

**Life of Blessed Charles
of Mount Argus**

A KNIGHT OF THE CRUCIFIED

BLESSED CHARLES OF MOUNT ARGUS

1821 - 1893

Edition IV

BY

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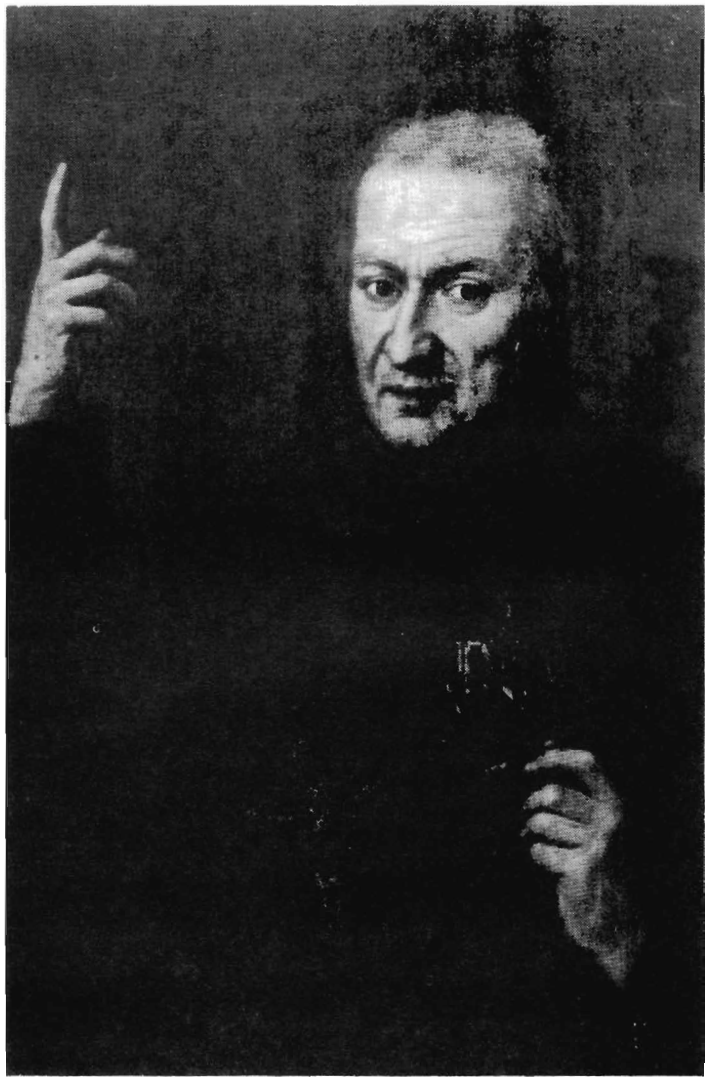
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Blessed Charles of Mount Argus

*Always at the beck and call of all
Always absorbed in prayer*



St. Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists, 1694-1775.

A KNIGHT OF THE CRUCIFIED

**Trumps
and
Troubles** The Mayor of Munstergeleen was fonder than most men of a good game of cards. It was about the only way of spending pleasantly the long winter evenings in the obscure Dutch village where there were few distractions and fewer interests outside the normal routine of everyday life. Sitting at the kitchen table in the Houbens' farmhouse, he paused between tricks to explain the finer points of the game to his partner, who was none other than the parish curate, Father Göbbels. Trumps were called, the cards were shuffled and dealt, and the game went on. A game with the mayor was always hectic. Like a true Dutchman, he liked his fun to be boisterous. As the excitement mounted, the game was punctuated by vigorous bangs on the table and lusty bellows of triumph or dismay. It was good, innocent fun.

But, then, there is a time and place for everything; and the right place and time for a lively game of cards is not at a table where a boy is trying to do his homework. The mayor, ex-schoolmaster that he was, would readily have admitted that if the point had been put to him. Yet at the same kitchen table where he thumped and shouted so wholeheartedly, his young nephew, Andrew—with his hands over his ears to deaden the din—sat poring over his books, his eyes glued to the page in a desperate effort to master its contents. Now and then, the youngster, baffled by some problem, would ask the one-time teacher for help—after all, it was precisely on that understanding that the mayor had been invited to come and stay with the Houbens. Nobody, of course, likes to be distracted at a critical moment in a hard-fought game of cards by being asked to spell some word or to solve some childish difficulty: so, more often than not, the only answer Andrew got to his appeal to superior wisdom was an unappreciative grunt, an exasperated growl, or a sarcastic remark on his lack of intelligence. True enough, the card-players were not always entirely to blame for their irritation

and want of sympathy: for the boy was not blessed with a keen brain or a ready memory, and so was apt to ask not only many questions but the same question many times in the course of the evening.

Little did the mayor and the curate guess that the boy who sat so patiently at the far end of that kitchen table and asked for their help so timidly would one day be sought after by thousands for the wisdom and comfort of his counsel, that in years to come his name would be a household word in lands they had never known. For, that boy we now know as "Father Charles of Mount Argus."

Moulds and Models Munstergeleen—where he was born on December 11th, 1821—is a village of little importance in Limburg, one of the smallest of the Dutch Provinces, immediately bordering on Germany. The Netherlands had a long struggle for national independence. Unhappily there had been added to that revolt against despotic foreign rulers, a revolt against the Catholic Faith. But, while almost all of the eleven Provinces were lost to Protestantism, the Limburgians clung tenaciously through years of bitter persecution to the Faith first preached to them by an English monk in the 7th century. The future Servant of God was born into a tradition of staunch Catholicism.

He was fourth of a family of ten. His father was a quiet, hard-working man, unassuming in his manner and deeply religious—though his neighbours knew well that, while scrupulously honest, he could drive a hard bargain. His mother was a kind, warm-hearted woman, forthright in her speech, and rather exacting in religious matters. Characteristic of her is the answer she gave her niece, a nun, who offered to nurse her through a prolonged illness. "Stay where you are," she wrote, "those who enter a convent should stay in it!"

With such excellent parents, young Andrew Houben naturally grew up in an atmosphere of simple piety. The Faith was for them a daily, living reality. Every morning, before their day's

work began, the whole family assembled as a matter of course to begin the day with their morning prayers. With the blessing of God on the day's work, they set off, each to his own particular employment, to gather together again in the evening around Our Lady's shrine to recite the family Rosary. As an old man, Father Charles's most cherished memory was of that happy home life. "Thank God," he wrote to his brother, "for having given us, in His Goodness, such good and virtuous parents."

The details we have of Andrew's childhood and youth are few and, from a biographer's point of view, unsatisfying. Those who knew young Houben could sum up their recollections of him in a few words: "We only know that he was a gentle, upright and pious young man, who lived a holy and retired life. He gave to others the impression of being extremely shy. As far as externals go, he lived the ordinary life of an ordinary Limburg boy; nothing abnormal or strange was noticeable in him, except that he was exceptionally pious." Even the members of his own family have little more to say: "He was of a friendly disposition and, although never talkative or frivolous, was always bright and cheerful in the family circle." That, at least, is something. It says a lot, too, for his general popularity and for his sterling character that, though his parents held him up to his brothers and sisters as a model to be imitated, never was there shown towards him a trace of that petty jealousy and spite too often incurred by such unwilling paragons and exemplars. Later, when he had left home and become a Passionist, we find one of his brothers writing to him with evident regret that he was unable to pay him a long-promised visit: "Time," he writes, "destroys monuments, but your memory will never be erased from our hearts." A surprisingly eloquent testimonial!

Plodding Besides his exceptional piety, only one other
Foot aspect of Andrew's character was outstanding—his stubborn perseverance. For ten long years he trudged the two-mile journey into the secondary school in Sittard, so that the villagers could not help remarking: "Will the miller's stupid

boy never be finished his schooling ?” But Andrew would not be beaten by difficulties. He had set himself a goal to be achieved and, with the grim determination characteristic of his race, he steeled himself to face and overcome every obstacle in his path. That goal was the priesthood. For as long as he could remember, he had wanted to be a priest. When exactly he had made up his mind on the matter, he could not say; but now that he had, he was inflexible in his purpose. Not even his own lack of intelligence would hold him back. With the help of God, he would grapple with and overcome even that handicap.

Often when his mother put aside her knitting or mending and raked the fire for the night before going to bed, Andrew was still struggling to get his exercises finished. Sometimes she would go over to him and, gently putting her arms about his shoulders, whisper: “Andrew, son, doesn’t all this study make you tired? Wouldn’t you prefer to put aside your books and help your father? It will be so long before you finish your studies.” If, after a particularly gruelling day at school, he was ever tempted to think his mother was right; if, after long futile effort to solve his many problems, he ever grew discouraged; if the thought of his yearly expenses, which his parents could ill afford, ever seemed a reasonable pretext for giving up his prolonged studies; if the thought that he could be of more assistance to his parents by working in his father’s mill or on the farm ever appeared not only sensible and practical, but also highly convenient; if, in fact, his resolution ever wavered—and, during those hard years, it must have, at least momentarily—his conviction that God was calling him to some greater work gave him back his confidence and his determination. And so he went on doggedly trying to acquire that knowledge which he knew was necessary before the authorities of any seminary could consider him as a candidate for the priesthood.

When the examination result-sheet was put up on the notice-board at the end of the school year, the boys would eagerly crowd around it to see where their names appeared on the list and what marks they had scored. As the years went on, Andrew

became so used to seeing his name at the end of the long list, with marks well below pass standard, that at last he hardly bothered even to look. His parents, too, knew what to expect before they opened the letter containing his annual school report: "CONDUCT: excellent. PROGRESS IN STUDY: unsatisfactory." At last his mother became so anxious about him that she decided to consult the parish priest.

The parish priest of Munstergeleen at that time was Father Delahaye. A very saintly man, though not unaffected by the strict Jansenistic opinions of the day, he ruled his parish with a strong hand. He firmly believed in instilling the fear as well as the love of God into his parishioners. "I will bring my people to Heaven," he would declare, "even if I have to bring them there by the hair of the head!" A good priest, even a saintly priest, a man of strong opinions who found it not at all easy to suffer fools gladly.

It is not hard, therefore, to imagine the thoughts that went through Andrew's mind as he stood anxiously with his mother in the waiting-room of the presbytery. Were his dreams, after all, to be merely dreams? Would Father Delahaye laugh at his foolish ambitions, and tell him bluntly that the good God Who made sows' ears does not make them into silk purses? Would he, severely practical man that he was, tell him to give up these vain efforts of his and go and do an honest day's work on the farm? For Andrew knew that if this were Father Delahaye's decision he would not, he dare not, defy him. The priest listened carefully to what Mrs. Houben had to say and, scanning the series of school reports she handed him, nodded his head thoughtfully in silence, while Andrew stood . . . waiting! Then the priest put his hand gently on Andrew's shoulder, and said to his mother: "Let him continue his studies. This boy will be great."

"Come to Me!" While the prediction of Father Delahaye does not necessarily indicate the gift of prophecy, it does most certainly show an uncommon insight. Not all who knew Andrew Houben, that "ordinary Limburg boy," "the miller's

stupid boy," saw in him the seeds of greatness. Almost alone, Father Delahaye rightly valued that stubborn pertinacity of his and that ready acceptance of the daily humiliation that he must have suffered. Looking beyond the dull brain of the boy, he saw that singleness of purpose and sacrifice of self of which greatness is born.

There was, besides, something remarkable in this boy who often spent so long at his prayers before the Blessed Sacrament on his way home from school, that it was long after nightfall when he returned home. His companions were later to testify that he knew only two roads in the village: the road to school, and the road to church. How well he knew every stone in the road to school! As for the road to church, we are told that, frequently, as the time for the family Rosary drew near and Andrew had not yet put in an appearance, his mother, growing anxious, would send his brother to look for him. He would go straight to the church, and invariably find him there before the Blessed Sacrament.

The secret of his long and frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament may well have been his need of someone who could understand and console him in his difficulties, and his assurance that only Our Lord could be that Someone. "Come to Me, all ye that labour and are heavily burdened." It was this intense devotion to the Blessed Sacrament which constituted that "exceptional piety" remarked by all who knew him.

It was characteristic of his hard-headed realism, too, that, despite his all-consuming desire for the priesthood, we never hear of his dressing up in make-believe vestments and playing at "saying Mass." Life was much too real, much too earnest for such flights of fancy, however harmless. Instead, he went as near the Blessed Sacrament as possible and asked permission to serve Holy Mass. Once Father Delahaye had granted that request, young Houben never missed a morning at his post of honour.

Marching Orders One evening in the spring of 1840, as Andrew was passing through the village on his way home from school, he saw the mayor posting up a notice on the hoarding outside the church. "What is it this time, Uncle John?" he asked casually. "Oh, it's you, Andrew," said the mayor, "there it is; read it for yourself; it concerns you." It did indeed concern him.

It was a royal proclamation summoning all the young men of the commune who had reached their nineteenth year to present themselves at the town-hall on March 2nd for the annual drawing of lots for military service. Compulsory military training was introduced into the Netherlands under Napoleon, and had become part of the Constitution. Each commune had to supply the army with a prescribed quota of men, the manner of determining the personnel of the quota being left to the discretion of the local authorities. The system generally adopted was by lottery.

It was with a heavy heart that Andrew came home that evening. His mother tried to reassure him. "Don't worry, son, you may not draw an unlucky number, after all." But when March 2nd arrived, and Andrew presented himself with his companions, his worst fears were realised. He did draw an unlucky number. He was appointed to the First Regiment of Foot, and ordered to be in readiness for July 1st.

There was only one hope left: that his parents would be able to hire a substitute for him. This procedure was quite legal, and the Houbens had already taken advantage of it in the case of Andrew's elder brother, John, some years before. But in this hope Andrew was doomed to disappointment. His father explained that, much as he would like to spare him the ordeal of two years in the army, he could not afford to pay for a substitute. The previous year had been one of heavy financial loss for the Houbens, who had lost most of their livestock in the flooding of the Geleen river.

So, on July 1st Andrew set out for the headquarters of his regiment at Bergen-op-Zoom. When he stepped into the barrack square, a new world opened up before him. What a

difference from the quiet Catholic atmosphere he had left ! He was soon rudely made aware that there was another and less pleasant side to life ; for the soldiers of any army are not remarkable for the piety of their language or behaviour. At first his fellow-conscripts regarded him as an oddity and, as such, fair game for their bantering remarks and rough humour. But his excellent Catholic upbringing stood him in good stead. His companions soon noticed that he spent most of his free time before the altar in the local church. With that strange attraction which natural, undemonstrative goodness has for even the roughest, officers and fellow-soldiers alike came to look upon him with admiration and respect. " That miller's lad was a good boy," one of them could afterwards testify, " when he was not in the barracks, he was in the church ; and he received Holy Communion every Sunday morning. That boy should never have been in the barracks."

One story about his soldiering days does give us a fairly good estimate of the military quality of Private Houben. In some disturbance or other, the military were called out and ordered to open fire on the crowd. Andrew, scared by the possibility of hurting somebody, fired his rifle in the wrong direction, and nearly shot his superior officer ! The comments of the officer are, mercifully, not recorded !

In the record preserved in regimental archives, there is this note: " Concerning Houben's conduct during his period of military service, nothing particular is known ; the military records of the period are no longer extant. It is definite, however, that he was never court-martialled, that he was never in the discipline squad, that he was never charged with desertion, and that he did not leave the service in disgrace." Its wholesale, definite negation is delightful. The authorities were not interested, apparently, in his military prowess, but noted gratefully that at any rate he showed no criminal tendencies ! So he was never court-martialled, he was not " drummed out " of the service—this boy who spent most of his spare time before the Blessed Sacrament !

Strangely enough, it was while in the army that he found his real vocation. One of his comrades—a certain Raaymakers—had a brother who had recently entered the Passionist monastery at Ere, in Belgium. Andrew had probably never seen a religious, as the monasteries had been suppressed in the Netherlands and were not tolerated there again until 1842. But Raaymakers was full of the subject, and showed his brother's letters to Andrew. There, in the glowing terms of the fervent novice, he first read of the happiness of life in a monastery. Andrew was more than interested. This was precisely the life he had secretly longed for, and for which he had worked so hard. We do not know what Andrew's prayers were before the Blessed Sacrament, but we can be quite certain that the grace to share that life figured largely in them.

Indefinite Furlough Andrew's military career was short. By October 9th he was home again, as his father had paid for a substitute with the first money that came in from the gathering of the harvest. He returned at once to his books with the same zeal but, almost miraculously, with new-found ability—the fruit, no doubt, of those many hours before the altar. During his absence, the school at Sittard had been obliged to close down; but one of the professors had set up a private school in his own home at Broek-Sittard. There, in the parlour of Heer Schyren's house, Andrew resumed his studies. His old teacher was astonished to find a marked mental improvement in him. Andrew studied with the greatest ease and made rapid progress. "It seemed," Professor Schyren reported "as though the hand of God had touched him."

Talking one day after Mass with his teacher, Andrew mentioned the Passionists. To his great joy he discovered that Professor Schyren knew the Fathers at Ere, and could give him a much more detailed account of their life than did his fellow-soldier at Bergen. The more he heard of them, the more convinced he became that God was calling him to join the Congregation of the Passion. He talked it over with his father—his mother had died shortly

before—and then discussed the whole matter with Father Delahaye, who advised him to write immediately to the Superior of St. Michael's Retreat at Ere.

The Provincial of the Passionists at that time was Venerable Father Dominic Barberi. With him rested the final decision to accept young Houben. It is interesting to note that he gave that decision about the time that he left for Littlemore to receive Newman into the Catholic Church. The date fixed for Andrew's admission into the Novitiate was November 5th, 1845.

As the day of his departure drew nearer, he began to show signs of an interior struggle. His father was the first to notice it. "Andrew," he remonstrated, "there is no need for you to go into a monastery. There is plenty here for eight, there will be enough for nine." "Father," he answered, "I have always wanted to enter a monastery, and now I am going to do so." His elder sister, Sybil, who also challenged him, received a similar answer: "Sybil, for Our Lord's sake, I would do anything—I would willingly spend my life in a wilderness."

On the night before he left home, after packing his bag, he knelt before Our Lady's shrine to say the Rosary with the other members of the family for the last time. Afterwards, he went quietly through the house, passing slowly from one room to another. Before his mother's picture he paused a long, long time. His sister, Christina, seeing him and knowing better than any of the others just what was wrong, whispered to him: "I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that you will never see all these things again." All he could say was a feeble "Yes, dear."

The following morning, he made his last farewells. With his father, he went to visit his mother's grave and knelt to pray for her to whom, under God, he owed everything, even his vocation. Then, holding his father's hands, he asked him for his blessing. The old man, unable to speak, pressed his hands firmly on his son's head. Andrew rose to his feet, threw his arms round his father, and fled from the cemetery. They never met again.

**Soldiers
of
Christ** The Passionist Monastery near Tournai, in Belgium, at which young Andrew Houben presented himself one bleak November evening in 1845, had been founded five years before by Venerable Father Dominic. It was the first Passionist foundation outside Italy. Here Father Dominic had laid the foundations and made all preparations for his apostolate in England; and from here, eventually, he set out for the English Mission, thus fulfilling the wish and prophecy of St. Paul of the Cross who, during a lifetime of prayer, had prayed fervently for the conversion of England. It was from here, too, that Father Peter Magganotto had set out to join the first Passionist missionaries in Australia, and Father Anthony Pluym to his vast bishopric in Bulgaria.

The Master of Novices received the young aspirant with kindness, scrutinising him carefully at the same time. What he saw before him was a young man, tall, of muscular build, swarthy complexion and strongly marked features. No doubt he had received an excellent reference from the parish priest, Father Delahaye, who would have spoken very highly of his steadfast virtue and love of prayer. It was one of the first of the Novice-Master's duties to correct the mistaken impression of this novice—as of many before and since—that religious life is one long round of meditation and spiritual exercises. Andrew was therefore, only a few days in the novitiate when he was put to scrubbing floors, sweeping stairs, peeling potatoes, washing dinner dishes, and all those other lowly duties seldom associated by a postulant with his religious training. Soldier Raaymakers had told him nothing of this! Nor had Professor Schyren warned him that frequently he would be severely reprimanded for trifling and even quite imaginary faults! But Andrew proved himself equal to the test.

Having been approved by the unanimous vote of all the priests assembled in Chapter, he was clothed in the religious habit on December 1st. As with other religious orders, so is it the custom with the Passionists to change their baptismal name on receiving the habit as a symbol of their entry into another and higher state

of life. The novice from Munstergeleen was given the name "Charles of St. Andrew." By that name he was to be known for the rest of his life.

For the next year, the year of his novitiate, Brother Charles was, in the truest sense of the phrase, lost in God. Of his spiritual life we know nothing: indeed, we know little of his spiritual life at any time. While many of the saints, from St. Paul of Tarsus to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, have written largely of the graces bestowed on them by God, Charles has left no written word directly dealing with his spiritual life. Never talkative on any point, he was particularly reticent on this most intimate matter. He was one of those simple souls who, by their quiet everyday example, unconsciously edify all about them. "He was strict in keeping the Rules," we are told, "simple and friendly to live with, his gentle and sincere disposition, his artless and all-embracing charity, his good spirits and natural gaiety during recreation compelling all to love him." This is the only comment we have to guide us. Fully understood and appreciated, it is enough to explain the fact that, even at this early stage in his religious life, he was looked upon as a saint.

Introibo On the morning of December 10th, 1846, the
ad solemn tones of the "dead bell" tolled slowly:
Altare Dei a young man was laying down his life for the love of
 that Lord Who had first laid down His life for love of him. As a corpse in its last vigil, he lay prostrate before the tabernacle. A deacon clad in white alb and violet stole read aloud the moving story of Christ's Sacred Passion. "And having loved his own, he loved them to the end." Clearly the words of St. John's Gospel rang round the church, telling again the story of human malice, diabolical triumph, Divine Mercy: down through the fear of Gethsemane, the frenzy of Jerusalem, the cruelty of Calvary . . . "Jesus, therefore, when he had taken the vinegar, said: 'It is consummated.' And bowing his head, he gave up the ghost." The reader paused for a moment, closed the Book, and went into the sacristy.

It was now Brother Charles's turn to prove his love for Christ: now was the time for *his* sacrifice. How often during the past year had he read and meditated upon the inspired words of that divine love-story! He had learned, too, that, to be sincere in his love for Christ, he must take up *his* cross daily and follow Him. How well he remembered that day when he had tried to excuse himself from what he considered an unjust accusation. He would never forget Father Master's quiet answer: "But Jesus was silent!" He had learned that, to be a Passionist, he must live the Passion in his own life, daily and in all things. Now, before the Blessed Sacrament, he was making his great profession of a life-time of sacrifice. With his hands clasped in those of his Superior, he vowed "to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary ever Virgin, and to all the Heavenly Court: Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, and also a diligent endeavour to promote, according to my strength, in the hearts of the faithful, devotion to the Passion of Our Lord." As a token of the life of sacrifice he was embracing, a cross was placed on his shoulder, a crown of thorns on his head, and on his heart the symbol, or "sign," of the Sacred Passion. "Receive, beloved brother, the cross of Our Lord, Jesus Christ." Brother Charles of St. Andrew was now, at last, a Passionist.

After his profession, the young religious began his course of studies for the priesthood. The life of a Passionist student is a hard one: hard physically, hard mentally, hard in the monotony of the same duties repeated day after day, year by year. After an hour spent in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament—from 2 until 3 o'clock in the morning—he rises again at 6 o'clock, and from then until 9 at night, with every hour carefully allotted to his various duties, he spends his time in prayer and study. The carefully-taken notes on philosophical and theological subjects, made during his student days and found in his cell after his death, show the earnestness with which this young Passionist studied. He must have known that there was a possibility of his being sent on the English Mission and that, therefore, he had to be prepared not only to spread the Faith but also to defend

it under attack. Father Dominic, himself a brilliant theologian, would have seen to it that his students were fully prepared for that difficult task, if they were ever called upon it. While encouraging them, he would have warned them of what to expect were they ever sent to England—and that hope was always uppermost in his mind. "Let those who come, keep clearly before them that they must be prepared to suffer—and to suffer much—derision, mockery, contempt, and a full meal of insult and outrage of every kind; and at the end death, it may be, amid suffering and pain."

On December 21st, 1850, Father Charles was raised to the priesthood by Monsignor Labis, Bishop of Tournai; and on the following day he offered his first Holy Mass. At last, he was a priest. For that hour he had longed from his boyhood; for that hour he had prayed and studied so hard. Not in vain had the miller's son of Limburg known but two roads—the road to the church and the road to the school; they had led him at last to the altar of God. That day he held in his anointed hands the living Body of Jesus Christ and, in the chalice, His Precious Blood "Which was shed for you and for many for the remission of sin." Only one thing marred his happiness that great day: none of his family could be present at his First Mass. His father had died only five months before, and the expenses incurred during his long illness made it impossible for any of the others to make the long journey to Tournai. Despite his great joy, he must have been lonely that day. It was, perhaps, symbolic of the life that was stretching before him. He was never to see Holland again—he was to spend his whole priestly life among a strange people, speaking a foreign tongue, with nothing to bind him to his own kinsfolk but the fact that the Blessed Sacrament he adored every morning was the same Blessed Sacrament before Which he had knelt so long in the village church at Munstergeleen.

**Angles
not
Angels** "I beseech you," wrote Father Dominic from England to his superiors in Rome, "send me men, good religious rather than learned Solomons." Almost immediately Father Charles received word to join the Passionists in England. He was, indeed, a good religious, if not a learned Solomon. So, less than six months after his ordination, Father Charles arrived in Staffordshire. In his first letter home he wrote: "I am already at home in England, and am beginning to speak a little English. Pray for me that I may learn to speak the language well. Pray, too, for the poor Protestants of England that they may be converted to the True Faith."

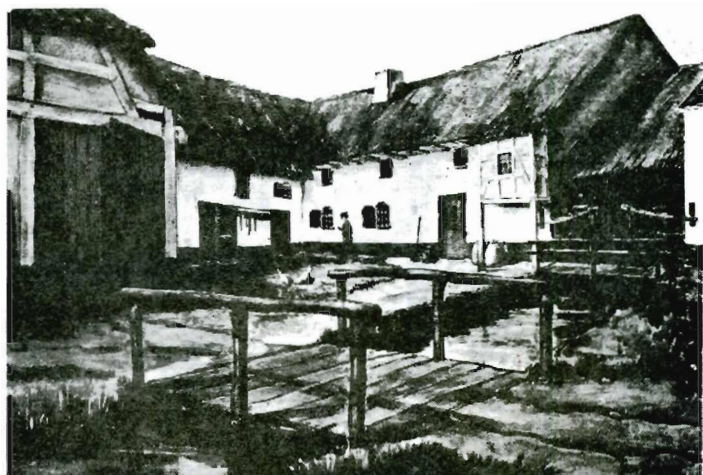
It was while a member of the community of Aston Hall, Staffordshire, that he first came in contact with the people to whose spiritual welfare he was to devote the greater part of his priestly life. During the previous ten years, hundreds of thousands of famine-hunted Irish people had emigrated to Great Britain in search of work. Many of them had settled near Aston, in the heart of the "Black Country," finding employment in the coal-mines and the foundries. The conditions under which they lived were appalling. Factory laws and trades union regulations as we know them to-day were unknown then, but the poverty-stricken emigrants were so anxious to get work that they took whatever they were offered, regardless of the inhuman conditions too often imposed upon them.

Moreover, they were living among people who hated an Irishman's creed even more than they did his nationality. Father Charles was not long in England before he learned what it meant to live in an openly hostile anti-Catholic atmosphere. Pius IX had just published the historic Brief proclaiming the restoration of the English Hierarchy. This was the signal for a fresh storm of intense anti-Catholic feeling. *The Times* of October 14th, 1850, described the Pope's action as "one of the grossest acts of impertinence which the Court of Rome has ventured to commit since the Crown and the people of England threw off its yoke." Effigies of the Pope and Cardinal Wiseman were burnt in the streets; even the theatre was made the scene of "No Popery"

demonstrations. Catholic homes were entered and plundered by bands of ruffians; churches were broken into and desecrated. This was the England in which the young, one-armed Michael Davitt defended a church with an unloaded revolver against a horde of hooligans. Father Charles soon realised what Venerable Dominic had meant when he had spoken of "derision, mockery, contempt, and a full meal of insult and outrage of every kind." He found plenty of scope for his fortitude and his zeal during the two years he spent at Aston.

In 1854 the monastery at Aston had to be abandoned owing to shortage of man-power, and the religious were appointed to other houses. Father Charles was sent to the novitiate at Cotton Hall, where he was for some time assistant to the Master of Novices. The Novice-Master at that time was Father Salvian Nardocci who, besides attending to the spiritual needs of the novices, found time to write a day-to-day account of the happenings in the Retreat. This diary, which fills nearly thirty volumes and covers as many years, is noteworthy for the many interesting and sometimes amusing things it records about Father Charles. Apart from his usefulness as a diarist, Father Salvian himself is worthy of special mention here on account of the strange part he was to play in Father Charles's later life.

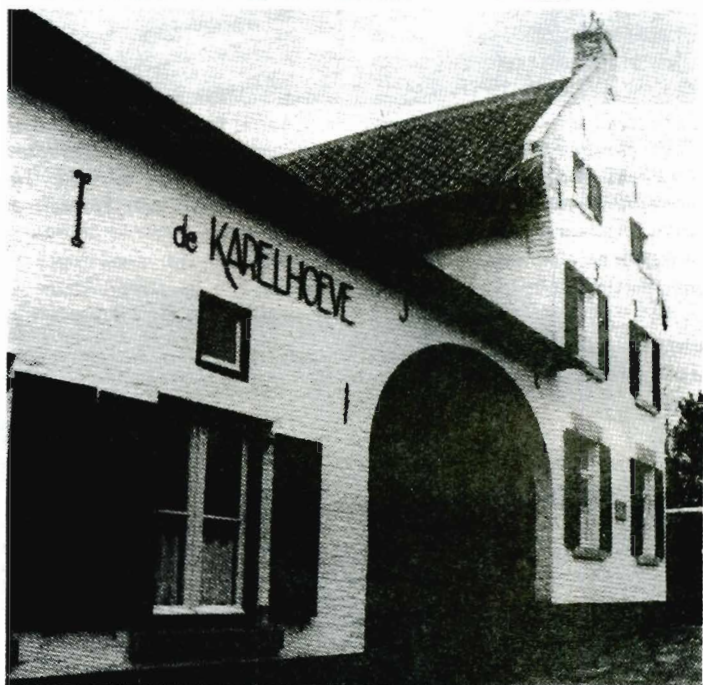
When the novitiate was removed from St. Wilfrid's, Cotton Hall, in 1855, Father Charles and another priest were left behind to take care of the extensive parish. It was a difficult assignment, for the Catholics were thinly scattered over the countryside—many of them indifferent, some even hostile. Unfortunately not all the immigrants were as true to their faith as they were to their fatherland. Living as they did in such utter destitution, it is not surprising that immorality and loss of faith were not unknown among them. "Father Charles used to walk for miles through the district," records his companion, "visiting the houses of Catholics, and trying to bring back those who had fallen away from the practice of their faith." Of a later period, when Father Charles was stationed at Sutton, we find our diarist recording: "Night and day he was called to the sick; he adminis-



Farmstead and mill house where Fr. Charles was born. His parents P. J. Houben and Johanna E. Luyten were next door neighbours. Houbens had a flour mill. Luytens had a saw and oil mill. The same river turned both wheels. The two wheels can be seen on right of picture.



Birth place turned into a chapel at Munstergeleen.



New home built by Fr. Charles' father. They had eleven children. Fr. Charles lived here for 10 years. It is preserved by State as a model Dutch farmhouse.



Mount Argus when Fr. Charles arrived in 1897. Picture shows old farmhouse as monastery and temporary chapel built by Fr. Paul Mary Pakenham in 1856.



*New Mount Argus monastery and church built in Fr. Charles' lifetime.
Notice section of old chapel still standing on right. This was demolished in March 1894.*



*Mount Argus on day of Beatification, 16 October 1988.
A monument to Blessed Charles' life of prayer, penance, labour and
watchful care.*



Shrine of Blessed Charles in Mount Argus church.

tered the sacraments, remained until a late hour in the confessional, catechised, preached; in a word, the burden of the work fell upon the shoulders of Father Charles." One who knew Father Charles's work in the English monasteries could unhesitatingly say that zeal for souls was his "predominant passion."

"My People" In the summer of 1857 Father Charles was transferred to the recently founded Retreat at Mount Argus, Dublin, where his real life's work began. He had first come into contact with the Irish people while stationed in Staffordshire. Working among them for more than five years he had grown to admire and love them, despite their many and sometimes grievous failings. This love for the people of his adoption—"my people" as he used to call them—was to grow with the years. When praising the strong and staunch Catholicism of the people of his native Limburg, he could offer them no greater tribute than to say: "They are very like the Irish." For the Irish people he was to labour for thirty years with utter disregard for himself, for his own comfort, his own convenience and, in the end, for his own health.

Those pioneer Irish Passionists certainly had their hands full. "There are five of us priests here, and five lay-brothers," he wrote to his family. "In proportion to the great number of Catholics, there are in Ireland few priests; and every Sunday I have to say two Masses. Almost every day we hear Confessions from morning to night—if we had twelve priests, every one of them would have much to do hearing Confessions and preaching." There is an entry in the Retreat chronicles for the year 1857 which records that, after the long morning service of Holy Saturday, the Fathers began to hear Confessions and continued until 2 o'clock in the morning; after which they went straight to the choir to sing the Solemn Matins of Easter Sunday!

Though Father Charles took his turn in the pulpit on Sundays, he was by no means a great preacher. His English was never fluent and he never really lost the strong Dutch accent of his

boyhood. Frequently he fell into the innumerable pit-falls of English pronunciation, grammar and syntax. His favourite topics, on which he preached loudly and long if somewhat confusedly, were the Eternal Truths—the result, no doubt, of the early influence of the fiery Father Delahaye.

If Father Charles was never an eloquent preacher, he was at this time an eminently successful confessor. In those days at Mount Argus, his confessional was always besieged by penitents. His fame as a physician of souls was well known in Dublin, many dating their conversion from the day they first spoke with him. His power to move the most hardened sinners came from his own intense love of God and his consequently vivid realisation of the malice of sin.

Though kindly, understanding and sympathetic, he was too near God ever to minimise even slightly the terrible evil of offending Him. Again and again he returned to this theme in his sermons. "There is a monster in the world which cannot be seen," he used to say, "neither in the streets of the town nor in the fields. Where is it, then? It is in the souls of many persons. That greatest of evils is mortal sin." In his letters he frequently asked for prayers for the conversion of sinners. "Here in this city of Dublin and its suburbs," he writes, "there are thousands of people who neglect even their annual Confession and Communion. I wish with all my heart that you would have the charity to pray and say Rosaries in the evening for the conversion of these great sinners . . . I am terrified at the thought that, in this great city, God is so often offended and so often crucified by such great sins." For this man who lived so near to Jesus Crucified, sin was a frightening reality: he had only to look at his crucifix to see how fearful it was. In the Ecclesiastical Process, there is an interesting example of just how vivid to him was the gravity of sin. "I remember," said a witness, "that when he was told of the suicide of Pigott"—the infamous author of the forged letters in the case against Parnell—"he cried aloud 'Oh, Mary!' The political significance of this terrible event meant nothing to him: he thought only of the sin of suicide."

**Evidence
of
Things Seen**

As the healer of souls Father Charles's fame was deservedly great; but what drew the eyes of the world upon him and made the people mark him as "a man of God" was his extraordinary power of healing sick bodies. Crowds flocked to him to receive his blessing. He was called out to lay his hand on the sick in their homes and in hospitals. In later years, the number who came daily to receive his blessing was about three hundred. The people's faith in the efficacy of his blessing was often rewarded in the most striking manner.

The following account of a cure which took place in 1861 was related under oath in the Ecclesiastical Process, by a witness who heard it from his mother. "Father Charles was called to visit a neighbour of ours, called Thomas Doyle, who lived in 23, Lower Ormond Quay. Father Charles came and saw the sick man; but, when about to leave the house, surprised all the members of the family by saying: 'But there is another sick person here.' No one had told him that a daughter of the sick man, Johanna Teresa, was also sick with a fever. They were not prepared to bring the visitor to see her as the room was not tidied up, and they tried to dissuade him from going to see her. But Father Charles insisted. The girl was ill with typhoid, or some malignant fever, and was so exhausted that Doctor Willis said that if she could not rest and take a little sleep she would die. She had not been able to sleep for several days. When Father Charles came in she was sitting up in bed, but in a delirium. The fever had reached its crisis, and she refused to take the prescribed remedies. Father Charles placed his hand gently upon her forehead, and quietly pressed her backwards until she was in a recumbent position. Almost immediately she began to sleep and, when the doctor returned the next morning, the crisis had passed and he declared the patient out of danger. My mother frequently spoke to me about this event, and always said that she considered it a miracle. She always declared emphatically that no one had spoken to Father Charles about the sick girl. I was always told that the doctor regarded the cure as miraculous."

Another witness testified as follows: "In the school of the Sisters of Mercy, Brown Street, Dublin, there was a little girl called Norah Kavanagh who, up to her ninth year, was completely paralysed and dumb. She had been treated without success in different city hospitals. Father Charles, about two and a half years before his death, went to visit the family of the little girl. He prayed over her and then ordered her to get up and walk. To the great amazement of her mother who was present, the little girl got up and ran across the room exclaiming: 'It is God Who has cured me'—although up to that time she had never walked or spoken. Ever afterwards, she had perfect use of her limbs."

The following rather amusing incident, though showing the people's great confidence in Father Charles, must have been somewhat embarrassing for the hard-working doctor involved. A Dublin lady was so completely crippled with rheumatism that she had to lie helpless in bed. Her doctor prescribed certain pills for her, and her son had to put them in her mouth. One day she asked her son to send for Father Charles. A cab was sent to Mount Argus for him, and he came immediately. When he arrived, she asked him if she would die from her illness. He did not answer until he had blessed her, and then told her she would not. When the doctor called the next day, he was astounded to find her dusting her drawing-room, completely cured! He was delighted and told her that her cure would make his name all over Dublin. Quickly she told him that it would do nothing of the kind as it was not his cure, but Father Charles's. She had spat out the pills her son had so carefully put in her mouth, and had not, in fact, swallowed one of them! To prove the fact, she showed him the box still full of the pills that she had never taken.

**The Voice
of
the People** Such extraordinary happenings could not fail to come to the notice of the public; and soon the name of Father Charles was a household word not only in Dublin and throughout Ireland, but even in England, America and Australia. One English Catholic newspaper speaks

of "the constant pilgrimages of the blind, the lame, and the halt to supplicate their cure at the hands of Father Charles Houben, and I am credibly informed," the writer adds, "that instances are not infrequent which furnish a practical commentary on the text of St. James: 'The prayer of faith shall heal the sick man.'"

An incident which occurred when he was only three years in Ireland gives some idea of the veneration in which he was held by the people. One day in the summer of 1860 he was invited by a friend to a day's outing in Glendalough. Somehow or other the people of the district got to know that he was coming; and when he arrived in Rathdrum he found the whole countryside waiting for him. A procession was formed and, to the accompaniment of sacred music provided by the local band, he was conducted to the parish church where he had to preach to the people and bless the sick who had been brought in carts from the neighbouring villages.

In later years, such scenes became quite common. One of the most extraordinary occurred on a platform, of all places, in the railway station at Westland Row just a few months before his death. On recognising the well-known features of Father Charles, crowds of passengers left their seats in the trains and, regardless of time or place, knelt before him on the platform and would not move or be satisfied until he had blessed them all individually.

Such demonstrations of veneration were very painful to Father Charles, who, apart from being a very humble man, was extremely shy and reserved, and hated publicity or special notice of any kind. For that reason, not wishing to embarrass him, his fellow-religious never spoke to him about his "miraculous" cures. "Though many real miracles take place," records Father Salvian, "we never take any notice of them, and much less does Father Charles himself." Only once did a young priest refer to them: "I commenced to tease Father Charles about what people said of his miraculous powers," he recalls, "and asked him jokingly if he really performed miracles. 'He Who made you,' he said, looking into his cup of coffee, 'made me'." Which, when you come to think of it, was rather a neat way of getting out of the

difficulty of preserving the truth and, at the same time, referring all things to the source whence they came.

That Father Charles attributed his cures only to Almighty God is beyond question. It was well illustrated when on one occasion a non-Catholic from Dun Laoghaire, whose son was seriously ill, came to Mount Argus and imperiously demanded that Father Charles should work a miracle. "You *must* cure my son!" were his first words when Father Charles came into the room. "There is no 'must' with God!" was the curt reply and, with uncharacteristic brusqueness, he walked out without another word. Very different, indeed, was his treatment of a greatly distressed mother who brought to him at Mount Argus a child who was suffering from a disease which many doctors had pronounced incurable. After explaining the case fully to Father Charles, she ended up by imploring him: "Now, Father Charles, you *must* cure him!" He smiled and answered good-humouredly: "Well, I suppose, if I must, I must!" Her confidence was amply rewarded. Her boy was cured, and later became a very successful doctor in Australia.

"They did it unto Me" While the extraordinary cures, which were of almost daily occurrence at Mount Argus, won for Father Charles the esteem of thousands, they had also another and very different effect. For some time a campaign against him had been fostered by the non-Catholic section of the medical profession in Dublin. As an example of this bitter antagonism, the following diatribe appeared in a non-Catholic newspaper called *Saunder's Newsletter*;

DISEASES OF THE EYE AND THE BLESSED (!) FATHERS OF
HAROLD'S CROSS

To the Editor of *Saunder's Newsletter*;

Sir,

I have the honour to be attached as Medical Officer to one of the hospitals of this city. A few days ago a poor girl having both her eyes destroyed by purulent ophthalmia applied at the hospital for advice. I asked her why she had not sought medical aid sooner, informing her at the same time that her case was now hopeless.

She made the following extraordinary statement. About six weeks previously one of her eyes became inflamed and, as she did not derive any benefit from remedies she had been advised to try, she applied to the Blessed (!) Fathers of Harold's Cross. These gentlemen rubbed her eyes with "the relics," ordered her to take holy water internally, and told her not to go near the doctors. She remained under this treatment until both her eyes were destroyed. Thus, a poor girl, who under proper medical treatment could have been perfectly cured of her disease, is now thrown into the poorhouse by those who, under the mask of religion, have done their utmost to ruin her not only in this world, but in that which is to come.

am, etc.,

MEDICUS.

It was quite obvious from the general circumstances that the indictment was levelled not at the Fathers in general, but at Father Charles personally. No evidence was ever brought forward to prove the charge; and Father Salvian—to whose diary we are indebted for the titbit—strongly insists that none of the priests, certainly not Father Charles, acted at any time as alleged. The libel was given the only treatment it deserved: it was ignored. Father Salvian adds, by way of footnote, one of his sly remarks: "In my opinion, the reason why the good 'Medicus' acted in the way he did was because the girl was poor. I dare say that, had she been a rich young lady, the 'Medicus' would have tried his skill for six or twelve months at the reasonable charge of a guinea per visit, and would not have been in such a hurry to say the case was hopeless!" It is said that some of the non-Catholic doctors approached the Archbishop to have Father Charles removed from Dublin. Cardinal Cullen refused to do anything of the kind.

Later, however, another incident of a very different kind arose, and Cardinal Cullen very wisely did advise the Superiors to transfer Father Charles. Again, Father Salvian is our informant: "The Superiors at the advice of Cardinal Cullen removed him from this place. The principal reason why His Eminence advised our Superiors to remove Father Charles from Dublin was that people were making money by selling the Holy Water blessed by him. Of course the poor man never dreamed that people

would do such a thing, and make their fortunes selling holy water. He was ignorant of it all along."

So, in 1866, Father Charles was transferred to England. We know little of him during the eight years he was to remain there. He returned to his parochial duties: preaching, hearing confessions, visiting the sick and comforting the dying. He did not, however, forget, nor was he forgotten by, his old friends in Ireland. Frequently sick people travelled over to England to receive his blessing; and every post brought piles of letters, all of which he promptly answered. To the sick who wrote asking for his prayers, he always counselled resignation to God's Will. "My prayers," he writes to one correspondent, "shall be offered with all earnestness for your family, especially for your mother that she may obtain a happy death. We must remember that sickness is oftentimes the mark of God's favour. We have all to carry our crosses; God did not spare even His Blessed Mother from suffering."

With his continued absence from Dublin, the antipathy towards him disappeared—nothing more seems to have been heard of it at any rate—and the unscrupulous exploitation of the people's veneration for him was stamped out. So, on January 10th, 1874, after eight years separation from "his people," Father Charles returned to Mount Argus, where he remained for the last nineteen years of his life.

**"Clinging Heaven
by the Hems"** Father Charles was gifted by God with many of those extraordinary graces that we associate with the saints. Besides the grace of healing, of which there is more than ample evidence, he seems to have been favoured with an insight into the future which, to say the least, was remarkable. Occasionally, too, when it seemed expedient, he diagnosed the spiritual condition of those who spoke to him and revealed it to them in an unmistakable manner. There is an instance of a young man who came to him to ask his prayers for his brother who was dangerously ill. "Your brother is quite safe," replied Father Charles, "but *your* soul is in great danger."

It is characteristic, however, of the relative importance attached by the Church to the more sensational spiritual graces that, of the 340 pages which summarise the evidence of witnesses at the Ecclesiastical Process, only 40 deal with alleged miracles.

The greatest wonder of all was the holiness of his daily life. A former novitiate companion could testify: "I lived with Father Charles for two years at our House in Ere. I lived with him again in Dublin for a period of seven years. He was then a priest; and I noticed that the fervour which had distinguished him as a student had in no way diminished, but had rather increased." Apart from the times specified for prayer in the Rule, he spent every free moment on his knees, either in his cell or in the church. Even as an old man, he would rise at night to chant the Divine Office in choir and, as though that were not sufficient, he would continue his prayer alone before the Blessed Sacrament until the religious gathered again to chant the morning Office. After celebrating Holy Mass with the greatest devotion, he would make his thanksgiving in some out-of-the-way place, generally in the organ gallery, where he knew he would not be disturbed. During the day, to avoid every possible distraction, he made a point of retiring to his cell after blessing the people though this meant, in Father Salvian's realistic expression, "going up and down 59 steps the whole blessed day from morning to night."

So intense was this habitual spirit of prayer that, even when he was with the community, he was frequently unconscious of what was going on. Speaking of the last photograph taken of him—the one with which we are most familiar—a contemporary says: "I well remember the day that photo was taken. He made one of a large community group, and was placed there in position scarcely realising what was going on; so we see him in a perfectly natural posture." The same religious recalls the old man moving quietly through the monastery, his eyes fixed on the little crucifix he always carried in his hand, keeping close to the wall to avoid being in anybody's way and to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

While we have no proof that he was favoured with visions and ecstasies, what are we to think of the following extraordinary happening as told by one who witnessed it? "I can never forget one ecstatic moment, so deeply was I impressed by it. It occurred in, of all places, the refectory or dining-hall. But it is, perhaps, all the more valuable on that account because it will help to convey to the minds of those who had not the privilege of knowing him personally an idea of how much he was always absorbed in God. It is our custom to read from the life of a saint or some other spiritual book during meal times, except on the evening of a fast day when only a collation is taken—which was the case on this particular evening. Everything was as usual: the meal was being taken in silence, in which one could hear the whispered ejaculations of Father Charles. Suddenly he started up from his seat with wonderful agility calling aloud: 'Mary! Mary!' Standing to his full height, holding his napkin with his left hand on the table and placing his right hand over his heart, he became transfixed and motionless as a statue, his upturned gaze fixed on a point in the lofty ceiling. I looked, all looked, at the same point expecting to see something. We, of course, saw nothing. Nevertheless, we felt that something extraordinary was taking place, and all were overcome with a feeling of reverence. For some moments he remained in an attitude of ecstasy, until called back to himself by the voice of the Superior: 'Father Charles! Father Charles! You are disturbing the community!' He then sat down and resumed his supper as if nothing had happened . . ." Was it a vision? Some of those present thought so; others were not sure; none could be certain, for Father Charles never referred to it in any way.

One would give a great deal to know more of the spiritual life of this great priest. We must be content with the knowledge—and this is very encouraging—that his holiness was nourished to a large extent by the ordinary, homely practices of Catholic piety. Great devotion to the Mass, love of the Blessed Sacrament, the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross—these were his favourite devotions; while his spiritual reading was, almost entirely, the

“Lives” of the Saints—devotions and reading well within the reach of us all.

The Man among Men It is the measure of our misunderstanding of true holiness that we are so often surprised to find that holy men are still normal men. It may be that, in the experiences and instances on which we base our half-formed judgments, we fail to verify the “true” before the “holiness.” However high a man’s head may be in the clouds, if he would be truly holy, his feet must be firmly placed on the earth. So, though his contemporaries looked upon him almost as belonging to another world, it must not be thought that there was no human side to Father Charles’s character.

While he was too shy ever to be a wit—even in the best sense of the word—he possessed an excellent sense of humour, and was always ready to laugh at the jokes of others, even when they were against himself. Once, during recreation, someone recalled the incident of his soldiering days when he sent a bullet whistling past the ear of his officer, and asked him if it were true. He laughed heartily, with a far-away look in his eye, took a pinch of snuff, and, to take the attention of all from himself, changed the subject as gently as possible.

“Towards the end of his life,” recalls a fellow religious, “he seldom appeared in secular dress; and because it was seldom, it was strange, occasioning no small amusement among us students—Father Charles in secular dress seemed to us so outlandish a sight. He wore a large cape, a silk hat, and carried an umbrella, all of which looked as old as himself, were badly shaped and very much the worse of wear. As he walked along the corridor, close to the wall, watched by all the concealed observers, he could not fail to notice how interested all were to see him so wonderfully transformed. But he took it all in good part, and his dear old face would beam with the most jovial of smiles.”

He was gifted with a very fine musical voice and on feast days when called upon to sing was always ready to oblige, his “party-piece” being the *Ave Maria*. When anyone else was singing,

it was a pleasure to see the delight in his eyes as he swayed rhythmically to and fro to the swell and cadence of the music and beat out the time with his hand. He was especially fond of martial music, a relic no doubt of his early training. When out walking during recreation, he would stop and listen when military bands passed—which they did fairly often in those days—until the music died away in the distance. Sometimes the young students would ask him to teach them some of his favourite songs and he, not knowing what he was letting himself in for, would cheerfully agree.

Here is an account by one of the students of a typical music lesson: "On a few privileged occasions he taught, or attempted to teach, us music. In every music class there are sure to be found the good, the indifferent, the bad, and the impossible; and we were no exception to the general rule. There was one particularly unpromising specimen amongst us who could make plenty of noise without producing the faintest suspicion of music. But he could, and did, succeed, to our teacher's great discomfiture, in drowning all the others. Then would follow a battle royal of vociferated 'music,' Father Charles raising his voice in opposition and doing his utmost to lead. But the contest invariably proved unequal: youth and superior lung-power never failing to win. Thus did the few lessons we had from him, despite his earnestness, end in good-natured fiasco."

Per Ardua ad Astra " All the religious in Mount Argus, from the youngest student to the highest superior, loved Father Charles as a companion and revered him as a saint. But there was one priest who, though he did not doubt his sanctity for a moment—indeed, it would appear, *because* he did not doubt it!—thought he could make him holier still and decided to speed up the workings of God's grace.

Father Salvian, the former Master of Novices, made himself a second Guardian Angel for Father Charles. Knowing well the importance of a thorough grounding in humility, and ever mindful of the principle that virtue, like any other habit, grows

by repeated acts, he put himself wholeheartedly to the task of providing Father Charles with every possible opportunity of growing in virtue. He would correct him, scold him, and humiliate him before the whole community; during recreation he would interrupt him in the middle of a song, and tell him to sit down. Any time he saw anything in any way exceptional in his conduct—and often enough even when he did not—he would express disapproval in no uncertain terms, preferably when others were present.

Not infrequently such corrections may have been administered on the occasion of the ceremonies which took place on the greater feast days. On these days part of the Divine Office is sung, and in the excess of his fervour, at particular words appealing to his devotion, Father Charles was inclined to introduce an exaggerated pause or crescendo not favoured by the best text-books of Gregorian Chant. Father Salvian could not, and never did, miss such a golden opportunity: Father Charles was sure to get a "commemoration" after Vespers.

Father Charles took all these corrections in the spirit in which, no doubt, they were meant, and never showed the slightest resentment, but remained silent and penitent. If he did venture to speak, his sense of humour came bubbling to the top as he whispered softly: "Poor old Charlie!" "One such occasion I can clearly recall," writes a priest, "because of the amusement it occasioned. Father Salvian corrected him before all the students with a great show of indignation for some trivial or rather imaginary fault; then broke off suddenly in the very midst of his tirade and went stamping away. Then, we who had been interested spectators of the scene were surprised and amused to see Father Charles tap his forehead while indicating with a nod his well-meaning tormentor. There was nothing of resentment in the gesture, because he was smiling pleasantly all the time; but rather a playful hint that he had doubts about the sanity of Father Salvian—and taking all things into consideration, his doubts were not altogether unwarranted."

When he was more than usually slow in the celebration of

Mass, somebody would go for Father Salvian. "It was our only remedy," says one of the students. And what a drastic remedy it was! "He would come along," continues the student, "and putting on a small stole, would kneel at the foot of the altar. The effect was electric. Not a word would pass between them, but Father Charles understood well the purpose of this strategy, and would proceed with proper haste under the reproachful eye of his mentor. After a time, however, he would again be overcome with some overpowering emotion. Everything around him faded and vanished, and he was alone with God. But Father Salvian was never slow to remind him of his presence by a gentle tap on the shoulder or by the mild command: 'Go on, Father, go on!'"

It is difficult to determine the motives of Father Salvian's strange conduct. Some thought he was acting under instructions from the Superior General to watch Father Charles carefully and to put his virtue to the test: but there is no evidence of such a commission, not even in Father Salvian's own diary where, we feel certain, such an important item as an order from Rome would have been noted had it ever been given. It is more likely that he was acting on his own initiative. Whatever his motives, it must be admitted that he succeeded admirably in watching Father Charles carefully and in proving and exercising his virtue. He kept a most assiduous watching brief on his spiritual charge, and it is to him we are indebted for much of our information about him, particularly about the last years of his life.

**"Must Thou
Char
the Wood?"**

About twelve years before his death, the cab in which Father Charles was travelling on his way to visit some sick person collided with another vehicle in turning the sharp corner opposite St. Clare's Convent, Harold's Cross. He tried to jump clear, but his leg was caught beneath the upturned cab and badly fractured. It was never properly re-set and gave him trouble for the rest of his life. About this time, too, and possibly as a result of the nervous shock caused by this accident, he began to suffer from continual toothache and

violent headaches. Under the date of August, 1884, the diary notes: "Poor Father Charles is not well at all, and should not be allowed for some time to get up for Matins, or even to say the Office at all, being extremely weak and suffering from a constantly recurring dizziness of the head . . . Like a saint, he never complains and never tells anyone what he is suffering. We find it out only from the way he walks and from the appearance of his countenance."

In the following year, the Superior sent him to the Passionist Retreat at Ardoyne, Belfast, hoping that his failing health would benefit by the change. The holiday did not prove as restful as was expected. When the people of Belfast heard that the renowned "Father Charles of Mount Argus" was among them, they came to the monastery in crowds for his blessing; and Father Charles, sick man though he was, would not disappoint them. After three weeks of this "busman's holiday," he was called back to Dublin.

"The saintly man is a little better, but not much," remarks Father Salvian. The daily pilgrimages began again immediately he returned. People arrived at all hours of the day, to the great annoyance of the diarist who, to give him all due credit, kept an eye on the health as well as on the holiness of his ward. Repeatedly he gives vent to his feelings: "If he attended at a fixed hour, he would not have to go down almost every half-hour the whole blessed day. I have proposed this to him several times, but he must have his own way." But God—mercifully—does not work to "office hours"; and Father Charles, with that complete disregard for himself and his own comfort which he had displayed from his early boyhood, could see no justification for doing so either. A command under obedience—which in this case was never given—seemed to be the only way of restraining the recklessness of a saint in the practice of charity—"the almost irrational virtue," as Chesterton calls it.

One who knew Father Charles in those last years gives us a picture of an old man, almost bent in two, making his way painfully through the house, his lips constantly moving in prayer.

"Whenever I saw him," he writes, "I thought of Christ on the Way of the Cross." The last time he appeared in Choir for the Divine Office was on Friday, December 9th, 1892. Instead of walking straight to the centre to genuflect, he was compelled to go round the side holding on to the benches and, when with great difficulty he had genuflected, he had to place both hands on the altar step to enable him to rise from his knee. All present noticed how ill he looked and discussed it among themselves afterwards. "At supper-time," records Father Salvian, "he was missing from his place, and the infirmarian went to his room to find out what was the matter . . . When the infirmarian asked him the cause of his difficulty in walking, he answered that he had a pain in his leg. The Brother asked to see it, and was shocked to find it very much inflamed with a large and extremely painful-looking sore. He ordered him to stay in his room." On the following day, a doctor was called in. He pronounced the disease to be a bad form of erysipelas, and expressed his opinion that the case was hopeless. That evening the Last Sacraments were administered.

For the next few days he rallied somewhat and at times gave hope of ultimate recovery. Soon, however, his condition became worst, and it was evident that the end was not far off. A male nurse from St. Vincent's Hospital was engaged to attend to him during the day, while the students watched at his bedside throughout the night. One of them notes: "His obedience to the infirmarian was always most prompt . . . if he was told to take a little sleep, immediately he composed himself as best he could; if ordered to put his hands under the coverlet to protect them from the cold, or directed to lie in some particular position, he obeyed without a murmur. He suffered much from a burning thirst which had to be assuaged by frequent draughts of a specially prepared cordial; but if it was suggested to him that he abstain from this for a time, he showed himself content and offered his suffering to God as a sacrifice."

He spoke very little, and when someone asked him why, he answered: "I must pray." He would ask the students to accom-

pany him in the recitation of short prayers, his favourite being: "My Jesus, I embrace this affliction for love of You. I desire to suffer in order to please You." He frequently invoked the help of his lifelong friends, the saints, and was once heard praying to St. Appollonia, one of the lesser-known martyrs who, before her supreme sacrifice for the love of God, had all her teeth broken. It will be remembered that severe toothache was one of the greatest sufferings he himself had endured for more than ten years.

Day by day the chastening process went on, until he was reduced to a living skeleton. The entries in Father Salvian's diary for the first days of 1893 tell of the tremendous sufferings of Father Charles during those days destined to be his last on earth. They reflect, too, his own profound admiration and love for this holy priest in whose life he had played such a strange part. On January 3rd, he notes: "The poor sick man has lost the power of speech and the sight of his eyes. He cannot swallow any food, and seems to suffer very much; but not even a sigh of complaint is ever heard from him."

The end came quietly and suddenly. There were present in his cell when he died only a priest, two students and the male nurse attendant. "There was no agony, not even a movement of the muscles. He just fell asleep and only the passing sigh told the watchers that all was over." It was half-past-five on the morning of January 5th, 1893.

Among His Own Within a few hours newspaper placards all over the city were reporting the chief item in the day's news. From poster, hoarding and pavement it attracted every eye early that morning: "DEATH OF FATHER CHARLES OF MOUNT ARGUS." It is not every day that newspapers feature the death of a priest so prominently, for priests have, generally, little news-value in life or in death. But Father Charles was different, very different. One reporter, with more respect for public opinion than for the Decrees of Urban VIII, paid the following tribute under the caption: "A Saint Whom Dublin Knew": "To speak to the people of Dublin, or indeed of

Ireland, of the fame of Father Charles as a man of wondrous sanctity, as one who was apparently the channel through which God bestowed on hundreds manifold and marvellous graces—would be a mere work of supererogation . . . If there was a foreigner who wove himself round the tendrils of the Irish nature more intimately than he, we have yet to seek him in legend or in life."

It was long after nightfall before arrangements were completed for taking the body to the church, where a large crowd had waited patiently for hours. And there, for a space of five days, "poor old Charlie"—as he had so often called himself—had the honour of a lying-in-state fit for an emperor. A constant stream of people filed slowly and reverently past the coffin to view the remains of him whose hands had so often gone out in blessing to them, to touch him if possible or have some object of devotion, a crucifix or Rosary beads, applied to him. So eager were they to get some relic of the dead priest that they did not hesitate to tear away portions of his habit.

Nor was this search for relics confined to the laity. "When the body of Father Charles was taken from his cell," notes the ever-watchful Father Salvian, "there was a general plunder of things that had belonged to the deceased. But Father Rector ordered that everything should be brought back to be kept as relics at the disposal of the Rector himself."

So great was the number of people in the church during those five days that often the doors had to be closed, and many had to go home disappointed; panellings in the confessionals were broken and it was feared at times that someone would be injured. Though the men of the Confraternity did great work, it was thought wise to get a detachment of Metropolitan Police to keep order on the day of the funeral itself.

"Never before in living memory," runs a newspaper report, "was there witnessed such an expression of veneration for the dead as took place at Mount Argus from Thursday afternoon until Monday last. Tens of thousands visited the bier each day. On Sunday evening all the city Confraternities recited the Solemn

Office in the church and, spacious though it is, large crowds were unable to obtain admittance and were content to remain for hours under a heavy downpour in the open air. On Monday, at the obsequies, the number was far greater than that of any previous day, the adjoining grounds being one dense mass of people. As the coffin was lowered into the grave every eye was wet with tears and loud and general manifestations of the most sincere regret and sorrow went up from the multitude present who clustered round with heads uncovered to take the last look at the coffin which enclosed the remains of a most exemplary and beloved priest."

The 'Cause' of Father Charles The devotion of the Irish people for Father Charles did not end with his death. Only a fortnight afterwards Father Salvian notes that "a great many people came to visit Father Charles's grave throughout the day." As the years went by, the number of those who came on daily pilgrimage to Mount Argus increased to such an extent that for a time the cemetery had to be closed to the public. But even then people would come under cover of night and gain admittance to the cemetery in order to kneel at the grave and take away pieces of clay as relics. They felt that he, who during life had been their friend, would continue to help them and intercede for them in Heaven. And Father Charles has not disappointed his "dear Irish people." Innumerable favours—many of them quite extraordinary—are reported as having been obtained through his intercession; health has been restored, employment secured, financial and domestic difficulties settled, and hardened sinners converted.

On November 13th, 1935, Pope Pius XI signed the Decree for the introduction of the "Cause" of Father Charles. During the years 1936 and 1938 the Ecclesiastical Courts of Enquiry known as the Apostolic Process were held in the various dioceses in which the Servant of God had lived. All were summoned as witnesses who could testify to his reputation for sanctity or who could report on the miraculous favours alleged to have

been worked through his intercession. These enquiries were naturally of a very exacting nature. Evidence was sought to prove not merely that Father Charles had a reputation for sanctity, but that he did in fact practise all the virtues in an heroic degree. The evidence given during these Processes is at present before the Sacred Congregation of Rites in Rome.

If, as we all hope, it is God's Will that Father Charles be raised to the honours of the altar, he will be, like St. Patrick, in everything save birth an Irish saint. For the miller's boy of Munstergeleen gave his heart and his life and his memory to the people of Ireland. May they, by the multitude of their prayers, ensure that that memory is kept forever fresh on the eternal altars of God's Church.

In 1949 by permission of the Congregation of Sacred Rites the body of Fr. Charles was transferred from the nearby cemetery to the church of the Passionist Fathers, Mount Argus, Dublin. It is now entombed in a simple shrine. Countless people come daily to visit his tomb and to pray for his Canonisation. All are invited to pray that if it be for the good of souls and the greater glory of God this Knight of the Crucified will soon be canonised.

Those who know of any favours or miracles wrought through the intercession of the Servant of God, or who wish to make an offering towards the expenses of his Canonisation, are requested to communicate with the Rev. Vice-Postulator, St. Paul's Retreat, Mount Argus, Dublin 6W.

APPENDICES

BY

FATHER OLIVER KELLY, C.P.

Vice-Postulator

APPENDIX I

THE CURE THAT MADE BEATIFICATION POSSIBLE

As the Cause of Fr. Charles progressed, various extraordinary cures were considered as likely to gain recognition by the Sacred Congregation in Rome as truly miraculous. If there is a possibility of explaining such cures by natural means they are discarded. Many were discarded. So it was with great joy that the case of Mrs. O. Spaetgens-Verheggen was unanimously recognised as a genuine miracle and has made beatification a reality. Father Xavier, C.P., Vice-Postulator of the Cause of Fr. Charles in Holland gives this account of the miracle:

Mrs. Spaetgens-Verheggen had known for a long time about the Servant of God. Before her recovery, she had never any special devotion to him. However, she had visited the house in Munstergeleen where the Servant of God was born, and she had been pleased to read his life story.

Mrs. O. Spaetgens-Verheggen on her 80th birthday, 8th April 1960. She lived for 22 years after her cure.



The fact that Mrs. Spaetgens never had any particular devotion to the Servant of God is quite normal and corresponds perfectly with her spiritual life. Mrs. Spaetgens is a woman of resolute character. She has a consistency of spirit, a great strength of mind and resolve of will. As she was a widow from early in her marriage she had to overcome on her own all of life's difficulties. In consequence of this, she enjoyed a prudence of mind that did not allow her to be carried away by feelings of sentiment.

Likewise, her practice of devotion is neither sentimental or fanatical. She is given more to action than to contemplation; she is more

practical than emotional. She did not take to unimportant and affected shows of devotion, but her vision extended to the overall plan of salvation, and she followed the great and practical devotions of Holy Mother Church: such as, the Mass, the Sacraments and devotion to Our Blessed Lady, etc. She did not follow Novenas or "Triduums" in honour of any particular saint. Rather, she practised a sort of active piety. Mrs. Spaetgens was an active participant in the work of Clemens-Hofbauer.

All the above explains the particular and personal manner in which were realised her invocation of the Servant of God and her consequent recovery from illness.

After the sick woman - who had been found incurable by the hospital doctors - had returned home, she had a visit from her sister-in-law, Mrs. Philomena Hamers, who lives in Sittard and is a niece of the Reverend Father Charles of St. Andrew. The latter advised the sick woman to make a Novena in honour of the Servant of God, and to pray to him for her recovery. She also gave a Novena booklet to the sick woman, who accepted it with gratitude. But there was no question of making a Novena. That did not go with her form of spiritual life.

Some time afterwards, the sick woman, who was steadily getting worse and was being supported by injections of cardiosol and morphine, passed a bad night. She felt really miserable, and believed that she was about to die. In this state of distress she thought of Father Charles, the Servant of God. It was, as she herself says, like "a voice from heaven" that urged her to invoke the Servant of God. She felt herself filled with a marvellously unshakable trust in him, something she never previously had and which God alone could give.

In her mind, she invoked the Servant of God as follows:

"Father Charles, you still need to perform a miracle for your beatification. Help me in my distress. I do not ask for miracles. Only stop this retching as once it ceases I shall feel cured. But I am ready to die, if the good Lord so desires."

The sick woman prayed, as she herself says, with an unshakable

trust accompanied by perfect resignation to the will of God. It was a spiritual experience that is impossible to describe: "all that I felt in those moments is impossible to tell".

The above happened on the night of the 15-16 February 1952. However, the sick woman was not fully aware of how much Father Charles had hearkened to her. It was only on the following day that she experienced this. She sensed the odour of food that her daughter was preparing in the kitchen; her appetite returned and she asked for something to eat. "In order to please her", as her daughter says, "I gave her a little purée, with gravy of seasoned meat and some apple jelly. I expected that mother would not be able to retain the food. Meanwhile, mother consumed with a hearty appetite all that food which previously she could not even look at; there wasn't the slightest tendency towards vomiting, or the slightest indication of nausea or the like. Mother was able to retain her food. She did not vomit, and from that time onwards she has never retched again. The following day she had even eaten sauerkraut with bacon. In the morning she ate bacon and egg, and on the subsequent day she ate a red herring, with an egg. And so on, afterwards. It is difficult to imagine anything more indigestible. There was no more retching, and no more nausea. She recovered her strength".

Two weeks after her recovery Doctor Pinckers examined her. He found that the tumour was noticeably reduced, and a week later he had to state that the tumour was no longer palpable.

Doctor Castermans was informed of the extent of the recovery. He asked, of his own accord, to be able to check out the fact. This was done in August 1952 during a visit of Doctor Castermans to Valkenburg. He did not find any anomaly. The sick woman had completely recovered.

All the above was further confirmed in September by the same specialist who carried out a supplementary examination in his own home, and by the x-rays that were later taken on June 18, 1953 and July 17, 1953.

On September 22, 1952, Father Xavier approached Doctor Castermans, to seek his opinion about the recovery. An answer was slow in coming, due to a transient illness of the specialist. However,

on March 30 of the following year when the Vice-Postulator visited Doctor Castermans, the doctor said that in his opinion the recovery could not be explained by natural means. He was ready to testify to this fact, and to have the necessary x-rays taken. The report on the illness has also been signed by Doctor P. Roodenburg, a Protestant doctor, who was the surgeon that treated Mrs. Spaetgens.



Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes erected in the 'Virgin Wood' at Tobertynam House, Longwood, Co. Meath, the home of Edward & Mrs. McEvoy, in the year 1868, in gratitude for the favour of a baby daughter, and blessed by Fr. Charles of Mount Argus. The shrine is still preserved by devoted local people.

(Photo taken 11th April 1976 by Fr. Oliver Kelly, C.P.)

APPENDIX II

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II

at the Ceremony of Beatification of

BLESSED CHARLES OF MOUNT ARGUS

Sunday, October 16, 1988

"Let thy steadfast love be upon us, even as we hope in thee"

In the Liturgy of this 29th Sunday of the year, the Church prays with these words of the Psalm (32/33, 22). All of us find in these words the ingredients of our own personal prayer. What could man more earnestly desire than to hope in God, in His gift; in the working of the love that comes from Him and penetrates the whole of human life, thereby giving it a new dimension? The dimension that is willed by God, the dimension that brings salvation.

Today, the Church places these words of the Psalmist on the lips of those who have been declared **Blessed**: Bernard Mary of Jesus, Charles of St. Andrew, and Honoratus of Biala Podlaska. Their lives and their work are proposed for the faithful's admiration and imitation.

These three newly declared **Blessed** have shown themselves ready – as were the apostles – to drink to the dregs the chalice offered by their Master. Following in the footsteps of the Son of Man "who came into the world not to be served, but to serve" (Mk 10:45), each one of them was **ready to serve**, to be the "servant of all" (Mk 10:44). And, in serving, they "have given their own lives in ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

Those who from today are honoured by the Church as *Blessed*, have looked with the eyes of faith towards Christ, the Man of Sorrows, Who was described in the prophetic vision of Isaiah, many centuries before the sacred Passion, as "Despised and rejected by men, acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Is 53:3).

"Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him" (Is 53:10).

Here is the reality of Good Friday, which is followed by the dawn of Easter Sunday, since the undeniable reality of the resurrection is unbreakably linked to the reality of crucifixion.

"When he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring . . . he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities" (Is 53:10-11).

Each one of these three, who today is declared *Blessed* by the Church, has profoundly lived the total meaning of the paschal mystery of Christ. Each has learned to know this mystery through the experience of his own faith and with his own heart, mind and will. Each has made the paschal mystery the foundation and source of his own paschal ministry, of his own witness, in the day to day pledge of "holding fast our profession of faith" (cf. Heb 4:14), that he may draw near "with full confidence to the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16).

In Father Charles of Saint Andrew, a priest of the Passionist Congregation, we find a striking example of God's power at work to console, reconcile and heal His people through the ministry of His faithful servants. The priestly ministry of Blessed Charles was carried out in the continual service of others. His life is characterised by that humble, exemplary dedication to service which determines the true greatness of a disciple. As Jesus tells His disciples in today's Gospel: "Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all".

Genuine holiness exerts influence on others, an influence which goes beyond any merely natural explanation. The thousands of people who were drawn to God through the priestly holiness of Father Charles attest to this truth. The power of God's grace at work in his ministry bore much spiritual fruit in the lives of countless individuals. He laboured tirelessly in the Lord's service both in England and in Ireland. At the Passionist Monastery at Mount Argus in Dublin he acquired a great reputation for holiness

and many came to him for counsel and to receive the Sacrament of Penance. he forgave their sins in the name of Christ and brought them to a better understanding of the Gospel message of reconciliation.

From his very first days in the Passionist novitiate at Ere, in Belgium, he meditated devoutly on the mystery of the Lord's Passion. He had first experienced the division of Christians in his native country of the Netherlands, and he came to see this lack of unity among Christians as a share in the Lord's sufferings. This was made ever more evident to him in the words of Christ's prayer to the Father on the eve of His Passion; "May they all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me".

After the profession of his religious vows and the completion of his theological studies, **Blessed Charles** was first sent to England to minister to the needs of the Catholic faithful and to work for the unity of Christians. Five years later he was sent to **Dublin** to help in establishing the new foundation that the Passionists were making there. It was in **Dublin** that it became clear to him that he was to devote himself above all to the ministry of reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance. He was to comfort and assist the spiritually troubled, and God greatly prospered his ministry by healing some of the sick who came to him for a blessing. He was daily concerned with the difficulties of others. In a word, he followed the example of Jesus who came "not to be served but to serve and to give his life in ransom for the many".

The outstanding example of **Father Charles** should serve as an inspiration to **all the spiritual sons of Saint Paul of the Cross**. His dedication to the ministry of reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance encourages **all priests** to continue to make this Sacrament readily available to the faithful. His example helps them to have great confidence in God's power to work in their ministry. **Blessed Charles** appeals to **all Christians** to be one in the unity for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper; he implores them "on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God".

"Lord, let your love be upon us, for we hope in you".

Today, let us thank the most holy Trinity for that love that penetrated and guided the earthly life of **Blessed Charles**. He hoped in the Lord and he has become great in the Spirit.

In today's solemn act of Beatification, the same Lord "prolongs" in a certain sense the days of **Blessed Charles'** life and allows him to see his "offspring", born by the love of the Holy Spirit and through the work of his ministry.

We, gathered here, uniting ourselves to the most holy Mother of God in the Communion of Saints, repeat the prayer of the Psalmist: "Lord, let your love be upon us, for we hope in you".

Following the example of Christ, who "did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life in ransom for many," let this love help us to serve our brothers.



An artist's impression of an apparition of Our Lady to Fr. Charles, as recorded by a member of the Mount Argus Community who was present.

**PRAYER SAID BY BLESSED CHARLES
TO OUR LADY,
MOTHER OF HOLY HOPE**

Most Holy Virgin Mary – oh, my Mother! How sweet it is to come to thy feet, imploring thy perpetual help! If earthly mothers cease not to remember their children, how canst thou, the most loving of all mothers, forget me? Grant then, to me, I implore thee, thy perpetual help in all my necessities, in every sorrow, and especially in all my temptations . . . I ask for thy unceasing help for all who are now suffering. Help the weak, cure the sick, convert sinners . . . Obtain for us, dear Mother, that, having earnestly invoked thee on earth, we may see thee, love thee, and eternally thank thee hereafter in heaven. Amen.

Mother of Holy Hope, pray for us.

**NOVENA PRAYER
FOR
CANONISATION OF BLESSED CHARLES**

Eternal Father, you called Blessed Charles of Mount Argus to bring good news to the poor and to heal the broken hearted; you opened his eyes to see the presence of Christ crucified in those who suffer. Through his intercession, may we learn the meaning of your compassionate love for us, by experiencing the blessings of your healing power. Merciful Jesus, hear our prayer and grant this request. Amen.

(Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father)

Blessed Charles of Mount Argus, pray for us.

All reports of favours received should be addressed to:

Vice-Postulator, Mount Argus, Dublin 6W.



Under the inspiration of Mary, the virgin Mother of Sorrows, St. Paul of the Cross founded the Passionist Congregation to revive the memory of Christ's Passion. The sufferings, death and resurrection of the Son of God in the great paschal mystery is the greatest proof of God's love and mercy.

St. Paul believed that the preaching of the Passion is the most effective way of converting sinners and bringing people nearer to God. Had not Christ said: 'They shall look upon him whom they have pierced'. When an old man Paul was asked what he would do if he were young again? He replied 'I would go through the world preaching the mercy of God'.

His motto for all Passionists was "We preach Christ Crucified".