

St. John Vianney, the Curé of Ars
Catechetical Saints
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In this year of the priest, these articles will be dedicated to catechetical saints who were priests. Since the year has been placed under the patronage of St. John Vianney, we will begin with him.

‘Here the teaching and example of Saint John Mary Vianney can serve as a significant point of reference for us all. The Curé of Ars was very humble, yet as a priest he was conscious of being an immense gift to his people: “A good shepherd, a pastor after God’s heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy”.

He spoke of the priesthood as if incapable of fathoming the grandeur of the gift and task entrusted to a human creature: “O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host...”

Explaining to his parishioners the importance of the sacraments, he would say: “Without the Sacrament of Holy Orders, we would not have the Lord. Who put him there in that tabernacle? The priest. Who welcomed your soul at the beginning of your life? The priest. Who feeds your soul and gives it strength for its journey? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, bathing it one last time in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest, always the priest. And if this soul should happen to die [as a result of sin], who will raise it up, who will restore its calm and peace? Again, the priest... After God, the priest is everything! ... Only in heaven will he fully realize what he is.”

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI PROCLAIMING A YEAR FOR PRIESTS ON THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ‘DIES NATALIS’ OF THE CURÉ OF ARS June 16, 2009

The priest and the revolution

If one wants to understand the Curé of Ars (the pastor of Ars), one must understand the French Revolution. Often it is described as a fight to overthrow the corrupt and decadent reign of the French monarchy, and as far as it goes this was true. However, with that must be coupled the knowledge that the revolutionaries did the best they could to destroy the Catholic Church. Thousands of priests and religious were exiled, or executed. Others were imprisoned on ships, and other spent their days hiding from the so-called revolutionaries to avoid capture and imprisonment.¹ The Vianney family was one of the devout families who hid these fugitives. These things continued after the so-called Reign of Terror officially ended. The thirteen year-old John Mary Vianney received his First

Communion secretly in the house of a neighbor, with hay bales blocking the light from the windows to prevent discovery.

The call

Soon he felt the vocation to the priesthood. His father was not supportive, but as is often the case, his mother was, and soon his father changed his mind. It is often said that John Mary was not very intelligent, but he just did not have the opportunity for much formal education, and had a very difficult time learning Latin, which was the instructional language in the Seminary. He studied with the Abbé Balley, who encouraged him not to give up despite his difficulties.

Meanwhile, other difficulties than Latin threatened to disrupt the call he had received. Napoleon was busy gathering an army and, while exempt from military duty, he was nonetheless conscripted. However, as his unit departed for Napoleon's war, John stopped in a church to pray and, while he was lost in prayer, the unit departed. Space does not allow us to record his adventures, hiding for 14 months from the authorities who thought him a deserter, but finally he was able to return to his studies with the Abbé. He still had to pass the courses in the seminary, and he struggled mightily with these.² However, in the end, through the intercession of Abbé, he was finally ordained in August 13, 1815. In 1818 he was assigned to the parish of Ars.

A catechetical priest

The Curé is famous for his ministry in the confessional. He heard confessions for up to 18 hours a day. 20,000 pilgrims a year came to see him in Ars. St. John Vianney also lived a deeply Eucharistic life. He often said, 'Our Lord is hidden there, waiting for us to come and visit Him, and make our request to Him. See how good He is!'

He was also a priest who took his catechetical ministry very seriously. The Revolution had caused much religious ignorance and indifference; as a result many lived immoral lives and the Curé sought to rectify this.

Shortly after his arrival, he opened an orphanage for girls called La Providence. Every day he catechized them himself.

'There, from eleven to twelve, he was a child again, and spoke as a child, to children - the Gospel way. It was as though from the looks of the children, unsullied by sin, he drew great draughts of Divine Truth, which he might pour back in overflowing measure - a perfect exchange. Strangers felt it and never wearied of it. What need of change, the Curé asked unhappily, in this paradise of innocence?''³

When the orphanage was handed over to someone else, he continued giving catechetical instruction in the church, teaching from a little desk he had installed for that purpose.

‘And yet the Curé of Ars did not speak words: true eloquence consists in speaking things; he spoke things, and in a most wonderful manner. He poured out his whole soul into the souls of the crowds who listened to him, that he might make them believe, love, and hope like himself. This is the aim and the triumph of evangelistic eloquence.’⁴

When the Bishop came to Ars to Confirm the children, he ‘declared after questioning them at length that the children of Ars were the best taught in the countryside, while the priests called to the bedside of sick people who had come from Ars were astonished to hear such humble Christians talk of religion with so much knowledge and understanding.’⁵

In October 2009 we will celebrate the 30th Anniversary of Pope John Paul’s Catechesi Tradendae. The Holy Father taught us that we teach in essence the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, and that Jesus is the source, the content, and the goal of catechesis (CT 5-9).

We have in the Curé of Ars a living witness to this. It has been written of him, ‘The faith of the Curé of Ars was his whole science; his book was our Lord Jesus Christ.’ In addition, ‘before him, and in him he had our Lord and the saints. He read their lives with passionate devotion...’⁶

St John Vianney is an inspiration and a model for catechetical priests everywhere. Pope John XXIII wrote:

‘It is said that St. John M. Vianney lived in the Church in such a way that he worked for it alone, and burned himself up like a piece of straw being consumed on fiery coals. May that flame which comes from the Holy Spirit reach those of Us who have been raised to the priesthood of Jesus Christ and consume us too.’⁷

May all catechists, priests, religious and lay people, share in that same zeal for the Church. St. John Mary Vianney, pray for us.

NOTES

1. For information about other saints who lived at this time, read the lives of Mother Julie Billiart or the *Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne*.
2. One of Vianney’s classmates was Matthias Loras, who became the first bishop of Dubuque, Iowa, USA.
3. Henri Gheon, *The Secret of the Cure of Ars*, 88-89.
4. This quotation has been published under many names, including *The Catechism of the Curé of Ars*, *The Curé of Ars to his People*, and *The Spirit of the Curé of Ars*. It is in this text that many of Vianney’s catecheses are contained.
5. Francis Trochu, *The Curé D’Ars* (a shorter biography), 51
6. Gheon, *Ibid.*, 33
7. *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*, 33-34.