



Saint John Vianney: Patron of Priests

Icon: Located in the Shrine Church – Sacristy
Icon written by Nazareth Studio, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

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On the evening of February 19, 1818, after having covered on foot the thirty kilometers separating Ecully from the village of Ars (near Lyons), Jean-Marie Vianney, a young priest, asked a young shepherd the way to his new parish. The latter set the stranger on the right path, and heard this word of thanks: "My little friend, you have shown me the way to Ars; I will show you the way to Heaven."

"Let us thank God for the saints that have marked the history of France" (John Paul II, September 25, 1996). Isn't it the mission of the saints to show us the way to Heaven? Saint Benedict tells us in the Prologue to his Rule: "Let us gird our flanks with the faith and the practice of good works; under the guidance of the Gospel, let us go forth in the ways of the Lord, so that we may finally merit seeing Him who called us to His kingdom. But if we wish to live in the palace of this kingdom, we must reach it by good works, without which we will not reach it."

Saint Jean-Marie Vianney, one of the flames that lights our way, helps us, by his example, to act according to our Christian vocation.

A little shepherd under the terror

1793. The Terror. In Lyons, in the square called *les Terreaux*, the guillotine was always busy. The churches were closed up. On the streets, only the bases of the calvary scenes remained: Men came to Lyons and struck down the crosses. But among the true faithful, the sanctuary of hearts remained inviolate. Jean-Marie Vianney, born in 1786, spent his early years in this revolutionary climate.

He carefully guarded a little statue of the Blessed Virgin, even taking it to the fields in a pocket in his shirt. He placed it in the trunk of an old tree, covered it with mosses, branches and flowers and then, on his knees in the grass, said his Rosary. The banks of the creek had replaced the unused church where no one prayed any more. Other shepherds kept their flocks in the surrounding area. They were not always good company; but Jean-Marie couldn't stop them from coming to him. And that's how, without thinking about it, he became an apostle. Catechist for his comrades, he retold what he himself had heard in the silence of the night, and taught the prayers that he had learned from his mother. A priestly vocation had just hatched: In the depths of his soul he had heard the *follow me* (Matt. 8: 22) which, on the shores of the sea of Galilee, drew Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Jesus.

At the age of 19, he began his studies as a seminarian. Alas! He found Latin grammar quite dull. The young man had a finely honed repartee; people loved to hear him speak, but studies were

difficult for him; when he had a pen in his hands, he became slow and embarrassed. In the major seminary of Lyons, his efforts seemed fruitless. It was very difficult for him when, at the end of five or six months, the directors, thinking that he could not succeed, asked him to withdraw. Many of his fellow seminarians were very troubled to see him leave the seminary. Deeply troubled himself, he confided in Providence. After a long and hard-working wait, his spiritual director presented him to one of the vicars general, Mr. Courbon, who governed the archdiocese of Lyons.

He asked: "Is Mr. Vianney pious? Is he devoted to the Blessed Virgin? Does he know how to say his Rosary?" - "Yes, he is the model of piety." - "A model of piety! Well then, I call him. The grace of God will do the rest.... The Church does not only need smart priests, but also and above all pious priests." Mr. Courbon was quite inspired. By the grace of God and dedicated work, Jean-Marie Vianney made real progress in his studies. During the canonical examination leading to the priesthood, the examiner questioned him for more than an hour on the most difficult points concerning moral theology. His clear and precise answers were entirely satisfactory. All of his life the holy Curé (curé is the French word for a parish pastor) would attach great importance to the knowledge of sound doctrine. He prepared his sermons with care. In order to sustain his knowledge, he would study on winter evenings.

Obsession with the salvation of souls

A way to the priesthood was now open to Mr. Vianney who received Holy Orders on August 13, 1815. *God sent His Son into the world so that the world might be saved by Him* (cf. *John 3: 17*). The mission of priests is precisely to make this work of salvation present and effective everywhere in the world. That is why the Curé of Ars could say: "Without the priest, the death and Passion of Our Lord would be useless. It is the priest who continues the work of the Redemption on earth."

In the image of the Good Shepherd, he spent his life searching for lost lambs in order to lead them back to the fold. One day he said, "Misfortune to a priest who remains silent when he sees God outraged and souls wandering away!" He was particularly attracted to the conversion of sinners. His weeping over lost souls was heartbreaking: "Even if the Good Lord were not so good, but He is so good!... Save your poor soul!... It is so bad to lose a soul that has cost Our Lord so much! What harm has He done to you that you treat Him this way?" One day he gave a memorable teaching on the last judgment, repeating several times on the subject of the damned: "Cursed by God!... Cursed by God!... What misfortune, what misfortune!" They were no longer words but sobs that brought tears to all those who were present.

As much as he could, he made himself available to offer the pardon of God to repentant souls. He surely was horrified by evil: "By sin we chase the Good Lord from our souls, we scorn the Good Lord, we crucify Him, we defy His justice, we sadden His paternal heart, we steal from Him adoration and homage which are due only to Him.... Sin casts frightening shadows into our mind that block the eyes of the soul; it obscures the faith like thick fog hides the sun from our eyes.... It prevents us from going to Heaven. Oh! Sin is a great evil!" That is why he spent a lot of time administering the Sacrament of Penance, the ordinary means for again finding the state of grace and the friendship of the Lord.

A besieged confessional

It has been said, "The great miracle of the Curé of Ars was his confessional besieged night and day." The saint spent three quarters of his existence in this confined space: From November to March, he spent no less than 11 to 12 hours there every day, and during good weather from 16 to 18 hours. In winter, when his frozen cracked fingers were too numb, he burned as best he could a bit of newspaper to warm them up. As for his feet, in his own words, "From All Saints to Easter, I don't feel them!" His feet were so numb that, when he took his stockings off in the evening, he would sometimes peel off the skin of his heels at the same time. But what did these small sufferings matter to him when, in order to save souls, he was ready for anything.

He was in the habit of saying, "To really have one's sins washed away, one must really make a good confession!" - "Make a good confession." First of all, that means that it is necessary to prepare oneself by a serious examination of conscience. Pope John Paul II reminds us, "Confession must be complete in the sense that it mentions all mortal sins.... Today, many people come to the Sacrament of Penance not entirely acknowledging all their mortal sins and sometimes come into conflict with the priest confessor, who, following his duty, questions them in order to arrive at a complete and necessary description of sins, as if he were taking an unjustified intrusion into the sanctuary of the conscience. I hope and pray for those unenlightened faithful that they understand that the rule according to which we require the precise and exhaustive enumeration of sins, according to the best abilities of one's memory, is not a weight which is arbitrarily imposed upon them, but a means of liberation and of serenity" (*Letter to the Grand Penitentiary, Cardinal William Baum, March 22, 1996*).

"Sin ties man to his shameful bonds," the holy Curé taught. According to the words of Our Lord: *Whoever commiteth sin is the servant of sin* (John 8: 34). Indeed, sin leads to sin; it generates vice and darkens the conscience (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1865*). Sacramental absolution, received with the necessary disposition, leads the soul to true interior freedom and gives it the force necessary to conquer bad habits. "It is beautiful to think that we have a sacrament that cures the wounds of our soul!" exclaimed Saint Jean-Marie Vianney. He also said, "In the Sacrament of Penance, God shows us and shares with us His mercy even unto infinity.... You have seen my candle at night: early in the morning it burned out. Where is it? It no longer exists, it is gone: in the same way, the sins for which one has received absolution no longer exist: they are gone."

The Sacrament of Reconciliation with God brings a true "spiritual resurrection," a restitution of divine friendship. One of its secondary fruits is joy of the soul and peace of mind. There were many penitents in Ars who experienced it. One of them, an old non-believer who hadn't been to confession for more than thirty years, admitted that after acknowledging his faults he felt "an indefinable well-being." The goodness of the saint towards sinners did not have a weak side to it. Before giving absolution, he required sufficient signs of conversion. Two things were absolutely necessary: First of all, contrition, that is, "the sorrow for having sinned, resting on supernatural motives, for sin violates charity towards God, the supreme Being, it caused the sufferings of the Redeemer and causes us the loss of eternal happiness" (John Paul II, *ibid.*) One day, the holy priest answered a poorly prepared penitent this way: "Your repentance is not coming from God, nor from sorrow for your sins, but only from the fear of hell." The firm commitment to sin no

more is also just as necessary. "It is also obvious that the confession of sins must include the serious intention of not committing sin in the future. If this disposition of the soul were lacking, there is in reality no repentance." (John Paul II, *ibid.*). The intention not to sin any more implies the will to put in place the appropriate means and, if necessary, to renounce certain behaviors. In this regard, the Curé of Ars showed a firmness in the face of criticism, as when he required that his penitents abandon dancing and indecent dress.

Confidence in grace

"The intention of not committing sin should be founded on the Divine Grace that the Lord never denies to those who do what is in their power to live right. We expect from the Divine Bounty, because of the promises and merits of Jesus Christ, eternal life and the graces necessary to obtain it." (John Paul II, *ibid.*). The holy curé encouraged his penitents to delve into the sources of grace: "There are two things that help unite oneself with Our Lord and to accomplish one's salvation: prayer and the sacraments." With grace everything is possible and even easy.

Above all, Saint Jean-Marie Vianney wished to lead his faithful to Eucharistic Communion. To receive Communion is to receive Christ Himself and to heighten our union with Him. It supposes a state of grace: "Anyone who desires to receive Christ in Eucharistic Communion must be in the state of grace. Anyone aware of having sinned mortally must not receive Communion without having received absolution in the Sacrament of Penance" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1415). To souls that were well disposed and desirous of making progress, the Curé of Ars, contrary to the custom of his time, recommended frequent Communion: "The food of the soul is the Body and Blood of a God! Oh what beautiful nourishment! The soul can only nourish itself with God! Only God can fill it! Only God can satisfy its hunger! The soul must absolutely have God! Therefore, go to Communion, go to Jesus with love and confidence!" The holy Curé had made the Eucharist the center of his own life. We know the place that the Mass held in every day of his life, with what care he prepared himself to celebrate it. He also encouraged frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and loved to tell the following anecdote: "In this parish there was a man who has been dead for some years. He went to the church in the morning to say his prayers before going into the fields, and he left his pick at the door and forgot himself before God. A neighbor, who worked near the same place and was in the habit of taking notice of him, was surprised by his absence one day. On his way back, he thought about going into the church, thinking that he might find him there. Indeed, he did. He asked him, 'What have you been doing for such a long time?' The man answered, 'I look at the Good Lord, and the Good Lord looks at me.'"

My oldest love

While leading souls to the Eucharist, the holy Curé led souls to the Blessed Virgin, the Mother of mercy and the Refuge of sinners. He passed numerous hours in prayer at the foot of her altar. In his catechetical teachings, preaching, conversations, he spoke of her out of the abundance of his heart: "The Most Blessed Virgin places herself between us and her Son. The greater sinners we are, the more is her tenderness and compassion for us. The child who makes his mother cry the most, is the one most dear to her heart. Doesn't a mother run most quickly to the weakest and the most exposed? In a hospital, doesn't a doctor give most of his attention to the sickest patients?"

One day he confided to Catherine Lassagne, one of his spiritual daughters: "I loved her [the Virgin] even before I knew her; she is my oldest love!" The Most Blessed Virgin is the light of our dark days. On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Despite his fatigue, the Curé of Ars insisted on chanting the High Mass himself. In the afternoon, after Vespers, all the parish went in a procession to the Brothers' school where he blessed a statue of the Immaculate Virgin set up in the garden and for which he had donated the money. That evening, in the village, they illuminated the bell tower, the walls of the church and the façades of houses. This feast was truly one of the most beautiful days of his life. Almost in his seventies, he appeared about twenty years younger. Never was a child happier to see the triumph of his mother: "What good fortune, what good fortune! I always thought that this ray of lustre was lacking in the Catholic truths. It was an omission which could not remain in our religion."

"I will rest in Paradise"

In his love for souls, Saint Jean-Marie Vianney did not forget the poor. He founded a home for abandoned girls, which he called: "Providence." This home took in fifty or sixty girls from twelve to eighteen years of age. Coming from every area, penniless, they spent an indefinite amount of time there and then were placed on farms in the country. During their stay, they learned to know, love and serve God. They formed a family, in which the oldest set the example, advised and taught the youngest. It was not an ordinary institution, but rather an emanation of the holiness of the founder. Resources, life, spirit and guidance came from him.

But these souls were not saved without a lot of suffering. Contradictions, crosses, struggles, ambushes came from everywhere to the holy Curé, both from men and the "Grappin" (nickname which was normally used to designate the devil). His life was a combat against the forces of evil. To sustain himself, the only resources he had were patience, prayer and fasting, which sometimes went beyond the limits of human prudence. He developed the virtue of meekness to the point that it was believed that he had no passions and was incapable of losing his temper. Nevertheless, those who were closest to him and saw him the most frequently remarked soon enough that he had a lively imagination and character. Among the surprising proofs of his patience, the story is told of a man from Ars who went to the presbytery to heap insults on him: the Curé received him, listened to him without saying a word, then accompanied him to the door and gave him a nice send off before taking his leave. The sacrifice was so costly to him that he went up to his room and had to go to bed. His body was covered with a rash on account of the effort he had made to master himself....

The saint owed this heroic patience to his love for Jesus Christ. Our Lord was his life, his heaven, his present and future, and the adorable Eucharist was the only thing that could possibly quench the thirst that consumed him. He often tearfully cried out, "O Jesus, to know You is to love You.... If we knew how much Our Lord loved us, we would die of delight! I do not believe that there are hearts hard enough not to love when they see how much they are loved.... Charity is so beautiful! It flows from the Heart of Jesus, which is all love.... The only good fortune we have on earth is to love God and know that God loves us..."

Coming to the end of his life, of which we have only touched on a few areas, the holy Curé ardently aspired to Heaven. One day he said, "We will see Him! We will see Him!... O, my brothers! Have you ever thought about it? We will see God! We will really see Him! We will see Him as He is... face to face!... we will see Him! We will see Him!!!" Like the worker who has indeed fulfilled his task, he departed to see God and rest in paradise on August 4, 1859.

"The Church does not look on its heritage as the treasure of a bygone past, but as a powerful inspiration in order to proceed on the pilgrimage of the faith, on paths that are always new" (John Paul II, Reims, September 22, 1996). The life of the Curé of Ars is a treasure for the Church. `Saint Jean-Marie Vianney, you who had in your life such great zeal for the salvation of souls and an unlimited love for poor sinners, increase in us the spirit of sacrifice and prepare for us a place in Heaven, so that we might contemplate God with you for eternity.'

That is what we ask in our prayers for you, for those who are dear to you and for all your dearly departed.

Dom Antoine Marie osb.

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