

Fr. Charles S. Giambrone

* January 16, 1926, Bridgeport, PA

+ June 1, 2001 – Bethel Park, PA

He received his primary and secondary education in his hometown, 1933-1944. He indulged in the usual sports and in 1942 starred in his high school's undefeated championship football team. While still in high school, he worked evenings in a shoe factory. Summer vacations saw him busy in all kinds of jobs: truck driver, gardener, salesman, construction worker, sundeck attendant, or rolling chair pusher on the boardwalks of Atlantic City. What he loved more was being houseman in a children's hospital.

When he was 18 in 1944, he was drafted, entered the Marines and served in the Pacific taking part in the Luzon landing under General Douglas MacArthur. Desirous of becoming a priest, he then entered St. Philip Neri School in Boston for a one-year course. A brochure about our Congregation and a meeting with Fr. Charles Stocker drew his attention to the Holy Ghost Fathers and their rugged work in Africa.

After two years in Cornwells, PA, 1952-54, he made his vows at Ridgefield, CT, followed by senior seminary studies at Ferndale, Norwalk, CT. He was ordained there on June 1, 1960 at the age of 34. His record shows that intellectually he was far from brilliant, but he made up for that by his religious spirit, and industriousness. In 1961 he was assigned to Kilimanjaro, Tanganyika and flew together with Fr. Thomas Tunney to Moshi. We find him located there consecutively at Naruma in 1964, Burka, in 1966, Olkakola as director in 1968, and Chekereni, again as director in 1973, thereafter in 1979 at Endulen among the Maasai in the Ngorogoro Crater until 1985 when he was assigned to St. Maggarn and Mtowamba. While on leave in 1988, he underwent a quadruple bypass operation, but returned to East Africa six months later and resumed his work among the Maasai at Endulen. Thereafter he took up ministry among the numerous refugees from wars until 1998.

He was in bad shape and spent some time at the (Cornwells) Bensalem community while being treated at a hospital. Being often disoriented, he could no longer drive a car. One day he disappeared and a police alert resulted in finding him at a doughnut store on his way to his sister in the King of Prussia area. In mid 1999 he was transferred to the Bethel Park, PA, Spiritan retirement home. He died there peacefully on June 1, 2001 around 8:00 a.m. while preparing for the community Mass. Burial took place at the Spiritan cemetery at St. Mary's.

There is more to be said about Charlie, as everyone called him. When he was assigned to the Chekereni mission there was no rectory there. So he stretched a ten-foot piece of burlap across a corner at the rear of the church, put a small bed and a chair there and went to live there. He was quite satisfied with it. After all, his people did not have much more than that. In later years when he had become well-known he would sometimes be offered free room and board at major hotels, but he never accepted the offer because he did not want to enjoy luxuries beyond what his people could afford.

Constantly on the go, he developed a prodigious appetite and consumed great quantities of food. It reminds me of a Canadian confrere out in Africa who did the same. On one occasion

the cook had prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner for the three priests stationed there. He was the first to sit down, eat and go out to work. When the other two came for breakfast, the cook told them "you will have to wait a little, Father X ate everything for his breakfast." Charlie became an expert in Swahili and published six small books in that language. He also functioned as editor of the diocesan Swahili newspaper. Much in demand as a speaker, he made a valuable collection of slides to illustrate his lectures.

Working among the refugees was difficult. There was no end to the stream of people fleeing from Rwanda and Burundi. In July 1996 there had been a coup in Burundi, causing a new flood of some 30,000 added to the 40,000 already in camps near the border of Tanzania. The people lived in grass huts and received food rations, but had little to do. Priests, Sisters and relief workers were not allowed to live in the camps, as it was too dangerous. So, he spent the nights in a rectory ten miles away and the days in the camps. His priestly ministry was fruitful and he had numerous baptisms, first Communions, and marriages, but his main aim was to show solidarity with the refugees by visiting them in their huts or the hospital and walking around the camp talking with them, thereby making them realize that, though refugees, they still retained their dignity as human beings and sons or daughters of God. He was happy when in 1995 Paul Flamm from the U.S.A. came to help him, and a few years later after his ordination in 1999, Paul returned to continue the work of the "old-young" padre Charlie.