

cover story

Father Hall:

A lighthearted priest
who helps others take
their faith seriously





L

Lance Armstrong, he ain't. And Father Charlie Hall will be the first to admit it.

That's the kind of honest, self-deprecating mindset which helps establish this Grand Rapids native as the new and approachable pastor at Our Lady of the Lake (OLL) Parish, Holland, the pastoral post he assumed this past July.

Yes, this cleric's got a bicycle. And in the rare spare moment, he'll hop aboard his two-wheeled steed and canvass the Park Township streets on which many of his parishioners make their homes and tend to summer getaways.

But by his own admission, he's not planning to take home any medals for speed, distance or even appearing remotely athletic in the process.

"Don't expect any gracefulness," says Father Charlie. "I'm one of the most clumsy people you'll ever know."

But he says it with a laugh and an "oh well" wave of his hand, and in the next breath, he's relating how, shortly after arriving at OLL, he mistook a dark stairwell for what he thought was the entrance to the living room in his new rectory, and tumbled keister over teacups all the way to the bottom landing. Just a few days later, Father Hall was installed by Bishop Walter A. Hurley as the new pastor, and still sporting some pretty nasty bruises about his head. Not long after that, he presided

at a wedding. Naturally, cameras showed up at both events, prompting the 56-year-old priest to exclaim with another chuckle that "Oh, those pictures will be classic!"

Father Hall was appointed at OLL this past summer after serving four years at St. Michael the Archangel, Remus, a rural church serving a fair number of third-



>> Father Hall stands with his prized Schwinn 10-speed bicycle that he received as an ordination present (photo right) from parishioners at St. James Parish in downtown Grand Rapids.

and fourth-generation Germans who hail from proud farming families. At OLL, Father Hall pastors to some 1,570 families – about twice the number he served in Mecosta County – who for the large part live in sprawling suburban tracts. Lake Michigan and its rows of alternately charming and upscale cottages are just three miles down the road. The contrasts don't end there.

Where St. Michael's has a legacy dating back to the late 19th Century, OLL was founded just 30 years ago, in 1979. The administrative staff at OLL is about double the number at St. Mike's. And every ancillary event at OLL seems to take on a life of its own. The parish festival alone commands upwards of 400 volunteers.

Father Hall takes it all in stride, describing his new duties as "A lot of the same things going on, but at St. Mike's, everyone just had to wear more hats."

Like many priests with decades of service, Father Hall's arrival at OLL comes by way of a circuitous road that allowed him to minister at more than a half-dozen other parishes before this latest assignment.

A good student, scout becomes a priest

He was educated at St. John's Seminary in Plymouth, the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada and at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids. He first served as a deacon at St. James Parish on Grand Rapids' West side, and it's where he was ordained, in February of 1979. He's also led flocks at St. John Vianney, St. Jude,

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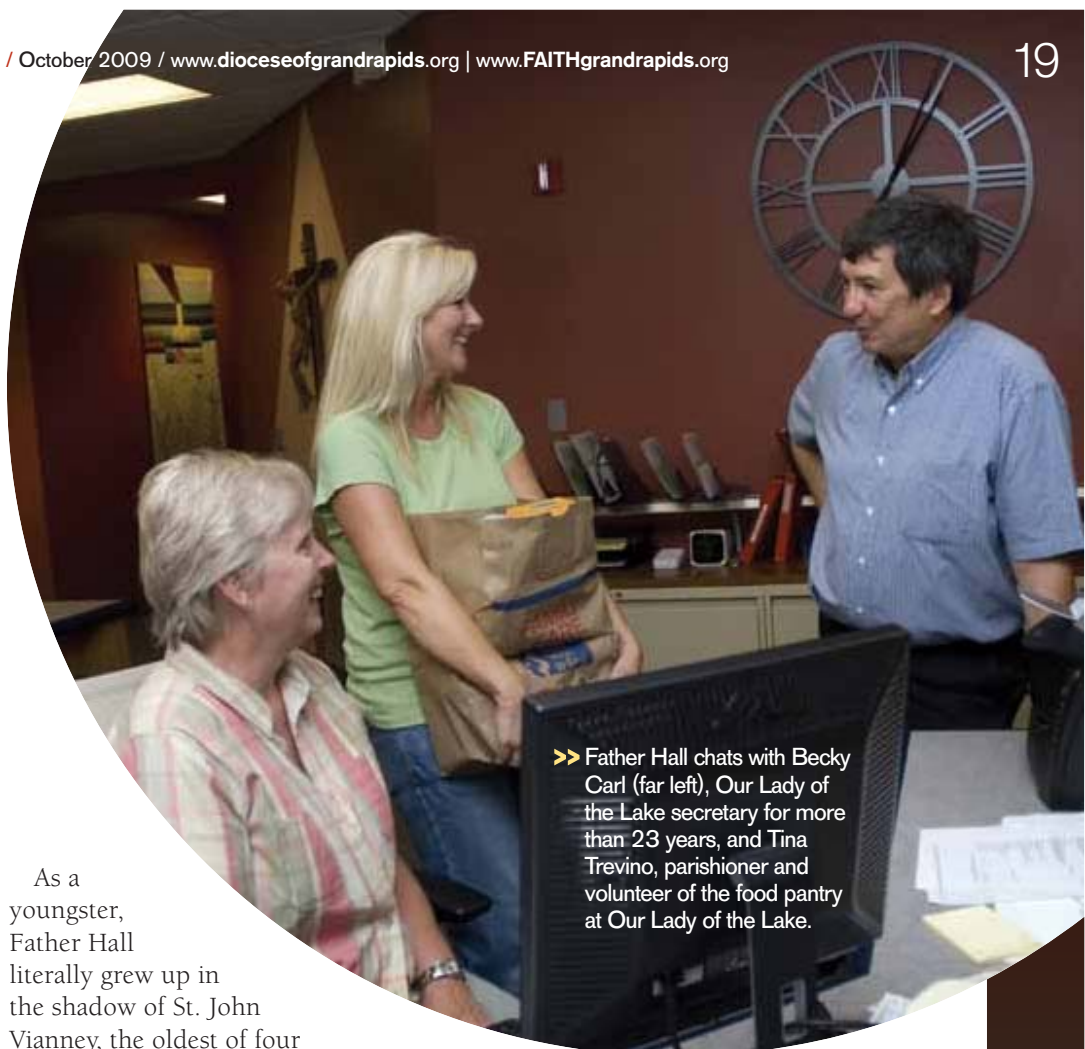
Sts. Peter & Paul in Ionia, St. Patrick in Portland, and in Remus. During the late 80s, he directed pastoral formation at Christopher House on the campus of Aquinas College.

As a youngster, Father Hall literally grew up in the shadow of St. John Vianney, the oldest of four children of Charles and the former Hilda DeBrosse; the family lived right across the street from the church.

He attended school there for grades two through eight, back when it wasn't unusual for a Catholic elementary building to be bulging with some 800 students.

"Good student," he acknowledges, the kind who glommed onto science and math classes with a passion reflected in the sort of stuff he asked for at birthdays and Christmas. Think Erector sets, desktop microscopes, gemstones.

But his stumbly-bumbliness surfaced at an early age, he says, when he describes himself as the sort of young altar boy "where the priest was probably afraid I would show up."



» Father Hall chats with Becky Carl (far left), Our Lady of the Lake secretary for more than 23 years, and Tina Trevino, parishioner and volunteer of the food pantry at Our Lady of the Lake.

Think dropping the paten, spilling the water and wine.

Suffice to say that the young Charlie Hall never excelled much at formal sports, either.

"The stereotypical geek, you might say," he relates good-naturedly. "I tried baseball, but I always played right field." He pauses. "Unless it was a left-handed hitter, in which case I played left."

But that's not to say he didn't grow up with a love of the outdoors. In fact, while walking to early elementary classes, he eschewed a beeline in favor of impromptu "shortcuts" that would double the time it took to get to school.

"I was notoriously late at both ends," he remembers, prompting other parents to instruct their kids not to hoof it in either direction with Charlie Hall, because he was always distracted by something along the way.

"My entertainment," he recalls of woods and water and fields, "was the outdoors."

>> Father Hall, who enjoys a stroll around the Holland lakeshore area, has had a love for nature since his childhood days as a Boy Scout.



>> Father Hall proudly displays a welcome sign he received from parish children upon his arrival at Our Lady of the Lake.

Fortunately, he found the perfect release for that passion in the Boy Scouts, where he thrilled to camping, jamborees, and honing skills that he would retain for a lifetime.

“The Boy Scouts were in its zenith then,” he says of the 60s and 70s, “and I was lucky enough to be able to catch that.”

The lessons imparted by the Scouts remained indelible. Years after trading in his neckerchief for a Roman collar, Father Charlie found himself on a sabbatical that allowed him to hike several hundred miles of the North Country Trail which stretches across seven states and is the longest hiking path in the U.S.

A crisis of faith

Even today, Father Charlie remains active, if evidenced only by his bicycling, which got a boost three decades ago, when parishioners at St. James surprised him with a blue Schwinn 10-speed to replace a dinosaur he'd been riding.

The bike's showing its age a bit, but performed ably enough for Father Charlie to pedal all the way from Remus to Holland this past summer, averaging about 25 miles per day over the 100-mile distance.

While Father Charlie's secular interests were shaped by a love of nature, his walk of faith was affected early on by a more sobering element: His father died of a heart attack at age 49, the summer after Charlie had finished sixth grade, leaving behind a wife and four youngsters, none yet teen-agers.

It made him realize at a tender age “the reality of mortality” and how “the clock was ticking.”

It also elicited in him a “crisis of faith” where he questioned what he'd been taught in catechism.

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Father Charlie chose, in the end, to believe,

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and has never looked back on his decision to follow his vocation. “There was nothing bigger I could do with my life than to help people take their faith seriously.”

Part of his journey has been to reconcile his two loves of science and religion.

“I guess I always wanted to deal with the big realities,” he said. “And faith and science have always dealt with the big issues – science with the ‘how,’ and faith with the ‘why.’ It pains me to see some people make one an enemy or opponent of the other. I’m simply in awe of God, who’s behind both.”

As a priest, Father Charlie likens himself to a “general practitioner” who doesn’t boast a specialty, but does his best to shepherd in myriad ways.

“I’m very secure in myself,” he says. “And I’m not threatened by what I’m not good at. I believe in what I’m about. And nothing is as powerful as our faith in giving us meaning and purpose in our lives.”

Of his duties as a pastor, he said, “I don’t think there’s anything at which I would be the best, but there’s nothing I’m involved with it at which I’m not pretty good.”

By more than one account, his parishioners seem to agree.

“He’s a very likable guy who delivers good homilies and is a good listener,” says Bob Hoffman, 78, a parishioner at OLL for 10 years.

If anything, Father Charlie will need to both delegate responsibilities and perhaps learn to step aside more than he’s used to, since, in Hoffman’s estimation, “We’ve got a bunch of hard-chargers here,” he said with a chuckle.

“We have just been so very pleased with Father Charlie and very impressed with his holiness and his humility,” says Ruth Winkler, speaking on behalf of herself and husband Rich, both in their 60s and parishioners for 25 years.

“He just seems to be such a genuine person. We’re very blessed to have him in our parish,” Hoffman said. “He’s going to do well here, because people like him.” ☺

