
The Legacy of Pierre Charles, S.J.

Joseph Masson, S.J.

Pierre Charles was born in Brussels on July 3, 1883. He became a Jesuit on September 23, 1899, and was ordained to the priesthood on August 24, 1910. He died at Louvain, the principal and final scene of his activities, on February 11, 1954.

Father Charles was of medium height, but solidly built and with broad shoulders. Throughout his entire life, and especially during the years of his priestly life, he resolutely arose before dawn and retired late at night, devoting all his time to study, prayer, and human associations. His understanding of the needs of both church and world grew within the context of wide scholarship, served by a prodigious memory and supported by a quick and subtle intelligence. He was a man who looked intently at people and things from under large, bushy eyebrows and through thick eyeglasses. That, however, was his only myopia.

One who attempts to sketch the main characteristics of Pierre Charles's personality should begin by noting the expansiveness of his outlook and of his intellectual and religious horizons. He was wondrously interested in the world. Chesterton would have called him a "man alive," and indeed he shared some of Chesterton's own humorous and paradoxical nature. Born in a small country, he relished every opportunity throughout his life to travel beyond its borders.

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The excitement of Pierre Charles about the missionary activities of his Belgian Jesuit mentors on the Zambezi dates to his high school days. From the beginning of his religious training he went beyond a perfunctory devotional life, combining the force of "catholic" doctrine and an interest in "worldly" realities into one and the same vigorous piety. His superiors contributed intelligently to that broad development by sending him to study philosophy with the German Jesuits who were then residing in Holland, and later to study theology with French Jesuits who were at that time refugees at Hastings in England (1907–1910).

The period of his religious formation was a time troubled by the problems of modernism, the synthesis of reason and revelation, science and faith, the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus, God and humankind, and so forth. Father Charles, a man of vigorous mind as well as a faithful Christian, found the discussions about such matters an opportunity to deepen his own in-

tellectual and spiritual life. One of his fundamental characteristics was a strong attachment to the essentials, mixed with freedom of thought. "Safe" people, he would say, are those who do not have ideas of their own. As for him, he was teeming with ideas; he verified and enriched them in Paris where he came into contact with widely contrasting viewpoints such as those found in the thought of Kant and Bergson. Later on, in America, Africa, India, and Ceylon, his hunger for human associations and experiences continued unabated. Thus his exceedingly open and well-informed mind was firmly established. He was, moreover, remarkably multilingual, mastering English, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian in addition to French, Latin, and Greek.

Pierre Charles remained a faithful priest, and his concept of the priestly and apostolic life was heightened and broadened amid all these influences. Those who want to have an account of it, without spending the time necessary to examine his course notes in detail, will do well to read some of his hundred meditations given in *La Prière de Toutes les Heures*, of which more than 100,000 copies were printed, and others from *La Prière de Toutes les Choses*. Those titles are significant in themselves, introducing us to a second characteristic of Father Charles's personality.

For want of a better term, we may call it a mentality of *incarnation*. To so vital a man, religion, that is to say Christian faith and life, cannot be reduced to a simple compartment of existence, limited in time, space, and purposes. In each and every person, Christian and non-Christian alike, and in the entire cosmos, it is something experienced and wrought by grace. He wrote, "The earth is the only road by which we are led to heaven." For him all land is Holy Land, all history Sacred History—if not already in fact, at least in hope and potential. All humanity waits to become the people of God; the church is designed to take the world upon itself in its ascent.

Teilhardism before Teilhard? Yes and no. Around 1920, Pierre Charles had indeed expressed his opinion precisely on the manuscript of *Le Milieu Divin*. He evaluated it favorably, but added some comments of his own. In effect, despite his optimism, the reality of sin in a humanity that is incapable of redeeming itself, and the need for a Redeemer who (as *Ad Gentes* puts it) "cleanses, assumes and uplifts" the whole of creation, both human and subhuman, had always been clear to him. An indication of that conviction can be seen in the first proposition of a theological treatise on "The Incarnation of the Word," which he completed only fifteen days before his death and which is one of his most brilliant contributions. He says in it: "The object of the first divine decree was Christ as the head of the universe; the

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* All Catholic historical works on missiological theory, up to the present, cite Pierre Charles, either to approve or to challenge. Some bits of information prior to 1955 are found in *Bibliografia Missionaria*, published annually in Rome. We learn, for example, that *La Prière Missionnaire* was again translated into Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese after the death of the author. Many articles were republished in different languages even without the knowledge of the author who, as a matter of fact, was little concerned about what was done with his works.

Incarnation would not have taken place if man had not sinned."

In his view of the world as a whole, he saw the richness of its spiritual character just as clearly as the lacunas. He also saw its absolute need of Christ—and the need for Christians, those who have received him, to bring this Christ to others.

If I am not mistaken, Pierre Charles's intense preoccupation with and activity on behalf of the missions grew out of all that has been described above: a deep and robust faith; an "appetite" for associations with people; a progressively wider international experience; a Christian view of the riches, needs, and aspirations of humanity as a whole; an almost prophetic eagerness to see the church become truly universal, rooted in all the world's diversity and cultural pluralism, as soon as possible.

Twenty-five years ago, in 1953, he wrote: "The mission is the bearer not only of doctrine and the means to eternal salvation, but also of a 'way of life.' This culture can and should reflect all the varieties to which its adaptation leads in the different human societies it penetrates" ("Mission et Acculturation," in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 1953, p. 27). In substance, therefore, he was already contending for what, in today's terminology, we call incarnation, contextualization, and so forth.

Father Charles was, alas, too much in demand from all quarters and too incapable of refusing such requests, to have enough

time left for minutely shaping his theological and missiological intuitions. By temperament, moreover, he was primarily an initiator of new and original ideas. He had a fondness for the research method of St. Thomas Aquinas in which one replies to whatever affirmation is made by saying: "It seems not to be so (*videtur quod non*)."

It is an approach that irritates many orderly thinkers but, if applied to the hundreds of theological concepts that enjoy perfunctory acceptance, it can lead to often decisive refinements or insights. I may note in passing that the novel effects of this method were especially pleasing to the youthful audiences of religious and lay people whom the professor frequently addressed both in the line of duty and for his own enjoyment.

At the end of one of his meditations, Pierre Charles noted: "We have many professors, but what the world needs is seers!" Beginning in 1923–1924, after World War I and during the awakening of Asia and Africa, Father Charles developed the great issues now taken for granted but then much debated. These were discussed in lectures and in the *Semaines de Missiologie* that he directed at Louvain until 1950: the value of non-Christian cultures and religions; the spiritual competence of non-Christians, even the "primitives" as they were called; the missionary vocation of every Christian as a member of the body of Christ in growth toward its fullness; the need to have communities and local churches living in their own cultures and entrusted to local pastors; the role of the laity (in this matter he did not hesitate to use Protestant examples); and the advancement of women.

As a typical example of this "foresight," much ahead of its time in the Roman Church at least, he advocated—as early as 1933—the reestablishment of a permanent diaconate in the church. When objections were raised on the grounds that it was contrary to canon law, his reply seemed almost "blasphemous" in those days: Then let the canon law be changed if that is what it takes!

Readers may ask what all the foregoing details have to do with a theology of mission. The answer is that they are enormously relevant, assuming that theology is not an intellectual game but a way of conceiving and living Christianity as leaven in the world. Those who knew Father Charles personally (and I had that privilege) can only smile or lose patience when intellectually myopic commentators interpret his favorite expression, the planting of the church, as a "juridical" theory. It is, on the contrary, the liveliest and most dynamic of expressions, and it comes to us from long ago.

The Old Testament refers more than once to the people of God as a vine that their Lord plants or uproots. The same idea is reflected in *The Ascension of Isaiah* (iii:3), a very old Hebrew document subject to Christian interpolations: "They will molest the planting that the apostles have planted." Jesus himself uses the words *tree* and *vine* in reference to the church; Paul employs the figure of the olive tree (Rom. 11:17, 24); Irenaeus, in *Adv. Haer.* (v:20, 22), has this phrase: "plantata est Ecclesia paradisi in hoc mundo"; and the Roman Breviary says that the apostles planted the church with their blood (not with laws—even those unquestionably legislated, beginning with the Council of Jerusalem).

For Pierre Charles, planting means a vital insertion into the human matrix, into a sociocultural whole, in such a way that the whole of the gospel and of the church enters the whole life of a people. And the process is reciprocal. Father Charles underscored two aspects: mission *does* it, and mission *should* do it.

"The missionary activity of the Church is not at all identical with the [eventual] total conversion of a country; it involves not only religious and moral preaching, but the whole social and even material task: teaching, bricks and mortar, charitable works, professional services, and relief" (from the course given in Rome between 1932 and 1938). So much for the *deed*.

Occasional Bulletin

of Missionary Research

Continuing the

Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library

Published quarterly, in January, April, July, and October by the

Overseas Ministries Study Center

P.O. Box 2057, Ventnor, New Jersey 08406

Telephone: (609) 823-6671

Editor:

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Books for review and correspondence regarding editorial matters should be addressed to the Editors.

Subscriptions: \$6 for one year, \$12 for two years, and \$18 for three years, postpaid worldwide. Individual copies are \$3; bulk rates upon request. Correspondence regarding subscriptions and address changes should be sent to: Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, Circulation Department, P.O. Box 443, Fort Lee, New Jersey 07024.

Advertising:

Hahn, Crane and Associates, Inc.

215 West Ohio Street, Chicago, Illinois 60610

Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in:

Christian Periodical Index

Guide to Social Science and Religion in Periodical Literature

Index to Religious Periodical Literature

Religious and Theological Abstracts

Opinions expressed in the *Occasional Bulletin* are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Overseas Ministries Study Center.

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ISSN 0364-2178

And now for the *duty*. It is based at the same time on a theology of the Redeemer and of those to be redeemed. "The Church is the divine form of the world, the only point of encounter by which the entire work of the Creator turns to the Redeemer; the only junction point in which the Redeemer himself enters into possession of his universal heritage" (from his course in Rome).

Further, "the Church accepts us as we are, and not as pure spirits" (*Prière Missionnaire*, p. 8). "It is not merely with souls that the Church is concerned; it is the equilibrium of the world as a whole and its eternal value that it conserves and consecrates" (*Études Missiologiques*, p. 37). Thus "the sanctification of the world is not only spiritual but also a very material task. Wherever the Church is propagated it should, by reason of its very structure and nature, promote the benefits of health, knowledge, social peace, decent life and holy joy, both for its own members and for those who are not yet members. Those responsibilities are not all outside the function of church planting but are very much included in it" (from his course in Rome).

Thus the goal is envisaged as "When the Church has become solidly established throughout the world, with her clergy locally recruited, her sacraments within reach of all sincere people of good will, her preaching available to all who are not willfully deaf, her laity disciplined and busy, her congregations both active and contemplative, with the salutary joy that she brings to her children" (*Études Missiologiques*, p. 240). Those words were written in 1932. "The Church is not satisfied with saving people, but in bringing them to maturity in accordance with all their abilities" (from his course in Rome). Those words date from 1932.

The missiology of Pierre Charles, as we have seen, is filled with his concept of the church, but it is a living church, a communion. Everything proceeds from the grace of Christ, the Head; and everything is directed to the whole of humanity, the environment of the church's life. In the power of the Trinity all that comes from God returns to God. And the church aids in it.

Pierre Charles died twenty-five years ago. What has happened since then to his ideas and ideals? In substance they seem more current than ever. His books, reprinted more than once, are still used. Recently a university student who had just read the anthology entitled *Études Missiologiques* declared, "That reads like a novel!" The living, imaginative style does, in fact, remain captivating. Whenever the present writer quotes from Father Charles in lectures or sermons, as he has often done and continues to do, invariably someone in the audience comes up to ask for the name of the author and the title of the book.

The major testimony to the lasting value of Pierre Charles's great contributions is, however, much more eloquent. It is seen by comparing them with the documents of Vatican Council II. The planting of the church, a phrase we all recognize as the key to his teaching, figures in the Council's definition of the aim of mission (*Ad Gentes*, no. 6). The mystical body of Christ as the dynamic motor of mission, a concept dear to Father Charles, is recaptured

in the *Ad Gentes* expression "the life that Christ communicates to his members" (no. 5), and again as that which constitutes "the deep requirement of catholicity" (no. 1).

Another of Pierre Charles's favorite concepts, the church as the "divine form of the world" to lead all to the Redeemer, surfaced at the Council in numerous texts that recommend appropriating everything good in whatever religious and secular spheres the world offers. The entire constitution *Gaudium et Spes* is the implementation of that particular emphasis.

Some of the specific issues for which Father Charles fought, because in his day they were still challenged, have henceforth been taken for granted: the restoration of the diaconate, which he proposed in 1933, appears in *Lumen Gentium* (no. 29) and in *Ad Gentes* (no. 16); preference for local clergy, which he advocated from 1926, is the recommendation of *Ad Gentes* (no. 16); the acculturation process he foresaw from the outset, and systematized in 1953, is treated in various paragraphs of *Ad Gentes* and in an entire section of *Gaudium et Spes* (nos. 54-62); respect for and dialogue with the non-Christian religions, and the idea that certain aspects of Christianity are reinforced by them (a concept found in Pierre Charles's teaching from 1935 onward), comes to flower in the *Nostra Aetate* declaration and in the establishment of the Secretariat for the Non-Christian Religions.

Pierre Charles long and vigorously advocated a church visibly present and with established hierarchy, but he also emphasized the nature of that church as mystical body and communion (an emphasis some commentators have failed to note). All this is reflected in the appeal of *Lumen Gentium* (no. 8) for a necessary equilibrium.

There are two ways by which an author may become outdated. The first is by being so completely identified with and limited to his own era that he is destined for that very reason to disappear with it. Such, in fact, is the fate of all who attempt to be strictly "contemporary," and we may therefore be apprehensive about the future outcome of some very "contemporary" theories. The second way is to set forth ideas that can wait because they have permanent value. This can be done only by one who is ahead of his time or, to put it more precisely, one who is sensitive to issues of future and more universal appeal. Being durable, such ideas are absorbed little by little into the general, popular opinion. Thus the ideas that were earlier challenged become "the obvious," axioms so taken for granted that origin and author are forgotten, even when the substance is utilized and the formulas repeated.

In this second way Pierre Charles is becoming outdated. His concept of the church as body of Christ and sacrament of the world, with all the breadth of horizon and meaning implied in that, has now become part of our universal mentality. It is no small achievement to have contributed toward its coming to flower in the Christian and missionary mind.

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