

César Chávez, whose birthday is today, was able to dedicate his life to the rights of farm workers and justice for the poor because he had a profound spirituality.

“A fast is first and foremost personal,” said Chávez, according to the official Web page of the United Farm Workers of America (www.ufw.org). “It is for the purification of my own body, mind and soul. (But) the fast is also a heartfelt prayer for purification and strengthening for all those who work beside me in the farm workers movement.”

This prayer was also for the oppressor, he said, calling it “an act of penance for those who are in positions of moral authority and for all men and women activists who know what is right and just, who know that they could and should do more.”

He also called it a prayer of preparation for those who want to renew the face of the Earth, according to the UFW Web site: “The evil (exploitation) is far greater than even I had thought it to be, it threatens to choke out the life of our people and also the life system that supports us all.”

“The solution of this deadly crisis will not be found in the arrogance of the powerful, but in solidarity with the weak and helpless. I pray to God this fast will be a preparation for a multitude of simple deeds of justice, carried out by men and women whose hearts are focused on the suffering of the poor and (those) who yearn, with us, for a better world. Together, all things are possible.”

And the fast-prayer, begun and sustained by Chávez for 36 days, was carried on by others who stepped in when they saw Chávez’s life fading.

Fasting was symbolic of a transformation of suffering. Chávez summarized this when he observed that “it is a question of suffering with some kind of hope.”

Chávez received this profoundly strong faith from his mother, according to Sister Martha Ann Kirk, a professor of religious studies at the University of the Incarnate Word. His mother’s faith was directed at helping the poor and included the courage and strength to turn the other cheek.

Later, Chávez learned that his mother’s philosophy had been articulated by Pope Leo XIII, who wrote, “If a man falls, he should be helped by another man.”

He heard these words from his pastor, Father Donald McDonnell, who liked to quote the pope’s declaration that “every man has a right to a decent wage and a comfortable life, (and) when workers’ burdens become too great, they should form associations to help themselves.”

McDonnell also often pointed out some of the horrifying facts that Chávez knew firsthand: that Mexican-American babies die at birth in high rates; that

Mexican-Americans get ill more often than Americans; and, particularly troubling to Chávez, that Mexican-American workers die younger than other workers.

“We are men and women who have suffered and endured much, not only because of our abject poverty, but because we are kept poor,” Chávez later wrote in a letter to a growers association president that was quoted by Ken Butigan in *From Violence to Whole* (Pace et Bene Franciscan Nonviolence Center).

“The colors of our skins, the languages of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process, the numbers of men slain in recent wars – all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our spirit.

“But God knows that we are not beasts of burden, agricultural implements or rented slaves, we are men (and women) locked in a death struggle against man's inhumanity to man...and this struggle itself gives meaning to our life and ennobles our dying.”

Prayer, fasting and suffering – so central to Chávez's life and work – produced not emotional “me-and-God” good feelings but deep convictions of how we are related to those around us and how that relationship obligates us to act on their behalf.

In his words and his actions, Chávez lived for something greater than himself.