

# Chavez: Is He A Devil, Or A Saint?

By GERARD E. SHERRY

Somewhere the other day asked whether Cesar Chavez was a saint or a devil, and this is perhaps the dilemma for many who have had dealings with him. To the growers of California he is anything but a saint, but with his followers there is almost an automatic canonization.

To those of us who have dealt for any length of time with the leader of the United Farm Workers Union, he has those virtues of sincerity and integrity which one does not normally associate with the hard-boiled labor leader in the modern day. What is more, there is a charismatic aura about him which belies his small stature and soft voice.

Still, Chavez is strong willed, and as volatile as any Latin-American, and also he is strong of purpose in his goal of achievements through non-violence.

To understand him, one has to go back to his beginnings and his birth near Yuma, Arizona, in 1927. His grandfather was a Mexican campesino who homesteaded land which later became the State of Arizona. In 1939, Chavez's father became a victim of the depression, lost the land, and with his family became migrant workers. They suffered much, and young Cesar was part of it.

In growing up, Cesar learned his religion from his grandmother and his beliefs in non-violence from his mother. He also claims influence from the lives of St. Francis Assisi and Gandhi. He joined the Community Service Organization, being a disciple of Saul Alinsky and Fred Ross, from whom he learned how to organize. When he felt he had learned enough he formed the National Farm Workers Association in 1962. At the time, he had a wife and eight children, little money, but great courage and discipline.

Jacques Levy, his official biographer, quotes Chavez as saying: "I don't think I could base

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my will to struggle on cold economics or some political doctrine. I don't think there would be enough to sustain me. To me, the basis must be faith."

And it is to the Catholic faith that Cesar Chavez has remained loyal, despite his own belief that until recently the Church has neglected his people, especially the farm worker. To express his faith and his belief in non-violence in the past 11 years, he has twice undertaken long fasts, the first in 1968 of 25 days duration and the second in 1972 of 24 days — both as penitential acts for "La Causa."

Just recently, Frank Fitzsimmons, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, mockingly labeled him "a twentieth century mystic." But to those who know Chavez and have worked with him, his mysticism is real and potent.

He was well aware that his two long periods of fasting would be injurious to his health, but he went ahead anyway, ignoring his doctor's pleas, putting his movement and his workers ahead of his life. These acts have not gone unnoticed among his followers who see in him more than a mere leader, but also a friend and confidante. His whole life-style is nearer that of his workers than his detractors, be they teamster union leaders or the growers.

He lives in the same frame house in Delano, which he has resided in since the start of his struggle. The only secure thing in it is the backyard fence. It's in a rundown part of the town, among the workers whom he serves. His salary is a mere pittance compared with the average labor leader, and his example has enabled his associates within the union to also accept a token income, with most of the union

funds going to the service of the workers.

This is not to say that he is fault-free. He is very quick tempered, especially in relation to incompetence and laziness among union members. He can storm and rave over a situation, but once he has spoken, that's the end of it. He presumes corrections will be made and situations improved. He bears no grudges and forgives easily.

Like many other charismatics he has learned humility through humiliation — and he suffered much of that. It points up one of his great characteristics — a great sense of humor in times of stress. Again, Jacques Levy illustrates the point:

"One such scene occurred at a motel conference room in Bakersfield last July, 12 hours before his major contracts with the big Delano growers were to expire.

"Chavez had asked for a break with the critical negotiations at an impasse after talks lasting from 6 p.m. to 3:30 a.m. Now the farm workers had returned to the conference room and were waiting for the growers to appear. Part of the negotiating team were two dozen farm workers who sat silent, serious and tense.

"Suddenly Chavez leaped up on the negotiating table, facing the growers' empty chairs. He arched his left arm upward while stretching out his right — thrust, parry, thrust. In the best swash-buckling style of Errol Flynn, he was shadow fencing his enemy. "This is Zorro," he joked as he went through his pantomime. The farm workers smiled and relaxed, their tensions eased.

"Thirty minutes later the growers were back, the position unchanged. After 15 minutes of



useless talk the negotiations broke up. The farm workers left the room shouting 'Huelga! — Strike!'

Chavez remains optimistic. The coming boycott might take a year or two, he told his followers, but growers cannot withstand the pressure indefinitely. As for the workers, he spoke from his experience: "In the movement, nobody starves. The people will sustain us."

And his people sustain themselves through their faith in

Chavez and the Catholic Church in which he believes. I remember not too long ago a priest critic of the United Farm Workers condemning Chavez for having rosary beads on the headboard of a San Jose Hospital bed where he was languishing as a result of a fast. The priest suggested it was merely a gimmick and that Chavez had no religious sincerity. The trouble was, the priest had never met Chavez, but only his detractors. One has to meet the man to believe in him and the righteousness of his cause.

## Chavez Union Reiterates 'Non-Violence' Posture

Fresno (RNS) — The United Farm Workers, headed by Cesar Chavez, reiterated their stand for "non-violence" when they adopted the union's first constitution during a three-day convention here.

Also during the convention, which drew some 2,000 persons, including 352 delegates, union officials, politicians and churchmen, the UFW members officially elected Chavez first president of the union to serve a four-year term.

Addressing the UFWU, Chavez said the union is facing a "life or death struggle" and is essentially back where it was in the late 1960s. But he told the delegates and onlookers, "The world knows that nothing will stop us from having our union."

Putting his case to the "court of last resort — the American public" — Chavez said he is asking Americans to boycott products harvested under what he calls illegal "sweetheart" contracts, including grapes, lettuce and wines.

The UFW statement on non-violence was part of the union's 111-page bilingual (English and Spanish) constitution. It said that "every member is sworn to reject the use of violence in any form for any purpose whatsoever." It also emphasized that the goals

for organizing union recognition, picketing boycotting, must be accomplished "only by and through totally non-violent means."

Among those lending support to the union's efforts to regroup and reorganize (its membership is reportedly down to 18,000 from a 1970 peak of 80,000) after losing many of its contracts, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph F. Donnelly of Hartford, Conn., told the farm workers he brought the prayers and good wishes of the U.S. Catholic bishops.

Bishop Donnelly, who chairs the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Farm Labor and took part in the 1970 negotiations between the UFW and growers, said that at

a recent meeting of the bishops they "showed an enthusiastic interest in your cause."

The prelate described that support as a "good page" in the country's religious history and he said "I am happy I was part of it."

Bishop Donnelly said union membership is not only a right but a duty. "The time has long since passed to debate the single right to join a union. Working people have a duty to organize. Not only must the worker be concerned with his own personal welfare, he must be concerned with the general welfare. No workers standing alone can help with these problems. A union can."



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