

Curé d'Ars: Model Priest

By Karna Swanson

NEW YORK, JUNE 19, 2009 (Zenit.org).- After more than 2,000 years of existence, there isn't much the Church hasn't addressed, faced or witnessed.

Granted, times change. New challenges continually present themselves. Progress is made. And while the Church continually works to keep step with the twists and turns of history, it sometimes breaks step and simply returns to the basics.

This is what Benedict XVI did recently when he declared a yearlong celebration of one of the most basic and fundamental elements of the Catholic Church: the priesthood.

Beginning today, the Church will dedicate one full year to remembering what it is to be a priest. This will not only be an opportunity for priests to rediscover their vocation, mission and passion for Christ, but it's also a chance for the rest of us to rediscover what a gift the priesthood is for our own lives.

The Pontiff chose as the occasion for this jubilee year the 150th anniversary of the death of St. John Mary Vianney, known as the Curé d'Ars.

By linking the Year for Priests with St. Vianney, who is also the patron of parish priests, the jubilee not only celebrates the basics of the Church, but also the basics of the priesthood itself.

As a priest, Father Vianney took upon himself many of the projects parish priests take on. He set about to restore the parish church, he founded an orphanage and did acts of charity for the poor. He also did some pretty extraordinary things. He had supernatural knowledge of the future and the past, and he performed healing miracles, particularly on children.

But it was in the basic duties of parish life that he excelled, namely preaching, offering spiritual direction, and, most notably, hearing confessions.

Rocky road

John Mary Vianney was born in Dardilly, near Leon, in 1786. His early faith formation took place within the context of the French Revolution, which pushed the practice of the Catholic faith underground. Later in his ministry, he would deal with the consequences of the revolution, which led many of the faithful to leave the Church.

The road to the priesthood wasn't an easy path for Vianney. After finally getting his father's permission to pursue his calling, he still needed to get caught up on his studies, as the revolution had interrupted his education. If he wanted to be a priest, he'd have to go

back to school with children half his age to learn the basics of reading, writing, and Latin.

Almost nine years later, in 1815, Vianney was ordained. He was 29. Less than three years later, in 1818, the young priest was assigned as the assistant pastor of the church in Ars, a small country village located about 25 miles from Lyon in eastern France. This is where he would spend the rest of his priestly life.

Arriving in Ars, the young priest noticed the loss of Christian faith and morals around him, a lingering by-product of the French Revolution. Father Vianney soon began to awaken the faith of his parishioners through his preaching, but most of all by his prayer and his way of life. His notoriety as a holy priest grew slowly, and Father Vianney soon became known as, simply, the Curé d'Ars (priest of Ars).

Not paparazzi, penitents

By the 1830s, his popularity swelled to the extent that the holy priest became somewhat of a prisoner in the confessional, held there by the hundreds of faithful arriving daily to the village to see the holy curé. Between 1830 and 1845, sometimes as many as 300 people a day would pass through Ars for a chance to confess with Father Vianney.

Overwhelmed with his own sense of unworthiness and weakness in the face of such a great mission, the holy priest tried three times to escape, but all attempts failed. On the third attempt his parishioners actually sent out a search crew in the middle of the night to find him and put him back in the confessional. He stayed there until the wee hours of the morning -- hearing confessions.

In 1853, a group of diocesan missionaries came to the aid of the overworked parish priest, who couldn't seem to get out of his confessional, let alone out of his own parish to take a holiday. His own bishop even told him not to attend diocesan retreats, as Father Vianney had too many souls to attend to in Ars.

By 1855, the number of pilgrims had reached 20,000 a year, and some 100,000 in 1858. There are reports that during the last 10 years of his life, he spent as many as 18 hours a day in the confessional, and that toward the end of his life, he confessed up to 80,000 penitents a year.

Father Vianney spent the last five days of his life hearing his confessions from his deathbed. Exhausted, the Curé d'Ars died Aug. 4, 1859. He was 73.

The parish priest was beatified in 1905, and declared the patron of the priests of France that same year. He was canonized 20 years later in 1925, and declared the patron saint of all parish priests in 1929.

A hero

In 1959, Pope John XXIII wrote a 13,000-word encyclical on St. John Mary Vianney on the centenary of the saint's death. He hailed the holy priest an "outstanding model of priestly asceticism, of piety, especially in the form of devotion to the Eucharist, and, finally, of pastoral zeal."

He was a "tireless worker for God," the Holy Father continued, and "a hero."

"His only motives were the love of God and the desire for the salvation of the souls of his neighbors," the Pontiff affirmed.

John XIII offered St. Vianney as a model for other priests because the saint was a man of God. This, he said, was the secret to the priesthood: "A man who is filled with Christ will not find it hard to discover ways and means of bringing others to Christ."

The Curé d'Ars is also a model for priests because he, like few others, knew what being a priest was all about.

"Holy Orders," he wrote in his Catechism on the Priesthood, "is a sacrament which seems to relate to no one among you, and which yet relates to everyone."

A priest, he continued, is "a man who holds the place of God -- a man who is invested with all the powers of God."

"Everything has come to us through the priest; yes, all happiness, all graces, all heavenly gifts," St. Vianney affirmed. "If we had not the sacrament of orders, we should not have Our Lord.

"Who placed him there, in that tabernacle? It was the priest. Who was it that received your soul, on its entrance into life? The priest. Who nourishes it, to give it strength to make its pilgrimage? The priest. Who will prepare it to appear before God, by washing that soul, for the last time, in the blood of Jesus Christ? The priest -- always the priest."

St. Vianney spoke of the priest as the doorway to the treasures of heaven, "He is the steward of the good God, the distributor of his wealth."

"Oh, how great is a priest," he exclaimed. So great, he noted, that it would be impossible for a priest to "understand the greatness of his office till he is in heaven. If he understood it on earth, he would die, not of fear, but of love."

And a priest, he continued, "is not a priest for himself."

It's often overlooked that a priest does not confess himself or administer the sacraments for himself. All of his priestly duties and functions are done for others. "He is not for himself," the holy Curé reminds us. "He is for you."

When you see a priest, you should say, "There is he who made me a child of God, and opened heaven to me by holy baptism; he who purified me after I had sinned; who gives nourishment to my soul."

"The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus," he added. "When you see the priest, think of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

This year, we have the opportunity to just do that.

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