

**Religious Education and the Communal Shaping of a Christian Social Consciousness:
The Testimony of César Chávez**

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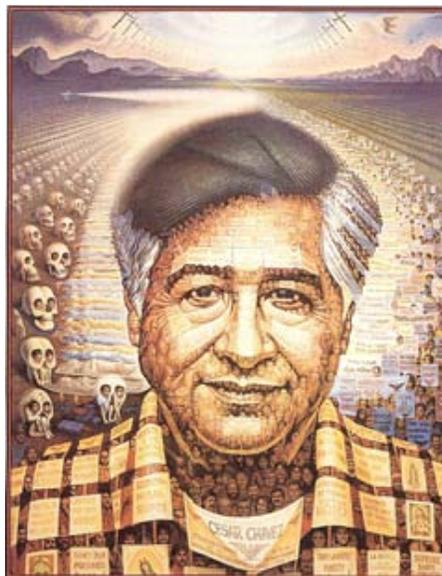
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Abstract. The life of César Chávez and his commitment to justice were deeply shaped by religious education practices and convictions at home and in his community. This paper is a critical exploration of biographical accounts of Chávez as well as collections of his thoughts. The paper examines the pedagogical importance of Catholic practices, stories, and devotions that inspired Chávez's social conscience. His testimony is introduced as a case study to affirm the communal dimension of religious education and the potential of popular Catholicism to shape and sustain social commitments among Christians.

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Cesar Chavez

"Portrait of La Causa" by Octavio Ocampo.

Source: <http://www.library.sfsu.edu/exhibits/cultivating/default.html>

The second part of the twentieth century brought about important social, cultural, and political transformations that deeply impacted life the U.S. society on multiple levels. We are the heirs of those developments. The Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Feminist Movement, and the Anti-War Movement, to name only a few, serve as good examples of what transpired during those decades. The dramatic expansion of horizons as a result of the space exploration, the technological revolution, the computerization of the world, and the emergence of virtual reality dramatically transformed everyday life. The Second Vatican Council, the Ecumenical Movement, and a rapid ethno-cultural transformation of entire regions, due mostly to an increasing Hispanic presence, pushed the Catholic religious imagination to new levels. All of this happened almost simultaneously! Many of these transformations can be categorized as revolutions, since they were in part a reaction to worn out, inadequate, and in some cases untenable models of communal identity and praxis. They could also be analyzed as paradigm changes resulting from critical analysis of present reality in light of a new consciousness. Whether participating in them or resisting them, these transformations demanded a response. No area of life in the U.S. society could have escaped their impact.

In this essay I focus on the testimony of a person who very much helped to shape the spirit of these years. He was not a mere bystander; neither was he indifferent to the larger movements taking place around him. His role in history was defined by his particular socio-historical circumstances. His legacy has implication beyond that particularity. One could easily argue that César Chávez was born at the right moment and in the right place. Reading the many portrayals of his life and character (Cf. La Botz, Levy, Matthiessen,) one realizes that his commitment to *la*

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causa (the cause... for justice) was almost inevitable. He rose up—not knowing exactly what this would entail—to the challenge of becoming one of the most influential social leaders in the history of the United States. For this he drew from what he was most familiar: his Catholic faith and the symbols of his culture.

The first part of the essay describes the influence of certain practices of faith that would profoundly shape the socio-religious conscience of César Chávez. Then I look at how he used the religious symbolism that sustained his own faith as a way to capture the socio-religious imagination of the people he served and to open new perspectives about the meaning of the Christian message in their lives. It is worth noting that both instances of faith formation highlighted here occurred in rather informal ways, yet both achieved key goals that Christian institutions desire for religious education in more formal venues. I then introduce John C. Hammerback and Richard Jensen's model of "reconstitutive discourse" and its potential for religious education and the development of social consciousness. This analysis builds regularly on biographical references. Often Chávez's own words make the argument. It is the only way to fully grasp who he was, the role of faith formation in his life, and what he accomplished. I conclude with a number of implications for religious education.

All Begins at Home

The Judeo-Christian tradition has insisted throughout the centuries that parents are the first educators in the faith. It is in the Christian home where children are supposed to have the first encounter not only with expressions and practices that embody the most basic Christian values, but also where they hear the Good News proclaimed for the first time. For César Chávez the role of family in the process of shaping his Christian identity, as well as his sensibility towards social issues, proved to be central. He was born in 1927 into a Mexican-American family in Arizona. His childhood coincided precisely with the years of the Great Depression. After losing the farm where Librado and Juana, his parents, worked, the family moved to California where they lived and worked in farms. In San Jose the family settled in a poor neighborhood called *Sal si puedes* (get out if you can).

Chávez grew up in a traditional Mexican-American Catholic family whose faith was sustained largely by practices of popular Catholicism. At the heart of these practices was the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, praying the rosary, and *dichos* (expressions) that captured in simple words the depths of the mystery of God revealed in the everyday. Catholic theologian Virgilio Elizondo insists that these expressions "encase in a tangible capsule the deepest truths, the mysteries, of Christian revelation" (Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*, 32). Such would be the same practices that also sustained the faith and identity of hundreds of thousands of farmworkers whom César would later organize. They served as the glue for some form of communal cohesion that would give a sense of common identity. The neighborhood where they lived did not have a church nearby and the presence of clergy was rather scarce. Neither there was formal catechesis for children: "As we did not have a church in the valley and it was very difficult to go to Yuma, it was my mother who taught us prayers" (Levy, 25).

Faith formation for Chávez took place under the tutelage of his mother and grandmother. This is a reflection of how in the Hispanic culture—as well as in other cultures—women play a central

role in sharing the faith, something that scholars have called *la fe de las abuelas* (the faith of the grandmothers) (Cf. Dalton, 32-37; Garcia, 19). It was his grandmother, Mama Tella, who prepared Chávez and his sister to receive first communion: “After the Rosary she would tell us about a particular saint and drill us in our catechism” (Levy, 26). Juana Chávez would pass on to his children her convictions. She was remembered for her generosity inspired in her own devotions: “My mother was very religious without being fanatic, and she believed in saints as advocates, as lobbyists, to pray to God for her. Her patron saint was St. Eduvigis... a Polish duchess who, in the early Christian era, gave up all her worldly possessions, distributed them among the poor, and became a Christian” (Levy, 25).

The example of the adults at home would complement his faith formation, something that would prove vital for the formation of Chávez’s social consciousness. He regularly observed his mother assisting people who were in need: “On [St. Eduvigis’] birthday, October 16, my mom would find some needy person to help and, until recently, she would always invite people to the house, usually hobos. She would go out purposely to look for someone in need, give him something, and never take anything in return” (Levy, 25). Around the age of 14 Chávez left school to become a farmworker and help his father. In the fields not only he experienced the difficulties of backbreaking work, but the injustices that many farmworkers had to endure, including verbal insults, racial discrimination, poor living conditions, and miserable wages: “There are vivid memories from my childhood—what we had to go through because of low wages and the conditions, basically because there was no union” (Chávez, 1966, 50). Chávez’s father, Librado, joined several attempts to organize unions that tried to organize, unsuccessfully, farmworkers. Many years later Chávez would accomplish what for decades no other leader could in the history of California. Witnessing his father and other coworkers fighting for more justice and better working conditions, Chávez learned that they needed to be together in solidarity: “I remember times when it was a little hard to quit—we needed the money—but we didn’t consider that. Our attitude was, we have to do it, and we accepted it” (cited in García, 86).

Faith Formation as Mentorship

In 1944 César Chávez joined the U.S. Navy for two years. The overall experience was rather negative, “[t]hose two years were the worst of my life” (Levy, 84). Mexican-Americans, African-Americans, Filipinos, and other servicemen of color endured discriminations similar to those they did outside the military (Cf. La Botz, 14-15; Levy, 84-85). During those years he simply confirmed that the status quo of social dynamics in the U.S. society needed to be challenged. He would do so as a labor organizer in California. In 1948 Chávez married Helen Fabela, a Mexican-American he met in Delano. There they would establish themselves as a family working as farmworkers. By 1958 the Chávez’s had eight children.

During the 50’s and 60’s Chávez defined with more clarity his identity as a labor organizer. He also explored more in depth his Catholic identity. The combination of labor organizing strategies with explicit expressions of Catholic religiosity made Chávez approach unique. Even though well-known community organizers and intellectuals of the labor movement like Saul Alinsky capitalized on the value of partnering with faith-based organizations to achieve political goals, Chávez often blurred the lines. I will return to this in the next section.

A turning point for Chávez in the development of his vision for labor organizing was his encounter with the insights of Catholic social teaching on work and justice. In 1952 Chávez had returned to *Sal Si Puedes* where he met Fr. Donald McDonnell. The young priest, about Chávez's age at the time, expanded his vision by inviting him to read about the history of the labor movement, legal decisions affecting farmworkers, the lives of the saints, Ghandi's work in India, and the social encyclicals of the Catholic Church, among other topics. He also used techniques of adult popular education such as images that depicted contrasting realities and invited Chávez to offer critical analysis. Fr. McDonnell served as Chávez's intellectual mentor (Dalton, 48-51; La Botz, 18; Levy, 89-93).

One encyclical that Chávez read with Fr. McDonnell was Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labor) published in 1891. This is considered the first major reflection on Catholic Social Teaching in modern times. *Rerum Novarum* paved the road for many other similar documents that to date amount to a major body of literature inspiring countless initiatives of faith formation as well as pastoral programs. The encyclical also signaled the emergence of a communal social consciousness among Catholics who have gradually embraced—although with much room to grow—more prophetic stances on matters related to injustice (read “structural sin”) in society. The principles that Leo XIII laid out to address the situation of workers in the Industrial Revolution at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe applied well to the reality of farmworkers in California sixty years later. The Pope's recognition that unions are instrumental to improve the life conditions of workers, and that workers should have a right to form them, was something that Chávez would make part of his permanent message (Cf. Dalton, 49). The first issue of the newspaper founded by Chávez and Dolores Huerta in Delano—published from 1964 until about 1975—called *El Malcriado* (the mischievous), directly quotes Leo XIII's encyclical: “wealthy owners and all masters of labor should be mindful of this—that to exercise pressure upon the indigent and the destitute for the sake of gain, and to gather one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine” (*Rerum Novarum*, n. 20). Similar references to Catholic social teaching, God, and other elements of the Christian faith would appear regularly in the paper (cf. Dalton, 98).

What we observe here is a good and effective instance of adult faith formation with three well defined characteristics: First, for Chávez to learn about the labor movement and what the Church said officially about social justice for workers was *personal*. His reading and study was not simply an exercise of intellectual curiosity. It was about his work, his children, his people in the barrio and the fields, and the vision for humanity that, inspired by his own faith, he considered possible. Second, his encounter with until then hidden treasures of Catholic social teaching *empowered* him to be more critical about the presence of sin in society and to denounce practices that were against the presence of God's Reign in history. Third, his faith formation under the guidance of Fr. McDonnell was not circumscribed exclusively to religious resources but expanded his horizons exploring a diverse body of literature, some of it beyond Christianity. This *pluralism* of resources exposed Chávez to voices and ideas that helped him return to his own Catholic faith with renewed commitment. Faith formation for the adult Chávez was personal, empowering, and pluralistic.

Appealing to the Religious Imagination

César Chávez was a practicing Catholic and his piety openly informed his organizing praxis. He attended daily Mass and regularly started his meetings with moments of prayer. His office was usually decorated with images of the saints he admired most. Francis of Assisi, whose commitment to poverty and peace was a true source of inspiration for Chávez (cf. García, 46). St. Martin de Porres, who is highly revered by Mexican-American, Mexican, and many other Latin American Catholics for his service to Black slaves. Our Lady of Guadalupe, an omnipresent symbol of faith and identity for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Spencer Bennett notes that it “was out of his religious background and his experience with the poor that Chávez forged the strategic and symbolic elements that would come to represent the United Farm Workers” (Bennett, 158). Most farmworkers shared Chávez’s faith and did not hesitate to incorporate it into their marches, strikes, and other practices of resistance and labor organization.

There was an inherent pedagogical value in the way Chávez and the United Farm Workers union incorporated religion. One could even argue that on occasions it was catechetical. On occasions Chávez sounded like a preacher quoting Scripture texts, church documents, and making reference to concepts such as Christian salvation (Cf. León, 61) and the public role of the Church in the plight of the farmworkers (Cf. Hammerback and Jensen, 1998, 30-31). Of course, the use of Catholic language and symbolism was not always welcomed or seen as appropriate among some of Chávez’s associates, non-Catholics, and more secular labor organizers (cf. Prouty, 24). Yet Chávez’s intention in appealing to people’s religious imagination was not necessarily to proselytize—even when Catholicism was at the forefront—but to capitalize on the socio-political potential of Christianity. From this perspective, he challenged Catholics to be consistent with the demands for justice born out of their faith: “Finally, in a nutshell, what do we want the Church to do? We don’t ask for more cathedrals. We don’t ask for bigger churches or fine gifts. We ask for its presence with us, beside us, as Christ among us. We ask the Church to *sacrifice with the people* for social change, for justice, and for love of brother” (cited in Dalton, 55, italics in the original; see also Prouty). This made significant sense particularly since many of the growers who opposed any form of unionizing were themselves Catholic and the institutional Church, at the local and national levels, was hesitant to publically support Chávez and the UFW (see Prouty, 31-66). Eventually it did. For Mexican-Americans back then—and for millions of Latinos/as today—the separation of Church and state did not necessarily mean suspension of religious belief and practice in public.

The instances in which Chávez used religious practices, devotions, and references to achieve labor organizing goals were numerous: vigils, masses, prayer services, a makeshift shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe in the back of his old station wagon, images of saints, adopting the official hymn of the *Cursillo* movement, calling martyrs those farmworkers who died at the picket line, naming the headquarters of the union *Nuestra Señora Reina de la Paz*, etc. They creatively captured people’s imagination inviting them to build on the natural connection that ought to exist between faith and life. Two major practices are worth exploring in detail as part of this analysis: pilgrimages and fasts.

As a Catholic, Chávez was very aware of the meaning of pilgrimages and how this practice was dear to Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, many of whom had traveled to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe as pilgrims (cf. García, 96). Chávez did not hesitate to call his marches

pilgrimages: “The pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento [in 1966] has strong religio-cultural overtones. But it was also the pilgrimage of a cultural minority who have suffered from a hostile environment, and a minority who means business” (cited in García, 97). Leading these pilgrimages was usually an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He had learned the value of this when in his early years as a labor organizer a woman asked if she could bring the image to a march. He agreed and immediately witnessed how successful the symbol was in attracting attention and support of people along the way (Levy, 140-141). In the historical memory of Mexicans, Our Lady of Guadalupe was already a source of religious and national pride. The connection was natural. For the farmworkers she was a reminder of the “promise that the poor have a place in God’s plan in their daily struggle for recognition and justice” (Bennett, 159).

Fasting was important for Chávez. His long fasts drew significant attention and were successful in bringing his supporters together as well as achieving the goals that motivated them. Yet, he was also critiqued, sometimes ridiculed (Cf. Levy, 277). Although the purpose of Chávez’s fasts had a strong political undertone, very much like hunger strikes, Chávez maintained that they were above all spiritual exercises. In fact, he emphasized the penitential aspect of his fasts. At the end of a twenty-five day fast in 1968, during the celebration of a Mass attended by Senator Robert F. Kennedy, a statement written by Chávez and read by a priest said: “I undertook this Fast because my heart was filled with grief and pain for the sufferings of the farm workers. The Fast was first for me and then for all of us in this Union. It was a Fast for non-violence and a call to sacrifice” (cited in Dalton, 133). In 1974 after a twenty-four day fast Chávez stated: “The fast was meant as a call to sacrifice for justice and as a reminder and how much suffering there is among farmworkers” (cited in Dalton, 135). Again, in 1988 Chávez undertook a thirty-six day fast—the longest of his life—stating: “I pray to God that this fast will be a preparation for a multitude of simple deeds for justice, carried out by men and women whose hearts are focused on the suffering of the poor and who yearn, with us, for a better world (cited in Dalton, 18-19). The penitential dimension of these fasts naturally connected with the idea of redemptive power of suffering ingrained in the Mexican-American culture, a culture deeply shaped by centuries of Catholic influence (Cf. Hammerback and Jensen, 1998, 40).

Chávez provided a model of re-appropriation of traditional religious symbols and practices with which people were familiar and of recasting their meaning in a different, non-religious context. However, it is important to notice that the symbols and practices did retain their religious meaning all throughout. In many ways this is why they were effective. Chávez and the union leaders affirmed the religious dimension of these symbols and practices while helping people to imagine new possibilities. Our Lady of Guadalupe was not just a mere Marian devotion but the one (divine) presence that led the people under her protection to conditions of justice and liberation (Cf. Bennett, 159), similar to the use of the symbol during the Mexican revolution. Fasting was not just an ascetical practice to discipline the spirit but an expression of penitential solidarity with *el pueblo* (the people) who suffered and a creative way to speak of solidarity in the midst of communal suffering. Our Lady of Guadalupe as a symbol of liberation and fasting as penitential solidarity appealed directly to the socio-cultural and religious imagination of most Mexican-Americans.

Reconstitutive Discourse and the Shaping of a New Social Consciousness

Note to the reader. As of now this essay has exceeded the suggested 3,000 word limit suggested. I will briefly summarize the following two sections and expand on them during the conversation at the meeting in Atlanta. Nonetheless, both sections are formally developed.

The study of César Chávez’s rhetorical career by John C. Hammerback and Richard Jensen (Cf. 1998, 2002) has certainly contributed to a better appreciation of Chávez’s words and style. But perhaps the part of their work that is most helpful for scholars of religious educators is that which focuses on the impact of Chávez’s words and his actions in reconstituting a new identity among the farmworkers he tirelessly served.

Hammerback and Jensen argue that, traditionally, successful speakers have used words to communicate a message well, mostly to persuade. Yet, there is this unique group of rhetors who seek to achieve more than that: they want to transform people’s lives. In many ways that separates good speakers from charismatic leaders. Hammerback and Jensen propose what they called a model of “reconstitutive discourse” (1998, 44-61). Building on the work scholars in the field of communication, Hammerback and Jensen argue that reconstitutive discourse has three parts: “the *first persona*, the person whom the rhetor appears to be in the eyes of the audience; the *substantive message*, which consists primarily of the themes, arguments, and explanations in the texts of the rhetor’s message; and the *second persona*, the auditor depicted implicitly and explicitly by the rhetor” (51).

In the rest of this section, guided by Hammerback and Jensen’s analysis, I provide examples of how Chávez (*the first persona*), uses religious language and symbols that appeal to the religious imagination of Mexican-American farmworkers (*second persona*) aiming at shaping a social consciousness that was rooted in the depths of the Christian tradition (*substantive message*). I conclude the section with a brief reflection on conversion as an aim of religious education and the possibility of using the model of reconstitutive discourse for faith formation.

Implications for Religious Education

I hereby use bullet lines to summarize the key points that bring the essay to a close:

1. Formation of a Christian social consciousness undoubtedly begins at home. Christian parents and other adults at home cannot outsource this responsibility. It is imperative that religious educators offer appropriate guidance and resources for faith formation at home.
2. To fully own the power of Catholic social teaching—and any other body of social teachings inspired by the Christian message—religious educators must help believers, particularly adults, to connect the richness of this tradition to the particularity of their lives.
3. The development of a Christian social consciousness must maintain in tandem the personal and communal dimensions of human experience.
4. Religious educators cannot afford to underestimate the pedagogical power of popular religiosity. The faith of millions of Catholics—and other Christians—in the United States is

sustained by practices and expressions of popular religiosity. For many, popular Catholicism is the only reminder of their Christian identity.

5. Religious education's aim to facilitate conversion must pay attention to how the message is delivered. The model of reconstitutive discourse provides valuable insights for religious educators not to reduce their efforts to mere rhetorical persuasion—without forgoing the validity of this aim—but setting the path for transformation, personal and communal.

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