some twenty-five farm workers and I picketed the chapel on the base protesting that the military was selling scab lettuce and thus were hurting the lettuce boycott. Because of the picketing, I and the farm workers were arrested and I was given a mandate by the colonel that I was never again to enter Camp Pendleton.

My life has been a saga of complaints, threats, transfers and exiles, and this thumbnail accounting is intended only to give you an overview of attitudes and actions in the country, church, and organized labor during those days of turmoil and struggle. That I occupied the center of the storm, at least in San Diego, says less about me as a brilliant, ethical and intelligent man than it does about others, more talented than I, who did not join me in the center.

At times the center was a lonely place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I reminisce on my days going up. and down those orange trees....The decision made on the quiet rocks above my father's vineyard to dedicate my life to people as a priest is still vivid....My work with my beloved mentor, Father Davis, is always with me....The work with the farm workers....my father's death....The many unjust incidents and treatment by the bishops in San Diego....The unjust treatment by an educational establishment even more bureaucratic than the hierarchy of the church....All this comes to mind, and I don't know how to conclude. In memory as in life, there is always more. Perhaps a succinct conclusion is best. An update.

My life of recent has been one full of new activities, mostly connected to education.

As I stated earlier, my years of study at St. Louis University, Missouri, and Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., were just another way of continuing my work on behalf of farm workers. As I stated, my MA thesis and doctoral dissertation were about the farm labor problems in California, efforts that could not be discussed without also discussing Cesar Chavez.

My ultimate reason for getting a doctorate in economics was to assure myself of a good job, one that could support me and not leave me dependent on the Church. My mentor, Father Davis, had advised me to do this book in 1963.

My dreams were realized when, in the fall of 1970, I was offered a position in Mexican-American Studies at Fresno State University — in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley of California. During my two-year stay there as a lecturer I taught classes on issues affecting Mexican-Americans, farm labor, and farm-labor problems. During those two years at Fresno State, I continued to help the farm workers and keep in touch with the UFW.

I felt secure, and after two years was looking forward to getting a tenured position in the Department of Mexican-American Studies — also called La Raza Studies. Fate, the invisible yet ever-present opponent of the secure, decided otherwise. I discovered — for the first time — that I had not found a safe haven in the educational system. The very students I was trying to help, together with my colleagues who I thought would defend me, ousted me from the university.

Since the summer before I had been making national news as “The Tortilla Priest.” When my contract was not renewed, one UPI press release that appeared in papers everywhere stated that I had been ousted because I failed to relate to Chicano students. This, of course, was not true. I failed to relate to a few Chicano students — but they, in turn, failed not only to relate to me but to all non-Chicanos.

Fortunately, after having been refused tenure at Fresno State University, I was offered a professorship for 1972-73 at a small independent University in Davis, California, near the University of California campus there. It was known as D.Q. University, a school

run jointly run by Chicano and Indian leaders. I received the same salary as at Fresno State, but it was an entirely different experience. Instead of teaching in a class-work setting, my teaching consisted of independent studies with about a dozen students. One of my students was the granddaughter of the famous Indian athlete, Jim Thorpe.

After a few months at D.Q. University, I realized that again I had not found a safe haven because I soon discovered that besides educational bureaucracy, I had to deal with community problems and conflict. On weekends there was excessive drinking and drug abuse on the campus. After a year, I resigned and began a search for another teaching assignment. This time I was not very successful and found only part-time employment at several institutions in the San Bernardino area some 120 miles north of San Diego. However, lady luck was partly on my side because in the Fall of 1974, I was offered a position in Mexican-American Studies at San Diego State University. Three years of successful teaching followed, lecturing and publishing. After those years, I felt that, indeed, I had found a safe haven. Lightning struck a second time and I was under its fateful impact.

At the end of my third year, when I was up for tenure, I was informed that I was given a terminal year because I had not met the proper requirements for a tenured position. My fourth and terminal year at San Diego was hectic because so much of my time was spent in defending my case. Batteries of lies were brought against me. All evidence that I presented to defend the fact that I had met the proper requirements were ignored. The irony of the matter was that during my years at San Diego State I was active in the union that represented the professors, the United Professors of California (UPC). The majority of the members of the union did not come to my defense. It is true that they rarely come to anyone's defense other than their own, but after all their brave talk and armchair radicalism, I was surprised. Those few union members who defended me believed that my academic freedom was violated. For a few months after being let go, I contemplated a civil case against the university, but the tremendous cost involved was not worth the effort.

I tried to get into other institutions after my removal from San Diego State, but the truth of the matter is that once you receive a terminal year from one University, it is difficult to get accepted into another. As a result, for the next four years I continued teaching part-time at different institutions of higher learning in San Diego without success in obtaining a full-time job. After four years of part-time teaching, I decided that since I was cut off unjustly from institutions of higher learning, I should try high school.

I had taught high school, as I mentioned earlier, for one year from 1962-63, at University High School, and one semester at another diocesan secondary school, Marian High. I made an appointment with my Bishop, Leo Maher, to offer my services to the Catholic high schools of diocese.

"You can't teach in any high school in the area because you'll only talk about the farm workers and this would cause problems," he said emphatically. "Let me suggest, instead, that you seek a position in a secular hospital and do hospital work. You always got too emotional when you're involved with farm workers."

Maher warned me, however, that if I worked in a hospital I would have to keep certain rules.

“I can’t be a hospital chaplain, Bishop. I’m saying Mass in my spare time for the farm workers in North County. Maybe I could teach at our Catholic University, the University of San Diego.”

“Don’t be foolish. There is no way I’d allow you to teach there! I’m on the Board of the University and, even though you are qualified, I’ll never permit it.”

“OK,” I insisted, “I won’t talk about the farm workers in the high school.”

“I have the final word about whether or not you can teach in the high schools, and I’m tell you *no!* You are a failure, a complete failure. You can’t even keep a job in the universities you’ve taught in!”

“That’s because of my association with the farm workers and other workers and unions....I can better identify with Christ, who himself suffered persecution and finally an unjust death, because of my association with working people,” I explained.

“Get off of it!” the Bishop shouted. “How dare you relate your priesthood to the life of Christ!”

I don’t think I was ever hurt more by a remark. I guess the spiritual aspect of my life didn’t interest him. When I saw that I wasn’t getting anywhere with him, I asked, “If I can’t teach in the Catholic high schools, may I have your permission to teach in public high schools?”

“Yes,” he said curtly. For him this was an excellent opportunity to get rid of me.

Before I left, Bishop Maher spent some time reminding me of the many times I acted without good judgment. He especially reminded me of the time I gave a sermon at the Chapel at Camp Pendleton that offended the Catholic Colonel who was the top man there. The sermon had been about the farm labor problems in California. In the sermon I encouraged the congregation to boycott Alpha Beta Markets because they were selling non-union lettuce.

Finally, after our hour-long meeting, the Bishop said, “You are just wasting my time.”

“Bishop, you are wasting my time, too.”

In order to enter the public high system, I had to go back to the university to get a high school teaching credential. It took me a year to get that credential, and, in November, 1983., I started teaching junior and senior high school.. After a year as a substitute teacher, I received a contract as a full-time teacher in September, 1984. Contracts are hard to come by in San Diego, but since I had a bilingual credential in Spanish and math credential, I received a contract immediately. There is scarcity of bilingual and teachers. Again, I felt secure and felt I had a secure source of income.

Again, my past caught up with me. After two years as a contract teacher with a salary commensurate with my doctorate, I was informed that I would not be given tenure because I lacked the ability to be an effective high school teacher. Lies and more lies were hurled against me and, despite the fact that representatives of the Mexican-American community put tremendous pressure on the school board, I still did not get my teaching contract renewed. The educational bureaucracy has a memory as good or even better than the hierarchical Church. I am convinced that because I am a priest — and not an ex-priest who is married — and because I am a man who is not part of the system, and because I identify with the poor, I was never given tenure in a university or high school.

Many friends encouraged me to fight back and initiate a civil case against the school district that treated me — and many, others — so unfairly. I decided not take this course of action. Instead, I became a substitute teacher in another school district where I have been now for the last six years.

Since I have a bilingual credential in Spanish, I have received an assignment almost every day since becoming a substitute. Also, since I go back to the same schools year after year, I know many students and that makes it easier to teach.

All junior and senior high school students know that there is an open season on substitutes because substitutes don't give them a grade. Students go out of their way to take advantage of substitute teachers by resorting to undisciplined behavior. Over the years I have developed a technique to handle this situation. I always tell the students that I am a Catholic priest who is a visiting teacher and not a substitute. I tell them a visiting teacher is like a regular teacher. This strategy helps me to maintain control.

In the last nine years, going from high school to high school in the San Diego area, I have almost daily come across former Chicano students of mine when I was a professor at San Diego State University. They are always surprised to see me and they invariably ask, "What are you doing her, Father?"

"I am a substitute teacher."

"You must be kidding. You were my professor!" It is quite a shock to them. It would be analogous in the Church if a man went from bishop to deacon.

Another experience I have had is the fact that hardly a day goes by that I don't meet a student I taught as far back as five years ago.

"Oh, I had you for math at such and such a school four years ago. You are a priest."

"Oh, you are the priest who knows Cesar Chavez and went to jail with him."

"Oh, I had you for Spanish at Such-and-Such High. Your story was in *Time*. You are the tortilla priest."

Still, the greatest compliment I can get from students is when they come up to me in schools where I don't tell them I'm a priest.

"I think you are a priest."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're different."

More on Cardijn Center

Since 1953 I have been involved with Cardijn Center, as I detailed earlier in these confessions. I co-founded the Center with Father Leo Davis. Because of the Center's primary goal of implementing the social teachings of the Church, all my recent activities have stemmed from my association with it. Since Davis' death in 1988, I have been the acting chaplain of the Center.

Over the years I have always tried to reach out to the community to implement the social teachings of the Church. As a result, I met Paul Majkut, a teacher colleague, in the fall of 1989, and since have been writing for the paper of which he is the editor, *The San Diego Review*. For the past two years I have written labor column titled, "The Tortilla Priest." *The Review* is the most progressive paper in San Diego. It is pro-labor, pro-activist environmentalist, and pro-peace.

On more than one occasion, readers have called Majkut and complained about the liberal labor views of the "Tortilla Priest," remarking that I am a defrocked priest. The reason they continue to believe this is that there has never been a follow-up to the story in *Time* back in 1971. No one has bothered, especially my bishops, to clarify that I was reinstated as a priest.

My involvement with *The Review* has helped me to sharpen my writing skills. It has helped me to reach a larger audience that I could never reach via a church pulpit. *The Review* has brought me into contact with all types of people — candidates for political office and other dedicated people throughout San Diego who are committed to the betterment of the community by their pro-labor, pro-environment and pro-peace efforts.

One personality I met and interviewed was Michael Moore, the producer of the highly-acclaimed documentary, *Roger and Me*, which exposed the scandal of General Motors abandonment of auto plants in Flint, Michigan, to seek cheaper labor in underdeveloped countries.

Because of my association with *The Review* in June, 1992, I was asked to give the invocation on the opening day of the week-long national convention of one of the largest unions in the United States, the United Auto Workers, and also to close with an invocation on the final day. I believe that the reason I was selected for this great honor was because of my involvement over many years with the labor movement. When my mentor, Father Davis, was alive he was always selected to give invocations at conventions of unions and other affairs related to the labor movement.

During his life, Father Davis was known as the labor priest of San Diego. Since Father Davis' death over four years ago it appears that I have inherited this legacy. I now am known as the labor Priest in San Diego. Since 1988 I have given many invocations on Labor Day and at labor rallies. I have been an activist with various unions in San Diego — picketing with the Carpenters, Teamsters, and Newspaper Guild.

During the last two years I have been more actively involved with the United Farm Workers helping them with the Vons boycott in Los Angeles and San Diego. Also. For more than a year now I try to say a monthly Mass for Cesar Chavez and his staff at the headquarters of the UFW in Keene, California, which is located some 240 miles from San Diego in the Tehachapi Mountains.

In 1984 Cesar Chavez initiated a third international grape boycott in order to force the California grape growers to renegotiate contracts with the UFW. In years past the UFW has had two successful grape boycotts that have secured contracts for the farm workers. This present boycott is more difficult because of a conservative shift in California's political power which has undermined the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) with anti-labor appointments.

The ALRB is the agency whose duty it is to enforce California's state law, passed in 1977, that allows farm workers to vote in a secret ballot election for the union of their choice. This law is known as the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA). Incidentally, the State of California is the only state that has such a law. Farm workers of the UFW win elections, but the ALRB begins to drag its feet and refuses to certify the workers' election victories.

Cesar Chavez cites pesticide poisoning as the primary reason for the third international grape boycott. The UFW maintains that there are more poisoning cases reported in fresh grapes than in any other crop in California. Chavez notes that in the small farming communities of Earlimart, McFarland and Fowler—in the heart of the grape-growing region of the Central Valley of California—cancer and birth defects have hit a record high. According to Chavez, the childhood cancer rate in these communities is higher than the national average. Research conducted by the UFW discovered that over seventy-six different pesticides are used in the production of grapes. No other receives a greater application of pesticides.

Presently throughout the United States there are at least 500 volunteers promoting the grape boycott. In California since July 1990 the UFW has mounted an all-out campaign of informational leafleting of Vons stores that have been promoting the sale of table grapes. Vons is one of the largest chain stores in California and research as shown that grape sale promotions account for 50% of grape sales. Large cadres of UFW farm workers and volunteers are concentrating this boycott against Vons in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods in California. At present, more than 500 workers leaflet Vons every weekend. My present involvement with the grape boycott has convinced me that there is so much misinformation about unions, in general, and the UFW, in particular, that is believed by the general public. It's the theory of the Big Lie all over again. When you tell a lie, don't tell little ones, tell big ones. And repeat them and repeat them, and people will come to believe them. We saw it with Hitler, we saw it in Vietnam, and we see it today. People believe and are easily misled. I often ask high school students if they know about Cesar Chavez and the grape boycott. Most students, including Chicano students, say that he is a boxer. They know nothing about Cesar Chavez, about labor organizing and the grape boycott. And don't seem to care.

A two-part CBS evening news report in September, 1991 is typical of the misinformation the public is receiving. The CBS report claimed that many farm workers

feel abandoned by the UFW because the union is supposedly no longer organizing farm workers. But the real issue now isn't one of organizing, but of negotiating contracts.

The UFW has won 470 union representation elections conducted by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB). Because of the elections, the UFW now represents 85,000 farm workers, who voted for the union, but can't get contracts from the employers who refuse to negotiate in good faith. Farm workers who try to organize are still threatened, fired, beaten, and brutalized. The UFW does not believe that it is just to ask desperately poor farm workers to risk their lives organizing when the cards are stacked against them by a pro-grower ALRB that is not stopping the violence against them.

CBS alleged that Chavez is not now organizing tens of thousands of America's most downtrodden workers as he did in the '60's and '70's. Instead, the report claimed, he feels more comfortable in suburban shopping malls. The truth is that the UFW, under the leadership of Chavez, won grape boycotts in 1970 and in 1975 *precisely* by boycotting supermarkets. The economic and political power of California agribusiness is so immense that only by getting consumer support via a boycott can the farm workers get contracts signed. Farm labor history has proven that only a strong and effective union can bring justice to the farm workers. Cesar Chavez has been successful in starting such an effective union. Agribusiness in California has used its power and might against the UFW because it fears the economic and political power that a strong union can muster.

Most of the enemies of the UFW forget that since the inception of the union in 1962, the union has obtained through contracts many benefits for the farm workers: higher wages, a medical plan, a pension plan, medical clinics and associate membership benefits. The recent CBS union-bashing commentary is nothing new. Such bashing has been in vogue since the grape strike started in 1965 and will continue even after the farm workers win the present third international grape boycott. For the time being, the boycott may be the best means the UFW has to keep its strike going.

One may ask if the present boycott is successful. Volunteers of the UFW who are promoting the grape boycott outside the United States have good reason to believe that more and more consumers are aware of the boycott. Volunteer boycotters from Taiwan visiting the United States had a meeting with UFW Vice-President, Arturo Rodriguez. These volunteers, when they returned to Taiwan, held a press conference to call attention to a study of California grapes by the Taiwan Ministry of Agriculture. Their study showed that 41.4% of the grapes tested contained pesticide residues, including captan — which was banned in Taiwan three years ago. This publicity prompted Taiwan importers to put a hold on 100 containers of California grapes worth about \$4.5 million. The press reported that as a result the prices of California table grapes in Taiwan dropped 15%-20%.

There is also proof that the third grape boycott is also effective in the United States and Canada. Research on grape production reveals that growers produce a bumper crop every three years. And 1991 was one such year, a year in which the cold storage of grapes was at an all time high. At the same time, statistics from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Labor Statistics, show that retail prices for grapes during the third quarter of 1991 have dropped considerably. Elementary economics show that when there is an oversupply of any commodity, the price of the commodity goes down. One can logically conclude that the reason grape storage is up in 1991 is that the grape boycott is

effective. A recent article in a grape grower magazine, *The Packer*, dated February 1, 1992, confirms that the California Table Grape Commission is increasing the amount of money budgeted to maintain radio ads highlighting grape's convenience and wholesome snack quality. *The Packer* stated that the Grape Commission is spending some \$4.2 million dollars to advertise grapes in the Far East and European markets. One can only conclude that if more money is being spent for grape sale promotion overseas, the grape boycott in the US and Canada must indeed be effective.

Recent Highlights

Two highlights in my life in the past two years have been very revealing to me. One was the celebration of my thirty-ninth anniversary of priesthood in my hometown of Escondido, some 30 miles north of San Diego. The other was the celebration of the 40th anniversary of my priesthood in San Ysidro, a small border community 17 miles south of San Diego.

The celebration of my 39th anniversary in my hometown made me realize how the Church has failed to develop a social conscience among its members. Twenty-five years ago, I preached a sermon on farm labor in Escondido and many growers walked out of the Church in protest. Last year I preached the same sermon that I preached 25 years ago, and I received the same reaction from farmers — except that in deference to me they did not walk out this time. The syndicated article on this event was covered by the *Los Angeles Times*. The reporter interviewed one farmer, a man who, I believe, is representative of Catholic farmers of Escondido. The farmer said: “The last time I heard him it was exactly the same,” he said, refusing to give his name or to describe the crops he has grown for 412 years. ‘Farmer is a four-letter word to Father Salandini. He never talks about the good farmers. I treat my men good. You’ve got to provide for them to help themselves. Money isn’t everything.”

Here are some remarks from the homily I gave in Escondido on the occasion:

In today’s Gospel we read these words: “He came to Nazareth where he had been reared and entered the synagogue on the Sabbath. As he was in the habit of doing, he stood up to do the reading. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: ‘the spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners. To announce a year of favor from the Lord. ‘ ”

After Christ finished saying these words taken from Isaiah the prophet, he simply said that today those words had been fulfilled. In other words, he said he was the long-awaited Messiah who was the son of God. St. Luke goes on to say: “At these words the whole audience in the synagogue was filled with indignation. They rose up and expelled him from the temple.” My dear friends, the Gospel in today’s Mass, then, basically recounts one of many incidents in Christ’s life where he met opposition from people to whom he had come to preach the good news. Reminiscing on my own life, I would like to mention that back in 1957 I was asked by the Bishop at that time, Bishop Charles Buddy, to go to El Centro to say Mass and care for the spiritual needs of the farm workers in that area. It was during my five years both as pastor of a Spanish-speaking parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe from 1957 to 1962 and chaplain to some 6,000 farm workers that I discovered that farm workers were needful of many things — and not just spiritual things. I started then to try to bring to the attention of the public both the material and spiritual needs of the farm workers. The pulpit was the vehicle I used to publicize the plight of the farm workers. After I left El Centro, I continued to use the pulpit in the San Diego area and throughout the United States to publicize the moral problems involved in their plight.

On the occasion of the 39th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, I would like to repeat the homily that I gave in this same church 25 years ago on the plight of the farm workers. When I first gave this homily, many farmers present at Mass were offended at what I said and walked out of the church during and after my homily. I do hope and pray that you'll bear with me and hear out my homily today. If you either agree or disagree with anything I am about to say, I would like to invite you to coffee and cake or cookies in the parish hall after Mass to exchange ideas.

It is my sincere wish that the comments I am about to repeat about the plight of the farm workers in this area will be better accepted today. If my comments are again not accepted by many, I will be inclined to believe that the attitudes and feelings of some have not changed from 25 years ago.

Even though my 39th anniversary celebration was not an entirely satisfying event, the celebration of my 40th anniversary of priesthood in February of 1992 was an up-lifting experience because it made me realize that I had more friends than I ever imagined.

I needed this experience because during the greater part of my priesthood I have experienced one setback after another from my superiors. The greatest thrill of this happy occasion was the remarks made by Cesar Chavez who spoke at the Mass. I came away from this 40th celebration with the conviction that plans that I have for the future may bear fruit because I have the support of allies and friends.

Future Plans

I will soon be facing the greatest challenge to my priesthood if I implement my current plans. I know and believe that I will be taking a great risk by carrying out these plans. However, I have taken more risks than one in my priesthood.

In my 27 years of association with the farm-workers' struggle, I have walked many picket lines in the agricultural fields of California. I have walked picket lines in front of supermarkets throughout the United States and Canada. Each time I walked a picket line I was courting death. I sincerely believe that no living priest in the U.S. has walked more picket lines than I have. It is a well-known fact that the most dangerous place to be in a labor-dispute is on the picket line. Many workers have been shot down in cold blood on picket lines in labor history. So far in UFW history several farm workers have been murdered while picketing.

The motivating cause of my immediate plans was a conference held at the University of San Diego in September, 1991, on the hundredth anniversary of the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

I helped to plan the conference over a period of three months and suggested a workshop on how the Church can work more closely with the labor movement in San Diego. At the workshop I and the majority of the participants came to the conclusion that we needed to take some effective action to change the present diocesan policy of hiring non-union contractors.

I explained at the workshop that in my 40-years as a priest in the diocese of San Diego the Bishops of the diocese have been inconsistent in their implementation of the social teachings of the Church. I emphasized that the greatest scandal is that the late Bishop Leo Maher and the present bishop, Bishop Robert Brom, have failed to adopt a diocesan policy of hiring union contractors and union labor in the construction of churches, schools, and halls. I mentioned the names of more than one parish which had employed non-union labor in its construction. I even notified the group that I and many labor leaders know that the present bishop had reconstructed his present quarters at the seminary with a non-union contractor and a non-union plumber. I also mentioned that I and members of the labor community have written more than one letter to the present bishop reminding him of his obligation as bishop to implement the social encyclicals of the Catholic Church by supporting organized labor.

The only way that the present Bishop can implement the social encyclicals is by formulating a diocesan policy mandating that no Church construction will be permitted in the future that is non-union. Bishop Robert Brom, has repeatedly ignored all my personal letters to him on this issue of union labor. He has also ignored the letters of labor leaders on this issue.

I suggested at the workshop that we take steps to meet with Bishop Brom on this important issue. I received great support from most of the members of the workshop, some of whom had been former altar boys of mine. Since September, 1991 I have discussed this workshop with many of my supporters and friends and we have been talking of possible strategies to persuade the Bishop to hire union labor. Many of us feel that the only effective way to convince the Bishop to act is to bring this scandalous behavior of the diocese to the attention of the public by picketing some Church construction now being done by non-union contractors and non-union labor. Some suggest that a press conference with national coverage of this scandal could also be effective. I and my supporters realize that the bishop of the diocese is being influenced by people that he has hired to advise him on financial matters. Most of these advisors know nothing about Catholic social teaching and are concerned only with saving money for the diocese by hiring the cheapest labor, which is non-union. However, this reality does not excuse Bishop Brom. He should know better. He has the ultimate responsibility to insist that the social teachings of the Church be implemented. Pope John Paul II's encyclical in 1982, titled *Laborem Exercens*, states the following:

“All these rights, together with the need for the workers themselves to secure them, give rise to yet another right: the right of association, that is, to form associations for the purpose of defending the vital interest of those employed in the various professions. These associations are called labor or trade unions....It is clear that, even if it is because of their work needs that people unite to secure their rights, their union remains a constructive factor of social order and solidarity, and it is impossible to ignore it.”