

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

This Tuesday, August 4th is the Feast day of St. John Vianney. St. John Vianney is the patron saint of parish priests. In conjunction with the 150th anniversary of St. John Vianney's death, Pope Benedict has declared a special "Year of the Priest." The Pope declared this special year to "encourage priests in striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends." As St. John Vianney is not the most well known of saints I thought I should tell you a bit about him.

St. John Vianney was born in southern France in 1786. He was the son of a small farmer and began at a young age to be a "herd-boy," shepherding the sheep and cattle that belonged to his father. John Vianney's parents were devout Catholics loyal to the pope who refused to join the "state Church" imposed on France by the revolutionary government. For much of John's youth he accompanied his parents to secret Masses offered by priests who remained faithful to the pope.

Because he was needed on his father's farm, John was not able to enter the seminary until he reached the age of twenty. His studies were very difficult for him as John's only previous schooling had lasted but a few months when he was nine. Latin was especially difficult, so much so that John Vianney made a special pilgrimage to the shrine of St. John Regis (patron of our neighboring parish in Hollywood) to seek the saint's intercession. When John returned to the seminary his studies were no easier but the deadly disease of discouragement was gone. While his superiors thought him the most unlearned of seminarians they also recognized that he was the most devout. Finally, on August 12, 1815, John Vianney was ordained to the priesthood. Very soon Father Vianney was recognized as a holy confessor and the lines to his confessional grew.

In 1817 St. John was made the "Curé", which is the French equivalent of "pastor," for the small village of Ars. The parish at Ars was not bad but the parishioners were characterized by spiritual laziness and displayed little real love for God. St. John Vianney chose to live on virtually nothing but potatoes and prayed all the time for his parishioners believing that if the people of Ars would not fast and pray then their pastor must do so for them. (*Thankfully, the people of this parish do all their own fasting & praying!*) St. John waged a relentless war against drunkenness, impurity and blasphemy in the village and he challenged the people of Ars to observe Sunday properly by coming to Mass and refraining from unnecessary work. Additionally, St. John was fervent in promoting charitable works in the village opening a school for girls and an orphanage.

Not everyone in the village was pleased with their pastor, especially those who were being challenged by St. John to repent. Even some of John's brother-priests, remembering his lack of education and simple faith, denounced him to the bishop as being over-zealous and "mad." The bishop responded by saying "I wish all my clergy had a small grain of the same madness." Additionally, and unbeknownst to his people, St. John was subject to frequent attacks from the devil.

Still, in spite of obstacles, the character of the village of Ars was radically changed for the better and St. John's reputation for holiness began to spread. When visitors commented on the good demeanor of the villagers they were told "We are no better than other people, but we live close to a saint." Due to his extraordinary gifts as a confessor, including the supernatural gift of being able to read his penitents' hearts, hundreds of people a day would come to St. John for confession. Some waited for days to have the saint hear and advise them in the confessional.

In his later years, the popular acclaim of the people became more and more of a cross for St. John and he tried three times to leave the village to seek the anonymity of a monastery. But neither the villagers of the bishop would let John Vianney leave Ars. In the year 1858-59 over 100,000 pilgrims visited Ars and the strain was too much for the elderly priest. On July 18, 1859, St. John Vianney knew the end was at hand but continued to labor on. People still came to him for confession even as he lay dying. As the news spread crowds of people from all around came to Ars. "It is sad to receive Holy Communion for the last time", murmured the dying priest. At 2 o'clock on the morning of August 4th, 1859, the humble parish priest of Ars went to his eternal reward. St. John Vianney was canonized in 1925 and declared the patron of parish priests in 1929.

Please ask St. John Vianney's intercession for your parish priests that we might imitate his love for God and his devotion to his parishioners.

Father Conley