

Cesar Chavez a natural for sainthood

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers of America, died last month while on union business in Arizona. He was 66.

If we were living at any time during the Christian era's first 10 centuries, Cesar Chavez would already have been proclaimed a saint by the people who knew him best or who personally gained from his lifelong, non-violent struggle for social justice. That number is in the thousands, more likely the millions.

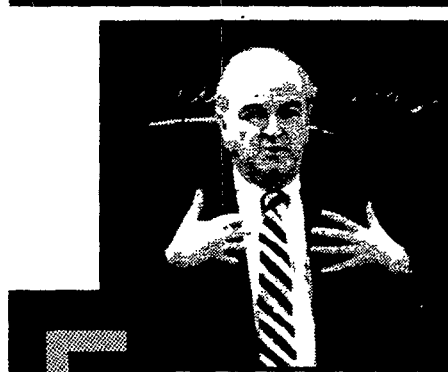
It was not until the end of the 10th century that the first historically attested canonization took place. In the early church martyrs were publicly venerated by the faithful. From the fourth century onward, veneration was extended to those who suffered for the faith, but short of martyrdom. They were called confessors.

As various cults developed, they came under the control of local bishops and councils, but frequently they spread beyond the limits of a diocese and even of a country.

Eventually the papacy intervened. After the publication of Pope Gregory IX's decretals in 1234, only the pope had the authority to canonize a saint.

But most of the early church's greatest saints, including the Twelve Apostles and Paul, were never formally canonized. They were simply recognized as such after their deaths.

Cesar Chavez would have been a natural choice for sainthood under those earlier norms.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

He devoted himself wholeheartedly and without any personal reward to the welfare of some of the most economically oppressed people who have ever worked in the United States, those of whom John Steinbeck had written so movingly in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Mr. Chavez captured the world's attention in the 1960s when he led a lonely battle to unionize the migrant farm workers in California's fields and orchards. He used the strike (*La Huelga*), fastings, boycotts, and long marches to advance *La Causa*.

He fasted for 25 days in the spring of 1968, losing a fifth of his body weight. The end of the fast was marked by the celebration of an open-air Mass at which he took Communion. But he was too weak to speak.

His famous call, also in 1968, for a boycott of grapes was honored by 17 million Americans and his campaign for justice won the support of key political and religious leaders.

The late Robert F. Kennedy described Mr. Chavez as "one of the heroic figures of our time." He was also supported by several Catholic bishops, including two auxiliaries in my own Hartford archdiocese: the late Bishop Joseph Donnelly, one of the pioneer labor priests of the 1950s and 60s, and Bishop Peter Rosazza.

Because of Cesar Chavez's efforts, the California legislature in 1975 passed the nation's first collective bargaining act outside Hawaii for farm workers — laborers who are largely excluded from the protection of federal law.

But Mr. Chavez never realized his dream of creating a nationwide union for a variety of reasons: competition from the Teamsters, internal conflicts, opposition from conservative politicians, and continued resistance from the growers.

In most of the country, therefore, farm workers continue to work at the low end of the wage-scale, live in poor housing, work without medical insurance or job security, and remain vulnerable to exploitation.

In spite of his national and international reputation as a major labor leader, Cesar Chavez was a small, shy and frail man who did not excel at public speaking.

A devoted husband and father with eight children, he was also deeply religious, a living example of

authentic Catholic spirituality.

Unlike the counterfeit piety of those who fail to see God in the faces of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, Mr. Chavez's spirituality was one of total dedication to the needs of others without regard for himself. He had a virtual vow of poverty, taking a weekly salary of \$5. (You read it right, \$5).

He was like Jesus, who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

Mr. Chavez saw his monastic existence as a "powerful weapon" for justice. "When you sacrifice," he once said, "you force others to do the same."

"When you work and sacrifice more than anyone around you, others feel the need to do at least a little bit more than they were doing before."

In an age of racial polarization, Mr. Chavez built alliances with Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans, and whites. "Our belief is to help everybody, not just one race," he said. "Humanity is our belief."

As I pointed out above, during the first 10 centuries of the church's history, before the formal process of canonization began, Cesar Chavez would even now have been proclaimed, "St. Cesar," patron of farm workers.

As a profoundly religious family man with a virtual vow of poverty, a person whose whole life was devoted to securing justice for the poor and the powerless, Cesar Chavez would merit canonization even under the current rules.

The pope would do well to make it official sometime soon.

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for that holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Hebrews 12, 14

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