

St. John Vianney

It is imperative to give a reflection on St. John Mary Vianney today as he is the patron saint of parish priests. Instead of providing an overview of his life, I will provide some fun facts that you may find interesting about the famous saint that we celebrate today.

Early in life, John Vianney had significant struggles. For example, he had to receive his first Holy Communion in secret at age 13 during the anti-Catholic reign of Terror in the French Revolution.

Additionally, John Vianney was drafted into Napoleon's army but fell ill and got separated from his unit. He ended up hiding out with other deserters until he was pardoned.

Additionally, many people are aware John Vianney struggled through seminary because he grew up a poor shepherd and farm boy and was nearly illiterate as a young man. He also did not understand Latin and almost failed out of school. His tutor was a seminarian named Mathias Loras, who eventually became a missionary in the United States and the first bishop of Dubuque.

After being ordained a priest at age 29, Vianney was sent to a remote village called Ars, which had a population of only 230 people. The bishop figured that he could do little harm there. In fact, Vianney got lost on trying to find the village and a child from Ars had to point him in the right direction! A statue of John Vianney and the child outside of Ars captures the moment where the future shepherd of Ars famously said, "Show me the way to Ars and I will show you the way to heaven."

John Vianney is certainly known for his extensive time in the confessional. He often did a confession marathon wherein he would spend 16 to 18 hours per day in the confessional. Eventually, something around 20,000 people traveled to the tiny village every year just to see him and confess their sins.

Additionally, John Vianney was extreme in fasting. For most of his life, he ate almost nothing, often surviving on one boiled potato a day. He saw fasting as a weapon to turn his heart to God and do spiritual penance for his parishioners, who initially resisted God. It's said that he would take walks and continually repeat, "Lord, please convert my parish."

Furthermore, John Vianney endured intense physical and audible nightly torment from the devil for 35 years. He would often hear loud noises, crashing pots, and demonic shouting outside his room. There were reports that he was pulled and dragged across the floor by his feet. On multiple occasions, the devil set his bed sheets and mattress on fire while he was trying to sleep. Vianney famously joked that the devil "couldn't catch the bird, so he burned the cage." He saw the burning of his bed as a sign that a major sinner would convert the next day.

John Vianney eventually got so used to these assaults that he once said, "The devil and I have become so used to each other that we have become pals." The devil once said of St. John Vianney, "If there were three priests as you, my kingdom would be ruined."

After many years serving his parish, John Vianney yearned for a contemplative life and to weep for his sins. It's said that he ran away from the parish three times. After ten years of serving the parish, some disgruntled parishioners and jealous clergy circulated a petition to remove him as the pastor of Ars. Vianney was shown the document and calmly took a pen and signed his own name to it. 😊

On August 4, 1859, overcome by fatigue, God's beautifully little priest passed away at 2:00 am. He was 73 years old and had served the parish of Ars for 41 years. It's estimated that 6,000 people and 300 priests attended his funeral.

Pope Pius XI canonized him in 1925 and named him the patron saint of parish priests in 1929. It's worth noting that while thousands of saints exist, those who spent their lives as pastors of parishes and are canonized as saints is *very rare*. The rarity of a parish pastor canonized as a saint makes St. John Vianney even more special. By God's grace, I hope to make purgatory where I will likely be grooming cats and brushing their teeth.

St. John Vainney is an excellent example for priests of every generation. May we pray that more priests today have the heart and zeal of St. John Vianney!

~St. John Vianney, pray for us!