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Priest who inspired Cesar Chavez dies at age 88

Monica Clark | Mar. 2, 2012

Fr. Donald McDonnell, who introduced the young Cesar Chavez to social justice and the principles of nonviolence, died Feb. 20 in California at the age of 88. Representatives of the United Farm Workers, which Chavez founded more than a decade after meeting McDonnell, were among the mourners at the priest's Feb. 25 funeral at Saint Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco.

The two men became close friends in the early 1950s, when Father McDonnell came to the impoverished east San Jose barrio of Sal Si Puedes ("Get Out If You Can") to establish a ministry among the Hispanic population. Chavez and his wife were among the priest's first parishioners of what would later become Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in San Jose. Chavez drove the priest to farm worker camps to say Mass and accompanied him to local prisons.

"Cesar Chavez tried to live the gospels and the social teachings of his Catholic faith every day, but his career dedicated to service to others all began with the lessons he learned early in life from Father McDonnell," said Arturo Rodriguez, Chavez's successor as president of the United Farm Workers.

"Father McDonnell embodied those Catholic teachings and he profoundly impacted Cesar and so many others," Rodriguez wrote on the union's website.

The priest's association with Chavez "perhaps changed the course of history," said Bishop Gerald Wilkerson, auxiliary bishop in the Los Angeles Archdiocese and president of the California Catholic Conference.

Deacon Salvador Alvarez of the Diocese of San Jose recalled McDonnell leading a Good Friday procession when Alvarez was a high school student in Sal Si Puedes. The priest had a group of men carry a telephone pole representing a cross. He told the worshippers, "the cross of poverty is too hard to carry by any one person," Alvarez told Catholic San Francisco after the priest's death.

McDonnell was one of a handful of priests known as the Spanish Mission Band who traveled throughout Northern California, aiding farm workers and other Spanish-speaking Catholics.

His work impressed a young seminarian, Roger Mahony, during a summer assignment with the priest.

"During that summer, my heart and soul were converted to the work of service to our migrant brothers and sisters, and since then, my life and ministry have been focused on them," said Mahony, now the retired cardinal archbishop of Los Angeles.

In 1961, McDonnell responded to a Vatican appeal for priests to serve in Latin America and was sent to Cuernavaca, Mexico, to teach Spanish language, culture and history to priests, brothers, sisters and lay volunteers preparing to work in Latin America. Three years later, he went to Tokyo to learn Japanese, and in 1964 was sent to Brazil to minister to Japanese immigrants.

He also learned Mandarin to serve the Chinese in Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in San Francisco, where he was pastor from 1970 until his retirement in 1989.

McDonnell was also a strong pro-life advocate and once spent 30 days in jail for blocking a Planned Parenthood entrance. He was among the first people arrested at an Operation Rescue demonstration in the San Francisco area. Wilkerson said the priest prayed the rosary daily for the unborn.

Memorial contributions have been designated for Project Rachel, a post-abortion ministry, in San Francisco.

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