



NEWS RELEASE

ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SAN DIEGO

Retired Bishop Gilberto Chávez Dies

National Pioneer in Hispanic Ministry was Revered Leader in San Diego Region

SAN DIEGO (March 16, 2020) – The Most Rev. Robert McElroy, Roman Catholic Bishop of San Diego, announced the death today of retired Auxiliary Bishop Gilberto Chávez, at age 87, a revered spiritual leader of Catholics across the region, particularly Latinos. He died Sunday at a local retirement home after months of hospice care due to failing health.

Bishop Chávez served the San Diego diocese for 60 years, 46 of them as auxiliary bishop. During this era, the San Diego region's population grew rapidly, particularly among Hispanics. Bishop Chávez championed initiatives both at the diocese and in the broader U.S. Catholic Church to serve Latinos, particularly with Spanish-language ministry.

He tirelessly encouraged parishioners to develop their spiritual formation and their leadership skills. He inspired generations of Latino Catholics to take leadership roles in their parishes, in their communities and in public life.

"The extraordinary gifts Bishop Chávez blessed us with during his lifetime profoundly shaped our faithful, our clergy, our diocese and our Church itself," Bishop McElroy said.

Bishop Chávez launched pioneering programs to represent Latino Catholics in San Diego and Imperial Counties, including training in Spanish. He headed the diocese's first commission to serve Hispanic Catholics, an organization that continues its work today, when Latinos comprise nearly two-thirds of the 1.3 million Catholics at the diocese.

He served in nine parishes, including his first assignment at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Riverside in 1960, his first of two assignments in the Our Lady of Mount Carmel in San Ysidro in 1971, and as rector for 24 years at St. Joseph's Cathedral.

Though Bishop Chávez retired in June of 2007 at age 75, he continued to be active until recently. He offered friendship and counsel to priests, particularly newly ordained ones. And he attended major events, including the ordination in 2017 of Auxiliary Bishop John Dolan, who as an eighth grader was confirmed by Bishop Chávez.

Bishop Chávez always attended celebrations of the faithful. In December of 2017, he attended the annual Our Lady of Guadalupe Mass at the Community Concourse, where he received a standing ovation to the chants of "¡Que Viva el Obispo Chávez!"

"I want to congratulate you for being faithful to the Catholic Church," he told the several thousand who gathered that day, "for choosing the path toward good, truth, humility, and love. You are all important to the Church and to society as a whole."

He was born Gilberto Espinoza Chávez on May 9, 1932, in Ontario, Calif., one of six children in a devoutly Catholic family that had emigrated from Mexico.

After high school, he entered the seminary in San Diego and was ordained in 1960 by Bishop Charles F. Buddy. He served in various assignments across Southern California, including a four-year stint as chaplain at a state drug and rehabilitation center in Norco.

While working in the prison system, he decided to pursue a college degree from UC Riverside to better prepare him for challenges to come.

Pope Paul VI named him auxiliary bishop in 1974, only the second Hispanic bishop at the time in the nation. He served first with Bishop Leo T. Maher and later with Bishop Robert H. Brom, a total of 33 years.

Beyond the diocese, Bishop Chávez actively supported community causes from Oceanside to El Centro, particularly those that advocated for social justice for the poor and disenfranchised. He once marched alongside César Chávez from the border to San Diego to support rights for farmworkers. The Bishop inspired a generation of young activists who would go on to lead organizations in the private and public sectors.

In 1983, he became rector of St. Joseph's Cathedral, where he served for 24 years until he retired as bishop in 2007.

He had requested a public fiesta be held in San Ysidro to celebrate his life. That celebration will be held after the COVID-19 crisis has ended.