

“YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER”

On June 19, 2009, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, Pope Benedict XVI will proclaim the “Year of the Priest” which will last one full year. As this year marks the 150th anniversary of the entrance into eternity of St. Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney, a.k.a the Cure of Ars, His Holiness will use the occasion to proclaim him the Patron Saint of all Priests. (He had been the patron saint of Parish Priests).

As a means of participation in this event, our newsletter will devote several issues to the Ordained Priesthood of Jesus Christ. Included will be the lives of a few priest saints as well as the Catholic teaching of what the Ordained Priesthood is and the challenges it faces at this particular time in the life of the Church. Since this Year of the Priest will be under the special patronage of St. John Vianney, we will start with his life.

Jean-Marie was born on May 8, 1786 in the small village of Dardilly, near the French city of Lyon. Blessed with devout parents by his fifteenth month, he could make the sign of the cross by himself. More importantly, he witnessed his parents living their Catholic Faith heroically, for this was the period of the French Revolution.

Probably one of the most misrepresented parts of human history, in secular histories the French Revolution is portrayed as a people oppressed

by a fossilized absolute monarchy finally rising to overthrow it and establish a nation based on “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” and the “Declaration of the Rights of Man.” In reality, it

sought to eradicate Christianity from the face of the earth. Young Jean-Marie’s parents would hide faithful priests (those who didn’t take the oath to the revolutionary regime) in their barn (the punishment for which would have been death). He along with people from miles around would secretly assist at Holy Mass offered by one of these fugitive priests. From this early age he learned how awesome is this most holy of mysteries, especially that people would risk their very lives to assist at it.



Cure of Ars

From his devout parents and this experience of Holy Mass came the seeds of his vocation.

No sooner had the ravages of the Revolution ended then Napoleon Bonaparte came to power and Jean-Marie, now a young adult, got drafted into the army, and started to march to Spain with his unit. However, God’s providential hand intervened and he fell seriously ill and had to drop out of the column. Trying to rest he fell asleep and upon awaking discovered that his column was long gone. Realizing that he would be classified a deserter; he hid at a country farm working as an ordinary laborer for two years.

An amnesty enabled him to return home and pursue his call to the priesthood. (Up to this time he had two years of formal education).

Entering the Grand Seminary at Lyon, he experienced great difficulty with the Latin language. At that time Latin not only served as the liturgical language but also the language in which theological studies were conducted. His seminary superiors recommended his dismissal. Because of the severe priest shortage, due to the ravages of the revolution, many seminarians were being “fast tracked” to ordination. When brought before the bishop, M. Courbon, Jean-Marie’s instructors were asked by Bishop Courbon; “*Is the Abbe Vianney pious? Has he a devotion to Our Lady? Does he know how to say his rosary?*” The instructors answered: “*Oh yes! He is a model of piety.*” The bishop then responded. “*A model of piety! Very well, I summon him to come up for ordination. The grace of God will do the rest.*” (Indeed it did!) On August 13, 1815, Jean-Marie Vianney was ordained a priest of Jesus Christ.

On February 9, 1818, Fr. Jean-Marie Vianney groped through a heavy fog to the village of Ars and came upon 10 year-old Antoine Givre tending his family’s cows and asked directions to Ars. After being given directions, Fr. Vianney said to Antoine, “*You have shown me the way to Ars; I will show you the way to Heaven.*” Here you have a simple, but so profound definition of the priesthood: its *raison d’etre*. The Cure of Ars lived for nothing else but that. His life and what would happen to Ars would bear that out.

When the church bells announced Holy Mass on the morning of February 10, 1818, the village people knew that a new pastor had arrived but otherwise just shrugged their shoulders. Three people showed up for the Cure’s first mass in Ars (one was the mayor “officially welcoming him”). In many respects Ars was mission territory. A remnant of religion had survived the revolutionary storm, but little real piety existed. On Sundays, village people neglected the church but filled the taverns, the market place and enjoyed the passing circuses. Few people knew their Faith, religious education being non-

existent, much less lived it. The Cure went right to work: starting with prayer and penance.

Long before dawn in the darkened church before the flickering light of the tabernacle, he prostrated himself before the Real Presence and prayed this prayer. “*My God, grant me the conversion of my parish; I am willing to suffer all my life whatsoever it may please thee to lay upon me; yes, even for a hundred years I am prepared to endure the sharpest pains, only let my people be converted.*” He bathed the cold stone pavement with his tears praying this. Unless priestly duty summoned him elsewhere people always knew where to find him, not in the rectory but in the church in prayer before the tabernacle. He liked to take afternoon walks for exercise and prayed his breviary and rosary doing so. In fact, one rarely saw him without rosary in hand. One day a farmer going through the forest came upon the Cure on his knees in prayer. He was weeping bitterly, repeating again and again: “*My God, convert my parish.*” The farmer withdrew very quietly, not daring to disturb so moving a prayer.

To his prayer the Cure added penance and the desire to imitate Christ in his poverty. He would say, “*Our Lord is never found in Pomp, Pleasure, Luxury, but in lowliness and humiliation.*” As Christ brought about our redemption through His sufferings, so the priest through his penance and sufferings would bring about the redemption of his parish. Surely God would forgive sinners more readily if someone paid the ransom of their sins. To save souls the price must be paid. The Cure removed most of the furnishings of his rectory, to the consternation of his housekeeper, and kept only the bare essentials (a bed and kitchen table). He allowed himself one hour of sleep per night. The rest of the time you knew where to find him. For his diet he would boil a pot of potatoes and leave the pot hanging near the door. On occasion when passing by he would take a cold potato and eat it. In his sermons he would always preach the necessity of mortification for the Christian life saying, “*A Christian either rules his inclinations, or his inclinations rule him.*” Word

started getting around, "*We have a saint here.*" The transformation of Ars was underway.

Most of all the Cure was known as the great apostle of the confessional. When he arrived in Ars no lines existed. Soon some 300 people came to Ars every day to confess to him. He heard confessions for 13-17 hours each day, and he had the remarkable gift of reading hearts. He would compassionately assist someone who hadn't been to confession in years and once he unmasked a Freemason who came thinking he could have some fun in the confessional at the Cure's expense. The Freemason wound up being converted.

The transformation of Ars didn't go unnoticed by the Adversary who saw all his diabolical work being undone by this priest. For a period of over 30 years the Cure of Ars suffered from attacks by the devil. The Devil would rob the Cure of his scant 1 hour nights sleep with hideous noises

often screeching, "*I'll have you, you potato eater!*" On several occasions the Cure's bed burst into flames. Objects in the room would fly at him. It was through the Cure's great devotion to the Blessed Mother that these attacks would eventually end. Before they ended the Devil paid him the ultimate complement by revealing to him that if there were three such men as himself on earth, his (Satan's) kingdom would be broken. And this about a man who was almost dismissed from the seminary. Academics could never bring this about, only prayer, penance and holiness.

We can see why Pope Benedict will proclaim the Cure the Patron Saint of **ALL** Priests. Here too, all of us (priests, religious and laity) have a sure fire program to defeat the Satanic darkness that threatens us today. If three such could break his kingdom, imagine what a few more could do. ✘