

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 4

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IN BRIEF

Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars

Parish priest of Ars from 1818 to 1859, tireless confessor and patron saint of parish priests.

Feast day	August 4
Born	May 8, 1786, Dardilly, near Lyon, France
Died	August 4, 1859, Ars-sur-Formans (Ain), France
Canonized	May 31, 1925, by Pope Pius XI
Era	19th century
Patron saint of	parish priests, priests, confessors

In this booklet

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Shrine of Ars, in the Footsteps of the Holy Curé

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LIFE

Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars

Saint John Vianney (Jean-Marie Vianney), the "holy Curé of Ars," was a French priest who spent more than forty years in a small village of the Dombes region, near Lyon. A poor student who was ordained only with difficulty, he transformed his parish through prayer, penance and confession, until tens of thousands of pilgrims were coming to Ars every year. He died on August 4, 1859, was canonized in 1925, and is celebrated on August 4. The Church has made him the patron saint of all parish priests in the world.

Who was Saint John Vianney?

Jean-Marie Vianney was born on May 8, 1786, in Dardilly, northwest of Lyon, into a devout and charitable farming family that readily welcomed poor travelers. He was three when the French Revolution broke out. During the Terror, churches were closed and priests loyal to Rome went into hiding: the boy learned the faith from his mother and attended secret Masses.

He made his First Communion around 1799 in Écully, in a house whose windows had been covered. He tended the flocks, worked in the fields, and felt a growing desire to become a priest.

Key dates in the life of John Vianney

- **May 8, 1786**: Born in Dardilly.
- **c. 1799**: Secret First Communion in Écully.
- **1806**: Begins his studies with Father Balley, parish priest of Écully.
- **1809-1810**: Drafted into the army, he misses his departure and lives in hiding in Les Noës, in the Loire, until an amnesty.

- **August 13, 1815**: Ordained a priest in Grenoble; becomes Father Balley's assistant.
- **February 1818**: Arrives in Ars, a village of about two hundred inhabitants.
- **1824**: Founds La Providence, a home and school for poor girls.
- **c. 1830-1859**: Ever-growing crowds of pilgrims; he often hears confessions for more than twelve hours a day.
- **August 4, 1859**: Dies in Ars at the age of seventy-three.
- **January 8, 1905**: Beatified by Saint Pius X.
- **May 31, 1925**: Canonized by Pius XI, who in 1929 proclaims him patron of parish priests throughout the world.
- **2009-2010**: Benedict XVI opens a Year for Priests for the 150th anniversary of his death.

A seminarian who struggled

The road to the priesthood was hard. Jean-Marie had started late, had barely gone to school, and struggled with Latin, which was then the language of all classes. Father Charles Balley, the parish priest of Écully, believed in him and took him under his wing.

After a time at the major seminary of Lyon, where his results were judged insufficient, he continued his training with his protector. It was his piety and common sense, recognized by the diocesan authorities, that finally opened the door to ordination, which he received in Grenoble on August 13, 1815. He remained Father Balley's assistant in Écully for two years, until the older priest's death.

Sent in 1818 to Ars, a small parish considered of no importance, he was told by a vicar general: "There is not much love of God in that parish; you will put some there." According to a well-known tradition, a young shepherd boy,

Antoine Givre, showed him the way to the village, and the priest answered: "You have shown me the way to Ars; I will show you the way to heaven."



The Monument of the Meeting at the entrance to Ars-sur-Formans.

The Curé of Ars

In Ars, the new priest began by praying. He spent long hours before the tabernacle, fasted, slept little and visited every family. He preached forcefully against drunkenness, working on Sundays, blasphemy and dances, which at first earned him opposition.

He restored the church, added new chapels, and in 1824 opened La Providence, where poor girls and orphans were taken in and educated, with the help of Catherine Lassagne. Little by little, the village changed: people came back to Mass and were reconciled with one another.

The Curé of Ars was also a man who knew trials. His biographers report years of nightly torments that he attributed to the devil, whom he called "the grappin." He suffered from feeling unworthy of his charge and tried several times to leave Ars to live in solitude, but each time he returned to his parish.

Confessor to the crowds

From the 1830s on, the priest's reputation spread far beyond the Dombes. Pilgrims came from all over France and from abroad, so many that a coach service was organized from Lyon. John Vianney spent his days in the confessional, often from one o'clock in the morning, winter and summer alike. He welcomed farmers, notables, priests and hardened sinners. Many testified that he seemed to read hearts.

His daily catechism, given in simple words, struck listeners with its images: he compared prayer to the sun melting ice, and said that the priesthood is "the love of the heart of Jesus."

He entrusted his requests to Saint Philomena, to whom he attributed the healings that people credited to his own intercession. Exhausted, he died on August 4, 1859. A great crowd of priests and faithful attended his funeral.

Why is Saint John Vianney the patron saint of parish priests?

John Vianney did nothing other than what every parish priest does: celebrate Mass, teach the catechism, visit his people and hear confessions. But he did it with total love, convinced that God's mercy is greater than any sin. In 1929 Pius XI proclaimed him patron of parish priests throughout the world, and in 2009 Benedict XVI placed the Year for Priests under his protection.

He shows that holiness depends neither on diplomas nor on talents. Catholics pray to him for priests and vocations, for parishes, and for those who hesitate to go to confession. Many seminaries and parishes in the English-speaking world bear his name.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Vianney in art

- **The cassock, surplice and purple stole** of a priest hearing confessions.
- **Hands joined in prayer** and a thin, worn face framed by long white hair.
- **The confessional**, where he spent most of his life.
- **The shepherd boy** pointing the way to Ars, in the famous sculpture at the village entrance.

Where to pray to Saint John Vianney

- **Ars-sur-Formans** (Ain, France): the Shrine of Ars, with the basilica, the reliquary containing his body, his confessional and his house.
- **Dardilly** (Rhône): his birthplace, open to visitors, and the nearby church.
- **Écully**: the church where he served as Father Balley's assistant.
- **Les Noës** (Loire): the village where he hid in 1810.



The basilica of Ars, built from 1862 around the holy Curé's church.

PRAYER

Prayer of Saint John Vianney: "I Love You, O My God"

The act of love "I love you, O my God" is the best-known prayer of the holy Curé of Ars. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes it to show what the prayer of a humble heart looks like. Below you will find this text, a famous saying of the saint about the priesthood, and an original prayer to Saint John Vianney for priests.

"I love you, O my God"

> *I love you, O my God, and my only desire is to love you until the last breath of my life.*
>
> *I love you, O infinitely lovable God, and I would rather die loving you than live a single instant without loving you.*
>
> *I love you, Lord, and the only grace I ask is to love you eternally.*
>
> *My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you, I want my heart to repeat it to you as often as I draw breath.*

Source: act of love attributed to Saint John Vianney (nineteenth century, public domain), quoted in paragraph 2658 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in the section on prayer.

A word to meditate on

> *"The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus."*

Source: a saying of the Curé of Ars reported by his contemporaries, quoted in paragraph 1589 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and taken up by Benedict XVI in his letter opening the Year for Priests on June 16, 2009.

Prayer to Saint John Vianney for priests

Holy Curé of Ars, you spent your life welcoming sinners: teach me never to doubt the mercy of God.

You struggled with your books and were thought incapable: remind me that God does not choose the most brilliant, but those who let themselves be loved. When I am discouraged by my limits, help me simply to do what is asked of me.

I entrust to you the priests of my diocese and my parish, especially those who are tired, lonely or going through trials. Obtain generous vocations for the Church. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Give me the courage to go to confession with trust, and the joy of remaining before the Lord, as you did, with no other word than love. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Saint John Vianney is celebrated on August 4, the anniversary of his death. Many people pray to him on Thursdays, the traditional day of prayer for priests, before going to confession, or at an ordination.

The act of love can be said at any time, as a short prayer in the morning or at night, or repeated slowly during adoration. The prayer for priests is a good way to support your own parish priest. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to the holy Curé of Ars and read the life of Saint John Vianney.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and words of Saint John Vianney, the holy Curé of Ars. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, start on July 26; it ends on August 3, and his feast falls on August 4.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, and say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for each day carries the prayer into your day. This novena is especially suited to praying for a priest or for vocations.

You can pray it alone, as a family or with your parish, for example to support a priest who is ill, discouraged or celebrating an anniversary of ordination, or to accompany a young person discerning a vocation. If you miss a day, do not give up: simply pick up where you left off. The Curé of Ars never asked for perfection, only for a heart turned toward God.

The nine days follow his life: the faith of his childhood under the Revolution, his difficult studies, the friendship of Father Balley, his arrival in Ars, his long hours before the tabernacle and in the confessional, his care for poor children, his trials, and his death after a life given entirely. At each stage, he shows that holiness grows in ordinary faithfulness.



Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, in a church statue or window.

Day 1: A faith received at home

During the French Revolution, Jean-Marie learned to pray from his mother, in secret. Faith is often handed on through simple gestures at home: a sign of the cross, a prayer before bed, a word about God at the right moment.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who passed the faith on to me. Help me hand it on in my turn.

Today: Pray for your parents, living or deceased.

Day 2: Persevering through failure

Latin defeated him, and he was judged too weak for the seminary. He did not give up, and he accepted help from Father Balley.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel incapable, give me the humility to ask for help and the strength to keep going.

Today: Take up again a task or an effort you dropped out of discouragement.

Day 3: Helped by a friend

Without Father Balley, Jean-Marie would never have become a priest. God places people on our path who believe in us.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for those who have trusted me. Teach me to encourage others.

Today: Encourage someone who doubts themselves.

Day 4: Arriving in a thankless place

Ars was a small village where faith had grown cold. The new priest did not complain: he began by praying for his parishioners.

Prayer: Lord, wherever you have placed me, help me to love first, before I judge.

Today: Pray by name for your neighbors or coworkers.

Day 5: Before the tabernacle

People saw the Curé of Ars spend long hours in church. He said that prayer opens the heart as the sun melts the snow. He did not need many words: being there, before the Lord, was already a prayer.

Prayer: Jesus, present in the Eucharist, teach me to stay close to you, simply, without saying anything.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in adoration in a church.

Day 6: Mercy in the confessional

For years, crowds came to Ars to go to confession. The priest never grew weary: every sinner was welcomed as a child of God, whose sins mattered less than his return to the Father.

Prayer: God of mercy, free me from the fear of going to confession. Give me trust in your forgiveness.

Today: Prepare for or receive the sacrament of reconciliation.



Praying with Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars.

Day 7: Caring for the poorest

At La Providence, the priest took in orphans and girls with no means. He gave away everything he had, even his own furniture. For him, charity toward the poor was inseparable from the love of God he preached.

Prayer: Lord, open my hands and my heart to the children and the poor around me.

Today: Give to a charity that supports children.

Day 8: Going through trials

The Curé of Ars felt unworthy, exhausted, tempted to leave everything. Several times he tried to leave Ars for a life of solitude. Yet each time he came back, and he remained faithful to his parish to the end.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you priests who are tired or discouraged. Support them, and support me in my own struggles.

Today: Write a thank-you note to a priest.

Day 9: Love to the end

On August 4, 1859, John Vianney died exhausted, having given everything. His favorite prayer fit into a few words: I love you, O my God.

Prayer: I love you, O my God, and my only desire is to love you until the last breath of my life. Through the intercession of the holy Curé of Ars, I entrust my intention to you. Amen.

Today: Go to Mass and pray for vocations.

Closing prayer

Saint John Vianney, at the end of these nine days, I place in your hands the intention I have entrusted to you. Pray for priests and for those whom God is calling. Obtain for me a simple heart that believes in mercy and loves without counting the cost. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint John Vianney and pray his act of love, "I love you, O my God."

PILGRIMAGE

Shrine of Ars, in the Footsteps of the Holy Curé

Ars-sur-Formans, in the Ain, is the village where Saint John Vianney served as parish priest from 1818 until his death in 1859. The Shrine of Ars brings together the basilica where his body rests, the old church where he heard confessions, his house, and several places of memory. About twenty-five miles north of Lyon, it is one of the most visited pilgrimages in France, particularly by priests.

In the Curé's lifetime: a church besieged by pilgrims

When John Vianney arrived in Ars in February 1818, the village had about two hundred inhabitants and a modest church. From the 1830s on, the crowd of pilgrims never stopped growing: people came from far away to confess to the holy Curé, and sometimes waited days to be received. The church, which he had enlarged and decorated with chapels, became too small.



The Shrine of Ars, in the footsteps of the holy Curé.

The basilica and the saint's reliquary

After his death, a basilica was built beginning in 1862 to plans by the Lyon architect Pierre Bossan, who also designed Fourvière. It was attached to the old church, preserved in memory of the Curé. The saint's body rests in a glass reliquary above an altar, dressed in his priestly vestments, his face covered with a mask. His confessional can also be seen here. A neighboring chapel, known as the Chapel of the Heart, houses the reliquary of his heart, and a vast underground church was built for the centenary of his death to hold large gatherings.

The Curé's house and the Providence

The presbytery has been preserved almost as it was in 1859: the kitchen, the bedroom, the bed, a few personal belongings, and the traces of the fire which, according to the accounts, was started by the "grappin" (the devil). Nearby, the Providence recalls the home for poor girls that he founded in 1824. At the entrance to the village, the Monument of the Meeting depicts the Curé and the young shepherd who showed him the way.

Praying at Ars

Before you leave, you can reread the life of Saint John Vianney. On site, a time of prayer before the reliquary, followed by a stop in the old church, lets you entrust a priest, a parish, or a vocation. Many pilgrims take advantage of their visit to go to confession, which fits the spirit of the place well. The act of love "I love you, O my God" can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.

Other places of the holy Curé

- **Dardilly** (Rhône): his birthplace, about twenty miles from Ars.
- **Écully**: the parish of Father Balley, where he studied and spent his first years as a curate.
- **Les Noës** (Loire): the mountain village where he stayed in hiding in 1810.
- **Lalouvesc** (Ardèche): the shrine of Saint John Francis Regis, to which the young John Vianney walked on pilgrimage to obtain success in his studies.
- **Lyon**: the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière, the great Marian shrine of the diocese where he was formed.

Practical information

Ars is a small village: the simplest way is to come by car, the nearest train station being in Villefranche-sur-Saône. The shrine offers lodging and welcomes many groups, especially around August 4, the saint's feast day. Check Mass, confession, and visiting times with the shrine before you come.

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