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Over the years, no one has emphasized more than I the necessity of building a wide and appropriate variety of well-planned stable institutions through which the poor can work effectively to overcome their own poverty. Examples of such institutions would be credit and purchasing cooperatives, job training programs and development of employment opportunities. Many other such examples could be mentioned.

Efforts along these lines are usually slow, arduous and even discouraging. In addition to the many difficulties inherent to the poverty situation itself, there is almost invariably if not open opposition at least deadening indifference on the part of the established, more affluent members of the community.

Authentic prudence, therefore, suggests that unnecessary provocation of the “power structure” should be avoided. Wherever possible the development of programs for the poor should be done quietly and circumspectly. In some rare situations patience and delicacy may even succeed in enlisting the support of those who hold the reins of the community’s power.

With it clearly understood, then, that I appreciate the potential immediate disruption of well-meaning and possibly promising efforts to deal quietly with the problems of poverty in California, nonetheless, on the basis of mature consideration and consultation, I feel compelled personally and dramatically to identify myself with the interests and needs of those thousands of grape pickers and their families in and around Delano who, for many weeks, have been conducting a strike in an attempt to bring the growers to the bargaining table.

An immediate need exists at Delano. There, the poor themselves have chosen their own most urgent and wanted objectives. The only proper way for the poor to become involved in the war against their own poverty is for them to identify for themselves not only their long-run objectives but also their most immediate needs on which they can cooperate. Moreover, an absolutely indispensable element in the self-betterment of the farm workers is organization into responsible and effective unions.

At Delano the workers are attempting just that. They have started and stayed with an exceedingly difficult effort to achieve that objective through their own initiative and self-sacrifice. In addition to the inherent difficulties of such an organization they have been opposed by the power of the growers, the local and regional press, the law enforcement agencies; in other words, the well-entrenched power structure. In addition, the strikers have pledged themselves to and almost without exception have actually practiced non-violence – something new and certainly most admirable in the history of labor disputes.

Despite these difficulties they have made a significant showing. They may not secure all their objectives this year. The pickets, under court-ordered restrictions, obviously have not been able to keep strike breakers out of the fields. Most if not all of the grapes seem to have been picked. The growers are apparently not hurting enough to even sit down with the workers' representatives and discuss anything. The growers really believe and expect they can discourage or starve out the strikers. Maybe they will. If they succeed because we, the Church, have failed to give the workers every support we can, both material and moral, then not only will our high-sounding principles seem to the workers to be merely a sham but also we will have lost any right later to claim their loyalty and cooperation.

The strikers need material help right now. But even more they need and want – indeed they are begging for – moral support particularly from that source from which they believe, and I believe, they have a right to expect it: the Church. And they're not getting it.

Very frankly, Church authorities often are frozen with fear that if they take a stand with the workers the growers will punish them in the pocketbook. It is evident that one cannot scorn the need for money to support the parochial and diocesan institutions. But Church institutions do not exist for their own sake. Nor does the Church itself exist solely for the comfortable, affluent and powerful who use or support these institutions.

Christ had a word to say about the shepherd who – out of fear, and because the sheep weren't his – abandoned the sheep when they were under attack. When the wolf is in the fold it's no help to the flock to assure them that, after all, the wolf needs to eat too and that besides efforts are being contemplated to build – at some time in the indefinite future – a more secure sheepfold or perhaps even to attempt to tame the wolves.

I firmly believe that just as there can be circumstances in an individual's life where fidelity to his Christian belief leaves him to choice but to sacrifice everything, even his life, so, too, circumstances can and do arise when the institutional Church can be faced with the same inexorable consequences of Her belief.

To be brutally frank, I think it would be more to the honor of the Church and infinitely more to the service of souls that churches, convents, rectories, and even schools, including seminaries, should remain unbuilt or unfinished or even closer rather than that the Church should knuckle under to the threats of those who demand that the Church “keep it's nose out of their business.” I can't believe that God will allow the Church to prosper materially or spiritually as long as its leaders feel that their first responsibility is to placate actual or potential major financial contributors.

You may ask why the NCRLC should be involved in this problem. Well, we have never conceived our role simply as one of proclaiming principles and hoping that someone else would hear and have the courage to apply them. We have never hesitated to judge specific situations as being either in accord or conflict with those principles. I don't think we ever

have been charged with timidity or over-caution. But, if at this moment when the help and support are so urgently needed and justified we should choose silence in place of outspoken witness or should use long-range hopes for the future as an excuse for not “compromising” ourselves now, we would be deserving of the scorn and rejection which we would have earned.

Theologians have spoken about the Holy Spirit’s operating particularly through the poor. Is it so hard to recognize His hand in the Delano struggle for dignity and decency and justice? Cannot one reasonably assume that it is His inspiration as well as Christ-like love which lead our Protestant brethren to put aside comfort and fear and human respect in order to join the strikers on the picket line and in jail? When they suffer criticism and insult and abuses and the cutting off of contributions from their constituents, are not they the ones of whom Christ was speaking when He said, “Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice sake?”

I feel it necessary to point out that the issue of “obedience” is wholly irrelevant to this situation. If my California Provincial should directly order me to refrain from any participation in the Delano situation, then obedience would come into play. Indeed, at that point there might arise a genuine “crisis of obedience” as it is being called today. Before I attempted to resolve that crisis I would seek and almost certainly follow the counsel of wise and experienced advisers.

But no ecclesiastical superior has any right to forbid me to be concerned with gross injustice and destruction of human dignity just because the specific problem exists within territory under his jurisdiction. Nor can he rightfully forbid me to express that concern in writings, speeches or personal presence. True, it might be considered “imprudent” (a word I am beginning to detest since it is so often used as an excuse for doing nothing) for me to go against his known wishes on the matter but in no way would it involve either disobedience or disloyalty.

It doesn’t take too much imagination to compare the situation which now exists in Delano to that which existed earlier in Selma.

The Church is on trial. We cannot satisfy the urgent demands of the moment by saying that we are beginning to begin programs which in the long run will be of great help. The strikers want and need help now. They would say something quite blunt and very vulgar to anyone who would dare to suggest to them that we’d like to but we can’t give them help now because that might jeopardize our ability to help them later.

In other words, I’m saying that I believe we – the National Catholic Rural Life Conference – have to put it on the line now – or, at least, that my convictions dictate that I have to.