

# Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 28: LETTER TO ARCHBISHOP CONNOLLY FROM CESAR CHAVEZ

2 AUGUST 2015

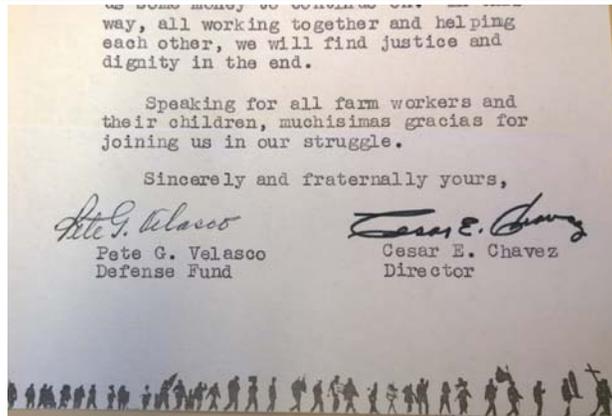
Archbishop Thomas Connolly, who led the Archdiocese of Seattle for more than twenty-five years, was never one to dodge a battle. In the ferment of the late 1960s, he saw it as his responsibility to engage with what was happening in the world. He supported many causes, including the civil rights movement, and he was passionate about the rights of working people. In 1968, he endorsed the grape boycott sponsored by the National Farm Workers Association. The Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle includes Connolly's correspondence with several important figures around this issue—including Cesar Chavez and Ronald Reagan.

The Delano Grape Strike and Boycott began almost exactly fifty years ago, on September 8, 1965, when a group of Filipino Americans working at California farms went on strike. Their wage was about \$1.10 per hour (the national minimum wage was \$1.60). Workers received no health benefits, and working conditions were poor—long days in the fields without access to water or toilets. The striking workers asked Cesar Chavez and his National Farm Workers Association to join them. Chavez did, but with some conditions. One was that Filipino and Mexican American workers would have to work together. He knew that farm owners had often utilized racial divisions to break strikes in the past; if the two groups worked together, they would be stronger. The other condition was that every striker take a vow of nonviolence. Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. were heroes to Chavez, and he felt that nonviolence was both the most effective way forward, and a solemn moral obligation.

Like his heroes, Chavez practiced creative nonviolence. He led a *perigrinacion*, a 300-mile march from Delano to the California state capitol in Sacramento. He combined the strike with an appeal for a nationwide boycott of grapes. He also prayed and fasted for the cause he believed in.

The strike began in 1965, and lasted for five long years. As the strikers persisted in their nonviolent approach, the movement began to gain momentum. While most of the farms were more than a thousand miles away, Archbishop Connolly, a native of San Francisco, felt close to the cause. He also knew that their struggle had implications for those much closer to home, the migrant farm workers who kept Washington's farms going. In the summer of 1968, he threw his considerable weight behind the cause. One of the motivating factors for Connolly was a telegram sent by the governor of California to many political leaders across the country, including Washington's governor Dan Evans, urging them to ignore the boycott.

Connolly was spurred to action. On August 23, he sent a telegram to Governor Evans, urging him to support the boycott and the striking workers, and stating (in the truncated language of



Above: Signatures of Pete Velasco and Cesar Chavez on a letter from the United Farm Workers, thanking Archbishop Connolly for his support. Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

telegrams) “labor practices California Grape Growers illegal and prejudicial to American way of life for thousands farm laborers.”

On the same day, Connolly shot off a message to California's governor, Ronald Reagan: “Regretfully deny and repudiate your telegram addressed Governor Evans State of Washington regarding boycott California table grapes. Sincerely urge you investigate personally claims of farm workers. Allegations grape growers erroneous, false, misleading. Regards. Archbishop Thomas Connolly.”

Connolly did not stop there.

On August 29, he addressed a letter to the pastors of the Archdiocese of Seattle, explaining his support for the striking workers, who were ultimately asking for nothing more than “human dignity.” He urged all pastors to invite their parishioners to join in the grape boycott: “it is a very small sacrifice to make for a good cause, and a punch in the profits has always been the most effective method for getting results from reactionary management.”

In hindsight, Connolly's support for the workers might seem obvious. But support for the farm workers was not necessarily easy. In January of 1969, the University of Washington responded to the pleas of Mexican American students on campus and implemented a campus-wide boycott of California table grapes, only to back down eleven days later under pressure from the campus Young Republicans. In contrast, Connolly held firm. On November 24, he again asked pastors to announce and encourage the boycott: “At this Thanksgiving season and in the coming Advent season, as we think about the plenty which is ours, let us remember the 3 million farm workers in this country who have been poor and outcast for generations. And let us remember the courageous group of California grape workers, led by Cesar Chavez, who endure in their 3 year old struggle to gain justice and a decent wage in the California vineyards.... Let our table decorations, fruit displays, and desserts go without grapes. Urge your friends not to buy or use grapes... for struggling farm workers our sacrifice can mean the start of a new life.”

In the latter part of 1968, Cesar Chavez and Pete Velasco wrote to Connolly to thank him for his support: “Speaking for all farm workers and their children, muchisimas gracias for joining us in our struggle.” The grape boycott would continue for more than a year, but at last, in 1970, the grape growers gave way and, for the first time in history, signed union contracts.

The struggle was far from over, and migrant farm workers continue to face many challenges today. But the grape boycott, begun by Cesar Chavez, and supported by Archbishop Connolly and people across the Archdiocese of Seattle, was a history-making step forward.

Corinna Laughlin, Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy