

Out of the Ash Heap...

When God created the angels, He did not place them in *the* Heaven immediately. That is to say that they did not immediately see God “face-to-face,” as St Paul puts it. They had a trial period in which they were given clear knowledge of God and then they had to choose whether or not they would be united with Him; they had to choose for or against God. Of course, some rebelled and they became the demons. The “battle-cry,” or more precisely the death-rattle, of Lucifer – the leader of the rebellious angels – was: I will not serve. The battle-cry of Michael, who fought against Lucifer, was: who is like unto God. It was a choice between pride (leading to death & misery) and humility (leading to life in abundance, ecstatic joy, and fulfillment).

This same scene is played out in human history over and over again, and will continue to play out until the end of time. Man, also, is not placed directly in Heaven. He too is given a trial period in which he is given (or offered) knowledge of God, without seeing Him directly or immediately, and then – like the angels – must choose whether or not he will accept, follow, and bind himself to the Lord. Man’s trial period is this life and this world. And just as with the angels, some choose pride / no / my own kingdom, and some choose yes / humility / the Kingdom of God. Just like with the angels, each individual person must make this choice.

One particularly significant instance of this choice was during the French Revolution, which occurred, roughly, between the years of 1789 and 1799. There is much that could be said about the French Revolution but for the purpose here, suffice it to say that it was very anti-Church, anti-Catholic, and anti-clerical. Priests, for example, were exiled and executed and Mass could only be offered in secret, under the threat of death for both priest and lay faithful. Faithful families would offer their homes as a place for Mass, with curtains drawn and lights dim.

During times of tumult, oppression, persecution, personal trials and difficulties, or just plain suffering, there is a great tendency to blame God, to accuse God, to cry out: where is God? Let us see where God is at such times.

On May 8, 1786, in Dardilly, France, Matthew and Marie Vianney had the 4th of their 6 children, a boy whom they named John. Dardilly was a small town in the southern 1/3 of France. Matthew Vianney was a farmer. The Vianneys, then, were not part of French high society, they were not “somebodies” in the eyes of the world, in fact they were much the opposite – they lived simple lives in a simple part of the country. They were nobodies, in the eyes of the world, from a nobody place. I seem to recall someone else that fit that description – I believe it was someone from a town called Nazareth.

Being born only 3 years before the start of the French Revolution means that John Vianney, today known as St John Vianney, grew up during the French Revolution. His family was one of the families that would host the clandestine Masses.

John was mild-mannered and very devout from his youth and he knew he had a vocation to the priesthood even as a boy. However, he faced many struggles on the path to ordination, too many to enumerate here. The difficulties he encountered (for example being drafted into Napoleon’s army and then getting lost and ending up missing for almost a year) led to him entering seminary at an older age, at a time when it was all younger guys or teenagers we might say. This led to him being often ridiculed by the other seminarians. This might sound minor but it is a real cross to bear, especially when borne day in and day out. Without his great humility and his great desire to serve the Lord come what may, it could have easily led him to quit. He bore it all with equanimity and without resentment.

We might pause here and consider these difficulties. What would be your expectation for someone who is so committed to the Lord? Would it be that the Lord would make a bed of roses for him, free of any significant external difficulties? Isn’t that what love means? St John Vianney is not the exception to the rule; all of the saints have encountered great tribulation, trial, and difficulty. Don’t these difficulties prove that Scripture is wrong and that God is not, after all, love? This is a great trap that people all too often fall into. Someone might start to enter into conversion and they encounter all kinds of difficulties, both internal and external, and they might start to doubt or question whether they are on the right path, or if God really is love, or maybe even if there really is a God. This trap is meant to capitalize on a wrong understanding of love, one that focuses on what I get rather than me loving the Beloved. When someone truly loves another, they want to pour themselves out for the beloved, they want to go to great lengths, to any length, for the beloved; doing so enlivens them.

Love, in this life, is more of a verb than it is a noun. The same is true for the saint. Although they truly suffer, at the same time they have a desire to bear all for the sake of the beloved, and the Lord affords them, indeed affords each of us, the opportunity to do just that. And in giving us these opportunities, He is giving us the opportunity to become like Him, which is the greatest thing we can have.

We might consider a few analogies to help let this point really sink in. Consider an athlete who is dead serious about his sport – say a football player; suppose it's an NFL player; he wants to be the best, he wants to be at the top of his game; he wants to excel for the sake of excellence. Given that, does he want to go play pee-wee football with 5th & 6th graders? If he did, he does not love his sport or excellence. No, he wants the most difficult challenge he can face. Likewise for the saint. The saint does not want some little pin-prick and then say: see Jesus, I wuv you. No, he wants to do all he can for the Beloved. Consider another simple analogy. Suppose a husband comes home some evening and plops down in his recliner. He then says to his wife – I love ya, honey. And she says – that's nice dear, would you take out the trash, to which he replies: I *really* love ya, honey, as he turns on the television and remains firmly rooted in his easy chair. What do you believe, the actions or the words? Love is not just words, it is not easy street, the lover wants to pour himself out for the beloved, just as our Lord did for us. Is the fault with our Lord if He gives us chances to do exactly that?

This is an important question today, one that people often melt before, so let us consider it a little further. Why does God allow trials & hardships? Consider a second reason – in addition to the lover enduring all for the sake of the Beloved. Suppose someone made a claim of having made some sort of indestructible material. Would you just believe it? Would you not doubt it? Would you not want proof of such a claim? Suppose, then, that this material was subjected to the most powerful physical forces known to man – say even nuclear bombs – and it remained unscathed, not even a scratch. You would probably start to be convinced – *or*, you might say that it strengthened your *faith* in the claim. Is this not what our Lord does with saints? Throw what you will at them and they will not yield or even bend. God reveals Himself, His strength and His love, in the great trials and tribulations of the saints. He uses the strong faith of saints to help strengthen the weaker faith of others. He will do the same with each of us, if only we respond with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Let us return now, to the great Vianney. St John Vianney is the patron of parish priests. As far as anyone seems to know, he is the only *parish* priest to ever be canonized; there are many other priests and bishops who have been canonized, of course, but Vianney the only parish priest.

The French Revolution had devastating effects on faith in France. A spirit of pride and rebellion – I will not serve, we will live by our own power and authority, we will make our own reality, our own kingdom (the great lie that entraps so many) – still ran rampant even after the revolution and overt oppression of the Church had subsided. **And where was God during all of this?** He was already preparing a remedy even before it began, a remedy unnoticed and unseen, a small bud, born on May 8, 1786. Do your worst worldly powers, our Lord seems to say, let us hear your roar, let us see if you really can overcome Me. Out of the ash heap you make, I will overcome you with the smallest, meekest instrument I can find. This He did in the person of St John Vianney. This He wishes to do today, if only He can find willing instruments.

There is much more that I would like to say about the great St John Vianney. I would especially like to turn to his exercise of parish priesthood. Unfortunately, there is not enough room for that this week so hopefully, having now laid some groundwork, we can return to the great Vianney next week. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.



St John Vianny, 1786-1859