

Father Joseph E. Tobin 1973-1980

May 17, 2003

LeRoy Chatfield,

On May 7, 1972, I was in San Diego visiting my parents, after spending a week in Mexico in a small parish on the border. I had just read in a Mexican newspaper editorial about the history of the 1886 Haymarket Riot in Chicago.

I called (Rev.) Jack Shaughnessy in Tucson, Arizona, to tell him that I would be late in getting back to the inner city. He told me not to hurry, because some farmworker organizers were staying in my room. (In the 1960s, Shaughnessy had been instrumental in trying to obtain the parish hall of St. Alphonsus in Fresno for the farmworkers' first convention. For years, Shaughnessy thought that it was the pastor, Fr. John Kaiser, who had canceled the event. Cesar told me 20 years later that it was the bishop, Aloysius J. Willinger, who did it. Shaughnessy's response was: "Well, he was a Redemptorist too!")

The governor of Arizona had signed into legislation a law prohibiting any strike (or boycott) of any crop valued at \$5000 or over. The reason that Cesar began to fast was to kick off the recall of Governor Williams. Shaughnessy asked me why I didn't attend the fast in Phoenix. Coretta Scott King, the wife of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Democratic presidential candidate Senator George McGovern, and Msgr. George Higgins of the NCCB came out in support of recall of the governor. Bill Solis, one of the organizers with Jim Drake, asked me to see whether the Yaqui religious dancers would attend the final day of the 24-day fast. Ethel Kennedy and some of her children were there. It took a year, but the farmworkers got enough signatures. However, the signatures were thrown out on some trumped-up technicality.

In September of 1973, I drove all night from Tucson to Parlier to support the strike against the teamsters' invasion of the farmworkers' jurisdiction in agriculture. We spent the entire week on the picket line during the day. And at night I visited the women and men in the county jails—people like Dorothy Day and Fr. Eugene Boyle, who had been arrested the week before. I

celebrated mass in a federal labor camp, which was being used to house the strikebreakers, and once I celebrated mass in the men's county jail with several cantors and musicians, which caused a near uproar among some of the guards.

Later, I helped an evicted Gallo striker and his family move their few belongings from the Gallo ranch in Livingston to the boycott house in Los Angeles.

Good Luck, LeRoy.

Joe Tobin C.Ss.R.

P.S. Give my regards to Chris Hartmire.

LeRoy Chatfield's Reply

Joe,

I reread your email last evening regarding your UFW involvement, and this sentence caught my eye, "In September of 1973, I drove all night from Tucson to Parlier to support the strike against the teamsters' invasion of the farmworkers' jurisdiction in agriculture."

Would you be kind enough to elaborate a little? These kinds of questions leaped to my mind: How did Joe know what was happening in Parlier when he was stationed in Tucson? Did someone from the farmworkers movement call him and ask him to come? What kind of a work assignment did Joe have that he was able to jump in the car and drive all night to Central California? Whose permission or OK did he have to get? Did he suffer any repercussions as a result? What prompted him to want to go help the union in Parlier against the Teamsters? Where did this allegiance come from? When Joe got to Parlier, how did he know where to go? Who was his contact? Had he been recruited to go to Parlier as part of an organized group? If so, how did he become an ad-hoc member of such a group? And why?

I do not mean for you to answer all of these questions. This is just my way of explaining what I wondered about as I read your email account. So many times in the history of the farmworker movement there were particular "crisis events," and the call was put out to the farmworker friends and supporters, and many of them dropped what they were doing and drove all night to help out. I saw this time and time again. How do we explain to others who come many decades after these events why people responded to the call for help? And what did it mean in their own lives when they decided to respond? And how do they feel about their response these many years later?

Anything you can write to flesh out your decision to drive all night from Tucson would be a valuable contribution to the Documentation Project, I believe.

May 20, 2003

LeRoy,

The Tucson recall of Governor Williams and the boycott of head lettuce office were headquartered in my house. Jim Drake had left Nancy Makoviac in charge with several full-time volunteers. Danny Ybarra is a name that I remember, but I cannot remember the others at the present moment.

I was a part-time volunteer in getting signatures and picketing a little at Safeway stores. Everyone was being informed about the teamsters union busting the farmworkers in Coachella. I witnessed a scuffle at a local Teamsters office in Tucson. I couldn't spring myself free to go Coachella because it was Holy Week.

I cannot recall all the details, but Fr. Jack Shaughnessy had a nervous breakdown and eventually ended up at the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas. (He was eventually diagnosed as bipolar.)

Two priests went to Nogales, Mexico, to learn Spanish while helping out in a parish there. Fr. Ricardo Elford and the two other confreres decided that we were not effectively fulfilling any pastoral accomplishment in the inner city. We had no jurisdiction. We didn't have baptisms and marriages. We had first communions and funerals in the Yaqui villages and a Sunday television mass for shut-ins, plus masses in a couple of chapels out of Santa Cruz parish and sometimes at Santa Margarita parish, plus jail ministry, which amounted to saying mass once a week in Spanish.

I know that I drove another time to Delano for the funeral of a farmworker who had been killed by a strikebreaker. But I cannot recall the sequence or time, I think that it was before I drove to Parlier because that was the end of the strike in grapes.

Chris Hartmire hadn't asked me yet to work full time with the Los Angeles boycott. When he did ask me, I had to wait for my provincial, Fr. Martucci, to return from Rome so I could ask his permission. So I went to Cuernavaca, Mexico, to study Spanish for a month.

When Fr. Martucci returned from Rome, he gave me verbal permission to work with the National Farm Worker Ministry. But that didn't help me with Bishop Ward, who at the time was liaison for the religious orders of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. When Fr. Luis Olivares went with me to the diocesan chancellor, Msgr. John Rawden, I got faculties for three months at a time.

I don't know whether I answered your questions or not, but I know that I had the verbal permission of my local confreres. I was naïve, but not disobedient.

I hope that this clarifies my reasons for going to Parlier a little better. I know that it sounds a little scattered, but this was 30 years ago.

Sincerely,

Joe E. Tobin

LeRoy Chatfield's Reply

Joe,

Thank you for filling your story out. I better understand why and how you responded to the call to go to Parlier to help out.

You mentioned that you went to work for the NFWM in the L.A. boycott. What year was that? How long did you work for the NFWM? Was L.A. your only assignment? Where did you live? What did your work on the boycott entail? What did a typical day or week's activity look like? Were you assigned to specific stores and/or areas of L.A.? How old were you when you worked for the NFWM?

Finally, when did you leave off working for the UFW? Why did you decide to make a change? And after you left, where did you go and what was your assignment?

I hope you don't mind dealing with some of these questions. Reading about your involvement with the farmworker movement helps me understand the role that many religious priests and nuns played in its development.

Many thanks. All the best.

LeRoy Chatfield

May 22, 2000

LeRoy,

I am very grateful that you took the time to ask me all those questions. I always felt that the farmworker movement was an ecumenical and spiritual commitment of very dedicated people (be they Jewish, Muslim, Christian, agnostic, and/or socialist).

I went to work in Los Angeles in November of 1973, with Chris Hartmire and Jim Drake. I was 38 years old at the time.

The NFWM was my umbrella. (I actually met you in Jim Drake's office at your original boycott office in the big building before Chris and Jim moved across the street to the bigger but older building, on Olympic Blvd. At the time, I was picking up the research papers on Gallo winery to read, and so Jim introduced me to you.)

I cannot remember what I did for the first six months, but we drove all over Los Angeles, boycotting liquor stores. We met every morning at the boycott house on Harvard St.

During the summer of 1974, Fred Ross, Sr. held a training program for new organizers at UCLA. I learned that I am not a very good organizer because I hate to ask people to do

things. I was given Monterey Park as my assignment. I worked hard but was not very successful.

That fall, I began working with Paulino and Victoria Pacheco. They didn't know much English. We worked out of the All Nations community center, on Soto and Michigan streets. Paulino was a very good organizer. We picketed Gallo Wines in every mom-and-pop grocery store in Boyle Heights during the week and Safeway stores on weekends.

After the 1975-76 Agriculture Labor Relations Act passed, I went up to Santa Maria to work with Fred Ross, Jr. for six months. I was very good at getting signatures for elections, because farmworkers don't lie to a priest when you ask them for their names and addresses.

After all the money was used up in the ALRB for conducting elections, I went down to Coachella to work with Eliseo Medina, and I worked in the hiring hall for six months.

In 1977, we had the grape campaign drive for elections. Marshall Ganz came down. I invited Bishop Patricio Flores to come to Coachella. As a courtesy, he contacted Bishop Leo T. Maher of the San Diego diocese for permission. And Bishop Maher said that I didn't have faculties to be in his diocese. In fact, I had verbal phone permission from the chancellor of San Diego!

Msgr. Michael Nolan, from St. Theresa's in Palm Springs, set up a meeting with Bishop Maher to go with me. It took six weeks to get a meeting, and I got another verbal permission, but nothing in writing. Bishop Maher gave me a blessing and told me not to rock the boat. But Bishop Flores never was able to come. I worked in the grape election campaign and was only deceived once by a farmworker family, who tricked me into believing that they were for the union.

Ruth Shy followed Eliseo Medina at negotiations as the director of the Coachella office. Marshall Ganz, I think, asked me to go up to Riverside to sign up farmworkers in citrus because the Riverside packing houses were undermining the Coachella citrus contracts. Someone filed a "pseudo-priest" charge against me with the ALRB.

In 1978, I was in charge of a very small grape ranch as a contract administrator. I was even worse at contract administration. The farmworkers wanted me to file the first grievance procedure, and the growers wanted me to tell the workers to work harder.

On April 1, 1980, I wrote Chris Hartmire that I was leaving the union. I think that everybody agreed that I was not a very good organizer and even worse at contract administration.

I took a sabbatical at the Menlo Park "Vatican II" institute at the San Francisco diocesan seminary. In 1981, I went to Great Falls, Montana, as a parish priest at St. Gerard's. I got involved in the peace movement and was arrested three years in a row for trespassing at

Malmstrom Air Force Base. The judge wanted to sentence me to six months, but a pro bono attorney, Robert Kelleher (a gubernatorial candidate in Montana), appealed the sentence. I served 10 days, four years later. In 1984, I went to a small African-American parish, Our Lady of Lourdes, in San Francisco's Hunter's Point. I stayed involved a little bit in the labor movement there. People like Miguel Contreras and many others who used to be with the UFW and were now with the Hotel and Restaurant Union, Local 2, kept me involved.

I was also involved in the San Francisco Organizing Project. I really did very poorly. I forget the title of the "job coalition," but the government promised to give a certain percentage of jobs at all the new industrial buildings to minorities. We went down to city hall dozens of times. (In four and a half years, I never got one job for anybody.) The parishioners were not interested. They already had jobs.

In 1989, I came here to St. Mary's Parish in Whittier, California. But my labor involvement has been at the minimum. I think I was the last priest ever arrested with Cesar Chavez in Montebello, in 1991(?) at the "Tianguis" mercado (Vons).

Four years ago, I was involved a little bit in helping the workers organize the Catholic Healthcare hospitals. And my only arrest has been with the janitors' strike of 2000, in Westwood, California.

Thanks for asking.

Joe E. Tobin

LeRoy Chatfield's Reply

Joe,

That was an amazing account of your chronology of assignments with the farmworkers. You managed to pack a lot in, in only eight years.

One easy question: In your various farmworker assignments, did you live in a parish or other religious house or did you live in the community houses rented by the farmworkers? Or did you find your own separate living quarters? In short, how did you handle your living situation?

Now, the most difficult question and perhaps not even answerable: To what/whom do you attribute your early, hands-on commitment to social justice? Many professed religious persons have some level of commitment to the principles of social justice, but only a handful translate it into daily action. In your case, you became a day-to-day participant in a movement, manned picket lines on the boycott and strike, and were arrested on several

occasions. Why was this the case in your regard, do you think, and why were you not content enough to preach and teach from the church pulpit or the Catholic school?

Perhaps there is no single answer that you can give, but if you could give the reader some ideas why this hands-on commitment was necessary for you, it might be helpful.

Thank you so much. I appreciate the hard work that went into your three essays. Their submission, in my view, is a valuable addition to the Documentation Project. Others who come after us will have much to read and think about--and who knows--maybe even feel "called" to action.

LeRoy

Email from Chris Hartmire

May 22, 2003

Joe died suddenly of a heart attack this morning. Chris (Hartmire)

Email from Father Ricardo Elford

May 23, 2003

From: H.R. Elford

Quite a few of you on this list knew Joe Tobin. I got the devastating news Thursday morning that Joe had just suddenly died in his room at St. Mary's parish in Whittier. (Thursday afternoon, I found an email message he'd sent in the morning.)

Joe (and his brother Dave, who was here last weekend) and I go back to the Redemptorist seminary in Oakland in 1952. Soon after ordination, Joe began speaking out for social justice in a dangerous environment in Brazil. Back in the U.S., he worked in our inner-city ministry in Tucson, in the Yaqui community, along the border and especially with the UFW. He'd done a lot with the UFW in Tucson and other parts of Arizona, but in 1972 he went to work full time with Cesar Chavez and the union in California. And it was not just as a chaplain. Joe got up early every morning—I think it was 4 a.m.—and went out to the fields with the workers. In later years, even while doing full-time Hispanic parish work, he continued working with the UFW and other unions in Southern California. In one of the last photos I saw of him, he was in the middle of the street, wearing his black suit, Roman collar, and handcuffs. I don't recall how many times he was arrested over the years, but he once did a stretch in a federal prison in Montana for peacefully protesting at a military base. (I'll include another more recent photo with this note—a collage made by a friend.)

For a relentless voice for justice (always, always from a gentle heart and at low volume),
inmensas gracias a Dios.

Ricardo