



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

*Wednesday, 5 August 2009*

***St. John Mary Vianney, the Holy Curé of Ars***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In today's Catechesis I would like briefly to review the life of the Holy Curé of Ars. I shall stress several features that can also serve as an example for priests in our day, different of course from the time in which he lived, yet marked in many ways by the same fundamental human and spiritual challenges. Precisely yesterday was the 150th anniversary of his birth in Heaven. Indeed it was at two o'clock in the morning on 4 August 1859 that St John Baptist Mary Vianney, having come to the end of his earthly life, went to meet the heavenly Father to inherit the Kingdom, prepared since the world's creation for those who faithfully follow his teachings (cf. Mt 25: 34). What great festivities there must have been in Heaven at the entry of such a zealous pastor! What a welcome he must have been given by the multitude of sons and daughters reconciled with the Father through his work as parish priest and confessor! I wanted to use this anniversary as an inspiration to inaugurate the [Year for Priests](#), whose theme, as is well known, is "Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of Priests". The credibility of witness depends on holiness and, once and for all, on the actual effectiveness of the mission of every priest.

John Mary Vianney was born into a peasant family in the small town of Dardilly on 8 May 1786. His family was poor in material possessions but rich in humanity and in faith. Baptized on the day of his birth, as was the good custom in those days, he spent so many years of his childhood and adolescence working in the fields and tending the flocks that at the age of 17 he was still illiterate. Nonetheless he knew by heart the prayers his devout mother had taught him and was nourished

by the sense of religion in the atmosphere he breathed at home. His biographers say that since his earthly youth he sought to conform himself to God's will, even in the humblest offices. He pondered on his desire to become a priest but it was far from easy for him to achieve it. Indeed, he arrived at priestly ordination only after many ordeals and misunderstandings, with the help of far-sighted priests who did not stop at considering his human limitations but looked beyond them and glimpsed the horizon of holiness that shone out in that truly unusual young man. So it was that on 23 June 1815 he was ordained a deacon and on the following 13 August, he was ordained a priest. At last, at the age of 29, after numerous uncertainties, quite a few failures and many tears, he was able to walk up to the Lord's altar and make the dream of his life come true.

The Holy Curé of Ars always expressed the highest esteem for the gift he had received. He would say: "Oh! How great is the Priesthood! It can be properly understood only in Heaven... if one were to understand it on this earth one would die, not of fright but of love!" (Abbé Monnin, *Esprit du Curé d'Ars*, p. 113). Moreover, as a little boy he had confided to his mother: "If I were to become a priest, I would like to win many souls" (Abbé Monnin, *Procès de l'ordinaire*, p. 1064). And so he did. Indeed, in his pastoral service, as simple as it was extraordinarily fertile, this unknown parish priest of a forgotten village in the south of France was so successful in identifying with his ministry that he became, even in a visibly and universally recognizable manner, an *alter Christus*, an image of the Good Shepherd who, unlike the hired hand, lays down his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10: 11). After the example of the Good Shepherd, he gave his life in the decades of his priestly service. His existence was a living catechesis that acquired a very special effectiveness when people saw him celebrating Mass, pausing before the tabernacle in adoration or spending hour after hour in the confessional.

Therefore the centre of his entire life was the Eucharist, which he celebrated and adored with devotion and respect. Another fundamental characteristic of this extraordinary priestly figure was his diligent ministry of confession. He recognized in the practice of the sacrament of penance the logical and natural fulfilment of the priestly apostolate, in obedience to Christ's mandate: "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (cf. Jn 20: 23). St John Mary Vianney thus distinguished himself as an excellent, tireless confessor and spiritual director. Passing "with a single inner impulse from the altar to the confessional", where he spent a large part of the day, he did his utmost with preaching and persuasive advice to help his parishioners rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence (cf. [\*Letter to Priests for the inauguration of the Year for Priests\*](#)).

The pastoral methods of St John Mary Vianney might hardly appear suited to the social and cultural conditions of the present day. Indeed, how could a priest today imitate him in a world so radically changed? Although it is true that times change and many charisms are characteristic of the person, hence unrepeatable, there is nevertheless a lifestyle and a basic desire that we are all called to cultivate. At a close look, what made the Curé of Ars holy was his humble faithfulness to

the mission to which God had called him; it was his constant abandonment, full of trust, to the hands of divine Providence. It was not by virtue of his own human gifts that he succeeded in moving peoples' hearts nor even by relying on a praiseworthy commitment of his will; he won over even the most refractory souls by communicating to them what he himself lived deeply, namely, his friendship with Christ. He was "in love" with Christ and the true secret of his pastoral success was the fervour of his love for the Eucharistic Mystery, celebrated and lived, which became love for Christ's flock, for Christians and for all who were seeking God. His testimony reminds us, dear brothers and sisters, that for every baptized person and especially for every priest the Eucharist is not merely an event with two protagonists, a dialogue between God and me. Eucharistic Communion aspires to a total transformation of one's life and forcefully flings open the whole human "I" of man and creates a new "we" (cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *La Comunione nella Chiesa*, p. 80).

Thus, far from reducing the figure of St John Mary Vianney to an example albeit an admirable one of 18-century devotional spirituality, on the contrary one should understand the prophetic power that marked his human and priestly personality that is extremely timely. In post-revolutionary France which was experiencing a sort of "dictatorship of rationalism" that aimed at obliterating from society the very existence of priests and of the Church, he lived first in the years of his youth a heroic secrecy, walking kilometres at night to attend Holy Mass. Then later as a priest Vianney distinguished himself by an unusual and fruitful pastoral creativity, geared to showing that the then prevalent rationalism was in fact far from satisfying authentic human needs, hence definitively unliveable.

Dear brothers and sisters, 150 years after the death of the Holy Curé of Ars, contemporary society is facing challenges that are just as demanding and may have become even more complex. If in his time the "dictatorship of rationalism" existed, in the current epoch a sort of "dictatorship of relativism" is evident in many contexts. Both seem inadequate responses to the human being's justifiable request to use his reason as a distinctive and constitutive element of his own identity. Rationalism was inadequate because it failed to take into account human limitations and claims to make reason alone the criterion of all things, transforming it into a goddess; contemporary relativism humiliates reason because it arrives de facto at affirming that the human being can know nothing with certainty outside the positive scientific field. Today however, as in that time, man, "a beggar for meaning and fulfilment", is constantly in quest of exhaustive answers to the basic questions that he never ceases to ask himself.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had very clearly in mind this "thirst for the truth" that burns in every human heart when they said that it is the task of priests "as instructors of the people in the faith" to see to the "formation of a genuine Christian community", that can "smooth the path to Christ for all men" and exercise "a truly motherly function" for them, "showing or smoothing the path towards Christ and his Church" for non-believers and for believers, while also "encouraging, supporting and strengthening believers for their spiritual struggles" (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n.

6).

The teaching which in this regard the Holy Curé of Ars continues to pass on to us is that the priest must create an intimate personal union with Christ that he must cultivate and increase, day after day.

Only if he is in love with Christ will the priest be able to teach his union, this intimate friendship with the divine Teacher to all, and be able to move people's hearts and open them to the Lord's merciful love. Only in this way, consequently, will he be able to instil enthusiasm and spiritual vitality in the communities the Lord entrusts to him. Let us pray that through the intercession of St John Mary Vianney, God will give holy priests to his Church and will increase in the faithful the desire to sustain and help them in their ministry. Let us entrust this intention to Mary, whom on this very day we invoke as Our Lady of the Snow.

### To special groups

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the pilgrimage groups from England, China, Korea and the United States of America. Yesterday the Church celebrated the 150th anniversary of the death of St John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, who is the patron saint of parish priests. In this Year for Priests, let us pray that through his intercession all priests will be renewed in love of the Lord, in the joyful pursuit of holiness and in generous commitment to the spread of the Gospel. Upon you and your families I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

My thoughts turn lastly to the *sick*, the *newlyweds* and the *young people*, especially to those participating in The Fifth International Encounter "Youth Towards Assisi". Today, the liturgical Memorial of the Dedication of the Basilica of St Mary Major, the liturgy invites us to turn our gaze to Mary, Mother of Christ. Always look to her, dear *young people*, imitating her in doing God's will faithfully; turn to her with trust, dear *sick people*, to experience the effectiveness of her protection in moments of trial; entrust your family to her, dear *newlyweds*, so that it may always be supported by her maternal intercession.

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