

On Pilgrimage - January 1977

Dorothy Day

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Summary: Reminisces about her involvement with the non-violent revolution of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers—boycotts, pickets, jailings, life with the workers, and worship. (DDLW #576).

Peter Maurin used to tell us to study history and so live in the present as to make the future different. That means our own personal history too.

Every year, I determine again to keep a record of my days, and so I have piles of note books and diaries and can look back and say, “Where was I last year. What was happening? Was I trying to make the present different? Trying to see the meanings of the storms and stresses we were passing through?”

Some of our fellow workers were in Washington, D.C. this month; Dan Mauk in jail for chaining himself to the Pentagon door to protest the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and Lee LeCuyer to sleep out with another group in packing boxes, in an endeavor to persuade the city fathers to open up empty housing for the poor.

Farm-Workers

As for me, I recalled the past as I looked over a diary of a few years ago when I spent a peaceful two weeks in a barracks jail outside of Fresno, California. I was there together with a very large group of Mexican women and sisters from many orders who joined the mass picket lines to disobey an injunction against picketing.

The growers have the land, the jobs, and, to some extent, the press, so workers have to resort to such demonstrations to bring the plight of the farm workers to the public. One could write a book about those two weeks. It was not hardship for me or the sisters. It irked me, that we were considered the privileged class, and it was easy enough to realize that the ordinary prisoner suffered far more and in many different ways.

For instance, to have to go to the toilet or shower publicly in a large enclosure makes one realize what the Japanese-Americans suffered in the internment camps in WWII. And what the agricultural workers suffered as a whole in those vast fields of California, with few, very few, portable toilets. People are treated like dogs – like cattle !

There were two pickets shot dead that summer and I walked the long procession at their funerals.

I go on with these “reminiscences.” People like to dismiss these tales of actual experience, using the term “reminisce.” Dorothy Day “reminisced.” Elie Wiesel, in his last book, told of our obligation to keep the memories alive. It is the work of a teacher.

Come to think of it, Doroty Gauchat, who is doing a beautiful work now with brain and body-damaged children, had an experience when she and her husband had just moved out to a farm given them by a generous reader of the **Catholic Worker**. They lived in an old, rebuilt, country schoolhouse, and there were shacks on the place where they took in some migrant Mexican families who had been working in the onion fields of the Midwest. The Gauchats had a cow and shared their milk with these families. One little girl came to the door one morning, and, on getting her milk can filled, said shyly – “My mother had a baby last night!” “And you didn’t call for help?” “She was afraid you’d put her out,” the child said. (From how many places had they been moved along!)

There are migrants and “stay-grants” in New York State and in many states, who raise our vegetables, pick our fruit and have no decent place to live. It is these people – the Farmworkers – whom Cesar Chavez is trying to liberate. It is an ongoing nonviolent revolution, carried on by the ceaseless work of the organizers, the boycott, legislation, and the publicity which draws the young workers to give their strength and energy to the cause. So I must keep writing about it.

Marcel, who contributes in many ways to our well-being at Tivoli, gets movies weekly from the library and shows them in our big living room. Last month, we saw “Grapes of Wrath,” which made me want to weep, so vivid were my memories of the thirties, when I saw with my own eyes the eviction of the sharecroppers from fertile lands in Arkansas and Oklahoma. In many cases it was Northern insurance companies who were taking over, building up what is now termed agri-business.

The first time I saw Cesar Chavez was in a little house in Delano, California. The house was not only an office but also a place where Cesar could lie down because of the trouble he was having with his back. I was struck immediately by his appearance. He reminded me so vividly of Mike Gold, an old friend of mine from the time of my first New York employment on the **New York Call**, the Socialist paper. I was eighteen years old and used to spend a great deal of my time with Mike exploring the streets of the East Side, or sitting at the edge of piers over the East River and talking about life and the miseries of the working classes. Every now and then he would break into a song, whether in Hebrew or Yiddish I do not know. Once in a while he would take me up to his home where his Orthodox mother wore the traditional wig of the Jewish women who cut off their hair at marriage. She used to look at me with great sorrow. All three of her sons, it seemed, were running around with Gentile girls. After we had eaten at her house, she conscientiously broke the dishes that we had eaten from. It would not be kosher to use them again. I was not interested at all in religion at the time and so understood very little about the Orthodox Jews and the grief they felt at the falling away of their children. I did feel, however, the intensity of their religious belief.

In a way I sensed the same intensity in Cesar Chavez. We talked that afternoon about religion and about the poor. We talked about the kibbutzim of Israel, which I had read about in Martin Bubers’ **Paths in Utopia**. Cesar said that he much preferred the moshavim, where a man had his own dwelling and bit of land.

Community

He was interested in community. Certainly, you find it in the United Farmworker movement. There is the Forty Acres, which is a community of homes for the elderly Filipinos, who were imported, as the Chinese and Japanese were imported, for farm labor. They were not allowed to bring their families with them and so women were provided for them by the conscienceless landowners. I actually saw with my own eyes, years before this meeting with Cesar, little rows of houses not bigger than corncribs, where girls sat on the steps and solicited customers. Certainly not half the story was told in Steinbeck's book, **The Grapes of Wrath**. Much of this came back to me as I saw Marcel's movie that night at the farm in Tivoli.

Already a great deal had been written about Cesar when I met him. Already a friendship had developed between him and the Kennedy brothers.

It was Catholicism, in part, that drew them together, and certainly religion plays a large part in Cesar's life. On marches to the State Capitol, joined by thousands of farm workers, the banners of Our Lady of Guadalupe were prominently displayed. There was always a Mass said every morning to begin the march.

On those picket lines which I joined, some years later, the day began, while it was still dark, with a Mass in a public park, with the altar a picnic table. And all around me there were men as well as women who knelt upright for the duration of the worship, their arms outstretched at the consecration. There was always a complete lack of self-consciousness. When there were these mass arrests and we were in jail for two weeks, Cesar sent work to us, during some crisis, that the prayers of those in prison were especially needed, and the Mexican women knelt with the arms outstretched all the while they said the rosary.

For how long a time this strike has been going on! Many would say that it is all but a hopeless cause, but the fact that the growers have had to hire the services of Madison Avenue public relations men shows that the struggle is by no means a hopeless one. Great gains have been made.

Of course Cesar has been maligned, but he had gotten nothing from the struggle himself but the hardship and continued poverty. I witnessed this for myself, since I was a guest in the family home in Delano and slept in their bed while my host and hostess, slept in a pullout bed in the living room. It might have been a four or five room bungalow. The plumbing was certainly inadequate, one or another thing out of order, as is usual in slum housing here in the city. Certainly they are poor. They are in the same condition as the other farm workers.

La Paz

The visit that I enjoyed greatly out there was the one I paid to La Paz, where Cesar's family now lives. It is up in the mountains and used to be a preventorium—that is, a place where the children of families where there was suspicion of t.b. were put to build up their strength. Helen Chavez herself, Cesar's wife, had to spend some time there as a child, and the loneliness was so great, that she was all but forcibly fed, and it was only with great reluctance that she moved from her home in Delano and joined this settlement up in the mountains.

Now there are a lot of families living at La Paz in their separate houses, and there are dormitories where many can be housed when conferences are held to discuss further action. It is a beautiful spot, and while there I had dinner with many of the families who have settled there. There is a credit union for the entire membership of the United Farmworkers, and that in itself calls for the cooperation of the high school students after school.

I had dinner at the U.F.W. New York headquarters, and was happy to see that they had been given a house (or the means to purchase it) – a house as spacious as our own and as well furnished. It is the same in many cities.

The readiness of many to accept any hardship, work long hours, and the prayers of Cesar himself make this the continuing non-violent revolution.

The boycott of Gallo wines, grapes and also of iceberg lettuce is still going on. We ask our readers to observe it. Boycotting is a powerful weapon, and spreading the news by the groups of young people in every city is helping to win acceptance of the union and contracts with the growers.

January 10 – Maryhouse

It is dusk. The windowpanes of my room rattle in the wind as I write. For the last six months, I have lived at Maryfarm, Tivoli, surrounded by beauty but also by hordes, one might say, of people. Because there, too, as in the cities, we are a house of hospitality on the land. Winter as well as summer. My room is more isolated here, so here I am resting for a time.

Dean Mowrer called me this morning, . . . scarcely able to talk with the heavy cold which confines her to her bed. She's in general misery—an infection of the ears which obstructs her hearing, so she does not even have the distraction of her talking books. She cannot get up for the daily Mass we now are privileged to have at our "Farm with a view, nor join with others at Vespers and Compline. She had dragged herself to the phone, which is not far outside her door, just to ask me to explain her absence this month from the columns of the Catholic Worker, and to write in my column about the Christmas party. It was an enormous success this year, thanks to Peggy Scherer's ingenuity. We actually had two "reindeer," bells ringing merrily on their improvised harness, as they galloped into our very large living room, drawing a child's wagon full of toys. The "reindeer" were two beautiful, young, brown goats, brought down from the barn on the hill, and allowing themselves to be guided by Peggy into the crowded room I must apologize for not keeping up with my mail, but will keep on trying to catch up, and, as with this January issue, which you will probably receive in the spring, you will eventually get an answer. So, please forgive us and be assured of our deep gratitude for all the ways our readers are participating in and contributing to our work so generously. (Special thanks to our reader who sent the von Hugel volumes I had mentioned as long lost, strayed or stolen!)