

Protestants Not Catholics

The first point I wish to make is that history will never accord to Protestants the credit they deserve for the founding, the credibility, the support, and the momentum they gave to Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement. My second point is that history will assign the credit to Catholics.

Before I discuss the reasons that might account for such an historical rewrite, it is necessary, I think, to provide full disclosure about my childhood Protestant bias. As a descendent of austere French-Canadian Catholics, I lived my childhood in a rural community of Northern California (pop: 2,800) under the religious auspices of conservative Irish Catholic priests. This childhood period would have been 1940 -1948. Given this religious context, I was not permitted to associate with Protestants, go inside their churches, attend youth activities in their church halls, or attend a church wedding or funeral. But especially, I was not permitted to date a Protestant or worse still, marry one.

A lesser standard was applicable to non-Catholics, who were not Protestants. For example, my mother married a non-Catholic (my father) but to remind her of this deviance, she was not permitted to be married from the church altar, but was required to stand outside the communion rail. These religious strictures were the important stuff of my 1940's Catholic childhood. It must be difficult to believe but the first Protestant church I entered was during my college years, when I walked into San Francisco's Grace Cathedral to take an organ lesson. Even as I write this paragraph, I shudder to remember how marginalized and narrow my upbringing was.

My first working experience with Protestants came at the age of 31, when I joined up with Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement. It was in this context that I met the California Migrant Ministers (not Catholic priests, mind you) Jim Drake, Chris Hartmire, David Havens, Gene Boutilier, Phil Farnham, Richard Cook, Dale Van Pelt, and many others. These Protestants were ordained religious men working at ground zero doing the daily work of building the farmworker movement. Catholics talked a good game, but it was the Protestants who literally rolled up their sleeves and joined the farmworkers to organize, strike, and boycott.

As a progressive Catholic I had read about the controversial (even though minuscule) worker-priest movement in France but in Delano California, through the National Farm Worker Ministry, I saw its reality in the creation of a full-blown worker-priest program, which included both men and women and their families. This ancillary movement formed the organizational backbone of much of the organizing and boycott activities of Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement.

And the Catholics? Many of the full time farmworker volunteers were Catholic, but none were assigned to the movement as part of their institutional church, in fact, just the opposite. They represented only their personal commitment. Some concerned priests and nuns – mavericks, I would call them – supported the farmworker movement, even in the early years of the strike, but they too were on their own; they did not enjoy the official institutional support of their bishops; they walked a fine line between the teachings of the church with respect to the rights of workers to form unions, and the Sunday contribution collection plates, which were heavily supported by rural Catholic growers.

What puzzles me now, more than 40 years later, is why Protestant ministers who were associated with the National Farm Worker Ministry during that era, or who were members of this utterly unique and radical farmworker-priest religious ministry, evince little or no interest in discussing, documenting, or reflecting about their role in the farmworker movement. Nor do any seem interested in the origins of the ministry, its theological underpinnings, or its subsequent history. Perhaps this priestly ministry so identified itself with the cause of the farmworkers, it lost any sense of its own institutional separateness. If this is the case, it is commendable, but it also represents an important and significant historical memory loss for the rest of us.

By default, the institutional Catholics have the farmworker history playing field to themselves, and it is their history of involvement you will read about; deserving perhaps, but in reality, only a small fraction of the story about the religious influences that sparked the development of the farmworker movement in the 1960's.

