

Are You An Emissary of Jesus Christ?: Justice, The Catholic Church, and the Chicano Movement

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Introduction

In 1969, Católicos Por La Raza (CPLR) emerged as an ethnic “protest group” against the “injustices” of the American Catholic Church in San Diego and Los Angeles, California. CPLR was critical of the Catholic hierarchy’s inconsistencies in relation to the Chicano community. As one of the wealthiest institutions, the Catholic Church was doing very little for a community that made up the largest part of the Church’s membership. For CPLR, the Christian message of “justice” was not practiced by the leaders of the Church. In Los Angeles, Chicanos were asking why the Archdiocese chose to close a high school in the barrio, due to lack of funds, but could still afford to build a three million dollar cathedral in downtown Los Angeles. In San Diego, Chicanos were asking the Catholic Church to become intimately involved in the everyday struggles of the Chicano community. Within this dialogue emerged a clear concept of “justice” and its meaning for CPLR members in relationship to the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church.

This paper examines the concept of justice and its role in structuring and defining CPLR into an ethnic and political movement in San Diego, California. As an ethnic movement, CPLR helped crystalize an understanding of “Chicano identity” in relation to the Church and the larger dominant community. As a political movement, CPLR forced the American Catholic Church to take a stand on political and economic issues impacting the Chicano community, including the role of the Church in the Farm Workers Movement in California.

The origins of CPLR began with the early union organizing activities of Cesar Chavez. The major goal for Chavez was to acquire equitable wages through collective bargaining legislation and decent working conditions for farm workers. As a faithful Catholic motivated by his religious convictions, Chavez challenged the hierarchy to take a stand on the issue of labor unions for farm

workers. Union activities impacted heavily on the political and ethnic identity of young urban Chicanos.

The 1965 strike in Delano, California, helped spawn an emerging ethnic consciousness for Chicanos within an economic and political milieu. The strike consolidated the Chicano movement within California universities, as the oppressed and exploited rural Mexican farm worker became the symbol of struggle for Chicano(a) college students.

Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association placed sectors of the American Catholic Church in conflict with the farm workers' struggle. Eventually, young urban Chicanos entered into the dialogue and asked why the Catholic Church was not doing more for its own. Out of this conflict emerged CPLR as it assessed the American Catholic Church and its relationship to the Chicano community.

The Origins of CPLR: Delano and the American Catholic Church

On September 8, 1965, some 2,000 Filipino workers, members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AFL-CIO), called a strike against the grape growers in Delano. Eight days later, on September 16, Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) voted to join their co-workers on the picket line.¹

The first three months of the grape strike were without precedent in farm labor history, for no strike had ever continued this long. Each day, roving picket lines of NFWA strikers went to vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley and exhorted workers to join the strike. Eventually some thirty-five farms were involved. The strike had a direct impact on agricultural giants such as DiGiorgio grape vineyards, covering 4,800 acres and Schenley Industries, Inc., with 4,500 acres under cultivation.²

By 1965, it became common knowledge from both the clergy and the laity that the Roman Catholic Church supported the rights of workers to unionize through Pope Leo XII's encyclical: *The Rerum Novarum*. However, once these teachings were put into practice, conflict arose from within the hierarchy.

From the very beginning, two priests from Sacramento, Fathers Keith Kenny and Arnold Meagher, joined the picket lines in Delano. Both men were prominent priest-directors of Cursillo movements in their diocese.³ Their actions caused loud protest from local Catholic leaders and Catholic growers. They were labeled "outside agitators" by growers who wrote and telephoned chancery offices. The Catholic hierarchy responded by suspending both Kenny and Meagher from priestly duties, and they were enjoined to refrain from making any statements or associating with any persons connected with the strike.⁴ This came as a disappointment to the strikers who assumed the Church would practice what it preached.

In direct defiance of their clerical superiors, other clerics lent their support to Chavez. Father James L. Vizzard, S.J., Executive Secretary of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, who formed part of the "Committee of Religious Concern," visited Delano in December 1965. Comprised of eleven

nationally prominent church representatives, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, the group called upon the strikers to continue their walkout until “. . . their just demands were recognized.”⁵ In addition, they asked Governor Brown of California and the State Legislature to pass legislation ensuring the right of collective bargaining. Finally, they urged President Johnson and Congress “. . . to enact Federal legislation extending the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act so that it included agricultural workers.”⁶

As with the early unionization efforts during the Bracero Program, Father Vizzard understood the intimate relationship between the Catholic grower and the actions of the American Catholic hierarchy. As he stated:

Church authorities often are frozen with fear that if they take a stand with the workers the growers will punish them in the pocketbook. . . . Church institutions do not exist for their own sake. Nor does the Church itself exist solely for the comfortable, affluent, and powerful who support those institutions. Christ had a word to say about the shepherd, who, out of fear and because the sheep weren't his, abandoned the sheep when they were under attack.⁷

Such statements brought dissension within the hierarchy, as voiced by Bishop A.J. Willinger of the Monterey/Fresno Diocese. Through his diocesan newspaper, the Bishop sought to minimize Vizzard's insights into the problem, as he wrote:

There is an old saying, “if you don't blow your own horn, who is there to blow it for you?” One of the horn blowers of the day is the Reverend James L. Vizzard, S.J. His participation in the dispute at Delano was an act of unadulterated disobedience, insubordination, and a breach of office.⁸

With clerics divided on the strike issue, and in an effort to breathe new life into the strike, the next strategy for the union was to boycott. The NFWA began promotion of a nationwide boycott of Schenley liquors. Within a few weeks, they had boycott centers in sixty-four cities, with the greatest success in Los Angeles and New York.⁹

The boycott of Schenley Industries led to secondary boycott strategies. A secondary boycott occurs when three parties are involved. Thus, the strike went beyond the farm workers and the growers and included the seller of the grapes. Schenley Industries charged that secondary boycotts were illegal. The National Labor Relations Board ruled in favor of the strikers. It ruled that the NFWA was not bound by the guidelines of the National Labor Relations Act. As of December, 1965, the secondary boycott would prove to be the farm workers' most effective tool against California growers.

The next step for farm workers was to make their cause known to the people of the United States. Their plight was dramatized in April 1966, close to Easter, with a 25-day, 300-mile march from Delano to the state capitol in Sacramento, California. Carrying a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and singing the

religious hymn “De Colores,” the marchers were joined by numerous clergy and seminarians from California. The march went into numerous communities, rallies were held, and the message of the strike and the Schenley boycott repeated. As a result of a march that attracted mass media coverage and national attention, Schenley Industries was persuaded to negotiate with the farm workers. The first contract was signed with Schenley in June, 1966.¹⁰

The next opponent for NFWA was the huge DiGiorgio Corporation. The boycott meant going against all DiGiorgio wine products and the affiliated S & W brand foods. A major obstacle in the strike was the difficulty of recruiting union members. The DiGiorgio Corporation forbid NFWA representatives from entering its property to organize. Three female NFWA members devised a plan to overcome this obstacle. A religious shrine consisting of a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe with candles and flowers was set on the back of a pickup truck and parked outside the DiGiorgio property for two months. People were invited there to hear Mass. A 24-hour vigil was kept at the shrine, and many of the DiGiorgio workers stopped to pray. In the process, the workers were asked to join the strike, and several workers were successfully recruited.¹¹

In June of 1966, the DiGiorgio corporation announced its commitment to unions. The company would allow workers to vote for collective bargaining rights. DiGiorgio invited the powerful Teamsters Union to organize the workers. In collusion with DiGiorgio, the Teamsters opposed NFWA and bid to represent the workers. Election day was set by DiGiorgio, without consulting with representatives of NFWA. NFWA boycotted the election and urged its members not to vote. Out of 732 eligible voters, 385 voted, and 281 voters specified they wanted the Teamsters as their union agent. The NFWA immediately branded the election fraudulent.¹²

A second election was scheduled for August 30, 1966. Some weeks before the strike vote, Chavez became aware that the DiGiorgio campaign had drained the union’s financial resources. As a result, Chavez merged the NFWA and AWOC into a new organization known as the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). In the election, the UFWOC clearly won a majority of the votes, resulting in the withdrawal of the Teamsters.¹³ A few months after the election, UFWOC signed a contract with the DiGiorgio Corporation. Within a year, eleven more contracts were signed with the major wine/grape growers of the San Joaquin Valley. In all, 8,500 workers were covered.

The signing of the DiGiorgio contract proved to be a significant event that galvanized farm workers in their efforts to unionize. After a five-year battle with grape growers of the San Joaquin and Coachella Valleys ensued, in June of 1970, with American Catholic bishops serving as mediators, Coachella Valley growers agreed to sign contracts, followed by growers in the San Joaquin Valley.

It was not until additional strikes, boycotts, fasts, and the deaths of farm workers,¹⁴ that the California state legislature in May of 1975 offered collective bargaining legislation for California farm workers.¹⁵ After years of struggle, Chavez and the United Farm Workers finally tasted the fruits of their labor. Throughout this struggle, the Catholic hierarchy did not take a stand on the rights

of farm workers to organize, even though a Catholic encyclical supported the rights of farm workers. In 1973 the American Catholic Church extended its support to California farm workers, as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops presented a farm labor resolution stating their support for free secret ballot elections. Each Catholic Bishop could offer his own interpretation of farm workers' rights within his own diocese that differed from the majority. This occurred in several dioceses throughout California.

A major theme to emerge out of the farm workers' struggle was an ethnic movement in search of political power to combat social injustices. The 1965 strike in Delano underscored the unique historical experience of Chicanos as described by Chavez:

It is clearly evident that our path travels through a valley well known to all Mexican farmworkers . . . because along this very same road, in this very same valley the Mexican race has sacrificed itself for the last hundred years . . . Now we will suffer for the purpose of ending the poverty, the misery, and the injustice, with the hope that our children will not be exploited as we have been . . . The majority of the people on our Pilgrimage are of Mexican descent, but the triumph of our race depends on a national association of all farmworkers. . . .¹⁶

As an oppressed and exploited group, Chicano farm workers sought to acquire the "tools" for political power in order to redress the subordinate status of farm workers. This understanding had a major impact on urban Chicano students.

In 1966, Chicano college students responded to the call for "social justice" in the fields. Many went to Delano to work with farm workers, and others began Huelga committees on their college campuses. According to Gustavo Segade,¹⁷ this marked the beginning of the Chicano movement. By 1967, student organizations such as Mecha and Mayo emerged with their own "ethnic agenda" that underscored a Chicano self-awareness and self-determination in the examination of dominant social institutions and their relationship to the Chicano community. Included in this analysis was a close examination of the American Catholic Church and its role in the Chicano community, out of which Católicos Por La Raza emerged.

The Emergence of Católicos Por La Raza in San Diego, California

The decade of the sixties introduced two new bishops into the Catholic diocese of San Diego. In September of 1963, Bishop Francis Furey was installed as Apostolic Administrator to the diocese and became bishop in March, 1966, upon the death of Bishop Buddy. Bishop Furey remained for only a short period. In June of 1969, he became Archbishop of San Antonio, Texas. As a result, Bishop Leo T. Maher became bishop of San Diego in August of 1969.

In 1969, Chicanos accounted for 50% of the 381,033 Catholic population in the San Diego Diocese.¹⁸ Out of the 160 parishes which comprised the diocese,

120 were listed as target parishes located in low-income and minority sectors of the diocese. Thus, the Church had ample opportunity to exercise its role as the servant of the poor.

However, poor Chicanos did not feel that their needs were being met. As a result, organized groups of Chicanos in the San Diego area came together at the Chicano Federation¹⁹ to bring their needs to the attention of the Church. While these needs included ministering to their spiritual and religious welfare, Chicano activists were more concerned that the Church should be involved in their social, educational, and economic development. The Federation approached Bishop Furey and requested that he establish a special office to specifically deal with and render services to oppressed minority groups. Two meetings were arranged between the Bishop and the Chicano Federation.

In addition, Father Raymond Moore, a member of the Diocese Social Action Committee, conducted a survey documenting the needs and number of the Spanish-speaking Catholic population in the diocese. A major accomplishment by Bishop Furey during his brief tenure as bishop was bringing about the formation of a senate of diocesan priests, whose role was to help and counsel on the issues affecting the diocese.²⁰ The facts derived from this survey, and the Chicano Federation's proposal for the establishment of an ethnic office, were endorsed by the Priests' Senate. The Priests' Senate petitioned the Bishop with a list of eight recommendations:

1. Establish the Ethnic Office proposed by the Priests' Senate of San Diego as a diocesan office.
2. Appoint a *native Mexican American* priest to head the Ethnic Office and he be free of all other responsibilities which could hinder him from devoting full attention to his work for minority groups.
3. Authorize and support this priest and his collaborators to preach in Diocesan Parishes with a two-fold aim in mind:
 - a) To educate the majority community in the needs, problems, and injustices suffered by minorities in the Diocese.
 - b) To appeal to these congregations for the financial and moral support for minorities.
4. Direct the University of San Diego to recruit and educate by providing financial and scholastic assistance to potential college students from underprivileged minority group families other than those already aided by federally funded programs at USD.
5. Immediately establish Chicano Studies in our entire Catholic school system.
6. Arrange for a weekly column and articles of interest to better educate the Anglo and the Spanish-speaking community. These articles are to be bilingual.
7. Abolish all national parishes in the diocese of San Diego.

8. Support the aims and goals of the Chicano Federation of San Diego, and the organizations therein and the Chicano community they represent.²¹

On August 1, 1969, Bishop Furey established the Diocesan Office of Ethnic Affairs (OEA). Father Patrick H. Guillen, a Chicano priest from San Salvador Church in Colton, California, was appointed director and given a budget of \$30,000 to staff and administer the office with an additional \$30,000 in ready reserve.²²

In the following months various organizational and planning meetings occurred. A Steering Committee made up of Chicano laymen, (Jose Becerra, Henri Jacot, Steve Moreno, and Pete Chacon) met with Father Guillen to work with the OEA until an Advisory Committee representing the entire diocese could be formed. They tentatively agreed that the OEA should be located at the State Service Center in San Diego because of the proximity of agencies serving the minorities there and for other economic reasons.²³ The committee was directed to investigate and discuss which area of concern (i.e., education, employment, housing, etc.) should be the primary focus of the OEA.

The Office of Ethnic Affairs' official existence was to serve as a channel of communication for breaking down racial or ethnic barriers among the people of the Diocese. It was entrusted with the responsibility of, in general, educating and informing both the clergy and the laity of the problems, aspirations, and needs of minority groups in the Diocese.²⁴ More specifically, the OEA held the goal of working toward improving the material status of the impoverished. This goal was to be accomplished by the Church itself initiating programs of social action, as well as by the existing governmental and grassroots or private programs.

In a letter to the diocesan administrator, Father Guillen outlined some of the intended operations of the Office:

The bulk of the work will be at the parish level, in conjunction with the priests of the area; and with other agencies, organizations and institutions. One of the chief target areas will be education and we will serve as coordinator for the Chicano Federation and the University and the parochial school system in promoting scholarships and tutorial programs dealing in Chicano history and other needed courses. Our office will coordinate with the probation and parole agencies and chaplains of the correctional institutions in providing a bridge between the institution and the parish and/or society. Another aspect of our program will be in securing minority membership in youth groups such as CYO, Legion of Catholic Action and Newman Clubs, and in developing both spiritually and socially oriented programs, such as retreat programs, the Cursillo movement, and also, social action programs, where the role of charity will be stimulated. We have, as a long range plan, to work toward the establishment of parish

councils, which would initiate programs dealing with ethnic groups and human relations, and inter-parish social action programs.²⁵

The administrative structure of the OEA included the diocesan director, a secretarial staff, and lay and religious personnel at the local and the diocesan level, who acted as liaisons between the Church and the community to coordinate and set up OEA sponsored programs. The office was supported by a grant from the diocese. Father Guillen's salary and travel expenses were met by the Diocese and not drawn from the grant funding the operating expenses of the OEA. Private foundations as well as governmental sources of funding were considered possible sources of future funding to augment the annual diocesan support.

The Office was accountable to: 1) the Senate of Priests, 2) the laity, and 3) the bishop. The office maintained its own autonomy. It was free to take official views on appropriate issues and to work at its own discretion with any organization.²⁶

The creation and formation of the OEA office represents an openness on behalf of a bishop who actively promoted lay involvement in his diocese. The times were ripe for the Chicano Catholic community to exert their presence in the church. Chicanos were forcing the Church to become more involved in the everyday struggles of people in the barrio who for the most part were Catholic. At the worst, Chicanos felt that they had been neglected and, at the least, taken for granted. They were beginning to ask: "Is the institutional Church Christian, or is it just another paternalistic white racist institution?"²⁷ The Church was viewed as an obstacle to the Chicano struggle for social, political, and economic independence.²⁸ Chicanos were asking the Church to redistribute its concentrated wealth and to appoint Chicano clergy in positions of power within the Catholic hierarchy.

As one of the wealthiest institutions, the Catholic Church was relegating poor Chicanos to a second class position of servitude:

The Catholic Church through its paternalistic attitude has been milking the Mexican American barrio since the day of the conquistadors. They have continually held out their hand in the name of God and asked for contributions but have not invested in solving the problems of the barrio.²⁹

A clear sign of progress for Chicanos in the American Catholic Church was the integration of Chicano clergy and laity in positions of authority beyond the local Church and over non-Chicano Catholics. Hence, the Chicano community was asking for the immediate appointment of indigenous Spanish-surname clergy to the American Catholic hierarchy.³⁰

It was justice that Chicanos were demanding from the Catholic Church, meaning the involvement of the church's institutional wealth and power in areas affecting Chicanos, such as the farm workers' struggle. For Chicanos, the Church's apathy toward the farm workers' struggle was racist:

The present silence of the Catholic Church on the farm workers, a contemporary version of slavery, can only be defined as non-commitment and racism.³¹

Therefore, the role of the Church as prescribed in the Chicano community was to:

. . . apply pressure directly or indirectly to introduce and support legislation which will benefit the well being of Mexican Americans who need better living wages, better health and housing conditions and collective bargaining power.³²

Chicanos were challenging a church which promoted itself as a servant church, that is, a church of the people, to practice what it preached. In their eyes, "true Christianity" demanded that the institutional power and wealth of the Church be brought to bear in solving the current Chicano urban and rural crisis.³³

Among the different service programs which the OEA offered in response to this challenge was a plan for minority leadership training. A Seminar Planning Committee planned a leadership conference for Chicanos to be held at Camp Oliver in Descanso, California. The hoped-for outcome of the seminar according to one of the lay committee members was to be increased unity and better communication among Chicanos.³⁴ Father Guillen, through the OEA, arranged the accommodations and financed the weekend conference held November 28-30, 1969.

The conference was announced as a "junta" aimed at self-evaluation of the Chicano Movement by Chicanos. A flyer, released by the Comité de la Raza Unida Para El Progreso, announcing the conference declared:

If the Chicano Movement is to be representative of an effort by the Chicano community, for Chicanos, we the community are going to have to honestly evaluate ourselves, our commitment, as well as our collective goals as Chicanos. To affect any progress we have to exert ourselves as a community. Appropriately our first test and triumphs will be this junta.

This junta is being planned to encourage open and frank discussion and exchanges to bring this (i.e., frustrations, despair, anger) out into the open because we believe that this turmoil, if kept within, will eventually create a permanent division in the Chicano community which would certainly devour La Causa. If we are honest, sincere in our commitments and goals as true Chicanos we must take this giant step towards unity. Unity in Thought. Unity in Action, and Unity in Progress.³⁵

The site of the conference was Camp Oliver, a youth camp owned and operated by the Sisters of Social Service, located about thirty miles east of San Diego. As the conference evolved, numerous participants decided to coalesce—as Católicos Por La Raza (CPLR)—in their commitment to the Chicano movement and in their determination to make the Catholic Church accountable to Chicanos. According to one participant, college administrators and community organizers made up the bulk of individuals who decided to "liberate the camp."³⁶

As a result, six young Chicano students (five men, and one woman) decided to seize the main building at Camp Oliver, on Sunday, November 30, 1969, and issued a statement renaming the camp Campo Cultural de La Raza.³⁷ The takeover was deemed valid by the Chicano Catholics because they felt "the Church is the people and therefore all the resources and properties belong to the people."³⁸ They calculated that with at least one million Chicanos in the Southwest attending Church each Sunday and with each contributing one dollar, the Catholic Church would stand to reap a million dollars per Sunday from Chicanos alone.³⁹ It was this type of gross injustice and insensitivity, not the Church, per se, which CPLR wanted to attack. They asserted:

We do not attack the Church's theological concepts or Church teaching concerning the spiritual welfare of the people. However, we do assert that the Church has failed in its worldly responsibility.⁴⁰

A statement of their grievances and a list of demands (the original eleven demands were expanded to the thirteen listed below) were sent to the bishop. The *Católicos Por La Raza* demanded:

1. The possession of Camp Oliver and its transfer of title immediately to the Centro Cultural de La Raza.
2. That the Catholic Church, via the Order of the Sisters of the Social Service, continue to pay the upkeep costs of the Camps, including caretaker services, and that from now on the caretakers be Chicanos.
3. That the Catholic Church immediately cease exploitation practices of the Chicano community as manifested by employment at Camp Oliver of Chicanos at wages of \$3.00 per day and the exploitative employment practices of Chicanos at other institutions.
4. That a rider be included in all legal transactions that the Catholic Church is not absolved of other responsibilities due the Chicano population, and that the transferring of Camp Oliver to Chicanos be only the beginning step for future community control of its lands and other properties.
5. That the schools run by the different orders of Priests and Nuns as well as the Catholic Church will announce:
 - a. Open enrollment for all Chicano children.
 - b. Free textbooks to all Chicano children enrolled in its schools.
 - c. Free uniforms to all Chicano children enrolled in its schools.
 - d. That immediate steps be taken for Catholic schools, at all levels, to begin to plan for community control and that a time table be jointly prepared in which this can be implemented.
6. That the Catholic Youth Organization, CYO, respond to the needs of the Barrio residents particularly those who are socially

and economically discriminated and that this organization immediately orient itself to social action work.

7. That the Catholic hospitals provide free medical and free hospitalization services to Chicano families and individuals who can pay some fees for the above mentioned services.
8. That the Catholic Church immediately release monies to develop controlled development corporation to initiate:
 - a. cooperatives
 - b. credit
 - c. housing projects
 - d. communication enterprises such as radio stations
9. That Burial Service be given free to Chicanos that are not economically viable due to Institutional Racism.
10. That Chicano laymen and priests be considered for top decision-making positions of present and future programs started by the Church.
11. That socially-oriented priests be jointly selected by the community and the Bishop for hierarchial positions, e.g., Monsignor and Auxiliary Bishops.
12. That the Catholic Church come out publicly in support of the Delano Grape Boycott and that it begin an active campaign to support the efforts of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.
13. That the Catholic Church immediately fund the Drug Abuse project for the rehabilitation of addicts as developed by Henry Collins, member of the Chicano Community.⁴¹

On Monday, December 1, 1969, when the activists refused to vacate the premises, the local sheriff was called to order them to leave. Six CPLR activists were arrested. However, no charges were pressed against the six and they were released within several hours. A call went out to the Chicano community to support the CPLR. Chicano students responded, and for over a week protests were held in front of Bishop Leo Maher's office, at the Chancery, on the campus of the University of San Diego, at the Bishop's home in Mission Hills, and on the outskirts of Camp Oliver. Chicano student organizations (MECHA-MAYA), in particular the group at San Diego State University, were instrumental in organizing and mobilizing groups of people.

Immediately, public statements were made by the Bishop and the Chicano community. There was little cooperation from either side. Chicanos asked Bishop Maher to attend a meeting at Camp Oliver, but he refused. The Bishop asked to meet with a small group, representative of the Chicano community, but they refused. The Bishop was able to meet with a group of "friendly Spanish-

speaking people” out of which he announced the formation of an advisory committee of lay citizens, from the diocesan office of Ethnic Affairs, representing all ethnic and minority groups in the diocese. In addition, the Bishop announced the possibility of creating a Mexican American cultural center at the University of San Diego.⁴²

At first, the Catholic hierarchy in San Diego denounced CPLR as “militants” and referred to the thirteen demands as “illogical.” The local hierarchy announced that CPLR had “no real direction” and that they were going to meet with the only legitimate voice of the Chicano community—the Chicano Federation. But when the leadership from the Federation announced their support for CPLR and directed the Bishop to meet with representatives of CPLR, the Bishop had no choice but to meet with them.⁴³

As a result, Bishop Maher, accompanied by his secretary Father Roger Lechner, met with students at the Catholic Newman Center on the campus of San Diego State University on December 12, 1969. Present were about 150 Chicano students representing MECHA-MAYA and CPLR. Met with placards and the sound of chanting and clapping, the Bishop informed the group that he was expecting to meet with a small group with which he could sit down and talk.⁴⁴ Suddenly a man in the crowd shouted:

We were freezing our butts off out there [in Descanso] waiting to talk with you. You didn't come! Where were you? Chicanos have slaved for the Church in America. But you've put up idols, you've taken our money, charged us for baptism, communion, and even for the very last event, even for death itself!⁴⁵

The Bishop responded with a \$1 million figure as representative of free medical treatment for San Diego Chicanos at Mercy Clinic, the Catholic hospital in San Diego. The Bishop was then asked: “Are you willing to meet with our committee?” The question was met with silence. The question was repeated: “Will you talk with us?”

The Bishop responded that he would meet with the committee in his office, to which many members of the group cried: “Meet us in the barrio!” “I don't want to meet in the barrio. I have an office,” replied the Bishop.⁴⁶

It was very quiet as a man stepped forward and asked Bishop Maher, “Are you an emissary of Jesus Christ?” “I am,” he replied. “Then I ask you,” continued the man, “did Jesus Christ ask the people to come to him? No! Christ went to them. Come to the barrio!” Within a few minutes a meeting was arranged that evening at Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in the Mexican American community.⁴⁷

At the meeting, CPLR presented the Bishop with their original demands. The Bishop responded with a compilation of what the Roman Catholic diocese of San Diego was doing for the Mexican American Community. He informed the group that the Church was very involved in social action programs through its Office of Ethnic Affairs and Headstart Program. Nothing significant emerged from this meeting.

Approximately two weeks later, on Christmas Eve, a major confrontation emerged once again between Chicanos and the Catholic Church. This time it was

ninety miles north at St. Basil Cathedral in downtown Los Angeles. CPLR in Los Angeles sought to challenge the wealth of the Los Angeles Archdiocese and its insensitivity towards the Chicano community. Gathering at Lafayette Park, 350 Chicanos(as) marched to the steps of St. Basil's Church to perform a prayer vigil. As the service was about to begin, demonstrators attempted to enter the church, only to discover that they had been locked out by the ushers. When a few of the demonstrators gained entrance, they were met by off-duty sheriff deputies who were armed and carrying clubs that were used to expel the demonstrators. There were injuries, and police arrested twenty-one demonstrators, twenty of whom stood trial for disturbing the peace and assaulting police officers.⁴⁸

Although CPLR activities in Los Angeles are beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that there existed a consensus as to the role of the Church in both Chicano communities of Los Angeles and San Diego. There were numerous channels of communication between Chicano students, faculty, and administrators from the various universities in Los Angeles and San Diego. As in San Diego, CPLR in Los Angeles committed itself to one goal:

The return of the Catholic Church to the oppressed Chicano community. In other words, we are demanding that the Catholic Church merely practice what it preaches and that it align itself economically and spiritually with the Chicano movement.⁴⁹

As in San Diego, CPLR in Los Angeles felt that the American Catholic hierarchy must become intimately involved in the farm workers' struggle in Delano. Poor people's struggles such as the farm workers' movement were in need of spiritual advice; for without it "... families crumble, leadership weakens, and hard workers grow tired."⁵⁰ As other issues took precedence for Chicanos in San Diego, Chicano activists began to channel their energies into other social causes. Nonetheless, a new era had begun for Chicano/Mexican American Catholics in the American Catholic Church. The philosophy of self-awareness and self-determination offered by Cesar Chavez and the Chicano movement (1967-72) validated and legitimized the identity of Chicanos as members of the American Catholic Church. It was the starting point for Chicanos gaining access into the Catholic hierarchy.

As a direct result of the Camp Oliver incident in San Diego, El Centro Padre Hidalgo was established by the San Diego Catholic Diocese to serve the Chicano/Mexican American Catholic community in 1972. Under the direction of Father Juan Hurtado, the main function of the center was to provide social service assistance, leadership development, and legal services. The Centro was very effective during its early years of development.

In addition, on April 16, 1974, Msgr. Gilbert Chavez was appointed the new auxiliary bishop of the San Diego Catholic Diocese. Gilbert Chavez was only the second Mexican American bishop elevated to the hierarchy. The appointment of Bishop Chavez came about through a mobilized effort from Mexican American/Chicano Catholics who voiced their desires for a Mexican American bishop.⁵¹

Analysis and Conclusion

From 1965 through 1970, Chicanos were a poor and segmented population with few resources, in search of political and economic power. As a result, symbols were implemented and manipulated through the political process in order to procure political and economic empowerment.⁵² For example, religion played an integral part in the farm workers' movement. Religious symbolism functioned to empower an otherwise powerless group, as exemplified in the famous farm workers march of 1966 to Sacramento, interpreted by some as a lenten penitential procession for which the participants would be rewarded by God. It was an act of faith for the faithful who sought decent wages and adequate working conditions:

In every religious-oriented culture, the pilgrimage has had a place, a trip made with sacrifice and hardship as an expression of penance and of commitment, and often involving a petition to the patron of the pilgrimage [Our Lady of Guadalupe] for some sincerely sought benefit of body and soul.⁵³

These expressions were non-official religious actions and symbols meaningful only within the farm workers' struggle. These religious expressions took on a political and economic character because the American Catholic hierarchy did not officially embrace the ideals of "La Causa" due to their loyalty towards the Catholic growers.

This perspective helped young urban Chicanos formulate their ideas regarding the role of the American Catholic Church in relation to the Mexican American community. One CPLR member at Camp Oliver recalls referring to the now famous article: "The Mexican American and the Church" (1966) by Cesar Chavez, for formulating their thirteen demands.⁵⁴ In addition, CPLR in Los Angeles was also influenced by Chavez and the farm workers' movement. Ricardo Cruz organized CPLR based on his personal religious convictions. As a law student, Cruz was helping organize farm workers in Salinas, California, where he met Cesar Chavez. Chavez was concerned that the Catholic Church had not publicly backed the UFW boycott. Cruz promised to see what he could do to get Church support.⁵⁵ As a result, CPLR challenged the ideals and principles of Roman Catholicism. In essence, they challenged the Church to practice what it preached. As a result, justice for the Chicano community meant a transformation of the institutional church that preached the gospel of the status quo into a prophetic church that demanded economic, political, and social change for Chicanos.

The conflict that emerged between CPLR and the San Diego Catholic diocese did not worsen the relationship between the Mexican American community and the Church—it actually started one. As one individual involved in the conflict states, for the Church:

The Mexicans were the nice little Mexicans leaning on a cactus praying to Guadalupe and they got a big awakening that made them aware they had to do something.⁵⁶

As a result, the Catholic hierarchy has changed and now realizes that the needs of Chicanos can no longer be ignored. After all, they are the largest group within the Church. Since this period, Chicanos have gained entree into the hierarchy of the American Catholic Church, and the hierarchy has recognized the importance of the "Hispanic Presence" in the Church as is echoed in the Bishop's pastoral letter for Hispanics. However, the question remains if this message of "justice" guides Catholic church leaders, or has it been incorporated, redefined, and institutionalized by the American Catholic hierarchy? Whatever the case, it is certain that the actions by Católicos Por La Raza have had a lasting impact on Chicano-church relations.

Notes

¹John Gregory Dunne, *Delano* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1972), chapter 7.

²Jerome B. Ernst, "Worthy of His Hire," *Extension Magazine* 61 (June 1966): 11-15.

³Patrick McNamara, "Dynamics of the Catholic Church: From Pastoral to Social Concerns," in *Mexican American People*, ed. Leo Grebler, et al. (New York: Free Press, 1970), 449-85.

⁴McNamara, 464.

⁵McNamara, 465.

⁶McNamara, 465.

⁷McNamara, 465.

⁸Dunne, 82-83.

⁹Ernst, 12.

¹⁰A few months before the signing of this contract, California's seven bishops, including Bishop Willinger, released a statement on March 16, 1966, laying down the Church's position on farm labor. It called for legislation to bring farm workers under the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Act. They stated: "This act will not only solve the farm labor problem, but it would be the first giant step toward a solution. It is becoming evident that unless farm workers are given the chance to organize, they are going to become wards of the state." Dunne, 83.

¹¹Dunne, chapter 7.

¹²Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 270.

¹³According to McNamara, Father Vizzard was successful in mobilizing nationwide support from the Catholic hierarchy for NFWA and pressuring the Teamsters to withdraw from the DiGiorgio labor dispute. Patrick McNamara, *Bishops, Priests and Prophecy: A Study in the Sociology of Religious Protest* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1968), 143.

¹⁴On August 14, 1973, a UFW striker from Yemen, Dagi Daifullah, 24, died from massive head injuries inflicted by Kern County Deputy Sheriff Gilbert Cooper. Two days later, a young man in a pick-up shot four times into the UFW pickets, killing Juan de la Cruz, 60 years of age. The strikes were protesting the Teamsters signing with Gallo in the San Joaquin Valley. Acuña, 275.

¹⁵The California state legislature passed a bill which included the following provisions: 1) An Agricultural Labor Relations Board would be established to supervise elections. Both seasonal and permanent farm workers would vote at the peak of the harvest season. Elections would occur within one week of the worker's petition for an election. Auxiliary Bishop Roger Mahoney of the Fresno Catholic diocese was appointed chairman by Governor Brown. 2) Secondary boycotts would be restricted to employers refusing to negotiate after the UFW had won the election. 3) The board would recognize one industrial bargaining unit per farm. 4) Workers under Teamsters of UFW contracts could petition for an election which could result in decertification of a union as a bargaining agent and nullification of existing contracts. Acuña, 276.

¹⁶Cesar Chavez, *Basta! La Historia de Nuestra Lucha: Enough! The Tale of Our Struggle* (Delano: Farm Worker Press, 1966), 9, 24, 56.

¹⁷Gustavo Segade, "Identity and Power: An Essay on the Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics in Chicano Thought," *Aztlan* 9 (September 1979): 85-99.

¹⁸"Social Justice: A Challenge to Catholics." Seminar (1969) Office of Ethnic Affairs. Diocesan Ethnic Affairs File. San Diego Catholic Diocese.

¹⁹The Chicano Federation is an organization which began in 1968 out of the felt need of the Chicano community to address issues in a unified and positive manner. It was designed as the advocate structure through which the Chicano community could come together and voice its needs and concerns.

²⁰Bishop Furey was also instrumental in pushing for the formation of parish councils.

²¹Priest Senate Recommendations, July 15, 1969, Diocesan Ethnic Affairs (1969-71) File. San Diego Catholic Archives.

²²"Social Justice: A Challenge to Catholics." Seminar (1969) Office of Ethnic Affairs. Diocesan Ethnic Affairs (1969-71) File. San Diego Catholic Diocese.

²³Pete Chacon, Memo to Church Committee, August 19, 1969, Católicos Por La Raza File. Personal Files of Gus Chavez.

²⁴The Office of Ethnic Affairs, Report to Priests and Religious in The Diocese of San Diego, September 1970, Diocesan Ethnic Affairs (1969-71) File. San Diego Catholic Archives.

²⁵Patrick H. Guillen, Letter to Rev. John Quinn, Diocesan Administrator, August 23, 1969, Diocesan Ethnic Affairs (1969-71) File. San Diego Catholic Archives.

²⁶"Social Justice: A Challenge to Catholics." Seminar (1969) Office of Ethnic Affairs. Diocesan Ethnic Affairs (1969-71) File. San Diego Catholic Archives.

²⁷"The Catholic Church and La Raza," *La Verdad* 1 (November 1969): 4-5.

²⁸*La Verdad*, 4-5.

²⁹*La Verdad*, 4-5.

³⁰*La Verdad*, 4-5.

³¹*La Verdad*, 4-5.

³²*La Verdad*, 4-5.

³³*La Verdad*, 4-5.

³⁴FLYER: Announcement of the Camp Oliver Retreat. Comité De La Raza para El Progreso Chicano. (1 November 1969) Católicos Por La Raza File (1969). San Diego Catholic Archives.

³⁵FLYER: Announcement of the Camp Oliver Retreat. Comité De La Raza Para El Progreso Chicano. (1 November 1969) Católicos Por La Raza File (1969). San Diego Catholic Archives.

³⁶"The Camp Oliver Take Over," *La Verdad* 1 (December 1969): 95-113.

³⁷According to one Chicano activist, the idea of the takeover came from the leadership at the conference. The son of one of the participants was telephoned and asked to gather people and bring them to Camp Oliver. C. de Baca, Vincent, Personal Interview, May 5, 1986.

³⁸Centro Cultural de La Raza, Telegram to Leo T. Maher, Bishop of San Diego, 30 November 1969, Chicanos: Camp Oliver, (1969) San Diego Catholic Archives.

³⁹Centro Cultural de La Raza, Telegram to Leo T. Maher, Bishop of San Diego, 30 November 1969, Chicanos: Camp Oliver, (1969) San Diego Catholic Archives.

⁴⁰Centro Cultural de La Raza, Telegram to Leo T. Maher, Bishop of San Diego, 30 November 1969, Chicanos: Camp Oliver, (1969) San Diego Catholic Archives.

⁴¹Centro Cultural de La Raza, Telegram to Leo T. Maher, Bishop of San Diego, 30 November 1969, Chicanos: Camp Oliver, (1969) San Diego Catholic Archives.

⁴²"Bishop Maher Plans to Meet Chicano Leader on Protest," *San Diego Union* (December 1969).

⁴³"Confrontación Con La Iglesia," *La Verdad* 1 (December 1969): 9.

⁴⁴Francis Hayes, "Chicanos Confront Bishop Maher Here," *Daily Aztec*, 10 December 1969.

⁴⁵Hayes, 1.

⁴⁶Hayes, 1.

⁴⁷Hayes, 1.

⁴⁸David F. Gomez, *Somos Chicanos: Strangers in Our Own Land* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 155-176.

⁴⁹"The Church: The Model of Hypocrisy," *La Verdad* 1 (December 1969): 9.

⁵⁰*La Verdad*, 9.

⁵¹In July of 1978, San Bernardino County was split from the San Diego Catholic Diocese and made into a separate diocese. A protest arose among Mexican American priests and the lay community as Father Philip Straling was named Bishop of the new diocese. The Mexican American community expected Auxiliary Bishop Chavez, who had lived four years in San Bernardino prior to the split, to automatically become the new Bishop. This event in itself is an excellent topic for analysis. Joseph Applegate, "Hispanics: Pick More of Us to be Leaders," *National Catholic Reporter*. 29 September 1978.

⁵²David Kowaleski, "The Protest Uses of Symbolic Politics: The Mobilization Functions of Protesters Symbolic Resources," *Social Science Quarterly* 61 (June 1980): 95-113.

⁵³Ernst, 11-12.

⁵⁴C. de Baca, Vincent, Personal Interview, May 5, 1986.

⁵⁵Lawrence Mosquesda, *Chicanos, Catholicism and Political Ideology* (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1979), 190.

⁵⁶Gustavo V. Segade, Personal Interview, May 14, 1986.