

## Saint Charles of Mount Argus

Saint Charles of Mount Argus was born at Munstergeleen in the Netherlands but, like Saint Patrick before him, he heard the voice of the Irish. In his case, this happened in the industrial towns of England where he ministered to the victims of poverty who had fled starvation and death in the early 1850s.

On 9 July 1857, Charles arrived in Dublin to be a member of the Passionist community at Mount Argus. He spent more than thirty-five years there, celebrating Mass, hearing confessions and doing what he is most remembered for, ministering to the sick and the needy.

This saint was not a scholar or theologian; he was not even a good preacher; but he knew how to communicate beyond words. His way of living spoke of the compassionate love of God. Day and night, he was at the service of others. As many as three hundred people a day would come to Mount Argus seeking physical or spiritual healing and asking for his blessing. At night, he would be called to bless the sick or dying in the hospitals of Dublin. Often when doctors or nurses could do nothing else for a patient who was close to death, they would advise the family to 'go and call Father Charles'.

Those who knew him recalled his kindness, his patience and, above all, his availability. He was 'entirely at the disposal of the sick and poor and dying', always ready, as soon as he was asked, to leave whatever he was doing and go and pray with them. Charles's compassion for the needy seemed to be without limit: 'All that interested him was that they were in trouble and needed his help which he gave most readily and effectively'.

Not all those who went to Mount Argus to receive his blessing were healed physically. To some he spoke words of encouragement and counselled acceptance; others he told to prepare for death. Through his gift of discernment, he was able to help them to know and accept the will of God and, through prayer, to bring them inner healing and peace.

In his ministry, his aim was to bring people to experience the healing power of the love of Christ, the love shown on Calvary: 'By his wounds we are healed' (1 Peter 2:24). His apostolate was rooted in the Passion of Jesus



which 'reveals the power of God which penetrates the world, destroying the power of evil and building up the Kingdom of God' (Passionist Constitutions, 5).

During the final years of his life, an accident on his way to visit a sick person caused a leg injury which left him in constant pain. His own pain did not cause him to turn in on himself; instead, he continued to reach out to others in their suffering. In one of his letters we read: 'The Cross patiently borne for the love of God helps greatly for our eternal salvation'. His increasing frailty became an eloquent homily on the love of God. Mary Cooke, a witness at the Canonisation Enquiry, said: 'He was very spent-looking, thin and bent with infirmity... I remember Father Charles's infirm appearance, which suggested that he really should have been in his sick bed; instead, he laboured incessantly, praying and blessing the people'.

### THE SECRET OF SAINT CHARLES

What was it that kept Father Charles going? This was a man who was always ready to answer the call of the sick

1821

11 DECEMBER

John Andrew Houben is born and baptised at Munstergeleen, The Netherlands

1835

28 JUNE

Confirmed by Bishop Anthony Von Bommel

1841

9 JULY

Begins his three months active military service at Bergen-Op-Zoom

1845

5 NOVEMBER

Enters the Passionist Novitiate at Ere, Belgium, and takes the name Charles of Saint Andrew

and the suffering, who spent hours every day listening to their stories of pain and misery and who day after day came face to face with all kinds of human woes. There must have been days when it seemed to be too much to bear, taking on his shoulders the burdens of so many. But if, like Saint John Mary Vianney, there were times when he wanted to run away from the people who continually besieged him with their needs, this has gone unrecorded. What we do know from those who remembered him is that he responded with love to those who sought his help.

His ministry to the sick could be physically demanding, as Father Columban Tyne recalled: 'At the time I knew him, when he was seventy years old, he was infirm as a result of his years and failing health; yet he would come down from his room at the top of the house most cheerfully and readily every time he was called for – probably many times a day. This must have been most trying and exhausting'.

Father Malachy Gavin, who was a student at Mount Argus during the last years of Saint Charles's life, said that if Charles had any noticeable fault, it was impatience. Sometimes he would get irritated when people tugged at his habit and told him that he 'must cure' them. Temperamentally, he was probably not entirely suited to the vocation God gave him: being available to the sick and suffering at any time of the day or night.



He was, in fact, quite a shy man. Even when living with his family in Limburg and speaking his native Dutch, he didn't have much to say. He was also prone to anxiety and could be scrupulous at times. As he grew older, he worried about his eternal salvation and would ask people to pray for him that he might have the grace of perseverance. In a letter to his family he quoted the

## Three Simple Rules

Father Charles had three simple rules about suffering. He told the sick to thank God in the midst of their suffering, to offer their suffering up to God and to expect God's help and sometimes healing.

The great Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh has a magnificent still painting of an open Bible with a novel lying beside the Bible. The novel in question was a popular one at the time that his father, a minister, had banned him from reading. Van Gogh thought it was an excellent novel which chronicled family tragedies and family scandals. If you look closely you will see the Bible is open at Isaiah, Chapter 53. Isaiah 53 says; 'He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows'. That was Van Gogh's way of linking the tragedies of daily life to God's journey with us.

Father Charles believed that Jesus walks with us during our suffering. It is a way of the cross. On the way of the cross Jesus fell three times but got up each time. He needed help. He needed Simon. He needed people. He

needed a mother to touch him. He needed a towel from Veronica. He needed compassion from the women of Jerusalem. After his resurrection he proudly displayed his wounds to Thomas.

Thomas is often referred to as 'Doubting Thomas' as if doubting was a sin. Doubt is not the opposite of faith; certainty is. Thomas wanted to see the wounds of Jesus. And when he did, he believed totally: 'My Lord and my God', he said, before going on to give his life to spreading the Gospel. Because of Thomas' doubts, we know for certain that Jesus carried the wounds of his Passion after his resurrection, showing that the new life of the risen Jesus was won by the wounds he still bore. Saint Peter later summed it up by saying; 'By His wounds we are healed'. That's what Charles believed and furthermore he was convinced that our own woundedness as well as His wounds saves us.

Charles knew that we don't need to be able to make sense of suffering, as long as we remember that 'Nothing is impossible with God'.

Brian D'Arcy CP (from *Herald of Hope*)

1850

21 DECEMBER

Ordained to the Priesthood by Bishop Gaspare Labis at Tournai

1852

16 FEBRUARY

Transferred from Holy Cross Retreat, Ere, to Saint Wilfrid's, Cotton Hall, England

1857

9 JULY

Arrives at St Paul's Retreat, Mount Argus, Dublin, Ireland

1866

3 JULY

Sent away from Mount Argus to England because he had become 'too remarkable for extraordinary cures'

words of Saint Bonaventure 'The struggle is continual', and then he added: 'It is for this reason that we must pray during our whole life'.

In these words, we see the secret of Father Charles. This man of action was also a man of prayer who tried to live every moment of the day in the presence of God, trusting not in his own abilities but in the grace of God. His was not a complicated faith or a complex spirituality. Trying to live always in the present moment, aware of God's loving presence, responding generously to what was asked of him, praying to God for his own needs and the needs of those who came to him, living in a spirit of confidence in the compassion of God and bringing that compassion to those who were suffering: that is how he lived his life. Father Francis Kelly said: 'My recollection of Father Charles is of one never out of the presence of God. He was a man of simple faith. If his exterior appearance represented his soul, then he was entirely on fire with the love of God. He possessed the prudence of pure simplicity; he was a man entirely without guile'.

## THE WAY OF SIMPLE FAITH

Saint Charles teaches us that the way to God is simple, even if at times it can be difficult. When we allow God into our life, then the impossible becomes possible. The miller's son from Limburg became the saint of Mount Argus by following the way of faith. He knew that this way could lead to suffering, but it would be a suffering that is lived in union with Jesus. He wrote: 'Only those who wish to be trampled upon, ridiculed, humbled, who bear their cross daily after Jesus, who walk in his footsteps after his example, who imitate him will be saved'. In the midst of all his activities, he was able to keep his heart fixed on Jesus Christ. He used to carry a little crucifix in the palm of his hand, as a tangible and visible expression of this desire to belong to Christ.

In the Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul the Apostle says that we can have hope in suffering because 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us' (Romans 5: 5). Saint Charles of Mount Argus gave hope to those who thought they had lost hope; he was able to do this because of the love of God which had been poured into his heart. Forty years after his death, one of Charles's contemporaries was asked what it was like to have met him; he said, 'When you spoke to Father Charles, you had the impression that you were talking to someone who was an intimate friend of God'.

Saint Paul tells us that our sufferings can bring patience, perseverance and hope (Romans 5: 3-4), but we need to remember that this does not happen automatically; if it did, we would all be saints! Saint Charles of Mount Argus (or 'poor old Charlie' as he used to call himself) reminds us that when we let God pour his love into our hearts, then we can have hope in suffering and we can learn to reach out to others with the compassion of God himself.

Paul Francis Spencer CP

In the sick and the suffering Saint Charles recognised the face of the Crucified Christ, to whom he had a lifelong devotion. He drank deeply from the rivers of living water that poured forth from the side of the Pierced One, and in the power of the Spirit he bore witness before the world to the Father's love.

From Pope Benedict XVI's Canonisation Homily, 3 June 2007

## Mother of Holy Hope

Saint Charles first arrived in Ireland on the Feast of Mary, Mother of Holy Hope, a feast which is proper to the Passionist Congregation. The picture of the Mother of Holy Hope shows Mary and, in her arms, the child Jesus who holds a cross in his left hand; it reminds us of the saying of Saint Paul of the Cross, 'The whole life of Jesus was a cross. The whole life of one who serves God, then, should be to remain on the cross with Jesus'. The mission of Saint Charles of Mount Argus, which began on this feast of Mary, was to bring healing and hope to the crucified ones of this world: the poor, the lonely, the sick, the dying. To them he would frequently say, 'Have faith; pray to Mary'. His aim was to bring the people to whom he ministered closer to Jesus, and to do so through Mary.

(*To Heal the Broken Hearted*, p. 102)

## The Message of Saint Charles

For Saint Charles of Mount Argus, the Crucifix was a book which always fascinated him and which he studied more profoundly every day. This was his great treasure, and he was often seen kissing the Sacred Wounds of the small crucifix which he always carried in the palm of his hand.

1874

10 JANUARY

Returns to Mount Argus where he would remain for the rest of his life

1893

5 JANUARY

Dies at St Paul's Retreat, Mount Argus

1988

16 OCTOBER

Beatified by Pope John Paul II

2007

3 JUNE

Canonised by Pope Benedict XVI

Many recall that when he celebrated Mass and came upon Scripture passages that referred to the Passion, he could not hold back his tears. His heart was filled with compassion for the One who 'was pierced for our offences, crushed for our sins' (Isaiah 53: 5).

The message that Father Charles offers to the Church, to the Passionist Congregation and to today's world is that of deep fidelity to Christ, even at the cost of one's life. It is an invitation to keep alive the memory of Jesus Crucified – a gift that is given for the well-being of every person; a gift that for the Passionist becomes the well-spring which in turn is poured out for others even to the point of death. This was the hope of Saint Paul of the Cross when he wrote:

'The religious, effectively detached from earth and dead to themselves, are better disposed to receive the impressions of divine grace so that afterwards, in due

time, and with hearts full of God's love they may undertake great things for the glory of God and for the defence of Holy Church even at the cost of their own lives, sparing neither privation nor any labour' (Saint Paul of the Cross, Brief Account of the Congregation, 1768, 5). In those moments in which fidelity to Christ called for heroism, Father Charles, as a Christian and as a Passionist, turned to Jesus in Gethsemane. Through personal prayer and through the intercession of our Founder, Saint Paul of the Cross, he prayed for the strength to do the will of our heavenly Father as it was manifested in the lives of those who came to him for help, and for the grace to accept being a grain of wheat which would fall to the ground so as to rise to new life and nourish the lives of others.

(from the Letter of the Superior General, Father Ottaviano D'Egidio CP, to mark the canonisation of Saint Charles)

## To Heal the Broken Hearted

The Life of St Charles of Mount Argus by Paul Francis Spencer CP



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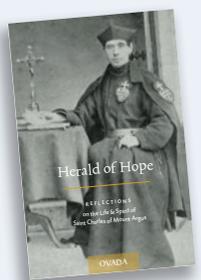
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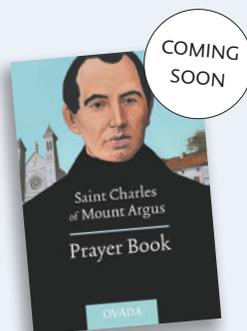
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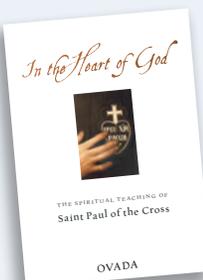


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