

Father Ken Irrgang 1973–1989

Growing up as a young boy in Nicollet, in southern Minnesota, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, I had no idea that my brief summer friendships with the children of Mexican-American migrant farmworkers would lead me to a long and rewarding association with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers.

On Sundays, the young farmworkers would come to town, and we would go with them on walks, to play baseball, or just sit around in the local cafe for hours on end—munching on popcorn, drinking sodas, hilariously trying to learn each other's language. We had some great times together.

After those summers, I gave little or no thought to Mexican-American farmworkers for several years, but in 1968, the year I was ordained to the priesthood, I learned about the grape boycott and the protest marches initiated by Cesar Chavez to enlist widespread support in the struggle to obtain justice for all farmworkers.

In August of 1973, while I was serving as campus pastor at the College of St. Benedict, located near St. Cloud, Minnesota, I found myself without any commitments until the school year was to begin in September. It was then that I heard of the murder of two farmworkers in California's San Joaquin Valley: Nagi Daifullah and Juan de la Cruz.

I went out to La Paz immediately after the two murders and offered my volunteer services. I continued to go to La Paz in succeeding years to hold Holy Week and Easter services before going on to attend annual campus ministry meetings on the West Coast.

In 1977, I decided to commit myself to full-time work for the migrant farmworker cause and became a member of both National Farm Worker Ministry and the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO. I continued to work at La Paz and elsewhere for the next 12 years, reluctantly returning to my diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota, in April of 1989 (that's another story).

During those 12 years, I held a variety of jobs in addition to my regular responsibilities for masses on Sundays, and for weddings, funerals, marches, conventions, and various other union celebrations. I worked in the personnel office, in the Boston and New York boycott offices, and in the Robert F. Kennedy medical plan office. During my last years in La Paz, I was a writer for both the Spanish and English publications: *El Malcriado* and *Food and Justice*.

The years of my involvement with migrant farmworkers—with farmworker youngsters in my youth, with farmworkers subsequently boycotting and striking in California and throughout the nation, and with them in solidarity as a member of NFWM and the UFW—have been the most meaningful years in my priesthood and, indeed, my entire life.

Of the many events out of the hundreds I could cite that made those years so meaningful for me was Cesar's third and final fast that he undertook in 1988. He had already fasted for long periods twice before—25 days the first time in 1968 in Delano and 24 days the second time in Arizona. This third time he fasted even longer—for 36 days. And this time again Cesar suffered through his fast at Forty Acres, the historic farmworker headquarters in Delano.

Every night of the fast, farmworkers from all over made pilgrimages to Delano to visit Cesar and in the evening attend a mass that visiting priests and I had the privilege of presiding at. Occasionally a minister or rabbi would also hold religious services. At each of these masses, a simple, homemade cross made of twigs would be presented to the priest, who would attach it to a big board next to the altar to mark each day of the fast.

A child usually presented this little symbol of Cesar's sacrifice. I remember how touching it was when little Jennifer Shepherd presented the cross. She was a victim of leukemia from the cancer-cluster town of Fowler, California. And one time the child who presented the simple cross with equal tenderness was Maeve, the daughter of Kathleen Kennedy Townsend and granddaughter of the late Senator Robert Kennedy. Twenty years earlier, Senator Kennedy had come to California to join Cesar in breaking bread as he ended that 25-day fast against violence.

During the long fast, besides the thousands of farmworkers who came to visit and pray with Cesar, hundreds of prominent people came to Forty Acres to demonstrate their solidarity with Cesar and farmworkers—labor leaders, entertainers, politicians, religious leaders of all faiths, and peace and social justice activists—far too numerous to mention.

One person I feel impelled to mention, however, is Brian Wilson, whose visit to Forty Acres to show his solidarity with Cesar and the farmworker movement touched me deeply. Wilson was a peace activist who, only a year before the start of Cesar's fast, lost both of his legs when he was run over by a train while taking part in a vigil at the Concord Naval Weapons Station. Wilson remained in Forty Acres and fasted during the entire three days he was there. His was just one of the many inspirational acts performed during the fast by farmworkers and supporters from all walks of life. Indeed, these inspiring acts seemed to be more the rule than the exception.

On August 21, Cesar ended his long fast on the 36th day. The closing ceremony at Forty Acres was held under a huge tent erected to shield the thousands of farmworkers and supporters from the hot sun as they gathered to pray for and show solidarity with Cesar. Prior to Cesar's arrival for the mass, prominent labor leaders, entertainers, and politicians took their places. Among the labor leaders were Gerald W. McEntee, president of AFSCME; John J. Sweeney, president of SEIU; Kenneth Young, executive assistant to AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland; and John F. Henning, executive secretary-treasurer, California AFL-CIO. Notable entertainers present were Martin Sheen and Edward Olmos. The Reverend Jesse Jackson was there. Seated in front near Cesar was Juana Chavez, his

96-year-old mother. The honored guest for the mass was Ethel Kennedy, widow of the late Senator Robert Kennedy, who was invited to fulfill the same role at this mass that her husband performed in 1968 when he broke bread with Cesar at the end of that 25-day fast.

This end-of-the-fast Mass was memorable for me because I was invited by Cesar to preside at the mass as the main celebrant. I was honored to preside at this mass, to be sure, but humbled, too, because among the celebrants presiding along with me were such inspiring priests and ministers as Monsignor George Higgins (now deceased), Reverend Eugene Boyle and Reverend Joe Tobin (now deceased), Louis Vitale, Jose Rubio, Lawrence Largente, John Maretta, and Deacons Sal Alvarez and Julian Ponce.

Just before the procession at the start of the mass, Cesar entered the tent, all but carried in by his sons, Paul and Anthony. He did not look good. During the fast, Cesar was ministered to by Dr. Marion Moses, who attended him during his first fast in 1968; by Dr. Augusto Ortiz, who attended him during his second fast in 1972; and by Dr. Fidel Huerta, son of UFW cofounder Dolores Huerta. All of these doctors had expressed grave concern over Cesar's deepening health problems as the fast went on.

One of several inspiring moments of the mass took place when Cesar's mother, Juana, was escorted up to the altar bearing the little cross of twigs like the ones the children had offered during the previous days of the fast. This cross she was honored to offer on the 36th and final day of her son's fast.

But the most inspiring moment of the mass occurred when, after Ethel Kennedy and Cesar had received Holy Communion, Ethel was handed a little loaf of semita bread. She carefully broke off a small chunk of it, smiled, and passed the loaf on to Cesar, after which they began to eat this special bread that marked the end of the fast.

After this dramatic moment, the emotions that, for more than an hour, had been kept under control, were released, and the silence that had dominated the mass was shattered. The huge throng rose and applauded enthusiastically, a burst of applause that was sustained a long time, until at last Paul and Anthony again moved to their father's side and escorted him out of the tent, into a waiting car that took him back to his room, back to the start of what would be a long and slow recovery.

Cesar died at the age of 66 in 1993 of natural causes. However, for me, the phrase "of natural causes," does not ring true. His father, Librado, died at the age of 101. His mother, Juana, died at the age of 99. Shouldn't Cesar have lived to approximately the same age as his parents did?

I can't help but believe Cesar died of *unnatural* causes, and those unnatural causes were the three long, water-only fasts he subjected his body to. I believe he thought he was indomitable, that he would recover from each of those fasts and would return to the same robust health he was blessed with before he embarked on them. But after his third and last

fast, he simply had to accept the fact that he would not be able to return to his customary good health as quickly or as fully as he thought he would.

One thing is clear to me, and that is that, whether Cesar knew it or not, those three drastic fasts, along with many other lesser sacrifices he made on behalf of farmworker justice during his life, led to his “laying down his life for his friends” at least three decades before he should have. If that was the case—and even if he knew it was—I am sure that that was perfectly okay with him.

I am grateful to Cesar Chavez, along with Dolores Huerta and other inspiring farmworker leaders, for working so tirelessly and fearlessly to found the farmworker union and thereby enable farmworkers, first of all, and then all of us—supporters from every place and every walk of life—to respond to the invitation to join in the noble struggle to win for farmworkers what they so rightly deserved—justice!

Sad Days Toward the End

In 1975, after the California legislature passed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA) that provided the United Farm Workers with the legal means to hold free and fair elections for farmworkers, the United Farm Workers won a flood of elections and gained contracts with a large number of growers throughout the state.

It wasn't long, however, before growers put their formidable financial and political resources together. The ink on the ALRA was barely dry before it was rendered useless, reversing the stunning successes the UFW had won and restoring power to the growers. Cesar Chavez's reaction to this change of fortunes for the UFW was to return to his favorite and previously successful tactic: the boycott. The primary boycott shortly after the gutting of the ALRA was launched in 1979 against Bruce Church, Inc., a huge company in California and Arizona. The main target of the boycott was Church's Red Coach lettuce. I took part in that boycott in Boston and later in New York in late 1979 through early 1981.

It was clear to most of us serving on the boycott that it wasn't catching on. We held house meetings, leafleted in front of stores, tried to enlist support from churches and unions, attempted to negotiate with store owners, and took other actions generally included in a boycott, but to no avail. People just didn't seem to respond. They were never hostile toward the boycott; they just seemed apathetic—totally unlike the enthusiastic support so many people gave to the 1973 boycott of table grapes, iceberg lettuce, and Gallo wines.

In July of 1984, Cesar launched another boycott against table grapes that didn't really take off until 1985. That boycott, too, was ineffective. Though it didn't bring grape growers to the bargaining table, all agree that it was greatly successful in raising awareness against the growers' widespread use of pesticides. But the increased awareness of pesticide poisoning growers were guilty of using did not translate into boycott support. It was during that dismal state of affairs for the UFW that Cesar made a decision to undertake another

strategy that proved so effective on two different major occasions in the past—long fasts in Delano in February-March of 1968 (25 days) and in May-June of 1972 (24 days).

And so, on July 17, 1988, Cesar initiated a water-only fast that he announced at a press conference in Fresno and later at a large rally in Delano. In this fast, Cesar said, he would fast for the purpose of “shattering the apathy among his own staff and union members and jarring the consciences of moral leaders and activists who could and should have been doing more to relieve the suffering of farmworkers and their families.” Cesar’s painful and debilitating fast ended 36 days later at a huge mass in Delano on August 21. Just as Robert Kennedy had joined Cesar to end his fast after 25 days, so, too, his widow, Ethel Kennedy, joined Cesar to end his 36-day fast 20 years later in 1988. The mass marking the end of Cesar’s fast was attended by thousands in Delano—farmworkers as well as labor, religious, and entertainment notables. It was a touching, emotional ceremony.

It was clear from Cesar’s behavior following the fast that he was deeply disappointed. It didn’t take long to realize that the fast had produced no noticeable effect on the boycott. Growers showed no sign whatsoever about being willing to negotiate. It seemed to me that Cesar was not only sad, but also mystified. Why hadn’t the boycott worked this time? Why had his excruciating fast not produced a favorable response?

After spending a few days of recuperation in Delano, Cesar returned to La Paz and tried to resume his normal life. But that wasn’t easy. The fast had really hurt his health. I remember that for at least two or three Sundays after the fast, Cesar did not attend the community mass, which was unusual for him. But he simply didn’t have the strength. So I went to his home and gave him Holy Communion in a brief private ceremony. Even on those occasions he seemed noticeably somber.

On the first Sunday after he came back to La Paz, I brought him Holy Communion, and I was so heartbroken to see how sad and dispirited he appeared. Hoping to brighten him up a bit, I took the occasion to tell him how honored I was to have been chosen by him to be the main celebrant of the mass ending his fast. I had never ever spoken to him so personally before. And I certainly was not going to hang around expecting him to reply to my remarks with a long, tender response. I knew better than that. But to this day I recall his softly spoken “thank you,” and the touching smile he managed to display. I was deeply moved.

Anyone who knew Cesar will recall how much he always wanted—and perhaps needed—to be active and busy at union work as well as at community improvement at La Paz. Even that, after his fast, seemed to produce more pain than satisfaction. In early November, he took it upon himself, aided by his faithful sidekick, Mario Vargas, to prepare some buildings for much-needed paint jobs. While working on the building right across from the administration building, scraping off old paint to ready it for fresh painting, he backed up against the worn, weather-beaten railing around the second-story passageway encircling the building, and it broke. He fell back and down onto the hard, rocky surface below. He

broke something, though I can't remember whether it was his right wrist or forearm. It may not seem to be a big thing, but, after all the other disappointments he had been experiencing, that fracture turned out to be one more frustrating thing that caused him grief.

On one or two previous occasions, I had informed Cesar that my bishop, Bishop Raymond Lucker of the diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota, which I was officially attached to, had been suggesting to me that I would soon have to make up my mind about whether I wanted to remain a member of his diocese or whether I wanted to be formally admitted to the diocese of Fresno under Bishop Joseph Madera. Because Bishop Madera was not very well disposed to Cesar and the UFW (shame on him!) I knew that if I transferred to his diocese, he would remove me from La Paz immediately and appoint me to another parish.

So in February of 1989, I asked for an appointment with Cesar and reluctantly informed him that I was caught in the middle of circumstances that forced me to choose the Fresno diocese or return to my own New Ulm diocese. I told him I had decided to return to New Ulm. His reaction was not angry or cold—just sad, immensely sad. As he silently read over the letter I had written to him, I knew at once that no further words would be called for. After he finished reading the letter, I remember saying little more than an awkward “thank-you-for-everything” and a brief farewell. He just looked at me and nodded, without a word, as I quietly left his office.

I will never forget that moment. It was one of the saddest moments of my life. It was sadder even than the occasion a couple weeks later when all of the people of the La Paz community gathered on the spacious lawn of the home of Cesar's son, Paul, for a farewell party in my honor. After a tasty buffet, I was presented with two farewell gifts. The first was humorous—a good-size bottle of “holy water”—gin, that is. Everyone was familiar with my thirst for gin-and-tonics and martinis. The second was serious. Paul made a tender farewell speech and presented me with a costly gold pocket watch and chain on behalf of the community. I was touched. And saddened, of course, because I couldn't help but notice that Cesar was not present. He simply could not bring himself to attend the farewell ceremony for me. But I bore him no ill will whatsoever because of that—and still don't today. However, I was profoundly sad that he wasn't there—and still am today.

It had been my custom after returning to La Paz from New York in 1981 to write a weekly bulletin that I sent out to all the members of the La Paz community. In the February 28, 1989 issue, I wrote the following:

During the several years I have been writing this weekly bulletin, I almost never commented on people's departures from the union and La Paz. Welcomes, si—departures, no. But I can hardly avoid making reference to my own departure from La Paz, which will occur shortly after Easter Sunday (March 26). I thought the best thing to do in this regard would be to reprint the letter I gave to Cesar when I spoke with him about having to return to Minnesota. Here it is:

Dear Cesar,

As you can see from the enclosed letter from Bishop Raymond Lucker of the diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota, it has become necessary for me to return to Minnesota by the end of March 1989. Choosing either to return to New Ulm or to be incardinated into the diocese of Fresno was painful because either one meant that it would be impossible to continue working with the National Farm Worker Ministry or with the UFW at La Paz. For almost 12 years, since July 11, 1977, I was fortunate enough to avoid this decision, but it is no longer possible for me to keep up my balancing-bishops strategy and must return to New Ulm. I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed working with you and the farmworker movement, especially living and working in La Paz. I loved it here and will miss everyone very much. But more important than just my personal enjoyment, it was good to be part of a cause that is clearly a matter of social justice and central to the eventual establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth.

Please be assured that, no matter where I go or what work I am assigned to, I will do whatever I can to help win the current boycott of California table grapes and further the farmworker cause in the future in whatever way I can.

May God bless you personally, Cesar, and all the people at La Paz and in the union, so that together you will be successful in bringing about justice for all farmworkers.

Sincerely,

Fr. Ken Irrgang

Only four years later, almost to the day, Cesar would die in Yuma, Arizona, where he was born and grew up as a little boy, and where now, ironically, he was testifying in a trial against the Bruce Church Company, the agricultural corporate giant he had launched a boycott against 14 years earlier. Ironic, yes. Sad, too. Immensely sad.