

On Pilgrimage - January 1972

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Summary: Aims to write about “the earthly spirituality that Christians need to recover.” She sees it exemplified during a stay with Cesar Chavez at the farmworkers education center in La Paz, California. Speaks of the dangers he faces and his zeal, fasting, and recognition of voluntary poverty as spiritual weapons. Notes that “much is wild, prophetic and holy about our [CW] work—it is that which attracts the young who come to help us. But the heart hungers for that new social order wherein justice dwelleth.” (DDLW #517).

I started this column innumerable times since I returned home a month ago from my travels and have been interrupted as many times by emergencies in the house. I shall start it again with two quotations which somehow clarified the situation, our life and our work for me. The first is from Jan Adams’ last article in the **CW**, “Farm Workers in Perspective.” She writes, “There does not seem to be any dynamism inherent in the mere existence of a meaningful social alternative that enables all people to make it more than an insulated haven.” The other quote is from “Signs in the Wind,” in **New Blackfriars**, by Rosemary Haughton. “It is this earthy spirituality that Christians need to recover if the Church is to be prophetic, wild and holy, and not merely socially enlightened. . . it is time to take the lid once more off the well of truth from which the mystics and saints drew.”

So, since Jan Adams mentioned in her article all those social alternatives that mean working from the bottom up and with people as they are, rather than from the top down (government), I’d like to write about the “earthy spirituality that Christians need to recover,” that Rosemary refers to. In a way, “Christians” is not quite the right word. The Jews in the tales of the Hasidim show themselves to be masters of that “earthy spirituality.” There is certainly more than a touch of the “wild, prophetic and the holy” in movements like Cesar Chavez’. It is “alive” in the sense that Jesus Christ meant when He said He has come “to bring life and to bring it more abundantly.”

I am sure that it is in the Catholic Worker movement too, and I sensed it in the new houses of hospitality, in San Francisco, run by Chris Montesano, and the one in Los Angeles, run by Dan Delaney, Jeff Dietrich, Sue Pollack (whose article appears in this issue) and several other young men. It is the only thing which keeps me from falling into a state of despair when I see the apparent hopelessness of the destitution situation around us here in New York.

La Paz

Sue and Jeff drove me from Los Angeles to La Paz on a clear and beautiful Fall day. Thirty miles from Bakersfield we turned off the throughway and onto a narrow road where immediately the sign struck our eyes, **Nuestra Senora de la Paz, Education Center**. Almost immediately we were stopped by a chain across the road with a little gate house to one side.

Of course they have such a guard at the U.N. office building and at most colleges too, but I was immediately and forcibly reminded of what I had heard from friends in San Francisco, that there had indeed been uncovered evidence of a very real plot to assassinate Cesar Chavez. He had been told by Federal officials in fact, not to go to a certain convention or meeting. But he went just the same. There have long been threatening letters and phone calls and he has for some years been guarded closely by relatives and other farm workers who have guarded his home and office in shifts, night and day. There are in addition to the silent and ever present guard, two beautiful German shepherd dogs whose names are Boycott and Huelga, who accompany him. On a seventy mile drive from La Paz to Delano late one Saturday night, I sat in the seat behind Cesar and his driver, with the two dogs behind me in the station wagon – almost with their chins on my shoulder, I felt them so close. There was the strong smell of a zoo in the car. It made me think of how my sister and I used, as children, to go to the zoo in Lincoln Park after school to see the wolves and lions fed.

Old T.B. Hospital

La Paz is practically a village, besides being an educational center. Before I left at the end of the week, preparations were under way for a “retreat” of 200 organizers and boycotters from the entire West Coast, from Seattle to San Diego. There are many little two or three room houses or double houses scattered around the grounds, besides six trailer homes, all of them occupied by families and single people. The children go to school in the neighboring towns of Keane and Tahachapee. There is a prison in Tahachapee, always there are these constant ugly reminders of the power of the State.

There are also hospital buildings at La Paz; one situated further away was a preventorium, and a large administration building where there is a statue of the Blessed Virgin facing you as you come in the front door. Both preventorium and hospital buildings will be used for groups who come for courses, for what is usually termed indoctrination. I was given my choice of a room in the hospital building which was housing only a few others, including a family who invited me to have breakfast in their rooms the next morning. The dining room and kitchen facilities were not at the moment being used since there was no cook or kitchen force. Appeals were being sent out for help, (five dollars a week salary). For the last few weeks the families had been cooking in their homes and the single people were eating around. (A sister who was part Indian told me “Indians and Mexicans are taught two things from early childhood – keeping their word, and sharing what they have.”)

This necessity to “eat around” was very good for me, since I got better acquainted with the family who make up the staff at La Paz. On the visit I made a few years ago during

the Coachella Valley strike, I ate at Delano at the Filipino Hall and at Coachella at the old wooden church hall which was the strike headquarters, and learned to enjoy the Filipino food, and the rice and beans which are so much a part of the diet of all Spanish-speaking Americans. Also tripe.

It gave me an opportunity to see how good the family life of the farm workers was – father and mother sitting down at table with the children, and though parents worked night and day, it would seem, there was still time to find out what the children were doing, what was happening among the younger generation.

Working Mothers

And what an enormous capacity for work. It surprised me to see how much responsibility a woman with young children, like Dolores Huerta and Cathie Murgia, was entrusted with. Dolores Huerta was in Sacramento when I was at La Paz and so I had only a glimpse of her, a hail and farewell in passing. She has negotiated contracts, lobbied for or against legislation affecting the farm workers. Cathie Murgia has charge of all the equipment at La Paz and she took me on a guided tour of the entire “village” (which is what I would prefer to call it rather than a plant or a center). The kitchen facilities are enormous and complicated and would strike terror to the heart of any Catholic Worker cooks. But she had used them all, even taking on the job as cook for awhile. There was an incinerator, a sewage treatment plant, the engine room – the cost of heating the large units is great. Unfortunately the day we were making our rounds was blanketed in mist which swirled over the hills around us, so that we could not see the Preventorium which is being remodeled to provide the extra accommodations needed eventually.

Many other women have played and are still playing their part in the movement. Helen Chavez, Cesar’s wife, who has charge of the credit union, Susan Drake, Marian Moses, Peggy McGivern, Hope Lopez – one cannot list them all.

Conference at Maryknoll

La Paz is a village, an adult education center primarily, where eventually **El Malcriado** will be published again. Presses have been purchased, the editorial offices are occupied and work is being done on the first issue of the paper, which has not been published for some time and has been sorely missed. The 22 children in school are getting not only an education at home, but in the local schools, and getting acquainted with the neighbors. There are infants at home and three more are on the way. When I think of the families engaged in the boycott activities around the country, I am wondering how they were all accommodated at Maryknoll a few months ago when they gathered together there for an East Coast conference with Cesar Chavez. Cesar had called us up to see whether Tivoli could accommodate them, but with a population of fifty already, with many living in the old mansion which is unheated and with no plumbing, we had to turn them away, much to the grief of us all.

Marge Hughes, in charge of the farm, recommended them to Graymoor's Ecumenical Center but it was already having a conference, and they received instead the hospitality of Maryknoll, nearby, which gave me great joy. Many a Maryknoll seminarian has helped us in the summer, and on the West Coast, Maryknoll sisters have helped us get houses of hospitality started.

Now they were getting ready to receive a hundred workers from the West Coast. Until they get some more house trailers, La Paz is so crowded with families that additional houses have been rented in the neighborhood, and I went to one of them one day for lunch. I ate also at Leroy Chatfield's at Feliciano Olgunin's, at Lupe Murgia's, and one night at the house of three single women, and Cesar came over and ate with us.

Fasting

I learned then that Cesar is on a vegetable diet, eating no meat or fish, cheese or eggs. "I eat plenty of bread," he said. "Work like this needs sacrifice. One must sacrifice." He said this not in front of the others, but once when he was talking to me about voluntary poverty.

"We all receive five dollars a week, and our expenses paid, such as rent and food and travel, and we have to keep on this subsistence level."

He clearly recognized voluntary poverty and fasting as spiritual weapons of great power. "As long as there is organizing to do among farm workers, we must keep to this level. They asked me to come to Florida to help there, and to send organizers. So my cousin Manuel Chavez is there, and I have just returned from there. If I had not gone, they would try to do it alone, but we can all help each other."

In a way I lived the life of the place that week, seeing Chavez in action at a day-long meeting of the board of directors of the union, driving with him to Delano for a Sunday celebration when the Filipino Hall was restored to the generous comrades who had given the use of their own recreation headquarters which they had built up over the years. The restoration was celebrated by a feast which began early and lasted all day, with speeches and singing and dancing, and concert music played by a stringed orchestra and solos by accomplished violinists and pianists. The feast was provided by all the women who cooked roasts and turkeys, and Mexican and Filipino dishes.

Larry Itliong

Larry Itliong was one of the speakers and was greeted with a tumult of applause as he urged all his fellow Filipinos to support the union and to defend each others' interests in spite of the fact that he had stepped out of his position of vice president or assistant director, some weeks before. He is a strong and good man and I thought of his testimony before a Congressional hearing years ago, when he told how he had come at the age of fifteen to the United States to continue his education but had been forced to go into the fields to earn his living and he had never gone back to school. But he had worked in the northwest canning and fishing industries where he helped organize his compatriots.

Delano

I stayed at the Chavez home in Delano, the night before the feast. They had not yet completed the move to La Paz, and I gathered that Helen Chavez was not too anxious to leave her new little grandchild. Besides I heard that she had been forcibly taken from her home when she was seven years old and brought to the preventorium section of the T.B. hospital which is now part of La Paz and kept there for eighteen months. She has nothing but unpleasant memories of the place. “But of course I am going,” she told me, “next week or the week after.”

Delano, is her home town where her own family lived for many years, and naturally family and friends from years back make it harder to leave. But to me, these flat, characterless little towns down through the long valley in California, cannot compare in attraction with the beautiful setting of La Paz.

The Chavez income is \$2100 a year, and the Internal Revenue Department has tried in vain to check him for income tax evasion.

Before I left for Los Angeles again, preparing for bed in my small hospital room at La Paz, I heard a knock at the door and a little boy came in and told me “Cesar wants you to come over.” It was a dark night and as we walked up the paved road to one of the little houses where Cesar’s family were going to live, we were passed by the security jeep making the rounds. Cesar’s house had been surrounded by a high fence which was locked at night, with a telephone which goes in to the house. Kevin Brown was spending the night and came to open the gate and let us in. Huelga and Boycott were on duty. I think it was only then that I truly felt the enormity of the situation – a man always living in danger of his life being snuffed out. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy – one had to remember them. Security guards are of no avail and Cesar knows it, but the union officials insist on taking all the precautions they can.

We neither of us talked of threats and dangers. He wanted to talk of the work of education, of getting out a paper, of education which included not only education for organizers and boycott but for credit unions and cooperatives, land trusts.

When we talked over two years ago at the time of my visit during the Coachella strike, I had just been visiting the Hutterites in Montana and South Dakota and he was interested in them. The pictures of Zapata on the walls of the union headquarters remind all Mexican workers of the struggle of this peasant leader for the **ejido**, peasant-ownership movement in Morelos, Mexico.

No Enemies

Chavez does not talk of “enemies” but “adversaries,” according to Henry Anderson who has written the most up to date book on the farm workers movement that I have read yet. **So Shall Ye Reap** is by Joan London (daughter of Jack London) and Henry Anderson, long associated with the farm workers. It was published by Thomas Y. Crowell Co. a year ago. He knows he is surrounded by adversaries not only because of the union’s struggle for wages,

decent conditions, and respect. I don't think most people realize how great his vision is. He has the long view, and in faith believes that by non-violent means man can attain to a decent life on the good earth. He is interested in land trusts and the eventual ownership by farm workers of cooperative farms, built up within the shell of the old profit system. Black Muslims have approached him with their ideas of getting thousand-acre farms and setting up co-ops. In Mississippi there are some small beginnings of this. Also in Louisiana and Alabama.

It is as though he poor were crying out, "Land for us. Room for us. We hope we are not adversaries to the death. Co-existence is possible. Change may not come about soon, but it is on its way. Just as a communist government was voted in Chile, not brought about by armed conflict, so there may be, in the future, a cooperative commonwealth. It may come about." The patience of the poor!

The farm workers are willing to talk about the machine, as they knew they had to talk about pesticides, in their contracts. Machines are necessary. They are not wedded to their short-handled hoe, to their stoop labor, their back-breaking work. While we talked Cesar lay flat on his back, evidently in pain. But he smiled as he told me of an Indonesian nurse at Maryknoll who had given him a massage which put him to sleep for a good eight hours.

Before I left I looked at the books on his bedside table. There were Neruda's poems, a book by Maryknoll's Fr. Eddie Gerlock, and Paulo Freire's **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**.

Our Involvement

Why do we give so much attention in the Catholic Worker to such matters as the condition of workers, unions, boycotts? This month I have had several letters, written undoubtedly by sincere and pious people who want to think only of contributing to bread lines and immediate needs of the poor. "Please spend this money for bread," they will write, "not on propaganda."

Let me say here that the sight of a line of men, waiting for food, ragged, dirty, obviously "sleeping out" in empty buildings, is something that I never will get used to. It is a deep hurt and suffering that this is often all we have to give. Our houses will not hold any more men and women, nor do we have workers to care for them. Nor are there enough alternatives or services to take care of them. They are the wounded in the class struggle, men who have built the railroads, worked in the mines, on ships, and steel mills. They are men from prison, men from mental hospitals. And women too. They all are often simply the unemployed.

We will never stop, having "lines" at Catholic Worker houses. As long as men keep coming to the door we will keep on preparing each day the food they need. There were six hundred on Thanksgiving day in Los Angeles. I helped serve there too.

Even Worse Poverty

Even now as I write I can see the Berlin-like wall, the high riot fencing topped with rolls of barbed wire which separates the barrios of Tijuana from the lush fields of southern California.

As far as the eye can see there are those shacks made of cartons and old bits of tar paper and carpeting, wall to wall, the wall of one, a wall for the next, acres and acres of destitution. Most horrible of all, there is caught in that barbed wire topping the high fences, bits of clothing, a sleeve of a coat, a sock, a ragged shirt, caught there and torn from the scratched and bleeding body of some desperate person trying to get over the fence.

Project Concern

A happier sight in Tijuana was the group of poor and small buildings which contained a hospital, a clinic, a pharmacy, a nursery and even a school for a couple of hundred children. American sisters, doctors, pharmacists cross the border each day, and with a Mexican assistant do what they can to alleviate the ills of children. I saw a tiny baby being operated on, in a small room, by a specialist who was at that moment saving the life of a child and teaching his Mexican assistant. Work was being done under circumstances that would not be tolerated in the United States.

There are so many empty buildings belonging to the Church, so many Sisters and Brothers who want to serve the poor, surely there should be more guest houses, hostels, than there are. I'd like to call attention to the fact that a man can go from New York to Graymoor and get hospitality; go on to Poughkeepsie where usually the jail is the only hospice; then come on to Tivoli and stay as long as he needs to just so he doesn't bring a bottle in; then on to Albany to Arbor House; (there may be a house in Schenectady); Fr. McVey has a house for men in Syracuse, or rather outside of it at Orwell, N.Y.; then there is St. Joseph's house of Hospitality in Rochester. There used to be two houses in Buffalo. I can envision men, in spring, summer and fall, going from house to house, staying for a while, looking up job opportunities, and when they have made the tour, coming back again and starting their pilgrimage over. "Men of the road" we call them, and we have lost track of the number we have sheltered at the farm at Tivoli.

But I repeat – Breadlines are not enough, hospices are not enough. I know we will always have men on the road. But we need communities of work, land for the landless, true farming communes, cooperatives and credit unions. There is much that is wild, prophetic and holy about our work – it is that which attracts the young who come to help us. But the heart hungers for that new social order wherein justice dwelleth.

(I must wait till our next issue to describe the wonderful labor of Charles Evers and the woodcutters strike in Mississippi).