



Mural of Cesar Chavez
by Mario Torero, Barrio
Logan, California.

CE SAR CHAVEZ: WHO SHALL INTERCEDE FOR THE FARMWORKERS?

by Sergio Lopez

GROWING UP CATHOLIC, you always have a sneaking suspicion that there's something you should probably feel guilty about – that there's something you're doing wrong. The thought echoed through my head as I walked the grounds of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San Jose, California. I made my way past the Stations of the Cross and headed toward McDonnell Hall, a squat and humble building.

In *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa*, Jacques Levy recounts how this church, one Chavez called “just a broken-down little shack,” was also the launching ground for what Chavez saw as a movement for the humanity and dignity of those who planted seeds and picked the crops.

Chavez himself grew up in a rural Southwest community without a church. “It was my mother who taught us prayers,” he said. The blend of religion his mother taught him was an Old World folk Catholicism of intercessors. People where he grew up, he said, “were more oriented toward relics and saints. My mother . . . she believed in saints as advocates, as lobbyists, to pray to God for her.” During the 1970s, Cesar Chavez recounted how his mother had venerated one particular Catholic saint: “St. Euvigis gave up all of her worldly possessions, distributed them among the poor, and became a Christian. On the saint's birthday . . . my mom would find some needy person to help . . . She would go out purposely to look for someone in need, give him something, and never take anything in return.”

The religion of his mother was both a more personalized folk tradition as well as one that exalted

the saints – those exemplary individuals who could intercede on behalf of the poor with worldly kings and princes.

Chavez was deeply influenced by this spiritual branch of Catholicism. “For me, the base must be faith,” he said of his organizing. Later, Chavez supplemented his childhood teachings with his own study – of “the Encyclicals, St. Francis, and Gandhi,” forming a philosophical underpinning for his belief in social justice. But his personal faith was what radicalized him: “I have read what Christ said . . . He was extremely radical, and he was for social change.

When the movement for farmworker's rights took hold in the mid 60s, Chavez's own Catholic Church chose to sit out rather than risk stirring up controversy. He lamented, “Why do Protestants come out here and help the poor, demand nothing, and give all their time to serving farm workers, while our own parish priests stay in their churches?” The Catholic Church would eventually come around, but in the beginning it was an ecumenical Protestant organization, the California Migrant Ministry, as well as a cross-section of other faith leaders who helped him at a time when he most needed their resources.

Chavez was up against powerful interests. California's Central Valley is one of the richest agricultural lands in the world, and in the 1960s, farming was the largest, wealthiest industry in the state – and its workers some of the poorest. In the fields, campesinos spent 12 hour days in the baking sun, without running water to drink or

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bathrooms to use. Financial exploitation and wage theft was routine. Numerous labour unions had failed over the years to organize to improve these conditions. In the end, it took a movement with a leader who built alliances with the church, someone who understood the power of symbols and icons in a mass media culture.

It was here, in a dusty field in Central California in 1968, where the image of Cesar Chavez most familiar from scratchy documentary film reels originated: neck and hands hanging limply after a twenty-five day fast beside Robert F. Kennedy wearing a United Farm Workers button on the lapel of his immaculate, tailored suit. Kennedy literally broke bread with Chavez, feeding him, as if offering communion in a moment captured and sent around the world.

The snapshot, instantly iconic, depicts Chavez at either his most crassly political, or his most beatific. "He was masterfully intuitive in his presentation of media and imagery and keenly aware of the persuasive power that that these ancient rituals held." When a farmworker was killed, it wasn't just a tragic accident, but the death of a "martyr." Two years earlier, when he led farmworkers from the Central Valley

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to the state capitol, it wasn't merely a march – it was a pilgrimage, he insisted with the ardour of a zealot.

The fast itself was his own masterful combination of Gandhian tactics with Catholic self-denial. He had to do "penance," he said. For what? That depended on who you asked. Was it a pressure tactic against the farmers? An apology for those in his circles who increasingly advocated violent means? Or something grander – penance for a society which had turned their back on the farmworkers? Maybe it was something more personal.

Dolores Huerta, a close ally of Chavez, once said that the fast was "part of the Mexican culture – the penance, the whole idea of suffering for something, of self-inflicted punishment."

Whichever combination of forces drove him, Cesar Chavez spent his life, like the intercessors his mother had prayed to, interceding for the poorest and hungriest with governors and senators – for those farmworkers who could feed a continent but not their families.

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