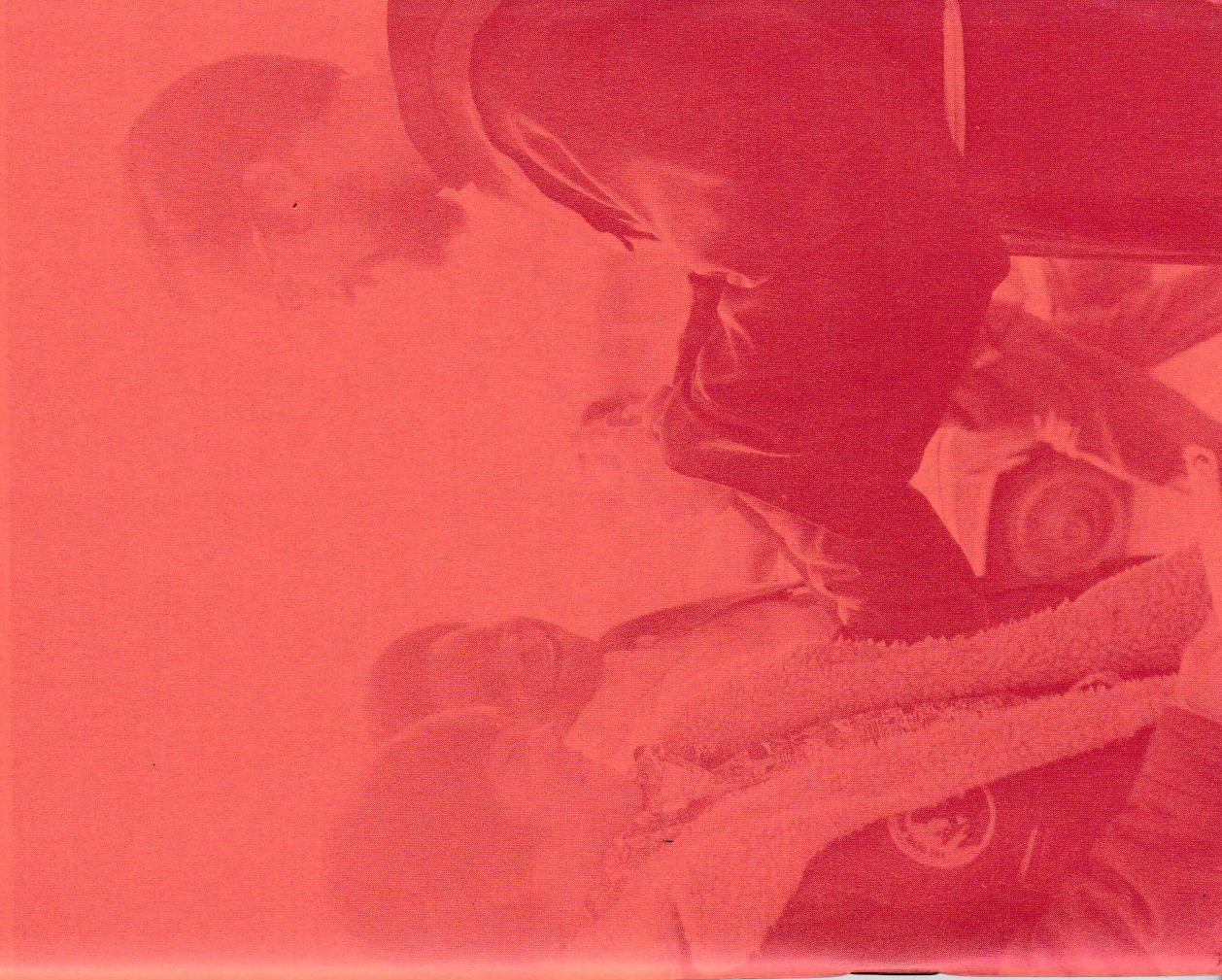


Hans W. Bertsch

Way

March 1974 50c

Christian
Commitment



Way

of St. Francis

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for wayfarers....

THOMAS MORE, the Patron Saint of the individual's conscience versus the tyranny of the State, was once advised to ignore a fine point of law in dealing with a scoundrel who was flouting both the law of God and the laws of the state. The great champion of the Law replied, "If you cut down all the high growth when you are chasing the Devil, then, when the Devil is chasing you, where will you hide?"

I find that young contemporary dissenters to the injustices sometimes done under our laws are surprised that the Great Dissenter so scrupulously observed the civil law. And, in fact, More never broke the least civil law; his enemies finally had to perjure themselves to deal with him. But then Henry was just forming the legal philosophy of the modern Nation State; and More might have to break the law to be true to his conscience were he alive today. Once you break the law, for whatever good reasons of good conscience, damage has been done; so, many people of good conscience find themselves in a dilemma. This is so particularly where a person would withhold federal taxes as a protest against war. Now there may be a solution to this problem of conscience.

H.R. 7053 would establish a World Peace Tax Fund. Under this bill, citizens morally opposed to war could have the portion of their income, estate and gift taxes that would otherwise be appropriated for military purposes channeled to a World Peace Tax Fund.

If this bill passes, many people could follow their consciences within the law. Pope Paul VI, in his Peace Message this year made his theme, "Peace Depends on you." Perhaps what you could do would be to let your Senators and Congressman know that you support this bill which would remove the conflict of law and conscience for many good citizens.

For more information on this seemingly enlightened piece of legislation, you can write to:

WPTF Steering Committee

Box 1447

Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

— Simon Scanlon, ofm

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Elias / Harquahala

— Hans Bertsch

"It isn't the philosophers...but I personally...a prisoner in harness for the fifth year, who has risen to that stage of development where the bad begins to appear the good."

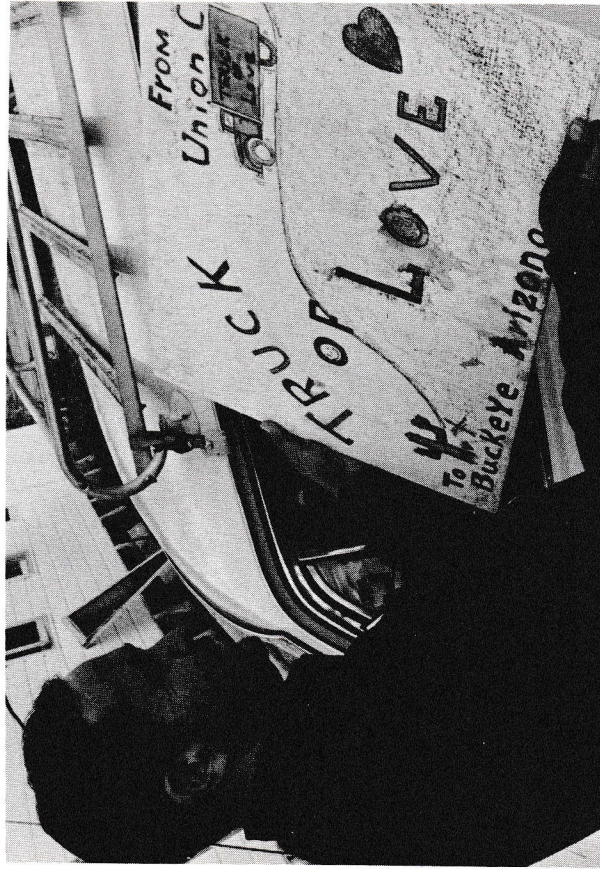
A. Solzhenitsyn,
The First Circle, chapter 8

THROUGH PARKER, Bouse, Hope, and Salome, Arizona, towns built up where two roads meet or cross; then southeast off U.S. 60 over thirty-five miles of dirt roads that connect farms to each other and the outside world, and we arrived at Harquahala Valley at one-thirty Thursday morning. We had driven our rented truck and trailer rig seven hundred and fifty miles since we had left the Bay Area less than thirty hours before. A long journey, but with light banter and deep respect between us, the trip had been pleasant. And we knew that we would visit our friend in the desert, the joyful Franciscan Elias.

As we turned off the last road, the plain, barracks-like wooden church took on distorted shapes. The moon was high in the cloud-patched sky, and our bouncing headlights shone momentarily on the shadows, then heightened the moon-bright areas, twisting shadows into light, and darkening what glowed. The flat dirt around the church served as the parking lot, and we drove into it. A mangy, thin mongrel — named Wolf — barked at us, chased along the side of our dust, then ambled off to a respectful distance, still barking, as we stopped by the back of the church.

"Elias isn't in; must be spending the night at one of his other missions," Gordon remarked as he laid his driving gloves on the dash of the truck's cab, pointed to the side of us where Elias usually parked his car, and twisted out from behind the steering wheel, testily unstiffening his legs on the Arizona ground. I got out the other side, commented on the church, and pretended to look around as I stretched my back and neck.

A metal door slammed; "*¡Callate, perrito!*" The dog whimpered, and the voice continued, "That you, Mr. Stewart? You're



Photos by Hans Bertsch

early! Come in for some fresh enchiladas my wife just made today. We'll put a fresh pot of coffee on. Welcome back!"

Gordon coughed, rearranging the dust in his throat, and relaxed. The truck was with the people of Harquahala once more, and his good friend Fabian was there to meet him. The strength of their abrazo warmed the cold desert air, introductions were hasty, and we went into the early-sixties-style trailer house, old members of the family.

Cigarettes were passed around, and we sat at the table. Gordon asked about Fabian's children; Tijerina forgot about the coffee as she wanted to show us the pictures of their eldest daughter's wedding just a few months ago. The life of her family gave her home a richness that more than made up for the poor surroundings.

Father Elias Galvez, OFM, arriving from Buckeye, woke Gordon and me the next morning at eight-thirty. We had spread out the night before on the broken-down sofa and a fold-up steel frame bed in the sacristy-living-room-bedroom-kitchen of the church that was home for Fr. Elias. The eagerness of Elias quickly eliminated any thought of further sleep. "I saw your truck, Gordon, and knew you were here. ¡Bienvenidos!"

★ ★ ★

Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter are special holidays. For the people of Elias, they are made even more special through the love and generosity of their friends miles away in California. For the past few years, the Truck of Love has been rolling from Union City, in the southeast Bay Area, to Harquahala Valley in southwestern Arizona. The brain-child of Gordon Stewart, the Truck of Love carries food, clothing, medicine and toys to the farmworkers of the Arizona desert. During these special holidays, Gordon organizes the families of southern Alameda County into a massive community of love. Sisters, Boy Scouts, parishioners of Our Lady of the Rosary Church, families — both children and their parents — all bring in canned food, flour, beans, new and used shirts, pants, dresses, coats and shoes. Pharmacies donate aspirins and other medical supplies; and people whose closets are bare send in a dollar, or five or twenty-five, to help pay for the rental of the truck or some of the gas necessary to drive the goods to Arizona. If there is not enough, Gordon somehow gets in touch with a few more people, and a filled truck heads for Arizona. Gordon's strong determination to share his life, bringing a measure of decency to people eking out a hard existence on soil that is not even their own, has made the Truck of Love not just a crucial help to people without even basic necessities, but a living sign of human concern for the welfare and dignity of our poorer brothers and sisters.



Elias put on a pot of coffee, sat down on a folding metal chair, and smiled. "It's good to see both of you again. It's been a hard year for the people here. The rains have been bad — either not enough or too much. And if there is no cotton or lettuce growing, it is even harder for them to earn a living. My people aren't lazy — but sometimes no matter what they do — there's not enough for even the basics. Is your truck full? Of course. I know you. This afternoon we can start unloading the truck. The people can really use what you've brought, Gordon."

We spent the morning talking with Elias, a short, round-faced Franciscan priest, thin, just slightly graying, stooped from long years of laboring with his native and American-born *mexicanos*. He spends every weekend traveling over 900 miles to visit his missions sprawled around the Arizona vastness. He brings the people food, clothing and other necessities, along with the sacraments. We talked about the poor, farmworker unions, and the rich. Any feelings of sadness over the plight of his people were quickly tempered by the hard-won realism of Elias.

"They're a happy people," he said, proving it with his own smile. "They're much happier than most people I know with more money. My people are really so nice; they show their appreciation and don't take things for granted. I'm getting spoiled. You know, I'm more at home in a setting like this than in a middle class parish, because I was raised poor." His people know the infertility of life and have gained survival by living against the odds. He walks among them, as a Planter of the planters, nourishing the lives of a people deeply rooted in the earth.

Father Elias lives a simple life, centered around the needs and concerns of his people. As their priest, he is their brother. "I'm trying to live like the people I live with...I guess I'm poor, because I don't have any needs." This is typical of Elias; he can turn an ingrained American social value upside down with one short sentence.

He told us quite unpretentiously that he keeps cans of food in his car, and when it is time to eat, "I stop and open up a can, eat it right out of the can, and move on. One time I picked up a guy — well, I guess you'd call him a real tramp, and he asked me if I had any food. So I gave him a can of soup. After he opened it, he told me, 'You know, this wouldn't be bad if it were hot.'" Elias paused, then added, "I guess I'm just used to it."

Our conversation naturally centered around the workers he serves. They usually work ten hours a day, just to earn enough to feed their families. A tractor driver may earn \$1.50 an hour, but



the normal rate is a dollar and a quarter. They are only paid during the season, so their average for the entire year is much lower. The one unionized farm, with a UFWOC contract, is a branch of a Delano-owned farm and pays union wages — two dollars an hour plus, and a "perbox" rate. The influence of Cesar Chavez has reached to Arizona, but far more is needed.

At the first cleaning of the growing lettuce, the owners give the workers a hoe with a short handle, so that the workers have to work ten hours completely bent over. They say this is to protect the young lettuce plants. Fabian's mother had come over to the sacristy to bring us some food, and was listening to our conversation. I asked her if she had ever used the short-handled hoe. She nodded, "*Es muy duro — y que cansado* — it is hard, tiring work." Her understatement reflected years of experience in the field.

As Elias talked, my head ached from the suffering he spoke about. "Cesar Chavez's union is really needed here," Elias said. For instance, he told us about one worker, a tractor driver, who had received a serious blow on the head, and had to go to the doctor. But the growers do not allow them to see a doctor during working hours. When he and his wife returned late that evening, they could not get into their house. The owner had locked the house; all their possessions were on the inside, and they had been coldly and efficiently locked out. The farm worker lost his house and job, and, as if that was not enough, had since developed a brain tumor during his "recovery." Elias let them live in his own room in the church (he just moved out to his car) until they could find some place to live. The grower has not helped the evicted worker at all. "That shows the need for the farmworkers' union," Elias said quietly, "to give them a little power so that such injustices can't be forced on the people." It was hard for me to understand the strength of this people in not rising up in violence.

An ecumenical "Truth Squad" had been sent into the desert recently to find out the true feelings of the workers regarding the union. Elias laughed, almost crying. "They came out here and surveyed 150 farmworkers, and concluded no one wanted Chavez and his union. So they got a big news story, that the farmworkers are against the union. At least these white church leaders were sincere in trying to find out the truth. But they were limited" — Elias paused over each word — "by the very nature of their inquiry. Any time an Anglo asks a worker, 'Do you want Chavez and a union?', he thinks the questioner is one of the boss's men. Obviously, the worker will answer 'No.' But if I asked them, then I would hear a different story — because I'm almost one of them." The browned priest looked at us, "If they tell an Anglo what they really feel, they would be out of a job." I was reminded of a

passage from Solzhenitsyn's THE FIRST CIRCLE: "These trusting, loving eyes — they might very well be working for the security officer." An odd comparison.

Another knock on the door; introductions were easy; I was the only newcomer, and Vasilio was a comfortable man, with a smooth, broad face, full-smiling. Father Elias continued our conversation. "I've taken kids to the doctor, because the boss won't let the father off to take the kid himself." Vasilio nodded in agreement, and then shared his own recent experience.

A few days ago, "Junior," the five-year-old son of a widower farmworker, had been playing and cut his head just above the eye. Because the father had to work and then take care of his other children, Vasilio drove Junior the thirty miles to "the good Catholic doctor" in Buckeye. On the way to the doctor's he had met a policeman who said the cut needed a doctor's attention. When he finally arrived at the doctor's office, it had already closed. After some persistent knocking, the doctor came out, and without so much as a cursory examination of Junior, told Vasilio, "I'm closed; take the boy in to Phoenix." That was another thirty miles, one way. After he was refused attention, Vasilio started on his way again, and by happen-chance met the policeman with whom he had just talked earlier. The officer inquired about Junior's condition, but Vasilio had to tell him that the doctor refused to treat the boy. The policeman got into the car, and told Vasilio to drive back again "to that doctor." Junior was treated.

Later that afternoon, I saw Junior, a bandage above his eye, carrying a handful of toys from the Truck of Love for himself and his brothers and sisters.

Elias stood up, finished his coffee, and summarized the plight of his people. "A Catholic charity drive had for its theme that everyone has a right to hope. It shouldn't have been 'right to hope,' because nothing is gotten. They have a right to justice. There's a big difference. Some more families are arriving, so let's start unloading your truck, Gordon." Hope is not enough; charity designed to build hope destroys dignity. Promises and hope are too often the excuses of the rich to keep the poor downtrodden. The reality of our human, animal existence, says that we must eat today. Hope leaves a baby's stomach and a father's hand empty; justice fills the child and the parent.

Gordon walked outside just behind Elias, then walked with him to where we had parked the truck. In a remark not meant to have been overheard, Gordon said, "Father, I thank God I've been lucky enough to share part of your work. I hope some of my experience rubs off on someone else so they can share it, too." That afternoon we unloaded the Truck of Love. ●