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César Chávez's Rhetorical Use of Religious Symbols

Joseph Zompetti

César Chávez has been studied and praised as one of the twentieth century's greatest orators. One of his strengths as a rhetor, however, has consistently been overlooked—his use of religious themes and images to identify and reach-out to his audience. This paper analyzes several speeches by Chávez to understand how he used religious themes and images. We find that the religious elements in Chávez's rhetoric signify the use of particular strategies as well as how he embodied religious themes and principles in his everyday life. Keywords: César Chávez, rhetoric, nonviolence, rhetorical strategies.

“The boycott is one of the most powerful weapons that poor people and people who struggle for justice have in this world. It's so powerful because it's really nothing more than the extension of love from one human being to the other. It makes it possible for people in the east coast and in California and in other places, in Texas, in Austin, and all over the world to help one another in a very direct way”

— César Chávez (1971)

It is not surprising that César Chávez is often looked upon as a model for how a single individual can change society for the better. After all, Chávez is credited for creating the United Farm Workers (UFW), a labor organization that has radically improved the lives of migrant workers in many parts of the United States. One of the greatest orators of the twentieth century, Chávez has been viewed as a “quiet persuader” who was able to connect to his audiences even in the absence of formal public speaking training (Stavans, 2000; Taylor, 1975; Yinger, 1975). Former President Bill Clinton even characterized Chávez as a “hero to millions.” (1993, p. 1). Anyone who knows the

story of Chávez should also know that he was one of our great American rhetors.

We may revere Chávez, as others have done, for the successes of the UFW. We would be remiss, however, to ignore the manner by which Chávez was so successful—his uniquely “charismatic” persona that persuaded audiences to be mindful of *La Causa*—in the struggle of the migrant farm workers. Indeed, Chávez’s sincerity and passion in speaking were steadfast. Because he knew his speeches were important to the cause, Chávez’s speeches were as serious and sincere as his life of struggle.

Many scholars, including biographers, have elaborated on Chávez’s rhetorical skills, but they have often overlooked the way Chávez utilized religious images in his public address. To be sure, Chávez was a devout Roman Catholic and his passion for farm workers was grounded, at least in part, in his spiritual beliefs. It seems peculiar, though, that given Chávez’s commitment to struggle and nonviolence that rhetorical scholars have not noticed a larger connection between Chávez’s religious beliefs and his rhetorical strategies. It was widely known that Chávez was influenced by St. Thomas, Aquinas, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Catholic theology. Since Chávez often spoke to Hispanics who, especially in the Southwestern region of the United States, are predominantly a Catholic demographic group, one would expect to see Chávez using religious messages and images in his persuasive strategies.

Assuming Chávez did use religious messages and images in his rhetorical strategies, how did Chávez incorporate such messages and images into his speeches? Were the messages and images important and/or influential? How did the messages and images fit within the larger struggle that Chávez was articulating? In this paper, I address the connection between Chávez’s rhetorical strategies and his use of religious messages and images. I will do this by extending earlier work on Chávez’s use of rhetorical strategies. By engaging in a close textual analysis of some of Chávez’s rhetorical acts, I will identify his rhetorical strategies and then examine the use of any religious messages

and/or images. In the end, we will have a better understanding of Chávez's public address and his use of religious messages and images as important elements in the rhetorical process.

Speeches from 1966 through late 1970 offer an important snapshot of the larger rhetorical picture of Chávez. This time period reflects a point when Chávez formed the UFWOC (United Farm Workers Organizing Committee) and participated in three key boycotts/strikes. Related to these boycotts and strikes, Chávez—along with the UFW—also faced challenges from the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO. According to some scholars, this moment in time also marks the key period when the Chicano liberation movement as a whole was gaining momentum and strength (Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 76; Segade, 1979, p. 85). Finally, the time period between 1966 and 1970 also marks a moment when Chávez was becoming both a nationally respected and despised leader. Attention to him grew as he simultaneously attracted support and hostility. Given this dynamic, it is important to understand and study Chávez's rhetoric to multiple audiences. We know, for example, that it was his "ability to appeal to a broad audience, to reach 'the *campesino* and college student alike,'" that demonstrated Chávez's commitment to the rhetorical situation (Hammerback, Jensen & Gutierrez, 1985, p. 36). However, we do not have a clear understanding for how Chávez addressed certain audiences. In this paper, I will look at how Chávez's use of religious themes and images helped him identify with particular audience groups.

After 1966, the UFW became the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), but for simplicity I will refer to the post-1966 farm workers as the UFW. With help from the AFL-CIO, Chávez and the UFW unanimously won the election to represent the Di Giorgio workers. As a result of that election, the UFW secured the first-ever collective bargaining arrangement and health plan for farm workers.

Chávez and the UFW

Over the years, the UFW continued to represent farm workers and fought to acquire higher wages, better working conditions,

and other benefits for farm workers. The UFW engaged in many serious strikes, boycotts, pickets, marches and other activities against growers such as the Christian Brothers, the Giumarra Corporation, and Gallo. The UFW also boycotted grocery store chains such as Safeway, lobbied Congress for pesticide legislation, and conducted campaigns for produce such as peaches, lettuce, melons, nuts, strawberries, and of course grapes. They also fought for social-based policies, such as anti-poverty programs. In fact, since Chávez and the UFW worked to establish day care, a credit union, cooperatives, housing projects, schools and other important facilities in the community, it can be said that the UFW was not just a union, but actually an entire social movement (Casper, 1984, p. 4; Segade, 1979, p. 86) As Shaw (1983) argues, the struggle "was even more than a battle for politico-economic power, it was a socio-cultural revolution, because it placed emphasis upon social services, land reform, and community development projects" (p. 196). As the union grew, however, its purpose remained firm: provide an organized community who can speak on behalf of all farm workers through all necessary but nonviolent means.

Chávez appeared at the forefront of all of these social issues, and he continued to lead the UFW to represent the interests of farm workers. Chávez was determined and committed to action. Reflecting this, Chávez said, "If anybody says, 'Let's do something,' and they're sincere, that interests me. I say, 'Okay, let's do it.' What I can't stand is somebody finding all the reasons they *can't* do something" (quoted in Matthiessen, 1969, p. 239). Additionally, Chávez stressed principles such as self-respect, human dignity, and nonviolence. He spoke out against the Vietnam War, and he reminded people, particularly Mexican-Americans, that their religious and cultural heritages were important influences on their lives. Indeed, Hammerback and Jensen (1980) argue that Chávez "became the most prominent, most revered, and only nationally recognized leader of Mexican-Americans . . . as an instrument for social change" (p. 173).

Primarily because of the action of César Chávez, the farm workers were an integral part to the larger Chicano liberation

struggle. As a key element to the cultural identity of Chicanos, land and working on the land was equated with the struggles of the farm workers. Moreover, since many Mexican-Americans had either been a farm worker at one time or had family members who had worked in the fields, the farm workers received a great deal of support from the Mexican-American community at large (Munoz, 1989, p. 60). As Prago (1973) declares,

Since 1968 he [Chávez] has blossomed into being something more than a leader of farm workers. He spoke out forcefully against the use of poisons, pesticides and other chemicals in the fields. He supported the national strike for peace-in-Vietnam and convinced members of his union that there was more to struggle for [them] than the elementary demands raised in *La Huelga*. *La Huelga* was not only inextricably bound with *La Causa*, but *La Causa* had merged with what may be the new American Revolution (p. 191).

The relationship between Chávez and his predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American followers should not go unnoticed. Of course Chávez was himself a Mexican-American. But one of the most important ways Chávez identified himself and *La Causa* to others was use of Mexican cultural images, particularly images relating to the common religious faith of Catholicism.

Chávez and Religious Themes and Images

When Chávez spoke, one of the strongest cultural characteristics of Mexican-Americans, particularly in the Southwest, was their loyal faith to Roman Catholicism. Chávez, a committed Catholic himself, understood the spiritual and symbolic importance of Catholic faith for Mexican-Americans. It is no coincidence, as a Catholic trying to persuade fellow Catholics, that Chávez frequently engaged in prayer during marches and boycotts, since the "power of his followers' faith was his greatest strength" (Stavans, 2000, p. 73). Just as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had his rhetorical grounding in the African American preacher

tradition, so too did Chávez's rhetorical strength emanate from spiritual and religious origins. We know that concepts of social justice and preferential options for the poor exist in the Roman Catholic tradition, particularly in the so-called "Liberation Theology" movement (Boff, 1987; Chopp, 1986; Gutiérrez, 1988). For Chávez, his drive, struggle and rhetoric all centered on this Catholic tradition. According to Chávez, "my need for religion has deepened. Today I don't think that I could base my will to struggle on cold economics or on some political doctrine. I don't think there would be enough to sustain me. For me the base must be faith" (quoted in Levy, 1975, p. 27).

A case in point was the famous 1966 march to Sacramento. That spring, the UFW, led by Chávez, intended to march to the capital demanding lawmakers to take action against the growers. Beginning with approximately one hundred participants, the march grew with each new town they walked through. In the end, thousands had joined the procession, with thousands more around the country yielding their support to the cause. Chávez, using religious imagery as a form of rhetorical strategy, didn't call the event a "march" but rather a "pilgrimage." The march, which traversed 250 miles in 25 days, was a symbolic testament to the struggle and will of the farm workers, as they engaged in a form of pilgrimage to the capitol (Ferriss & Sandoval, 1997; Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995). The *perigrinación* (pilgrimage) culminated on April 10th, which that year was Easter Sunday. The symbolic parallel of the farm workers' struggle and sacrifice with that of the message of the Catholic period of Lent was no coincidence. Chávez, as well as the farm workers, understood and appreciated the symbolic connection. It gave the pilgrims momentum and purpose, as they walked the 250 miles from Delano to Sacramento (Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995). According to Chávez, the march was a "penance more than anything else—and it was quite a penance, because there was an awful lot of suffering involved in this pilgrimage, a great deal of pain" (quoted in Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 51). Chávez even alluded to the struggle of the pilgrimage in a later speech in Detroit: "we wanted to do penance for those things we

knew we had done wrong in the six or seven months of striking prior to the march, and we wanted to discipline ourselves to the commitment of nonviolence" (Chávez, 1967b).

At the end of the *perigrinación*, Chávez gave a speech, which he entitled "*Perigrinación, Penitencia, y Revolución*," or simply "the Great speech" (Chávez, 1967b). Chávez talked about sacrifice, struggle, and justice. Surrounding him were images of the UFW flag, crosses, the flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the obvious scheduling of the speech on Easter. According to Yinger, these images were extremely powerful to the largely Catholic and Mexican-American audience:

Daily at any of the major shrines of the country, and in particular at the Basilica of the Lady of Guadalupe there arrive pilgrims from all points—some of whom may have long since walked-out the pieces of rubber tire that once served them as soles, and many of whom will walk on their kneed the last mile or so of the pilgrimage. Many of the "pilgrims" of Delano will have walked such pilgrimages themselves in their lives—perhaps as very small children even; and cling to the memory of the day-long marches, the camps at night, streams forded, hills climbed, the sacral aura of the sanctuary and the "fiesta" that followed. But throughout the Spanish speaking world there is another tradition that touches the present march, that of the Lenten penitential processions, where the penitents would march through the streets, often in sack cloth and ashes, some even carrying crosses as a sign of penance for their sins, and as a plea for the mercy of God (Yinger, 1975, p. 106-7).

Accordingly, together the speech and the march produced momentum and excitement among the followers. As Griswold del Castillo and Garcia (1995) explain, the event "generated spirit" (p. 52), which helped the struggling union move forward with energy and enthusiasm.

The pilgrimage on Sacramento had other cultural and religious messages. During the march, as with other marches and

boycotts, the workers carried many crucifixes, a flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the UFW flag which is red and white, representing *Huelga*, or the strike, with a black eagle in the middle to symbolize the Aztec eagle of Tenochtitlan (Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 22; Matthiessen, 1969, pp. 40-41). These flags were used to excite and mobilize the audience. In this way, as Shaw argues, articulation can use "ideas, opinions, and cultural components, such as art, music, dance, etc., which becomes the reservoir from which the [resistance] ideology is drawn" (1983, p. 21). The Virgin of Guadalupe, too, was as much a cultural icon as she was a religious symbol, and Chávez knew this. As he said at LeMoyne College, "the Lady of Guadalupe . . . is the patroness of the Americas . . . the Lady of Guadalupe is as much Mexican as she is Catholic; she is our own, and we can use her how we want to" (Chávez, 1970a). Putting these symbols together with the concept of social justice was important for Chávez. As he described in his speech in Detroit, "the great pilgrimage march links penance with revolution . . . we're not used to thinking of it in this way" (Chávez, 1967b). However, Chávez realized how penance had cultural significance. For example the fast, as an act of sacrifice and penance, had cultural overtones. According to Chávez,

I know it's hard for people who are not Mexican to understand, but this is part of the Mexican culture — the penance, the whole idea of suffering for something, of self-inflicted punishment. It's a tradition of very long standing. In fact, César has often mentioned in speeches that we will not win through violence, we will win through fasting and prayer. (quoted in Levy, 1975, p. 277).

Indeed, on March 11, 1968, Chávez gave a speech which concluded a twenty-five day fast. The fast was primarily aimed at pressuring UFW supporters to remain unwaivering in the nonviolent philosophy. But the fast had another meaning—a meaning that was more symbolic. The fast, and the speech that followed it, demonstrated the significance of penance and struggle. As Chávez declared:

Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons. When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving of our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness [sic], is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man [sic] is to suffer for others. God help us to be men! [sic] (Chávez, quoted in Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, pp. 87-8).

Chávez also noted that the march was “an excellent way of training ourselves to endure the long, long struggle. . . . This was a penance more than anything else—and it was quite a penance, because there was an awful lot of suffering involved in this pilgrimage, a great deal of pain” (Chávez, quoted in Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 51). Of course, this suffering and pain helps tie *La Causa* to the larger Catholic struggle to fight injustice, in the spirit of Christ’s sacrifice for the greater good.

In a later speech, Chávez declared that “[w]e are very strict about fasting. We don’t want it done just for the propaganda. Because, you see, fasting should not be confused with a hunger strike. They’re two different things. Fasting, I think, is the ultimate—is perhaps the best form of discipline, hunger strikes are sometimes confused with fasting” (Chávez, 1969b). The rhetorical power of these religious themes and messages was unparalleled. According to Ferriss and Sandoval, the great fast speech was a “defining moment for the union, one that renewed its sense of hope and unity and restored the power of nonviolence” (1997, p. 143). The speech’s importance was borne out by the transformation in spirit that took place among the

workers, helping them to unify for the grueling, but eventually successful, boycott against Di Giorgio.

Immediately preceding the march on Sacramento, Chávez delivered a speech to energize those who would be engaging in the pilgrimage. Called "The Plan of Delano," the speech broadcasted the UFW's core ideas on what was important for *La Causa*. The speech captured Chávez's hope that the forthcoming "historically" significant march was "derived from the sacrifices and suffering of generations of farm workers" (Hammerback & Jensen, 1998, p. 93). Not only did the "Plan of Delano" speech invigorate the audience, but it, too, carried a substantial religious message. One of the articles of the Plan was:

We seek, and have, the support of the Church in what we do. At the head of the Pilgrimage we carry LA VIRGEN DE LA GUADALUPE because she is ours, all ours, Patroness of the Mexican people. We also carry the Sacred Cross and the Star of David because we are not sectarians, and because we ask the help and prayers of all religions. All men [sic] are brothers—sons of the same God; that is why we say to all men [sic] of good will, in the words of Pope Leo XIII, "Everyone's first duty is to protect the workers from the greed of speculators who use human beings as instruments to provide themselves with money. It is neither just nor human to oppress men with excessive work to the point where their minds become enfeebled and their bodies worn out." GOD SHALL NOT ABANDON US (Chávez, 1966, p. 12).

Here, again, we have Chávez re-emphasizing the importance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Catholic tradition, but also other symbols such as the Star of David for Judaism. While Chávez and most of his followers ascribed to Roman Catholicism, many supporters of the UFW had other faiths. Chávez, a firm believer that *La Causa* was for all farm workers, reached out to believers of many faiths to garner additional support for what was "right."

In 1968, Chávez endured another fast, again to promote the importance of the nonviolent struggle against the growers. For Chávez, nonviolence was integrally tied to religious conviction. Having read the works of St. Francis of Assisi, and the newspaper and historical accounts of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chávez was convinced that a Christ-like path of struggle required a nonviolent philosophy (Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995). While the UFW had accrued some positive gains for farm workers, much was left to do. Naturally, emotions and tempers rose, and violent acts were reported in the popular press. In response, Chávez issued the following—not only a call to nonviolent action, but also a plea for religious conviction in times of serious struggle and sacrifice:

We are gathered here today not so much to observe the end of the Fast but because we are a family bound together in a common struggle for justice. We are a Union family celebrating our unity and the nonviolent nature of our movement. Perhaps in the future we will come together at other times and places to break bread and to renew our courage and to celebrate important victories. The Fast has had different meanings for different people. Some of you may still wonder about its meaning and importance. It was not intended as a pressure against any growers. For that reason we have suspended negotiations and arbitration proceedings and relaxed the militant picketing and boycotting of the strike during this period. I undertook the Fast because my heart was filled with grief and pain for the sufferings of farm workers. The Fast was first for me and then for all of us in this Union. It was a Fast for nonviolence and a call to sacrifice (Chávez, 1968, reprinted in Yinger, p. 46-47).

As Ferriss and Sandoval explain, this speech was a “defining moment for the union, one that renewed its sense of hope and unity and restored the power of nonviolence” (1997, p. 143).

Later in 1968, Chávez wrote a letter that was published in the Mexican-American newsletter, *El Grito*. Entitled, "The Mexican American and the Church," Chávez essentially appealed to the Catholic church for its support with *La Causa*. Since most Mexican-Americans were Catholic, and since the Church espoused dignity in labor and allegedly works for social justice, Chávez argued that the Church should do more to help the farm workers. As he proclaimed, "We don't ask for more cathedrals. We don't ask for bigger churches of 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. We don't ask for words. We ask for deeds. We don't ask for paternalism. We ask for servanthood" (Chávez, 1968b). In this passage, we do not simply see Chávez appealing to the Church for assistance—a clear acknowledgment to the role the Catholic faith played with farm workers. In the spirit of Liberation Theology, we also see Chávez urge the Church to model the example of Christ as a servant to help those in need. In this way, Chávez was not just making a point to the Catholic Church, who until this point had largely observed the farm worker struggle from a distance. Chávez was also speaking to all farm workers. In addition to reinforcing their faith in the ideal that struggle and sacrifice—like Christ's life—was necessary in the fight against injustice, Chávez also encouraged them to pressure the Church for help. As Chávez said to Levy in an interview, "I'd get the priests to come out and give me their blessing. In those days, if a priest said something to the Mexicans, they would say fine" (Levy, 1975, p. 107).

In 1969, Chávez wrote and delivered a letter to the President of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, E. L. Barr, Jr., which was primarily intended to defend Chávez's efforts at nonviolence. Beyond nonviolence, however, Chávez stated that "Today on Good Friday 1969 we remember the life and the sacrifice of Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave himself totally to the nonviolent struggle for peace and justice. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. King describes better than I could our hopes for the strike and boycott: 'Injustice must be exposed, with all

the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured” (Chávez, 1969a). Of course, the letter was important for its allusion to Dr. King as a symbol to the strength of nonviolent protest (Solis Garza, 1972). The letter is also important since it was written on Good Friday, the day that Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice for humanity—his life. Chávez used this day as an important reminder of the struggle experienced by the farm workers. Particularly for Catholic farm workers, the timing of the letter on Good Friday was no coincidence. Symbolizing the struggle that farm workers endured in *La Causa*, Chávez used Christ’s sacrifice, coupled with the memory of Dr. King who was assassinated for his struggle and beliefs the previous year, to galvanize support. To summarize this connection, according to Levy, Chávez “believed that truth was vindicated, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself. That belief comes from Christ himself, the Sermon on the Mount, and further back from Jewish and Hindu traditions. There’s no question that by setting such an example, you get others to do it. That is the real essence, but that is difficult” (1975, p. 92).

Later that year, Chávez used a similar strategy of connecting his religious principles of nonviolence with an important historical figure. This time, instead of alluding to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chávez referred to Gandhi. In a Canadian Broadcasting Company interview, Chávez stated that “Of course the Christian tradition plays a very important role in my life. And Gandhi is very important because although he was a Hindu, I consider him one of the greatest persons, you know, who lived in the world, and showed in a very precise way how nonviolence can be applied to freeing a whole nation without war, and that is the best example we’ve had yet in the whole history of mankind” [sic] (1969b). As the interview progressed, Chávez reiterated the concept of struggle, especially in how it is linked with Christian theology:

In a Christian faith, it’s worth saying, if you’re rich you can be poor and that would be a great virtue,

but it is certainly no virtue to be poor and not have a decision about it. It's certainly not. Poverty can't be a virtue when your dignity has been stripped away from you and where you're poor because of social injustices (1969b).

Here again, Chávez signaled the importance of his religious faith and how that impacted his perspective on the farm workers' struggle. Their on-going difficulties with the growers highlighted the sense of struggle. Chávez contextualized his pursuit for the concept of "justice" in a way that was deeply rooted in religious faith.

By now, Chávez and the rest of the UFW leadership realized the importance of connecting religious clergy, particularly Roman Catholic priests and nuns, to *La Causa*. Some priests, including Father James Vizzard, argued on behalf of the farm workers despite orders to the contrary from his superiors (de Toledano, 1971, p. 62). Other Roman Catholic leaders, such as Father Donald McDonnell, wrote letters and participated in other various forms of support for Chávez and the farm workers (Ferriss & Sandoval, 1997, p. 49). Leaders of various Protestant denominations also contributed significantly to the struggle (Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 149). When the leadership of the UFW, namely Chávez, based the entirety of their union strategy on strategies such as nonviolence, fasting, prayer, and so on, one would think that there would be a natural affiliation with clergy. While many religious leaders, most of whom were Catholic, initially opposed the UFW's efforts, the growing prominence of themes such as justice, dignity and human rights slowly convinced most clergy that Chávez and the UFW were fighting for principles they should endorse. As a matter of fact, Chávez laid out this natural relationship when he said, "The churches had to get involved. Everything they had taught for two thousand years was at stake in this struggle" (Quoted by Day, 1971, p. 53).

Chávez later made known more explicitly his feelings about relationships with church leaders. Speaking to the Delano

Church Group in 1970, Chávez declared:

We know from experience that anytime a group of clergymen get together and speak to the other side or get together and make public pronouncements or get together and walk picket lines or the work that must be done, it has an impact. And all we have to do is look around. We can cite examples. The most dramatic example is the Migrant Ministry. If it hadn't been for the Migrant Ministry in the beginning of the strike here in Delano, we would have been destroyed (Chávez, 1970b).

Chávez praised the efforts of the Migrant Ministry in an earlier speech as well. While in Lansing, Michigan, trying to shore up more support for the UFW, Chavez remarked that "We had no way of getting anyone to give us money except some friends that we had in the Church. Immediately when the [Schenley] strike started, I called on the Migrant Ministry. It is a group that had been around in California for about forty-years trying to do something for workers, and it was that group that gave us the first \$500 to use for the strike" (Chavez, 1967a). It is clear that for a movement with religious principles, an alliance with religious leaders was necessary. Later in the speech to the Delano Church Group, Chávez said that "We see that, how dramatically we were able to involve the church throughout the country in someway, sometimes very effectively" (Chávez, 1970b). Chávez was usually a modest man, but he spared no appreciation for the support of religious leaders. In fact, in a different speech delivered to at a New York Episcopal Church, Chávez proclaimed his deep appreciation for the help from church leaders:

We have had priests with us before, during and after the strike. The priests of the California Migrant Ministry, Chris Hartmeier and Jim Drake, have been with us from the beginning. They took losses in their church because of the Migrant Ministry and the suffering they accepted was for the migrants and

for justice. It was from them that we learned the importance of the support of the church in our struggle. The church is the one group that gives help and never qualifies it or asks for favors. The priests and ministers do everything from sweeping floors to giving out leaflets. They developed a true worker-priest movement. In the field and in the center, a minister and a worker joined together. The importance of Christian teachings to the worker and to his struggle for dignity becomes clear (Chávez, 1968a).

With Catholic and Protestant alike, Chávez knew that religious support was vital to the movement (Levy, 1975, pp. 115-116). With their power to touch entire congregations, religious leaders enabled the UFW to take its struggle nationwide.

In December 1970, Chávez gave a speech at Le Moyne College where he addressed both students and faculty about the conditions of the farm workers. In his speech, he continued his discussion of the importance of nonviolence. It was typical for Chávez to refer to Martin Luther King or Gandhi in such discussions, but in the Le Moyne speech, Chávez elaborated on the religious significance of nonviolence. According to Chávez,

I don't know at what point I began to understand the power of nonviolence and my willingness to do it. But, it certainly had a lot to do with my own upbringing. My mother is probably the best example of nonviolent life I've seen at close range. My own religious tradition certainly has something to do with it, and then studying and seeing the work that Gandhi did and Reverend King. Many people fail to see that St. Francis also has a lot of influence here, because he had the discipline that it takes. It's not only nonviolence, but in order to get there, you also have to have this tremendous discipline. And, in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, and we see that this has been true (Chávez, 1970a).

In this way, we clearly see the connection between nonviolence and religious faith from Chávez's perspective. A young student at the time, Bob LaSala commented on the impact of Chávez's visit to Le Moyne nearly thirty years later:

Living and working together to promote a peace and social justice agenda at Le Moyne helped us define our ideas and commitments. Bringing Catholic leaders such as Dorothy Day and Caesar Chávez to the campus prompted us and our fellow students to consider a very different interpretation of basic tenets of Christian life as manifested in the Catholic Worker and the United Farmworkers movements. Our many projects in the community provided a means of testing our beliefs and giving of ourselves to others while bearing witness to the concepts of Christian community. This work created a bond that linked all the members of IH. The people of International House and the commitment we made to others helped shape my decisions after college to choose a career in public service at the local level (LaSala, 2003).

LaSala tells us, on one hand, something we already know—that the content of Chávez's proclamation at the College in 1970 was integrally tied to Catholic precepts. On the other hand, however, LaSala also confirms what we have been suspecting all along, namely that Chávez's power of discourse helped to convince his audience of the plight of the farm workers and the importance of living a life predicated on religious principles. This is vitally important. Of course Chávez targeted certain audience members or groups when he gave speeches—we know that because he would speak in English or Spanish when it fit the audience (Jensen & Hammerback, 2002, p. xxv), or he would tailor the content of his speech accordingly, such as addressing issues that would affect students in his Le Moyne College speech or references to how other religious leaders gave the UFW support in his 1970 Delano church group speech. But what is perhaps most important to note

about Chávez's speeches is that he had the ability to reach-out and identify with multiple audience members, even when they weren't necessarily targeted. Referring to this unique rhetorical quality, one such audience member, Dorothy Rensenbrink, commented, "I am puzzled at the power of such an uncommanding person to command so much loyalty from so many" (Rensenbrink, 1974, p. 444). As we have seen, particularly among audiences with a religious affiliation or an understanding of religious themes, Chávez was able to orchestrate a nexus between the struggle of the workers and the main principles of Christ. That intersection enabled him to "command" loyalty and support in ways that probably would not have occurred absent the use of such religious themes and images.

Conclusion

"Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful, and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons."

— César Chávez (Quoted in Levy, 1975, p. 286).

César Chávez has been noted as "an extraordinarily skilled communicator who placed his discourse at the very heart of his career" (Hammerback & Jensen, 1998, p. 3). His rhetoric has been the subject of multiple studies, as scholars have tried to understand how such a simple man could have such a commanding presence. We know that Chávez's religious beliefs helped to guide his daily, personal actions as well as his union strategies—including his rhetorical strategies. As such, Chávez incorporated a number of different religious themes, messages and images in his rhetoric. These rhetorical elements went beyond simple speeches; they enabled Chávez to reach out to his audience—in what Kenneth Burke called "consubstantiation"—that served to identify himself with sympathetic supporters (Burke,

1969, p. 45). And, as we have seen, Chávez's use of religious images and themes transcended simple Biblical references. Not only did Chávez use important religious and cultural images to persuade his audience—images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and crucifixes—but he also embodied principles of sacrifice in ways that coincided with his religious faith, namely marches that culminated on Easter Sunday, or fasts that occurred on Good Friday. Thus, in various ways, Chávez was able to speak, write and enact his religious faith as he led a struggle for human decency and dignity.

This examination has sought to go beyond just describing Chávez as an important rhetor in American history. Others have already made such arguments (Jensen, Burkholder & Hammerback, 2003; Hammerback & Jensen, 1998; Zompetti, 1998; Hammerback & Jensen, 1994; Hammerback & Jensen, 1980; Shaw, 1983; Hribar, 1978; Yinger, 1975; Backus, 1970). Instead, we see Chávez as being an important rhetor for a very specific and significant reason—his use of religious themes and images in his discourse. On occasion we read of how important social movement or union leaders make reference to religion as they attempt to reach out to certain audience groups. But with Chávez we see the use of religious themes and images that go well beyond simply trying to identify with a particular audience. Chávez actually lived his life in a way that reflected his religious references. Starting as a boy when he assisted the priest at mass as a *curcero*, to his daily attendance at mass when he was fasting, Chávez was devoutly religious. He embraced and enacted, as do Liberation Theologians, principles of struggle, penance, sacrifice, nonviolence, and Christian love, in what some call "*praxis*." To be sure, Chávez's *praxis* also enabled him to reach out and identify with certain audience groups. And, while Chávez undoubtedly wanted to persuade others of *La Causa*, Chávez also firmly believed in embracing his religious faith in his rhetoric out of principle.

Hence, for Chávez, speaking and acting were the same. His use of religious themes and images were necessarily tied to how he engaged in life. We may try to measure the persuasive-

ness of religious images as rhetorical strategies, or we may use Chávez as an example to understand the integrity of the rhetors who use religion in their discourse. However scholars choose to view Chávez's use of rhetorical themes and images, one thing is clear: Chávez remains one of the most important rhetors of our time, and he used religious themes and images to help identify with his audiences. His religious faith was central not only to his rhetoric, but also to the way he lived. Chávez, himself, made this point clear at a union meeting in 1969, when discussing nonviolence:

There is no such thing as means and ends. Everything that we do is an end, in itself, that we can never erase. That is why we must make all our actions the kind we would like to be judged on, although they might be our last—which they might well be, who knows? That is why we will not let ourselves be provoked by our adversaries into behaving hatefully (Quoted in Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 47).

As such, it should be clear that Chávez's rhetoric was closely connected to, if not entirely guided by, his religious convictions. Jensen and Hammerback (1992) claim that because Chávez was a devout Catholic, he "served as a model for his life and ideas. He believed that it was his mission to organize workers into a powerful organization that would improve their lives" (p. 93). Indeed, just as the Catholic social doctrine determines the Liberation Theology movement, so too did the principles of social justice, human dignity and nonviolence provide the framework for Chávez's rhetoric of struggle.

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