

En Memoria de César Chávez

1927 - 1993

The Quest for Justice

"Culturas, Espíritu, y Orgullo"

Cesar Chavez exists in the forefront of our collective memory for his achievements to alleviate the suffering of migrant farm workers and bring hope to all people who resist oppression. During his more than 30 years of public life, Cesar Chavez brought national attention for the first time not only to Mexican Americans but to the working poor from all ethnic groups. He fasted to inspire members of the United Farm Workers to commit themselves to nonviolence in their struggle for justice and he fasted to focus the world's attention on the suffering that migrant farm workers had endured for many generations. He saw significant gains and heartbreaking losses. As recently as 1990, he was arrested in East Los Angeles for picketing a food chain. He lived his belief that "there is no way on this earth in which you can say yes to man's dignity and know that you're going to be spared some sacrifice."

At his funeral Mass April 29, 1993 in Delano, the small town where he had conducted his fast in 1968, 30,000 came to pay their respects. They arrived on farm equipment, trucks, buses, or walked, carrying flowers and flags bearing the eagle of the UFW or the unions or universities they represented. The entourage included old flatbed trucks carrying photographers and news cameramen documenting the six-mile procession. Pallbearers included numerous civic leaders as well as farm workers who took turns carrying the casket. Following behind the simple, hand made pine casket were the Chavez family, Dolores Huerta, and Cardinal Mahoney from Los Angeles, as well as religious and political leaders. The Mass was held outdoors against the panorama of recently harvested fields and an array of traditional Mexican dress and Aztec folk costumes in red, white, green, yellow, and turquoise. The bright clothing against the brown canvas of the tilled fields and the dust kicked up on the dirt road suggested a celebration and a testimony to the resilient human spirit.

My thoughts during the six-mile procession brought back the risk of putting one life's on the line for a cause; and while it is difficult to capture, the feelings today are no less poignant. My strongest memories, from 1963 to 1969, joined idealism with terror. I first met Cesar Chavez 30 years ago, when I was a college student at St. Mary's College in California. I had just completed two years in the Christian Brothers monastery, and had become involved in support of the then-emerging United Farm Workers union. With the other Brothers and college students, I gathered food and clothing for the UFW and took them to Delano for the farm workers. Standing on farm picket lines with priests and nuns and college students provided deep emotional experiences that was, to my mind, similar to the demonstrations against Vietnam.

But marches against the war took place in cities, where demonstrators had a reasonable chance of escaping the club of the law. In rural California, however, in the open fields, there was no place to run or hide. Each of us was vulnerable, entreating the workers early in the morning to come out of the fields and strike. I remember seeing faces from all ethnic groups among the field laborers — Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, Black, White.

Those days for me combined the high ideals of workers daring to strike and the fear of knowing that your life might be extinguished at any moment. I remember the sensation of the damp earth coming through my shoes and the smell of grapes or ripening strawberries. I remember the power of the sunrise on the expanse of open cultivated fields. And I recall the genuine terror of standing out in the open facing a line of armed sheriffs and deputies. Unlike the urban demonstrations against Vietnam, the remote fields of the Central Valley offered no cover. Violence was a heartbeat away. At any moment, the red juice of strawberries leaking from the mouths of workers scrambling out of the furrows could easily turn to blood. There was the fear of never knowing what would happen as I mentally replayed the images of the freedom fighters in the South lying dead, face down in fields and ditches.

As the nation's best-known Mexican American, Cesar Chavez had a profound influence on California's labor movement. He was deeply Catholic, and a tribute to him must reflect the power of

faith that propelled his life. He fasted for the plight of agricultural workers and petitioned the American consumer to boycott produce. In the '80's the issues turned to ecology, use of pesticides and the effect of pesticides on the worker. But the focus remained on promoting humane conditions of the working class. In a speech ten years ago he stated, "Regardless of what the future holds for our union, regardless of what the future holds for farm workers, our accomplishment cannot be undone."

Cesar Chavez died a quiet and natural death befitting the peaceful measures for change he championed for three decades. "Fighting the good fight," he leaves a legacy of profound influence on Mexican Americans and a testimony to the human spirit.

Let us keep alive the language of that fight: *¡si se puede!*

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