

A Model to Priests

John XXIII, in his encyclical, Sacerdotii nostri primordia, of July 31st, 1959, takes the opportunity of the Centenary of the death of the Holy Curé of Ars to speak of the priesthood and to accentuate, in the light of his death, certain aspects of the priestly life which are of great importance, especially in our times.

Fifty years later, on this past June 16th, our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI promulgated a letter to all the priests of the world, in which he explained why he had chosen the Holy Curé of Ars as a model for the priests and as the patron of the Year of the Priesthood, which he would start on the feast of the Sacred Heart.

Thus, these two popes lie within the continuity of Saint Pius X and of Pius XI in proposing Saint John Mary Vianney as model, patron and intercessor to the priests of the entire world. All of them consider the meditation on his life and the application of his words and his examples as necessary and profitable in the life of every sincere priest desiring to conform himself to Christ.

Fr. Romain Pons

Something that is great

"The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus", the saintly Curé of Ars would often say. This touching expression makes us reflect, first of all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself. 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". These words, welling up from the priestly heart of the holy pastor, might sound excessive. Yet they reveal the high esteem in which he held the sacrament of the priesthood. He seemed overwhelmed by a boundless sense of responsibility: "Were we to fully realize what a priest is on earth, we would die: not of fright, but of love... Without the priest, the passion and death of our Lord would be of no avail. It is the priest who continues the work of redemption on earth... What use would be a house filled with gold, were there no one to open its door? The priest holds the key to the treasures of heaven: it is he who opens the door: he is the steward of the good Lord; the administrator of his goods ... Leave a parish for twenty years without a priest, and they will end by worshiping the beasts there ... The priest is not a priest for himself, he is a priest for you". (Benedict XVI)

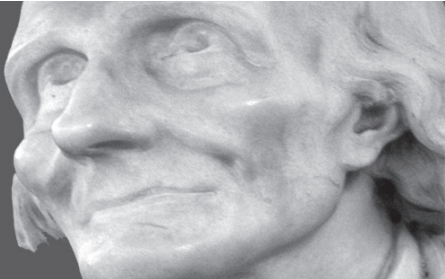
Man of prayer

The Holy Curé of Ars above all taught his parishioners through his example, by the good conduct of his life. "The priest above all must be a man of prayer," he had said. Also, he kept a constant union with God amidst his excessively occupied life. He could talk forever about the joys and the benefits of prayer: "Man is a pauper who has need of asking everything from God... What a lot of souls could we convert through our prayers!" Through his words and example, the faithful learned to pray, to voluntarily stop in front of the tabernacle to pay a visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. "One does not have to speak much in order to pray – the Curé explained to them – One knows that the Good God is there, in the holy Tabernacle; one opens his heart to Him; one delights in His presence. That there – is the best prayer." And he exhorted them: "Come to Communion, come to Jesus, come to live of Him, in order to live for Him," "It is true, you are not worthy of it, but you have need of it!" This education of the faithful in the Real Presence and in Communion took on an exceptional effectiveness when the faithful saw him celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Those who would assist thereat would say: "How could anyone have a face that expresses such adoration... He contemplates the Host with so much love." "All the good works combined – he would say – are not equivalent to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, because they are the works of man and the Holy Mass is the work of God." He was convinced that all the fervor of the life of the priest depends upon the Mass: "The reason for the laxity of the priest is that he is not careful about the Mass! Alas! My God! How a priest deserves sympathy when he does it like something ordinary!" And he had the custom, when he celebrated, to always offer the sacrifice of his own life: "Oh! How good it is for a priest to offer himself every morning in sacrifice to God."

Confessional besieged

This personal identification with the sacrifice of the Cross conducted him – by one sole interior movement – from the altar to the confessional. "The priest must always be ready to answer to the needs of souls." (Benedict XVI) All his life was, effectively directed, turned towards souls. The main thing in the life of the Curé of Ars was the confessional: for thirty years, a torrent of unceasingly renewed pilgrims flooded towards the

church and the confessional of Ars: It was said in those days that Ars had become a great hospital for souls. "The great miracle of the holy Curé," they would say, "is his besieged confessional night and day." What truly filled him with joy was the return of souls to God. It was definitely his zeal for the salvation of so many sinful souls "that made him embrace throughout his long life a grueling ministry, without interruption, without attentions, without mellowing in any way, that made himself rise at midnight or one o'clock in the morning and leave the church very late, that condemned him to an almost total privation of sleep, and that, however, maintained in him an unaltered patience in the midst of the most annoying importunities." (Testimony at the process of beatification)



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"The Curé of Ars had a different manner of conducting himself with the varied penitents. Those who approached his confessional, drawn by an interior and humble need of the pardon of God, found in him the encouragement to plunge themselves into 'the torrent of the divine mercy' which washes away everything in its tide. And if someone was afflicted by his weakness and his inconstancy, fearing to relapse in the future, the Curé revealed to him the secret of God through an expression of touching beauty: "The Good God knows all things. In advance He knows that after you have confessed you will sin again, and nevertheless He pardons you. What love as that of our God who goes so far as to forget the future in order to forgive us!" (Benedict XVI) But there was something more irresistible than words for the tepid and the hardened: it was tears. It sufficed for him sometimes, in order to soften a hardened heart, to tearfully show the crucifix hanging on the wall: "I cry for that which you do not cry", he said. "Even then, if the Good God was not so good, but He is so good. Must men be so barbarous for such a good Father?"

The one sent from God

His preaching was very simple, but so filled with the love of God that no one would weary from listening to it, be it in the daily catechisms at 11 o'clock or the Sunday preaching. "One would not listen to him like he listens to an ordinary preacher, but as one sent from God, a new John the Baptist who knows something of the secrets of above. (...) His words were full of eternity. His fiery gaze fixed sometimes on one, sometimes on another of his listeners, as if he had wanted to thrust the sword of his words all the way into their heart; he would lash the vice, he would curse the sin or more often, he would sing the beauties and the joys of the love of God." (Mons. Trochu) "This humble priest had, indeed, understood to an exceptional degree the dignity and the greatness of the ministry of the Word of God: 'Our Lord who is Truth itself', he would say, 'did not attach less importance to His Word than to His Body.'" (Sacerdotii nostri primordia)

Above all, Fr. Vianney urged souls to frequent the sacraments: "Not all those who approach them are saints, but the saints will be always taken from those who often receive them." Thus he was one of the first promoters of frequent Communion in a France that was still so influenced by Jansenism and Rigorism.

Privations

The consciousness that he had of his greatness, completely ordained to God and to the bestowing of His heavenly gifts, would then press the Curé of Ars, and normally all priests after him, to copy their life on this divine predilection. From there comes this asceticism which was in many respects more admirable than imitable: "To speak of St. John Mary Vianney, is to call to mind the figure of an exceptionally mortified priest who, for the love of God and the conversion of sinners, deprived himself of food and of sleep, imposed on himself harsh disciplines and above all practiced self-renunciation to a heroic degree (...) To everyone, the Curé of Ars' admirable example of renunciation, severe for himself and mild for others, recalls in an eloquent and insistent manner, the indispensable place of asceticism in the priestly life. (...) Convinced that the greatness of the priesthood is in the imitation of Jesus Christ, the priests, therefore, will be more than ever attentive to the calls

of the Divine Master: 'If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me'..." (Sacerdotii nostri primordia). "He himself kept a tight rein on his body, with vigils and fasts, lest it rebel against his priestly soul. Nor did he avoid self-mortification for the good of the souls in his care and as a help to expiating the many sins he heard in confession. To a priestly confrere he explained: 'I will tell you my recipe: I give sinners a small penance and the rest I do in their place'. Aside from the actual penances which the Curé of Ars practiced, the core of his teaching remains valid for each of us: souls have been won at the price of Jesus' own blood, and a priest cannot devote himself to their salvation if he refuses to share personally in the "precious cost" of redemption." (Benedict XVI)

Evangelical counsels

This ascetic physiognomy of our Holy Curé materialized in the practice of the three evangelical counsels, poverty, chastity and obedience, which, of course, are not imposed on the priest in accordance with his clerical state, but which are nevertheless the royal way of Christian sanctification.

St. John Mary Vianney is an admirable example of evangelical poverty: His poverty, in fact, was not that of a religious or of a monk, but that which is demanded of a priest: He "was rich for giving to others and very poor for himself." He explained: "My secret is really simple; it is of giving all and of keeping nothing." When he arrived there, having his hands empty, happily, he said to the poor who spoke to him: "I am poor like you; I am today one of yours." Thus, at the end of his life, he could affirm in total serenity: "I have nothing more; the Good God may call me when He wishes."

It was the Curé of Ars of whom Pius XI was thinking when writing to the priests: "Daily experience proves that a poor and disinterested evangelical priest certainly does miracles with the Christian people." (Divini Redemptoris) And again: "When we see men selling and buying everything with money, may they pass it exempt from all egoism, scorning all greediness; may they give of themselves to the pursuit of souls, not of money, to the glory of God, not of themselves." (Ad Catholici Sacerdotii)

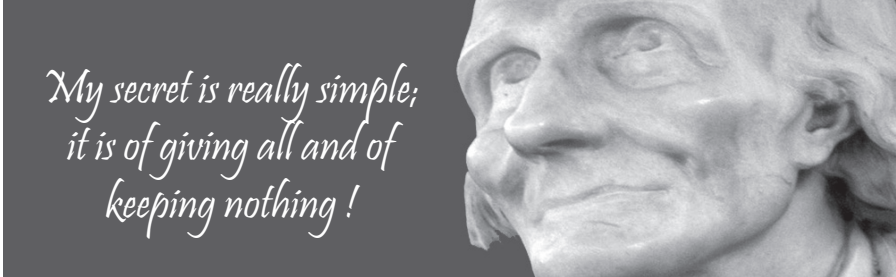
The look of love

His chastity was also that which is demanded of a priest for his ministry. We could say that he acted with the chastity necessary for one who habitually touches the Eucharist and who habitually contemplates it with all the ardour of his heart and who, with the same fervour, gives it to the faithful. It is said of him that "Chastity shone in his look," and the faithful became aware of this when he turned towards the tabernacle with the look of a lover." (Benedict XVI) This asceticism necessary for chastity, far from shutting the priest up in a sterile egoism, made his heart more open and more receptive to all the needs of his brothers: "When the heart is pure," the Curé of Ars said magnificently, "it cannot refrain from loving, because it has found the source of love, which is God." (Sacerdotii nostri primordia) To reach this source of Charity, the Holy Curé would use the mortification, and in an extraordinary manner: "His mortification had been constant, extreme, universal; it had taken up all of his life... The life of a trappist is nothing in comparison to his. I do not think that Christian penitence could be pursued further. The Curé of Ars has made us believe in the most extraordinary accounts in the history of the Fathers of the desert." (Testimony at the process of beatification) He never had enough penitence because he always wanted that his body and his soul would be more faithful instruments of Christ. His heart was without sin, and for forty years he fasted and scourged himself for sinners. But his greatest instrument of penitence was his confessional. Besides, in summer his confessional was an oven, and in winter, a freezer.

In the Church for the Church

"Likewise, the obedience of Saint John Mary Vianney was entirely personified in his adherence to all the sufferings united to the daily demands of the ministry. We know how much he was distressed by the thought of his incapacity for parish ministry and by his desire to flee "in order to weep in solitude over his poor life." Obedience alone, and his passion for souls, succeeded in convincing him to remain at his post. He proved to his faithful, as to himself, that "there are not two good ways to serve Our Lord, there is only one; it is to serve Him as He wills to be served." It seemed to him that the Golden Rule for a life of obedience was this: "Do not-

ing but that which may be offered to the Good God." (Benedict XVI) It was said of the Curé of Ars that he lived only in the Church and for the Church, like the blade of wheat lost in the furnace. Priests of Jesus Christ, we are plunged in this furnace that lights up the fire of the Holy Ghost; we have all received from the Church; we



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act only in Her name and through the powers that She has conferred upon us: let us love to serve Her in the bonds of unity and in the manner in which She wants to be served". (Sacerdotii nostri primordia) And Pius XII: "the sanctity of the personal life and the efficacy of the apostolate have for their foundation and their support (...) the constant and exact obedience to the holy hierarchy".

Conclusion

We close this brief insight of the virtues of the Holy Curé of Ars by taking up again with our whole heart the wish by which pope John XXIII concluded his fine encyclical, that this hundred and fiftieth "anniversary of the death of Saint John Mary Vianney may arouse, in the entire world, a renewal of fervour amongst the priests and amongst the youth called to the priesthood, and also from the part of all the faithful a greater and more active attention to the problems of the life and the ministry of priests.

May this Year of the Priesthood be the occasion for all to rekindle our Faith in the essential role of the Priesthood and to obtain that we always better see in the priest "God hidden like a light behind a window, as the wine mixed with the water." This is how it was explained by the Holy Curé of Ars.