

VICTOR SALANDINI, “THE CONFESSIONS OF THE TORTILLA PRIEST”

Foreword: Cesar Chavez

This is a book about Father Victor Salandini’s exemplary priesthood, now in its 41st year. Before the beginning of the grape strike in September, 1965, when very few recognized our struggle for the farm workers of California, Father Victor was with us.

I first met Father Victor in August, 1965, about a month before the union I started, the National Farm Workers Association, (NFWA) went on strike in Delano in September, 1965. Brother Gilbert Chatfield, a Christian Brother, from Bakersfield, California, introduced Father to me. During a period of some two days in August, 1965, I sat down with Father Victor and related to him what the NFWA was trying to do. I explained to him the history of the union and I emphasized among many things that the union was more than just a union. I explained to Father Victor that the NFWA was a social movement that was attempting to give to all farm workers, not just Mexican farm workers, the power to better their lives by helping them to get better wages, better working conditions, housing and all the things necessary to live a decent life. I especially emphasized to Father that the union was organized by family units—father, mother and working-aged children were all members of the union.

The farm workers and I have always been amazed at his courage. He proved his courage in a very dramatic way when he went to jail in 1966 with me and ten farm workers. Father Victor was the first of very few priests to go to jail with me in the history of our union. This was the first time that a Catholic Priest stood up for the workers and was willing to go to jail so that they could be paid a decent wage and be provided decent living conditions.

Later, we were transferred to the lockup in San Diego. At the jail, we perceived the first sign that a most uncommon Priest walked among us. We were marched out of our cells to go to our first meal. . . .the meal tables were placed in the center of a big communal room which served as the eating center for the jail inmates. We walked in with Fr. Victor in the lead. Instead of the usual noisy mess room we entered into a strangely silent room. All the prisoners waited silently standing against the walls. Not a drop of food had been eaten. They waited They had heard that Father Victor, the first priest of the workers, was in jail. Upon our entrance, the prisoners began clapping in unison greeting Father Salandini. This was to be a day that would forever be etched in their minds. They sensed and knew that Father Victor was an uncommon man . . . one who walked with God.

On our August, 1965, visit Father Victor told me he was leaving in a few weeks to study for four years at Catholic University, Washington D.C., for a doctorate in labor economics. We needed someone to lobby for us in the nation’s capitol. I gave Father Victor authorization to lobby for the NFWA.

Father Victor officially represented the NFWA for two years in Washington, D.C., from the fall of 1965 to the fall of 1967. Since Father had a heavy study schedule, from the fall of 1967 to June of 1969, he continued to help on a part-time basis by lobbying,

picketing, and organizing in Washington, D.C. While in the Capitol he started the Washington D.C. Huelga Committee. He recruited for this committee many influential people who helped to support the grape strike and boycott. Among them was a former leader of the United Auto Workers, Esteven Torres, who is presently a U.S. Congressman.

After his work in Washington D.C., Father joined the staff of the union full-time from June 1969 to June 1971, when he was research director of the union. During these two years, he worked in Delano, San Diego, and Escondido, California, Montreal and Toronto, Canada, New York City, Baltimore, Maryland, together with side trips to other cities and states.

During these two years Father Victor was threatened with arrest and harassed by police on picket lines in these various cities. Once, in Montreal, Canada, he was arrested by the Mounted Police because he was thought to be a member of a revolutionary group that was using violent means to overthrow the ruling government in the province.

Father Victor related to me that on one occasion in Montreal he was scheduled to speak at a Catholic University on the grape boycott. A few days before his scheduled talk he was informed that his talk was postponed to another day. A few days later the building where Father Victor was originally scheduled to speak was bombed on the very day his talk was originally scheduled. Fortunately, no one was in the building at that time.

After his two years full-time with the union, Father Victor became a university professor for eight years, then a high school teacher for nine years. During this time Father Victor continued to help us.

During the past two years, Father Victor has been teaching full-time as well as involved with our union. He hopes that when he retires at the end of the year, he will be able to devote time to the union.

Father Victor Salandini may not be popular with Bishops, but to thousands of farm workers, especially Mexican farm workers who still slave in the hot sun of California agricultural fields, he is a prophet. Since the grape strike in 1965, he has marched and picketed with farm workers arm-in-arm in farm communities throughout California. He has carried the message of the farm workers cause to customers at supermarkets throughout the United States, to all congregations — Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant. Because of his activism, he courted arrest many times and has been arrested on various occasions.

On more than one occasion in the past when I have spoken to farm workers, I have compared Father Victor to Father Hidalgo who, in 1810, led the Mexican people in revolution against an oppressive Spanish regime. Father Victor, like Father Hidalgo, was abandoned by his church and bishops. Father Victor follows in Father Hidalgo's footsteps in leading the farm workers to dignity and justice. It is unfortunate that more priests have failed to heed the prophetic voice of Father Victor.

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