By Giving Our Live, We Find Life:

A Conversation with Cesar Chavez

by John Dear

Cesar Chavez lived his life in service of others. A servant of the poor, a servant of justice, a servant of nonviolence, he founded and led the United Farm Workers Union in their struggle for justice. A steadfast practitioner of nonviolence, he fasted, prayed, marched, picketed and boycotted his way to justice.

In April 1993, he traveled to Arizona to stand trial in a lawsuit against a grape-growing company. He also fasted privately for six days. At the end of the fast, on the evening of April 22, 1993, he retired to his room. He died quietly with a book in his hands. He was 66 years old.

Like tens of thousands of others, I journeyed to Delano for his wake and funeral at Forty Acres, the former UFW headquarters in the heart of California's Central Valley. Fifteen thousand farmworkers viewed his body in an open pine wood coffin, made by his brother. They gathered for the evening vigil and rosary service under a huge tent with a large banner picturing Cesar. The prayers, scripture readings, testimonies and songs continued on through the night until the start of the march the next morning.

The next day, April 29th, over 40,000 people, mostly poor farmworkers, marched through Delano to his funeral, where they pledged to continue the struggle for justice. Dignitaries, church people, and farmworkers alike compared him to Gandhi and King and called him "a prophet of justice and nonviolence."

Later, Cesar was buried in a rose garden at the foot of a small hill in La Paz, his small hometown. He used to climb the hill every morning before dawn to meditate and watch the sun rise.

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Cesar was born on March 31, 1927 into a family of farmworkers. After his father lost his farm, the family migrated from Arizona through the Southwest to California as itinerant farmers. In the 1950s, as he studied the Catholic church's social teachings on the rights of workers, he became a community organizer for Mexican-Americans. For ten years, he worked out of San Jose, California with Fred Ross, a longtime West coast organizer, and the Community Service Organization. In 1962, Cesar moved to Delano with his wife, Helen and their eight children and founded the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta.

In 1965, the farmworkers began a successful five-year strike and boycott against grape growers that rallied millions of supporters to the UFW. From the beginning, Cesar advocated the nonviolence of Gandhi and King. In 1968, Cesar undertook a 25-day fast to reaffirm the UFW commitment to nonviolence. "For us," Cesar said, "nonviolence is more than academic theory; it is the very lifeblood of our movement."

At the end of his famous 1968 fast, he called everyone to take up the nonviolent struggle for justice. "I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act

of humanity is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice," he said. "To be human is to suffer for others. God help us to be human."

On Good Friday, 1969, Cesar wrote a widely published letter to the president of a grape-growing industry. His plea for justice explained that "we advocate militant nonviolence as our means for social revolution and to achieve justice for our people."

> We are men and women who have suffered and endured much, and not only because of our abject poverty but because we have been kept poor. The colors of our skins, the languages of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process--all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our human spirit. But God knows that we are not beasts of burden, agricultural implements or rented slaves; we are human beings. And mark this well, we are people locked in a death struggle against humanity's inhumanity to humanity in the industry that you represent. And this struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying...[The farmworkers] have been under the gun, they have been kicked and beaten and herded by dogs, they have been cursed and ridiculed, they have been stripped and chained and jailed, they have been sprayed with the poisons used in the vineyards; but they have been taught not to lie down and die nor to flee in shame, but to resist with every ounce of human endurance and spirit. They have been taught to resist not with retaliation in kind but to overcome with love and compassion, with ingenuity and creativity, with hard work and longer hours, with stamina and patient tenacity, with truth and public appeal, with friends and allies, with mobility and discipline, with politics and law, and with prayer and fasting...We know that our cause is just, that history is a story of social revolution, and that the poor shall inherit the earth.

"We do not hate you or rejoice to see your industry destroyed," Cesar concluded. "We hate the agribusiness system that seeks to keep us enslaved and we shall overcome and change it not by retaliation or bloodshed but by a determined nonviolent struggle carried on by those masses of farmworkers who intend to be free and human."

In the early 1970s, Cesar led the largest, most successful farm strike in U.S. history, calling for a grape, lettuce and Gallo wine boycott that drew the support of over 17 million Americans.

Eventually, the UFW moved their headquarters to Keene, California and named their compound, "La Paz." Pledged to voluntary poverty, Cesar never earned more than $5000 a year. In 1984, Cesar called for another grape boycott to protest the use of cancer-causing pesticides which have killed grapeworkers and their children. The boycott gained new national recognition in July, 1988, when Cesar fasted for 36 days "as an act of penance for those who know they could or should do more."

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I first met Cesar in 1989 at a rally outside Safeway's national headquarters in Oakland, California. He gave a stirring speech to a packed auditorium calling

Safeway to boycott grapes and the rest of us to organize the boycott. I spent the rest of the day with other farmworkers going door-to-door in San Francisco, urging people to boycott grapes and telling them about the dangers of pesticides on farmworker families. Later, we gathered in the early evening for a social with Cesar. He was upbeat and his passion for justice was contagious.

I saw him twice just weeks before his death, at the funeral of a priest friend, and again at an award ceremony in Los Angeles. Each time, he spoke with his usual enthusiasm and optimism about the boycott, the pursuit of justice and the need for others to get involved. He said he was convinced that the boycott would succeed and that one day soon, cancer-causing pesticides would no longer be used.

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On Friday night August 7th, 1992, I sat down with Cesar Chavez after he delivered the keynote address to the annual Pax Christi conference. I asked him first how he kept going all these years.

"I'm always very hopeful. I know it doesn't take everybody in the world to get things done. It takes a few and those few are there. So, really, it's not a question of converting anyone or getting people to make a new commitment. The commitments are there. We just have to find them. That's a hard thing. Getting the word out, communicating, giving people some action they can take. Together, there will be a great impact.

What happens is that people don't help often times because they are not given a specific, clear task to do. We ask them to take public action. We say, 'Don't eat grapes.' We're not asking people to give us money or to go on a march, although we'd like that. We don't depend on that to win. We break it down so that millions of people can take action. We give people something very specific, very simple to do. There are specific things that can be done. So I'm always confident.

What is the latest grape boycott about?

We're boycotting grapes for the same reason we did back in the 1960s. There are a number of cancer clusters, little communities where the grapes are grown in California, where the children of the farm workers are exposed to pesticides on the grapes and then get cancer. There's a very high rate of cancer. We couldn't get the owners to investigate it. We couldn't get the state to test the pesticides. So we're saying, 'Don't eat grapes.'

In the 1960s, we got them to stop using DDT after they could not sell any grapes. Today, we want to get the growers to stop using the cancer-causing pesticides. To do that, we have to get enough people not to buy and not to eat the grapes. That's going to happen. That will do it, more than anything else.

The boycott has been a very important part of your struggle over these years. What is your understanding of the boycott?

The boycott is a way to vote at the marketplace, which is a lot more powerful than going through politicians. Politicians and public policy are not doing anything because

we cannot hold them responsible or accountable. Everybody can be involved in our grape struggle. When you go to the marketplace, you by-pass all of the politicians, all the public policy machine, and you can get a reaction. Instead of voting once every four years, you can vote every day in the marketplace. The polls never close and you don't need a majority to win. More Americans need to know that. The boycott is a very powerful tool.

You have spoken of the difference between public policy and public action. What do you mean by public action?

By public action we mean that the public directly participates, not in the political arena, but in the marketplace, through economics.

For instance, we had a case in one town in California, where a rule was made that it was illegal for more than two people, Mexican farm workers, to be talking together on Main Street. We were arrested. We went to the city council and said if you don't solve this problem and stop harassing us, we will no longer buy things in your stores. We started a boycott. No one bought anything in their stores. We shopped elsewhere in the state.

Within thirteen days, the owners of the stores, not the politicians but the businessmen, came to us. We told them it was time to get rid of the city council and the mayor. When they did that, we would start shopping again in their stores. We didn't wait for the vote. The marketplace is more powerful than the registration of votes. We need to get people to understand that and find a way to struggle for justice through economics. We have more power there.

What's your understanding of nonviolence?

We have a rule not to write or to preach about nonviolence. I've never written a word about nonviolence. There are people, including you, who have written all about nonviolence. We don't have to write about it, interpret it, or dissect it. It's very simple for us. We just do it. Nonviolence has to go beyond the rhetoric.

There's no real trick to being nonviolent if you're locked up in your room and your praying the rosary. Anybody can do that. But how about being nonviolent in the face of violence? That's where it really happens.

In the early days of the struggle, I talked a lot about nonviolence, more than I should have. And so, we had many people, grown men, running around like saints with their hands folded together, and looking like angels. So I said, "No, no, no. You don't have to go around like you're in another world to be nonviolent. You don't have to go around like you're stepping on egg shells. That's not the idea. Be yourselves and do things, but just don't use violence."

Nonviolence, you see, can go the other way too. You can become passive, and that's not going to change anything.

Ten years ago, when I entered the Jesuits, I made the thirty day silent retreat of St. Ignatius, the "Spiritual Exercises." Each day during the retreat, one of the Jesuits posted a quote on the community bulletin board for our reflection. Toward the end,

one day, I read the statement you made at the end of your 25 day fast in 1968, when you said, "It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of humanity is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be human is to suffer for others." That had a big impact on me. Do you still believe that, twenty-four years later?

Yes, I still think the same. We work so hard at not being human, so hard at being something other than ourselves. The whole idea is that you have to be who you are and let other people be who they are. We don't have to change people to change the world. There are enough of us. We don't need a whole majority to change the world. We have to find a certain number of people and help them to act.

For instance, if you don't have a concrete beginning and end, you go through life speaking rhetoric, patting yourself on the back, and going to meetings. We spend our time meeting ourselves coming and going to meetings. Meetings are not very good. Gandhi used to say that to get things done you have to keep the fire in the gut inside. Don't let it outside. Keep it inside so that you can get the work done. If you let that fire out, it dissipates and there is no more fire and no more action.

Primarily, there has to be action. Without action, you're kidding yourself. In the struggle here in the United States, you have to be part of real action. You have to get beyond the talking, writing and planning stage and get into real action if you want to change anything. Things do not change by writing or reading about them, but they do change when you actually confront other people, as in our case, the grape industry.

Given the primary task of action, where do you see the role of prayer and fasting in the struggle for justice?

They are more for you than for anybody else. Prayer is for you, for one's own self. How do you reach somebody through prayer who does not give a hoot about what you are doing? But prayer reaches you. Your prayer translates into action and determination and faith.

Fasting is probably the most powerful tool of communication that we have, the way I've come to understand it. It communicates, but not through the written way. Fasting communicates through the soul. In my fasts, I've listened carefully and come to understand that fasting sends a message, but not through the written or spoken word. It's an understanding that transcends the normal senses. I really believe that. I don't know how it happens, but it is the most potent way to communicate that I've ever seen. Things begin to happen that you never expected. The best example of this was Gandhi's Great Fast.

The key for me, and I think for Gandhi, King and Dorothy Day, is that our action is faith-based, rooted in a belief in a nonviolent God of justice and peace. What is the role of faith in your struggle for justice?

It is fundamental. The only justice is Christ-God's justice. The courts make decisions and we're the victims of a lot of shenanigans by the courts, but ultimately, down the line, real justice comes. It does not come from the courts, but it comes from a set of

circumstances and I think God's hand is in it. God tends to write very straight with crooked lines.

The other thing that's important is faith in human beings. We've got to have faith that human beings have God's wisdom, that people know, that they have that wisdom from God between what's wrong and what's right and the wisdom to act for what is right. And so we need faith to keep plugging along and working until it happens, to help people to act for what is right.

Can I ask you then what is your image of God? In your struggle for justice, who is God for you?

God is manifested through God's people. It's always me and God and you and all people, never just me and God. If it's just me and God, then we get into trouble. It's me and God and you and everyone. Always.

You've been involved in the struggle for justice for forty-four years now. A friend of mine once said about Dorothy Day that the most significant feature about her life was her lifelong faithfulness to the struggle for justice and peace. What advice do you have for us in terms of being faithful, making the life commitment to the struggle?

It all goes back to faith. You've got to have faith in God and have faith in God's people, too. That faith in God has to transcend also to God's people. If you do that then, you will be able to withstand all the cruelties of life. If you have faith then, you can withstand all those things that shouldn't happen, all the injustices, all the setbacks.

When a sewer is stopped up, and you have to bore right through it to open it up. Faith is like that. It helps us to drill right through everything.

Unless you give everything up to doing something, you shouldn't be involved in it. If you do not commit your life to it, then it will not get done. You're kidding yourself because you're splitting up your time. That happens. Many people are really committed to their own way of life, to their jobs, to advancement, and all those things. But however good their intentions, you can't get the job done.

That's the number one reason why we're not getting the job done. Too many just have time to go to a conference once a year or a meeting once a month. That's not going to change anything.

We need to commit our lives, to be willing to give up our lives, to the struggle for justice and peace?

Completely. We need people who are committed to the struggle, who are completely committed, otherwise nothing will happen.

Like Jesus?

Exactly. Jesus never gave up. He didn't say, "Well, I'm going to be here just for a little while, and then I'm going to forget you." He said, "I'm going to be with you all the time, forever and forever."

I don't know how much I've accomplished, but I know I've been there for people. When the poor and the destitute needed love and attention and caring, I was there for them. I don't know how much I helped, but I was there for them. That's what counts.

There's a difference between being of service and being a servant. If you are of service, you serve at your convenience. You will say, 'Oh, I can't do this today at 5:00 or on Sunday but perhaps next week.' If you are a servant, you are at their convenience. You have no escape. You are at their service all the time. You are there to serve people. That's faith and commitment.

What is your message to Catholics working for peace and justice?

First of all, I want to congratulate them. And then, I want to caution them not to get involved in anything that will keep them away from public action. It is very important to concentrate on public action for justice and peace. Without action, things are not going to change. People come and go, people get scared, people lose interest because nothing's happening. But with action, things happen. That's my recommendation to people who are devoted and concerned: Don't ever give up on public action for justice and peace.

You began by speaking about hope. What is the basis of your hope? What are the signs of hope that you see these days?

Time is our best friend. Time cures a lot of illnesses. Gradually, out of the hopelessness and despair, people are beginning to take action. People are beginning to realize that though they are working a lot, they are not doing the right work to get change to happen. That's my hope.

People go through a phase. They join an organization. They work hard. They come and go to meetings. They plan and discuss. They do everything--except action. Then, a period comes when people get discouraged. They start wondering. They loose faith and hope. Out of this group emerges a few people who analyze the situation and say, "Wait a minute. Change is not happening because I'm not doing the right job, because I'm not getting into action." We've got to get into public action.

I see this every day. When we started boycotting and struggling thirty years ago, there were hardly any organizations in the United States supporting us, except the old-line groups. People weren't organized. Today, there are organizations galore. Every community has two or three environmental groups and peace and justice groups and groups involved in stopping hunger and homelessness. They weren't around in those days.

I've seen a dramatic change occur. So, I'm hopeful. I'm always hopeful.