

Fr. Charles T. BEHL 73 USA

* Nov. 29, 1917, Philadelphia + Oct. 19, 1991 Bay City MI

A bright student, he attended a high school in his hometown before entering a Passionists junior seminary in New England. In 1938 he could pronounce his first vows there and begin his senior studies. At the end of his temporary vows, however, he withdrew, feeling that their kind of life was not for him.

He then worked for a while as a shipping clerk and credit manager, but still feeling called to the religious life and the priesthood, he applied to the Congregation. Coming with very good credentials, he was accepted and could make his profession in Ridgefield, CT, on August 14, 1943. His ordination to the priesthood followed on September 28, 1946 at Ferndale.

His first appointment in 1947 took him to Holy Ghost Church, Opelousas, LA, reputedly the largest Black parish in the U.S.A. It lasted less than three years. Asthma began to plague him in Louisiana's hot and humid climate and, in addition, he found it difficult to accommodate himself to the wishes of his pastor. He kept longing for another assignment, and this trait proved to be characteristic for the remainder of his active life. Strange to say, there had been no signs at all of such a tendency during his formative years when he gave full satisfaction to all.

What followed was a long string of some twenty appointments in thirty years, such as to Emsworth, New York, Millvale, New Orleans, Ann Arbor, Pittsburgh, Inkster, Riverside, Philadelphia, and so on--none of them lasting more than two years. He could not find his niche anywhere.

Not surprisingly, in 1952 he began considering leaving the Congregation and in 1965 he made an official request to become a diocesan priest. It

was rejected as unlikely to solve his problem. Two years later, however, he was accepted by the diocese of Burlington, VT, "ad experimentum."

Predictably, the ink on his transfer papers had barely dried when he regretted his step and returned to the Congregation because his whole heart and soul were still attached to it.

Nothing, however, had changed; again, one appointment followed another in search of a place that could satisfy his ever-changing longings. They were interrupted also by a variety of illnesses, some requiring operations, including a triple coronary by-pass in 1977. Nine years later, he went into retirement, first at Stella Maris, Sarasota, FL, and then at St. Joseph's, Bay City, MI. He died there peacefully of heart failure. Interment took place at the community cemetery of Cornwells.

Anyone who thinks that he now has an adequate picture of Fr. Behl would be greatly mistaken. Charles always made a very good impressions on all with whom he came in contact: he was, they said, a perfect gentleman and a scholar, a delightful man to meet. He did not indulge in any excesses, his conduct was "most exemplary," his "discretion above reproach;" his piety was based on a "solid fund of personal holiness," and he was a great community man. But he described himself as a man who was forever "laughing on the outside," but "crying on the inside" because he could not overcome his inner tendency to soar to the height of euphoria only to sink quickly to the depth of depression.

What perhaps saved his sanity, was his delightful sense of humor that made him "the life of any priestly gathering." Let me give two examples of that saving humor. On his first assignment to Opelousas, the pastor told this

young assistant that it was his job to see to it that the area in front of the church would be clean before people came to Mass. Charles considered such work not in keeping with his priestly dignity, but did not refuse. Instead, he turned it into a farce: dressing up in cassock, camaille and biretta, he swept the street with a smile on his face.

Later, he performed a spoof that became a legend. He loved to ridicule the inflated self-importance of some modern poets, and impersonated such a character as the famous Professor Karl von Boyle, by declaiming some wholly incomprehensible but important-sounding poems before an audience of graduate students at a university. It took some time before they realized that the whole thing was a spoof and burst into laughter.

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