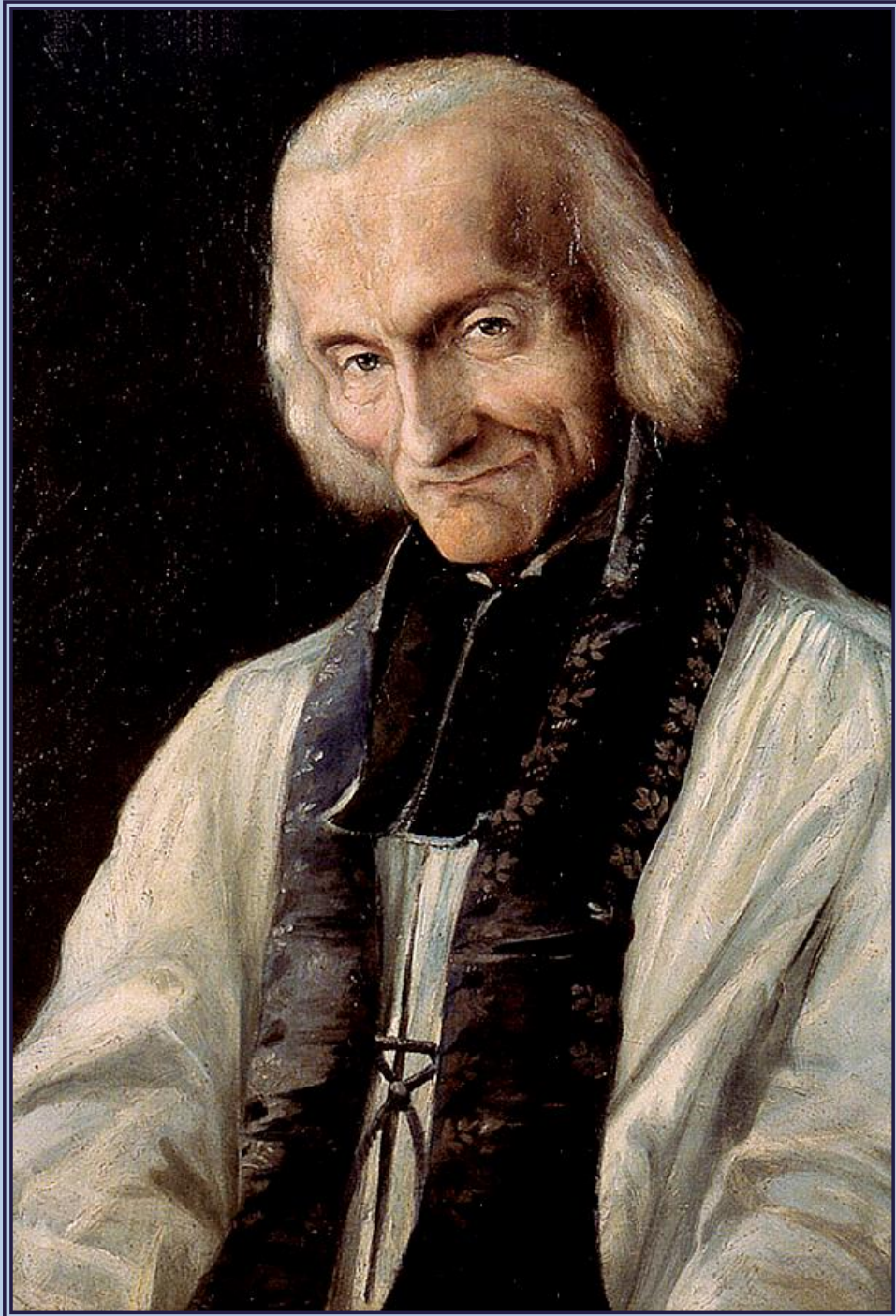


Saint Jean Baptiste Marie Vianney



Curé de Ars

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(1785 – 1859)

by

Lady Herbert



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JEAN BAPTISTE MARIE VIANNEY was born in 1785 at Dardilly, a village not far from Lyons. His parents were respectable and pious people of the farmer class. His mother was especially noted for her great and deep religious feeling, and it was to her teaching that Jean Marie Vianney used to say he owed all his holiest impressions. Yet, from a child the little Jean Marie was noted for his goodness and his love of God. Prayer was his delight, even at four years old, when, being one day missed, he was found on his knees in a corner of the stable. His loving mother would go every morning herself to wake her children, so that she might make them offer their little hearts to God and to secure that this should be their first thought. When she saw her little boy's extraordinary devotion, her one idea was that he should someday become a priest. Yet, she had many trials to go through ere this hope could be realized. The French Revolution came first, and swept away both throne and altar. Their parish church was closed—their priests exiled or murdered. Rarely were the blessed seasons when the faithful were summoned to some carefully guarded hiding-place, where Mass was said by some fugitive priest, at the peril of his life and theirs.

Little Jean Marie was then eight years old and had the charge of the cows and sheep on his father's farm, leading them out every day to browse in the fields near his home. Our Lord made this the school in which the boy, like another Saint Vincent de Paul, was trained for the interior life. He became also a little apostle among his companions, to whom he would often speak of devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Having placed a little picture of the Blessed Virgin against a willow tree (which is still shown), he would frequently say a "Hail Mary," and was never as happy as when he could induce the other shepherd-boys to do the same.

Next to God, Jean Marie loved the poor. His parents were most kind and hospitable, and his greatest delight was to help his mother to prepare their beds or their food, and to deny himself every little delicacy to add to their store. If some were children like himself, he would gather them round the fire, and coax them by pious stories to listen to him and to make acts of faith, hope, and charity, and this was done so humbly and simply that none took offence, and many were touched to the heart by his words. Owing to the troubled state of the times, he did not make his first Communion until he was eleven years old, being prepared for it by some pious Sisters of the Order of Saint Charles, who had taken refuge in the neighboring parish of Ecully, where his grandfather was then living. From that moment, he seemed to increase every day in fervor and piety, yet without ever neglecting his home duties. His obedience became a by-word in the family, so that his mother used to set him as an example to the rest. In the midst of the hard work he often had to do, he never lost the habit of interior prayer, nor his sense of the continual presence of God. He would often say later:

“When I was alone in the fields ploughing or sowing I would pray aloud, but when others were with me I used to pray in my heart. Oh, those were happy days! I often used to say to myself, as I struck my hoe or my spade into the ground, “So I must cultivate my soul, to pluck up the evil weeds and to prepare it for the good seed of the good God.”

At last, the Revolution was at an end: the priests who remained returned to their flocks; and Ecully joyfully received back one of these confessors of the Faith, the Abbé Balley, who had often ministered to them during the days of terror at the peril of his life. His first care was to collect the boys and young men in his parish, and it was not long before he found out the holiness of Jean Marie. The sight of this holy priest at the altar made the deepest impression on the lad, and his longing to be able to devote himself body and soul to the glory of God and the good of souls increased daily. At last, he opened his heart to Abbé Balley, who encouraged him in every way. Jean Marie was so beloved at Dardilly that all the neighbors offered to share in the expense of his education. His parents gladly gave their consent; but then a terrible difficulty arose. His earlier education had been entirely neglected. He knew no science but that of the saints. His was slow to learn and his memory was unretentive. Sometimes he would be entirely disheartened. But one day the bright idea struck him to go on foot, asking alms as he went, to the tomb of Saint John Francis Regis, and there to ask for the power of learning enough to become a priest. His faith was rewarded and the grace was obtained in a way that astonished both his masters and himself. All seemed to augur success in his vocation, when a new and a terrible blow fell upon him.

It was in the autumn of 1809. Napoleon’s wars had exhausted the youth of France and a fresh conscription was ordered. Jean Marie, although inscribed on the list of students for the priesthood, found he was compelled to serve in the army and was ordered to join his regiment at Bayonne. The grief of his family and friends may be imagined. Every effort was made in vain to find him a substitute. He alone kept up his courage and tried to submit cheerfully to the will of God. On his way to Bayonne, he was taken so ill that he was placed in the Lyons hospital and later was placed under the care of the Sisters of Saint Augustine at Roanne. There, he recovered enough that he was appointed to join a detachment being formed to join the army in Spain. On the way, a stranger came up to him and asked him why he looked so sad. Jean Marie told him his story; and the stranger begged him to follow him through the woods and mountain paths, until he brought him to a lonely house. There, he was kindly welcomed by a newly married couple who gave him food and shelter, while his guide suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. The next day, he was taken to a village called Noes, where he was kindly received and carefully concealed by a woman named Fayot, whom he spoke of later as one of the most beautiful souls he had ever known. Here, he opened a school, having changed his name to that of Jerome, to conceal himself from the search of the soldiers.

The painful suspense of his parents as to his fate was at last relieved by the good widow Fayot herself, who went to Ecully to see them and assure them of his safety. In 1810, his younger brother volunteered to take his place, and the exchange was accepted, so that after fourteen months absence he was able to return to his beloved studies. He was so much beloved at Noes that everyone in the place insisted on contributing something towards his outfit—one giving him a cassock, another table-napkins, and the like. Soon after his return, he was sent to the little Seminary of Verrieres to go through his course of philosophy. He suffered much from his fellow students. When they saw he was their inferior in intellectual abilities, they treated him as a simpleton. This treatment did not last long. His masters had failed at first to appreciate the noble qualities of their slow and timid student, but they were soon filled with admiration of his consistent and constant piety. His companions were not slow to make the same discovery and, conscious of their previous injustice, did all in their power to show their love for and appreciation of him. In 1813, he began his study of theology under his old friend, Abbé Balley. Yet, when the moment of his examination came, his memory became a blank and he made such incoherent replies that the examiners summarily dismissed him. M. Balley went at once to the Superior of the seminary and entreated him to come the next day with the Vicar-General to examine his pupil in private. The result was most satisfactory, and Jean Marie was at once admitted to the great Seminary of Saint Irenaeus to prepare for Holy Orders.

When the time for his ordination drew near, however, the same difficulty arose. Jean Marie, in spite of the humility, sweetness, and piety that had won the esteem of all, was sadly deficient in the learning usually required for candidates for the priesthood. Again, Abbé Balley sought an interview with the Vicar-General, M. Courbon, who administered the diocese in the absence of the Archbishop, Cardinal Fesch, and who was remarkable for his discernment of character. On hearing from all Jean Marie's superiors that, whatever might be his deficiency in learning, Jean Marie was a model of piety, he at once exclaimed, "That is enough. I will receive him—Divine Grace will do the rest." He was accordingly ordained sub-deacon at Lyons by the Bishop of Grenoble, deacon the July following, and six months after was ordained priest at the same place. This was on August 9, 1815, he being then twenty-nine years of age.

His first appointment was as curate to his old friend and master, M. Balley, with whom he remained for two years until the death of the venerable priest. Of M. Balley, Jean Marie Vianney wrote, "He died like the saint he was; and his pure soul departed to add new joy to Paradise." The people of Ecully tried hard to obtain Jean Marie Vianney as his successor, but he steadily refused, alleging his own unworthiness. Three months later, he was appointed Curé of Ars, a little village in the Department of Trévoux.

The peasants in this place were in a state of the utmost ignorance and spiritual poverty. How was their new pastor to win their hearts and bring them to a better state of mind?

He had but two weapons: one, incessant prayer, and the other, the fervent preaching of the word of God. To this, he added the most tender charity; so each one of his flock felt he was loved and cared for. His great desire was to establish in his church the perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: but where was he to find adorers? At last, he found a few faithful souls who were willing to join him. First, Mademoiselle d'Ars joined him. Mademoiselle d'Ars lived in the chateau, or big house of the place, and her time was divided between prayer and the care of the poor and sick. Then a simple peasant joined them, who, whether going to his work or returning from it, never failed to go into the church and adore his Lord. Jean Marie once asked him what he said when he knelt before the Tabernacle. "I say nothing," the old man replied; "but I look at Him and He looks at me!" Then he added a poor widow named Bibot and a Madame Pignaut, who had come from Lyons to be under Jean Marie Vianney's pastoral care. Thus a little group was formed, who began the day with Holy Mass and ended it with night prayers and the Rosary said in common. Very soon, other members of the congregation followed their good example; and, to the joy of the good Curé, all the village came at last, after their day's work, for half an hour's prayer before going to bed.

Encouraging them in more frequent Communion, stopping Sunday labor, and inducing the young girls in the parish to join in a Confraternity of the Rosary were his next objects of zeal. In all of these, he was eminently successful. Then, decorating the neglected parish church was his next goal. He was greatly assisted in this by the Vicomte d'Ars, who sent him a splendid tabernacle, candlesticks, and reliquaries for his new altar. To show his joy and gratitude, Jean Marie and all his flock made a pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Fourvieres at Lyons. Next, he built various small chapels: one dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, his patron; the next, to Saint Philomena, his "dear little saint," (as he called her) who obtained everything and to whom he attributed all the graces and wonders that were done at Ars.

After five years in the parish, Jean Marie was appointed to the parish of Saller, an important place in the Beaujolais. He did not refuse to go, but most earnestly wished to remain in his obscure village. Thrice he packed his poor furniture for departure, and thrice the inundation of the Saone rendered it impossible. In the meantime, his flock redoubled their prayers and remonstrances to the Bishop and the Vicar-General, and, at last, they were persuaded to cancel the appointment and leave the beloved Curé in peace.

From that time until his death, Jean Marie Vianney never left his parish, save to assist neighboring priests occasionally in giving missions and retreats. In one that he gave at Trévoux, in 1823, the number of conversions was so great that he was beset with similar applications; but he accepted such work only when he could do so without neglecting his beloved parishioners at Ars. In 1825, he began an important work in his parish, which was the founding of an asylum for orphan and destitute girls, which he called "La

Providence.” To purchase a house for this purpose he sold all he had in the world and anticipated all he received from his living. He placed it under the care of two very pious women whom he had himself trained in obedience, humility, simplicity, and absolute dependence on God—Benoite Lardet and Catherine Lassagne. They began in the utmost poverty, without even bread, but, trusting in Divine Providence, their wants were, one by one, supplied. Soon the number of the orphans increased to such a degree that the house had to be enlarged. The Curé became at once architect, mason, and carpenter—he made the mortar, cut the stones, and carried them with his own hands; so that, fired with a like zeal, the whole parish came to help in the work. Over and over again, food was miraculously multiplied in answer to his prayers. His granary was filled with corn and his cellar with wine. Money poured in from the most unexpected quarters and always at the moment of his greatest need. The type upon which he had founded his Home was rather that of a poor and pious family than of a charitable institution. It embraced none of the modern systems of learning; but the girls were taught to write and sum, besides needlework and knitting, the rest of the time being filled up by household duties. The Curé gave them catechetical instruction every day himself, speaking to them of the chief truths of faith and, above all, of the fear and love of God. These little instructions have been collected by his old friend, the Abbé Monnin, and are models of beautiful and touching teaching on the Sacraments, on the practice of certain special virtues, and the sweetness of the Real Presence.

We have said nothing yet of the heroic life of the Curé d’Ars. There are few even among the saints whose daily lives bear the mark of a more systematic and unflinching crucifixion of the whole man, a more uniform practice of both exterior and interior mortification, than we find in the portrait traced of him by those most familiar with the details of his really supernatural existence. His ordinary food consisted of some pieces of black bread, or some potatoes, which he boiled for himself once a week. In vain, did his pious housekeeper or any friend make him some little delicacy; it went instantly to the poor and sick. He had at first a straw pallet on his bed, but, finding that too luxurious, he slept latterly on the floor with a stone for his pillow. His whole day, with very short exceptions, was spent in the church, and he rarely allowed himself more than two or three hours sleep. When his confessional became so crowded that from midnight the people were waiting for their turn, he reduced the already small amount of rest allowed his worn-out body. As to his clothes, though particular as to cleanliness, he never would have more than one cassock, which he wore until it was in rags; his hat was shapeless and his boots were guiltless of blacking. Yet, in this guise, he would attend ecclesiastical conferences and other clerical meetings, and, in answer to the raillery of his companions, would reply, “What I have got on is quite good enough for the Curé d’Ars,” thus adding humiliation to mortification.

The sufferings inflicted on him by the devil were added to those he himself had so mercilessly waged upon his poor body, which for years interrupted the little sleep he allowed himself. His biographer states that this persecution went on, with more or less violence, for a period of thirty years. Not only were horrible noises heard, which alarmed everyone who came to the house, but terrible doubts of his salvation, fear of hell, and other spiritual conflicts were added to his physical tortures. What courage this man had, who could hold out, night after night, against this continual, sensible pressure of the powers of evil, and return to his daily labor for souls with a brow so unruffled and a voice as calm and soothing as if none but ministering angels had been suffered to come near his bed! His brother priests often laughed at him for these "hallucinations," as they called them. Some went so far as to treat him as a visionary and a maniac. One evening, when he was giving a retreat at Saint Trivier-sur-Moignans, this raillery took a bitter tone. "Your presbytery," they said, "is nothing better than an old barn; the rats are quite at home there, and you take them for devils!" The holy Curé said nothing, but retired to his room rejoicing in humiliation. That very night, however, the scoffers were rudely awakened by a fearful noise. The presbytery seemed upside down, the walls shook as if with an earthquake, while fearful cracks seemed to threaten to bring down the whole house. Everyone rushed out of bed and to the Curé's room. There, they found him resting. "Get up," they cried; "the presbytery is falling!" "Oh, no," he replied. "I know very well what it is. Go back to your beds. There is nothing to fear." They never after this jested at his nightly disturbances!

These violent noises almost always coincided with some wonderful manifestation of Divine Grace in the conversion of noted sinners. So, the holy Curé accepted the trial patiently for their sakes. One day, when there was a great celebration of the Forty Hours Adoration of Ars, a strong smell of burning pervaded the place. It was found that the humble bed and all the furniture of the Curé's room were burnt, including the few poor holy pictures round his bed; yet the floor remained unscathed, though, being old wood, it would have caught fire instantly had the conflagration been a natural one. The Curé, as it happened, had been all night in adoration. When told of the event, he said, laughing, "As he could not burn the man, he has consoled himself by burning his bed. Today I think I am the poorest man in the parish. They all have beds, and now, thank God, I have none." Somebody having begun to pity him, he answered, quickly, "Oh, there is less harm in this than in the slightest venial sin."

Yet, it was not only the evil spirit who was permitted thus to torment him. The Curé d'Ars would have wanted one essential mark of sanctity if this persecution had not been accompanied by the dislike and misrepresentations of even good men. He bore his trial for more than eight years; but he lived it down. A meeting had been held by the most influential clergy in the neighborhood, who resolved to make a formal complaint to the

new Bishop of Belley “of the imprudent zeal and mischievous enthusiasm of this ignorant and foolish Curé.” Monsignor Devie sent his Vicar-General to Ars to inquire into the whole matter, who returned edified and delighted with all he had seen and heard. “I wish you, gentlemen, a little of that folly at which you scoff. It would do no harm to your supposed wisdom.” Such was the verdict of the good and holy Bishop after a most minute inquiry. Never during that terrible trial did word or look betray what Jean Marie Vianney suffered or mar the serenity of his face. Believing himself to be deserving of all the blame cast upon him, he always expected to be ignominiously dismissed from his curé.

Yet, he worked on, just as hard and just as calmly. To a priest who one day came to complain of the wearisome and unjust persecution to which he was subjected, Jean Marie Vianney replied, “My friend, do as I do. Let them say all they have to say; then there will be no more to be said, and they will be silent.” He practiced to the letter the maxim so often on his lips, “The saints never complain.” When asked how he could possibly, under the continual threatening of dismissal and amidst the wearing vexation of this strife of tongues, have preserved his energy and the self-command necessary to labor on with unabated ardor and perseverance, he replied, “We do much more for God when we do the same things without pleasure or satisfaction.”

To the jealousy and calumnies of the good were added the bitter enmity of the bad, who dared to accuse this man, an example of the most austere penance and modest gravity, of being a vile hypocrite and of leading an evil and scandalous life. When someone was expressing his indignation at such imputations on his spotless purity, he answered:

“I am sorry that God should be offended: but, on the other hand. I rejoice in all that is said against me, because the condemnation of the world is the benediction of God. I was afraid of being a hypocrite when people were making some account of me; and I am very glad to see that unfounded estimation of me turned into contempt.”

Thus did his humility defeat every wile of the devil. It was at this very time that the concourse of pilgrims to Ars began to increase in so wonderful a manner. His great miracles and his great works (supported by abundant alms) also date from this period.

Yet, this faithful disciple of his Divine Master was to drink the draught of His own chalice—that dereliction of soul that is the heaviest of all trials to one who loves God with his whole heart. The Abbé Baux, who was his confessor for many years, affirms that his soul was habitually subject to the bitterest desolation. Our Lord hid from him the immense good that his efforts were working. He honestly believed himself to be utterly useless and devoid of piety, understanding, knowledge, discernment, or virtue. “He was continually haunted,” writes his great friend, Abbé Monnin, “by confusion for past faults

and by fears of faults to come; and by the constant dread he had of doing ill on every occasion.” “I have no resource against temptations to despair,” he once said, “but to throw myself before the Tabernacle, like a little dog at his master’s feet.”

His intense appreciation of the sanctity required of the ministers of the sanctuary was another source of suffering.

Speaking one day of the difficulty of corresponding with a true priest’s vocation, he exclaimed:

“Ah, to say Mass one ought to be a seraph. If we really knew what Mass is we should die! We shall never understand how blessed a thing it is to say Mass until we are in heaven. How pitiable is the state of that priest who does this as an ordinary thing! Some have begun well and said Mass devoutly for some months; yet afterwards . . .” Here, his voice was choked with tears. “Oh, when we consider what it is that our Great God has entrusted to us, miserable creatures that we are! What does the mischief is all this worldly news, this conversation, these politics, these newspapers. We fill our heads with them: then we say our Mass or our Office . . . We do not enter enough into ourselves. We do not know what we are doing. What we want is more reflection, more prayer, and more union with God. Oh, how unhappy is a priest who is not interior! One of our great misfortunes is that our souls become callous. At first, we are deeply moved at the state of those who do not love God. At last, we come to say, “These people do their duty well, so much the better. These others keep away from the Sacraments, so much the worse.” and we do nothing—neither more nor less—in consequence.

“Ah!” he continued, “there is no one in this world so unhappy, very often, as a priest. In what does he pass his life? In beholding the good God offended; His Holy Name blasphemed; His commandments continually violated; and His love continually outraged. The priest is like Saint Peter in the praetorium of Pilate. He has always before his eyes his Lord insulted, despised, mocked, and covered with ignominy. It is horrible. If only God were less good! But, He is so good! What will be our shame when the Day of Judgment discovers to us our ingratitude! We shall then understand it; but it will be too late.”

In spite of all these mental and bodily sufferings, however, there was no outward indication of the conflict within, so great was the strength and the patience with which he possessed his soul.

The pilgrimage to Ars, which, for a period of thirty years, seemed to bring back a scene from the days of Saint Bernard to the unbelieving nineteenth century, began shortly after the foundation of the “Providence” asylum. “Divine Providence,” wrote M. Leon Aubineau, “so ordered it that men and women enamored of all kinds of vanities should

come in crowds to this out-of-the-way village to do homage to humility and simplicity. While the philosophers of our day are all inveighing against Confession and its consequences, the people have replied by flocking to Ars to venerate a confessor!”

Persons of the highest rank and most refined and luxurious habits were content to be ill-lodged and ill-fed; to rise at daylight or before; to be squeezed, elbowed, and repulsed; to brave cold, hunger, thirst, fatigue, and want of sleep—all to catch a few words from the holy Curé. They would not have done as much for any king or queen.

In 1835, it was found necessary to organize a regular system of public conveyances from Lyons to Ars, and of steamboats on the Saone. Jean Marie Vianney soon arrived at that state to which Saint Philip Neri bound himself by vow—never to have an hour or a moment to himself. From that year, he was dispensed by the Bishop from the usual pastoral retreat. “You have no need of a retreat,” said the Bishop; “and there are souls at Ars that have urgent need of you.” M. Monnin states that, even in 1848, the number of pilgrims amounted to 80,000 in the course of the year, and they went on steadily increasing. They were admitted to his confessional each in his turn; but Jean Marie Vianney would sometimes call out of the crowd such as, by the supernatural light vouchsafed to him, he perceived to be in most urgent need of spiritual succor. No other claim of precedence was allowed.

This daily and unremitting labor for souls constituted the real miracle of the life of Jean Marie Vianney, which was passes, in fact, in the confessional. Of the twenty-two hours he gave to labor, he reserved only time to say his Mass and Office and to snatch the semblance of a meal at midday. Two hours only were given to sleep. At one o’clock in the morning he was in his confessional in the chapel of Saint John the Baptist until six or seven o’clock, according to the season, when he left it to prepare to say Mass. So closely did the crowd press upon him that it was necessary to clear a passage for him whenever he stirred. After Mass, he blessed the various objects of piety which were presented to him, drank a little milk which had been brought to him in the sacristy, and then heard the confessions of forty or fifty men who had been waiting all night. At ten o’clock, he closed the sacristy door and said his Office, kneeling on the floor without any support. When that had been done, he went to a little room under the belfry, where he confessed the sick or those who could not wait any longer at Ars. At eleven o’clock, he catechized. As he went down from the pulpit, the throng was thicker than ever. At twelve, he went to his poor dinner, the people watching for him at every outlet from the house. At half-past twelve, he went to the “Providence” on parish business or went to visit the sick. Then he returned to the church, said Vespers on his knees, and went back to his confessional until night.

It might have been supposed that labors so incessant and absorbing would have prevented him from giving his full attention to each soul in particular. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Every one of his penitents believed him or herself to be the object of Saint Jean Vianney's special solicitude. He had that great art and wisdom that enables a man to concentrate his whole mind on the present moment. Therefore, even amidst the overwhelming pressure of a multitude of people, he listened to the penitent at his feet as if he had nothing else to do or to think of. For thirty years, such was the life of the Curé of Ars. A man of the world wrote not long ago, "People speak of the miracles at Ars; but the greatest of all was the laborious and penitential life of Jean Marie Vianney. That a man could do what he did, and do it every day, without ever growing weary or sinking under it, is what surpasses all human comprehension. This is to me the miracle of miracles."

In the beginning of May 1843, however, he was seized with an illness that threatened to be his last. The concourse of pilgrims in May had been immense, and at length even his giant strength gave way. He had previously been attacked by a fever that was so prevalent in the unhealthy atmosphere of the district, and was ever afterwards subject to acute headaches, which he bore with his accustomed calm and cheerfulness; but this time his health gave way so completely that the Last Sacraments were administered to him. The despair and desolation of his flock may be imagined. Then he begged that a Mass might be said for him at the altar of Saint Philomena, when he fell into a peaceful slumber, which was the precursor of his perfect recovery. He attributed his cure entirely, under God to the intercession of his "dear little saint," as he called her. A profound terror of the judgments of God and an intense fear of death characterized this first severe illness of the holy Curé. Yet, when the hour of departure really came, sixteen years later, there was no trace of this fear. It had, by then, given place to the simple trustfulness of a little child sinking to rest in its mother's arms.

At this time, however, upon his recovery, the Bishop insisted on his accepting a coadjutor, and appointed M. Raymond, the Curé of Savigneux, to assist him. Jean Marie Vianney no sooner saw M. Raymond installed than he thought he might now leave his work in better hands than his own. He further thought that Divine Providence had thus set him free to follow the long-cherished wish of his heart for perfect solitude; or, as he expressed it, "to weep over his own poor sins, so that God might perchance have mercy on him." He had run away once, three years before, one very dark night, when an interior voice called him back to Ars. Now, however, on the plea of health, he went back to his old home at Dardilly, on foot and by wayside paths, lest he should be pursued and forcibly brought back.

The whole parish was in utter consternation. His flock followed him to Dardilly, so he felt he must seek some other refuge. In the meanwhile, the Bishop positively forbade

him to leave his diocese and begged him to go with M. Raymond and make a pilgrimage to the chapel of Beaumont, an ancient sanctuary of Our Lady. They went into the church to say their Office when they arrived; and, on rising from their knees to go out, found, to their astonishment, that the whole church was filled. M. Raymond told him that he could not do less than say a few words to these poor people. The Curé began to speak to them on the love of God, and his voice, which had been so weak since his illness, was restored to him, so he could be heard by the whole church. The next morning they both said Mass; and, during his thanksgiving, Jean Marie Vianney, turning to his companion, said, suddenly, "Let us return to Ars!"

His flock was overjoyed. The laborer left his work, the thresher threw down his flail, and the women ran out of their houses. At last a cry arose, "Here is our Saint!" and his children crowded round him, struggling as to which should be the first to get his blessing, to touch his cassock, or to kiss his feet. He went straight to the church and said the evening prayers, amid the joyful and grateful tears of the people. Like his Divine Master, the Curé d'Ars having fled from the applause of men, returned to consummate his sacrifice.

Once more, however, was the temptation to escape to come over him, for he always felt and said, "It was a fearful thing to pass from the cure of souls to the tribunal of God."

He had raised funds for the foundation of a society of missionaries, which was established at Pont d'Ain, and which enabled missions to be preached in ninety parishes of the diocese. Monsignor Devie's greatest wish was to connect this house with Ars, so that the example of the holy Curé should be continually before the eyes of his young priests. This design was carried out by his successor, Monsignor Chalandon, who, in 1853, appointed Abbé Toccanier, one of the missionaries at Pont d'Ain, to go to Ars and assist Jean Marie Vianney. Here was a favorable opportunity for the good Curé to put, as he expressed it, "a better man in his place." The serious illness of Jean Marie's brother gave him the pretext, and, in spite of the efforts of his flock, he again set out in a carriage provided for the purpose. Yet, he had scarcely started when he was seized with a most unusual feeling of fatigue. He got out of the carriage to get some fresh air, and tried to walk, but in vain. M. Toccanier, who was with him, offered to go on to visit Jean Marie's brother in his place. Jean Marie Vianney accepted, and no sooner had he turned his horse's head towards Ars than all feelings of weakness and illness disappeared. He was met by the omnibus from Lyons, full of pilgrims, some of whom had not been to confession for forty years. "You see," said his friend, "that the good God stopped you Himself this time, to bring you back to the work so dear to Him—the saving of souls." Jean Marie Vianney smiled, but the lesson had not been lost upon him. He now understood that what he had believed was an inspiration, was, in fact, a temptation; and never again strove to leave the path that God had so visibly pointed out to him.

The celebrity that became so keen a suffering to this humble and holy man of God increased as time went on, and was the more extraordinary from the fact that it rested on his sanctity alone. One distinguished pilgrim exclaimed, "He is the very model of that childlike spirit that Jesus loved; and, therefore, it is that God is with him." Another, a celebrated poet, was so struck by his appearance that he involuntarily said out aloud, "I have never seen God so near." "True, my friend," instantly said Jean Marie Vianney, pointing to the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar, "God is not far from us; we have Him there, in the sanctuary of His love."

Not only eminent laymen from all parts of the world flocked to his confessional, but Bishops and Princes of the Church. Among these was Monsignor Dupanloup, who came filled with fear on receiving the burden of the episcopate. "There are many Bishops in the calendar of saints," replied Jean Marie Vianney, "but hardly any curés. Judge, Monsignor, whether you have as much cause to tremble as I!"

In May of 1854, the Bishop of Birmingham, Dr. Ullathorne, came, and left a graphic account of the extraordinary impression the Curé produced upon him. The Bishop was speaking of prayer for England, and of the sufferings of our poorer Catholics on account of their Faith. The Curé was listening, his eyes nearly closed; when, all of a sudden, he opened them wide, and, fixing them on the Bishop with extraordinary brilliancy, exclaimed in a tone of confident assurance, "I believe and am sure that the Church in England will return again to its ancient splendor!"

Père Lacordaire paid him a visit the previous year, and listened in silent reverence to the words and advice of the holy Curé. When Jean Marie Vianney heard who it was, he exclaimed, "That which is greatest in science is come to humble itself to what is least in ignorance; the two extremes have met." He had the greatest dislike to having his portrait taken, and, on one occasion, when a very holy painter came with a letter from the Bishop, to beg for a sitting, he replied, "Willingly—provided Monseigneur will permit me to leave the place directly afterwards!" The poor artist was compelled to catch the likeness by stealth, and with much difficulty.

Among the marks of honor he received was the Dignity of Canon conferred upon him by Monsignor Chalandon, and the Cross of the Legion of Honor, sent to him by the Emperor. He never wore his Canon's dress except at the ceremony of his reception by the Chapter. As to the Cross, all he said was, "I can't conceive what made the Emperor send me this, except for having been once a deserter!" He had opened the case containing it, supposing it was a relic or something for his church; and his look of blank disappointment was well remembered, as he said, "It's nothing but this, after all."

We have said nothing of Jean Marie Vianney's personal appearance. He was rather short and not devoid of vigor. His whole frame indicated a highly nervous temperament. Up to the very day of his death, his hearing retained its acuteness, his sight its keenness, his mind its clearness, and his memory its freshness. Yet, his body had reached such a degree of extenuation as to seem almost transparent. His head fell slightly forward on his breast, from the habit of recollection and adoration. His hair fell thick and long, like a white aureole, round his head. On that emaciated face there was no token of aught earthly or human; it bore the impress of divine grace alone. The eyes alone betokened life; they shone with exceeding luster. There was a kind of supernatural fire in Jean Marie Vianney's glance, which continually varied in intensity and expression. That glance dilated and sparkled when he spoke of the love of God, while the thought of sin veiled it with a mist of tears. It was by turns sweet and piercing, terrible and loving, and child-like and profound. It was a very furnace of tenderness and compassion when fixed upon anyone. It had that mysterious power of attraction bestowed by Our Lord upon those closely united to Himself. Wonderful to say, that glance, which searched all hearts, never frightened anyone. Without thinking or knowing it, this man, so weak in bodily presence, drew to himself all who came near him and within the sphere of his influence. Once one met his eye, or heard his voice, one was to be fascinated by him forever. Men of the world acknowledged that after they had seen the Curé d'Ars, his image seemed to haunt them and his resemblance to follow them wherever they went, so vivid was the impression of his sanctity.

Next to his eyes, the most remarkable thing in the face of the Curé d'Ars was his profile, the lines of which were bold, harmonious, and well defined. Although the sweetness and serenity of his face betokened the divine peace that dwelt within him, his characteristic expression, when at rest, was a kind of supernatural sadness. Yet, when he came forth from his habitual state of recollection to converse with men, a bright and gracious smile was ever ready to respond to every look turned upon him. In fact, every one of his features seemed to smile. In conversation, he was gentle, cheerful, and even playful. The spirit of God that dwelt within him gave an incomparable sweetness, fitness, and simplicity to his lightest word. As he always said, "the people say of others now and then, right thing in the right way."

When Monsignor Chalandon came for his visitation, Jean Marie met him with the words, "Monsignor, the days on which your holy predecessor visited our parish were days of benediction, and no wonder, for where the saints pass, God passes with them. We have lost nothing Monsignor. On the contrary, we have gained, for Monsignor Devie still blesses us from heaven, and you, whom he chose to carry on his work, bless us on earth. Bless us, Monsignor; bless the pastor and bless the flock, that we may always, and altogether, dearly love our good God."

Monsignor de Langalerie, said to him, “My good Curé, will you kindly permit me to say Mass in your church?”

Jean Marie at once replied, “Monsignor, I am only sorry that it is not Christmas, that you might say three.”

At the end of the long procession on Corpus Christi, one of his friends wanted him to take some food. He refused, saying, “I do not need it. How should I be tired? I have been bearing Him Who bears me.”

A religious once said to him, with great simplicity, “Father, people believe generally that you are very ignorant.”

“They are quite right, my child,” he replied. “But it does not matter. I can teach you more than you will practice.”

We might multiply such speeches here were we not afraid of exceeding the space allotted to us.

It is a difficult task to preserve perfect tranquility amidst incessant activity; recollection amidst the most absorbing exterior labors; entire sweetness and self-possession and constant union with God in the midst of hurry, noise, and an undue pressure of work. Yet the Curé d’Ars was exceptional at doing so. No matter what moment he might be seen (always surrounded, pressed, and assailed by the indiscreet multitude) and no matter how he was harassed by absurd and idle questions, tormented by impossible requests, called hither and thither, intercepted whichever way he turned, and not knowing how or whom to answer first, he was always himself. He was never irritable or impatient, always gracious, always amiable, always compassionate, always ready to yield and grant everything to all with a sweet, calm, and smiling countenance. It was impossible to detect a cloud on his brow or the slightest shade of annoyance or discontent. Still less did anyone ever hear a word of reproach or complaint from his lips. Towards the last years of his life, he was surrounded by the most clamorous and unrestrained tokens of respect, confidence, admiration, and veneration; he was applauded, followed, borne in triumph by the multitude. Whenever he saw them haunting his steps, hanging on his words, kneeling for his blessing—he was still the same; as simple, modest, humble, and ingenuous as a child, never seeming for a moment to suspect that his own sanctity had anything whatever to do with this extraordinary concourse or with the miracles acclaimed by so many tongues.

Another remarkable feature in his sanctity was his extraordinary consistency. Most men have their good and bad days, their hour of weakness or irritability. With the Curé d’Ars, it was otherwise. He was watched day and night, day after day, week after week, and he

was never known or seen to act but in the most perfect manner. In all he did, he combined the utmost purity of intention with the greatest intensity of fervor, so that it was impossible for those about him to find an instance in which he might have done better what he had in hand. His tender and considerate kindness was one of his most striking characteristics. It sprang, in part, from his total self-forgetfulness. Never seeking sympathy under the severest sufferings of mind and body, he gave all he had to those around him, especially to the poor, weak, ignorant, and sinful. He was as sensitive, careful of, and anxious for the health of his missionaries as he was sternly insensitive towards his own.

“On one of my first Sundays,” writes M. Toccanier, “he remarked that I coughed at vespers. I was astonished to see him come in to me, after night prayers, through a violent storm, with his little lantern in his hand, and say, “My dear friend, I fear you have a bad cough. Stay in bed tomorrow morning. I will say the first Mass in your place and catechize the children.”

To buy for one a warm cloak, for another an umbrella, and for a third some other material comfort, were typical daily proofs of this tender consideration of those about him and carried into all the most insignificant details of his daily life. He never sat down in the presence of others, and did not allow others to stand in his own. How could anyone help loving a man who was himself so full of love? It was not by alms that he won all hearts, but by his loving tenderness and sympathy; by the active and heartfelt interest he took in others. With the growth of his interior life, his solicitude for his neighbor seemed also to grow day by day.

Of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, we have given already sufficient examples in the holy Curé's life. During Mass, he seemed actually to see Our Lord and when the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, the expression on his face was such that it riveted the attention of all who saw him. He had received the gift of prayer to a super-eminent degree along with a constant realization of the presence of God. Yet, he had not the smallest affectation or singularity in his devotions and deprecated any posture in church that might attract attention.

“Jean Marie Vianney,” wrote one of his biographers, “had but one thought—to love God and to make Him be loved by others. Always God's work—never the slightest admixture of his own. Never did he allow himself the most trifling relaxation and never an instant's respite.” “It is impossible to conceive,” wrote Catherine Lassagne, “how much M. le Curé had at heart the salvation of souls.” He labored and wept for them by day; he suffered for them by night. To satisfy his burning charity and insatiable liberality, he would sell all he possessed, even to his clothes.

“We should never repulse the poor,” he would say. “If we cannot really give them anything, let us pray that someone else may be inspired to do so. People scold me and say, ‘They will make bad use of their money.’ Let them make what use of it they will. They will have to answer for the use they make of your alms; but you will have to answer for not giving it if you can.”

Money, however, poured in to him from all quarters, and not just money, but food and wine were miraculously supplied to him on several occasions. When he wanted to make a foundation, he would simply pray to Our Lady or one of the saints, “If this work be pleasing to thee, send me the means to carry it out,” and his simple faith was invariably rewarded. The sum he received for the single work of the mission amounted to 200,000 francs; and this was only one of the many great works he was permitted to accomplish. To a priest, who was in despair for money to finish his church, he said, “My secret is very simple—it is only to pray, and when you have obtained what you have asked, to give everything and keep nothing.”

Of the austerity of his life, we have already spoken, as also of the severity of his bodily sufferings; but he mortified himself in a hundred little ways besides. He would never smell a flower, never drink when parched with thirst, never brush off a fly, never appear to be conscious of an unpleasant smell, never express disgust at any repulsive sight, never complain of anything whatever that affected him personally, never lean against anything when kneeling, and so on. He suffered terribly from cold; but would never take any means to preserve himself from it, and once, during a very severe winter, both his feet were frozen.

Love, humility, poverty, mortification—these were the links of the chain that carried this marvelous soul to heaven. He would often say, “We have nothing of our own but our will, and a single act of renunciation of that is more pleasing to God than fasts or disciplines.

Even in the world, we might find opportunities to duplicate this kind of renunciation. We can deprive ourselves of a visit that would give us pleasure. We can perform some distasteful work of charity. We can go to rest a little later or get up a little earlier. Of two things to be done, we can choose that which is the least pleasant to us. It is this that makes saints.”

“Who was your master in theology?” was once ironically asked of the Curé d’Ars. “I had the same Master as Saint Peter,” he replied with the utmost simplicity. His faith, in fact, was the only source of his science—his only book was Our Lord Jesus Christ. He spoke without any other preparation than his habitual recollection in God and with perfect self-possession that arose from entire forgetfulness of self. He thought only of the souls

before him and made them think only of God. This stood him instead of any great talent or rhetoric and gave a singular power and irresistible authority to the simplest words he uttered.

“It was his whole being that preached,” wrote the Abbé Monnin, “and the power and energy of his words struck home to his hearers even without the beauty of imagery that abounded in his sermons.” “Those who only heard him in his catechetical instructions,” writes M. Monnin, “only half knew his power. It was in his Sunday discourses that the apostle, the prophet, the saint, consumed with thirst for the salvation of souls, came forth in his full power and mastery.”

In the words of Monsignor Devie, “The Curé d’Ars was not learned, but he was specially enlightened by the spirit of God.” The extraordinary gift of illumination with which he was endowed shone forth preeminently in his direction of souls. His singular gift of discernment enabled him to give counsel to every person who came to him—counsel that proved was the most conducive to the perfection of each. One he would advise to enter a religious order; another to wait until some home duty had been discharged. He would advise a third to marry, a fourth to lead a single life in the world, and so on. With loving playfulness, he would answer one girl who had been pouring out a long story that he knew by heart, “My child! In which month of the year do you talk least?” As she bit her lips in silence, he added, “It must be the month of February, because it has three days less in it than any other!”

A parish priest came to him one day with a very complicated case upon which no one he had hitherto consulted had been able to throw any light. Jean Marie replied with one word, which threw such vivid and instantaneous light on the subject that the priest was amazed and overjoyed. “Where did you study theology?” he exclaimed. Jean Marie pointed to his prie-dieu. His judgment was so esteemed, that there was not a charity or religious congregation founded in France during his life that was not first submitted to him. In this way Mde. Eugénie Smet laid her plans before him when she was thinking of starting her congregation for the relief of the souls in Purgatory. She begged him to pray especially for this project on All Souls Day. The holy Curé remained for some time with his head between his hands. Then he looked up and said with tears, “This is the work God has been so long asking for.” He then dictated a letter to her, which began as follows, “The idea of founding an Order for the relief of the souls in Purgatory comes directly from the Heart of Our Lord, Who will bless and prosper it.”

This sketch of this holy man’s life would be incomplete if we did not say a few words of the miracles that were worked in answer to his prayers. Of course, these miracles were submitted to official investigation during the process of his beatification; and they are attested by too many eyewitnesses to admit of any doubt.

The first, in 1838, was the cure of one of the directresses of the “Providence” who had been entirely given up by the doctors, and was, in fact, in her agony. The Curé prayed earnestly to Saint Philomena, and she was instantly restored to health and strength.

A poor soldier had a crippled child and brought him to the Curé. “Be consoled,” he said; “your child will be cured.” The words were hardly out of his mouth when the boy jumped up and began to walk.

A similar cure occurred with another child, whose mother had traveled many miles to bring him to Ars. For twenty-four hours, she had hung upon his steps, holding up her boy with a gesture of such faith and entreaty that no one had the heart to drive her away. That evening, the boy begged his mother to buy him some shoes, as the Curé had told him he would walk the next day. Full of faith, the poor woman did so, and was rewarded by seeing her child run to the church, crying out, “I am cured! I am cured!” The mother only implored to be allowed to thank him. The Curé was inexorable. Later he was told that he must help her to thank Saint Philomena, to whom he always attributed all his cures. Then he exclaimed in a tone of mortification, “Saint Philomena really ought to have cured this little thing at home!”

Endless tales of the same kind are recorded; and still more wonderful were the miracles of grace of which he was the channel. This was emphatically his work, to which the bodily cures wrought at Ars were but secondary.

A gentleman persuaded his friend, a noted atheist, to accompany him to Ars. The atheist went from pure curiosity, believing in nothing. Passing out of the sacristy to say his Mass, the Curé’s eye fell upon this man. It was but a glance, but that glance pierced the man’s soul. He remained motionless during the Mass. When the Curé passed again, an invisible force seemed to drag the atheist to follow the priest. The door was closed, and all the man could say was, “I have a crushing burden on my shoulders!” “I know it,” replied the Curé, “and you must get rid of it at once. Kneel down and tell me all your poor life, and Our Lord will take up your burden, for He has said, “Come unto Me, all ye who are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” The man did as he was bid, and opened his whole heart to the good Curé, who comforted and cheered him. The man left the sacristy full of faith and hope and joy. No doubts ever destroyed his peace.

A volume could be filled with similar conversions—conversions that continued up to the very time of Jean Marie’s death; for at last, the hour came when this faithful servant was called to his reward. The intense heat of the month of July in 1859 had tried him very much and the church was positively suffocating from the great crowd that continually filled it. Several times, he fainted away. Yet, the moment he recovered, he went back to his confessional. On Wednesday, July 29, he went through his usual routine of labor—

catechizing, passing seventeen hours in the confessional, and ending with night prayers. When he returned home, he sank onto a chair, saying, "I can do no more." He went to bed, but at one o'clock in the morning, when he tried to rise to go as usual to the church, he fainted away. Someone came in and exclaimed, "You are ill, M. le Curé; shall I call someone?" "No, it is not worthwhile. I think it is my poor end." He had foreseen and foretold his approaching death and did not speak of saying Mass, which was a bad sign. He would not submit to the use of a fan, however, which he considered a luxury. "Leave me with my poor flies," he feebly said. "You are suffering very much," said one of the watchers. "We are going to invoke Saint Philomena with all our might that she may cure you as she did before." "Oh, Saint Philonnena will not do so now," was his only reply.

The consternation was deep and universal when Jean Marie Vianney's absence from the confessional was perceived. The missionaries and the brothers of the Holy Family watched continually round his bed, while night and day his pillow was tended by his old and beloved friend, the Comte des Garets. Another of his parishioners took up his station on the roof of the presbytery and, under the burning sun of August, during the whole time of Jean Marie Vianney's illness, continuously watered the roofs and walls to keep up a refreshing coolness around him. On Tuesday evening, Jean Marie Vianney asked for the Last Sacraments; silent tears flowed from his eyes when the bell announced the last visit of his Lord. A few hours later, he wept once more, but they were tears of joy. They fell upon the cross of his Bishop, Monsignor de Langalerie, who came, in breathless agitation, praying aloud as he forced his way through the kneeling crowd who intercepted his passage. He was but just in time. At two o'clock in the morning, without struggle or agony, Jean Baptiste Marie Vianney fell asleep in the Lord, while the priest was pronouncing the words, "Let the holy angels of God come forth to meet him and conduct him to the city of the heavenly Jerusalem."

The Curé d'Ars gave up his holy soul to God in the arms of the faithful companions of his labors, the Abbés Toccanier and Monnin. The life of extraordinary self-sacrifice, devotion, prayer, charity, patience, humility, and mortification was over. He had fought the good fight. He had finished his course. He had received his crown.

The emaciated body, seamed and scarred with the glorious stigmata of penance, lay on his poor pallet, arrayed by the hands of his beloved missionaries in the cotta and cassock that he had never laid aside in life. One of the lower rooms of the presbytery was hung with white drapery and flowers. There, for two long days and nights, came pilgrims from every part of France to weep and pray around him, who, for the first time, had no answering tears to give, but whose prayers, now ten-fold mightier than before, were

rising for them before the throne of God. Notwithstanding the intense heat, not a trace of decomposition appeared upon the body up to the time of the funeral. The venerable face lay uncovered, sweet, and calm, as if in a quiet sleep.

The funeral procession was formed on Saturday. From early dawn, dense masses of people had been collecting in and near the village until six or seven thousand were gathered together. More than three hundred priests and representatives of all religious orders came to pay their last tribute of reverence to the departed saint.

The procession halted in the square before the church. There, the Bishop of Belley, in words that have echoed through many lands, told what had been the life and death of this good and faithful servant of God. "The apostolate of the saints," writes M. Monnin, "ends not with their earthly life. Their relics have a mission, too. We hope Jean Marie Vianney will carry on his work from his venerated tomb. Several instances of extraordinary graces and bodily cures, wrought by his intercession, have already occurred. We may not forestall the judgment of Holy Church; but when it shall please Him to call this new star to shine in the firmament of His Church, it shall answer, 'I am here.' It will be the hour of His Divine power, and many miracles will reveal it."

Many hearts have thrilled at the words of consolation that he spoke.

*Pray for us, then, O holy Confessor of Christ,
by the slow martyrdom of your lifelong toils for souls!*

*Pray for our priests, that their labors may be multiplied and their numbers
and strength are made equal to their labors.*

*Pray for our unbaptized and neglected children,
O father of the orphan and outcast!*

*Pray for those, who, from no fault of theirs, have been brought up in
heresy and schism, that their eyes may be opened and that they may see
the light and the beauty of God's Church.*

The Beatification of the Venerable Jean Baptiste Marie Vianney was decreed by Pope Pius X in Saint Peter's on January 8, 1905. His Canonization was celebrated twenty years later, on May 31, 1925, by Pope Pius XI.

Nihil obstat:

J. Donovan,
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