

"We owe Charlie far more than he owes us"

A true story by Father Bernard F. McWilliams C.S.S.R.*

Those Puerto Ricans are savages, is what I hear frequently from people whose only window on the world is The New York Daily News. It is true that many of the young bandits arrested daily by the patrolling police carry handsome names like López and Rodríguez and Rivera. Perhaps for that very reason, and to do justice to a noble people, it is time to tell the story of Charlie Rodríguez, who died of intestinal cancer on July 13, 1963 in Caguas, Puerto Rico.

In truth, I firmly believe that I am not exaggerating when I say that never in all the history of the Church has there been a more completely and actively dedicated lay apostle than Charlie Rodríguez. The emphasis here is on the word "more." There have been, there are, and there will always be many other heroically self-sacrificing men among the ranks of lay apostles. I am simply saying that I cannot imagine a man doing more for the glory of God than Charlie. He gave himself totally; no man can do more than that. Those close to him were amazed at his total absorption in apostolic works. One priest who knew him intimately said recently: "As far as I know, he has never lived a single *day* of *self-complacency* in his *entire life*."

Charlie grew up in Caguas, a large town in a valley surrounded by extraordinarily beautiful mountains. In the Catholic elementary school he proved to be a brilliant student. Upon graduation he enrolled in the local public high school. But due to his recurring bouts of illness, it took him six years to complete the four-year course. Notwithstanding, this experience convinced him of the need for a lay ministry among the students. Although it is

difficult to determine where to place the blame (parents' negligence? irreligiousness of the teachers? an education system without God? the normal rebellion of adolescents?) The fact is that in Puerto Rico and, to tell the truth, all over the world, students tend to lose faith in God. Charlie was to devote the latter half of his life in a relentless effort to avert that tragedy wherever he could.

For one year only he attended the very secular University of Puerto Rico, a militantly atheistic school, according to some people. Due to the fact that the professors seemed to take a perverse delight in ridiculing Christianity, this was a year of intense anguish for him. He argued relentlessly with them, with the happy result that the other students at least began to question the conceited omniscience of their professors. Some years later he would return to the university to continue his battle on behalf of these young minds, this time not as a student, but rather as a moderator of a student discussion group.

He was admirably qualified for this job. His command of philosophy and theology was surprisingly profound. Priests who listened to him expound upon philosophical and theological concepts say that they have never known anyone, neither priest nor lay person, more brilliant in these fields.

One night I myself heard him respond to a student who was questioning the credibility of the Assumption of Mary. Consulting neither notes nor textbooks, he spent more than a half hour detailing reams of evidence in support of this dogma.

He was a young man of slight stature, fragile with a fine voice and a style of expressing himself rapidly. But he spoke with such an intensity and evident sincerity that one could not help thinking

that this should be the speaking manner of the priesthood.

Until he was bedridden with his last illness, Charlie gave himself totally and tirelessly to Christ. He directed three distinct discussion groups in three different towns. He conducted classes for the Confraternity (of the Christian Doctrine) every Sunday for high school students, and he prepared for them with great care. Since the majority of his students could not afford books, he was constantly mimeographing adequate material for them. The truth is that during his last ten years he had to work countless hours simply in front of the mimeograph machine. Not only did he produce material for his classes and discussion groups, but he also published a weekly liturgical bulletin as well, which he mailed to all those interested in receiving it, and all at his own expense. During those years he worked full time in a government office, so that most of that other work had to be done during his lunch periods. What remained of his modest salary after paying for stencils, paper, envelopes and stamps, was destined for the purchase of religious books or for the poor.

When one remembers that Charlie also conducted an intense person to person ministry, that he attended Daily Mass, that he set aside hours each day for prayer, and that he read a prodigious quantity of books, one has to ask, how was he able to do all that? Especially when one also remembers that he was plagued almost constantly by a nervous stomach affliction.

He was truly an exceptional man! But what was it that propelled Charlie? Was it a compulsion? Scrupulousness? Was it some type of madness? Or simply love of God? Well, one doesn't know much about a man and his motivations until the moment of his death.

How does he behave at that moment? How did Charlie behave?

Let us consider that during his last years he was fighting a hopeless battle against intestinal cancer. Although there is no easy death, the slow death by cancer is, without a doubt, more difficult to accept than others. Here the will of God presents itself as something monstrously difficult to fulfill. But, without a word of complaint, Charlie bowed his head in acceptance of his pain. Only when it became absolutely unbearable did he permit a sedative to be administered. He had lived in pain all his life; he would die in pain for the good of humanity. In this he resembled so many other saints who preceded him.

He would still have to suffer a pain even greater than his cancer. During his last two months he entered into what writers call "the dark night of the soul." He, who had lived so joyously in God's presence throughout his life, now felt himself abandoned by God. He for whom the word *hallelujah* resounded with such a special ring of ecstasy signifying our resurrection together with Christ, now clamored with the anguish of Christ crucified: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Some priests, including his brother Pepe, a Benedictine priest, spoke with him, but to no avail. His night became even darker. During his last weeks of agony, while Charlie was slowly wasting away, there was never a ray of light in the profound darkness of his soul, never a feeling of closeness to God. This is how most of God's chosen people have lived their last days.

Later, all of a sudden, there was light, a light that flooded his soul, and an incomparable happiness, which illuminated his face. Those who have no idea what the word he now pronounced meant to Charlie, will surely smile. But those who, throughout the long months, had felt his pain, his desolation, and his continual

deterioration,, were now filled with immeasurable joy when Charlie lifted his head one moment and said: *"Hallelujah!"* He looked at those who were around his bed,, and with a weak but clear voice he said: *"Let us pray!"*

Did this man leave some heavy impact on others because of his apostolic life of abnegation? That question can be answered in hundreds of different ways by hundreds of people. Students whose faith was kept alive in an unlikely environment; priests for whom his tireless zeal constituted a source of profound edification; people from all walks of life who will not easily forget the vision of a small man always in movement and full of fire with the love of God.

.But perhaps the best response was given by the doctors who attended him during his last and lengthy illness; men whom Charlie could not fool in his attempt to hide his pain. Perhaps in gratitude for the lessons in kindness which Charlie granted them in the midst of his intense suffering,, they felt well recompensed, and they said to his relatives:

"Throw away our bills; we owe Charlie far more than he owes us."

Catholic Home Messenger

(c.1973)

*NOTE: This factual account by Father Bernard F. McWilliams, C.S.S.R., was published c.1973 in the magazine, Catholic Home Messenger." Father Bernard,, now deceased,, was a great Redemptorist priest who worked for many years in the Caguas

parish, Sweet Name of Jesus, and he had a close relationship with Charlie. Charlie collaborated with him on parish projects, especially in his study circle and in the preparation of professors for the confraternity of the Christian Doctrine. At the time of Charlie's death, Father Bernard was not in Puerto Rico, but after returning for a short visit, he became interested in the details of his death. Upon his return to the United States, he wrote this article and subsequently sent copies of it to several friends. Fortunately one of these copies was discovered recently among some old papers destined for the trash. Surprisingly, here was this magnificent testimony, which we include in translation [in the book "En Aquel Tiempo"**) so that you may understand that his [Father Bernard's] eloquence and validity carries with it the spiritual authenticity of someone who dealt directly and profoundly with Charlie, and whose memory still evokes feelings of gratitude among the parishioners of Caguas.

****Later updated and retitled "¿Un Santo Puertorriqueno?"**