

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Does it make sense to talk about the “Power” of nonviolence?
- Chavez experienced the injustices which surrounded his life on the farms. He read the Bible. He asked some simple questions about what he had experienced and seen. How has food production changed with the globalization of economics?
- Do you think that the concerns of Chavez have now been solved? What are the present day concerns in agriculture as they relate to the farm worker?
- What does the message of Chavez’s life say to you as a young person living in the third millennium?

ACTION

Make a list of everything in your family’s kitchen that comes from a product harvested in a field. Check out the dry good pantry, refrigerator, freezer, snacks etc. Just make an itemized list to which items are grown, harvested and processed in the region, in the state, in the USA, or in a foreign country. Pick one fresh food item (e.g. an orange, apple) and one processed food item (e.g. frozen peas or Cheerios) to make a simple chart mapping out all the people involved from planting, to harvesting, to processing and to arriving in their kitchen. Compare and contrast the wages and living conditions of each level from growing to eating.

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or power.
It is measured in
the legacy
we leave behind
for those we love
and those we inspire.”*
Cesar Chavez

PRAYER

Loving God,

Show me the suffering of the most miserable; So I will know my people’s plight. Free me to pray for others; For you are present in every person. Help me take responsibility for my own life; So that I can be free at last.

Grant me courage to serve others; For in service there is true life.

Give me honesty and patience; So that I can work with other workers.

Let us remember those who have died for justice; For they have given us life.

Help us love even those who hate us; So we can change the world.

AMEN

Justice, Peace & the
Integrity of Creation

Cesar Chavez: A Commitment to Nonviolent Social Change

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PROVINCE OF
SANTA BARBARA



Cesar Chavez: A Commitment to Nonviolent Social Change. By Mark Schroeder, OFM

Though life was difficult for the young Cesar Chavez, his childhood prepared him for a career as a prominent labor organizer and civil rights activist. Chavez was born on a small farm near Yuma, Arizona, on March 31, 1927. When his parents lost their land in the Great Depression, the Chavez family moved to California, living mostly in the San Joaquin Valley. Despite frequent moves and meager living conditions, Chavez managed to reach the seventh grade.

After serving in the Navy for two years during World War II, Chavez settled in San Jose, California, with his wife, Helen, where they worked in the fields and taught parishioners in their Catholic church to read so they could become U.S. citizens. He became active in the Community Service Organization (CSO), a support group for Latinos. From 1952 to 1962, he organized chapters, led voter registration drives, and worked with needy families. In the process, he began to see unionization as an important means for bettering the lot of California's Latino migrant farm workers. In the early 1960s he helped start the National Farm Workers Association (now the United Farm Workers of America) in California's agriculturally rich central valley.

In 1965, the new union joined a strike begun by Filipino workers against grape growers in the region. Chavez led 500 workers on their first strike (what became known as the Great Delano Grape Strike), seeking a \$1.40/hour minimum wage. "La Causa" ("The Cause") and "Viva La Huelga" ("Long live the Strike") began to echo across the U.S. and overseas, as churches, unions, and many others joined in an international boycott of California grapes, wine, and later lettuce. The strike lasted five years. Cesar's famous 25-day fast in 1968 brought purification to the movement, as well as leaders like Robert F. Kennedy and Dorothy Day to his bedside. At the strike's conclusion, 23 local growers had signed a contract with the field workers. For Chavez, the strike signified more than a labor dispute; it was a fight for social justice.

His commitment to nonviolent social change was rooted in the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, St. Francis of Assisi, and Jesus. Chavez advocated nonviolent protest and strict dedication to *La Causa* as he sought the liberation of both his oppressed farm workers and their oppressors. Chavez said, "People think nonviolence is weak and nonmilitant. These are misconceptions that people have because they don't understand what nonviolence means. Nonviolence takes more guts, if I can put it bluntly, than violence."

He died in his sleep in April, 1993, after two days of testimony in a court case supporting farm workers in Arizona. Cesar Chavez was a man proud of his Mexican American heritage. He understood well the history of oppression of Latino people as well as the valiant resistance to that oppression. He remains a living example of the vibrancy and strength of following a path of nonviolence and of dedicating one's life to social change.

Chavez once said, "True wealth is not measured in money or status or power. It is measured in the legacy we leave behind for those we love and those we inspire."

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