

# A Chilean champion of the poor

Labor leader Clotario Blest lived a life both holy and heroic

By JERRY RYAN

Long before there was liberation theology, there was Clotario Blest.

He died peacefully May 31, 1990, in his little room in the Franciscan Convent of the Recoleta, Santiago, Chile, where he had been given hospitality during the last months of his life. He had refused supper and asked the Franciscan community to pray for him, as he expected to die that night. He was 91 years old and weighed 73 pounds. He was buried in his robes marking him as a third order Franciscan.

The following day the workers of Chile observed a minute of silence in memory of Clotario — a gesture of gratitude for all he had done for them. Testimonies of admiration and appreciation abounded. I have before me a yellowing copy of a newspaper that often opposed him, announcing on the front page: "*Ha Muerto Un Hombre Bueno*" ("A Good Man Has Died").

Don Clota, as he was affectionately called, was a thorn in the side of successive governments, be they of the right, left or center. Yet not even his most bitter political enemies could question his integrity. Most of the great champions of social justice had their Achilles heel. Martin Luther King was no model of marital fidelity, Dorothy Day had her turbulent past; Clotario Blest was one solid piece, totally consequent all his life.

Before I met Don Clota, all I knew of him was that he had succeeded in uniting all the Chilean trade unions in a single federation, which he directed for eight years. I learned the

details of his earlier life from his obituary notice. He was the son of a schoolteacher. He lost his family early, entered the seminary and discovered the social teachings of the church through a controversial Jesuit, Fernando Vives Solar.

Clotario soon realized that he wasn't cut out for clerical life. Some sources say he was expelled from the seminary for organizing a student protest against the rector. While studying law, theology and chemistry at the University of Chile, he worked for the Department of the Treasury. At that time, government workers were forbidden to unionize. To get around this, Don Clota formed "athletic clubs" for public workers. Little by little these "clubs" evolved into de facto unions that were eventually recognized.

In 1952 he was named general secretary of a commission seeking to unify all the labor unions throughout the country. This resulted in the Central Unica de Trabajadores, or CUT. Clotario was elected president, a post he held until 1961, when the Communist Party sabotaged his leadership and obliged him to resign. The CUT would remain a powerful force in Chilean society. But once sectarian politics entered the picture, the movement lost the integrity it had under Don Clota, its unity torn apart by petty intrigues.

Clotario never joined a political party. For him, parties divided the working class. Clotario spoke not without humor of the 25 times he had been imprisoned; of his friendship with Che Guevara (Clotario and Che were

named co-presidents of the International Youth Conference in La Havana in the 1960s, when Clotario was already more than 60 years old); of his admiration for Luis Emilio Recabarren, the founder of the Chilean Communist Party. Recabarren had tried to unite the working class around noble ideals, but ultimately committed suicide out of frustration. Recabarren was for Clotario what Peter Maurin was for Dorothy Day.

## Greatest triumph

Don Clota's greatest triumph, up to that time, was the 1955 national strike that paralyzed the country and established the CUT as a formidable force. Clotario recounted how the then-president of the republic, Carlos Ibáñez, unable to govern, had summoned him to his office and offered him his chair and the presidential sash. Clotario simply repeated the demands of the striking workers.

I first met Clotario in 1970. When Salvador Allende was elected president, the Swiss owners of the foundry where I worked decided to "visit their families" in Switzerland and take their capital with them. Six hundred of us were about to lose our jobs. A delegation asked President Allende for state intervention. Thus it was that our plant was among the first to be nationalized.

The government had a plan for worker participation through "production committees." I was elected to head the committees in my section. Neither I nor the other delegates had a clue about what we were supposed

to do, so we consulted the different political parties that composed Allende's coalition government — Socialists, Communists, Christian Left, and so on. They came in suits and ties and told us what the workers wanted and how to get it by toeing the party line. It was all too obvious that these guys wanted to use us. Finally someone suggested that we invite Clotario Blest.

Clotario was already in his 70s, a living but apparently harmless and irrelevant legend. He did not show up with a suit and a tie, but looked like a homeless beggar — about 5 feet tall with a stubbly beard and missing a few teeth, in overalls and a battered beret. He asked us what the workers wanted.

Don Clota worked with us for two and a half years, encouraging us in a certain direction without ever dictating what we were to do. The workers themselves decided. Our role was to inform, suggest and try to carry out

