

# **LIFE OF BLESSED CHARLES OF MOUNT ARGUS**

Passionist Priest  
1821-1893



*By*  
*Father Oliver Kelly, C.P.*  
*Vice-Postulator.*



Mount Argus as it was when Fr. Charles arrived in 1859. The temporary chapel built by Fr. Paul Mary Pakenham in 1856 is on the right of the picture.

**Blessed Charles of Mount Argus**  
**An Apostolic Mystic**  
**1821-1893**

*Always Available*  
*But Always Absorbed In Prayer*

by

**Father Oliver Kelly, CP**  
**Vice-Postulator**

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Man of faith, hope and charity.  
Special painting of Blessed Charles for Beatification

# Foreword

by

## **The Superior General of the Passionists The Most Rev. José Agustín Orbegozo, C.P.**

When God raises some members of the faithful to the heights of heroic virtue and confirms by miracles their reputation for exalted sanctity He is setting up fresh beacon lights to meet the needs of the time, new models of faith and prayer to encourage us to resist the temptations of the day. In gratitude to God it is our duty to study them and to make them known by every available means of communication: pulpit, press, radio and television. We can never have too much literature on the saints.

This portrait of Blessed Charles of Mount Argus by the Vice Postulator, Fr. Oliver Kelly, C.P., presents Blessed Charles as a man of intense faith and habitual prayer. Faith and prayer is the greatest need of society today. Hence the beatification of Father Charles must be seen as a most timely remedy and antidote to the growing spirit of secularism which threatens the whole world with ruin.

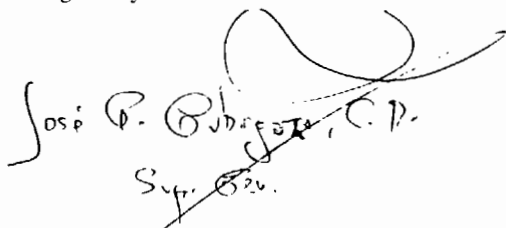
Blessed Charles spent his whole life trying to make God better known and loved by his constant preaching of the paschal mystery of the sufferings, death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Pope John Paul in his homily at the ceremony of beatification of Blessed Charles proposed him as a model for all, but in particular as a striking example to all priests. "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."

His unshakable faith and absorbing prayer kept him faithful to his lifelong commitment to the priesthood and religious life. It is hoped that many will have the grace to follow his example. He had to overcome almost insurmountable difficulties in

following his vocation. With Pope John Paul in his message for Vocations Day I say to all young people who may read these pages: "Take courage; Christ is calling you and the world awaits you! Remember that the kingdom of God has need of your generous and total dedication. Do not be like the rich young man who, when he was invited by Christ, was unable to accept but remained with his possessions and his sadness (Math. 19.22) even though Jesus had glanced at him with love. Be like the fishermen who, when they were called by Jesus, left everything promptly to become fishers of men" (Math. 4.18.22).

May Blessed Charles guide you.



Joseph P. Suber, C.P.  
Sup. B.V.

## Blessed Charles of Mount Argus

### IRISH BY ADOPTION

Pope John Paul II concluded his historic visit to Poland in June 1979 with this exhortation to his countrymen: "Be strong with the strength that comes from faith." Fr Charles of Mount Argus, who is now Blessed Charles, was before all else a man of faith. He was not a born Irishman. Neither was St Patrick. But like St Patrick he made Ireland his adopted country. In a letter to his family he wrote: "I love the Irish, because they remind me of my own people."

Fr Charles was born in Münstergeleen, in the Province of Limburg, Netherlands, on December 11, 1821. He was baptized the same day and given the name John Andrew. His parents Peter Joseph Houben and Johanna Elizabeth Luyten were devout Catholics who made the salvation of their children their first concern. The Province of Limburg is predominantly Catholic and the village in which Fr Charles was born has been singularly favoured by God. Throughout the days of persecution against the faith in Holland, whether under the Calvinistic Princes of Orange or during the Erastian French occupation, the little parish Church of Münstergeleen was never secularised nor the people left without a priest to administer the Sacraments, and they proved themselves worthy of these blessings by the fervour of their faith and the purity of their morals. The piety of his parents and the truly Catholic outlook of the villagers and the saintly example of his parish priest, Fr Delahaye, all helped to preserve and strengthen in his heart the special graces given to John Andrew in his baptism. To this day the Catholic atmosphere of the Province of Limburg is manifested by the many wayside shrines to be seen throughout the area. When I visited the birthplace of Fr Charles in 1979 what a pleasant surprise it was to see a large Crucifix openly displayed in the main entrance of a bank in Maria Hoop!

It is interesting to recall that the parents of Fr Charles were



Birthplace of Fr. Charles. Notice two millwheels

next-door neighbours. Only a small garden separated their two homes. Both families were small farmers, with mills as an extra source of income. The Houben family had a flour mill and the Luytens an oil press. One and the same river provided the power to turn the wheels of both mills. If there had been matchmakers around, such as are commonly spoken of in Ireland, the prospects of a more viable holding under one management would have been an ideal situation for the promoters of romance. But whatever the material advantages of such a union, the spiritual blessings to be hoped for from the sacramental grace of matrimony were more attractive to two young people so admirably matched in faith and devotion as Peter Joseph and Johanna Elizabeth. It was the sort of marriage we often hear described as 'made in heaven.' God blessed their marriage with eleven children, the tenth of which was still-born. Their home was in truth 'a domestic church.' Each day began with family morning prayers before they dispersed for their daily occupations. The day ended with

the family rosary. It was a cradle for vocations and it is no surprise that two of the sons become priests and one daughter a nun. The old Houben home is now converted into an Oratory or Chapel. Crowds come there from great distances to seek the intercession of Fr Charles, noticeably childless couples, expectant mothers and students preparing for examinations. A special show of sympathy seems to be given by Fr Charles, who is prompted no doubt by the fact that he himself endured the anxiety and fatigue of the slow learner and by his remembrance of the anguish suffered by his mother when she lost her second last child.

### BOYHOOD

As a little boy John Andrew was not particularly bright. In fact he was somewhat below average in intelligence. At school his progress was dismally slow. Year after year, as he was left behind, he must have been painfully conscious of the image he presented, a big dull-witted youth in a class of little children. But he would not give up. Strong in faith and prayer he was a stickler. He had a purpose in mind. Well-meaning friends and neighbours, and no doubt his teacher too, thought the lad was wasting his time. His parents were puzzled and wondered what was best for the boy's future. They brought their problem to the parish priest, Fr Delahaye, who knew John Andrew as an altar boy and member of the church choir. He had made his own assessment of the lad and confidently told his parents: "This boy will become great." That settled the matter. Could he have foreseen how great? The one-time backward little boy of Münstergeleen now Blessed Charles of Mount Argus!

While Andrew continued with dogged earnestness at his books he took no interest in athletics or school games. Instead he was exceptional for his devotion to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and to our Blessed Lady. He seemed to find more joy in hours of silent prayer in the parish church than his companions found in the village playing fields. This was something surprising in an ordinary strong, healthy young

boy, but not at all to be wondered at in Andrew whose vivid faith absorbed him in the contemplation of the great mysteries of religion. For as Fr Christopher Coleman remarks in his excellent *Life of Fr Charles*: "Not even the imagination of a Hans Andersen could create a world as wonderful as that in which Andrew Houben passed his childhood and, for that matter, his whole life. Even as an old man he could still speak of Heaven and the angels as children prattle of fairyland and its fairy Princes." God does not have to wait until adult age to give His chosen ones a glimpse of that indescribable third heaven which so enraptured the Apostle St Paul. Simple-hearted children have always been very dear to God and have been favoured with special divine revelations. "Jesus declared, I thank thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and the understanding and hast revealed them to babes" (Matt. XI.25).

### THE CONSCRIPT

At nineteen John Andrew Houben was conscripted in accordance with the Constitution of the Netherlands. His parents were unable at the time to pay the necessary money that could have bought a substitute and secured exemption from military service as was a common practice. They had just built a new home for their large family of ten. Money was scarce and times were difficult. After a few months they did manage to raise enough money to get a substitute and Andrew was happily released. His short term of service in the army was a gruelling experience. But even in the uncongenial surroundings of barrack life his piety bore witness to Christ. He was seen to spend all his hours of recreation in prayer in the local church. One of his comrades testified many years afterwards: "When he was not in the barracks he was in the Church, and he received Holy Communion every Sunday. That boy should never have been in the barracks." Perhaps not. But there was a divine purpose in that ordeal. While he was in the army he met a fellow conscript, with whom he exchanged confidences.

He learned that the young man had a brother who had recently entered the Passionist Monastery at Ere, Belgium. It was the first time Andrew had heard of the Passionists, a Congregation founded by St. Paul of the Cross under Our Lady's inspiration, to preach the mercy of God and bring sinners back to God through the knowledge of Christ Crucified. It was a joyful discovery that brought new hope to the troubled youth. He was indeed troubled. Army life had opened Andrew's eyes to a dark world of evil, the existence of which had never crossed his mind in the sheltered circle of home life at Münstergeleen where it was said that: "He knew only two roads, to the school and to the church." If he had previously dreamed of the priesthood as his vocation he now resolved, if God so willed, to be a Passionist priest.

As soon as he was released from the army he returned home and took up his books afresh with unshaken trust in God but with little immediate success. Then quite suddenly he began to make surprisingly rapid progress. "It seemed," one of his teachers said, "as if the hand of God had touched him." Could this have been a direct intervention on the part of God in answer to the persevering prayer of a young man eager to devote his life to God as a priest but without the natural ability to reach the required standard in his studies Or could it be the sudden quickening of his intelligence, the slow flowering of latent intellectual potentialities such as we read of in the case of St Thomas Aquinas who in his earlier days was labelled by his less perceptive critics as the 'dumb ox of Sicily'?

### THE PASSIONIST

Within four years of leaving the army he had completed his preparatory studies, had applied to the Passionists at Ere (Belgium) for admission to their novitiate, and had been accepted. Fr Charles loved his home and family. It tore the heart out of him to leave them. A few days before he left home and country at the age of twenty-four to become a Passionist he was seen

to be unusually silent. He moved about from room to room, lifting up, as he went, various little objects, books, pictures, statues and ornaments, looked at them lovingly and put them down again. His sister sensed the thoughts that were in his mind. He was saying a last farewell to home and family. His heart was bleeding. But to his sister's words of sympathy and understanding he replied: "I would live in a wilderness to be with God." The resolute young man had all the potential to become what Pope John Paul II proclaimed him, a hero for Christ, a hero with an affectionate heart that always melted with compassion for the sick and suffering. He entered the novitiate on November 5, 1845, and received the habit of the Passion on the first day of December. At this time, in accord with the custom of the period, he was given a new name, Charles, and in place of his surname (Houben) he retained his baptismal name as a personal devotion. So, from that day forward he was to be known as Charles of St Andrew. His record as a novice and student marked him out as 'an example of devotion, piety and faith'. Those who lived with him described him as: "Simple and easy to live with, his gentle and sincere disposition, his good spirits and natural gaiety during recreation compelling all to love him." He had a beautiful singing voice, and when requested he would enliven the community recreation with some of his country's songs which he would sing with patriotic fervour. Another favourite piece was the Ave Maria.

He was ordained on December 21, 1850 and less than two years later he was sent to England and arrived on February 11, 1852. For the next four years he laboured in different monasteries in Staffordshire, Worcestershire and London. Altogether, he worked for nearly 14 years in England. The Monastery Chronicler wrote about his priestly apostolate, praying and preaching: "Night and day he was called to the sick; he administered the holy Sacraments, remained until a late hour in the confessional, catechised, preached; in a word the burden of the work fell on the shoulders of Fr Charles. The poor man has not a moment to himself." Yet in all these

laborious years no great cures or miracles were accredited to him, nor did he receive widespread public acclaim till he set foot upon Irish soil. One is often tempted to wonder why? Could an explanation be found in the passing remark of an onlooker when a sick man, hoping for a cure, travelled all the way from Dublin to Sutton, in Lancashire, to seek the blessing of Fr Charles? The significant remark was: "The faith of these poor Irish!" Faith certainly does make a difference. In Capernaum Our Lord's own hands were tied because the people had little faith. "And He could do no mighty work there . . . And He marvelled because of their unbelief" (Mark VI. 5.6). God looks to faith. "Without faith, it is impossible to please Him" (Heb. XI. 6).

### ARRIVAL IN IRELAND

On July 9, 1857, Feast of Our Lady, Mother of Holy Hope, Fr Charles arrived in Ireland for the first time. His reputation as The Holy Man of Mount Argus spread rapidly throughout the country. The Irish were quick to recognise his sanctity. People flocked to him in constant pilgrimage as the fame of his sanctity spread through the wondrous cures attributed to him. In him were fulfilled the words of the Prophet: "The Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted" (Is. 61. 1). His coming on that beautiful feast of the Mother of God, Mother of Holy Hope, had special significance. It was only ten years after the famine. The spectre of Black Death had devastated the country and decimated the population. The survivors were indeed an afflicted people, depressed and oppressed. Centuries of cruel persecution by the sword of the invader could be seen and endured as the human injustices of political bigotry and aggrandisement, but the disaster of the famine was something different. It made the people feel that the hand of God was against them. Like the Israelites of the waterless desert after the flight from Egypt, they might be heard wondering: "Is the Lord among us or not" (Exodus 17.7).

It was at this hour of national crisis that the Mother of Holy

Hope brought Fr Charles to Ireland. Twenty years later Our Lady herself would appear at Knock in that dramatic tableau on the gable end of an old country church. That wordless portrayal set before the eyes of the people of Ireland the central mysteries of our Catholic faith far more eloquently than any spoken word could ever do. It showed Mary the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God who brought the Saviour into the world. It focused attention on the Lamb of God, Jesus Crucified, ever present on the altars of the Catholic world in the holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It recalled the good tidings of salvation in the book of Sacred Scripture: "Words of Spirit and of Life." It highlighted the Church's teaching authority in the mitred figure that is commonly identified as St John, the disciple of love and theologian of the New Testament. Among the Apostles he is symbolised by the figure of an eagle, because his gospel soars to the highest realms of theology. There also was St Joseph, head and bread-winner of the first Christian family, Patron of the Universal Church. The whole scene at Knock was a heavenly inspired message of hope that said to the down-trodden suffering Catholics of Ireland: "Lift up your hearts. Have faith. Pray to Mary." After your Gethsemane there will come the joy of your Resurrection.

Mary's message was but an emphatic repeat of the message of Fr Charles. With crucifix in hand he reminded the people of all that Jesus Christ suffered for their sake. He assured them that they would only have to suffer for a time, and that God would reward their patience. In that way he encouraged them to hope and check all rebellious thoughts, as did the psalmist who was tempted to envy the prosperity of evil doers until he realised that 'it does pay to be honest.'

"How useless to keep my heart pure  
and wash my hands in innocence  
when I was stricken all day long,  
suffered punishment day after day.  
Then I said: "If I should speak like that  
I should abandon this faith of your people."

I strove to fathom this problem,  
 too hard for my mind to understand,  
 until I pierced the mysteries of God  
 and understood what becomes of the wicked.”

(Psalm LXXII)

Preacher of the Passion of Christ, Fr Charles recalled that “God spared not His only begotten Son but delivered Him up to be crucified” for us. In this way he helped people to pierce the mysteries of God and “be strong with the strength that comes from faith.” Strengthened by the grace of renewal in faith they remained true to their Christian heritage and lifted up their hearts in hope.

### BANISHED FROM MOUNT ARGUS

After the first nine years of his great apostolate, preaching, counselling and healing, he was hailed in the public press as “the renowned and saintly Fr Charles.” But the cures effected by his blessing had another and very much less happy result. A bitter campaign was stirred up against him, whether from jealousy or religious bigotry matters little now. He was accused of inducing the sick to come to him rather than seek medical aid. To make matters worse, dishonest adventurers tried to cash in on his reputation by selling water labelled ‘Holy water blessed by Fr Charles’, much like their counterparts of more recent times, who sold cotton wool dipped in chicken’s blood as Padre Pio’s! Poor Fr Charles was totally innocent of this trickery. His superiors knew that he was innocent but they had a problem on their hands and were advised by the Archbishop to send Fr Charles away. On the pretext of giving him a much needed rest, which in truth he did need, they changed him to the Passionist Monastery in Worcestershire, England. What Fr Charles himself thought of this move we cannot say. He would not be human if he did not feel he was going under a cloud, but he just went where he was sent and said nothing. But the people of Dublin had no doubts about him. They pursued him to England. “Every post brought letters seeking his prayers,”



Glendalough, the City of the Seven Churches

the chronicler writes, "and sometimes sick people made the journey from Ireland hoping to be cured by his blessing." Eventually he was recalled to Dublin on January 10, 1874. The news of his return was the signal for the pilgrimage of visitors to start anew. In the annals of Mount Argus we read: "In one day, more than three hundred people came to be blessed by Fr Charles, which is the usual number of people coming to be blessed by him. Fr Charles is well known in this city of Dublin as well as throughout Ireland for the many miraculous cures people say they have received. Several persons came to Dublin from America and England for his blessing and to be cured of some disease or other."

### MAGNETISM OF SANCTITY

Wherever he went Fr Charles was the centre of attraction, the object of extraordinary veneration. On one occasion he was invited by a friend and benefactor to visit the ancient

monastic city of Glendalough. On the way the local band with a great crowd of people met Fr Charles and his companion at Rathdrum and escorted them to the Seven Churches. It was a spontaneous demonstration of devotion on the part of the good people of the countryside, but it was a very embarrassing experience for the humble priest who always tried to put into practice the golden advice which he had learned as a novice in what is known as the 'monk's alphabet' – 'Learn to be unknown and reputed as nothing, for this is more profitable than the praises of men.'

The parish priest conducted Fr Charles to the church where he spoke to an overflow congregation from the pulpit. All were deeply impressed by the simplicity and sincerity of his words. But there was more to follow. Outside the church an immense crowd had gathered in from surrounding districts bringing the sick and disabled in cars and carts of all kinds. What had been planned as a restful visit to the peace and solitude of Glendalough had turned into a triumphal march and ended as an impromptu mission of apostolic charity for the crowds craving for blessing, consolation and cures.

In 1875 Fr Charles celebrated Mass in the Presentation Convent in Killarney. The convent chapel could not hold the crowds that came to the holy priest's Mass. From the convent of Presentation he went to the Sisters of Mercy. There it was Glendalough all over again. It was impossible to accommodate the crowds that thronged to the convent from all sides. A nun opened the gate into a nearby field and there Fr Charles spoke to the people and blessed them. The scene could only be described as another impromptu open-air mission. Not long before his death he was recognised as he passed through Westland Row Station. The crowds flocked around him and regardless of the surroundings knelt down and begged him to bless them.

What was the secret of the great popularity of this apostolic mystic, this self-effacing priest who took no part in athletics, never bothered to read newspapers, and would have shunned anything in the nature of modern discos or shows. The answer to this seeming paradox can be found in a letter written to the

Vice-Postulator on June 6, 1971, by an Irish-born lady living in America. The writer was a Mrs Farrell. She wrote:

“I was born and raised in Dublin, and as a child attended Mass often at Mount Argus and often the Mass was said by Fr Charles Houben. He loved to bless us with a relic which he believed helped to heal us spiritually and physically. I remember a portion of one wall of the church covered with canes and crosses attesting to the effectiveness of this belief.

“I remember also when anyone was dying Fr Charles was called to give the Last Rites. From the moment he entered the cab he began to pray, and as the cab went on the way along the streets to the home of the stricken person we could hear Fr Charles almost shouting the prayers for the dying as he passed our homes. Also I remember after he died and was buried people came from miles around to visit his grave and each one filled a little bag with earth from his graveside believing that it could bring about cures.

“I am now eighty-eight years old but I still remember the holiness of Fr Charles and how the people fully expected him to be canonised one day.”

There we have the secret of his popularity. Sanctity was the secret.

Fr Charles made no claim to any great powers of oratory. He never strained after effect, never sought popularity, never studiously tried to impress, but impress he did. His preaching was never tiresome or boring. His was the magnetism of the man of God, the man of prayer whose obvious sincerity and fervent faith made his listeners hang upon his words. The theme and style of his preaching is clear from the little sermon notes found in his room after death. The invariable theme of his sermons was the malice of sin, the sufferings of Christ in atonement for sin, and the Eternal Truths. He would never agree with the false teachers of modern permissive society who tell us never to say that anything is a mortal sin, and to forget the idea of God as judge and punisher of evil. To him mortal sin was a dreadful reality – “the monster of the world . . . to be feared more than anything in the world, because he who

commits mortal sin becomes the enemy of God; how dreadful must it be to have concealed mortal sin in confession." The Evangelist St John did not hesitate to say: "Some sins are deadly." Neither did Fr Charles.

His blessings of the people were always preceded by instruction. It was his general practice to gather into groups the people who came to him and lead them into the Church. There he would hold up the crucifix, which he always carried, and direct attention to the wounds of Christ as proof of the justice of God who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rm. 8.32). In the simplest language he would recall the blasphemy of the impious Herod, who dared to mock Christ as a fool; the moral cowardice of the place-hunting Pilate, who knowingly sentenced the innocent Christ to be scourged and crucified rather than risk offending the Emperor Caesar and miss his chances of promotion; the treachery of the faithless disciple Judas, who sold Christ for the paltry sum of thirty pieces of silver. Then he would challenge the Herods and Pilates and Judases of the day and call out with unanswerable defiance: "What will Annas and Caiphas and Herod say, who treated Our Lord so cruelly?" In this way, he would call them to repent and return to God who was waiting to have mercy on them.

'Man of God,' though he was, he had a holy fear of God's justice and punishment of sin. With great earnestness he tried to communicate his own fear to others. Many people today would like to get rid of this notion of fear and tell us to rule out all idea of God as judge and punisher of sin. That is the convenient theology of permissiveness. God's word says: "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." The Church teaches that fear of God is one of the special gifts of the Holy Spirit. Fr Charles had this gift. But his fear of God was not the paralysis of despair that causes deep depression; it was the energizing impulse of the Holy Spirit impelling him to do what the First Commandment of God tells us all to do: "Love God with your whole heart, your whole strength and your whole mind." Fr Charles was a true lover of God. From justice Fr Charles

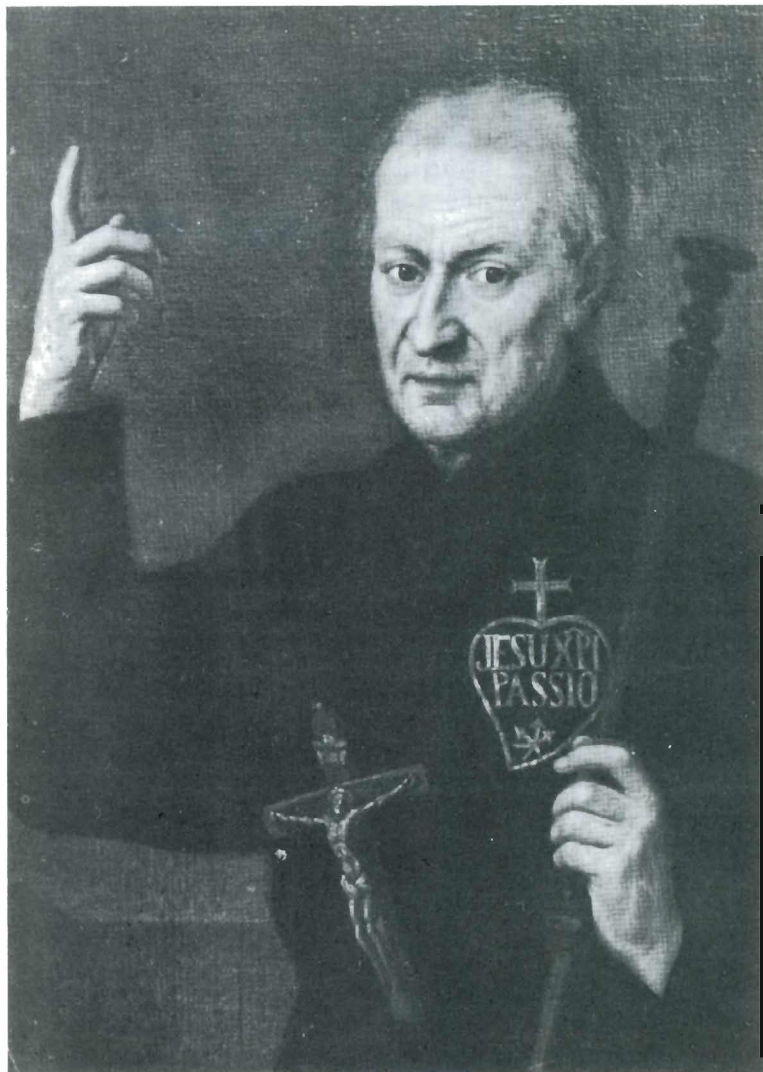


Artist's impression of apparition of Our Lady  
to Fr. Charles

would turn to mercy. Pointing again to Christ crucified he would remind all that God so loved them that He sent His own beloved Son to die for them, and to seek and save even those that were lost in sin – Justice, Mercy and Hope!

To the saving power of the crucifix he would always add a plea to Mary, the Immaculate Virgin Mother of God and Mother of Sinners, who was proclaimed by Christ on the Cross to be our Mother too. His devotion to Mary had all the warm affection of a child's love for its mother. A simple prayer which he said to Mary, Mother of Holy Hope, is evidence of his faith, love and trust. "Oh most holy Virgin Mary! 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?" He loved to speak about the Blessed Virgin at all times, but especially in conversation with his brother religious and when writing to his family. In a letter to his sister Sibyl a few years before his death he wrote: "I hope you have a copy of that lovely book on true devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, written by Blessed (now Saint) Louis Marie de Montfort; he also wrote *The Secret of Mary*. I have both books in English." It is on record that on one occasion when having the evening collation in silence with the community in the refectory, Fr Charles was lifted up in ecstatic rapture. Fixing his gaze on one point in the ceiling, he cried out in a loud voice: "Mary! Mary!" Nobody else saw anything, but all present believed that he saw that which is not given to us to see. He was constantly reminding people that: "We should love and serve the Blessed Virgin, and imitate her virtues. She ought to be our book, our model, our Mother." Every day he said this prayer to Mary for a happy death:

Mary, sweet refuge of miserable sinners, when my soul is on the point of leaving this world, oh my most sweet Mother, by that sorrow which thou didst endure when assisting at the death of thy Son on the Cross, assist me with thy mercy. Drive the infernal enemy from me, and



St. Paul of the Cross

do thou come and take my soul to thyself and present it to the eternal Judge. My Queen, abandon me not. Thou, after Jesus, hast to be my comfort in that terrible moment. Entreat thy beloved Son in his Goodness, to grant me the grace to die clinging to thy feet, and to breathe forth my soul in His wounds, saying, 'Jesus and Mary I give you my heart and my soul.' Amen.

### APOSTOLIC MYSTIC

Sixteen centuries after the death of the Apostle St Paul, who in his mission to the Gentiles judged himself to know nothing but Jesus Crucified, God sent another Paul, St Paul of the Cross to establish the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ with the avowed purpose of reviving the memory of the sufferings and death of Christ as the greatest proof of the love and mercy of God, and the most effective way of overcoming the evils of the world. The Passion of Christ is the school of every virtue. In the words of St Thomas Aquinas: "In the Passion of Christ we find a remedy for all the ills which come upon us on account of our sins. But the Passion is not less useful to us as an example. Indeed, the Passion of Christ is sufficient in itself to instruct us completely in our whole life. For if anyone wants to live a perfect life, he has only to despise the things that Christ despised on the Cross, and to desire what Christ desired. The Cross provides an example of every virtue" (2nd Lesson, Feast of St Thomas).

When St Paul of the Cross founded his Congregation he wanted every one of his followers to be an 'Apostolic Mystic.' He coined that apparently contradictory term himself to express what he wanted and in his programme for the education and formation of Passionists he spelled out what it meant: "A man who is totally a man of God, totally apostolic, a man of prayer, detached from the world, from things, from himself, a man who can in perfect truth declare himself a disciple of Christ and render himself fruitful" (cf. *The Passionist* 1976, p.18). Thanks to God's grace, many Passionists achieved

this high ideal. There was St Paul of the Cross himself, his contemporary St Vincent Mary Strambi, St Gabriel of the Sorrowful Virgin, Blessed Dominic, Blessed Isidore, Blessed Pius, Blessed Bernard Mary, Blessed Charles of Mount Argus, and a host of others whose causes for canonisation are in progress.

In the above description of the ideal Passionist we have a vivid pen-picture of Fr Charles. Here are a few telling sentences from the sermon preached by Fr Wilfrid O'Hagan on the occasion of his funeral. "Fr Charles lived for God alone. His life was a living sacrifice. He loved the observance of his rule. He loved the solitude of his cell. He never left the house except under obedience or on some work of charity. No matter what went wrong in the world outside, with him it was no concern. I don't believe he ever looked at a newspaper. All who knew him never knew him to be without prayer. I think he prayed in his sleep. Night and day he prayed. He was an example to us all. He was never known to say an uncharitable word. I suppose there is not a single man or woman in Ireland who has not heard of him. He preached by the holiness of his life. He preached by his charity, and I will say he will preach better after his death."

If he seldom or ever read newspapers it was because he was not interested in the gossipy sensationalism that gets so much space in the media. In this he was like that famous Curé d'Ars, Saint John Mary Vianney, and yet again like him, he was fully aware of the important events of the time, and could give very sound advice. He could write calmly about the sorrows of the Church in the troubled days of anti-papal and anti-clerical activity: "Reading the persecution of our Holy Catholic Church, I am of the opinion, that by means of all these persecutions, Catholics will become more steadfast in the Holy Faith, and will be thus encouraged to fulfil more faithfully the duties of their state, will be brought to esteem more the value of the faith, will be more grateful for so great a benefit, and will thank God almighty that he has caused them to be born in the bosom of a Church which the greatest kings



St. Gemma Galgani

of the earth have regarded and esteemed as their Mother. I would recall the words of our Holy Father, the Pope of Rome: Faithful children of the Church remember constantly those beautiful words spoken in 1870 by his Holiness Pius IX "The grand army of the Pope are the souls who pray. With this army, every obstacle will be overcome'."

### CONVERSE WITH GOD

Saints converse with God and God converses with His saints. The conversation is always a holy exchange of ideas about the salvation of souls for God's glory. If we were to divide the people of the world into just two categories, the secular and the religious, it would be true to say that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives. It might come as a surprise to many who call themselves Christians or even to some Catholics, to read about St Gemma Galgani. She was a contemporary of Fr Charles. She died just ten years after

Fr Charles. When she was only seven years old the Sacred Heart of Jesus spoke clearly to her and asked her to make a big sacrifice. Her mother was very ill and about to die. After receiving Confirmation, Gemma remained to assist at another Mass in thanksgiving and to pray for her mother. "I heard Holy Mass," she said, "as well as I could, praying for Mama, when suddenly a voice at my heart said to me: 'Wilt thou give me Mama?' 'Yes,' I replied, 'provided Thou takest me also.' 'No,' replied the voice, 'give me unreservedly thy mother. Thou hast to wait for the present with thy father. I will take thee to heaven later.' I was obliged to answer 'Yes' and when Mass was over I ran home." She had made her first great sacrifice for God.

As Gemma grew in awareness of Christ's sufferings for sin she offered herself to God as a victim of reparation for sinners. God accepted her offering and she made it her vocation for life. With great fervour she begged to be allowed to share with Christ Crucified the suffering of His Passion. She was privileged to bear in her hands and feet and side the wounds of Crucifixion, or 'sacred stigmata' as it is called, as well as the long deep wounds of the scourging, the painful thorn-puncturing of her head and the shoulder wound from the carrying of the Cross. This became a weekly occurrence every Thursday and Friday. Her regular confessor was Bishop John Volpi. Naturally he was greatly worried and puzzled by such extraordinary phenomena, wondering could it be the effects of hallucination or diabolical intervention, rather than the work of God. In his anxiety he invited the Italian Passionist, Fr Germano, a highly skilled confessor and acknowledged authority in matters theological, to come to Lucca and investigate the case. Fr Germanus arrived in Gemma's house on Thursday evening. He tells us what he saw.

"I found the child in ecstasy. The subject of the ecstasy was the conversion of a sinner and the form was a wrestling between the blessed maiden and the Divine Justice to obtain his conversion. I confess that I never saw anything more affecting. The dear child was sitting on her bed with her eyes, face and all her person turned towards a point of the room where

our Lord appeared to her. The sinner in question was well known and highly respected in public life, but in private he was leading a very sinful life. Gemma knew nothing about him till God pointed him out to her and entrusted his salvation to her prayers and penances. God is always seeking the conversion of sinners. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18.23). The trouble is that so few are willing to offer themselves as victims for the conversion of sinners. Our Lady of Fatima said to the children: "Many sinners are lost because there is nobody to pray and do penance for them." Fr Germanus who had the singular privilege of watching and listening to Gemma in her tearful pleadings with the Sacred Heart for her sinner was overjoyed to record the success of her wrestling with God's justice. The ecstasy ended with Gemma's joyful exclamation: "He is saved, he is saved."

This incident from the life of St Gemma, recorded by her spiritual director and biographer is a very graphic account of God's communications with his saints. Fr Charles, too, was privileged to read souls and alert them to their danger. To give but one instance. A young man came to Fr Charles asking for prayers for his brother who was very ill. Fr Charles was silent for a few moments. Then he turned to his visitor and said: "Your brother will be better, but your own soul is sick." The young man admitted he had been leading a sinful life and made his confession. He came looking for one miracle and he received two! Which was the greater miracle, the sick man's recovery or the sinner's reconciliation with God?

Readers of the bible, particularly the Old Testament, are familiar with the idea of God conversing with patriarchs and prophets. The case of David and Nathan is an outstanding example (2 Sam. XII 2-15). David was a good young man. He was chosen by God to be prince of his people, and is described as 'a man after God's own heart'. But that did not exempt him from temptation. Even God's greatest Saints are tempted. David was tempted and failed miserably. He committed adultery and in a futile attempt to cover up his sin committed the



Mother of  
Holy Hope

greater crime of murder. This is a very human folly still practised even in our own day. Apparently David thought he had got away with it until God sent the Prophet Nathan to remind him of his sinful state and the threat of God's justice. By God's mercy David listened to the voice of conscience, admitted his guilt, accepted his penance and was reconciled with God. The Good Shepherd had found another lost sheep. Many people may be tempted to think that God's ways have changed, but it is comforting to remember that Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever, and that even in our day God continues to converse with his chosen servants and to make them ambassadors of his mercy. United with God in a spirit of intense faith and habitual prayer Fr Charles laboured for almost thirty years at Mount Argus as an ambassador of God's mercy to the poor and suffering. From his place in heaven with the Blessed he still seeks the glory of God in the salvation of souls and we pray that the many who visit his shrine daily will always find help in their sufferings and the great peace of reconciliation with God.

## Eucharistic Life

Through the great mystery of the Incarnation God became man. The Word of God was made flesh, taking a body and soul like ours, and dwelt among us. The history of God's relations with man was repeating itself. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, were constituted in grace, the grace of supernatural union with God. It was a blissful state. It is described in the first book of the bible in these simple but most telling words: "God walked with them in the garden." How lovely! What a happy delightful life! God saw all that He had made and it was good. But the devil, envious of man's happiness, with serpentine cunning tempted the man and woman to join him in rebellion against God. They ate the forbidden fruit, broke God's commandment, and by that sinful deed brought sickness, disease, misery and death into the fair world of God's creation. That was the awful tragedy of man's fall from grace. He had cut himself off from God and was expelled from the life of paradise.

However, all was not lost. God punished the sinners as He always does, but at the same time, full of compassion and love, held out the hope of Redemption. "God so loved the world that he sent His only Son that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish but may have eternal life." God planned to restore all things in Christ. Jesus Christ came to take away the sins of the world and to re-unite the whole human race with God. By His death on the Cross He wiped out the handwriting of the decree of death that was against us, and by the institution of the Eucharist he re-established the blissful life of union with God. "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh. He that eateth this bread shall abide in me and I in him. He shall live by me." That is the great mystery of Eucharistic life, a marvellous intervention of God's tender love and compassion. A wonderful re-making of fallen nature, even more wonderful than the first creation of the world from nothing.

Shrine of  
Our Blessed Lady  
in the old  
Parish Church



Blessed Charles had a keen appreciation of this great mystery of faith. As a little boy John Andrew Houben was a gentle, affable little fellow, a favourite with everybody, always happy and content and the coveted companion of his school mates. But he didn't join them in their childhood games. Not that he had any dislike for these games of hide-and-seek, rounders, skittles, football etc. He just had found a better source of enjoyment in the company of Jesus and Mary. Quietly he turned away from the village playgrounds and headed for the village church. There he found Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and a shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In that blessed company he spent hours of silent prayer and loving adoration. St Alphonsus Liguori had written many years before that: "The soul's entire holiness and perfection lies in love of Jesus Christ, our God, our highest good, our Redeemer." Young Houben was intent on perfection.

It was said that John Andrew Houben knew only two roads, the road to school and the road to church. For him school and

church were really two schools on different planes, and if he lagged behind in the classroom of secular education he made rapid progress in the school of Jesus crucified. Jesus in the tabernacle taught him to know and love God, and in Mary, the Immaculate Mother of God, he found the Seat of Wisdom.

By the time he was admitted to his first holy communion his silent hours of prayer in the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle had engendered in his soul an intense longing for greater union with God. It was no surprise to anyone that on the very day of his first communion he joined the Confraternity of Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. He had eaten the bread from heaven and he resolved to achieve the purpose of Christ's coming. Had not Christ said: "He that eateth this bread shall abide in me and I in him"? Had not the apostle St Paul emphasised this desire of the Sacred Heart: "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in Him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Col. 2:7). Rooted in Christ! That is the best way to describe the life of Fr Charles from his earliest days. Greater union with God was the aim and object of his whole life. It was with that in mind that he decided to leave home and family and become a Passionist. Love of his family made him acutely sensitive to the sacrifice he was making. But when his sister and other members of the family suggested that he didn't have to leave home his reply was resolute and clear. "I would live in a desert, the bottom of a pit to be with Jesus Christ." There we have the essential motivation of every genuine vocation, greater union with God.

During the years of his novitiate and studentship his prayer life developed under the watchful guidance of his spiritual director. The study of logic and philosophy clarified his conceptions of life and reality, while theology opened up new and deeper insights into the love of God and the ineffable mystery of salvation through the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Daily meditation revealed to him the unfathomable treasures of the sacramental life of the Church. He longed with ever increasing desire to reach

the goal of all his efforts – the grace of Holy orders. He was ordained on December 21, 1850.

That day was a day of great joy and much sorrow. Both his parents were dead and none of his brothers or sisters, for some unknown reason, was present. He was alone and felt his loneliness. But he turned his sorrow into joy and rejoiced to have so much personal self-sacrifice to offer with the sacrifice of Calvary in that Mass of Ordination. The indelible character of Holy Orders had bound him to Christ as a priest forever. Hence forward the Mass was the inspiration and centre of his daily life.

He celebrated Mass daily unless prevented by serious illness and assisted at as many Masses as possible. He was always delighted to seize the opportunity to serve Mass. Besides the regular time prescribed by Rule for prayer, Fr Charles sought permission to prolong his prayers and often spent two hours in preparation for Mass. During the celebration of Mass he was absorbed in prayer and often transfigured in ecstatic fervour with tears flowing down his face. The server would tug at his vestments, but not infrequently a priest had to be called to urge him to continue with the prayers of the missal and finish the Mass.

It can be truly said that devotion to Jesus Crucified ever present in the Blessed Sacrament moulded the whole life-style of Blessed Charles. In his reflections before the tabernacle he thought of the love of God who emptied himself of all the external signs of divine majesty and was born into this world as a man; a working man, a poor man; a meek and humble man; a gentle and compassionate man who would not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax, but lifted up and encouraged the weak; a good shepherd who carried on his shoulder the sheep that was not able to walk; a zealous pastor who came to seek and to save those that were lost; in a word, a heavenly physician who went about doing good and healing all kinds of diseases and died on the Cross that all might be saved. That was the compellingly attractive image that Charles kept in mind as he rose from his knees before

the tabernacle. That was the model on which he moulded his life. All who were privileged to live with him, revered him as a saint, always absorbed in prayer but always ready to listen and help others in their needs.

Saints are men and women who practised virtue in a heroic degree. That means that they did not get it easy to be good. Who does? The universal law of Christian living is clearly stated by St Paul in his second letter to St Timothy: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The devil never gives up! Fr Charles left no personal diary of his spiritual combat, but those who lived with him could not fail to notice his fear and trembling in the presence of the enemy as they heard him cry to Mary for help. It is recorded in the chronicles that on one occasion the Brother who went to his cell to call him found him lying on the floor where he spent the whole night. But when he asked what was wrong, the only answer he got was: "Temptations, temptations." Fr Salvian gives his account of another incident when he heard unusual sounds and loud voices coming from the cell of Fr Charles and when he went in he found him alone, greatly agitated, trembling and exhausted. We have no means of knowing what the terrifying temptations were but a note found among his writings makes known their source: "There are five persons in this cell, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, myself and the devil." His weapons of defence were the same as he so often recommended to others, strong faith in God's mercy and prayer to the Mother of God. "Have faith and pray to Mary."

### CURES AND MIRACLES

Only God can work a miracle or someone to whom God gives that power. Scoffers and sceptics, who rush into the pages of our daily press to belittle the apostolic value of miracles and ridicule the Church's reliance on miracles in the canonisation of saints, would do well to read the Scripture. They might study the answer Christ gave to the disciples of John the Baptist when they questioned Him about His identity as the expected Messiah. "Go," He said, "and tell John what

you hear and see, the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them” (Matt. XI. 4.5). An obvious appeal to His miracles as proof of His divinity. A miracle, accepted by the Church, is recognised as a sign of God’s seal and approval on the reputed sanctity of an individual member of the Church, who is then proclaimed authoritatively as a model worthy of imitation.

The miracles attributed to Fr Charles, during his long mission of close on thirty years at Mount Argus, won for him a nation-wide reputation as a true man of God, a model of faith and prayer and penance. Even as a young priest, before ever he came to Ireland, in his great zeal for the conversion of sinners he used to organise the novices in a campaign of prayer for lapsed Catholics, the lost sheep who had given up the practice of religion. To his prayers he added that other indispensable element of pastoral care: penance. Often he was found on his knees in the dark, cold, flag-stoned passage that leads from the monastery private oratory in Mount Argus to the church bell tower. There in the lonely hours of the night he poured out his heart in prayer and penance for the salvation of souls.

Christ prayed at the tomb of Lazarus and asked God to glorify Him in the presence of the bystanders by letting them see the undoubted miracle of raising to life a dead man who was already rotting in the grave. By that miracle Christ was approved by His Eternal Father as the heaven-sent Messiah, Teacher and Saviour of the world. The miracle was lost on the prejudiced enemies of Christ. Instead of accepting the truth, they planned to destroy the evidence. They would kill Lazarus. Another cover-up!

During his lifetime and after his death Fr Charles obtained wonderful favours and extraordinary cures for those who sought his prayers and blessing. He never talked about them. The Community made no reference to them. They knew it would displease him. But one morning a breezy young priest feeling in the mood for a bit of banter, presumed to say to him: “Is it true, Father, that you work miracles?” Fr Charles



Mother Arsenius when professed

was silent for a moment and then replied: "The same God who made me made you." A neat answer that avoided further discussion and at the same time effectively silenced youthful levity.

In the Information Process, set up to enquire into the life-style of Fr Charles with a view to his beatification, many reports of favours received were attested on oath, far too many to be listed here. There is one case, however, that has special significance in as much as it highlights another of Fr Charles's charisms, his gift of prophecy.

An Irish Sister of Charity, now well-known as Mother Arsenius, as a young nun suffered from incessant headaches. On medical advice she had been applying blisters with little effect. She told her troubles to Fr Charles. He laid his hand upon her head, blessed her, and from that day on she had no more need of the blisters. Later she approached Fr Charles again with a new problem. She had been appointed to go to Balaghaderreen, Co. Roscommon, to open a new convent

there. She felt greatly perplexed and fearful about the task laid upon her. Fr Charles again blessed her, told her to go, and prophesied that she would do great work there. With calm confidence she went, and in due course founded the famous Foxford Woollen Mills which for years provided employment for hundreds. The prophecy was fulfilled.

In the course of years that holy and energetic nun fell ill. The doctor said an operation was necessary and urgent. He accompanied her to Dublin. But rather than face the operation, she asked for Fr Charles. "Get me Fr Charles, he will cure me." The doctors were not happy about that. "She seems to have more faith in that old priest," they said to the bishop who visited her. "Can you blame her," replied the bishop, "he cured her before."

Strange to say, her companion Sisters failed to comply with her request until she collapsed completely. Then two nuns, Sister John Gaynor and Sister Aloysius Kerins, hailed a cab and hurried to Mount Argus. At first Fr Charles was not inclined to go with them. He thought the poor patient had worked long enough and deserved to go to God. But they insisted: "Father, she wants you. Do, please, come." He went, and when he arrived at the Convent he found the sisters kneeling at the patient's bedside reciting the *De Profundis*. In fact word had been sent to the priests in Ballaghaderreen that she was dead and prayers were said in the Cathedral for the repose of her soul on that Passion Sunday. Fr Charles knelt down by the bedside in deep prayer and after some minutes the apparently dead nun began to show signs of life and completely recovered. She lived for over forty years. It was with intense gratitude that she testified to the sanctity of Fr Charles.

A one-time student in Mount Argus supplies another testimony to Fr Charles's gift of prophecy. On one occasion when Fr Charles was ill in bed this student visited him in his room. During conversation he said to Fr Charles: "Will I be a priest?" Not that he had any doubts about his vocation. He was resolutely determined to be a priest. But he felt he would like the encouragement of assurance by Fr Charles.

The reply he received was shattering. "No, not a priest, but a doctor." He went to the Novitiate but after six months there his superiors advised him to leave. Still he very much wanted to be a Passionist and even applied again to be re-admitted to Mount Argus. When that failed he tried unsuccessfully for admission to Clonliffe. So much for his longing to be a priest. He had neither the wish nor inclination to be a doctor. He had an instinctive horror of blood. He thought of becoming a chemist. In the end he did take up medicine and qualified as a doctor. Fr Charles's prophecy was fulfilled.

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. Fr 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 Münstergeleen 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 or sentiment.

Likewise, her practice of devotion is neither sentimental nor 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, and still is 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 miserable, and believed that she was about to die. In this state of distress she thought of Fr 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 Fr 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, and by the beginning of April she was even able to leave her bed."

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, Fr Xavier approached Doctor



Mount Argus as it was at the time of the death of Fr. Charles. The Chapel of 1865 is on the right of the picture

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.

### MOUNT ARGUS

The name of Fr Charles Houben is prominently inscribed on the large Celtic cross erected in Mount Argus cemetery to the memory of deceased Passionists. But his real monument is Mount Argus itself. It was the fame of Fr Charles which was to carry the name of Mount Argus through the length and breadth of Ireland and far beyond the seas. The first Passionists in Ireland had been in Mount Argus for only eleven months when Fr Charles arrived on the feast of Our Lady, Mother of Holy Hope, July 9, 1857. These early pioneering Passionists were poor and penniless. Their only banking account was Divine Providence. But they were men of great magnanimity. They thought big and they built big. By September 1863 they had succeeded in building what was described in the Catholic News as: "The noblest religious house erected in these countries since the so-called Reformation." The next step was to build a new church. The foundation stone was laid on June 29, 1866. Two months later Fr Charles, due to circumstances already described was sent away to England. After his departure things came to a standstill. For a whole eight years no progress was made. He was recalled to Mount Argus in January 1874. The foundation stone was there but covered with grass and weeds. His return was the signal for things to start moving again. The building went up steadily and so did the bills. Architects and builders had to be paid. A colossal debt was incurred. It became necessary to start fund-raising campaigns. Every member in the community was involved. Fr

Charles was not one to stand idly by and live on the labours of others. Although for him it was a most distasteful task, its very unpleasantness made it that much more meritorious in his eyes. With his inseparable companion Bro. Michael he went up and down the country seeking help. He turned his travels into little missionary excursions, always exhorting people to think of the sufferings of Jesus Crucified and to pray to Mary, Mother of God and Mother of Holy Hope.

As everybody knows, fund-raising can be a very absorbing and distracting occupation, and it should come as no surprise to anyone to hear that, at least in some cases, religious observance and prayer life suffered some relaxation at that time in what was really a life and death struggle for survival. But not so with Fr Charles. His spirit of unremitting prayer and his personal commitment to the rule of St Paul of the Cross saved him from the pitfalls of tepidity. He uttered no word of complaint nor any unkind criticism of his companions, but pressed on quietly and cheerfully with undaunted optimism in the assurance of faith. "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him" (Rom. 8.28). He never lost confidence in the power of God to restore all things in Christ. By his example and prayers Fr Charles won the grace of renewal for all.

In very recent times Mount Argus was involved once again in colossal debt. This time it was due to that prevalent plague of all ageing buildings – Dry Rot. Again Fr Charles came to the rescue. Through his intercession, the good people of Dublin and indeed of all Ireland were inspired to contribute generously to the Restoration Fund and it is no mere coincidence that the work was completed in the year of his beatification.

But there is still one outstanding problem, a problem shared by all religious orders in Ireland, both men and women, and indeed by the whole Catholic Church. "The problem of priestly vocations, and also of male and female religious is, and I say so openly, the fundamental problem of the Church" (Pope John Paul II). We trust that the example and intercession of Blessed Charles, now raised to the honours of the altar, will

encourage many young boys and girls to dedicate their lives with undivided hearts to the whole-time service of God as priests, brothers or nuns. "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mother or children or lands, for my sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19.29). "Why do you stand here idle all day? Go you into my vineyard too" (Matt. 20.6).

### LAST ILLNESS

Total abandonment to God's will was the dominant note in the spirituality of St Paul of the Cross, founder of the Passionists. In this Fr Charles was a worthy disciple of the founder. In his earliest days the ready response of the young John Andrew Houben to the grace of his vocation echoed the words of the incarnate Son of God on his coming into this world for the salvation of mankind by his death on the cross: "A body thou hast fitted for me. Behold I come to do thy will." To do God's will was the single-minded purpose of Fr Charles all the days of his life. It was obvious to all who saw him that he fashioned his life on Him who was meek and humble of heart, obedient even to death on a cross. By word and letter he counselled all to accept whatever cross God sent them. If he heard that members of his family were ill he wrote immediately assuring them of his prayers and exhorting them to be resigned to God's will. To one he wrote: "I am sorry to hear of my brother-in-law's death. Let us submit ourselves entirely to God's will." To another: "Our happiness in this life and in the next lies in carrying out God's will." And to another: "Let us ask the Infant Jesus to give us the virtue of patience and of complete submission to the will of God in all that we do and in all the sufferings we have to bear, especially in our last illness and in the hour of death." In his own last illness he gave an admirable example of patient suffering. About twelve years before he died he was involved in a car accident. It happened that he was being driven to visit some sick person. The car collided with another car at the end of Harold's Cross Park, just outside St Clare's Convent. Fr Charles tried to jump clear but got pinned under

the car and suffered severe injury, fractured leg and ankle. It never healed properly. For the rest of his life he had a limp and suffered constant pain. Soon after the accident he began to have violent headaches and severe toothache, and was never really well. He said his last Mass on December 8, 1892, Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Next day he succeeded in dragging himself to the community choir or oratory for evening prayer. It was pitiable to see him limping along. One of the community has left a description of him: "Whenever I saw him I thought of Christ on the way of the Cross." After the evening prayer he managed to get back to his room, but was unable to go down to the refectory for the evening meal. The infirmarian went to see what was wrong. Like everybody else he had noticed the poor man's difficulty in walking, and asked him the reason. Fr Charles tried to make light of it by saying he just had a pain in his leg. But when the infirmarian looked at it he was horrified to see it so frightfully swollen with a large angry looking open sore. He helped the poor patient to bed and called the doctor. It was too late. The end had come. There was no hope of recovery. Next day he received the Last Sacraments with perfect resignation and never uttered a word of complaint during the twenty-six days of intense suffering until he died at 5.30 on the morning of January 5, 1893. One of those who was at his bedside wrote: "To us students fell the privilege of watching at his bedside during the night, and it was in truth a labour of love. What an example of patience he gave us during those nights and days! What prompt obedience to our smallest desires! What modesty he displayed and at the cost of so much pain, lest he might give the smallest shadow of offence! 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 to abstain from this for a time he showed himself content and offered his suffering to God as a sacrifice." A couple of days before he died, Fr Salvian, the monastery chronicler, wrote: "Dear Father Charles gets worse every day, but his patience in suffering is indeed marvellous. The poor man has lost his



Fr. Charles a few years before his death

power of speech and the sight of his eyes. He cannot swallow any food and seems to suffer very much, but no word of complaint will escape his lips. He speaks to no one except when a priest goes to see him, and he always asks for a blessing."

No sooner had he died than the word swept through the whole country. In Dublin that evening on newsboys' sandwich-boards, on public hoardings, in the evening papers, the principal item of news was the death of Father Charles of Mount Argus. With moist eyes people looked at each other and whispered: "The saint is dead." One newspaper reporter headed his column with the caption: "A saint whom Dublin knew." Yes, by public acclaim Fr Charles was proclaimed a saint. Mount Argus church, where his remains were laid out in an open coffin, was stormed by thousands of weeping mourners. All wanted to see and touch his saintly remains and, if possible, to have some little relic or memento. The most bitter weather, sleet and snow was no deterrent. Immense crowds pressed into the church. Devotion made some overlook due reverence as they tried to cut pieces of his habit. A bodyguard had to be placed round the coffin, and members of the community were kept busy touching the body with candles, rosaries, prayerbooks, handkerchiefs or whatever was at hand. So vast was the crowd and so forceful their efforts to get near the body of their dead priest that the confessional boxes were crushed into matchwood. On the day of the funeral the church and the grounds around were one great dense mass of people. The Evening Telegraph that day January 9th carried this report: "Never before within living memory has there been such an outburst of religious sentiment and profound reverence as was beheld around the open grave of Father Charles. As the coffin was lowered into the grave every eye was wet with tears, and loud general manifestations of the most sincere regret went up from the multitude present, who clustered round with heads uncovered to take a last look at the coffin which enclosed the remains of a most exemplary and beloved priest."

On the day after the funeral, two cab men were found in the cemetery, filling their horses' nosebags with soil and pebbles

from the grave. That was only the beginning of an unending pilgrimage. All down the years crowds have been coming day by day to carry away pockets of soil to be used as relics. When the grave was opened in 1937 for an identification of the remains as part of the official process for beatification, the coffin was perfectly sound although it had been forty four years in the ground! Little fragments of that coffin are now given out as relics and are very much appreciated in as much as the coffin was in closer contact with the body than the soil on top of the grave. Wonderful favours have been received through the use of these relics with the prayer of faith. In November 1949 the body was transferred to the church. This greatly facilitated visits to the tomb. Then on May 10, 1979, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Fr. Charles 'a man of heroic virtue.' This gave a tremendous impetus to devotion to Fr Charles and encouraged his clients to pray with intensified fervour for his beatification. There was universal rejoicing when news was received from Rome that he would be beatified in October 1988. For this big event his shrine has been reconstructed. His remains are now placed in a new urn above ground and clearly visible. It promises to be the most popular shrine in Dublin. Now that Fr Charles has been raised to the honours of the altar people may confidently hope for great blessings and favours from the saintly priest who said: "I love the Irish people."



New Shrine of Blessed Charles – October 1988



The birthplace of Fr. Charles which is now a chapel

## A Man of Our Time

In the beatification of Blessed Charles of Mount Argus we have a fully accredited witness to Christ and an approved model for all who claim to believe in Christ. We live in an age of liberalism, consumerism and materialist humanism. Who has not heard the strident voice of the campaigners of secularism and neo-paganism? Individually and collectively they question the existence of a personal God; the divinity of Christ and his virgin birth is denied; the idea of an infallible Church instituted by Christ is ridiculed; mortal sin is laughed out of court; evil practices condemned by God and the Church are given the protection and sanction of civil law; vice is varnished and glamorised as virtue in the guise of "freedom of conscience," even though at times that "human right" can be conveniently over-ridden by the party whip. People say they are confused.

Who will say we do not need another model of Christian living? In his watchful care of the weak and wayward human

race God never leaves himself without witnesses. Witness to the truth is an essential part of God's plan of Redemption. The Son of God became incarnate and was born into this world "to bear witness to the truth." "He is the image of the invisible God." To His apostles He said: "Go, teach all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem." In every age God calls and justifies and sanctifies some chosen individuals and sets them up as beacon lights for their generation. In this modern age He has sent Blessed Charles. The very sight of him as he moved about, eyes cast down, crucifix in hand, absorbed in prayer, was a sermon on the presence of God. All would-be followers of Christ and especially the Irish people owe a debt of gratitude to God and His blessed Mother for this latest authenticated defender of the faith and true model of Christian living. Apostolic Mystic that he was, his message is clear. To all who are burdened with the pastoral care of souls, and to all who are seeking vocations to the priesthood and religious life he repeats the words of St Paul: "Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable and perfect." To the confused and wavering who may be suffering what is called a crisis of identity he repeats words of Divine Wisdom: "Stand by your covenant and attend to it and grow old at your work." To the whole troubled world he says: "Strive to spend a few minutes every day thinking of the bitter sufferings of Christ . . . Have faith, and pray to Mary."

"With God everything; Without God nothing"

*Sit Laus Deo*

## Appendix

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 hope 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,



Pope John Paul II gives a special blessing to the Vice-Postulator, Fr. Oliver Kelly, C.P.

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 establish 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 serve 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.



Blessed Charles of Mount Argus

