# Saint Cesar of Delano

*As the leader of the farm workers' movement, Cesar Chavez became an iconic figure of the 1960s. But his union was largely a failure. It was as a martyr who embodied the psychic contrast between Mexico and America that he commanded our attention.*

**BY RICHARD RODRIGUEZ**

The funeral for Cesar Chavez took place in an open field near Delano, a small agricultural town at the southern end of California's Central Valley. I remember an amiable Mexican disorder, a crowd listening and not listening to speeches and prayers delivered from a raised platform beneath a canvas tent. I do not remember a crowd numbering 30,000 or 50,000, as some estimates have it—but then I do not remember. Perhaps a cool, perhaps a warm spring sun. Men in white shirts carried forward a pine box. The ease of their movement suggested the lightness of their burden.

When Cesar Chavez died in his sleep in 1993, not yet a very old man at 66, he died—as he had so often portrayed himself in life—as a loser. The United Farm Workers (UFW) union he had cofounded was in decline; the union had 5,000 members, equivalent to the population of one very small Central Valley town. The labor in California's agricultural fields was largely taken up by Mexican migrant workers—the very workers Chavez had been unable to reconcile to his American union, whom he had branded "scabs" and wanted reported to immigration authorities.

I went to the funeral because I was writing a piece on Chavez for *The Los Angeles Times*. It now occurs to me that I was present at a number of events involving Cesar Chavez. I was a teenager at the edge of the crowd in 1966, when Chavez led UFW marchers to the steps of the capitol in Sacramento to generate support for a strike against grape growers. A few years later, I went to hear him speak at Stanford University. I can recall everything about the occasion except why I was there. I remember a golden light of late afternoon; I remember the Reverend Robert McAfee Brown introducing Cesar Chavez. Something about Chavez embarrassed me. It was as though someone from my family had turned up at Stanford to lecture undergraduates on the hardness of a Mexican's life. I stood at the back of the room. I did not join in the standing ovation. I would not give him anything. And yet, of course, there was something compelling about his homeliness.

In her thoroughly researched and thoroughly unsentimental book *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope, and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement*, journalist Miriam Pawel chronicles the lives of a collection of people—farm workers, idealistic college students, young East Coast lawyers, a Presbyterian minister, and others—who gave years of their lives at subsistence pay to work for the UFW. By the end of her book, every person Pawel profiles has left the union—has been fired or has quit in disgust or frustration. Nevertheless, it is not beside the point to notice that Cesar Chavez inspired such a disparate, devoted company.

We easily forget that the era we call "the Sixties" was not

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**Seated beside U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy and fed by Presbyterian minister Chris Hartmire, Cesar Chavez breaks his 1968 fast in a symbolic tableau.**

only a time of vast civic disaffection; it was also a time of religious idealism. At the forefront of what amounted to the religious revival of America in those years were the black Protestant ministers of the civil rights movement, ministers who insisted upon a moral dimension to the rituals of everyday American life—eating at a lunch counter, riding a bus, going to school.

Cesar Chavez similarly cast his campaign for better wages and living conditions for farm workers as a religious movement. He became for many Americans, especially Mexican Americans (my parents among them), a figure of spiritual authority. I remember a small brown man with an Indian aspect leading labor protests that were also medieval religious processions of women, children, nuns, college students, burnt old men—under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

By the time he had become the most famous Mexican American anyone could name—his face on the cover of *Time*—the majority of Mexican Americans lived in cities, far from the tragic fields of California's Central Valley that John Steinbeck had made famous a generation before. Mexican Americans were more likely to work in construction or in service-sector jobs than in the fields.

Cesar Chavez was born in Yuma, Arizona, in 1927. During the hardscrabble years of his youth, he dropped out of school to work in the fields of Arizona and California. As a young man he accumulated an autodidact's library. He read books on economics, philosophy, history. (Years later, Chavez was apt to quote Winston Churchill at UFW staff meetings.)

He studied the black civil rights movement, particularly the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. He studied most intently the lives and precepts of St. Francis of Assisi and Mohandas Gandhi.

It is heartening to learn about private acts of goodness in notorious lives. It is discouraging to learn of the moral failures of famously good people. The former console. But to learn that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was a womanizer is to be confronted with the knowledge that flesh is a complicated medium for grace. To learn that there were flaws in the character of Cesar Chavez is again to test the meaning of a good life. During his lifetime, Chavez was considered by many to be a saint. Pawel is writing outside the hagiography, but while reading her book, I found myself wondering about the nature of sanctity. Saints? Holiness? I apologize for introducing radiant nouns.

**CESAR CHAVEZ SEEMED to understand, the way Charlie Chaplin understood, how to make an embarrassment of himself.**

The first portrait in *The Union of Their Dreams* is of Eliseo Medina. At the advent of the UFW, Eliseo was a shy teenager, educated only through the eighth grade. Though he was not confident in English, Medina loved to read *El Malcriado,* the feisty bilingual weekly published by the UFW. He remembered that his life changed the Thursday night he went to hear Chavez in the social hall of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Delano. He was "disappointed by the leader's unimpressive appearance." But by the end of the evening, he had determined to join the union.

No Chavez speech I have read or heard approaches the rhetorical brilliance of the Protestant ministers of the black civil rights movement. Chavez was, however, brilliantly theatrical. He seemed to understand, the way Charlie Chaplin understood, how to make an embarrassment of himself—his mulishness, his silence, his witness. His presence at the edge of a field was a blight of beatitude.

Chavez studied the power of abstinence. He internalized his resistance to injustice by refusing to eat. What else can a poor man do? Though Chavez had little success encouraging UFW volunteers to follow his example of fasting, he was able to convince millions of Americans (as many as 20 million, by some estimates) not to buy grapes or lettuce.

Farmers in the Central Valley were bewildered to find themselves roped into a religious parable. Indeed, Valley growers, many of them Catholics, were distressed when their children came home from parochial schools and reported that Chavez was used as a moral exemplum in religion class.

At a time in the history of American entrepreneurialism when Avis saw the advantage of advertising itself as "Number Two" and Volkswagen sold itself as the "bug," Chavez made the smallness of his union, its haphazardness, a kind of boast. In 1968, during his most publicized fast to support the strike of grape pickers, Chavez issued this statement (he was too weak to read aloud): "Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few."

Chavez ended his 1968 fast in a tableau that was rich with symbol and irony. Physically diminished (in photographs his body seems unable to sustain an erect, seated position), he was handed bread (sacramental ministration after his trial in the desert) by Chris Hartmire, the Presbyterian minister who gave so much of his life to serving Chavez and his union. The Protestant activist was feeding the Catholic ascetic. Alongside Chavez sat Robert F. Kennedy, then a U.S. senator from New York. The poor and the meek also have allies in high places.

Here began a conflict between deprivation and success that would bedevil Chavez through three decades. In a way, this was a struggle between the Mexican Cesar Chavez and the American Cesar Chavez. For it was Mexico that taught Chavez to value a life of suffering. It was America that taught him to fight the causes of suffering.

The speech Chavez had written during his hunger strike of 1968, wherein he compared the UFW to David fighting Goliath, announced the Mexican theme: "I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness

is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men." (Nearly three decades later, in the program for Chavez's funeral, the wording of his psalm was revised—"humanity" substituted for "manliness": *To be human is to suffer for others. God help me to be human.*)

Nothing else Chavez would write during his life had such haunting power for me as this public prayer for a life of suffering; no utterance would sound so Mexican. Other cultures in the world assume the reality of suffering as something to be overcome. Mexico assumes the inevitability of suffering. That knowledge informs the folk music of Mexico, the bitter humor of its proverbs, the architecture of its stoicism. *To be a man is to suffer for others.* The code of machismo (which in American English translates too crudely to sexual bravado) in Mexico derives from a medieval chivalry whereby a man uses his strength to protect those less powerful. *God help us to be men.*

Mexicans believe that in 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared in brown skin, in royal Aztec raiment, to a converted Indian peasant named Juan Diego. The Virgin asked that a church be erected on the site of her four apparitions so that Mexican Indians could come to her and tell her of their suffering. Our Lady of Guadalupe was a part of every UFW demonstration.

Though he grew up during the American Depression, Chavez breathed American optimism and American activism. In the early 1950s, while still a farm worker, he met Fred Ross of the Community Service Organization, a group inspired by the principles of the radical organizer Saul Alinsky. Chavez later became an official in the CSO, and eventually its president. He persuaded notoriously apathetic Mexican Americans to register to vote by encouraging them to believe they could change their lives in America.

If you would understand the tension between Mexico and the United States that is playing out along our mutual border, you must understand the psychic tension between Mexican stoicism—if that is a rich enough word for it—and American optimism. On the one side, Mexican peasants are tantalized by the American possibility of change. On the other side, the tyranny of American optimism has driven Americans to neurosis and depression—when the dream is elusive or less meaningful than the myth promised. This constitutes the great irony of the Mexican-American border: American sadness has transformed the drug lords of Mex-

**Cesar Chavez leads farm workers and supporters on a 340-mile march from his hometown of Delano to the steps of the California state capitol in Sacramento in 1966. The union leader called the journey the Peregrinacion (Pilgrimage), imbuing it with religious overtones.**

ico into billionaires, even as the peasants of Mexico scramble through the darkness to find the American dream.

By the late 1960s, as the first UFW contracts were being signed, Chavez began to brood. Had he spent his poor life only to create a middle class? Lionel Steinberg, the first grape grower to sign with the UFW, was drawn by Chavez's charisma but chagrined at the union's disordered operations. "Is it a social movement or a trade union?" Steinberg wondered. He urged Chavez to use experienced negotiators from the AFL-CIO.

Chavez paid himself a subsistence annual wage of $5,000. "You can't change anything if you want to hold onto a good job, a good way of life, and avoid suffering." The world-famous labor leader would regularly complain to his poorly paid staff about the phone bills they ran up and about what he saw as the misuse of a fleet of second-hand UFW cars. He held the union hostage to the purity of his intent. Eliseo Medina, who had become one of the union's most effective organizers, could barely support his young family and, without even the prospect of establishing a savings account, asked Chavez about setting up a trust fund for his infant son. Chavez promised to get back to him but never did. Shortly after, discouraged by the mismanagement of the union, Medina resigned.

In 1975, Chavez helped to pass legislation prohibiting the use of the short-handled hoe—its two-foot-long haft forced farm workers to stoop all day. That achievement would outlast the decline of his union. By the early 1970s, California vegetable growers had begun signing sweetheart contracts with the rival Teamsters Union. The UFW became mired in scraps with unfriendly politicians in Sacramento. Chavez's attention wandered. He imagined a "Poor Peoples Union" that would reach out to senior citizens and people on welfare. He contacted church officials within the Vatican about the possibility of establishing a religious society devoted to service to the poor. He grew interested in the Hutterite communities of North America and the Israeli kibbutzim as possible models.

Chavez visited Synanon, the drug rehabilitation commune headed by Charles Dederich, shortly before some of its members were implicated in a series of sexual scandals and criminal assaults. Chavez borrowed from Synanon a version of a disciplinary practice called "the Game," whereby UFW staff members were obliged to stand in the middle of a circle of peers and submit to fierce criticism. Someone sympathetic to Chavez might argue that the Game was an inversion of an ancient monastic discipline meant to teach humility. Someone less sympathetic might conclude that Chavez was turning into a petty tyrant. I think both estimations are true.

From his reading, Chavez would have known that St. Francis of Assisi desired to imitate the life of Jesus. The followers of Francis desired to imitate the life of Francis. Within 10 years of undertaking his mendicant life, Francis had more than 1,000 followers. Francis realized he could not administer a growing religious order by personal example. He relinquished the administration of the Franciscans to men who had some talent for organization. Cesar Chavez never gave up his position as head of the UFW.

In 1977 Chavez traveled to Manila as a guest of President Ferdinand Marcos. He ended up praising the old dictator. There were darker problems within the UFW. It was rumored that some within the inner circle were responsible for a car crash that left Cleofas Guzman, an apostate union member, with permanent brain damage.

Chavez spent his last years protesting the use of pesticides in the fields. In April of 1993, he died.

In death, Cesar Chavez became a Mexican saint and an American hero. The year after his death, Chavez was awarded the National Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton. In 2002, the U.S. Postal Service unveiled a 37-cent stamp bearing the image of Cesar Chavez. Politicians throughout the West and the Southwest attached Chavez's name to parks and schools and streets and civic buildings of every sort.

In 1997 American painter Robert Lentz, a Franciscan brother, painted an icon of "Cesar Chavez of California." Chavez is depicted with a golden halo. He holds in his hand a scrolled broadsheet of the U.S. Constitution. He wears a pink sweatshirt bearing the UFW insignia.

That same year, executives at the advertising agency TBWA/Chiat/Day came up with a campaign for Apple computers that featured images of some famous dead—John Lennon, Albert Einstein, Frank Sinatra—alongside a grammar-crunching motto: THINK DIFFERENT.

I remember sitting in bad traffic on the San Diego Freeway and looking up to see a photograph of Cesar Chavez on a billboard. His eyes were downcast. He balanced a rake and a shovel over his right shoulder. In the upper-left-hand corner was the corporate logo of a bitten apple. ■