

Conservative political activist Paul Weyrich dies at age 66

FAIRFAX, Va. – Conservative political activist Paul Weyrich, who was credited with coining the term “Moral Majority” and was considered a chief architect of the modern conservative movement, died Dec. 18 at age 66 after a lengthy illness. He lived in Fairfax.

A funeral Mass for him Dec. 22 at Holy Transfiguration Melkite Catholic Church was to be followed by burial in Fairfax Memorial Park. Mr. Weyrich was a deacon in the Melkite Church.

According to The New York Times, his family did not release a cause of death but associates said he had suffered from diabetes and other health problems over the years. In 2005 his legs were amputated at the knee. He suffered a spinal injury in 1996 that left him confined to a wheelchair.

“The nation has lost a treasure in Paul Weyrich, and I have lost a friend,” said Father Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, in a Dec. 18 statement.

“Paul was a deacon of Jesus Christ. He inspired me, and millions, to appreciate the power that the political process in America provides us, to protect the nation’s key values,” the priest said.

Born in Racine, Wis., Oct. 7, 1942, Mr. Weyrich was a student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison when he became involved in politics. He was active in the Racine County Young Republicans, 1961-63, and was involved with Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign in 1964.

Mr. Weyrich, who left the university before graduating, worked in journalism as a political reporter for what is now the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel daily newspaper. He also worked in television and radio and had a stint as news director of a Denver TV station.

In 1967, he got a job as press secretary to a U.S. Republican senator from Colorado,

which is where he first met beer magnate Joseph Coors. In 1973, with financing provided by Coors, Mr. Weyrich and Edwin Feulner founded the Heritage Foundation, a Washington think tank.

Over the next two decades, Mr. Weyrich founded, co-founded or held prominent roles in a number of other political organizations, including the American Legislative Change Council, an organization of state legislators.

It was Mr. Weyrich who coined the phrase “Moral Majority” that the Rev. Jerry Falwell would choose for the faith-based political organization with which the Baptist minister was most closely associated. Mr. Weyrich met Rev. Falwell in the late 1970s.

In a May 2007 interview shortly after the minister’s death, Mr. Weyrich told Catholic News Service that one success of the Moral Majority was the change it fostered in how Catholics and evangelical Protestants worked with each other.

He recalled an event at an arena in Texas to support a minister who had been booted off his radio station because of preaching against homosexuality. Rev. Falwell introduced Mr. Weyrich by pointing out that “he’s a Catholic,” and adding, “if any of you want to leave, go ahead.”

Perhaps five people stood up among the thousands in the arena. Mr. Weyrich said he saw that as “a change in the atmosphere from the time where Catholics and evangelical Protestants almost could not be in the same room with each other.”

Mr. Weyrich said Rev. Falwell once told him that if they were discussing theology they would “probably come to bloody blows,” but in discussing politics “we were blood brothers.”

The Moral Majority was not always on the side of Catholic Church leaders, especially regarding some of the hot-button issues of the 1980s, such as U.S. policy toward Central America and government programs to aid the poor. For example, one organization affiliated with Mr. Weyrich criticized the U.S. Catholic bishops’ 1983 pastoral letter on war and peace.

“Moral courage was a defining trait of Paul himself,” said Mr. Feulner, president of

the Heritage Foundation. “On any policy issue that turned on a core principle, he never failed to take a public stand – regardless of how that stand might affect his professional or personal relationships.”

He called Mr. Weyrich a “a visionary, a builder, a moral and political leader” and said “America is a better and stronger country because of his contributions.”

Mr. Weyrich is survived by his wife of 45 years, Joyce; two daughters, Dawn Ceol of Haymarket, Va., and Diana Pascoe of Honolulu; three sons, Peter of Alexandria, Va., Stephen of Fairfax Station, Va., and Andrew of Fairfax; and 13 grandchildren.