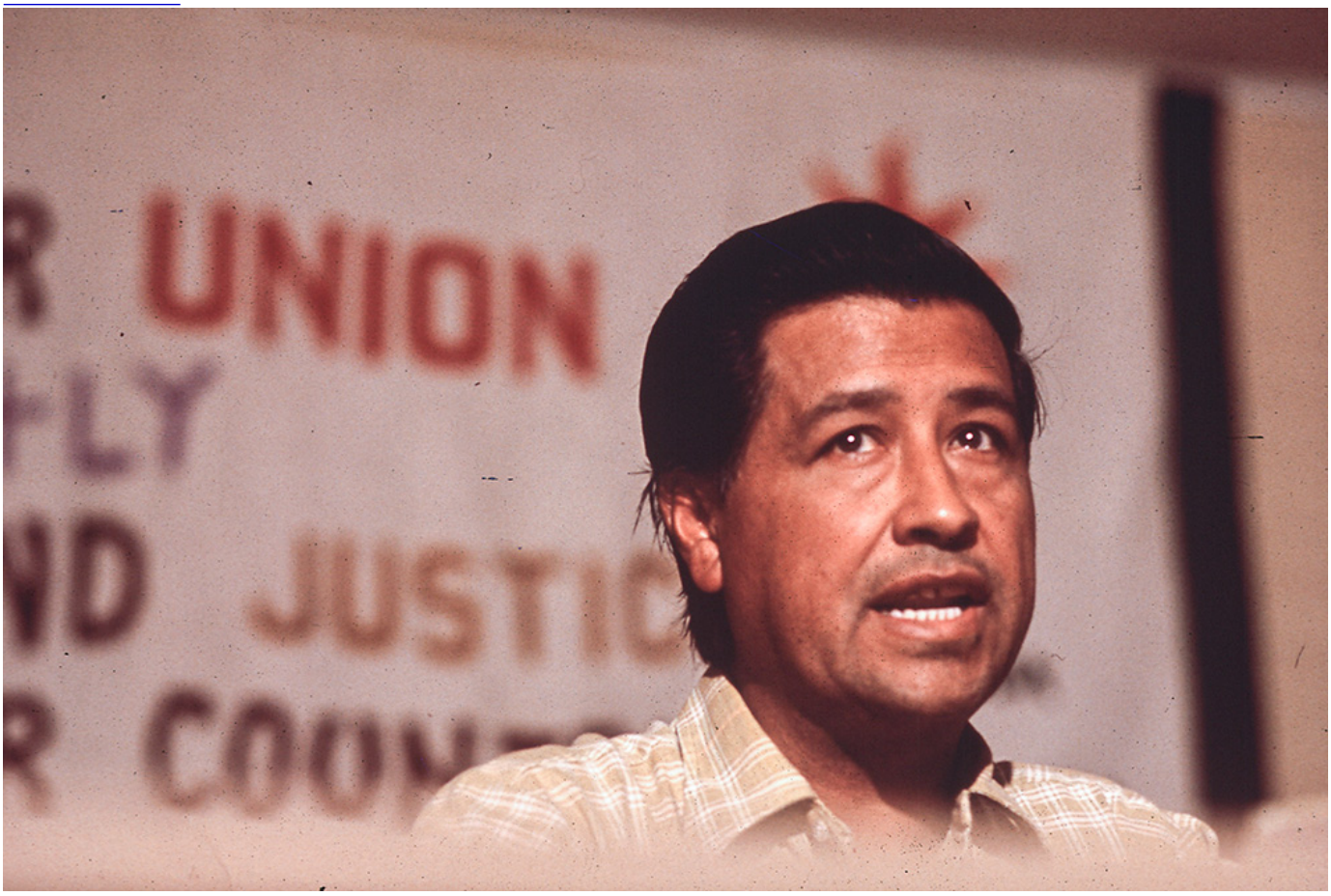
Opinion
NCR Voices



Cesar Chavez in August 1972 (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)



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The enormity of the serious allegations of sexual abuse against United Farm Workers co-founder César Chavez is not lost on American Catholics committed to social justice. Along with members of the Kennedy family and Dorothy Day, Chavez was among an elite pantheon of U.S. Catholics who loom largest in our public life and memory. Now, with allegations that Chavez sexually abused at least two teenage girls, as well as UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta, another larger-than-life Catholic folk hero comes crashing down, leaving some Catholics to wonder, was Chavez's prophetic work all a lie?

I was inspired by how visibly Chavez used his Catholic faith and practice in his organizing — invoking the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe, hosting Masses, and breaking one of his rigorous hunger strikes alongside Robert Kennedy in 1968. I was particularly drawn to Day's recounting of her time in Fresno County jail alongside UFW strikers. For me, Chavez embodied the best of what Catholic social teaching and community organizing have to offer our country. He was, in short, a hero. But heroes fall.

The bulk of the allegations against Chavez were reported by The New York Times in a nearly two-year investigation published March 18. The previous day, the UFW said that it had learned of "deeply troubling" allegations against Chavez and that it would not be taking part in celebrations for Cesar Chavez Day, which is marked on March 31 each year. After the New York Times published its report, UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta released a statement sharing her story of being abused by Chavez. CNN described Huerta's allegations as the "most shocking against a man long lauded as a champion of human dignity."

Chavez is not the first Catholic hero to fall in the light of truth. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community, was credibly discovered to have sexually abused women. The legendary Abbé Pierre, who founded the Emmaus movement, has been accused of abusing dozens of girls and women in his life.

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In the wake of these sorts of revelations, it's understandable to feel disillusionment, grief, betrayal. Does any of the work matter? How can a person committed to the

common good commit such heinous harm? What are we to do about it?

The horrifying statement from Huerta — outlining her abuse and the two resulting pregnancies — demonstrates the cost of hero worship, particularly to those who feel pressure not to reveal the truth about individuals revered by large swaths of people. While many have long criticized Chavez's well-documented high-control tactics, and the potency of his personality cult, Huerta's story raises the pitch of those conversations about power and personality.

Now 95 years old, Huerta said in her statement, "I carried this secret for as long as I did because building the movement and securing farmworker rights was my life's work." Huerta endured violence, broken families and secrecy for decades because she believed that the truth about Chavez would undo their work. Because she believed that we needed our hero.

But we don't need heroes. We need each other.

As Huerta herself said, "The farmworker movement has always been bigger and far more important than any one individual. Cesar's actions do not diminish the permanent improvements achieved for farmworkers with the help of thousands of people."



Grape and lettuce boycotters with the United Farm Workers picket a grocery store in Chicago in August 1973. (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)

The movement that won farmworkers the right not to be sprayed with pesticides while working the fields, that mobilized a nation on behalf of workers concentrated in California, and continued for decades to win legislative victories, is a movement that like all movements depends on the sacrifices of a great many. Not the charisma or power of a single individual.

The devastating revelations about Chavez arrive during Lent, and the Gospels have much to teach us about our temptation toward hero worship. Jesus offers an alternative. When James and John seek greatness through him, Jesus tells them that to be first, they must be last, and that if they want true glory they must drink from his bitter cup. When the devil tempts Jesus with worldly domination, he tells the deceiver, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only you shall serve." Jesus refused to allow himself to be cast as a worldly hero, and he would not name one among his followers.

The farmworker's movement, like any other Gospel witness animated by a charism, is not about the rise and fall of a singular hero. But rather, the movement was formed by the countless daily sacrifices made by all those "thousands of people," as Huerta put it, who made it a reality. The loss of Chavez as a hero must not discourage those witnessing to Gospel justice nor dampen the commitment to the ideals he preached. His grave crimes must not overshadow the daily holiness of all those who have bent the arc of history toward justice.

Chavez died three decades ago. And in the meantime, the UFW, largely under the guidance of Huerta, has accomplished much. It has met the times with the full power of its charism, even transcending Chavez's deep anti-immigrant sentiments to become a leading voice in defense of undocumented agricultural workers. The movement survived Chavez's death, and it can survive the truth about his actions and character. Movements are not built on the back of heroes but on the backs of people united in motion.

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