

St John Vianney

Last week's bulletin article started on the life of St John Vianney. To reiterate just a bit, St John Vianney was a French priest, born in 1786, and who thus grew up during the French Revolution. The French Revolution was very anti-Church, anti-clerical, and had devastating effects on faith in France. In response to the ash heap created by this debacle our Lord raised up the greatest of all parish priests – St John Vianney, an unnoticed, insignificant nobody from a nobody town. Vianney struggled through seminary mainly because he struggled with Latin and all classes were taught in Latin. One of his former classmates tried to help him with Latin and he became so exasperated at one point that he “boxed the ears” of poor Vianney! The poor seminarian immediately regretted it, fell to his knees, and begged the saint for forgiveness. That seminarian, incidentally, would later be sent overseas to be the bishop of Dubuque, IA.

Vianney's academic struggles in seminary added to his (presumed) insignificance. After ordination, he was assigned as an associate with his old mentor, Fr Balley. After a short time as an associate, the bishop sent Fr Vianney to be the pastor of a small town called Ars, where he would spend the next 40 years, the rest of his earthly life, seeking to bring God to man and man to God with every ounce of his strength. Today Vianney is often simply called: The Curé of Ars, curé (pronounced cure-A, long A) being French for pastor or priest.

When the bishop sent Vianney to Ars he said to him: there is not much faith in Ars, you will have to bring it there. We might pause on that little mandate. How many priests today long to hear such words: get in there and really work for the Lord; the faith is primary; spare nothing for the salvation of souls. Is this prevalent? Is it not more likely to hear, in some form or another: be nice, don't rock any boats, go along to get along, be pleasing to the worldly, I don't want to hear any complaints from people? Does this not occur because this is what is all too often demanded? The Church is just a business after all, a mere human organization – so goes the erroneous mentality – and the role of the priest is to please customers, at least any who might make noise and be supported by popular media and popular mentalities. Do we now demand to crucify our Lord again?

Coming back, now, to Fr Vianney's assignment as pastor of Ars, what do you think happened when he got there? Everyone recognized his great sanctity and loved him and immediately began to conform themselves to the Lord? Not anywhere close. Vianney preached and taught the fullness of what God has revealed, including moral truths, the need for Mass and Confession, lukewarmness, and so on. And many people ground their teeth at him...at first. As a side note, a number of the holy Curé's homilies are available in a book called: The Sermons of St John Vianney; if someone has fallen asleep, the good Vianney will wake them up.

Being the man of God that he was, Vianney was well aware that human effort alone would not win the day. Unless the Lord builds the house, the Psalm says, in vain does the builder build. One of the things that Vianney was well known for was the severe penances he did. He offered these to our Lord for the conversion of his parish. His fasting, for example, was pronounced. His penances were combined with long hours before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, pleading with Him for the conversion of his parish. He put up with the obstinacy and ill-will, did all of these penances, and prayed intensely for one reason only: out of love for our Lord, a great desire to serve Him and please Him, like a devoted husband to his wife. Love of God means, for one thing, that the person wants what God wants. Thus Vianney's zeal, expressed especially in his great personal sacrifice, is showing us our Lord's love for us, our Lord's desire for the salvation of souls.

The prayers and sacrifices of the good Vianney did not go unnoticed...by either friend or foe. Vianney began to notice strange sounds at night. At first he thought it was mice. But then he thought maybe it was somebody up to no good. So he asked the blacksmith, a big strong young fella, to come over one night to sort of stand guard and see if they couldn't catch whoever it was. Ah yes, Curé, the man replied, and I will bring my shotgun too. That night the entire house shook, there was some sort of hammering on the walls and doors, and they could hear something like hoof beats outside. The blacksmith promptly informed his pastor that he would not be back! When Fr Vianney would later recount this story, he chuckled a little and said that he thinks the good blacksmith plumb forgot that he even had his shotgun with him! These were overt attacks of Satan and the other demons. These were so common that Vianney even had a sort of nickname for the devil – he called him the grappin, which is something like pitchfork in French. One night he heard a hissing voice say: I will get you Vianney, to which the holy priest responded: I am not too much afraid of you, grappin. With these attacks, the

devil himself was testifying to the power of this meek and humble priest, the threat that he was to the kingdom of hell. We should take note of these struggles. If you wish to follow the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation.

Our Lord was now also showing great favor to Ars, and not just to Ars but too much of France. Numerous miracles occurred through the intercession of St John Vianney – most importantly conversions but also physical healings. St John Vianney had a great fondness for St Philomena and he had an altar to St Philomena placed in the parish church. When someone came with a physical ailment and was properly disposed, he would tell them to take it to St Philomena. There are still numerous crutches, braces, canes, and so on, in the church of Ars, left there by people who were suddenly and miraculously healed.

The thing that St John Vianney is most well-known for is his long hours in the confessional. Our Lord had granted him the rare capacity of “reading souls,” meaning that Vianney would often know people’s sins even without them telling him. If they forgot something or left something out, Vianney would know and would remind them of it. There was one man who was very obstinate about going to confession but his wife just kept after him so finally, with a somewhat sour attitude, he went. He went into the confessional and Vianney asked him how long it had been since his last confession. The guy said something like – I don’t know, 30 years. Vianney said: add a little. The guy said, 35 (or whatever it was), and Vianney said – a little more. The guy said 40 and Vianney said: 44. The man had a pencil and he did a little arithmetic on the wall (he knew when he’d been to confession last) and he realized that Vianney was exactly right. It literally scared the hell out of him. The man made a good confession and went on to live an exemplary life, dying a peaceful and edifying death.

The people of Ars really began to enter into conversion, even the hardest of cases. Word about the holy priest in Ars began to spread and people from all over France, perhaps throughout Europe, began to flock to Ars. There were so many people coming to this little village in southern France that new rail and stage coach lines had to be put in to accommodate the crowds. People would wait for days to get to Confession to the holy Curé. He, in turn, would spend 16 to 18 hours a day in the confessional. The people of the parish would kick in and try to help organize lines for confession and provide for the material needs of the pilgrims – all of whom, rich and poor alike, came to be finally relieved of their burden, their burden of sin. All who came were edified. By the end of his life, it is estimated that 60 to 80 thousand people a year were coming to Ars. Travelers who came to Ars were struck by the great charity, peacefulness, and helpfulness of the people of Ars. Had they come 30 or 40 years earlier, this is not what they would have seen. Conversion *is* possible and it does have effects even in this life and this world as well.

What do you think? Is this a good way to live – the way Ars became after really becoming converted to God? Or, is making self-interest first and foremost, with the contentiousness that always accompanies it, better? Can Catholics here and now become a sign of contradiction to the world, like the people of Ars after the French Revolution, like our Lord Himself, and like our Lord calls each and every Catholic to be?

Let us take **an overview of St John Vianney and Ars**. Faith was decimated by the French Revolution. Faith is decimated *throughout* our country today. People of Ars were interested only in their worldly affairs – business, pleasure, getting my immediate desires fulfilled. The same is true almost world-wide today. Where was God in the French Revolution? He was preparing a way back to Him and back to sanity. Where is He today? God does not change. He is doing the same thing now, today. But His plan is dependent on people responding. What is the basic response? Conversion. How did this conversion come about in Ars? Prayer and personal sacrifice, combined with unmitigated teaching. And this led to what? What is the first and most fundamental response? It is what St John Baptist preached to “prepare the way of the Lord,” it is the first thing our Lord preached: Repentance. Vianney was most well-known for confession. There is no other way. Who needs to enter into real repentance and conversion? It is not my neighbor, it is me; if I look around and say: yeah that guy over there, then we will just flounder along as self-seeking world lings. How do I enter into conversion? This is something we will talk much about. Very briefly, though: study the faith, personal prayer really raising your mind to God, paying visits to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass. The Lord, Himself, then will begin to enter into your thoughts and lead you greater and greater conversion. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.