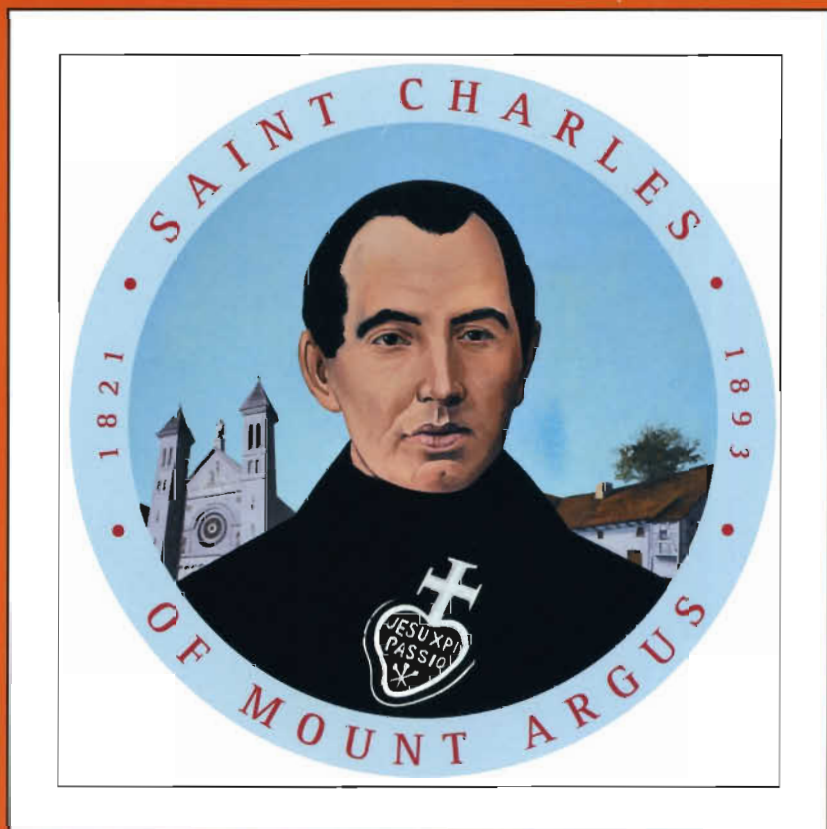


# SAINT CHARLES OF MOUNT ARGUS



*By Fr. Brian D'Arcy, C.P.*



*Saint Charles of Mount Argus.  
Feast Day 5th January.*

# Saints

When I was young saints were holy and remote. They were frightening. But they were useful, especially at exam time. You might not be friends with them but you made sure not to make enemies of them.

I never thought I would serve in the same Community where hundreds of people still come to pray to the saintly man who put Mount Argus in Dublin on the map.

Even though Saint Charles of Mount Argus died in 1893, his reputation for healing and his extraordinary cures, keep his memory very much "alive".

Not everyone is enthused by saints. Fair enough. You won't come across anything here to change your mind.

Others, like myself, are encouraged by human beings who make a difference. It helps me to know that someone who lived the same life, coped with similar problems, struggled with doubts, and who saw it through, is now in heaven helping and encouraging me.

## **Saints are Relevant**

Saints are relevant. Their lives on earth give us an example. They are our models and our friends. Through them God gives us strength and protection. They spur us on.

Saints "renew the Church in every age". They tell us about God's unchanging love. Heroic lives inspire us. Their constant prayers help us. The glory of our brothers and sisters is a joyful thing for us and "their communion with us in your Church gives us inspiration and strength, as we hasten on a pilgrimage of Faith eager to meet them". (Cf Prefaces 69-71).

## **Man of his Time**

Saint Charles was a man of his time. We have to be people of our time. But it is the same God we serve, so he has something to say to us.

The way he coped with suffering, his dedication to his healing ministry, the prayers he offered, the hope he gave, his perseverance, and his compassion, give me inspiration. I hope they help you too.

On June 3rd 2007, a Dutchman who spent most of his life helping the sick and suffering in Ireland was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI. That man is now known as Saint Charles of Mount Argus. He is the man I want to introduce to you.

You'll get a flavour of the times in which he lived, his background, his personal trials, his humanity, his compassion and his gift of healing.

Before a person is beatified and canonised there is a rigorous examination by the Church into everything that person said and did. There must be two approved miracles attributed exclusively to the intercession of the person canonised.

## **A Miracle of Hope and Healing**

In the case of Saint Charles the first miracle approved is a beautiful story of hope and healing.

Mrs. Octavia Spaetgens Verheggen was a distant relative of Saint Charles but for most of her life had no great personal devotion to him. In 1950, when she was 70 years old, she went to Lourdes in perfectly good health. In Lourdes she suffered her first liver colic. She had another a month later, this time accompanied by a fever.

The doctors advised surgery which eventually took place in August 1951. She was sent home but her condition did not improve and a few days before Christmas she had to be re-admitted to hospital. She was very seriously ill. In hospital they could do nothing to help her. There was a growth in the abdomen and because of her age and condition it was

decided not to operate. She was sent home to die in January 1952. At home she was in constant pain and was unable to eat any food.

Within three days she was critically ill. Her family prayed to Fr. Charles, who as well as being a relative, came from the same area. On the third night, unable to bear the pain, Mrs. Spaetgens herself pleaded with Fr. Charles to help her. Immediately she became calmer and felt herself that she was already cured. The vomiting ceased, she began to eat normally, the growth seemed to have disappeared.

Over the next few days Mrs. Spaetgens' general condition improved. The doctors were informed and could observe the disappearance of the growth. Top medical experts confirmed that the cure was instantaneous and miraculous. The symptoms never returned and the lady died twenty two years later at the age of 94, from natural causes.

The cure was attributed to the intercession of Fr. Charles. It was fitting that such a miracle of healing should lead to his beatification for Fr. Charles spent his life easing pain, helping those who suffered, blessing the sick and giving hope to those who shared closely in the Passion of Jesus.



*Mrs. Verheggen.*

### **The Miracle that made Blessed Charles a Saint.**

The miraculous healing of Dolf Dormans of Munstergeleen opened the way for the canonisation of Blessed Charles.

This is the cure that, having passed through stringent medical scrutiny in the Netherlands, was then given unanimous approval by the even more stringent Vatican Medical Council as a miracle attributed to the intercession of Blessed Charles of Mount Argus.

Mr. Dormans comes from Munstergeleen in Holland, birthplace of Blessed Charles. On March 29th, 1999, his doctor had him taken in to the emergency room of the Maasland Hospital in Sittard. What he had experienced as abdominal pains turned out to be a ruptured appendix, with serious complications. The oozing acid had damaged the small intestines to such an extent that, every other day, the inside of his abdomen had to be rinsed out under full anesthetic.

From the outset Mr. Dormans had put his trust in Blessed Charles, praying for a positive outcome to his illness, and asking a blessing on the hands of the physicians who were treating him.

On April 11th his grandson, Simon, was due to make his First Holy Communion. All dressed up, he was brought to see his papa in hospital. On arrival it was discovered that Mr. Dorman's wife, Mia, and the other family members had been sent for. His condition had worsened. The surgical procedure that morning had exposed totally weakened and already porous intestines.

Every action taken by the surgeon to improve the situation seemed to have the opposite result. Even a little touch caused the intestines to leak even further. The doctor informed the family that from a medical point of view nothing more could be done and that there was no hope of recovery.

His condition was so bad that the medical staff decided not to resuscitate him. The family were advised to prepare themselves for an unpleasant death, within a very short time. With Mr. Dorman's intestines totally destroyed, the surgeon calmly and quietly explained that there was nothing he could do. The last sacraments of the Church were administered by the local priest.

The family said their goodbyes. Blessed Charles was invoked to guide him through these difficult hours.

However somebody up there had other plans. On a visit a couple of days later, Mr. Dorman's family doctor was looking at him and saying to him: "*Father Charles has performed his miracle, now it's up to the medical staff here*". His health continued to improve with every passing day.

The surgeon said: "*It is beyond me that you are sitting here, and still alive!*" The medical team decided to perform further surgery and reserved a full day in the operating room on October 27th. When they went in, however, they found that all they had to do was connect the small intestines and close a little hole. Everything else was already healed.

### **A Man like You and Me**

Saint Charles was an ordinary man without pomp. He spoke of himself as "poor old Charlie".

He was born John Andrew Houben in the village of Munstergeleen - a village on the borders of Holland, Germany and Belgium. His father wrote in his prayer book the day Andrew was born: "John Andrew Houben, was born 11th December, 1821. Glory and thanks to God". He was baptised the same day.

He was the fourth of a family of eleven children born to Peter and Johanna Houben. The family background was simple and Catholic. They worked in a flour mill owned by their uncle.

### **Home Life**

The kind of home he came from is seen from a letter he wrote to his brother Matthew and sister Anne Mary, from Dublin. He hoped that they would be like his own parents and if they had children they should "bring them up to know His peace, have them pray every morning and every night, and teach them to recite the rosary in the evening, so that the welfare of their souls will be the most important thing in life for them. We should be thankful to God for giving us such good parents".

John Andrew's childhood was nothing exceptional. He was shy, quiet, pious, friendly and "always bright and cheerful in the family circle", according to his brother. He was always singing about the house.

One of the characteristics which attracts me to him is his plodding perseverance. For ten years he walked the two miles into secondary school in Sittard. So much so that the neighbours used to say: "Will the miller's stupid son never be finished school."

### **Slow Learner**

His greatest desire was to become a priest. And even though he found study difficult he stuck with it. Like





many of us, he spent his youth studying into the early hours. And even then he barely scraped through. A family friend, Fr. Gobbels, remembers that he was a slow learner. His parents wanted him to give up study. Apart from study he served Mass and visited the Church every day.

It was not a very exciting time by today's standards but normal enough in the 1830's.

### **The Military Life**

At nineteen, Andrew was enrolled for military service. Although enrolled in March 1840 and dismissed in 1845, he was in active service for only three months. He was not an outstanding soldier. He spent too much time in Church, they said. Once, when there was a disturbance in the town, the army was called out and told to fire. Andrew was afraid that he might hit someone and pointed his rifle in the wrong direction and just missed shooting his superior officer. So much for his military career. He would never make a soldier but providentially, while in the army, he first heard of the Passionists. So when his three months in the army were over, he decided to become a Passionist.

### **Mother Dies**

It meant he had to resume study. This time a local teacher, Mr. Schrijen, helped him. Strangely Andrew took to study much more easily now. For four years he worked in the mill by day and in his spare time studied to become a Passionist.

He had his share of trouble too. First, his uncle, who had taken a special interest in Andrew's family, died. Then in 1844 his mother died. She was fifty-two years old and Andrew was twenty-two.

### **Joining the Passionists**

Shortly afterwards, in February 1845, Andrew's period as a reserve was over and he was free to join the Passionists. He arranged to join in November of that year. His father tried to dissuade him at the last moment but Andrew had his mind made up: "I've said I will go to the monastery and I'm going", he answered.

He joined the Passionists on 5th November 1845. A month later he became a novice and had to change his name. It was the custom then. Andrew was given the name Charles and that's why we know him today as Saint Charles. There is very little known about his time as a novice and student except that fellow students remember him as good-humoured and cheerful.

### **Ordination**

He was ordained a Passionist priest on Saturday 21st December, 1850. It was a joyful day, but as with all of his life, there was sadness too. In August his father had died. He never saw Charles ordained. In fact there was none of his family with him on ordination day. Their father's long illness meant that they had no money to make the journey to Tournai for the ordination.

### **An Exile Forever**

He spent the rest of his life in foreign lands speaking a foreign language, for in February 1852, he was sent to England and never saw Holland again.

Whilst working in a parish in England Fr. Charles first came in contact with the Irish. Their faith and their poverty reminded him of his own people. It was shortly after the Famine in Ireland, during which four million had either died or emigrated. The poorest Irish who had to leave home, but couldn't afford to go to America, were working in the coalfields and factories of England. They lived in deplorable conditions. Fr. Charles's heart went out to them.



*Mount Argus as it was on Fr. Charles' arrival. (Temporary chapel built by Fr. Paul Mary Pakenham on the right of picture).*

### **Arrival at Mount Argus**

A few years later he had first-hand experience of the Irish, because on July 9th, 1857, he arrived in the newly founded monastery of Mount Argus, in Harold's Cross, Dublin.

Ireland would be his home for thirty years and his final resting place. He was still only thirty-five years old, and a priest for less than five years, when he came here.

Mount Argus had been founded eleven months previously. But its first Rector, the famous Fr. Paul Mary Pakenham, died suddenly in his mid-thirties, two months earlier.

There were ten Passionists living in a reconstructed farmhouse who were overworked, discouraged and suffering from malnutrition, when Charles joined them. According to historian Mary Purcell, Dublin also was a different place. Mount Argus was three miles out in the country. The air was clean which meant that doctors sent delicate patients to convalesce in the area. There was a military barracks nearby.

### **Dublin in the 1850s**

Dublin itself had a population of less than a quarter of a million - a very large proportion of whom were British soldiers.

Nor was it such a saintly place either. In those days there were, officially 147 brothel-keepers, 1,057 prostitutes, 1,500 licensed public houses and as many shebeens. Murders were common and moral standards questionable.

Religious knowledge was hopeless. Many children didn't know the basics of religion. The sign of the cross was as much as they could manage. The "Our Father" and the "Hail Mary" were unknown to them.

The Passionists tried to help. They pioneered Christian Doctrine classes in the area and set about building an eighty-roomed monastery and retreat house for priests and lay people, the first of its kind in Ireland.

### **"My People"**

Charles was not a good preacher. He never really mastered the language. But it was in the Confessional and in comforting the sick that he excelled.



*Saint Charles in his sixties.*



He was fond of the Irish. He called them “my people”. He respected their struggle against oppression, he admired the way the Faith was preserved. But he wasn’t blind to our faults. He wrote to his brother Peter, a diocesan priest, that there were: “thousands of people who neither go to Confession nor make their Easter Communion ... I implore you to pray for them ... I shudder to think of how often Our Lord is offended in this large city, crucified by serious sins”.

He soon became extraordinarily popular not only in Dublin but all over Ireland, which is probably why he was given a task seldom referred to, namely, collecting money throughout the length and breadth of the country to pay for the new monastery of Mount Argus.

### **His Gift of Healing**

It was his gift of healing the sick which is most clearly recorded. Almost immediately hundreds of people came to him to be blessed - as many as three hundred a day, according to the records.

Fr. Sebastian Keens, a member of the Community at the time, told of a boy of 12 years old who lost the use of his leg and was brought to Fr. Sebastian by his mother. “I made no delay in calling Fr. Charles to bless him,” he recalls. “Whilst Fr. Charles was blessing him I put on my secular dress to go into Dublin. Great indeed was my surprise to find the little fellow walking in front of the house waiting for me, perfectly cured, when I came down.”

Miracles were so common that the Community didn’t take much notice of them. Charles was so shy that he didn’t speak of them either.

On one occasion a younger priest teased him about the cures. Charles looked at his coffee and said: “He who made you, made me.” Which was a neat way of deflecting the tease and of attributing the cures to God.

On another occasion a mother demanded in a haughty way. “You must cure my son.” To which Charles replied: “There is no must with God” and turned and walked out of the room. Another woman who used the same words but with a different attitude was rewarded. She arrived with her child, after she had been told by doctors that he had an incurable disease. The mother explained all this to Charles and pleaded: “Now, Fr. Charles, you must cure him.” This time Charles replied good-humouredly. “Well I suppose if I must, I must.” The boy was cured and later became a doctor in Australia.

### **His Fame Spread**

By now his fame had spread. According to an English newspaper of the time, “there was a constant pilgrimage of blind, lame and halt” coming to Charles for cures and “instances of cures are not infrequent”.

He worked himself to the bone blessing and helping the sick all day, every day, so much so that he hadn’t a moment for himself, and became thin, weak and run-down.

### **Trouble on Two Fronts**

And yet in 1866, his popularity got him into trouble on two fronts. The first happened when some members of the medical profession accused Charles of telling the sick they had no need to go to a doctor. They wrote letters to the papers about alleged instances. A young girl was supposed to have been blinded for life because she went to Mount Argus and not to a doctor. There was no evidence to back up the accusations and the priests there vehemently denied the charge.

Years later the doctor withdrew the accusation, yet at the time it did Charles no good at all. It is said that some doctors went to Cardinal Cullen and asked him to remove Charles from the diocese. He refused to do anything of the kind.

But then another incident happened which he couldn't ignore. The annals of the time give a full account of it.

It was Charles's custom to bless holy water with a relic of St. Paul of the Cross, so that people could take it home with them.

Unfortunately a group of shady characters got their hands on the blessed water and sold it to simple people all over Dublin and throughout Ireland.

This may well have been an indication of the popularity of Charles, but it was rightly frowned upon by the authorities. To sell blessed water is a serious sin, and even though poor Charles was totally innocent of what they were up to, it was agreed between Cardinal Cullen and his superiors that he be sent away. It was the only way to stop the scandalous practice, they said.

And so it was that Charles, though innocent in both cases, was sent to England. His old friend, Brother Michael, was the only one who went to the boat with him to see him off. It must have been a devastating experience for Charles.

### **Eight Years in England**

He remained in England for eight years. Not much is known of his work there, except that he took the opportunity to renew himself physically and spiritually. He helped with the novices, did much good work in various parishes and blessed the sick who came to him. However there is no evidence of any unusual cures.

Some people came over from Ireland to visit him, many more wrote to him. He kept in touch. Eventually, the furore which led to his departure, died down, so on the 10th January 1874, Charles was able to return to "his people" in Mount Argus where he remained until his death nineteen years later.

### **Always Available**

Once again the daily pilgrimage of sick and distressed began almost immediately. Both Passionists and lay people all testify that his most obvious quality was his availability,



even when he was weak and tired. Back in Ireland, healings began to take place again.

### **Many Cures**

John Patterson came to him in 1876, as a six-year-old boy. He was blinded eighteen months earlier by flying stones.

His step-mother, who was a Protestant, brought him to Fr. Charles who blessed him in the Church. The first thing the boy saw was Fr. Charles with his arms outstretched. Then as he left the monastery his sight returned gradually. On the way home he saw a cow in the field and later that night he saw his family.

Not only did Charles bless those who came to him but he went out and about all over Dublin and into the country blessing people. This was highly unusual for a Passionist at the time. There are many, many recorded instances of physical cures and spiritual insights.

He started on his fund-raising rounds again too. Just before he left for England the foundation stone for the new Church has been laid. Nothing was done while Charles was away but as soon as he came back, they started building the Church again. It was largely due to Fr. Charles's efforts that the Church was built and paid for.

His remains now lie in that Church and people come from all parts to pray at his tomb.

### **His Last Years**

During the last years of his life he had many trials. The Community in Mount Argus had serious problems due to the pressure of debts and due too it must be said, to their own laxity. It was difficult for a holy man to find peace or recognition there.

He was also in failing health, was anxious about death, and prayed constantly for a happy death. He used to say: "So many Communions, so many Masses, so many Confessions yet how sinful I am ... will I ever get to heaven".

His family in Holland, whom he never saw again, were dying. He was finding it more difficult to meet the huge demands made on him. Old injuries returned to plague him. Once while he was out blessing people, the trap in which he was travelling overturned near St. Clare's Convent, in Harold's Cross. He fractured his right leg in the accident. It never set properly and was painful for the rest of his life.

During his last years he had constant toothache too. He never complained about it but the people saw his jaw swollen and he constantly kept his hand up to his mouth.

### **Constant Contemplation**

Charles however, became holier each day. There's a humorous little story in the records which shows how his constant contemplation landed him in trouble. The toilets in the monastery were being repaired and the plumber had left a trap-door open. Charles "fell in a hole about six or seven feet deep ... Poor Charles who is always wrought up in God didn't see the hole and down he went ... He complains only of a little pain and of the fright he had".

### **Nearing the End**

Towards the end of 1892, it was obvious that the life of Fr. Charles was coming to an end. He said his last Mass on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception 1892. The next day he couldn't say Mass but did go to the Community chapel to pray.

Later he didn't come down for his meal and they discovered him lying on the floor in his room. His leg was badly swollen and he was close to death.

During his last illness he was always patient and when he could speak at all, he said simple prayers like: "My Jesus, I embrace this affliction for love of you".

Word of his illness spread through the city and crowds gathered to enquire about him. Just after Christmas he couldn't eat, lost his sight and was like a living skeleton.

## **The End**

The end, when it came was calm and peaceful. Those who were with him recalled that "no struggle with death was evident, not even a movement of the muscles. He just fell asleep and only the passing sigh told the watchers that it was all over". It was 5.30, on the morning of the 5th January, 1893.

As soon as the news broke, people flocked to Mount Argus. The papers carried the same headline: "*Death of Fr. Charles of Mount Argus*".

His body was brought to the Church and "poor old Charlie" as he liked to call himself, lay in state for five days. Despite heavy snow, thousands filed past his coffin.

The police were called out to control the crowds. It was said to have been bigger than Parnell's funeral in 1891.

The papers reported that "tens of thousands" of mourners came to Mount Argus.

His compassion for the poor and sick, his prayerfulness, his faith and his patience in suffering were recognised by the people and by his Community.

He was buried in the Community cemetery which immediately became a place of pilgrimage. Shortly after his death people broke into the graveyard during the night to pray and to take the clay from his grave.

The tradition of praying at the grave of Fr. Charles has lasted for over one hundred years. It is handed down from generation to generation.

When the body was transferred from the graveyard to the Church in 1949, the crowds continued to come from all over Ireland.

## **Why do they come?**

They come for healing and hope. People afraid of imminent death are comforted because Charles had the same fear; those fretting about examinations realise that Charles was a slow student; the sick know that he suffered much himself, the poor know his concern for them and think about the lonely ordination he had because his family couldn't afford to travel; people discerning God's will pray to him knowing that at 24 years old he was a late vocation - he knew what he wanted but found it difficult to achieve.

Childless couples find him a great help. They pray at his tomb knowing he will understand because his parents lost a little child too. I have seen women suffering from breast cancer and young people in comas all helped through the intercession of Fr. Charles. Suffering people receive hope and healing daily.

People in entertainment take to him because of his singing; emigrants and those who lead lonely lives, recognise that he is likely to have a soft spot for them; the misunderstood think of how jealousy and being taken advantage of meant eight years away from "his people".

With Charlie there are no false promises. Not all those who came to Charles were healed in the way they expected.

One man sought healing but was told that he would die within a month and that he should prepare himself and his family for it. He did what he was told and he died a month to the day.

To another he wrote - "We must remember that sickness is often-times the mark of God's favour. We all have to carry our crosses; God did not spare even his Blessed Mother from suffering".

## **Hope**

Hope is a constant theme of his life. The saint who founded the Passionists, St. Paul of the Cross, asked each member of the Congregation to have a picture of Our Lady of Hope in his room. The picture shows Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms, pointing to a cross. The Passion of Christ gives us hope to overcome any suffering. No suffering is wasted.

Charles came to Mount Argus on July 9th, which is now the Feast of Our Lady of Hope. He brought hope to Mount Argus Community and to the people of Ireland at a time when they badly needed hope.

He gave hope to the hundreds of thousands who came to visit him. He still brings hope to those who ask his help.

The famous Novena of Hope in Mount Argus, and at St Gabriel's, The Graan, Enniskillen shows that Saint Charles still cares for the sick, the poor and those in need of hope.

### **Perseverance**

He tells us that there is a value in perseverance. He did not live in ideal times. He didn't use the language well, he was a bad preacher in a community of preachers. Life in the Community was difficult, Faith was weak in Dublin at the time, yet Charles persevered and won through.

### **Accessibility**

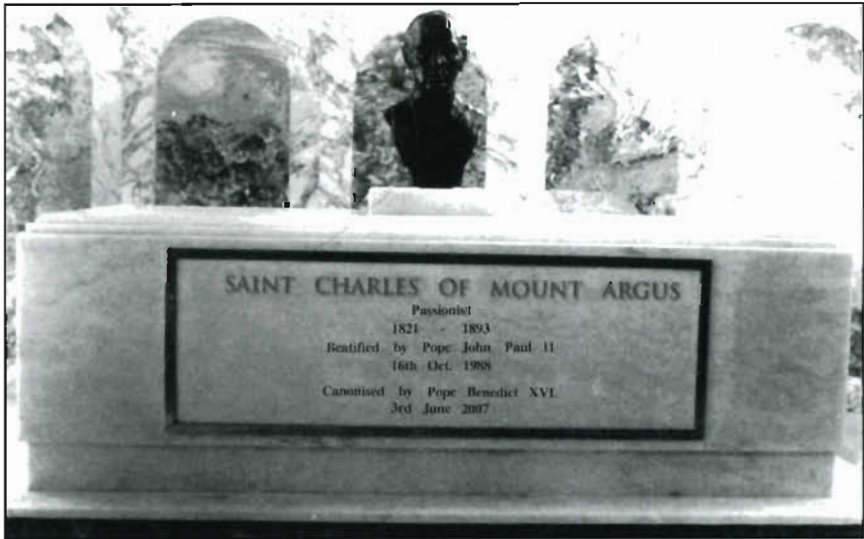
He was accessible. He was tireless in dealing with the sick and poor who came to him. He was patient. He was available.

He wasn't one to be jealous about his gifts. He used them generously for those in need.

### **The Eucharist**

The Eucharist was central in his life. Before he joined he spent long hours before the Blessed Sacrament. Later in life he spent an hour before Mass, and another hour celebrating Mass.

He had a healthy devotion to Mary. "Have Faith and pray to Mary" was his constant



The Shrine of Saint Charles of Mount Argus



advice. Once in the Community dining room, while others were eating he focused his eyes on the ceiling, called out “Mary, Mary”, and rose up from the seat. When the others looked, they could see nothing, but all were convinced that Charles saw a vision of Mary.

The Superior at the time called him to order. “Fr. Charles, you are disturbing the Community,” he said.

He told people to pray always. He prayed the Stations every day in the Community chapel so that he wouldn’t be distracted or called away. Those who drove him around in a trap sometimes had to shake him at the end of a journey, he was so wrapped up in prayer.

### **A Ministry of Prayer**

His ministry was a prayer ministry. Before blessing people he told stories of the Passion. Then he prayed silently himself, he would lead those to be blessed in prayer and finally he prayed over each of them individually. His blessings were a way of teaching people to pray and to meditate on the Passion. He linked the crucified Jesus with the suffering people.

When he joined the Passionists it was said that he was too old and not very bright. Yet he is an example of how the power of God can take hold of a person’s life.

“The power of the Cross, which is the wisdom of God, gives us strength to discern and remove the cause of human suffering.”

*(Passionist Constitutions).*

The ministries of healing, hope, prayer and reconciliation - highlighted by Saint Charles - are carried on by Passionists to this day.

## **What was he like?**

It’s easy to give a potted pen-picture of Saint Charles. He was born on 11th December, 1821, in the Netherlands, the fourth of eleven children. He was shy and backward as a boy but brightened considerably after he spent three months in the army when he was nineteen.

At twenty-four he joined the Passionists and was ordained a priest in December, 1850. He left his native country two years later and remained an emigrant for the rest of his life.

First he came to England and then to Ireland. He was a Vice-Master of Novices, a Curate in a Parish, a Fundraiser and most of all a Priest who went out to hospitals and homes to comfort the sick and the poor and blessed up to three hundred people a day who came to visit him.

When he died in 1893, the people thought of him as a saint and came to pray at his grave from that day until now.

He was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II in 1979 and was Beatified by him in 1988. Fittingly for a man who gave his best years in Dublin, the Beatification took place during the city’s Millennium year. He was canonised in Rome on June 3rd 2007.

That’s the easy part. But what was he like to live with?

When his body was exhumed from the grave, there was nothing but bones left in the coffin. He was human, like the rest of us.

### **Mild and Modest**

One of the best accounts of what he was really like is given by a man who actually lived on the same corridor with Fr. Charles. Fr. Eugene Nevin was a student at the time. He remarks that great men, like great mountains are better appreciated from a distance, yet the more those who lived with Charles knew him, the more they appreciated his goodness.



*Mrs. Molly Cranny who knew Fr Charles well, was still alive aged 103, at the time of his Beatification in 1988. Pictured with Fr Brian at the Beatification ceremony.*

He remembers him as a man whose appearance was a sermon in itself, a man who showed “the mildness and modesty of Christ”.

### **His Humanity**

He walked with a limp and unsteadily as a result of the accident he had in Harold's Cross. He had a great “sense of humour and was as natural as anyone in the Community”. He enjoyed get-togethers; and when “called upon to sing would acquit himself very creditably”.

He sang at get-togethers, in the Church, in choir. His favourite piece was Ave Maria. He even tried to teach the students to sing but it ended in a fiasco when one of them who hadn't a note in his head drowned Charles out completely.

He used to listen to the military bands passing by Mount Argus.

As a boy at home his family remembers him as always singing about the house. In Mount Argus as an emigrant the students said he went about humming the Dutch national anthem.

Fr 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 which his father, a minister, had banned him from reading. Van Gogh thought it was an excellent novel that chronicled family tragedies and family scandals. If you look closely you will see the bible is open at Isaiah 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.

Fr 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 is 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. St 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.

He 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".

Charles is not a remote saint with nothing to offer our generation. As a Passionist, I should learn to look at his life and discover that our greatest gift is to be people of compassion; to be willing to walk with people along their way of the cross, in search of meaning rather than handing out futile answers.

Van Gogh also said that God always sends works of art so that we might recognise ourselves in the works of art. "Christ is the greatest artist of all. He works not in canvas but with human flesh," he concluded. Blessed Charles, is a wonderful example of a human canvas that God made into a work of art. He was a poor preacher, ridiculed by those who lived with him. At the end of his life he suffered pain but remained human enough to have a sing-song and a glass of whiskey when he needed it. He's my kind of saint.

He called himself "poor old Charlie" as he walked along the corridors. One lasting memory that Fr Eugene Nevin had of Charles, was his fear of death as he hobbled down the 59 steps from his cell on the top floor, to bless the sick in the parlours. All the while he kept repeating the second half of the Hail Mary; "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen."

In theory, Charles was not the ideal model of the perfect Passionist. Yet of all the Passionists who've lived and worked here for over 150 years, he's the only one to be canonised a saint.

### **The Devil's Advocate**

The Devil's Advocate, who has to try to think of reasons why someone should not be called a Saint, highlighted some of Charles' faults. They said he was scrupulous especially saying Mass. It often took him an hour to celebrate.

He could be impatient, particularly with a Fr. Salvian who took it upon himself to test Charles's holiness. But when you realise what Salvian did, the wonder is that Charles could put up with it at all.

They pointed out that Charles took snuff. Sometimes his religious habit showed all the signs. And they mentioned that he took an occasional brandy or whiskey.

He was an ordinary man with human needs, was aware of them and persevered to be as good as he could in spite of them, and in the midst of the tremendous demands made on him. Saints are human beings who try harder.

He loved fresh air. When the people came for his blessing, the porter often found him out walking in the garden admiring the flowers.

Fr. Nevin has one lasting memory of Charles. It was a beautiful sunny day and Fr. Nevin was looking out his window at Charles walking in the garden, lost in admiration of the flowers. He was perfectly at ease.

Then two little kittens jumped out of the flower beds and pawed playfully at his habit.



*The coffin containing the body of Saint Charles is exhumed in March 1988. The remains were later placed in the new shrine in Mount Argus Church, Dublin.*

When he didn't notice them, they skipped back into the flower beds. They kept up their playful routine the length of the path. A nice memory of a saint, that.

Fr. Nevin finishes with another peaceful picture of life with a saint. "And so we leave him sleeping in an Irish grave, far away- from the land of his birth ... his virtuous life still clinging as a protecting ... influence around Mount Argus ... Of his saintliness no one who knew him could entertain a doubt. To live with him and tend him in his last illness, has been my privilege and my joy: to his help I look forward, when that help is most needed.

For a fuller account of the life of Fr. Charles, see *To Heal the Brokenhearted* by Fr. Paul Francis Spencer, C.P., available from all good booksellers. If not in stock, please order from Mount Argus, Dublin 6W, Ireland.

Those who know of any favours granted through the intercession of Saint Charles, or if you would like to have a relic, please contact - Rev. Vice-Postulator, Mount Argus, Dublin 6W, Ireland.

### **Blessing of the Sick with the Relic of Saint Charles of Mount Argus**

We fly to your protection, O holy Mother of God. Despise not our prayers in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.

#### **Let us pray.**

We your servants, Lord, ask that we may enjoy lasting hearth of mind and body; we ask the help of Mary, our Mother to be delivered from our present sorrow and to enjoy everlasting happiness.

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

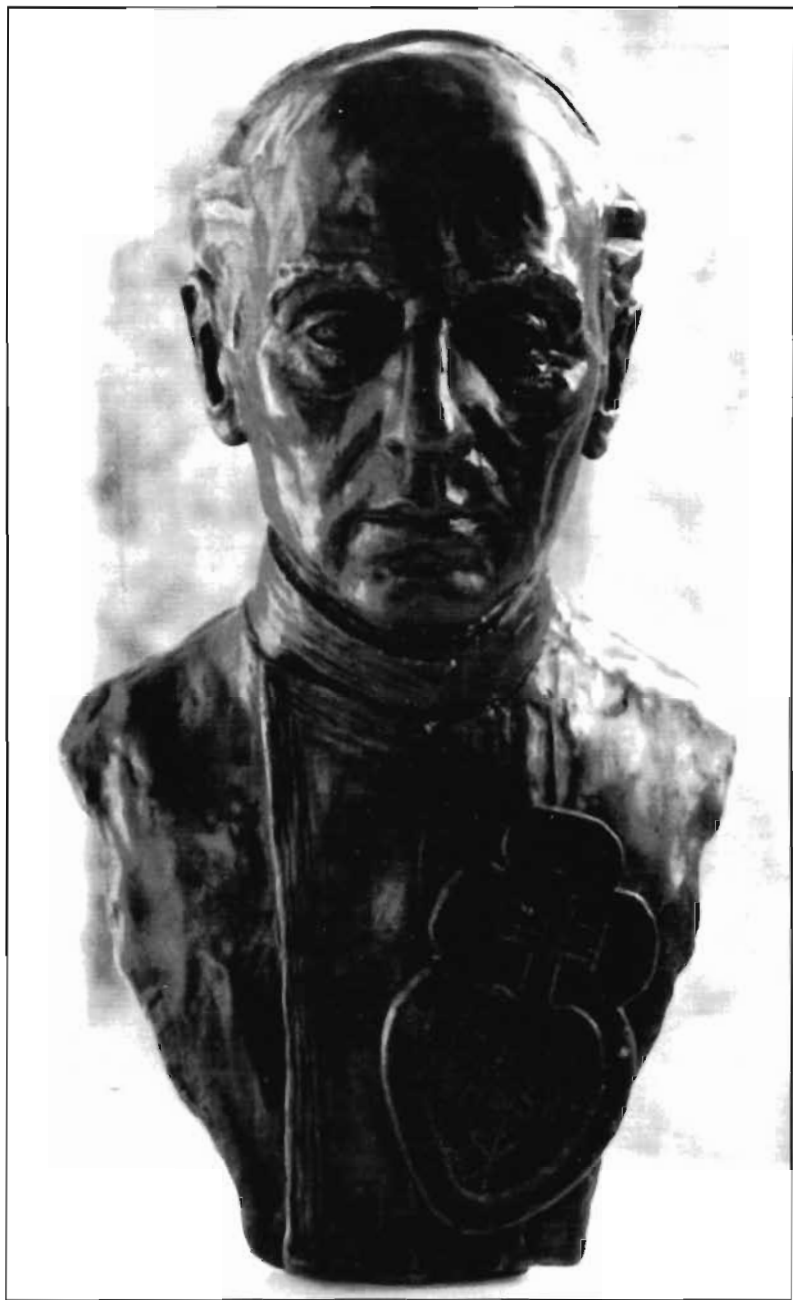
Hear Lord, the prayers we offer to you, through the intercession of Saint Charles of Mount Argus, that we, who have no trust in ourselves may be helped by the prayers of him who was so pleasing to you.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

### **BLESSING WITH THE RELIC**

Almighty God, hear the prayers we make for (N.... ) whom we now bless in your name. Through the intercession of Mary, the Mother of God and Saint Charles of Mount Argus, grant that the power of this blessing may be effective and they may be freed from every evil of soul and body. Take away all their pain and anxiety and grant them healing, health and happiness. And may the blessing of Almighty God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, come down upon us and remain with us forever. **Amen.**





*Saint Charles of Mount Argus from the New Shrine.  
Sculptor: Marjorie FitzGibbon, A.R.H.A.*

# ***Prayer in honour of Saint Charles of Mount Argus***

Feast Day 5th January

*Father, you called Saint Charles of Mount Argus to bring good news to the poor and to heal the brokenhearted. You opened his eyes to see the presence of Christ crucified in those who suffer. Through his intercession, may we learn the meaning of your love for us, by experiencing the blessings of your healing power. Through Christ our Lord, Amen. (Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father.)  
Saint Charles of Mount Argus,  
for us.*

