

Twenty-fifth Sunday Per Annum (B)
September 20, 2015.

The godless say, 'let us wait for the righteous one, who makes life inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; who reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training' (Wis. 2:12).

August 13th of this year marked the two hundredth anniversary of the ordination of St. Jean Marie Vianney to the priesthood. He is popularly known as the Curé of Ars, that is, the parish priest of Ars. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed a Year for Priests and at that time made St. Jean Vianney the Patron Saint of all priests. As we look to the upcoming Year of Mercy we do well to acquaint ourselves with this saintly father of souls who would often say, *the priesthood is the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*. Pope Benedict observed: *This touching expression makes us reflect, first of all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself. I think of all those priests who quietly present Christ's words and actions each day to the faithful and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their style of life. How can I not pay tribute to their apostolic labours, their tireless and hidden service, their universal charity? And how can I not praise the courageous fidelity of so many priests who, even amid difficulties and incomprehension, remain faithful to their vocation as "friends of Christ", whom he has called by name, chosen and sent?* (Letter of Pope Benedict XVI proclaiming a Year for Priests on the 150th Anniversary of the 'Dies Natalis' of the Curé of Ars). In February 1818 Jean Vianney was sent to the tiny village of Ars whose population was about two hundred people. He would stay there until his death on August 4th, 1859, by which time he had become Curé of all of France and beyond. His journey to the priesthood had not been an easy one nor was the exercise of his priestly ministry.

He was born in in 1786, three years before the beginning of the French Revolution, whose tragic events marked his childhood. Because of the Revolution and its fierce persecution of Catholics, Jean Marie received his First Holy Communion in a barn where a priest who had remained faithful to the Church, had secretly celebrated Mass. While the Jacobins, supported by the Freemasons, were organizing the hunt for priests and sending them and their faithful to the guillotine, young Jean-Marie was studying the catechism in secret and understood that the Crucified One must indeed deserve all since so many thousands of priests and lay people were giving their lives for Him, tolerating even the most atrocious torture. Such is the power of faithful witness; it produces saints.

Why were Catholics persecuted and priests hunted down like wild animals!? Quite simply, because the Revolutionaries were engaged in a grand project of remaking the world without God. Our secular culture in many ways is a product of this ongoing project. In this new world order there would be no room for the superstitions of religion and most certainly not for a sacrificing priesthood. If you can believe it, the secular state, such as it was, even attempted to impose the worship of a supreme being who in no way resembled the Triune God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. Cathedrals were converted into temples to Reason. In this new order there was no room for the faithful Catholic priest who essentially has three duties (*munera*): the duty to teach, to sanctify and to govern.

When Fr. Jean Vianney arrived in Ars in 1818 he found a parish that had suffered the full effects of the Revolution but he undertook his duties with zeal and so he began to serve his flock, some of whom resented him and even tried to have him removed. Nonetheless, he fasted and prayed for them and reminded them of the truth of Christ that endures for ever, and gradually Ars was changed and once again God was worshipped in spirit and in truth and Christian charity was in evidence. Gone was the cruelty of paganism. Fr. Vianney was not content with mediocrity. He said, *After God, the priest is everything. Leave a parish without a priest for 20 years and beasts will be worshipped there...How a priest is to be pitied when he celebrates Mass as an ordinary event. How unfortunate is a priest without an inner life!* So he sought to enflame in the hearts of his parishioners the same love of God that he possessed. He was an exceptional confessor, spending up to eighteen hours a day in the confined space of the confessional, absolving sin and administering the mercy that one can only receive as the fruit of repentance. He was also an exorcist and because of this the devil attacked him. All of this of course was against the spirit of the age; as it is against the spirit of our times for in a godless world the priest has become an enemy. For those who love God however, the priest is a friend, an indispensable friend because of his friendship with Our Lord. The Curé of Ars said that *the priest is a crucified man...If a pastor stays silent on seeing God outraged and souls on the run, woe to him! If he does not want to damn himself...he must say no to human respect and the fear of being ridiculed and hated by his parishioners. And should he be put to death after descending from the pulpit; that should not stop him from preaching the truth.* This is why pilgrims visited him by the thousands and why penitents waited for days to make their confession to him. Surely, because he was a saint; but also because the Revolution was to have destroyed such priests, and in many places, it had succeeded. There have been other revolutions inspired by this same grand project to remake a world without God; in Spain, Mexico, Russia, Germany and elsewhere – and in all these revolutions priests have also been hunted down and martyred because *the priesthood is the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, and a godless world cannot understand such a love. A godless world is a world marked by cruelty, the brutal cruelty of pagans. Thus all in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity, the French Revolutionary government committed genocide against the residents of the Vendée, drowning men women and children, starving them. Our secular, godless world trades in the body parts and organs of the unborn and kills the sick and elderly; but it is all legal. Our Lord became man to deliver us from such cruelty and this is why the priesthood of Our Lord Jesus Christ is so much needed because *the priesthood is the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*.

It is no secret that a great crisis has affected the priesthood; and this crisis, unlike open persecutions, has questioned and denied the very nature of a sacrificial priesthood. The denial of the priesthood as established by Our Lord strikes at the very heart of what it means to be and become authentically human. What good is a man or a woman who does not understand and appreciate the value of self-sacrifice? This is why Our Lord has left us the memorial of His Passion; that all of us might model and pattern our lives on the Mystery that we celebrate. If we endeavour to do this with generosity and purpose then through us God will spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere and we shall be *the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing* (2 Cor. 2:14-15).