

'Tortilla Priest' Aids Strikers on Coast

By EVERETT R. HOLLES
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SAN YSIDRO, Calif., Sept. 11 —The tortilla is taking its place alongside the Aztec black eagle as a symbol of Cesar Chavez's efforts to organize the several thousand Mexicans who come across the border here each day to work as "stoop" laborers on California farms.

The Rev. Victor Salandini, a Roman Catholic priest who is both the spiritual leader and research director for Mr. Chavez's United Farm Workers, was recently suspended and later was reinstated by his Bishop because he substituted corn tortillas for unleavened wheat bread at masses held for strikers picketing the tomato fields of the Egger-Ghio Company.

The Most Rev. Leo T. Maher, Bishop of the San Diego Catholic Diocese, found the 44-year-old bearded priest guilty of "scandalous disobedience" in his conduct of the roadside masses. Father Salandini used an old ironing board as his altar and wore as a vestment a burlap serape emblazoned with the Chavez black eagle.

A New Confrontation

Diocesan officials also accused "the tortilla priest," as he has come to be known, of using his religious status as a political weapon and harassing the owners of the picketed farm operations by holding daily masses in defiance of a court injunction.

His one-week suspension was lifted on July 21 when

Father Salandini agreed to discontinue use of the flat corn cakes, remove the black eagle from his vestment and remain away from the Egger-Ghio homes.

But after a new confrontation with the Bishop last week, the dissident priest informed his followers that he was prepared to resume using the corn tortillas for the Sacramento unless the Bishop abided by a promise to collect food from the 167 parishes in the diocese and deliver it to the striking workers and their families.

The Bishop denied that foodstuffs from the diocesan charity office had been withheld from the 75 Egger-Ghio workers, who have been on strike since March 26, when 12 of them were dismissed, allegedly for wearing Chavez buttons. The union said that "when we have the funds," \$3-a-day benefits are paid to the strikers, most of whom live in Tijuana and have as many as eight to 10 children.

Bishop Maher, whose authority embraces 600,000 Catholics, including nearly 100,000 Mexican-Americans, also denied that he has agreed to issue an appeal for foodstuffs specifically for the strikers.

Spirit of Goodwill

"We're helping the needy, including but not exclusively, those who were on strike and on the picket lines," he said. "Good Catholics are involved on both sides of this dispute, and I have stressed repeatedly my intention to remain neutral and my readiness to mediate

for the benefit of both sides.

"I strongly support the right of the farm workers to organize although not necessarily through the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee."

Father Salandini said that he had gone to the Bishop in a spirit of goodwill.

"But about all I got was a complaint about my beard," he said. "The Bishop said it was another violation of regulations, and he asked me to shave it off."

"If the Bishop is going to continue to oppose us in our struggle for social justice, then the corn tortilla to which he has such strong objections will signify our determination and our conviction that there is a law above ecclesiastical law."

Father Salandini says that his communicants are better able to identify with the tortillas, which are the Mexican's staff of life. He added, however, that any priest in Mexico using tortillas in the mass "probably would be lynched."

Even before his meeting with the Bishop last week, Father Salandini had gone back to using tortillas as the host of the Sacramento but said that they were made of wheat unless corn tortillas were the only ones available.

Father Salandini left this week to resume his post as associate professor of labor economics at Fresno State College. He intends to return on weekends, however, to work with the strikers and conduct masses at the union's storefront headquarters in San Ysidro.

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