
Book Review: The Gospel Of César Chávez: My Faith In Action

In the novel, *The Gospel of César Chávez: My Faith in Action* by Mario T. García, Cesar Chavez explains that religious experiences in the United States should be nonviolent, while at the same time care for the welfare of others and give back to those that are in need. Cesar was a devout Catholic man who was greatly influenced by his parents' teachings which laid the foundation for his spirituality and principles. As Cesar grew older, he met Fr. Donald McDonnell who took him in and educated Cesar about social justice, nonviolence, and the sacrifice for others. With the help of Fr. Donald, Cesar was also able to meet someone else that had a great impact on his life, Fred Ross. Through Ross, Cesar was able to realize what his goal in life was, a life as a community organizer. Throughout his life, he noticed many instances where those of Mexican descent faced public discrimination whether it be at school, public facilities, and more. The struggles that people of Mexican descent faced allowed Cesar's spirituality to transform into one that "was based on his love of and care for others and their liberation from poverty and oppression" (Garcia, 277). Cesar was able to practice these beliefs that allowed him to help others because of the influences of his parents and grandma, as well as the teachings of both Fr. Donald and Ross.

To start off, throughout the novel there are many references on how Cesar's mother and grandmother heavily impacted Cesar's spirituality in the beginning. Both of the women were devout Catholics who guided Cesar "to be nonviolent, to care about the welfare of others, and to give to those in need" (Garcia, 230). Due to the struggles that his family faced during the Great Depression, Cesar had to constantly move to different labor camps, so his education was cut short. Due to the teaching of his parents against prejudice, in one instance, Cesar sat in the main section of a theater, although he was not allowed, and was arrested. He knew that he was not at fault for what he did, but that public discrimination against his race was the problem.

Still a devout Catholic even in his adulthood, Cesar was able to meet Fr. Donald McDonnell who took him in and made it his responsibility to finish Cesar's education. Fr. Donald's education was focused greatly on his own views of what he believed social justice and nonviolence were. Cesar was able to receive many copies of social justice doctrines from Fr. Donald, such as *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII whose theme would later be the emphasis of many works that Cesar has done with farm workers. This social justice doctrine "focused on the importance of providing dignity and respect to the new industrial labor force created by industrial capitalism" (Garcia, 254). This only strengthened the belief of Cesar who advocated for Fr. Donald also introduced the biography of Gandhi to Cesar who was very inspired by Gandhi's moral principle of nonviolence and how India was able to achieve independence from Empire through the use of nonviolence. Cesar later used nonviolence as "a central tenet of the farm workers' struggle" (Garcia, 254). Fr. Donald also showed Cesar the practices of St. Francis in the sacrifice for others, in which Cesar would most likely sacrifice his life for the social justice and salvation of the people of his race. Through Fr. Donald, Cesar was able to meet Fred Ross, another person that greatly influenced his life.

As a community organizer, Ross aided in the organization of a group called, the Community Service Organization, that assisted Mexican Americans in more developed areas. Because of

Ross, Cesar was able to find what he believed to be his mission in life was, a community organizer. Fr. Donald contributed to the evolution of Cesar's profound spirituality, while Ross guided Cesar on "how to organize people around issues that mattered to them" (Garcia, 271). Ross' teachings to Cesar were derived from Saul Alinsky's five principles of organizing methods. These methods were: "you had to organize around people's experiences. You had to communicate with the people. You had to bring out the contradictions of the system. You had to take the moral high ground. You had to put pressure on the system" (Garcia, 284). Cesar later used these methods when working with the farm workers.

With the help of Ross, Cesar was able to become a member of the Community Service Organization and used his strong beliefs and skills he obtained as an organizer to become the head of the organization in California. Because Cesar believed in the principles of helping others from being oppressed and discriminated, he against sought to aid in organizing farm labor. However, people in the organization were against the idea because they believed that they were not ready to help those where organizing is more difficult, so Cesar left the CSO. He knew this task would be difficult, and that there would be a lot of opposition, but he knew that with his unhindered beliefs, that it could be done.

In conclusion, this novel was able to show the beginning foundations of Cesar Chavez's ever growing spirituality and principles that eventually led him to accomplish his tasks "as a great civil rights leader among Mexican Americans and by extension other Latino groups in the United States" (Garcia, 138). Even through his struggles, Cesar was able to maintain the idea of nonviolence and sought to regain social justice for Mexican Americans. He truly was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of his own time.