

Meditations: August 4, Saint John Mary Vianney

Saint John Mary Vianney, the Holy Curé of Ars, was named an Intercessor of Opus Dei by Saint Josemaria. Some reflections that can assist our prayer on his feast day.

- The reach of a priest
- Memory and gratitude for one's vocation
- Love for confession

SAINT JOHN Mary Vianney, known as the Holy Curé of Ars, was a French

priest in the small village of Ars, where he spent nearly 42 years. When he arrived at the town, which had just over 200 inhabitants, the vicar general of the diocese told him: “There is little love of God in that parish; you will have to be the one to put it there.”^[1] The new parish priest strove to enkindle the hearts of his faithful through the sacraments and preaching and his personal penance. He did not have much formal learning, but his close union with God not only transformed Ars, but also the rest of France, and today he is a model of the priesthood for the whole world.

In the years following his arrival, a large number of people began to come to Ars, attracted by the holiness of this priest who was “astonishing for his penance, so familiar with God in prayer, outstanding for his peace and humility in the midst of popular acclaim.”^[2] In 1855 the number of

pilgrims reached twenty thousand. “The church was packed all day, starting early in the morning. People lined up to receive the sacraments. They knelt in the side chapels, behind the main altar, in the sanctuary, or remained standing on the church steps.”^[3] —

The Curé of Ars was canonized and declared the patron saint of priests by Pius XI in 1925. Saint Josemaría named him intercessor for Opus Dei’s relations with diocesan bishops. On the feast day of Saint John Mary Vianney, he encouraged his children to have recourse to him to pray for priests. And he asked them to try to accompany priests with their own affection, realizing all the good that a holy priest can do, and having himself known some priests who had found themselves left alone. He once said that “everything that helps priests helps to save them. And to save a priest is to save thousands of

souls.”^[4] The life of Saint John Mary Vianney shows us the reach that a holy priest can have, whose greatest desire is to lead people to God through the sacraments.

THE LIFE of the Curé of Ars was not without difficulties. When he was in the seminary, some professors did not consider him suitable for studies in preparation for the priesthood, since his test results were not very good. Shortly after arriving in the village of Ars, he had to endure slander from various parishioners and also from other priests from nearby towns. Furthermore, on many occasions he even experienced physically the devil’s anger. But he knew that God would triumph in his weakness. Since God had called him to the priesthood, He would always sustain him.

In every vocational path moments of trial arise. Situations in which tiredness weighs on us more heavily or we seem to have lost sight of the reference points that had guided us on our path. Then is the time to remember the first call, to return “to that dazzling light with which God’s grace touched me at the start of the journey. From that flame I can light a fire for today and every day, and bring heat and light to my brothers and sisters. That flame enkindles a humble joy, a joy which sorrow and distress cannot dismay, a good and serene joy.”^[5]—

Along with the memory of that first call, the memory of all the people we have helped can also bring us encouragement. “How beautiful it is when an elderly priest sees or is visited by those children – now adults – whom he baptized long ago and who now gratefully introduce a family of their own!”^[6]— Our “yes” to

God has repercussions that we never grasp fully, but at times seeing some of the fruit of our fidelity makes us say with Saint Paul: “I do not cease to give thanks for you” (*Eph 1:16*). Being grateful for the vocation that God has given us, and that has had a deep impact on others, will lead us to recognize the signs of God’s love that reach us every day and that confirm us on our path.

LOVE FOR the Sacrament of Reconciliation was one of the outstanding characteristics in the life of Saint John Mary Vianney. “It was his heroic service in the confessional which particularly struck me,” Saint John Paul II said. “That humble priest, who would hear confessions more than ten hours a day, eating little and sleeping only a few hours, was able, at a difficult moment in

history, to inspire a kind of spiritual revolution in France, and not only there. Thousands of people passed through Ars and knelt at his confessional.”^[7]

The Curé of Ars used to say that when we approach the sacrament of Penance we are unnailing Jesus from the Cross. In this sacrament we let ourselves be healed by Christ; we respond to the call to conversion that He, thinking only of our good, addresses to us. “This endeavor of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a ‘contrite heart’ (*Ps 51:19*), drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first (cf. *1 Jn 4:10*).”^[8] And in doing so we find joy, peace, renewed desires to embark on the path to holiness. Saint Josemaría wrote, based on his own experience: “‘Blessed be God!’ you said to yourself after having finished your sacramental Confession. And

you thought: it is as if I had just been born again. You then continued calmly: ‘*Domine, quid me vis facere?* — Lord, what would you have me do?’”^[9]

“The important thing, in the life of every man and woman, is not never falling down on the way again. The important thing is always getting up, not staying on the ground licking your wounds.”^[10] Saint John Mary Vianney enabled God’s mercy to reach thousands of souls. He helped many people to get up, who due to the weight of their sins had lost hope. With his help and our Lady’s, we will always begin again, knowing that Christ never tires of forgiving us.

^[1] Cf. Francois Trochu, *The Curé d’Ars*.

^[2] Saint John Paul II, *Letter to Priests*, 16 March 1986.

^[3] Bruce Marshall, “The Curé of Ars,” in Clare Boothe Luce, ed. *Saints for the Present*, pp. 293-316.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken during a get-together, 28 March 1969.

^[5] Francis, Homily, 19 April 2014.

^[6] Francis, *Letter to Priests*, 5 August 2019.

^[7] Saint John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*, Image Books, p. 57.

^[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1428.

^[9] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 238.

^[10] Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, ch. 6.

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