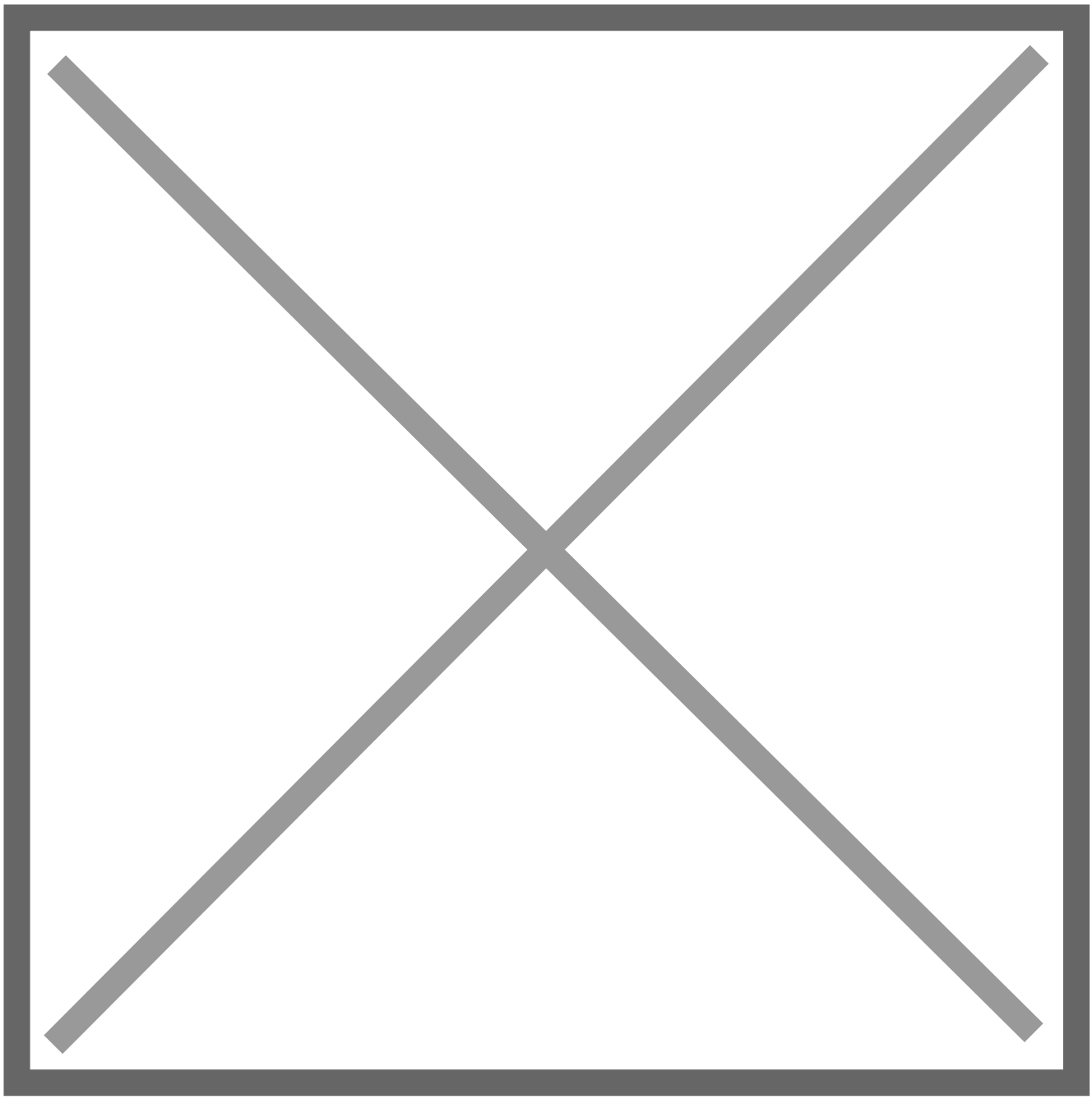
News



Facilities workers with Denver Arts and Venues remove a bust of the late United Farm Workers union co-founder César Chávez at a Denver park named for him March 19, 2026, following newly reported allegations the activist sexually abused several women and girls, including Dolores Huerta, now 95, who co-founded the UFW with Chávez. (OSV News/Reuters/Cheney Orr)

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Catholic dioceses and organizations are canceling events and rethinking initiatives honoring the late civil rights icon César Chávez, following newly reported allegations the activist — who publicly drew on his Catholic faith in his work — sexually abused several women and girls.

A New York Times investigation published March 18 "uncovered extensive evidence" that during his decades of lobbying for farmworker and Latino American rights, Chávez — who died in 1993 at age 66 — had sexually abused two teen girls, raped his closest colleague, fathered at least four extramarital children and sexually harassed several other women.

The newspaper said its report, sparked by a 2021 tip about Chávez, was drawn from on-the-record interviews with victims that were partly corroborated by interviews with more than 60 individuals, including top aides to Chávez, union members and relatives. Hundreds of records, emails, photographs and audio recordings were also analyzed.

After the report was published, Dolores Huerta, who co-founded the United Farm Workers of America with Chávez, issued a statement saying she had been sexually assaulted twice by Chávez as a young mother in the 1960s, with both encounters

resulting in pregnancies. She had kept the pregnancies — and the attacks — secret, placing the children she bore with stable families, she said.

"I have kept this secret long enough. My silence ends here," said the 95-year-old Huerta, who gave The New York Times permission to reprint her statement, issued in English and Spanish.

In a March 18 statement, the Cesar Chavez Foundation described the revelations as "shocking, incredibly disappointing, and deeply painful," adding, "To the survivors: we believe you. We honor your courage, and we are very sorry for the harm you have carried in the shadows for so long."

As of March 20, the foundation had offlined most of its website, which had detailed Chávez's life and legacy, replacing the main page with its March 18 statement.

Now, Catholics who have long hailed Chávez's legacy of championing human dignity and Catholic social teaching on labor are seeking to separate the message from the man now accused of violating that dignity.

Chávez spoke openly about his Catholic faith and was hailed by St. Paul VI as a "loyal son of the Catholic Church" during a private 1974 audience. He partnered with the nation's Catholic bishops to support farmworkers, famously breaking one of several public fasts for the cause with a 1968 Mass — one of several liturgies he attended in the fields with laborers — with a crowd of more than 7,000, including Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, civil rights activist. In his work, Chávez appealed to a broad coalition of diverse supporters.

Following his death in 1993, Chávez has been widely recognized within the Church and the wider American culture. Dioceses and parishes have celebrated annual "César Chávez" Masses; streets, schools, civic buildings and a U.S. Navy ship were named after him. Chávez was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994.

Chávez had even been floated by some Catholics as a possible saint. Up to this point, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops listed Chávez on its website as a "Champion of Life and Dignity," alongside St. Oscar Rómero, St. Teresa of Kolkata and Dorothy Day.

"Since the allegations of abuse came to light about Cesar Chavez earlier this week, the USCCB has begun the process of reviewing our website to identify references to him for removal," USCCB spokesperson Chieko Noguchi said in a statement to OSV News.

She added that "in the cases where references to Chavez are part of historical archives, they cannot be erased, but the Catholic Church is committed to addressing the sin of sexual abuse, keeping children safe, and no matter where the abuse took place, to accompanying survivors of abuse in their healing."

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The California Catholic Conference — representing the Catholic bishops of the state home to Chávez's activism — said in a statement to OSV News that it was "deeply troubled" by both the allegations and "the harm experienced by those who have come forward."

"We stand first and foremost with the individuals who have shared their stories, recognizing the courage it takes to speak about painful experiences," said the conference. "Their dignity, healing, and pursuit of truth must be our priority."

The conference added that "as Catholics, we are called to uphold the dignity of every human person, to listen to those who have been hurt, and to seek justice rooted in truth. We pray for all those affected, and we remain committed to fostering a culture of accountability, healing, and respect for every person."

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles told OSV News in a March 19 statement that an annual Mass honoring Chávez would not take place this year, in accord with a request from Chávez's family.

"The Archdiocese has historically worked with the Chavez family and the United Farm Workers (UFW) to celebrate a Mass annually around the anniversary of Cesar Chavez' birth, March 31," the statement said. "The Archdiocese was informed by the Chavez Family last week that they had decided not to move forward with having a Mass this year, saying they had received information about a sensitive matter regarding his legacy."

The archdiocese said it "agreed with the family's decision," calling the reports of the allegations "disturbing."

"The Archdiocese stands firmly against abuse. We offer our continued prayers for all survivor-victims of abuse and everyone impacted by these events," the statement said.

Bishop Michael Pham of San Diego said in a March 19 statement that his diocese's annual César Chávez Day would "henceforth be recognized as National Farm Workers Day."

The bishop said the change, made "after prayerful reflection and discernment," would enable participants "to focus our attention fully on honoring the dignity, sacrifices, and essential contributions of farm workers and their families."

The observance "will serve as a time for prayer, gratitude, and renewed commitment to justice for those whose labor sustains our communities and provides food for our tables," said Pham.

"By centering this observance on farm workers themselves, we reaffirm the Church's enduring commitment to human dignity, solidarity, and truth," he said. "I encourage our parishes, schools, and ministries to mark Farm Workers Day with prayer, education, and acts of support consistent with Catholic Social Teaching."