

WITNESS

ST. JOHN VIANNEY

The Patron Saint of Catholic Diocesan Priests

St. John Mary Vianney or as he was affectionately known – the Curé of Ars, was born in 1786, one of 6 children, 3 sons and 3 daughters of Matthew Vianney and Mary Beluse. The family lived in Dardilly, a small village 5 miles north west of Lyons. The Vianneys were renowned for their outstanding hospitality and generosity to beggars and visitors who passed through their home.

Early Years

John grew up in what was known as the “Old France” before life was shattered by the violent and godless attack of the French Revolution. It was a France imbued with a spirit of faith and charity. Indeed, France was referred to as the First Daughter of the Church. John Vianney was a prayerful child from an early age and his childish well-spring of faith was soon to become a great river of love. His regard for his mother, whom he described as one of the main spiritual influences in his life, led him to write of her:

“After God, I owe it to my mother. She was so wise! Virtue passes easily from the hearts of mothers into the hearts of their children...”

His mother gave him a little wooden statue of the Blessed Virgin, which he treasured and which never left his side. Almost 70 years later, he said of his heavenly Mother:

“The Blessed Virgin is my oldest love: I loved Her even before I knew Her....”

St. John Vianney was honoured by the Church for three things; the intensity of his pastoral zeal; his constancy in prayer; and his relentless penance.

His early life was lived out in the midst of the terrors and persecutions of the Revolution. Churches were boarded up, statues and crucifixes were smashed and the priests were hunted down. In this maelstrom of anti-religious hatred,

“The voice of a small boy could be heard preaching to other children, reciting the Rosary with them and holding processions which were forbidden by law”.

The Vianneys often hid fugitive priests and such was the Christian witness given to the young John. At this time, priests were often disguised as artisans, while secretly carrying out their priestly ministry. One such priest, Fr. Groboz,

in the guise of a master cook visited the Vianney home and so John made his first confession at the age of 11 years. He subsequently made his First Communion at 13 years in 1799. Years later, John recalled that day:

“When we receive Communion, we sense something extraordinary.... a great joy....a consolation....What joy for a Christian to get up from the sacred banquet and go forth with all of heaven in his heart!”

By 1802, a Concordat was agreed between Pope Pius VII and Napoleon Bonaparte and the churches of France re-opened. At this time, the thought of becoming a priest was very much to the fore in John Vianney’s mind and heart. But the need to learn Latin terrified him. He was a farm boy with only a rudimentary education. He wasn’t stupid, he had keen powers of observation and sound common sense, but his memory was like a sieve. He just couldn’t get to grips with the conjugations and declensions of Latin. Help came in the person of Fr. Charles Balley, who was also to become a major spiritual influence in his life. Fr. Balley was recruiting vocations for the priesthood and he took John under his wing, though somewhat reluctantly in the beginning.

A touching story is told about Matthias Loras, who was the brightest of Fr. Balley’s students. He was so frustrated with John’s slowness in Latin, that one day he slapped him across the face. In response, John knelt down and asked Matthias for forgiveness. The young man was so taken aback that he threw his arms around John’s neck and the two of them became friends for life. Matthias became a missionary and later a Bishop in Iowa in America, where he was renowned for his holiness.

Training for the Priesthood

In 1812 John was accepted into the seminary at Verrières; he was 26 years old, the oldest student in the class, where even the professor was younger than he. There he remained in the bottom 25% of the class. He went on to the Major seminary at Saint Irénée in Lyons, but here his grades were “D” which was almost zero and he was dismissed from any further classes. He resigned himself to this decision with his usual humility. However, his ardent mentor, Fr. Balley came to the rescue, and took up his tuition, so convinced was he that John Vianney would be a priest. Aware of the candidate’s lack of academic prowess, the administrator of the Archdiocese of Lyons, Fr. Courbon, asked:

“Is Abbé Vianney a devout man? Does he have devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary? Can he recite his Rosary?”

“Yes he is a model of piety”! was the response.

“A model of piety! Well then I accept him. The grace of God will do the rest!”

And so Fr. Balley won the day and the French Church gained a saint!

John Vianney was eventually ordained at Grenoble on August 13th 1815. Interestingly, he was ordained with permission to say Mass, but not to hear confessions (though this was later lifted). Yet this good priest spent the biggest part of his ministry in the confessional box! Concerning the priesthood he is quoted:

“The priest will truly understand himself only when he gets to heaven.... if we understood what the priesthood means we would die, not from fright, but from love!.....”

According to the memoirs of a priest from Montpellier- he wrote:

“On Oct. 3rd. 1838, Abbé Vianney made a very important revelation to me. I asked how he had succeeded in overcoming temptations against chastity. He finally avowed that it was the result of a vow. He had made the vow 23 years earlier in 1816 when he was a curate at Ecully. It consisted in the daily recitation of the *Regina Coeli* (Rejoice O Queen of Heaven) and in reciting six times daily the prayer ‘Blessed be forever the most holy and immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Amen’”.

God’s providence was evident for John’s first placement was as curate to his old tutor Fr. Balley at Ecully. In this way, he began his ministry as the protégé of this holy priest, from whom he learned so much and to whom he was eternally grateful. John described him as “a beautiful soul”. The two of them fasted and prayed so much that the parishioners complained to the Archbishop’s office that they were too hard on themselves. The reply from Fr. Courbon was:

“People of Ecully, you are indeed fortunate to have priests doing so much penance for you”.

This demonstrated just how meaningful then was the doctrine of the Mystical Body in that the penances made by pastors were seen to bring blessings for their parishioners. Fr. Balley died in Dec. 1817 and was given the last rites by his loyal pupil and friend.

On to Ars

Early in 1818, Fr. Vianney was summoned to the Archbishop’s house and told he was being sent to Ars, with the words:

“There isn’t much love of God in that parish. You will put some love of God into it.”

Apparently, Ars had known better days in terms of religious fervour, but the ravages of the French Revolution had dampened spiritual zeal. The people weren’t anti-religious so much as indifferent as to whether they had a priest or not. It would seem that drinking in the taverns, dancing and partying were the activities of the day in Ars (things never change!) among the population of 200. On his way to Ars, Fr. Vianney met a little boy called Anthony Givre, who gave him directions. The good priest said,

“My little friend, you have shown me the road to Ars; *I will show you the road to Heaven*”.

What did this humble Curé look like? He was 32 years old; very thin with a furrowed face. He was 5ft. 2 ins. in height, smaller than the average Frenchman, with a mass of curly auburn hair. His most striking feature was his bright blue eyes, gentle and penetrating, yet vivacious.

The Curé of Ars was a giant of prayer and his parishioners had no idea of the great impact he would make on their lives. He literally “lost himself in God” and would spend the greater part of the day and night prostrate before the tabernacle. When he couldn’t be found everyone knew where he was. His prayer was humble, trusting, faithful and constant. He incessantly prayed for the conversion of his parish. This he did by means of prayer and fasting after the words of the Gospel (Mt.17:21). Christ’s battle against Satan occurred in the context of prayer and fasting.

He would give several hours each day to visiting his parishioners, especially at mealtimes when he knew the whole family would be together. Fr. Vianney also set great store by his sermons, but as we said before, he had a terrible memory and could not have repeated them without a text. Often he would copy pages from his most trusted authors. It was stated that the value of his sermons lay more in the manner in which he preached rather than in their doctrinal content, so intense was his conviction. It has been said that “the best preacher is the one who loves God most” and again “it is not beautiful and elegant words that convert but examples of virtue and of a powerful love of God”.

Within five years he had transformed the parish of Ars. He was to write,

“I am in a little parish that is filled with religious spirit that serves the good God with all its heart.”

He set about organizing pilgrimages to other parts of France and also set up a free school for girls and for orphans in Ars, which he called “La Providence”. Here he taught Catechism daily. The parish church in Ars was in need of repair and with the help of a generous benefactor he was provided with beautiful vestments and vessels. He furthermore resumed the annual Corpus Christi procession and people came from all over to participate with great reverence.

The Curé of Ars was also well known for his encounters with the Devil, whom he referred to as “grappin” and whom he generally ignored. These experiences are well documented from reliable witnesses. These diabolical battles lasted for 35 years, but ceased the year before he died. He was sorely tried by these encounters. Fr. Vianney used to say when these occurred – “now we will catch a big fish tomorrow” and usually a great conversion would be made within a few days. He spent many, many hours in the confessional and people came to confess from all over France, even his own Bishop to whom he said,

“your excellency – love your priests very much”.

Many miracles were reported through his prayer and sacrifices, though he never attributed them to himself, but stated that it was through the intercession of his beloved St. Philomena, to whom he had great devotion. One such miracle occurred when La Providence ran out of flour with only enough for 3 small loaves of bread. However, 10 large loaves each weighing 22lbs were produced. There also occurred a miraculous multiplication of wheat when the wheat crop had failed that year. God seemed to grant him whatever he needed such was his trust in God’s bounty.

Fr. Vianney had a deep desire to follow the spirituality of a hermit and longed to go off to a monastery where he could be alone in contemplation. But each time he tried to leave Ars, his parishioners would not let him go. So he gave up trying and resolved to stay. His great love of the Eucharist led him to encourage frequent communion – not common in those days among the laity. He began to establish parish missions and of course needed to find donations to assist the missionaries in their travels.

A colleague priest said to him one day,

“Monsieur le Curé, how happy you look today”. The reply came,

“ I should think so – I have been given a very large amount for my missions and this capital has been deposited in the most solid bank in the world. I lent it to the three richest persons anywhere in the world”.

“And who are these three persons?”

“The Persons of the Blessed Trinity!” was the reply.

At one point the Bishop wished to make Fr. Vianney a canon and visited him unannounced, bringing the ‘mozzetta’ which was a cloak depicting the office of canon. Fr. Vianney protested but to no avail. After the Bishop left, a bright idea occurred to him so forthwith he sold it for 50 francs to increase the funds for his missions. He furthermore wondered if the Bishop would give him another one and he might sell it too. He established missions in over 100 parishes before his death. By 1853 over 100,000 pilgrims came to Ars every year.

Approaching Death

Although his health began to fail, he continued an arduous regime of hearing daily confessions, working and planning and praying ever more intensely. In one of the warmest summers in 1859 he finally took to bed and death began to draw closer. He sent for Fr. Monnin, his confessor, who recited the prayers for the dying. As he came to the words,

“May God’s holy angels come to meet him and bring him into the heavenly Jerusalem”... the Curé of Ars, John Mary Vianney passed from this life at 2 o’clock in the morning on 4th August 1859. He was 73 years old. Just at that moment, a thunderstorm broke over Ars and lightning filled the great night sky.

Seventeen miracles were recorded to support Fr. Vianney’s beatification and a further two with a view to his canonization which was carried out in 1925 by Pope Pius XI.

It was said in reference to his spirituality that,

“all who are called to exercise apostolic activity within the Church should learn from his example of the need to root action in contemplation. The underlying foundation of his never-ending apostolic activity was his interior union with God alone, in the silence of his soul”.

St. John Vianney, Curé of Ars was to do honour to his priesthood:

“Rarely has it been more truly said of a priest – *Sacerdos alter Christus.*”

Taken from: “Saint John Vianney: The Village Priest who fought God’s battles.”
By Leon Cristiani. 1994.