



Blessed Charles Houben Munstergeleen

Homily in honor of Blessed Charles Houben Munstergeleen

- January 5, 2004

"Every saint, every Blessed, even though he might feel caught up in the shadows of this world, helps us pilgrims to journey with spirits sure and free toward the Truth, toward the light."

With these words our Holy Father, some years back, reminded us of this characteristic of Christian holiness. (Osservatore Romano, 20-21 Oct., 1986)" And this is just what our Blessed Charles Houben (1821-1893) is doing for us today. Besides being an example of heroic Christian virtue, he is preparing us, through the celebration of his feast, to contemplate that light of which he is already a part. He is in reality a true sign of hope, especially in these times where we often feel the

weighs of our world because of its uglier side, its egoisms, and its evils. At times, we are lead to doubt in the coming of the Kingdom of God, particularly when we see wars, violence, hunger, racism, poverty, loneliness, desperation, but let us remember the saints and blesseds who have lived their lives for Christ, who have made room for him in their lives, and thus have become ever more strong and more confident. They have become persons under the Lordship of Christ on this earth and they show us the concrete possibility of being a true sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God. Blessed Charles is one of these brave persons, a person of great hope.

Blessed Charles of Saint Andrew was born Johannes Houben, on the 11th of December, 1821, at Munstergeleen, diocese of Roermond, Holland. His father was a wealthy farmer, Petrus, his mother was Johanna Elisabeth Luyten. He was the fourth often children. His baptism took place on the same day that he was born, Johannes Andreas. By nature he was devout and reserved, and from his childhood, he expressed the desire to become a priest. His first communion took place on 26 April, 1835, and was confirmed on the 28th of June of the same year. He began his classical education at Sittard, and continued his studies at Broeksittard, until 1840, when he had to interrupt his studies for military service. During his military service he met a Passionist Priest who worked as a chaplain to the soldiers. The warmth and holiness of that Passionist had a great influence on him. Following his discharge from the military, he completed his studies, and still attracted to their spirituality, he asked to be admitted to the Passionists. We can say that as Natanael's call has been marked through the encounter with Philip, who already met and accepted to follow Jesus, so happened to Blessed Charles through the encounter of the Passionist chaplain. It was Blessed Dominic Barberi who received his request, and he was subsequently accepted for the novitiate at Ere, near Tournai, on 5 November, 1845. In December he was vested in the Passionist habit, and took the religious name of Charles of St. Andrew. Following his canonical year of novitiate, he professed his vows on 10 December of the following year. He then completed his philosophical and theological studies, to be ordained on 21 December, 1850, at the hands of Mons. Labis, the Bishop of Tournai.

Shortly thereafter, he was sent to England, where the Passionists had founded three monasteries and where he served for a time as Vice-Master of Novices at Broadway, as well as in parish ministries both in the parish of St. Wilfrid, and in the surrounding area. Finally, in 1856, he was transferred to the new monastery of Mount Argus, near Dublin. He was a priest of exceptional holiness. He was noted for his practice of obedience, poverty, humility and simplicity. Even more, his holiness was an expression of his devotion to the Passion of the Lord. He was known to always carry in his hand a small crucifix so that he would always be able to meditate on the Passion. His celebration of the Mass was so devout that he often went beyond the usual duration of the Mass. Due to his imperfect mastery of the English language, he was never a recognized preacher, nor did he preach missions. However, he dedicated himself in a special way, and with great effect, to the spiritual direction of souls in the confessional. His reputation for holiness drew many of the faithful to the monastery who sought out his personal blessing.

Recognizing his sanctity and gifts the people flocked to him. When anyone met him, they immediately felt that they were in the presence of someone very special. His faith and his love for others shone out like a bright lamp. People came in large numbers every day, just to receive his blessing. Word spread very rapidly about this saintly Dutch priest, and men and women came to see him from as far away as mainland Europe and North America.

As the years passed, many people claimed to have been cured from various illnesses by the prayers of Fr. Charles. Those that were not cured by him said that they had received wonderful graces from God because of him. He touched the hearts of thousands.

His life was a full dedication to God and to everyone, he truly loved, like St. John says in his first letter, and this is why he passed from death to life; in fact we still feel his living and effective presence among us. The source of his love was the Passion of Jesus, *the most great and stupendous expression of the Love of God* (St. Paul of the Cross) that he used to meditate, contemplate and preach constantly. Christ Crucified and Risen is the true ladder of Jacob that conjuncts heaven and earth and upon which the angels climb up and down; Jesus, the Crucified One is the full revelation of the Glory and Love of God: *no one has a bigger love than this, to give life for his friends, and we are all his friends!* Whoever will search for a "sign" out of this one will only find illusions and idols. Only through Him, with Him and in Him we exist and we find the truth of ourselves: we are created and saved to love one another like He loved us. And if we remain in communion of love with Him we can, like Blessed Charles, release the Glory of God with our lives.

How can this be possible? Nathaniel said: *Can anything good come from Nazareth?* We say today: Is it possible that anything good can come from Munstergeleen or from me? Yes it is possible because to God nothing is impossible. It is possible because his power manifests in our weakness. It is possible because he has chosen in the world what is weak to confound the strong and what is foolish to confound the wise; in fact He was born in a stable in Bethlehem and came from Nazareth where apparently nothing good could come from it. It is possible because the King of kings decided to have thorns as a crown and a cross as a throne. It is possible because during the darkness of Good Friday, when everything seemed finished, the curtain of the Temple was ripped and so the Holiest became accessible to everyone, especially to the poorest, to the most far, to the sinners: today you will be with me in heaven says Jesus to the good thief. Many times God trusts us more than we do and than what we can imagine! What He wants is that we trust Him and abandon ourselves to his Love just like Blessed Charles did.

But how can we concretely manifest the Glory with our lives? We find the answer in the first reading of today: *Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.*

Blessed Charles, through his constant contemplation of the Passion of Jesus, felt himself deeply moved to love as Jesus loves us. Whoever recognizes the gift of life expressed in the Passion of Jesus will certainly want to layout its own life like He did. Love calls to love.

It is the Love of God that calls us to come here in Munstergeleen, in this simple and humble chapel that used to be a barn, like the pastors and the three kings went to Bethlehem. In reality, we come here because we feel accepted, welcomed, comforted. We feel, as St. John says, loved *in deed and truth*. We feel known like Nathaniel felt when Jesus met him. We feel the tender and warm presence of Blessed Charles who also knows us. He knows our wounds, our failures and our weakness and he tells us with his living presence that despite our failures and sins, it is possible to everyone to start again, in a new way, because nothing is impossible to God! And if we feel that our heart has something to reproach to ourselves, coming here, we truly feel that God is greater than our heart and is always willing to put us on his shoulders like a Good Shepherd.

It is, therefore, to this Merciful God, through the intercession of Blessed Charles Houben, that we entrust our human weakness, but even more, our desire to become saints, to become testimonies of His wonderful love that embraces the entire world.

Amen.

FR. Salvatore Enzo Del Brocco, C.P.

