

In Memoriam:
John Ralph Duggan, 1916-2005
Activist Priest, Long-Time
Champion of Farmworkers

By A.V. Krebs

Tonight in Auburn, California, at St. Theresa of Avila Roman Catholic Church, a vigil will be held for a man whose life was dedicated for many years not only to the priesthood but to *La Causa*—bringing social and economic justice to the men, women, and children who both grow and harvest our food.

To thousands of farmworkers who fought to end the bracero program in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, to organize a union with the power to bargain collectively with their employers, to end their involuntary servitude at the hands of corporate agribusiness, John Ralph Duggan, 89, will forever be remembered as one of their most ardent champions.

His activist journey began during the years of World War II at St. Patrick's Seminary in Northern California. Here, he and other seminarians learned from a course on social justice taught by Father Joseph Munier about the great economic and labor papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (Pope Leo XIII) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pope Pius XI).

As labor union advocates Henry Anderson and Joan London, the elder daughter of the famed writer Jack London, wrote in their 1970 book, *So Shall Ye Reap*, a chronicle of Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers' movement:

“For most of the seminarians, it was a revelation to learn that ‘workingmen’s associations’ were held by the most authoritative teachings of the Church to be consonant with Natural law; hence, workers had not only a right to join unions but a moral duty.

“It was also a revelation to learn that, on occasion, priests—such as Father Peter Yorke of nearby San Francisco around the turn of the century—had actively engaged in union organizing with the full knowledge and consent of their bishops.”

As Duggan himself would later reflect to Joan Johnson, a socially conscientious reporter for *The Monitor*, the official paper of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, there was a dire need within the Church for a realistic approach to “the socio-economic problems of people as they are.” He believed that the Church could “be much stronger in the work of training leaders—persons who would have a strong Christian viewpoint on social problems and because of that viewpoint feel compelled to become involved in solving these problems.

“Leaders do appear on the scene,” he added, “thanks be to God, but often this is more a credit to them as individuals than to training programs. And while Catholics have emerged as leaders in the business and medical fields, for example, few have been involved in the socio-political scene, particularly in relationship to the poor.”

It was to those poor—"the little people—the last to be hired and the first to be fired," as he described it—that Duggan dedicated his life as a priest, a pastor, an activist, and a friend. During his days at St. Patrick's, Duggan became one of five seminarians who conducted "a seminar within a seminary," along with Fathers Donald McDonnell, Thomas McCullough, John Garcia, and Ronald Burke. They not only taught themselves Spanish, but late at night, after finishing their seminary studies, they would discuss contemporary developments within the Church; foremost, the fledgling Catholic Worker movement in New York City, inspired by Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day.

There was no talk of a "new breed" of priests, Anderson and London note, for they considered themselves totally loyal to the traditional Church and its teachings. "Their studies convinced them that that loyalty required, among other things, a devotion to social justice."

After ordination in 1947, they all were assigned different parishes in the San Francisco Archdiocese. Our Lady of the Holy Rosary in Decoto, California, was given that name when Duggan became administrator in August 1950. The parish ledger was signed over to him on January 29, 1951. He resided at the parish house in Niles for a few weeks, at which time he moved to establish residence at the rear of the church.

It was at this time that Duggan had a significant encounter with a middle-aged respected California poet by the name of William Everson, who later described the occasion of their meeting.

"In the spring of 1950 my Guggenheim Fellowship ran out, and I found myself on Skid Row. I had two choices open to me: I could enter a religious order or go back to my job [janitorial at UC Berkeley]. I approached the Benedictines and then the Franciscans, but nothing jelled with either of them.

"From their point of view, I was too new a Catholic—before undertaking religious life the Church prefers a two year interim after Baptism. From my point of view, the men I spoke with gave me no satisfaction as to the role of the poet in their version of the monastic life. Then I met a priest named Ralph Duggan who sent me down to a Catholic Worker House of Hospitality newly opened in West Oakland. I remained there fourteen months."

It was from there that Everson became a Dominican oblate (Brother Antoninus) and in the ensuing years would go on to establish himself as America's finest religious poet of the 20th century. On June 3, 1950, though, responding to increasing numbers and needs of the area's Spanish-speaking minority, Fathers McDonnell, McCullough, Garcia, and Duggan were withdrawn from their parish assignments and were formulated into the Spanish Mission Band.

In the ensuing years they would offer mission services to the large and scattered settlements of Spanish-speaking groups who lived "outside the functional scope of the established parishes," which included the isolated, often inhumane, camps provided to the Mexican farmworkers by their employers.

Because of the introduction of thousands of Mexican contract workers—*braceros*—into the country's domestic farm labor market, the Spanish Mission Band's emphasis was meeting the needs of these often exploited and underpaid farmworkers.

Recognizing that not only must the program be terminated if workers were to achieve fair wages and working conditions, the activities of the Mission Band—specifically those of McDonnell and McCullough, who were labeled “troublemakers” since they were outspokenly advocating immediate farm unionization—quickly raised the ire of corporate agribusiness.

It would be in the early 1950s that McDonnell would encounter a member of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish, which was a center of religious as well as social activities in San Jose, California, by the name of Cesar Chavez. Along with a Community Service Organization (CSO) organizer by the name of Fred Ross and a woman whom McCullough introduced to Ross in Stockton by the name of Dolores Huerta, the seeds would be planted for the formation of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), which would evolve into what is now the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

The controversies surrounding the Mission Band’s organizing efforts, however, eventually led to its downfall in 1961 through a combination of California chancery office political machinations and those hierarchies surrendering to implied economic sanctions against the Church from some of its more wealthy grower members.

For example, McCullough, McDonnell, and Norman Smith, an organizer for the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, appeared before a student forum at the Jesuit University of San Francisco to argue the case for farm labor organization. After the forum, two students wrote angry letters to the school paper protesting the participation of priests in a pro-farm labor bloc. The California Farm Bureau, already angry over the priests’ activities, used the protest letters in press releases all over California and the nation, making it appear that there was some sort of great opposition to organizing activities within the Catholic Church, when in fact the opposition was but two Catholic university students.

During this period, Duggan was likewise transferred out of Decoto, California, where his activities had also drawn opposition from the local farm establishment and church officials.

Later, in 1962, serving as a priest in the Stockton diocese, he became assistant executive secretary of the U.S. Bishop’s Committee for Migrant Workers and the following year traveled extensively throughout the Southwest and West encouraging persons—particularly those of Spanish-speaking background—to back organizations representing them in opposing extension of Public Law 78—the bracero program.

The law, however, was extended for another year, and finally on December 31, 1964, the measure originally passed in 1942 as an emergency wartime domestic labor shortage measure was killed. Less than nine months later, the journey from Delano, California, to the successes of the UFW today began.

Fortunately for Duggan and his fellow Mission Band priests, they lived long enough to see some of their dreams and hopes realized to a large extent, but at the same they were always aware, in Duggan’s words, that their church needs to continue to encourage and participate in joint organizational efforts by “the little people” to cope effectively with the problems arising from automation, discrimination, and the effects of “imported” labor.

Perhaps another “farmworker,” Tom Joad in the film *Grapes of Wrath*, summed up the type of life John Duggan had and the legacy by which he can be remembered:

“Well, maybe it’s like Clancy says: A fella ain’t got a soul of his own, just a little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody. And then, it don’t matter, I’ll be all around. In the dark. I’ll be everywhere. Wherever you can look.

“Wherever there’s a fight, so hungry people can’t eat, I’ll be there. Wherever there’s a cop beaten’ up a guy, I’ll be there. I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad, and I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry and they know supper’s ready. And when people are eatin’ stuff they raise and livin’ in the houses they build, I’ll be there, too.”

Rest in peace, good friend !!!

(Kathleen Lawrence was the copy editor for this essay)