The Farm Workers and the Franciscans: Reverse Evangelization as Social Prompt for Conversion

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Conversion has diverse meanings in the study of Christian spirituality, and these diverse meanings reveal divergent assumptions about the quest for religious meaning and the practice of faith. The study of conversion attends to diverse religious experiences, from the decision to change one’s religious affiliation, to a conscious process of changing one’s behavior, world view, or self understanding.¹ Conversion may be formulated as a single event, or an ongoing process. Bernard Lonergan described three primary dimensions of conversion: intellectual, moral and religious.² Donald Gelpi developed two more, affective and socio-political, and proposed that ongoing conversion entails continuing interactions between these five dimensions.³ And Len Sperry has proposed “somatic conversion” as a sixth dimension.⁴ These formulations describe conversion as a multi-dimensional response to the love of God, understood to a great extent as an internal process in which individuals make their own decisions about changing their lives, whether this is an abrupt decision for a new religious identity, or an ongoing process unfolding over a long period of time. Such conversion may take place in the public realm, but even Gelpi’s socio-political conversion, while focused on civic engagement and citizenship, assumes that personal agency is expressed through the individual’s decision to change one’s relationship with the social world.

Drawing from the example of St. Francis of Assisi, contemporary Franciscan spirituality emphasizes the initiative or agency of God the Spirit in conversion. God is understood as expressing agency through other social actors to further or deepen one’s own conversion. Francis and modern Franciscans describe conversion as initiated by God and effected through serial social encounters charged with religious significance. Francis dictated his “Testament” in the final year of his life to narrate the key events of his conversion process:

The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world. . . . And the Lord gave me such faith in churches that I would pray with simplicity . . . and after the Lord gave me some brothers, no
one showed me what I had to do, but the Most high Himself revealed to me that I
should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.5

Hagiographic sources about Francis’ life describe his conversion as a move-
ment away from vanity, fantasies of knighthood, and the comforts of the
merchant class, and toward humility, prayer, and concern for the poor and
outcast.6 These sources describe the impact of imprisonment and ill health on
his conversion, but place particular importance on his encounters with lep-
ers. These stories do not describe Francis relieving the suffering of lepers, but
rather narrate the impact that they had on him and his understanding of God.
They describe how his social encounters furthered his own conversion process.
These hagiographic accounts narrate Francis’ spiritual journey as a series of
encounters with unanticipated outcomes. Early in his life of penance, he did
not expect that he would receive brothers—or sisters, such as Clare of Assisi.
He traveled with the Fifth Crusade to the Holy Land in 1219 to preach to the
Sultan Malek el-Kamil, but instead of receiving his expected martyrdom, the
two of them entered into dialogue.7 Francis reversed the logic of “holy war,”
and in 1221, included a chapter on missionary work in his Rule, a first.8 He
mandated that preaching be done in a spirit of kindness, peace and mutual
respect.9 Francis’ life was marked by a series of encounters with some kind of
other, whether leper, brother, sister, or Muslim. In contrast to the model of mo-
nastic enclosure, Franciscan spirituality frames conversion as a transformative
journey into relationship with others in the midst of the world.10

This essay argues that social encounter as prompt for conversion is an
important theme in Franciscan spirituality, and that investigating this theme
can open up fresh perspectives on the social dimension of conversion in the
broader study of Christian spirituality. The impact that the California farm
worker movement had on the Franciscan Friars of the St. Barbara Province in
California during the 1960s demonstrates this in a compelling way. In what
follows, I will describe the character of these encounters and examine how
the Friars interpreted them with language that echoes Francis’ description of
his own spiritual experiences, but is also inflected with elements taken from
contemporary culture. Franciscans report that their participation in the farm
worker movement evangelized them, that they experienced the migrant farm
workers proclaiming the “good news” of the Gospel to them. The farm worker
movement served as a prompt to the Franciscans, as in a theatrical perfor-
ance, by indicating the next steps in their spiritual journey during this period
of social and ecclesial upheaval.

The story of this relationship is thus not of heroic acts undertaken by the
Franciscans for the farm workers. It inverts the more typical narrative of reli-
gious leaders preaching to convert laity; instead, it reveals how the religiously-
inspired farm worker movement challenged the “official” religious order to deepen its ongoing conversion. This essay is written consciously, or self-consciously, by a member of this same religious order decades after its initial encounters with the farm worker movement. The social engagement dimension of this case study complements prior studies of the retrieval of Franciscan contemplation and of renewal in the Franciscan tradition.

This essay is based chiefly upon twenty oral history interviews conducted with Franciscan Friars who participated in the farmworker movement, and with leading members of the farm worker movement itself. These interviews are supplemented with recent literature on the religious dimension of César Chávez and the farm worker movement. The essay proceeds as follows.

Initial contacts between Franciscans and farm workers began during the 1940s and 1950s. The Second Vatican Council called for renewal, and many California Franciscans expressed this through deep social engagement with the farm worker movement. It narrates Franciscan accompaniment of farm workers and their movement into the 1980s, and examines the implications of this engagement—and others like it—for Franciscan spirituality and the study of conversion.

INITIAL CONTACTS: FROM CHARITY TO SOLIDARITY

The purported agricultural labor shortage during World War II prompted Congress to pass the Bracero Act. This allowed for the importation of Mexican men to work on farms throughout California and the Southwest. The program was highly structured, paid little, and stifled dissent by deporting laborers who questioned its justice. Bracero labor camps provided the first occasions for Franciscans to encounter Mexican farm workers, near Oceanside and Santa Barbara, California. Franciscan seminarians visited these camps as a part of their training for ministry. These contacts provided opportunities for young men with religious aspirations to encounter poor people, and humanized their understanding of people on the margins of society.

During the 1950s, an enterprising Friar named Arturo Librentz developed a specialized outreach strategy to serve the needs of farm workers in the bracero camps. He created a traveling chapel in a trailer pulled by a pickup which he used as a platform for sacramental services as he drove around rural California. He offered Masses, heard confessions and brought marriages into conformity with cannon law. He became the vicar for Mexican outreach for the Catholic Diocese of Monterey/Fresno. He would later become critical of César Chávez because he did not favor union actions against growers, but he was always supportive of other Franciscans serving farm workers. His priestly service was consciously for and to the farm worker, but also reflected a certain clerical paternalism.
In 1958, Father Alan McCoy launched what became known as a Pastoral Year Project at St. Mary’s Parish in Stockton, California. It introduced newly ordained Friars to a year of practical theology, exposing men who had been in various cloistered seminary institutions for 12 years to the diverse social and ministerial worlds they now faced as priests. Fr. McCoy wanted to imbue them with the spirituality and practical implications of Catholic social teaching. Between 1958 and 1968, he missioned roughly one hundred new priests.
to provide social and religious outreach in the jails, in the hospitals, in free kitchens, among homeless people, and in *bracero* labor camps. He brought in social scientists and theologians to expose them to the church’s social vision, and trained them in theological reflection on their pastoral experiences. In addition, Fr. McCoy imported the *Cursillo* (“short course”) retreat from Spain to St. Mary’s parish, arranging for parishioners, lay leaders and Franciscans to participate in it.

During the life of the Pastoral Year Program these outreach activities accorded the Franciscans credibility among community organizing groups, such as the Community Service Organization (CSO) for which César Chávez worked. The congruent interests of the CSO and the Franciscans foreshadowed future collaboration. The new priests in the program went out on weekends to serve some of the Mexican-American parishes in the Central Valley. This program also exposed the Friars to future leaders in the farm worker movement. Co-founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union Dolores Huerta lived in the parish, and she started a forerunner of the UFW in one of the parish buildings. Fr. McCoy offered space in St. Mary’s parish buildings for the local branch of the CSO, and when Chávez traveled to Stockton during the 1950s, he met the Franciscans there. These early personal relationships between dozens of Friars and Chávez established a mutual trust that was to deepen over the years. When Chávez and the union were later accused of communism, the Franciscans knew this was not true, and pointed to their history of collaboration with him as evidence. St. Mary’s Parish, just 60 miles south of the state capitol, hosted farm workers on their pilgrimage to Sacramento in 1966. Dolores Huerta observed the following about the solidarity shown by the Franciscans to the union:

I don’t think that there’s any other way that one can learn unless you’re walking in the other person’s shoes. And Father Alan was willing to do this, to literally walk in the shoes of the farm workers. . . . So when we got in the middle of this big strike and everything, they [the Franciscans] were there to support us. And it was also very important, because at this point in time we didn’t have the bishops supporting us.

The social outreach from St. Mary’s exposed young Friars to Mexican-American aspirations for civil rights and social justice, and laid the foundation for a shift in the style of their collective social engagement from charity to solidarity.

**LIVING OUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE COUNCIL IN THE LATE 1960S**

Fr. Alan McCoy was elected Provincial (leader) of the West Coast Franciscans at their 1967 chapter (a gathering for discernment and election). He became a key interpreter of the Second Vatican Council and its call for renewal among...
religious orders. This call had two dimensions: a return to the sources of Christian life and the origins of their specific religious community, and the adaptation of the community to the modern era. McCoy’s experiences in Stockton shaped his understanding of renewal and religious leadership in society. He was elected Provincial at least in part because his confreres were so impressed by his work in Stockton and endorsed his vision of religious renewal incorporating social concern.

During the 1960s, the Franciscans assumed responsibility for several parishes in Mexican-American communities: in San Jose, Fresno, Union City, and Delano, California. These provided more opportunities for young priests fresh from the Pastoral Year Project to deepen their relationships with Mexican-Americans, and to respond to their aspirations for dignity and economic opportunity. The Cursillo retreats were a part of these efforts. According to Brother Ed Dunn, when these retreats were held in these parishes, they became a program for faith formation and for inviting participants to express their conversion in concrete ways:

César made a Cursillo, and that’s why the [the song] De Colores became so identified with the UFW . . . it came from the Cursillo Movement. He just gave it kind of a justice focus and orientation, but it came out of the Cursillo. . . . And at the end of the Cursillo, they kind of see the light, and the question then always is, “Well what happens to somebody who gets converted?” They may or may not deepen and continue their conversion, but César was there at the door of every Cursillo to make sure people had an opportunity to put their Cursillo into practice by inviting them to union meetings.

McCoy had sought to ensure that people making the Cursillo could express their spiritual response in the form of social engagement, and Chávez picked up on this. For a period, the Cursillo served a common project for the Friars and the UFW.

The Franciscans ministering among Mexican-Americans organized an informal group known as the “Valley Friars.” The group questioned the contemporary relevance of the province’s more traditional, institutional forms of ministry, such as education and retreat houses, and they gathered for social analysis and mutual support. The Valley Friars lasted about six years and helped negotiate transitions in thinking about ministry by Friars seeking social engagement. Gatherings provided a space in which the new currents of interest in social engagement emerging from the Second Vatican Council could be discussed and reflected upon, and could inform new approaches to their ministries.

During the late 1960s, Friars (and thousands of others) participated in “boycott Masses,” which commissioned union volunteers departing for points East to extend the consumer boycott on behalf of the strike. These Masses
were organized collaboratively by the UFW and Catholic clergy, especially religious order clergy. Local diocesan clergy were unwilling to support the UFW for fear of alienating grower parishioners. However, the Franciscans took a different approach, engaging and supporting the farm workers wherever possible, while also striving to maintain good relations with those growers who were members of their parishes. In the course of their work some of the Franciscans became very close with the leaders of the farm worker movement.
In 1967, for example, Franciscan Father Mark Day became the chaplain for César Chávez. Friar Ed Fronske attended the March, 1968 Mass in which César Chávez publicly broke his fast with Robert F. Kennedy.

The decision to take over responsibility for Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in Delano had profound implications for the Franciscans, because César Chávez had chosen this town as the base for creating the UFW. During the initial years of the Great Delano Grape Strike, Bishop Willinger of the Monterey/Fresno Diocese had kept his distance from the farm workers. He was concerned about being perceived as taking their side, and thus upsetting local Catholic growers. The Catholic Bishops in California were in a difficult position, because they had to balance their pastoral responsibilities to—and financial dependence upon—growers with the burgeoning movement for justice and the new emphasis on this that emerged from the Second Vatican Council. When Bishop Manning took over the Fresno diocese in 1967, he asked McCoy and the Friars to serve the pastoral needs of the farm workers in Delano.

When the Friars came to Delano, they entered a town deeply divided by class and race. The parish hall at Our Lady of Guadalupe was where Chávez’s farm worker union voted to launch the grape strike in 1965. Franciscan Fathers Ignatius DeGroot and Ed Fronske had to juggle their desire to affirm the farm workers’ struggle for justice with the pastoral needs for reconciliation within a fractured parish. Fr. DeGroot had been working in Stockton in 1966, and had participated in the last leg of the pilgrimage to Sacramento. He was thus deeply committed to the farm worker cause; he was also committed to ministering to all the members of his parish. There were so many hard feelings among different members of the parish during this period that they had to suspend the greeting of peace during the Eucharist. They also suspended parish meetings because they were afraid that there would be physical fights between groups of parishioners. The Franciscans re-opened the parish building to UFW meetings in 1968, prompting the growers and some of their employees to leave for another parish in town.

The late 1960s was a period of rising violence on the picket lines. Growers and their affiliates hired or inspired groups of strikebreakers to attack strikers or those who had come to express solidarity with them. In one case, a gang of “goons” attacked a student from Notre Dame University who had come to volunteer for the union. They impaled him on a car, smashed his nose, and beat him. Fr. Ed Fronske received a call from union organizers begging him to come to a local park to lead a Mass for peace. He recalls: “I got a phone call that morning from the people, I think it was near Wasco. And they said, ‘We are on the verge of violence, and we need you to come out and say a Mass in the park, or we’re not going to be able to control it anymore.’ So I went out and said a Mass in the park for peace, for non-violence.”
Groups of clergy interested in the farm worker struggle came on fact-finding delegations to Delano, and the Franciscan Friars received them. Many of these clergy and religious leaders described being confused and disoriented by their experiences. They were outraged by grower violence, and then taken aback by the anger of union activists. Fronske recalls how in 1970:

... there was a lot of scary stuff going on. There were some people killed. So it was a very tense ... and the [clergy and religious order] superiors went out to the picket line. And the growers made probably one of their biggest mistakes of the whole strike. They went down the line of picketers and sprayed them with the stuff that they used to spray then, pesticides, yeah. ... They went down with a truck and sprayed them. It was the dumbest thing they could have done, but they did it. And if there was anything that galvanized people to support César and his non-violent stand and understand how hard it was, that was that one particular incident.36

This event was covered by the media and became a public relations nightmare for the growers. The nonviolent response of the farm workers accorded them legitimacy, and set the stage for the first union contract.

Many religious visitors asked for the Friars’ perspective on the union and movement, and they interpreted these events using the approach to reflection and analysis taught them by McCoy. The Friars created a space for people to talk, served as interpreters of the farm worker movement for other religious leaders.37 They undertook these efforts as representatives of the Franciscans. Fr. De Groot noted:

I always felt that we were there, we were extensions of the province, in other words, we knew that Alan was supportive. ... We had these Valley Friar meetings ... and I always felt that we were there, not just as individuals, we were there really with the support of the province ... in general I felt that the province at large was really supportive of us being there and working with the farm worker situation.38

As soon as the first union contracts were signed in Delano, farm workers in the Salinas lettuce fields promptly went on strike. Chávez came to the Salinas Valley to bring organizing skills and contract negotiating experience. During this period, he received credible death threats from growers, and traveled with multiple bodyguards and dogs. In August 1970, Chávez requested a safe house from the provincial, and McCoy granted him permission to stay at a small house on the property of Saint Francis Retreat, in San Juan Bautista 17 miles from Salinas. He rested there for about a month.39 Chávez’s bodyguards were vigilant for fear that the wooded hill behind the retreat house offered a hiding place for snipers to assassinate Chávez.40 Chavez conducted negotiations with some growers there.41 The Friars offered him refuge from the whirlwind of activity, but it would come at a price.

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During the period after the first contracts were signed in 1970, the UFW faced the challenge of having to administer them. Serving these contracts required a different set of skills than organizing strikes and boycotts, and by most accounts, the union was not particularly effective at administering them.42 Grow-

UFW Marches, Boycotts, Rallies: Farm workers in Indio, California demonstrate in support of a ban of five dangerous pesticides that threaten the health of themselves and their children: parathion, methyl bromide, phosphrin, dinoseb, and captan. Shows a man who holds his child and carries a sign that reads: “Abajo con las pesticidas” (Down with pesticides), c. 1980s (3649). © Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.
ers recruited the Teamsters as a more compliant labor contractor, and violence in the fields continued. Strong feelings of resentment and rancor characterized labor disputes in the Salinas, San Joaquin and Coachella Valleys, even as the UFW gained credibility in society and among religious groups.

In November 1973, the U.S. Catholic bishops broke their official stance of neutrality and specifically endorsed the UFW boycott. By this time, Chávez was a well-known figure in the U.S., especially among circles of religious activists. Hundreds of clergy and religious order members defied court orders and walked a Fresno picket line, and some spent days in jail for their civil disobedience. In Delano, Fr. DeGroot continued as pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and he helped organize religious leaders to address conflicts in the fields:

I was involved with a group of ministers, a couple from Bakersfield, but mostly from the Delano area and Wasco. We formed the Clergy for Non-Violence on the Picket Line . . . we organized ourselves, and two of us would be up at five o’clock in the morning and follow the caravan of picketers from Forty Acres, and we had jackets that had the lettering on it. And we would walk between the people working in the fields and the picketers, and we notified all the papers and the radio stations that we were there, and we would give them a report of any violence. And it was really amazing. Never when we were there was there any violence.

Fr. De Groot viewed both parties, the union strikers and strike breakers, as his parishioners. This challenged the Friars to balance the desire to foster reconciliation and healing with the struggle for justice.

During this decade the farm workers’ struggle extended to the statewide initiative process, with major agricultural interests and the union working on different ballot propositions. The pastor of St. Elizabeth Parish in Oakland, Friar Oliver Lynch, helped lead the boycott of the Fruitvale Safeway, and was known as the “city guru” of the grape boycott. Brother Ed Dunn, who was at the time both a Friar and a UFW organizer, recalls requesting assistance from Fr. Lynch during a particularly difficult moment:

Oliver Lynch was still pastor, and every weekend for this signature campaign, [we] would bring in farm workers from the valley to give presentations at churches and the local community centers, and to do the gathering themselves of signatures . . . I’m on his doorstep on Friday at three to say, “Would it be possible for seventy farm workers to sleep in the [parish] hall?” He said, “Sure, let me get the calendar, Ed, to find out the date you want.” I said, “Actually, they’re coming in an hour.” And Oliver says, “No problem.” And within an hour, he made a couple of calls, and we found 70 mattresses, and the gymnasium was turned into a farm worker encampment for the weekend.

Numerous Friars assisted in gathering signatures at this time, and Alan McCoy led a press conference with 50 religious leaders to decry a negative ad campaign financed by growers.
At least once a year, the Franciscans offered hospitality for the UFW Board of Directors, for Chávez and for his family at their institutional facilities. The province opened up its doors to them at Mission Santa Barbara, Mission San Antonio, St. Francis Retreat, and St. Anthony Retreat House in Three Rivers. This hospitality would cost the retreat houses dearly. For the two decades before the farm worker movement, the retreat houses had received substantial financial and material support from growers. Many retreatants had come from parishes dependent upon the farming industry. When word got out that the Franciscans had hosted Chávez, or expressed support for the union, Catholic growers were outraged by what appeared them as betrayal. They withdrew their support and persuaded others to stop attending events. This brought both St. Francis and St. Anthony Retreats to the brink of financial collapse in the late 1970s.

Ed Dunn had been inspired to join the Franciscans in 1975 after meeting Friars such as Ed Fronske who were active with the farm worker movement. Dunn described the impact the farm workers had on his understanding of his own religious vocation:

... I think they really pushed us, I can speak for my own experience. It pushed me as a Friar to really think about what solidarity means and frankly to ask myself, “if these folks are really working against huge odds to try to form a union, get up at four o’clock in the morning, work a hard day in the fields and then do another eight-hour shift after that—or more—working on the boycott and working for justice” I ask myself, “what are my vows about? How do I get myself off the hook so quickly about how I see our responsibility to be proclaimers of the Gospel, when these folks give their whole life to it?” So they were really evangelizing me.

His reflection relates the impact these social relationships had on him, and his religious self-understanding. In Dunn’s view, a kind of reverse evangelization was taking place across California, where farm workers and union members were active in their parishes and ministry locations.

I think that all of the Valley Friars who started getting involved in the ‘60s in this support for the farm workers did it a) because there were farm workers in their parishes, and b) because they got to know César personally, but most importantly c) I think they found a sense that the struggle for non-violence, the faith, the perseverance, the sort of gutsiness of the movement, and of the union, to bring people that had... been assumed could never be organized, and to insist that it could be done. I think you would say that most of those Friars felt evangelized by César and the movement. So it was not simply a place to minister, but [a place] to be ministered to. If you were wondering whether your own parish organization or your own parish leadership was ever going to develop in the way that you wanted to, and maybe you were ready to throw in the towel or say, “This is going to take way too long,” all you had to do was look over the fence and see César taking on the largest agribusiness... in the country and say, “Well, maybe our struggle isn’t as bad, and maybe we have something to learn from him and the movement.” So I
think there really was an early sense of a kind of transferal of evangelizing energy that happened among our Friars.52

Thus, the ministers were being ministered to by the poor themselves. But for Dunn, the dynamic of reverse evangelization reached beyond individuals and their ministries to reach the entire province.

[It was] as if God said to us, “All the pronouncements you’ve made in your chapters, and in the leadership you’ve elected to your province in the ’60s and the ’70s and the ’80s and beyond, it’s all very important, but you may have a temptation to leave that on paper. So I will give you a movement of poor people to really give you the opportunity to enflesh it.” That’s how I see the farm worker movement. . . . A lot of my understanding of Franciscan spirituality has come through the UFW, because it forced me to figure out how they were looking at Saint Francis. What did they see in Francis that was so powerful that I was missing? And I began to see it through a new way.53

The UFW and its associated social movement challenged the Franciscans to re-think the socio-political dimension of their religious vocations. The farm worker movement manifested self-sacrifice, non-violence, voluntary poverty, and the struggle for justice; this inspired Franciscans to explore the meaning of their own conversion in a more profound way.

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND ONGOING CONVERSION

As the farm worker movement has faded from the public eye, the Franciscans have been less engaged with it and its issues. Friars have not worked for the UFW as organizers or chaplains since 1990, but many who were involved have continued to practice deep social engagement on the social margins. Ed Dunn for example accompanied the poor in shantytowns in El Salvador and Mexico. Ed Fronske served as pastor for a farm worker parish for nine years, and has served as pastor on an Apache reservation for more than twenty years. Ignatius De Groot served parishes in poor immigrant communities in Northern California, worked as a pastoral agent in a Guatemalan shantytown, and eventually returned to the U.S. to serve on a Native American Reservation. He notes that his experience of participating in the farm worker movement had a lasting impact on him:

Once you start in on something like this, you become conscientious. It stays with you. I mean, every place since then, I’ve been socially involved. Whether it was [a community organizing group] in Oakland, in Stockton, or even on the Indian Reservation . . .54

For Ed Dunn, although the relationship between the farm workers and the Franciscans evolved over time, it remained important. He described an event at
the 1994 Chapter, held one year after the death of Cesar Chávez during what was a very difficult moment for members of the St. Barbara Province:

. . . we invited Artie Rodriguez, the new [UFW] president, and Helen Chávez, his widow, to come and speak with us. And what was powerful for me is two things. The [first thing was] they said were how important it had been for César and for the farm worker union to have [had] not simply the physical and organizational support of the Friars through all those years but [also] the spiritual support, because César had a particular love for Saint Francis. And he felt, in the Friars, that there was some kind of spiritual connection to the life of Francis that gave him energy to take the risks that he needed to take. And so whenever they came to us, it really was a feeling like being re-embraced in a religious tradition that gave César courage that they were all pretty much astounded with. So that was a very powerful moment. But then the second one was the real dramatic moment when both Artie and Helen said, “We know that you are going through crisis right now, through the whole sexual misconduct struggle, and you have been with us all of these years, and we know that some people now have been tempted to turn away from you.” And they said to us, “We’ll never do that.”

Dunn wept as he related this story. This scene echoes the iconographic depiction of Christ crucified reaching an arm down to comfort the grieving Francis.

Even though Friars are no longer active with the farm worker movement, this style of social engagement has continued in two modes: accompaniment of diverse civil society organizations, and animation of Friars’ social con-
sciences, a process internal to the Franciscans themselves. Accompaniment was expressed by joining or collaboratively launching civil society organizations. Franciscans actively participated in protest against nuclear weapons testing in Nevada, and helped start the organization, Nevada Desert Experience, to commemorate the eighth centenary of the birth of St. Francis. Scores of Franciscans along with thousands of other persons of faith committed civil disobedience at the Nuclear Test Site.56 Others serving homeless persons in San Francisco helped found a low-income housing corporation while advocating with public officials for protecting urban housing. During the Central American wars of the 1980s, Franciscans and their parishes hosted refugees and collaborated with the Sanctuary movement. In 1994, in response to the anti-immigrant California Proposition 187, the Franciscans co-founded the Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, and have continued to advocate for this issue.57 Although the California Friars appear to have evinced more social engagement during this era relative to many other Franciscan provinces, Franciscans around the world have worked with civil society organizations to advocate for peacemaking, human rights protection, basic social services for the poor, sustainable development, and environmental protection. The sustained contact with poor and marginalized people described herein appears to have heightened the awareness of justice issues in this province.

Less visible but equally significant has been the work to educate and “animate” the Friars within their own religious communities. Pope Paul VI called for national, regional and local initiatives to analyze their local pastoral situation for how best to make Catholic social teaching practical and specific.58 Many religious orders launched their own efforts at social analysis, and these eventually resulted in “peace and justice” offices, or in the case of the Franciscans, “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation” offices, found at the highest level of the order as well as in most provinces. The first article in the General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor describes the vocation of Franciscans as including the preaching of reconciliation, and peace and justice by their deeds.59 The chapter on evangelization states: “. . . no one can evangelize who has not first accepted evangelization.”60 The General Statutes, in turn, describe the work of justice, peace and integrity of creation offices as ensuring that these themes are a part of the life and service of the order.61 They are headed by who Friars animate their confreres, which in contemporary Franciscan parlance means conducting advocacy for justice, peace and creation issues, but more importantly, the continuing education and ongoing formation of social conscience among the Friars. The degree of social engagement varies widely among Franciscan Friars and provinces, making generalizations unsatisfactory. Many provinces are chiefly focused on serving pastoral needs, but others have been profoundly affected by social movements. For example, Brazil’s Santa
Catarina Province worked very closely with the movement of landless people (known as MST in Portuguese), and subsequently re-designed their formation and evangelization strategies around their accompaniment.62

To commemorate the eighth centenary of the founding of the Order, José Rodríguez Carballo, the Minister General, wrote a document to the entire order framed in the language of Francis’ Testament, using as sub-titles the exact phrases quoted in the introduction of this article. It describes conversion as “the result of the initiative of God, who gets in touch with us through our meeting with the other . . .”63 Carballo asserts that too often, spiritual formation is too theoretical, too removed from the concrete suffering of the poor, and challenges the Friars to undertake “journeys closer to the lepers of our times.”64

CONCLUSION

Francis described the lasting impact that encounters with lepers had on him: what had been bitter became sweet.65 The farm worker movement was for many Franciscans an agent of their own ongoing conversion. It gave a specific voice to poor people seeking justice; it prompted Friars to respond with love, hospitality, and solidarity. The sustained contact between members of both groups over several decades deepened the impact of this mutual accompaniment. Social circumstances favored sustained collaboration between the farm workers and the Friars. These events unfolded concurrently with a return to the sources of Franciscan life. Just as the interests of the Franciscans and the farm worker movement were congruent, so too were the interests within the Friars in linking ressourcement with concrete acts for justice. The farm worker movement was an inspiration and a source of hope for many Friars. It inspired them to risk believing that conversion was possible, in the personal, institutional and social dimensions of their lives. Sustained contact between these groups and their members over decades resulted in profound impacts on the religious identities of the Franciscans, and the social dimension of their vocation.

Friars active with the farm workers used language and imagery consonant with—though not directly drawn from—that of Francis’ description of his own conversion. As Friars reflected upon the example of St. Francis during this turbulent era, the farm worker struggle provided a specific, compelling case in which these ideas challenged them to action. Several participating Friars felt like they represented the spirit of St. Francis in the midst of social conflict. Friars described this movement as shaping their social conscience, inspiring them to self-sacrifice and the practice nonviolence, and deepening their self-understanding as Franciscans.

This essay suggests three directions for further research in spirituality. First, this demonstrates the importance of a spirituality of Christian ministry.
The dynamic of conversion described herein is not limited to the Franciscan tradition. Many “official” religious leaders report experiences in which what started as ministering to others resulted in their own edification, evangelization and conversion. The social context of ministry and its impact on the spirituality of ministers merits additional investigation and elaboration. Second, more in-depth and comparative studies are needed to flesh out the relationship between social movements, religious groups, and shared understandings of justice. Some work on this has been done, but more is needed to explain the role of religious imaginaries, the spirituality of social movement leaders, what and how spiritual traditions contribute to social movements, and how they mutually influence each others’ development. Religious leaders have affirmed and thus legitimized social justice movements, but this study suggests that the impact of social movements on religious groups and their discourses merits closer examination. Third, a comparative study of ongoing conversion within Christian spiritual traditions could deepen our understanding of its social dimension. Do other spiritual traditions articulate a role for social prompts? Do other spiritual traditions echo the social circumstances of the conversion of their founders? The Franciscan tradition may be unique in its emphasis on the social dimension of conversion, or it may merely have a more robust lexicon for this.

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NOTES

6. For example, the Life of St. Francis by Thomas of Celano in Armstrong, Francis of Assisi, 180–310.
15. Primary sources of oral history are drawn from nine persons who were interviewed by the author. These were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in California between October 2002 and April 2005. Four were with leaders of the farm worker movement: United Farm Workers co-founder Dolores Huerta (March 19, 2003); Richard Chávez (March 19, 2003; brother of César Chávez); Pablo Chavez (October 9, 2002, son of UFW co-founder César Chávez); and Rev. Chris Hartmeyer (head of California Migrant Ministry 1961–1971, National Farm Worker Ministry 1971–1981, and union staff member 1981–1989; interviewed December 11, 2002). Five were with Franciscan Friars: who actively supported the farm worker movement: Fr. Louis Vitale, OFM (April 30, 2005, former provincial minister of the St. Barbara Province); Fr. Finian McGinn, OFM (November 10, 2002, former provincial minister of the St. Barbara Province); Fr. Ignatius DeGroot, OFM and Fr. Ed Fronske, OFM (both January 14, 2003); and Br. Ed Dunn, OFM (November 10, 2002 and September 7, 2004). Supplemental sources of oral history are drawn from semi-formal interviews with the following persons active with the farm worker movement: Deacon Salvador Alvarez; Luis Valdez (founder of El Teatro Campesino); Leroy Chatfield (former treasurer for the United Farm Workers); and Sr. Dolores Fenzel, OSA. Additional interviews with the following Friars were conducted, with notes taken: Br. Bill Short, OFM; Fr. Evan Howard, OFM; Br. John Gutierrez, OFM; Fr. Alan McCoy, OFM; Fr. Robert Pfisterer, OFM; Fr. Richard McManus, OFM; and Br. Angelo Cardinalli, OFM.
17. Interview with Ed Fronske, OFM and Ignatius De Groot, OFM.
18. Interview with Finian McGinn, OFM.
19. The *Cursillo* (“short course” in Christianity) movement was a renewal program that emerged in Spain during and after World War II. See Marcene Marcoux, *Cursillo: Anatomy of a Movement—the Experience of Spiritual Renewal* (New York: Lambeth Press, 1982).
20. Interviews with Dolores Huerta and Finian McGinn, OFM.
21. Interview with Finian McGinn, OFM.
22. Interview with Ignatius De Groot, OFM.
23. Interview with Dolores Huerta.
24. Interview with Finian McGinn, OFM. Note that this study is restricted to the St. Barbara Province of Franciscan Friars based in California, although Capuchin and Convivial Franciscans also live and minister here; these other Franciscan groups were not active with the farm worker movement. Many individual Franciscan Sisters, however, were quite engaged with the movement.
27. Interview with Ed Dunn, OFM (2002).
28. Interview with Louis Vitale, OFM.
30. Interview with Ed Fronske, OFM.
31. Note that Friars are not the only Franciscan religious order. Many Franciscan sisters also worked with the UFW and the farm worker movement around the U.S. Sister Dolores Fenzel, OSA served as pastoral associate for Our Lady of Guadalupe during the early 1970s.
32. Prouty, Cesar Chavez.
34. Interviews with Ignatius De Groot, OFM and Ed Fronske, OFM.
35. Interview with Ed Fronske, OFM.
36. Interview with Ed Fronske, OFM
37. Interviews with Ignatius De Groot, OFM and Ed Fronske, OFM.
38. Interview with Ignatius De Groot, OFM.
40. Interview with Richard Chavez.
41. Levy, Cesar Chavez, 386
43. Prouty, Cesar Chavez, 102–3.
44. Presentation by Fr. Eugene Boyle, Santa Clara University, October 25, 2004.
45. Interview with Ignatius De Groot, OFM.
46. Interview with Ed Dunn, OFM (2002).
47. Interview with Ed Dunn, OFM (2004).
49. Interviews with Pablo Chavez and Dolores Huerta.
50. Interviews with Angelo Cardinali, OFM, Richard McManus, OFM, and Evan Howard, OFM. The withdrawal of grower support was not the only factor that drove these retreat houses into financial crisis, but it was an important one.
52. Interview with Ed Dunn, OFM (2004).
54. Interview with Ignatius De Groot, OFM.


60. General Curia OFM, *General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor*, article 86.


