

# St. John Vianney

BORN 1786; DIED 1859  
PRIEST  
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 4

**D**ESTRUCTION OF CHRISTIAN FAITH has been a preoccupation of Western culture since the “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century in Europe pitted reason against belief. The French Revolution, which began so well that it had the support of the Church, rapidly became so hostile to religion that it turned churches into Temples of Reason and sought to uproot the Catholicism of the French people. To them was sent St. John Vianney, who restored a small village to fervor and brought many thousands back to the practice of their faith.

John was born in the village of Dardilly near Lyons, France, the fourth of six children of Mathieu Vianney, a peasant farmer, and Marie Béluze. He was three when the French Revolution began and seven when Lyons was overrun by revolutionary troops. The family could go to Mass only in secret, when a priest loyal to the Pope, risking deportation or execution, arrived. John’s parents sheltered these faithful priests in their home. Despite the revolutionaries’ efforts to destroy the Catholic faith — in Ly-

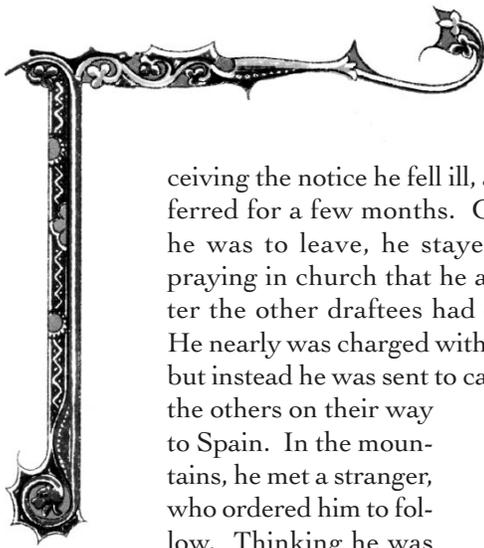


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ons alone one hundred thirty priests were martyred — John’s parents remained devout and were known for their charity to the poor. His mother was his teacher in the faith. From the age of seven, shepherding his father’s cattle and sheep, he preferred praying and playing “church” to games. Well-liked by the other children, he taught the faith to them. He made his First Communion in secret. He attended school for only a year but, although of average intelligence, he found learning difficult except for the catechism. Eventually, the government again permitted public celebration of the Mass.

When John asked his father permission to study for the priesthood, his father initially refused, unable to pay for John’s education and needing him on the farm. John only received his father’s permission when he was nineteen. He then enrolled at Abbé Charles Balley’s “presbytery school” in the nearby village of Ecully. His nearly nonexistent formal education — he was not yet able to read — and his difficulty memorizing made abstract study and learning Latin immensely hard.

At twenty-three, though exempt, John was drafted into Napoleon’s army. Shortly after re-



ceiving the notice he fell ill, and was deferred for a few months. On the day he was to leave, he stayed so long praying in church that he arrived after the other draftees had departed. He nearly was charged with desertion, but instead he was sent to catch up with the others on their way to Spain. In the mountains, he met a stranger, who ordered him to follow. Thinking he was being led to the group, he obeyed, and found himself in a remote area populated by deserters. He turned himself in to the local magistrate, who advised him not to return since he would be accounted a deserter. For fourteen months he stayed in the locality, lodging in a stable, working on a farm, and serving as the local schoolmaster. He earned the love and respect of everyone. Several times he was nearly captured; once he was nicked in the ribs by a bayonet while hiding in a hayloft. Following an amnesty for deserters and his brother volunteering as his substitute, John came home, free of legal problems, and resumed his studies at Ecully.

At twenty-six, John studied philosophy for a year, and then enrolled in the seminary in Lyons. However, all the instruction was in Latin; unable to learn, he was dismissed six months later. He returned to Abbé Balley for private coaching, but failed the seminary's examination even though he knew the answers. Abbé Balley asked one of the examiners to interview him privately, and with the rector of the seminary the examiner came to Ecully. Both were satisfied with John's responses. They then asked for a ruling on "the most unlearned but the most devout seminarian in Lyons." John was ordained at the age of twenty-nine on the grounds that "the Church wants not only learned priests but, even more, holy ones." The bishop relied on the grace of God to make up for John's deficiencies in learning.

John's was first assigned to Ecully as assistant to Abbé Balley. After several months, he was allowed to hear confessions and was, from the beginning, a great confessor. Following Abbé Balley's death, John was assigned as curé



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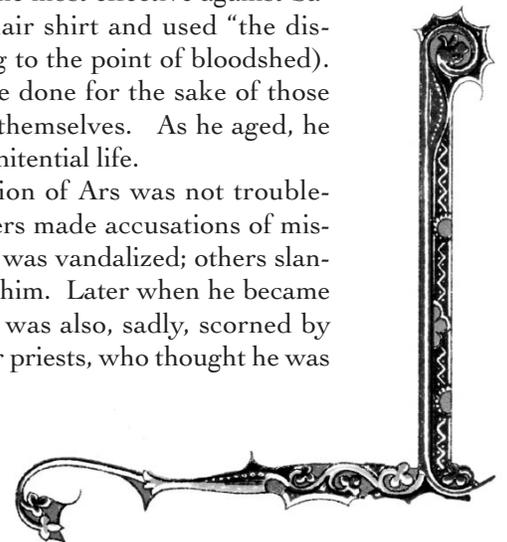
(pastor) in Ars, a tiny village of some two hundred sixty souls about twenty miles from Lyons. Known before the Revolution as especially devout, Ars had since become indifferent to God. John visited each family and began catechizing the children. He unhesitatingly attacked the

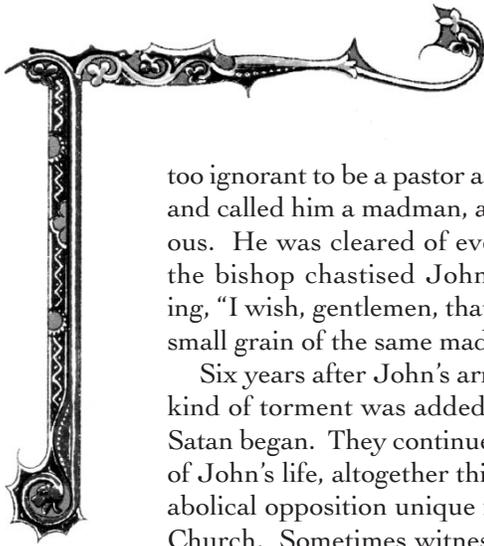
principal vices of the village — drunken and debauched dances, immodest dress, and blasphemous, profane, and obscene speech. The

village's four taverns eventually closed for lack of business, and several new ones failed. He also called the villagers to faithful attendance at Mass and observance of the Sunday rest. In the beginning, he was especially stern with his flock, preaching sermons that did not flinch from the risk of damnation and speaking plainly, to make sure that he was understood. As the villagers grew in faith and the practice of virtue, he focused more on God's mercy and preached with more tenderness. For their part, the residents of Ars began to desire to obey the saint in their midst.

One of the most significant ways John brought Ars to conversion was his own sanctity. His profound humility was joined to kindness, gentleness, simplicity, patience, and cheerfulness. He ardently loved Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and spent hours in prayer before the Tabernacle. He lived in poverty, eating little besides potatoes and milk, and gave what he had to the poor (at sixty, he became a Franciscan tertiary). He fasted, occasionally for days at a time, and sacrificed sleep, mortifications which he believed were the most effective against Satan. He wore a hair shirt and used "the discipline" (scourging to the point of bloodshed). His penances were done for the sake of those who did none for themselves. As he aged, he eased up on his penitential life.

John's conversion of Ars was not trouble-free. Some villagers made accusations of misconduct; his home was vandalized; others slandered or ridiculed him. Later when he became widely known, he was also, sadly, scorned by some of his brother priests, who thought he was





too ignorant to be a pastor and hear confessions, and called him a madman, a fake, and overzealous. He was cleared of every accusation, and the bishop chastised John's tormenters, saying, "I wish, gentlemen, that all my clergy had a small grain of the same madness."

Six years after John's arrival in Ars, another kind of torment was added when attacks from Satan began. They continued until near the end of John's life, altogether thirty-four years, a diabolical opposition unique in the history of the Church. Sometimes witnessed by others, they occurred day and night and were noisy and violent. On various occasions things were hurled at him, he was dragged across his room, and his bed was burned. Amazingly, he became accustomed to this abuse and could speak with wry humor about it to others, even remarking how the worst attacks seemed to herald the imminent arrival of a serious sinner seeking to confess his sins.

In the same year he acquired his hellish tormenter, John helped to open a free school for poor girls, where he himself taught catechism classes every day. Three years later, the school expanded to become La Providence, a home caring for orphaned and abandoned children from infancy to adolescence that relied entirely on contributions. The girls were never charged for their care or education, and none were ever turned away. Up to sixty girls lived there at a time. Two of the many miracles attributed to him directly assisted the school, one of the multiplication of wheat in a nearly empty loft, the other of flour needed for bread. La Providence became a model for other institutions throughout France.

But John's principal ministry was reconciling people to God. From the beginning, he spent long hours in the confessional. As word of his gift of reading souls and pithy counsel spread, the hours lengthened, until in the last ten years

of his life, he spent eleven to twelve hours in the confessional daily in the winter, and sixteen to eighteen hours daily in the summer. He knew when people hid serious sin from him, once remarking that these things came to him as though from memory. He brought many thousands of Catholics back to the practice of their faith. Nine years after his arrival at Ars, he began to become the object of pilgrimages. In 1855, over twenty thousand people came annually. Special railway tickets were issued from Lyons to Ars, allowing eight days before the purchaser's return

since so many others also desired to obtain absolution. In the last year of his life, over one hundred thousand pilgrims arrived by rail and private transportation. Even

going from the church to the parish house, he walked through crowds seeking his blessings and favors. Some wanted more: bits from his thin hair, pieces from his clothing, pages from his prayerbook. He thought it a carnival and was deeply mortified by it all.

John strongly believed in the power of liturgical prayer, once saying: "Private prayer is like straw scattered here and there; if you set it on fire it makes a lot of little flames. But gather these straws into a bundle and light them, and you get a mighty fire, rising like a column into the sky; public prayer is like that." Despite his poverty and that of Ars, he made the church and the liturgies as splendid as possible.

Throughout his years in Ars, John yearned to live a contemplative life. Three times he fled Ars; once, after a severe illness, it required all the persuasive powers of the people — they as sinners could not do without him — and his bishop to bring him back. He poured himself out in the care of souls nearly beyond his own endurance, and then gave even more, in love for those whom God had given him. In doing so he has become the model for all parish priests.

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