



The priest and the confessional

Along with the praise and glory which he renders towards God, the primary work of the priest, and that towards which all of his duties impel him, is his duty toward the sanctification of souls, referred to in theological terms as the *munus sanctificandi*. The priest, as another Christ, is fundamentally obliged to work towards the sanctification of the souls which have been confided to him.

It is the same profound desire and duty for the salvation of souls which particularly attracted St. John-Mary Vianney towards the priesthood: “When I was young, I thought, ‘If I were a priest, I would win many souls for the Lord.’” And when he was in the midst of a moment of discouragement and had decided to abandon his studies for the priesthood, it was enough for his ‘tutor and protector,’ Fr. Balley simply to remind him, “Very well, goodbye to your dreams, John-Mary! Goodbye to the priesthood, goodbye to souls,” for him to put behind him the temptation to quit his studies.

How, concretely, does the priest fulfil his duty towards the sanctification of souls? Clearly he principally does so through the administration of the Sacraments, because this is the means by which he will impart and augment divine grace in souls; it is also through the administration of these sacraments that he will strive to work out his own sanctification with the most dignity, the most holiness, and the most faith possible. The Holy Curé of Ars, whom Benedict XVI invites each priest to take on as a model in his pastoral duty, exhorted his faithful above all else towards the frequent reception of the Sacraments. “All those, he would say, who approach the Sacraments are not saints, but the saints are always among those who receive them often.”

And among these Sacraments of course Confession and the Holy Eucharist hold a particular place. He would say: “The more we use the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, the more the yoke of the Lord is sweet and light. Purified by these Sacraments like a salutary bath, our soul lifts itself towards God.”

The Sacrament of Confession

All who are even a bit familiar with the life of Saint John-Mary Vianney know what an important place his apostolate in the confessional had in his life. In his letter introducing the current Year for Priests, Benedict XVI wrote: “From St. John-Mary Vianney we can learn to put our unflinching trust in the Sacrament of Penance, to set it once more at the centre of our pastoral concerns, and to take up the ‘dialogue of salvation’ which it entails.”

The holy Curé would hear confessions for up to 18 hours a day and would enter the confessional at one in the morning except when, due to the number of pilgrims, he would be obliged to begin before midnight. After having heard so very many confessions during his life, he said one day: “If I had not been a priest, I would have never known what sin truly is.”

It is because he knew the ugliness of sin, because he knew what an offense it is to God and how much damage it does to souls that he said that he was always free to offer the mercy of God to the souls who came to see him, no matter how many that might be. “Why are we insensible to the benefits of Confession? It is because we fail to look at all for the benefits of the mercy of the good Lord, who has placed no limits in this sacrament.” The love St. John-Mary Vianney had for the confessional came from, as we have said, his thirst for the conversion of sinners. Mademoiselle des Garets tells us that each evening during his prayers he was so moved to tears that he could hardly recite the phrase “O Lord, who wills that no sinner might be lost...” Fr. Toccanier testified at his

beatification that the Curé d’Ars told him, “I am the happiest when I am praying for sinners.”

This is why priests in their ministry should work to acquire a deep sense of sin and of its consequences. The Saint would say, “If we had faith and could see a soul in a state of mortal sin we would die of fear. The soul in a state of grace is like a white dove. In a state of mortal sin it is no more than a rotting cadaver, a carrion.”

Along with St. John Vianney’s physical penance of remaining for such long hours in the confessional – he passed out a number of times, he suffered from the cold in winter and from the heat in the summer – it was even more so a moral penance for his soul: “No,

there is nothing sadder in this world than the life of the priest! How does he carry out his days? By seeing the good Lord offended. The priest sees nothing but this. He is constantly like St. Peter in the praetorium. He always has before his eyes Our Lord being insulted, despised, covered in opprobrium... Oh, if I had known this was the life of a priest, instead of going to the seminary, I would have hurried to enter a Trappist monastery.” But, nevertheless, the confessional was the place where throughout the life of the Holy Curé thousands of souls were reconciled to God. Many left the confessional with tears in their eyes and their souls completely transformed. “Oh my friend,” the Curé d’Ars would say, “It is only at the last judgment that we will know how many souls found their salvation here.”

By his long hours in the confessional St. John-Mary Vianney has given a lesson to all priests throughout the world. It was in this hidden place that he passed the greater part of his days. Pope Benedict XVI on June 21st of this year stated, “Priests



(Confessional: the Code of Canon Law approves of: “*confessionals with a fixed grille between penitent and confessor*” Canon 963§2.)



(FSSP priests and seminarians in Ars with statue of the Curé in the background on Sunday 13th September 2009; Sacred Minister on the left is British FSSP deacon Rev Mr Simon Harkins.)

should never find it acceptable that their confessionals are empty, nor should they think it enough to simply apprehend that the faithful no longer have a taste for this extraordinary source of serenity and peace.” Here once again the Curé of Ars is an example for each priest: when there were fewer faithful coming to Ars, he would even pray novenas for the crowds of penitents to return. This ought to show us as priests how much we need to pray that souls will approach the confessional where the pardon of God awaits them.

“I know,” he would say, “that we are weak, and we can fall into sin. Nevertheless, it is our fault because God does not refuse us His grace. But to remain in sin after having committed it, while one has all of the means to escape from it, to remain in enmity with God, this is something I could never understand.”

As the Holy Father reminds us in his letter for the opening of the Year for Priests, St. John-Mary Vianney adapted himself to each soul which presented itself to him. He never took long with a penitent, but for each soul he showed a great compassion. Once a sinner who was kneeling before him asked the Saint why he was crying and he responded, “Well my friend, I am crying because you are not crying enough.” One priest who was a witness at his beatification stated that a number of those converted had told him later that “seeing that man cry over their sins was what had made the greatest impression upon them.”

To all souls, finally, the Curé d’Ars preached without ceasing about the mercy of God. “The sacrament of Confession, where God seems to forget His justice in order to manifest His mercy,” is how he would explain it. “His greatest pleasure is to

pardon us. . . Let us therefore give this joy to this good Father; let us return to Him and we will be happy.”

He often stressed the consoling and encouraging fact that once a sin is confessed it will never reappear again: “You saw my candle; this night, this morning it burned out. Where is it? It no longer exists; it has gone out of existence. The same is true of our sins which have been absolved; they no longer exist, they have been annihilated.”

Finally, in order to inspire the sinner with confidence and to encourage him to confess freely, the Saint, along with the tears that he often wept, would not hesitate to say to him, “I am much more culpable than you, do not hesitate to accuse yourself.”

In fact he loved to say the following phrase which should be a rule for each priest: “One must have compassion for the sinner, not contempt.”

Holy Mass

In his duty towards the sanctification of souls the priest of course finds the celebration of Holy Mass at the centre. Benedict XVI invites all priests to offer the Holy Sacrifice daily. Here once again St. John-Mary Vianney is a priestly example. After his sickness in 1843, he could hardly stand up and he had to be carried rather than walk to the church. Due to his weakness he could not go until the morning without eating. In order to keep the fast he would offer the Holy Sacrifice at three in the morning. “When I ask during the Mass to know the will of God, I see a light which seems to indicate it to me.”

The Saint would say, “I don’t want to be the pastor of a parish, but I am glad to be a priest so that I can celebrate Mass.”

Even if the hours spent in the confessional could serve as an excellent preparation for the celebration of Holy Mass as his confessor had assured him, St. John-Mary Vianney would always remain kneeling on the steps of the sanctuary for 20 to 30 minutes before each Mass. His hands would be joined in prayer and his eyes cast upon the tabernacle. He would say, when

‘Year for Priests’ Clergy pilgrimage to Ars & Lyons: 8-12 February 2010 (only 6 places left).

Led by Fr Armand de Malleray, FSSP

Depart Monday morning 8th February 2010 from the UK, arriving in the afternoon in Lyon and reach Francheville (FSSP house on the outskirts of Lyons). Return from Lyons Friday morning 12th February 2010.

Cost estimate: £330 per person.

Possibility of offering EF private Mass daily. Prayer, conferences, fraternal meals and recreation.

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speaking simply about attending Mass: “One ought always to devote at least a quarter of an hour to prepare oneself to attend Mass well.”

His long preparation, his thanksgiving which he would carry out in just as edifying a manner, and his manner of celebrating the Mass, would profoundly touch souls as they saw in it a profound faith in the Mysteries of the altar. “We will not understand the greatness of being able to offer Mass until we are in heaven.” During his thanksgiving, if one of his parishioners needed to speak to him after Mass, the Curé would go out with him and after having briefly answered the needs of the soul before him, he would excuse himself from the conversation in saying, “My friend please excuse me, I must return to the church, there is Someone who is waiting for me.”

It also occurred that many priests would ask the Curé of Ars to help them better understand and better live out the mystery of the Mass. He would tell them that “the foremost cause of laxity in priests is a lack of attention during the Mass! Alas, my God! How culpable is a priest when he treats it as something ordinary.”

His profound faith in such a great mystery helps us understand why he always selected what was the most beautiful and precious to be used for the celebration of Mass. This is likewise an excellent lesson for our own times. He was fond of saying that nothing was too beautiful for the Lord. His biographers tell us that for the Holy Curé the vestments for Mass could never be too magnificent. He wanted a chalice that was of solid gold, because the most beautiful one he

had did not seem to be sufficiently worthy to him to hold the Precious Blood of Our Lord.

“All our good works put together do not equal the Sacrifice of the Mass because they are the works of men, and the Holy Mass is the work of God. Martyrdom is nothing in comparison; it is the sacrifice that man makes of his life to God; the Mass is the sacrifice which God makes for men of His body and of His blood.”

In celebrating Mass he was not known to be too slow. Nevertheless, exceptionally, he would slow down at the Elevation where he could pass up to five minutes, his eyes

fixed upon the Host, as if in ecstasy. It was as if St. John-Mary Vianney saw Our Lord at the altar; as if he saw Him with his own eyes; as if he recognized Him at Holy Communion coming to those who had the good fortune to attend that Mass.

He was known to follow rigorously the rubrics of the missal and Mgr. Convert tells us that when flies would bother him at the altar he would not even move his hand to chase them away.

“This idea of the Holy Sacrifice which he had was also the cause for the respect which he professed for the holy liturgy; he would observe the smallest detail of it with perfect exactitude.” The same author states what is also an important point of meditation for our times: “He would never give Holy Communion without using the paten, which he carried with the ciborium, that he might catch a Host which might accidentally fall, and in order to collect any particles which might detach from the Host. One day he cried tears while speaking of the particles which fell to the ground, saying: “We march over the good Lord! Oh, how sad it is! It is painful even to think about it.”

His manner of celebrating, his piety at the altar was in itself a means of preaching. Fr. Monnin explained that: “The mere sight of the Curé d’Ars celebrating Mass converted more than one sinner.”

In the encyclical which Bl. John XXIII wrote for the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the death of St. John-Mary Vianney we find these words which can serve as an excellent conclusion: “Speaking as a Father, We urge Our beloved priests to set aside a time to examine themselves on how they celebrate the divine mysteries, what their dispositions of soul and external attitude are as they ascend the altar and what

fruit they are trying to gain from it. They should be spurred to do this by the centenary celebrations that are being held in honour of this outstanding and wonderful priest, who drew such great strength and such great desire to dedicate himself ‘from the consolation and happiness of offering the divine victim.’ May his prayers, which We feel sure they will have, bring a fullness of light and strength down upon Our beloved priests.”

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(Fr Bizard – on the right – assists Bishop Brouwet at Pontifical Mass in Ars on 13th September 2009.)