

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Curé of Ars

This weekend we begin the Novena to St. John Vianney. Who? More than a few people might be scratching their heads, not quite sure who this character is, or why we're praying to him. I thought a little background might be helpful.

John Vianney was born in 1786 and grew up as a farm hand in France. He was a very pious child and taught other children prayers and catechism. His great dream, though, was not to labor in the fields like his family, but to labor in God's fields, as a priest. He was evidently a terrible student; it took him many years to complete his studies (and, most notoriously, master the intricacies of Latin). In 1818, he was assigned to a parish in Ars, near Lyons. It wasn't a great assignment, by any means. It was considered one of the worst churches in his diocese. The faithful were, at best, indifferent. Mass attendance was poor.

But young John Vianney took it upon himself to care for all those who needed him. He went out of his way to visit the sick and the poor. He'd spend days in prayer. He slept little, just two or three hours a night, reportedly doing penance for the people of Ars. He had an uncanny ability to read people's hearts and discern spirits, and soon gained a reputation as a gifted and merciful confessor. People began coming from miles around to have him hear their confessions. He would spend twelve or fourteen hours a day in the confessional. It's impossible to count how many lives were converted because of him—how many hearts were turned due to his sympathetic ear and compassionate advice. His popularity was so strong, he never left his village, and he became known simply as “The Curé of Ars.”

By 1855, the town that had struggled with terrible Mass attendance saw 20,000 pilgrims a year visiting from around the world, just to be in the presence of John Vianney and go to him for confession.

He died in 1859, of natural causes. He was named a saint in 1925 and quickly became the patron saint of parish priests. To this day, his body in Lyons is incorrupt.

We pray to him now for vocations, and for more priests to labor in the fields of faith the way that he did. I can't help but think it is significant that the man chosen to be the patron of parish priests isn't a great theologian, or a brilliant preacher, or a man renowned for his piety at the celebrations of the Eucharist. No. He is a man whose most important and most enduring legacy was with the people, as a mediator in the confessional. It was his sympathy, his mercy, his love and his perseverance that drew the faithful to that little church in Ars. It was John Vianney's simplicity and purity, and his genuine love for the people he served that converted hearts, and eventually made him a saint. And it is that ideal of holiness and sacrifice that parish priests now seek to follow. During this novena, we join in our prayers with those around the world who have prayed to St. John Vianney with these words:

Dear Saint John Vianney, your childhood dream was to be a Priest, to win souls for God. You endured years of toil and humiliation to attain the Priesthood. You became a Priest truly after God's own heart, outstanding in humility and poverty, prayer and mortification, totally devoted to the service of God's people.

The Church has exalted you as a model and the patron saint of all Parish Priests, trusting that your example and prayers will help them to live up to the high dignity of their vocation to be faithful servants of God's people, to be perfect imitators of Christ the Savior Who came not to be served but to serve, to give His Life in ransom for many.

Pray that God may give to His Church today many more Priests after His own Heart. Pray for all the Priests under your patronage, that they may be worthy representatives of Christ the Good Shepherd. May they wholeheartedly devote themselves to prayer and penance; be examples of humility and poverty; shining models of holiness; tireless and powerful preachers of the Word of God; zealous dispensers of God's Grace in the Sacraments. May their loving devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist and to Mary His Mother be the Twin Fountains of fruitfulness for their ministry. AMEN.

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