

FRESNO COUNTY JAIL - 1973

UFW Civil Disobedience Campaign

by

Rev. Juan Romero

[A massive Civil Disobedience Campaign led by the United Farm Workers Union resulted in the arrest of between 3,000 and 2,500 striker farm workers and supporters---including more than sixty priests, nuns, religious brothers, and Dorothy Day, legendary Apostle of the Poor. Among those arrested and jailed was Father Juan Romero, executive director of PADRES, a national organization of Mexican American priests. The following is Father Juan's personal account of the first two of his thirteen days in Fresno County Jail. All prisoners persevered in "praying and fasting" as a way to "cast out the demons of injustice." His report was originally published in the PADRES Newsletter, September 1973, and is reprinted here in honor of the Golden Jubilee of the United Farm Workers Union, May 2012.]

--August 3, 1973 - 2 PM. Fresno County Industrial Farm, Caruthers, CA 93609.

I have been under arrest for nineteen hours, and just moved into new quarters--our third move. The spirit is high, and beautifully strong. We are confirmed in our direction and action. When I joined the picket line yesterday morning, the line captains were very careful that we remain on public (state) property--from telephone post to telephone post, outward toward the street--and that we not trespass the property of the grower. The line itself was well ordered and disciplined, although noisy: *¡HUELGA! ¡VENGAN, COMPAÑEROS! ¡ESQUIROLES! ¡CHAVEZ SI, TEAMSTERS NO!*" The point of the pickets and gathering was precisely to challenge the injunction calculated to diminish the effectiveness of the strike. Let me go over a little more chronologically the sequence of events:

Arrived from Puerto Rico, enriched from the ecumenical experience of reflection on Hispanic Ministry, but frankly I was a little bored from eight days in the lush paradise of the flamboyant and coqui. It was a good time for dialogue and prayer, but a little too disconnected to the reality I live. Dad picked me up Tuesday afternoon (July 31st) and took me to his seminary near Compton where he was studying and where I spent the evening. Wednesday morning I heard about the arrests of the priests and nuns in Fresno, and called the UFW headquarters in L.A. The people who answered were happy and surprised to hear from me. They gave me a rundown of the situation, and asked me to

mobilize people (priests and sisters) to go up to Fresno and/or send telegrams to the judge and sheriff who had the farm-workers, priests and nuns in jail. That was the end of my leisure vacation time with dad. I was in Los Angeles not only to visit him, but also to attend the Las Hermanas national meeting where I was scheduled to be a speaker. I spent much of Wednesday afternoon contacting people about the situation; urged telegrams, and prepared to come up to Fresno. I contacted some Sisters, but unable to persuade any to go to Fresno. Only one priest –Ralph Luna –was interested, willing and able come up with me. We borrowed a car from St. Linus parish in Norwalk where I had been assigned, and left L.A. about 8 PM.

We arrived about 1:30 in the afternoon at St. John's Cathedral in Fresno where one of our PADRES, John Esquivel, lives. Earlier in the day, he and Enrique (Abe) Lopez had visited the jail full of farm-workers, priests and sisters, and the padres left them a Spanish hymnbook that during my visit three months prior in May I had envied. John gave us a map, and pointed out the town of Parlier where the 5 AM rally was to take place at the park. We got up at 4:15, and were shortly on our way.

It was still dark for the early morning ride to Manning Street in Parlier where the park is located. Upon arriving, we saw five sheriff cars before we saw any farm-workers. In our borrowed large blue stationwagon, we parked in the lot next to a car with two local young Chicana women. Shortly afterward, Sister Pearl came by and introduced herself, a nurse for UFW in charge of their clinics. She took our names and that of "next of kin" who should be contacted upon arrest.

We saw Rev. Chris Hartmire of the National Farm Worker Ministry, and he was happy to see me and Ralph. He mentioned that Dorothy Day arrived the day before, and that was an especially pleasant surprise for me! Chris asked me to be master of ceremonies for the morning rally, and I was very happy to comply. Towards the end of the Rally, Cesar Chavez arrived. In his powerful and quiet way, Cesar can truly move a crowd! He is honest, tough, and straightforward. He spoke of the importance of unity and of the UNION, and of non-violence. He challenged his listeners to fight the fight with spirit, but to always engage non-violently those who opposed the farm worker cause. He assured us that would put Fresno on the map, and he suggested as a future political campaign the recall of the judge and sheriff who stood in the way of farm

worker freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. Cesar outlined the importance of workers' asserting their rights right here in Fresno where unjust injunctions unconstitutionally denied free assembly and free speech. He also asked: "What are you going to tell your children and your grandchildren when they ask you, 'Where were you on that strike? Did you go to jail?'"

By then, about a hundred people or so from the rally were ready to go to the picket line. Chris Hartmire informed me that Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement was one of them, and that we would be riding there in the same car. Our car keys were collected, and Ralph and I joined the car that contained, besides Dorothy, a young Jesuit priest who is a new pastor at a parish in Spokane, a Chicana Sister of St. Joseph of Orange--a Health Organizer (male nurse and clinic director) for farm workers.

Dorothy Day reminded me of Simeon as she said with great sincerity and truth, "I am so happy to have lived to see this day!" For most of her 78 years, she has been a champion of the poor, living with them in her deeply evangelical life-style. She was plugged into some of the early organizing efforts of farm workers that failed here in California during the '30's. She has been in jail ten times, and on long fasts many times, traveling along the path of non-violent search for justice that some have considered "anarchical."

The first time Dorothy went to jail, she was the youngest of the group. This time, she confessed, she is the oldest! Careful to bring her own portable chair, Dorothy sat at one end of our picket line, reading aloud the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) from a pocket New Testament. The day before, Dorothy had wanted to read the New Testament to the sheriffs, but they were too far away. She promised herself to return the next day and read to them the Sermon on the Mount, and this day she redeemed her promise! Meanwhile, the rest of us chanted, cheered and invited: "*¡HUELGA! ¡VIVA CHAVEZ! ¡ABAJO LOS TEAMSTERS! ¡SALGAN, COMPANEROS. VENGAN CON NOSOTROS. NO SEAN ESQUIROLES!*" ["Strike! Long live Chavez! Down with the Teamsters! Come on out, companions--Don't be strikebreakers!"] We kept in our places for a while, and then began to walk in our orderly long rectangle, carefully keeping out of the private property.

Shortly after we had arrived at the picket line, two large busses, empty except for the

driver, came and waited at the picket line. A Spanish surnamed sheriff officer said that he spoke in the name of the people of California, and through his efficient mobile loudspeaker system, informed us that we were “AN UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY!” He did not explain why we were “unlawful,” but just declared our gathering as such! One of my fellow inmates, a young Chicano intending to study law, had with him a Penal Code book. In the evening, during the visit of a UFW lawyer, my companion showed me the definition of an “unlawful assembly.” It involved a “riot” and other things that did not apply!

The arresting officers were super-nice to us, a contrast to the style of previous arrests other farm workers had experienced and recounted to us. This time, for the mass arrest, the sheriffs loaded one large bus with the women, and the other with the men. The farm workers were asked to put their hands upon the bus while searched. It's a scene I have seen in East L.A., especially three years ago during the days of the Chicano Moratorium in

When my turn came to enter the bus, the officer kindly asked me if I had any knives or weapons. I wagged my head in the negative, and he simply invited me to get onto the bus. Not wanting clerical privilege, I got in the line again. Another sheriff asked if I had been searched. I responded, “Not really.” A little embarrassed, he cursorily went through the motions of searching me before I got on the bus.

We began our journey about 9:30 AM, and were first taken to the Industrial Farm where we arrived about 11:00 AM. The quarters looked like an army camp, bunk beds in a dormitory, but were comfortable enough. The sheriffs seemed unorganized, obviously not accustomed to such large mass arrests at one time. Booking us proved to be a challenge. We were herded into an auditorium-like room where we waited a short time. Soon we were given a false start, and then asked to go into the contiguous large room, then told, “Not yet!” Finally, we did go into the next room where the booking process was taking place. An officer filled out an information sheet on our behalf, and signed (or we could refuse to sign). Picture taken and numbered (mug shot), and thumb prints taken. A courteous officer filled out for me a form on which he checked the box “Mexican” for my ethnicity. I explained to him that I was born in this country, as were my parents, grandparents and ancestors for over four centuries. Without being

nationalistic, I requested to be identified instead as “Chicano” since I affirmed that identity with pride. However, to no avail insofar as that was not a choice.

During our bookings, the women arrived for the same procedure. They were warmly cheered –especially when Dorothy Day entered. After the bookings at the Industrial Farm, we were transferred on another bus to the Fair Grounds. At our new “home,” we had one large room—bigger than a large auditorium---no beds, just mattresses on the floor. The men prisoners who had been arrested on the picket lines the day before had been at the Fresno County Jail, and they had just come back from their arraignment in court. It was a good feeling to be with a group of like-minded and like-hearted people that included about twenty-five priests among more than 250 men.

We later received the good news that Cesar would be coming with two priests to visit us the following day at 9:30 AM. Just that good news perked up the whole group. However, the next day, Cesar was detained by a telephone conversation with George Meany. The jail authorities wanted to move us to another facility before Cesar came, but the common decision of the men was to stay at the Fair Grounds (temporarily converted to a jail—no beds or shower facilities) until Cesar came. He finally arrived, and it was a great joy! He was accompanied by Father John Coffield, one of my life’s mentors, and Rev. Chris Hartmire. Cesar again spoke movingly, appreciatively, and gave some good news: The whole world is watching, and there is great support! Teamsters look like they want to back out [of their sweetheart contracts with the growers]!

George Meaney is marshalling even greater support nationally!

Since we were stuffing the official jail and all of the men could not all fit into in, some men were taken from the Fair Grounds back to County Jail, and the rest of us were taken to the Juvenile Hall (Youth Center of Fresno). The group was divided according to place in the alphabet. Poor Father Luna had to go to the “real” jail where there were only walls, few windows, and a dearth of showers. I got to come here at the Youth Center where I am writing these notes and where there are showers. It’s 7 PM, and I’m going to indulge right now!

About an hour ago, at the six o’clock news in Spanish—yes, we have a TV in our Youth Center “jail,” more like a low cost motel--the farm workers, with evident pride, were hearing themselves talked about on television, and that mattered to them. A good

ten minutes were dedicated to the whole situation including what is happening to us: strike, picket line, injunction, civil disobedience.

PADRES John Esquivel and Enrique Lopez of Fresno came to visit us. John and Abe were with us for the PADRES Convention in L.A., October 1971, and Abe was also with us in April at TUCSON for our Retreat-Workshop with Dom Helder Camera. Father Woodruff who was at MACC for five weeks this summer came here to visit us about 4:30. Fr. John returned later with the paraphernalia for the liturgy. In about an hour and a half, we will have Mass. We will celebrate the Liturgy in praise and thanks to our God for health and strength, for perseverance toward victory in the struggle—for the a fuller share in the Paschal Mystery. *¡Viva La Huelga! ¡Viva Cesar Chavez! ¡Vivan Los Campesinos! ¡QUE VIVA LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE!*

EPILOGUE

--Los Angeles, Sunday: May 20, 2012

Early this morning at the United Farm Workers' Convention in Bakersfield, central California, Bishop Richard Garcia of the Diocese of Monterey is celebrating a Eucharistic liturgy (Mass) for farm workers and their supporters for the Golden Jubilee of the founding of the UFW. My thoughts and prayers are with them today as I salute and congratulate them. I thank God for the leadership of Cesar Chavez that made this day possible. May Our Lady of Guadalupe continue to intercede for justice for farm-workers.

I have actively supported their organizing efforts since my priestly ordination over forty-eight years ago. My thirteen days in spiritual and physical solidarity with so many farmworkers and their supporters almost thirty-nine years ago—including laity, clergy and religious women-- remains one of the most satisfying events in my life. My Fresno County Jail time was the most prayerful retreat I have ever experienced, and a privilege to be among the “salt of the earth and light of the world” for the duration.

Many gifted and highly effective people--including labor and religious leaders, entertainment people, politicians and just plain folks of every walk of life--supported Cesar Chavez in his organizing efforts. His top tier of organizers and advisors included Dolores Huerta, attorney Jerry Cohen, Marshall Gantz, and so many others. At this time, I wish to recognize two of Cesar's lieutenants who especially inspired me with their dedication and service to La Causa: LeRoy Chatfield and Christ Hartmire. They were not only Cesar's lieutenants, but generals in his army of workers, each of whose salary was

\$5 a day plus board and room.

LeRoy Chatfield, a former Christian Brother, was a key strategist and tactician for the UFW. He was in charge of the highly effective boycotts of grapes and lettuce as a non-violent tool of social change. He created the highly effective tool of the HUMAN BILBOARDS that peppered the overpasses of L.A. Freeways and other strategic locations during the California “NO on 22” Campaign in the fall of 1972. LeRoy organized the Robert Kennedy Insurance Program for the Union, and after years of service with UFW, ran the Sacramento-based Loaves and Fishes program to feed the hungry. After working with Cesar and for the Union over several years, he became a special assistant to Governor Jerry Brown during his first time around as Governor. In recent years, he has dedicated himself to a literary endeavor called the Syndic Literary Journal, an online magazine <www.syndicjournal.us>, and to the on-line Farmworker Documentation Project <<http://farmworkermovement.com> >, a most ambitious project that serves as the largest data base of its kind.

I first met LeRoy c. 1970 when he came to Hollywood to meet with some priests from Los Angeles who attended a lecture at Blessed Sacrament Church that Bishop Hugh Donohoe--a former professor of sociology at St. Patrick’s Seminary in Menlo Park--gave on the topic of the Church and Farm Labor. As a result of the meeting with Chatfield, the priests took out a paid advertisement in support of the Grape Boycott. Over twenty priests put their names to it and helped to pay for it.

Rev. Chris (Wayne) Harmire was a young Presbyterian minister when he founded the National Farm Worker Ministry--successor to the California Migrant Ministry-- that provided inter-religious support to the organizing efforts. The Migrant Ministry had provided food, clothes and some education to workers and their children on the migrant-worker trail, but the new Farm Worker Ministry began to focus on galvanizing support of the religious community for organizing efforts of farm-workers. Although separate from the Union, NFWM nevertheless worked hand-in-glove with the Union. Chris, by the grace of God and the gentle-force of his personality, was most effective in gathering the collective energy of leaders of various faith traditions to provide a moral and humanitarian basis for supporting farm worker union organization. NFWM provided effective ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation in a significant joint effort. Among

the projects Hartmire coordinated were ecumenical/inter-religious delegations to visit corporate executives of chain stores to try to persuade their companies to honor the boycott by pulling out non-union grapes or lettuce. Sometimes it worked, but at other times it was not effective. A much more successful on-going project was to place on the local and national agenda of various church bodies--judicatories, dioceses, religious organizations--resolutions to support the UFW and/or the boycott efforts.

I am compelled in the name of justice to write a word of appreciation to my schoolmate--two years ahead of me in seminary--retired Archbishop of Los Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahony. As a young priest of the Fresno Diocese, he worked closely with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops' Committee on Farm Labor. Together with Monsignor George Higgins, the Washington-based Bishops' point-man on farm labor issues, then-Monsignor Roger Mahony helped to forge a consensus of the Catholic Church in support of farm workers' right to organize and form their own union. This ultimately involved supporting the boycott of grapes/lettuce, a controversial and contentious tactic for some Catholics and many others. Monsignor Mahony accompanied Bishop Sidney Metzger of El Paso, a great supporter of Labor, who came to visit us at the Fresno County Jail in August 1973. Cardinal Roger Mahony, as Archbishop of Los Angeles, presided at the funeral of Cesar Chavez in March 1993, and gave the homily/eulogy at Forty Acres in Delano, the original location of Filipino Hall and UFW Headquarters. I was privileged to help organize Cesar's funeral rites.

The famed community organizer Fred Ross is credited with "discovering" the talent of Cesar Chavez, but more to the point Ross helped to hone the organizing ability Chavez through mentoring and action in the Community Service Organization. Others who mentored the young Cesar Chavez were Father Donald McDonald of San Francisco and the Franciscan priests of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in San José. They introduced Cesar to the "social encyclicals" of Pope Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum* of 1891) and of Pope Pius XI (*Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931). In spite of the affirmation at the highest level of Catholicism for the right of workers to organize unions for collective bargaining, the institutional leadership of the Catholic Church in the United States was initially tepid in embracing the cause of Chavez and the UFW. Protestant leadership, especially by the Presbyterian Church through its California Migrant Ministry and later

through the ecumenical and inter-religious National Farm Worker Ministry, were quick to lend support. Jewish leadership, following their prophetic tradition, promoted the cause of organizing farm workers by getting out the word and helping to raise money to fund both the UFW and NFWM.

Cesar challenged his Catholic Church, specifically his priests and bishops to explicitly endorse the Union and lend their moral and financial support. Msgr. George Higgins, a consultant to the U.S. Bishops on labor issues, was influential in garnering support among the hierarchy. Father James Vizzard, S.J. used the pen to influence lay readers of the predominantly progressive Jesuit-published *America* national weekly magazine. Cesar's challenging call found early resonance among Franciscan priests such as Fathers Mark Day, Lou Vitali, and Allen McCoy. Mark was UFW Chaplain in 1968 during Cesar's severe Lenten Fast of twenty-five days. Lou is a true son of Francis, an apostle of justice and peace who is active on many fronts, and Father Allen McCoy lent the credibility of his Franciscan Order to publicly support farm worker organizing efforts. Father David Duran, a priest of the Fresno Diocese, also served as chaplain for the UFW. The Union also put to use his prior experience as an accountant. Father Victor Salandini, a priest of the San Diego Diocese known by some as the "Tortilla Priest," was always supportive and often controversial with his ministry among farm workers in the fields.

On Cinco de Mayo, 1970, Cesar proclaimed a scripture reading at the ordination ceremony in the stadium at the San Antonio Hemisphere Plaza of the first Mexican American Bishop. Cesar did so, of course, at the request of the new prelate, the Most Rev. Patricio Flores. As a young farm worker growing up in Ganado, Texas, Patrick Flores picked cotton. As Bishop, he occasionally ministered directly to farm workers, but always consistently supported the efforts of Cesar Chavez. Bishop Flores visited him in a California jail, and presided at the funeral of a murdered farm worker in Arvin, California. Members of the fledgling PADRES organization (*Padres Asociados para los Derechos Religiosos, Educativos y Sociales*), the national association of Mexican American priests, followed the lead of their President, Bishop Flores, in actively supporting the Union.

Cesar, may you not "rest" in peace, but continue to work in heaven, interceding before the throne of God on behalf of farm workers of our country and of the world.

“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice, for they will be satisfied.”

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Below are resources touching upon my experience in farm worker ministry, and that I wish to share on this Golden Jubilee of the UFW:

1973-FIGHTING FOR OUR LIVES (YouTube-Film Documentary)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eTGI9QMaGvk>

<http://farmworkermovement.com/50th-anniversary-documentation-project-1962-1993/leroy-chatfield/>

Notre Dame Journal of Education-MINISTRY TO FARMWORKERS

<http://farmworkermovement.com/essays/essays/Father%20Juan%20Romero%20Essay.pdf>