

On Pilgrimage - September 1973

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Diary-like description of her participation in a United Farm Workers' picket in California, her arrest, and several days in jail. Discusses the work of Cesar Chavez, Joan Baez, Daniel Ellsberg, and others. Concludes with a prayer to Pope John to aid Chavez and other rural workers throughout the United States. (DDLW #533).

July 30. We left Kennedy Airport at noon for San Francisco, Eileen Egan and I. She was attending, as I too was supposed to, the 50th Anniversary of the War Resister's International. Joan Baez had invited me to be at her Institute for the Study of Non-violence for the week with some members of Cesar Chavez' United Farm Workers' Union. When we arrived in time for the Institute's Monday night pot luck supper in Palo Alto, plans had changed because of the mass arrests of farm workers who were defying an injunction against mass picketing in Kern County. There was now a strike in the vineyards as well as in lettuce fields because the growers would not renew their contracts with the farm workers and were making new contracts with the Teamsters. The strike was widespread and mass arrests were continuing. Cesar Chavez' union of Farm Workers has everything that belongs to a new social order, so my path was clear. I had come to picket where an injunction was prohibiting picketing, and I would spend my weeks in California in jail, not at conferences.

This first evening was beautiful. Joan Baez sang all evening in the patio of one of the houses belonging to a group interested in land trusts, non-violence, and the farm strike.

Joan lives up in the hills somewhere near, has a "Christ room" where an old ex-prisoner stays. Lee Swenson, who works with the Institute, drove us to one of the houses where we slept well. We had arrived in California at 2:30 p.m. California time, 5:30 N.Y. time and by N.Y. time were probably in bed well after midnight. It was a long day.

July 31. A very hot drive down the valley to Delano today, arriving as strike meeting ended. Today many Jesuits were arrested. Also sisters who had been attending a conference in San Francisco. Mass in the evening at Bakersfield, ended a tremendous demonstration, flag-carrying Mexicans – singing, chanting, marching – and when the Mass began there were so many people that it was impossible to kneel, but there was utter silence.

August 1. Up at 2 a.m., picketed all day, covering many vineyards. Impressive lines of police, all armed—clubs and guns. We talked to them, pleaded with them to lay down their guns and clubs. One was black. His mouth twitched as he indicated that, No, he did not enjoy being there. Two other police came and walked away with him. I told the other police I would come back next day and read the Sermon on the Mount to them. I was glad I had my folding chair-cane so I could rest occasionally during picketing, and sit there before the police to talk to them. I had seen a man that morning sitting at the entrance to workers' shacks with a rifle across his knees. (Within two weeks, Juan de la Cruz was shot in the chest by such a rifle.)

August 2. Slept at Sanger with nurses from one of the farm workers' clinics. Up at 4 a.m., was at the park at Parlier before dawn. Cesar came and spoke to us about the injunction and arrests (wonder when he sleeps) and we set out in cars to picket the area where big and small growers had united to get the injunction. When three white police buses arrived some time later we were warned by the police thru the bull horns that we were to disperse, and when we refused, were ushered into the buses and brought to this "industrial farm" (which they do not like us to call a jail or prison though we are under lock and key and our barracks surrounded by riot fencing topped with barbed wire). Here we are, 99 women strikers including 30 sisters, 50 men strikers including two priests. This is a 640-acre farm and can accommodate 300. Now greatly overcrowded. Fr. John Coffield and Bill Butler were my first visitors. Fr. Coffield is an old and dear friend in the Los Angeles diocese who has always rejoiced in tribulation, his own and that of others. Bill is with the Los Angeles House of Hospitality, the Ammon Hennacy House. Eileen is staying with Helen Perry, where I too stayed before arrest. Helen is with the Grail. Had her with us in N.Y. and with Eileen in Vietnam.

August 3. Maria Hernandez got ill in the night. Taken to Fresno Hospital, cardiograph taken and she was put in the Fresno jail. (She was returned to us still ill August 7. She worries about her children.) Lidia Salazar has 3 at home, 11, 8 and 2. Her husband works at a trailer camp. The 11-year old girl takes care of the house and children. I met them, as I'm meeting many families, at visiting hours. Kathleen and Pat Jordan, on a vacation West, visited today. Another Mexican mother in our barracks has ten children and there certainly was a crowd visiting her. Such happy, beautiful families – it reminded me of a tribute paid to the early Christians when they were imprisoned and the hordes of their fellow Christians visited them and impressed their guards.

I must copy down the charges made against me. (We were listed in groups of ten): “The said defendants, on or about August 2, were persons remaining present at the place of a riot, rout, and unlawful assembly, who did willfully and unlawfully fail, refuse and neglect after the same had been lawfully warned to disperse.”

Some other women listed in the criminal complaint in my group of ten were Demetria Landavazo De Leon, Maria de Jesus Ochoa, Efigenia Garcia de Rojas, Esperanza Alanis De Perales, etc. How I wish I could list them all!

The second charge made against us was “refusal to disperse and being assembled with two or more persons for the purpose of disturbing the peace and committing an unlawful act.”

Other visitors during our imprisonment, or “detainment,” were Eugene Nelson, I.W.W. editor of **The Industrial Worker** who was refused admission because he came between visiting hours. Glenda, a “small grower’s” wife (they have 40 acres) who said small people were being crushed between the big growers and corporations. Another 20-acre grower said he was just beginning to make it when the strike came. Their visits hurt of course, but they had no sympathy for the strikers, and strong racist feelings.

During crucial meetings between Cesar Chavez and Teamsters the sisters all signed up for a night of prayer, taking two-hour shifts all through the night, and the Mexican women all knelt along the tables in the center and prayed the rosary together. Barracks A, B, and E were alive with prayer.

Tonight, a young Mexican legal assistant of the Union attempting to talk to us was brutally and contemptuously ordered out. He looked like an El Greco painting. There were only three incidents I could have complained of—one other rudeness, and the attempt to search the bodies of the prisoners for food smuggled in.

Two of the youngest pickets perpetrated a bit of mischief when a woman guard attempted to search a striker. They dumped a paper bag of small frogs at the feet of the guard. They were getting even, they said, because she called them “dirty Mexicans.” Today I had interesting conversations with Jo von Gottfried, a teacher of rhetoric in Berkeley, a great lover of St. Thomas and St. Augustine. I tried to understand what “rhetoric” really means and she explained, but I cannot now remember.

August 8. Today Joan Baez, her mother and Daniel Ellsberg visited us. She sang to us and the other prisoners in the yard. There was a most poignant prison song. Her voice, her complete control of it, is remarkable. It tore at your heart. A dramatic song. She was singing when other prisoners were being brought to the dining room, and she turned her back to us and sang to all of them directly, as they stopped their line to listen.

Daniel Ellsberg said Cesar Chavez, the thought of him, had given him courage during his two-year ordeal in the courts.

August 9. I'm all mixed up in my dates. Dr. Evan Thomas came today, 91 and tall, lean, strong looking. God bless him. And Father Don Hessler whom we've known since he was a seminarian at Maryknoll. He suffered years of imprisonment under the Japanese in WW II. After years in Yucatan and Mexico, he now is working in San Antonio with Bishop Flores. He brought with him 4 sisters who belong to Las Hermanas, the national organization of Spanish-speaking sisters. Gerry Sherry of the **San Francisco Monitor** came for an interview. The Catholic Worker has known him many years, in Atlanta, Fresno and San Francisco.

August 11. Good talks with Sister Felicia and with Sister Timothy of Barracks B who are good spokeswomen for our groups. Two blacks representing **Newsweek** called. They were interested in "the religious slant" of the strike. Greg Howard, photographer, was from Princeton, Thurman White from Stanford.

August 12. Union lawyers visiting us say we'll be free tomorrow. A peaceful Sunday. Mass in the evening. Today the Mexican girls were singing and clapping and teaching the sisters some Mexican dancing. They reminded me of St. Teresa of Avila with her castanets at recreation.

All our praying seemed to bring about some results. Mr. Fitzsimmons, president of Teamsters, canceled or disavowed the contracts signed by another Teamster leader in Delano. He demoted or took some action on the leader who signed them. We really know little. We do know the power of prayer, however.

August 13. We packed our bags last night and a first bus load, me too, left our farm labor camp this morning, reached the jail and were turned back! Then we spent hours in the "rec" hall where a team of "public defenders" whom we were supposed to have seen Sunday, sat around (perhaps I saw **one** working) while Sister Felicia interviewed all the women in our barracks for the rest of the day and filled out forms which the judge required.

In the evening we finally all were again loaded in vans and brought to Fresno where we, with a great crowd in the park in front of the courthouse, celebrated Mass.

Jan, Chris and Joan were waiting to greet me from the St. Martin de Porres House which is in San Francisco. Cesar Chavez welcomed us all and Helen Chavez and three of her daughters, young and beautiful all of them, were there. A meeting of strikers is scheduled for Friday, so I have time to visit the San Francisco House for two days. (As I am copying these notes from my diary here in the Los Angeles' Ammon Hennacy House some one comes in bringing a newspaper, the **Times**, carrying gigantic headlines, **Teamsters Give Up.**)

Strike Continues

It is August 21 as I write and my entry in my diary of August 12 is this same news the **L.A. Times** presents on August 21, the feast of Pope Pius X. The fact remains that there is still no contract signed by grape growers and Cesar Chavez' union. There have been instead two deaths since, that of Naji Daifullah, an Arab striker from Yemen, Arabia, and of Juan de la Cruz of Delano. We attended the funeral service of Naji at Forty Acres. A mile-long parade of marchers walked the 4 miles in a broiling sun from Delano with black flags, black arm bands and ribbons, and stood through the long service in the broiling sun where psalms from the office of the dead were heard clearly over loud speakers and the words from the book of Wisdom: "In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die but they are at peace." There were Moslem chants, a liturgy with which I am unfamiliar—but it was Arab music. (500 Arabs recently came here from Yemen, Arabia—this land of opportunity—and one has met with death at the hands of a deputy wielding a heavy flashlight which fractured his skull.)

The Mass for Juan de la Cruz was offered by Bishop Arzube of Los Angeles, Spanish-speaking, from Ecuador. Two men have shed their blood, there are no contracts signed as yet, there has been a three-day fast requested by Cesar Chavez, and a renewed zeal in boycotting lettuce and grapes. There is no money left in the treasury of the union, especially after death benefits have been paid to the families of the dead strikers. One of the Mexican girls in jail told me proudly that their \$3.50 dues (comparing them with the Teamsters dues of \$7.50) paid benefits for lives born and lives lost. And there were all the clinics operating at Calexico, Delano, Sanger and other places. The Farm Workers' Union is a community to be proud of, and would that all our unions might become a "community of communities" such as Martin Buber wrote of in his **Paths in Utopia**.

(Sister Katherine, who was a fellow prisoner in Barracks B, is working five days a week – and what long hours!—here at the Ammon Hennacy House, and the soup kitchen and clothing room in Skid Row, and she is so like the sisters who have come to help us in her peace and joy and diligence that I feel marvelously at home. She has typed out this column for me.)

Prayer

I must mention a prayer I wrote in the front of my New Testament, and hope our readers, while they read, say this for the strikers:

Dear Pope John—please, yourself a campesino, watch over the United Farm Workers. Raise up more and more leader-servants throughout the country to stand with Cesar Chavez in this non-violent struggle with Mammon, in all the rural districts of North, and South, in the cotton fields, beet fields, potato fields, in our orchards and vineyards, our orange groves – wherever men, women and children work on the land. Help make a new order wherein justice flourishes, and, as Peter Maurin, himself a peasant, said so simply, “where it is easier to be good.”

Please help, Pope John, these rural workers to repossess the land in co-ops, land trusts, with credit unions, clinics—a proliferation of “the little way” of St. Therese. Help us, Pope John. **Amen.**