

Features

Spiritual dimension sustains efforts to aid farm workers

By Lee Strong

Cesar Chavez was 12 years old in 1939 when his father and uncle participated in an early attempt to organize farm workers. "They had a strike and my father and uncle picketed," he now recalls. "It made a deep impression on me."

That strike failed — as did so many of the farm workers' early efforts to organize — but the impression remained in Chavez. Raised in migrant camps and attaining only a sixth-grade education, Chavez later gained international recognition for his successful efforts to unionize farm workers and to organize grape boycotts in the 1960s and '70s.

Chavez visited western and central New York last week to speak in Rochester, Brockport, Binghamton and Ithaca in hopes of gaining support for the United Farm Workers' current boycott of California table grapes. Begun in 1984, the effort — called the "Wrath of Grapes Boycott" — was undertaken to bring about three objectives: fair elections and bargaining agreements for farm workers; a ban on the use of the dangerous pesticides parathion, phosdrin, captan, dinoseb and methyl bromide on grapes; and joint UFW-grower testing for poisonous residues on grapes sold in stores — with the results of the tests to be made public.

On Monday, Feb. 29, Chavez spoke to more than 350 people at Corpus Christi Church in Rochester, urging them to boycott "anything that even looks like a grape" not only to support the farm workers, but also to protect their own health.

According to Chavez, the grape growers of California use pesticides that are toxic to the workers in the fields, people living downwind from the fields, people whose water supplies are contaminated by the pesticides, and consumers eating the grapes.

"If you think the (Environmental Protection Agency) is protecting you, you are sadly mistaken," Chavez declared.

As part of his presentation, Chavez showed a UFW-produced videotape, "The Wrath of Grapes," which focused on the pesticide problem. The 14-minute movie included interviews with parents of children born with birth defects and suffering from cancers linked to pesticides.

Following the videotape, Chavez talked about people who had been affected by the pesticides. One 30-year-old man, for example, died after working in a field that had just been sprayed with pesticides. "He went to work at 8 (a.m.), he was dead by 10:30," Chavez said. "His employer forgot to tell him that the field had been sprayed that morning."

According to UFW statistics, approximately 300,000 farm workers a year are injured by the pesticides. In the Central Joaquin Valley of California, the cancer rate in farm workers' children is estimated to be four times higher



Cesar Chavez, head of the United Farm Workers' union, tells his audience at Corpus Christi to boycott California table grapes because of dangerous pesticides.

than the expected rate.

Chavez contended that although California has laws to protect workers' rights and health, and to prevent pesticide pollution, the laws are not being enforced. Not only are workers being affected, he said, but residents of areas near the fields also are suffering the effects of the pesticides, Chavez noted. In California, 19 cancer clusters — areas showing higher than expected cancer rates — have been identified in farming regions, according to Chavez. In the town of Delano, for example, 31 children within a six-block area have been diagnosed with cancer in the last year, he said. Yet, he said, nothing is being done to correct the problem.

In light of this lack of legal and governmental support in California, Chavez said he decided to appeal to consumers. "We believe the American consumer is our best court — the court of last resort," Chavez said.

"We have seen in our lifetime two or three times when the consumers made a difference (through boycotts)," Chavez said. "We see the consumers and farm workers as one family."

Chavez first achieved fame for the grape boycott he organized in the 1960s. At one point, an estimated 17 million Americans joined the boycott, and this support convinced the farm owners to negotiate with farm workers.

The boycotts, fasts and other non-violent



Mary Ann Franchi of Rochester talks with Cesar Chavez at a reception following his address at Corpus Christi Parish. Chavez visited western and central New York last week in hopes of gaining support for the United Farm Workers' grape boycott.

techniques the UFW has used in all of its labor disputes can be traced to Chavez's training in Saul Alinsky's Community Service Organization. In 1952, Chavez, working in the fields but already recognized as a local farm worker leader, was recruited by the CSO. By 1958, he had become the organization's general director. He left the CSO in 1962 to begin organizing the UFW.

Chavez also attributes his techniques — and their success — to his faith. "An economic cause is not enough to sustain you, not enough to sustain anyone," he explained.

Every morning when he is home, he and his wife rise before dawn to pray — he to read Scriptures, she to say the rosary. Consequently, he said, his work has a spiritual dimension, and he has seen that dimension affect the outcome of the farm workers' campaigns.

"There are times when we (get into situations in which) there seems to be no way out," Chavez noted. "Even with the strongest faith we know we can't win — and something happens." Nonviolence as a technique is not well un-

derstood, Chavez said. "Nonviolence calls attention to the problem a lot more effectively than violent methods," he explained. "It's a natural method, and a lot of people will respond (to it)."

Non-violent methods place "the opposition in a quandary," he continued. "They don't know how to deal with people who are willing to sacrifice, to suffer, to talk and to persuade, not just confront."

If nonviolence is to succeed, however, it needs a spiritual dimension, Chavez said. "(Nonviolence) doesn't do anything by itself. There must be a faith commitment, a commitment to prayer — that's why it works."

Chavez predicted that the current grape boycott will succeed as well as the earlier efforts did. "We'll be successful, the question is when," he said. "We have patience — it will happen." Success will come about if enough people support the boycott, Chavez said.

"If today the consumers decided to do something, tomorrow you would have clean food," Chavez stated.

attie's
Est. 1940

Young
Fashions

586-8655

MON.-FRI. 10-9
SAT. 10-6



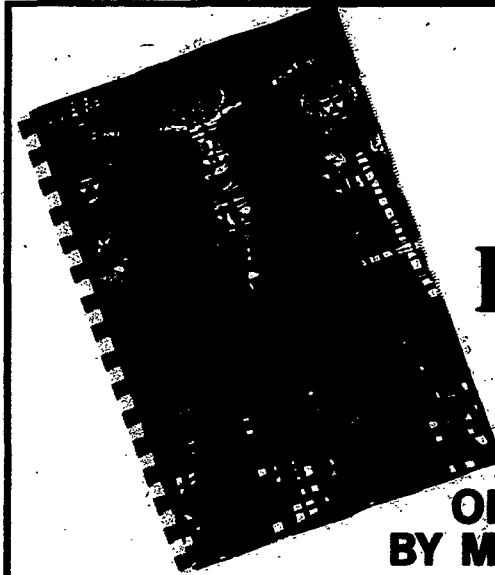
FEATURING A LARGE
SELECTION OF
BEAUTIFUL DRESSES
AND BOYS SUITS

"For
First Holy
Communion"

★ INFANTS
★ BOYS TO SIZE 20

★ SCHOOL UNIFORMS
★ GIRLS TO 14

1467 PENFIELD RD.
PANORAMA PLAZA
ROCHESTER, N.Y. 14625



**THE 1988
DIOCESAN
DIRECTORIES
ARE IN!**

**ORDER YOURS NOW
BY MAILING THE COUPON
BELOW TO:**

COURIER-JOURNAL, OFFICIAL DIRECTORY
1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624

Enclosed please find my
check for
\$ _____ to cover the
cost of _____ Directories.

1988 Diocesan Directory Prices

\$12.00 Single Copy
\$22.00 Two Copies
\$31.50 Three Copies
\$10.00 Each Additional Copy

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Make Checks Payable to Courier-Journal Directory
THE 1988 DIOCESAN DIRECTORY is also available at
Logos and Trant's Bookstores in Rochester