



Extolling education
Catholic schools throughout the Diocese of Rochester celebrated Catholic Schools Week — Jan. 28-Feb. 3 — with a variety of events. Pages 10 and 11.



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Church boosts union efforts

By Rob Cullivan
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A large crowd, containing all of humanity, divided into two great throngs, and stood before the enthroned Son of Man as he prepared to pass eternal judgment over them.

Turning to the saved, he said: "When I was hungry, you fed me; when I was thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me."

And the saved said to the Lord: "When did we do any of these things for you?" And the Lord replied: "Whenever you did this for the least of my brothers and sisters, by paying your union dues and supporting workers' rights to organize, you did it for me."

While the 25th Chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew doesn't read quite like the above interpretation, it might as well, according to David Martinez, a former Catholic seminarian who now works as secretary-treasurer of the United Farm Workers.

"I see Matthew 25:31-46 as an obligation to organize," Martinez told the *Catholic Courier* in a telephone interview from UFW national headquarters outside Bakersfield, Calif. He sees his work as an extension of his Catholic faith — a faith formed within a poor migrant family that picked crops for meager wages in the 1940s and '50s in the U.S. Southwest.

The secretary-treasurer believes that his failure or success as a union organizer ultimately affects the well-being of workers throughout the world.

"What I do today affects people in Central America," he said. "If I refuse to join my fellow workers in trying to better my condition ... then I am taking shelter, food from (others)."

Martinez is one of thousands of Catholics who have spent time, energy, money and sweat working on behalf of unions in the United States. The story of Martinez' union belongs to a long and colorful history of labor organizations in this country, a story in which several chapters show the Catholic Church to be a significant character.

Labor organizations and Catholic reform leaders have worked together in the United States since the mid-19th century. "Catholic reformers wanted the social and economic system to function more equitably so that the poor and overwhelmingly Catholic urban class would have opportunity for advancement," Neil Betten wrote in his 1976 book, *Catholic Activism and the Industrial Worker*.

In the late-1800s, unions received two boosts of support, one from the Catholic hierarchy on each side of the Atlantic. At that time, the U.S. Catholic bishops began scrutinizing the country's first major labor organization, the Knights of Labor, because its secretiveness made it suspect along the same lines as the anti-Catholic movement Freemasonry.

But Baltimore's archbishop, James Cardinal Gibbons, defended the Knights before the American bishops and, subsequently, before Rome. The cardinal's defense was crucial in setting the tone of relations between the church and labor unions in the United States, according to Monsignor George G. Higgins, former director of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and a noted expert on church/labor relations.

"The Cardinal had carefully considered all the arguments against the Knights of Labor and found them unconvincing," the monsignor wrote in a Sept., 1986, article for *New Catholic World*.

"The Cardinal knew the working people of America intimately; he sympathized instinctively with their struggle for social justice and trusted them implicitly," Monsignor Higgins continued, adding, "And from that day to this, there has never been serious friction between organized labor and organized religion in America — a fact which we take too easily for granted."

Monsignor Higgins' article pointed out that labor movements in Europe, unlike those in America, were Marxist in character, alienating Catholic workers from the movements and leftist Catholics from the church. However, between American labor and the church, no such cleavage occurred.

Indeed, Pope Leo XII's 1893 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* was seen as an endorsement of Catholics' involvement in



the labor movement. Although the encyclical rejected socialism and communism, it also had harsh words for unfettered capitalism, and upheld the rights of workers to organize to ensure better conditions.

The encyclical, interpreted by some European Catholics as a papal call for restructuring the economic order, was viewed less radically in the States, Betten's book observed. "Americans readily acknowledged the pope's support of trade unionism," he wrote, adding that it was through trade unionism, and not anti-capitalist revolution, that many Catholics would seek economic reform.

Throughout the 20th century, Catholics made up the bulk of the American working class and, therefore, its unions. Catholics — aided by parish priests, bishops, archbishops, sisters and brothers — struck, picketed and bargained their way out of economic misery, helping to build one of the world's most powerful labor movements through such organizations as the AFL-CIO.

The labor movement made allies of conservative anti-communist Catholics and such leftist activists as Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker movement. Through the Great Depression of the 1930s, Catholics made their mark on the labor movement, with the assistance of such agencies as the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference.

Monsignor Higgins noted that Catholic social activists' involvement in labor tapered off after World War II. "Religious, and lay leaders began to concentrate on a number of social problems which were thought to be of

greater urgency," he wrote.

Nonetheless, Catholicism continued to surface as a powerful pro-union force, most especially in an organization started by the former farmworker and community organizer Cesar Chavez.

Chavez began organizing a militant farm workers' union in California back in the early 1960s. Chavez's beliefs had been influenced by his association with Father Donald McDonnell, a parish priest whom he had met while working with the Community Service Organization, a Mexican-American association.

"(Father) McDonnell introduced (Chavez) to the Papal encyclicals, agribusiness economics, St. Francis and Gandhi," Pat Hoffman wrote in her 1987 book, *Ministry of the Dispossessed*. The teachings of Gandhi influenced Chavez to adopt nonviolence as the way the UFW would fight for the farmworkers' rights, Hoffman wrote, noting that such a strategy inspired Catholics to support the movement.

"Chavez's commitment to nonviolence made possible the broad church support that later developed for the farm labor struggle ...," her book explained. "The religious grounding of Chavez and many of his workers provided a dependable place for thousands of middle class Christians to stand next to farm workers."

Nonviolence and religious faith also played an important role in last year's United Mine Workers of America's strike against the Pittston Coal Group. According to an article in the July, 1989, edition of *Sojourners* magazine, the

Continued on page 15