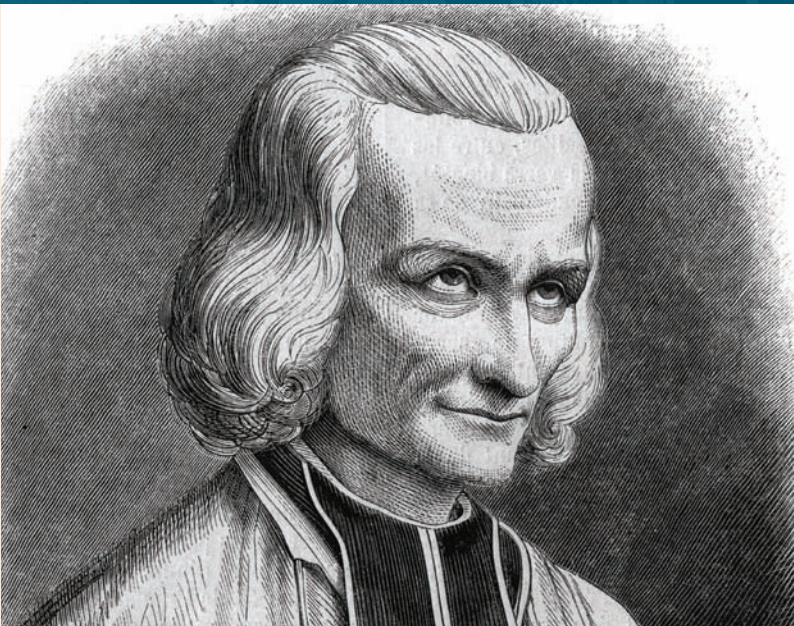

CURÉ D'ARS

Saint John Vianney



by George W. Rutler

CTS Biographies

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The early years

Ars-sur-Formans is a village in southeast France, just 40 kilometers from Lyons. It was difficult to find in 1818, when the priest John Mary Vianney, in his early thirties, arrived with a few possessions, mostly books, in a cart. One item he had, which he kept all his life, was the shaving mirror of his own parish priest, Charles Balley of nearby Ecully, who Vianney believed was a saint. He was good at seeing saints in others, and said with awe that the mirror “had reflected the good priest’s face.” A young local boy named Antoine Givre pointed out the village to Vianney, not that there was much to see in the settlement of about 260 people, four taverns and a broken down church. Vianney thanked Antoine: “You have shown me the road to Ars. I shall show you the road to Heaven.” It was an odd remark, and the new pastor said it matter-of-factly, but the boy always remembered it.

Harsh times

Vianney was not much taller than five feet and thin, his hair longish and his features angular. He wore rough shoes and an ill-fitting cassock made of coarse wool for hard work. There would be much work. The Vicar General had told

him: “There is not much love of God in that parish; you will bring some into it.” It was not large enough to qualify as a parish with a proper pastor. Since the Revolution, two priests in charge had abandoned it, and one had died in the unhealthy climate. For a while the tiny church had been turned into a kind of lodge for a small group who called themselves Freethinkers, although they were not quite sure what that meant. On his first day, he tried to ring the broken bell but it only clanked and no one showed up for Mass.

The dismal scene was the product of a long neglect of the Faith which went far back beyond the chaos of the Revolution. But those recent harsh years which tore the fabric of France with high-sounding hopes had turned into a terror, and had proscribed the Catholic life of the land. By the time of Napoleon’s pragmatic restoration of official Catholicism, religious practice had largely evaporated. The sadness was worsened by the defeat of France’s Grand Army. Families were broken, and the byways were filled with homeless children. The taverns offered quick and fleeting solace, and the traditional festivals turned raucous, for attempts at simple fun had failed. Vianney was no prude, but he knew the occasional public dances for what they were – lame and lewd.

Growing up in the Revolution

He had been born in a farmhouse in Dardilly on 8th May 1786 and lived as a farm boy, but with an intuition of a

different life. One priest has unsuccessfully tried to introduce the ways of the puppet church, independent of the papacy, which had been set up by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. But even the untutored local people had sensed that something was wrong because he did not say thanksgiving prayers after Mass. Hundreds of priests who refused to conform died as galley slaves, some as far away as Guyana. A few faithful priests ministered occasionally in disguise. One of them, Monsieur Groboz heard the eleven year old Jean-Marie's confession "at the foot of our clock." Mass was said from time to time in barns with local farmers keeping guard. That is how he made his first Communion two years later, with fifteen other children.

Dechristianisation

All the while, the people heard the reports of mass executions at the guillotine in Lyons under the cold direction of Joseph Fouché, who had studied with the Oratorians in Nantes and Paris and taken Minor Orders before becoming one of the Revolution's architects of 'dechristianisation,' personally slaughtering 130 priests with an efficiency that amazed even Robespierre.

Originally the guillotine had been promoted by a physician, Guillotin, an opponent of capital punishment, as a humane attempt to improve the clumsier methods. Louis XVI had once formed a scientific commission

made up of him along with Antoine Lavoisier, who had promoted Jennings's practice of vaccinations, and Benjamin Franklin, to disprove the quack theories of Mesmer. Guillotin was imprisoned by the Terror but survived and helped found the Academy of Medicine in Paris. Lavoisier was decapitated by the Republic which declared that the Revolution had "no need of science." Fouché, after a tumultuous time as Minister of Police for Napoleon who disdained him but found him useful, died in Trieste in restless exile in 1820.

Vianney survived childhood in those twisted times but never forgot them. He said that a priest is a man who would die to be one. He would also say from hard experience, "When one wants to destroy religion, one begins by attacking the priests."

Vocation

While working dutifully on the family farm, Vianney was convinced that he was called to be a priest. When he had his own parish he would often tell the people, "When you see a priest you should say: 'There is the one who has made me a child of God...one who has cleansed me from my sins, who gives nourishment to my soul.'" It was not a complete impossibility since Napoleon had ended the Revolution's prohibitions in 1802 with his Concordat legalising the Church under papal obedience. Napoleon

had his own pragmatic reasons, but he knew France needed the Church and so did he.

The local bishop had instructed priests to start classes for pre-seminary training and Father Balley did so in the local parish. Vianney enrolled, but as a teenager he was the oldest and the younger children made sport of him as he sat cramped behind a small desk. Once, when he could come up with the right answer, a boy named Loras punched him. Vianney knelt and apologised, which shamed Loras to tears. “The way to be truly wise, my children, is to accept everything as coming from the hand of God.” That boy Loras eventually would become a missionary bishop across the ocean in Iowa, and so fine a one that when he died he was considered a saint.

Vianney had difficulty learning to read, and tried to help himself by fasting, sometimes for two or three weeks. Later he would call that a folly of his youth. He was not the dullard that some biographers have called him. He was just not used to using his brain in an academic way. He revered books as rare and almost magical tools. Latin was as exotic as it was difficult.

Cardinal Fesch, an uncle of Napoleon and Archbishop of Lyons confirmed Vianney in 1807. It was not uncommon for him to confirm thousands in a single day to make up for the lost years. From that time Vianney began to sign himself as Jean-Marie-Baptiste or Jean-Baptiste-Marie. In a dark moment when he thought he

might give up his priestly ambition, he made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Francis Regis who had done much to teach Catholicism when Protestantism first began to spread. Vianney was inscribed as a candidate for Holy Orders in his twenty-first year.

Soldier

Napoleon showed his peculiar attitude to religion by seizing the Papal States and arresting the Pope in 1809. Vianney's limited studies were not enough to persuade the authorities that he was a serious seminarian and he was enlisted in the army for the Spanish campaign. He was not a pacifist and, with all Frenchmen he honoured the armoured saints Louis IX and Joan of Arc.

The new soldier contracted fever and spent eight weeks in two military hospitals and then was ordered off to Spain, although he had no uniform and no training in manoeuvres. An officer flung a knapsack at him and ordered him to catch up with the rear guard in Renaison. "Never, perhaps, have I said the rosary with such courage". Lost on the road and exhausted, he was led by a woodsman to the hamlet of Les Robins where he was told to hide because he was already considered a deserter.

He spent two years working with the farmers, both terrified that he was a criminal, and managing to charm to the local people. If naïve about the ways of the government, he was also innocent of evil intent. His own

family had no word of his whereabouts. He was certainly not, as his greatest admirers said, a draft-dodger. Soon the number of *réfractaires* outnumbered the active enlistees. When a general amnesty was granted in 1810 to celebrate the Emperor's marriage to his new wife, the Archduchess Marie-Louise, the citizens of Les Robins found black cloth to stitch together a soutane. He referred to those days only once late in life, when he was amused and not a little perplexed that Napoleon III sent him a medal.

Seminarian

A few weeks after he returned home, his mother died. "I can never think of her without weeping." In 1812, the 26 year old was sent to the minor seminary at Verriers. He got high marks in zeal, conduct and character but was listed as very weak in 'general knowledge'. At the Major Seminary in Lyons he felt despair when it came time to take the examinations. A classmate said, "There was nothing extraordinary about Jean-Marie. He was just perfectly simple." The faculty were not impressed by that and dismissed him after six months with the lowest grade they could give.

Conquering depression, he resolved to become a lay brother in some institute but, back home, Monsieur Balley gave him a crash course and presented him for another examination. His mind went blank, but the faculty agreed to recommend him for Minor Orders if he

could find a bishop who would take him. Balley asked the chief examiner, Canon Bouchard, to test him on his familiar turf in Ecully, and in French rather than Latin. The people lit candles in the church during the examination. "Monsieur Balley was a saint. But there is one thing he will have to answer for before God, and that is having me admitted to Holy Orders." The Canon was impressed.

Ordination as priest

In 1813 the Emperor abdicated and Cardinal Fesch fled. In the confusion, the Vicar General summoned him to ordination and said the grace of God would do the rest. On the Feast of the Visitation in 1814 he received Minor Orders in the cathedral of Lyons. One priest watching said, "He is less learned than many of his companions, but he will do far more than they in the sacred ministry." At the next examinations, "our theologian," as one of the examiners wryly called him, did very well. He headed off to priestly ordination in Grenoble along a dirt road one hot August day, with some food and an alb.

On 12th August 1815 Bishop Simon laid hands on his head and anointed him. "How great is the priest! The priest will only be understood in heaven. Were he understood on earth, people would die, not of fear, but of love." The next day, he offered his first Mass unnoticed as two Austrian army chaplains said Mass at nearby altars.

“The priest should have the same joy as the apostles in seeing our Lord whom he holds in his hands.” The trip to Grenoble and home again was the longest he would ever make. “At the sight of a steeple you can say, what’s that in there? The body of our Lord. Why is he there? Because a priest has passed by and said the Holy Mass.”

A Parish changed

Because of his tentative learning, the priest who would spend most of his waking hours hearing confessions was denied faculties as a confessor for several months. His first penitent was his own parish priest, Monsieur Balley, who took him on as his curate since no one else would have him. His sister Marguerite visited Ecully from Dardilly and admitted that he did preach very well. Others said that he had St Francis de Sales' gift for "seeing everyone without looking at anyone."

Confessions were difficult for him, as he had little experience of the temptations and failings he began to confront in the confessional. To steady himself, each day he said the "*Regina Coeli*" and recited six times: "Blessed be for ever the most holy and Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God! Amen."

His parish priest took him on frequent pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Fourvière. Vianney anointed him in 1817 when he was dying from gangrene. "Look, my poor child," said Balley as he handed Vianney his instruments of penance, "hide these things; if they were found after my death people would imagine that I have sufficiently expiated my sins, and so they would leave me

in purgatory until the end of the world.” Vianney knew better, which is why he kept that mirror.

Appointed to Ars

The parishioners of Ecully wanted the young priest as their pastor but the authorities doubted his competence for even so modest a parish, and so did Vianney: “I would not have liked to be the parish priest of Ecully; it was too big a parish.” A new pastor, Monsieur Tripier, thought Vianney was ‘rigid’ and furnished the presbytery in a more comfortable fashion.

When the undesired parish of Ars in the Ain region became available, Vianney was assigned there. So he arrived in 1818, welcomed by no one save the kindly lady of its chateau who wanted a chaplain. He arrived on 9th February in a cold mist, his tricorner hat under his arm, and was the only man in the world who looked on Ars with promise. The small church of weathered greyish-yellow stone was surrounded by a few thatched cottages. Rumour had it that a man named Ruf had tried to make it a Temple of Reason during the Revolution. Vianney said to himself, “How small it all is. Yet this parish will not be able to contain the multitude of those who shall journey here.”

Bold beginnings

Of the fifty or so families in Ars, only a few showed any interest in the church or its God, but they showed up for

the new Curé's installation a week later. He was in his thirty-second year but felt much older, eighteen hundred years older, when the former superior of the minor seminary led him from the small two-storey presbytery into the church and placed the stole on his shoulders. At two o'clock the next morning, one of the locals went into the church out of curiosity and found the new Curé d'Ars on his knees. People began to whisper, "This one is not like the others." His sallow and sunburned face looked prematurely wrinkled, but many who tilled the soil were that way. The next Sunday he seemed to skip into the pulpit and preached in a sharp and tinny voice which the *châtelaine*, Madame des Garets, said always hurt her ears. His opening was not a study in charm: "Christ wept over Jerusalem ... I weep over you. How can I help weeping, my brethren. Hell exists. It is not my invention. God has told us. And you pay no heed ..."

Effects of puritanism

The puritanical spirit of Jansenism had filled the void of religious sentiment in those who tried to make sense of God in those cynical times. Jansenism, as a school of theological thought, had spread in France in the sixteenth century until Pope Clement XI condemned it in 1713. As a general psychological climate, it continued to shape attitudes. Its distinction between an ideal 'Spiritual Church' and a barely tolerated 'Institutional Church' sat

well with the Gallican sense of superiority to Rome. Its liturgical attitudes, which would turn the Mass into an edification of the people more than a worship of God, was congenial to the puritan whose severe spirituality wanted to strip the churches of any embellishments that evoked a mystery beyond human grasp.

When Pope John Paul II visited Ars in 1986, he commented about the dangers of rigorism which did not understand the Divine Mercy. In dim times it was easy to think that Original Sin had hopelessly condemned the human race and that misery is our lot. In the Jansenistic calculation, sinfulness obscured redemption. The spiritual infection was as corrosive as the complacency which, in more comfortable times, obscures the reality of sin altogether.

Vianney had absorbed some of that angularity. He struggled against it because he never lost confidence in the Divine Love who made the world.

Mercy

Like Dr Johnson who could not be a philosopher because cheerfulness kept breaking through, Vianney's happiness with God was more contagious than the infection of scrupulosity. He became more and more like St Alphonsus Liguori in the confessional, giving light penances and doing the rest himself. Penitents were told, "Well, my child, say such and such a prayer and forget

all that.” In 1828 he demurred when his bishop wanted him to become parish priest of Fareins which had a history of Jansenism: “Pagans are more quickly converted than Jansenists.”

Confessions rediscovered

The confessional became the engine for the revival of Ars. Soon Vianney would spend up to sixteen hours a day hearing confessions as pilgrims flocked. He was intent on the redemption of souls, rather than just their reformation.

Inaugurating the Year for Priests in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI said: “Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament. In France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the Revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion. Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence.” The Pope chose to start the Year for Priests on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, which devotion had been anathema to the Jansenists, for Vianney had preached over and over: “The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”

Hidden holiness

Vianney was ‘a real character’ but not in the superficial sense of eccentricity as it is commonly meant. A ‘character’ is an imprint, and Vianney was imprinted with the love of God in a way that made others want to be impressed by it themselves. In later testimony, a youth of those early days, Guillaume Villiers, insisted: “The majority judged him to be full of kindness, cheerfulness, and affability, though we never realised his great holiness.” True to form, Vianney said, “If one of the damned could just say once ‘My God, I love you’ it would no longer be hell for him.” By the end of his life, over 80,000 pilgrims came each year, from as far as America, to be close to him. One year, the figure claimed was 120,000. Vianney did not count numbers because one soul is worth the entire universe: “Only on the Day of Judgment will one know how many souls were saved in Ars.”

Pastoral ways

His own parishioners were his first responsibility. When he arrived in Ars, he wrote all their names on a ribbon and placed it in a gilt metal heart attached to a statue of the Blessed Mother. Many of those inscribed did not return the compliment at first. They deeply resented his criticisms of their barn dances which were virtual debauches, and his cold eye on the absinthe drinkers who were ruining their families and themselves. “We live in

such a poor century. Although it may seem grand, think about its poverty and its opulence.”

The Curé was accused by some of morbid austerity and, inconsistently, of fathering a child by a derelict woman. He kept preaching, sometimes falling asleep in the sacristy over books of the ancient Fathers whom he tried to interpret to the people, having struggled first with them himself. He would sometimes preach for nearly an hour, and defended the assistant priest he was finally given, when a neighbouring priest said he preached too long: “He puts them into an ecstasy but you do not even give them time to sit down.” In his first years he tried to memorise his sermons but his memory was poor. When he lost his train of thought he would sink down in the pulpit like a drowning man. In his last years, when he was almost toothless, and practically incomprehensible, the congregation thought he was the most eloquent, as he kept pointing to the Tabernacle: “He is there! He is there!”

Preaching missions

When the grand Dominican orator Lacordaire heard in Paris of the man in Ars, he visited and preached from the rickety pulpit which was such a contrast to the pulpit of his conferences in the cathedral of Notre Dame. Vianney was bewildered: “How is it that the greatest in science should come to me, the weakest?” If Lacordaire indulged histrionics on occasion, he was not a sentimentalist. So

Vianney was astonished that there were tears in Lacordaire's eyes when he stood in the poor pulpit of Ars.

Because of a priest shortage, Vianney was one of the priests directed to give missions in other obscure parishes in the department of the Ain: Trevoux, Saint-Trivier-sur-Moignans, Limas, and Chaniens. At Trevoux in 1823, the rush of penitents nearly overturned his confessional. Once he nearly fainted from hunger and was thought to be dying. Sometimes he was forced to take a carriage if he seemed to be faltering, but he usually walked from parish to parish.

On entering the church in Limas: "I beheld the chancel full of clergy and the body of the church packed with people of every condition. At first I felt unnerved by the spectacle. However I began to speak of the love of God, and apparently everything went well: everybody wept."

Works of mercy

All of Fareins poured out to greet him in 1837 when he arrived to absolve a woman dying of cancer. Another time, he lay down to hear the confession of sick man, as he was sicker than the man himself. Beggars knew he would give them his own clothes and once he returned to Ars without his shoes.

Baptisms, confessions and communions increased in Ars, even though frequent communion was still a rare custom in the universal Church. This threatened those

accustomed to indifference. More than a few called him a bore and, resenting the way regular Mass attendance was once again becoming the norm, they yawned loudly during his sermons. He would stop and sigh: “When I am with you I do not feel weary.”

Jealousy and persecution

The Revolution of 1830, though comparatively mild in its consequences, stirred some to try to return Ars to its former ways. The younger ones who missed the promiscuous dances flung excrement at the presbytery and vandalised it for some eighteen months. “I thought a time would come when people would rout me out of Ars with sticks, when the bishop would suspend me, and I should end my days in prison. I see, however, that I am not worthy of such grace.”

Of great help were a few women, headed by his housekeeper Catherine Lassagne, who helped him start a small school, La Providence, for children who were orphaned in the social turmoil, and some of whom had been abused. He helped carry the bricks and mortar when it had to be enlarged to house about sixty children. When food ran out, he prayed and an upstairs room suddenly filled with so much grain that the floor almost shattered. The grain was not typical of the region. It was accounted an early miracle of Ars.

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