



Cesar Chavez, the Catholic Bishops, and the Farmworkers' Struggle for Social Justice

Marco G. Prouty

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César Chávez and the farmworkers' struggle for justice polarized the Catholic community in California's Central Valley during the 1965–1970 Delano Grape Strike. Because most farmworkers and landowners were Catholic, the American Catholic Church was placed in the challenging position of choosing sides in an intrafaith conflict. Twice Chávez petitioned the Catholic Church for help. Finally, in 1969 the American Catholic hierarchy responded by creating the Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Farm Labor. This committee of five bishops and two priests traveled California's Central Valley and mediated a settlement in the five-year conflict. Within months, a new and more difficult struggle began in California's lettuce fields. This time the Catholic Church drew on its long-standing tradition of social teaching and shifted its policy from neutrality to outright support for César Chávez and his union, the United Farmworkers (UFW). The Bishops' Committee became so instrumental in the UFW's success that Chávez declared its intervention "the single most important thing that has helped us." Drawing upon rich, untapped archival sources at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Marco Prouty exposes the American Catholic hierarchy's internal, and often confidential, deliberations during the California farm labor crisis of the 1960s and 1970s. He traces the Church's gradual transition from reluctant mediator to outright supporter of Chávez, providing an intimate view of the Church's decision-making process and Chávez's steadfast struggle to win rights for farmworkers. This lucid, solidly researched text will be an invaluable addition to the fields of labor history, social justice, ethnic studies, and religious history.

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