

Brother Gilbert's Appeal Letter - November 1965

My dear friends,

This is rather a difficult letter to write but one that I feel obligated to send because of your interest and kindness to me in the past.

Very simply put: I am withdrawing (voluntarily) from the Christian Brothers in order to work full time for the National Farm Workers Association—a grass-roots movement begun in Delano, California, by Cesar Chavez to organize farmworker families in California. (For my non-Catholic friends: my withdrawing from the Christian Brothers does not mean that I have to leave or that I intend to leave the Catholic Church. I will once again assume the position proper to that of a “layman,” i.e., a member of the Church but without the religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.)

My reasons for such a decision are really not very profound or complex. I just feel that I can no longer work on behalf of social justice at the level of abstraction that my life as a religious teaching Brother seems to indicate. Then too, my ever-increasing involvement and identification with the poor only continues to widen the gap between my obedience to religious authority and my own understanding of what my life as a Christian must entail. Actually, the decision to make a decision was probably the most difficult part.

I must emphasize that it is not with an attitude of bitterness or hostility that I leave the Brothers. Quite the contrary! I will always be most grateful to them for the opportunities that I had to work with young men and women—that experience alone has been worth a lifetime to me. Then too, many of my closest friends are Brothers and will continue to remain so. In short, whatever “levels of consciousness” I have attained is due in large measure to my having been a Christian Brother.

As I have indicated, I will be working for the NFWA at a salary of \$20 a month. I will serve as the Director of CO-OP Development. Our idea is to build a complex of cooperatives (clinic, pharmacy, credit union, garage, etc.) somewhere in the valley—but this complex would be owned and controlled by farmworkers themselves. Since almost all of these families make less than \$3000 a year, this idea presents some unique difficulties that must be overcome. My job—as I see it—is to attempt to organize these CO-OPS by setting up their overall economic and legal structures and to recruit professional men and women (doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, accountants, teachers, etc.) who will give us one or two years of their lives to work for the poor through the CO-OP at prices that farmworkers can honestly afford to pay. We look upon this as a prerequisite for serious grass roots organizing.

I estimate that it will take two years to organize such a CO-OP—granting of course that it can be done! Since at the age of thirty-one I begin from “scratch” without financial resources, I will have to live in a kind of voluntary poverty for the next two years at least. By voluntary poverty I mean that I will have to live on \$100 a month and buy (and support) a Volkswagen. Since the NFWA can only afford to salary me at \$20 a month at this time, I am going to have to be dependent upon friends

who believe in me enough to pledge, let's say, \$5 a month for a year to support my efforts at organizing.

Honestly! This is not a letter of appeal. God knows you have received enough of them from me in the past. I don't want you to do anything for me or for the cause I believe in unless you really want to. I realize that what I propose to do will strike some of you as "crazy" or "naïve" or "nuts" and maybe in two years' time I will agree with you. But right now I am convinced that Cesar Chavez and the NFWA represents a true anti-poverty program that respects the dignity and integrity of the people involved.

For the first year (at least until June of 1966) I expect to be operating mostly in San Francisco and Los Angeles. I have two "contact" offices:

San Francisco Area:

LeRoy Chatfield
c/o Bonnie Burns
700 Church St. Apt 205
San Francisco, California
(Phone: MA 6-2281—Evenings)

Delano Office:

LeRoy Chatfield
c/o National Farm Workers Association
Box 894
Delano, California
(Phone: 8661)

For those of you who want to know what you can do, consider the following:

1. Keep me free to organize by contributing small amounts each month for my support.
2. Make a small contribution towards the purchase and support of a VW.
3. Let me know if I am welcome to stay with you for a day or two when I am in your area. Believe me, I won't overstay.
4. Put me in contact with professional persons or persons with specialized talents who might want to work in a CO-OP situation at the grass-roots level. Warning: This work will entail a kind of voluntary poverty and the living conditions will be very basic.
5. Arrange for me to speak to potentially interested groups about the NFWA and our CO-OP movement.
6. Refer me to existing CO-OPs that you are personally acquainted with so that I can visit and learn more about them.

Thank you, thank you, for all you have done for me in the past. I hope that you will look with understanding on what I feel that I have to do to close one chapter in my life and begin another.

Love,

LeRoy Chatfield
(Formerly: Brother Gilbert, FSC)

P.S. I suspect that my San Francisco address will be the fastest way to contact me—at least for the time being.