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## The Curé of Ars and the Art of Hearing Confessions

- Introduction
  - The great miracle of the Curé of Ars,” one commentator has said, “was his confessional, besieged day and night.”
    - He is the patron saint of parish priests not because he left us a body of inspiring sermons like Fulton J. Sheen, or celebrated Mass with copious tears, or because of his all night vigils of prayer, fasting on boiled potatoes, legendary battles against the devil, his love and care for orphans.
    - What made him famous, what earned him the reputation of being a saint in his lifetime, was what God did through him in his besieged confessional.
  - For most of his 41 years in Ars, a town that had 230 souls when he arrived and about 600 permanent inhabitants when he died, he heard confessions of about its entire population every day.
    - 12-14 hours in the winter. 16-18 hours in the summer.
    - Most non-priests, in hearing those numbers, are amazed at his commitment and dedication, much in the same way that we would admire anyone who worked 18 hour days for decades out of love for his family or those that he was serving. When I was a seminarian and read his biography for the first time, I, too, admired his heroic *commitment* to *prioritizing* the sacrament of confession. But it was only in December 2000, while hearing confessions at my first Advent penance service at Espirito Santo Parish in Fall River, that I really understood what this meant. That night, seated in the confessional of a heated Church, I heard confessions for 3 hours. Though I was once a collegiate athlete who used to push my body in training to the limit, I have never been so exhausted.
    - Preaching a retreat in California a couple of years later, I heard 16 hours of confessions stretched from Friday night through Sunday afternoon. I was basically comatose.
    - When I think now about the Curé of Ars hearing confessions for 12, 16, 18 hours a day, the closest analogy I would give would be to running 25-40 miles a *day* ... uphill ... into gale force winds... with ankle weights ... and wrist weights ... in full body armor ... made of lead — and he did it almost every day from the age of 32 to 73. There’s a man named Dean Kamazes who each year runs 50 marathons in 50 consecutive days, whose stamina amazes even marathon runners and ironmen triathletes. What St. John Vianney did is the equivalent of running a marathon for the last 11,315 days of his life.
    - It gives new meaning to the term heroism. It was a steep way of the Cross every day and he willingly embraced that Cross and brought that salvation.
    - This is the first reason why we can say that the great miracle of the Curé of Ars was his confessional.
  - The second reason his confessional was miraculous was because of what was occurring on the other side of the screen.
    - People from all over France were making their way to an inaccessible hamlet in the southeastern corner of the country, taking trains and then horse-drawn carts, walking for miles in mud, and waiting in general up to eight days in line to have their confession heard, waiting patiently in a church that was stiflingly warm in summer and ice cold in the winter.

- Why wouldn't they take the easy way out and just go to confession to one of the priests close by?
- Moreover, this great exodus to Ars was taking place at a totally unpredicted time, when the Church in France was in great disarray due to the destruction wrought by the French Revolution — which killed many priests and nuns, closed convents and Catholic schools, formed their own clergy to promote secular values — and by the ideas of the Enlightenment, which were hostile to faith not to mention to the sacrament of confession, which were being inculcated into every level of education and culture.
- And yet one day up to 4,000 people arrived to go to this one man to confession, and 120,000 in a year.
- Why were they coming to this emaciated man in a worn cassock, surplice and purple stole in the previously unheard of village of Ars to eight days to spend five minutes with him in the confessional?
- The preliminary answer, the one given by contemporaries at the time, was that they were coming because, as one said, they were encountering “God in a man.”
  - In St. John Vianney, they found more than a man ordained to act in the person of Christ to absolve them of their sins — any priest could do that.
  - They were coming to someone who incarnated the mercy of the Heavenly Father, who shared the Good Shepherd's zeal to do anything it took to bring back to the fold the one lost sheep, who would rejoice with all the saints in heaven over the repentance of one sinner, and who like Christ would willingly be hammered to the wood of his confessional to save sinners. In him, they encountered not just a confessor who administered God's power for the forgiveness of sins, but the closest earthly approximation to the holiness of God. That drew them irresistibly and through all types of sacrifices to make the road to Ars the road to Damascus. God used him, however, almost single-handedly, to bring the whole Church of France back to the beauty of his mercy.
- He once said that he would readily forsake the joys of heaven in order to remain in the confessional for the salvation of others. “Only on the day of judgment” he humbly said, “will one know how many souls were saved in Ars.”
- Four years after his canonization in 1925, Pope Pius XI named him the patron saint of parish priests. But he is a model not merely for those priests who do the most important work of all in the parishes, but also those who teach full-time, those who work in diocesan offices, those who work in the diplomatic corps, those who serve as bishops and even popes.
  - This highlights just how central the sacrament of reconciliation needs to be in the life of every priest, how he is called to model his life on the heroic sacrificial love exemplified by St. John Vianney in the service of reconciling all God's prodigal sons and daughters.
  - St. John Paul II and Pope Francis have both emphasized that we are living in a “*kairos* of mercy,” a time in which God's loving forgiveness is especially crucial. The reason is because we're living at a time in which unexpiated guilt is wreaking so much havoc. After two World Wars and the Cold War, the Holocaust, the genocides in Armenia, the Ukraine, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, after so many atrocities from tyrannical governments, after the waterfalls of blood flowing from more than two billion abortions worldwide, after the sins that have destroyed so many families, after so much physical and sexual abuse, after lengthy crime logs in newspapers every day, after the scourge of terrorism, after so much hurt and pain, the terrible weight of collective guilt crushes not only individuals but burdens structures and whole societies. The modern world is like one big Lady Macbeth, compulsively washing our hands to remove the blood from them, but there is no earthly detergent powerful enough to take the blemishes away. We can converse with psychiatrists and psychologists, but their words and prescriptions can only help us deal with our guilt, not

eliminate it. We can confess ourselves to bartenders, but they can only dispense Absolut vodka, not absolution, and inebriation never brings expiation. We can escape reality through distractions and addictions — drugs, sports, entertainment, materialism, food, power, lust, and others — but none can adequately anaesthetize the pain in our soul from the suffering we've caused or witnessed. Whether we admit it, whether we realize it, we're longing for redemption. We're yearning for a second, third or seventy-times-seventh chance. We're pining for forgiveness, reconciliation, and a restoration of goodness. We're hankering for a giant reset button for ourselves and for the world. And if we can't have that personal and collective do over, then at least we ache for liberation from the past and, like Zacchaeus or Ebenezer Scrooge, for a chance make up for has been done. We want atonement. And God responds to our age's great desire and need for expiation with his mercy.

- In a 1986 letter to priests on the bicentennial of the Curé's birth, Pope John Paul said that the state of the world requires that all priests should imitate the pastor of Ars in making themselves "very available" for the Sacrament of Penance. He asked them to give it "priority over other activities" so that the faithful will realize the value attached to this "most difficult, the most delicate, the most taxing and the most demanding [priestly ministry] of all — especially when priests are in short supply."
- Pope Benedict wrote in a 2009 letter to the priests of the world, "Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this Sacrament. In France, at the time of the Cure of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion. Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the Sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence. He thus created a 'virtuous' circle. By spending long hours in church before the tabernacle, he inspired the faithful to imitate him by coming to visit Jesus with the knowledge that their parish priest would be there, ready to listen and offer forgiveness. Later, the growing numbers of penitents from all over France would keep him in the confessional for up to sixteen hours a day. It was said that Ars had become "a great hospital of souls".
- Pope Francis, Jubilee of Mercy. Missionaries of Mercy: preach, confess, witness.
- The Church is clearly calling priests to take up again this most important ministry and reopen this great hospital of souls. "It is a beautiful thought, my children," St. John Vianney said, that we have a Sacrament which heals the wounds of our soul!" Priests are the only creatures in the entire universe to whom the Divine Physician has given the power to absolve sins in his name. We're living in a time in which sin abounds, but if grace is to super-abound, it's only we who can make it available.
- In this talk, I'd like to speak on a few things we all of us can learn about the art of reconciling people to God from St. John Vianney.
- SJV as a penitent
  - As we look at the "great miracle" of the Curé of Ars' "besieged confessional," it is important to pause to consider St. John Vianney as a penitent. One of the reasons why he was able to become one of the greatest confessors in the history of the Church was because he was a very devout and regular recipient of the sacrament. He knew how much he needed the sacrament; that's one of the reasons why he was willing to sacrifice so much to make the sacrament available to others who needed it, too.
  - St. John Vianney preached often about his experience as a penitent. One of his favorite stories was of his first confession. It was the time of the persecutions against priests during the French Revolution when priests who hadn't taken the oath to the civil constitution were being hunted down and guillotined in the squares of major French cities. One of the courageous "refractory" priests, Fr. Groboz, had come to the Vianney home in Dardilly, where he would occasionally take refuge and rest from those who were pursuing him. After blessing each of the kids in the family, he turned to

the young John Mary and asked him how old he was. “Eleven,” the boy replied. “How long is it since you last went to confession,” Fr. Groboz queried. “I have never yet been to confession,” the future saint told him. “Well, let us set right this omission at once!” Then, the later extraordinary apostle of the confessional knelt down under the clock in his parlor and confessed the sins he had committed since his baptism. He never forgot the peace he experienced. He never forgot what a grace it was to have priests near so that he could go to confession. For the rest of his life, John Vianney sought to make up for lost time.

- An even greater illustration of St. John Vianney as penitent happened in 1845. A 37 year-old priest, Fr. Louis Beau, was appointed as the pastor of Jassans. One of the first things this young cleric did upon arriving in his new assignment was to pay a visit to his neighbor in Ars. When he arrived, Fr. Vianney was in the confessional, so Fr. Beau had lunch with the parochial vicar. At the end of lunch, Fr. Vianney returned from the Church. Fr. Vianney was exceptionally delighted to meet him and held his hands in his own for a considerable length of time. Then he asked Fr. Beau to come to his room. When they got there, the famous confessor turned to his much-junior colleague and said, “Friend, your predecessor was kind enough to hear my confession; you will do me the same service, *n’est-ce pas?*”
- Before the stunned Fr. Beau was able to say yes or no, Fr. Vianney pointed to a chair, Fr. Beau sat down, and Fr. Vianney, kneeling before him, confessed his sins. Fr. Beau would remain his regular confessor until death. By his actions, Fr. Vianney showed his great faith in the power of the sacrament. He didn’t seek out a “specialty confessor,” but humbly asked a priest he barely knew, since he knew he was confessing principally to Christ and not to a man.
- In recent years, the popes have been calling priests to be good penitents so that they may be great confessors. Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical on the Sacrament of Penance, “In order to be a good and effective minister of Penance, the priest needs to have recourse to the source of grace and holiness present in this Sacrament. We priests, on the basis of our personal experience, can certainly say that, the more careful we are to receive the Sacrament of Penance and to approach it frequently and with good dispositions, the better we fulfill our own ministry as confessors and ensure that our penitents benefit from it. And on the other hand this ministry would lose much of its effectiveness if in some way we were to stop being good penitents. Such is the INTERNAL LOGIC of this great Sacrament. It invites all of us priests of Christ to pay renewed attention to our personal confession.”
  - St. John Vianney paid attention to this internal logic of the sacrament — and that was one of the secrets of how God was able to form him to be one of the great confessors who have ever lived.
- The first is what I’d call St. John Vianney’s martyrdom of waiting, which was a precursor to his being the greatest confessor in the history of the Church.
  - Because of his fame as a ceaseless and heroic confessor, it’s hard for some priests today to relate to him, because often their experience has been quite different than their patron’s: rather than having penitents wait up to eight days for the opportunity to spend five minutes going to confession, many priests would say their experience has been more like needing to wait eight days to have five penitents!
  - That’s why it’s useful to recognize that it took St. John Vianney almost a decade as pastor in Ars before his people began to have regular recourse to him as a confessor. From 1818-1827, no matter how much he preached on God’s mercy, on sin and on the Sacrament of Penance, no matter how many all night vigils he spent in his tiny church begging God for the conversion of his parish, few of his people came to confession. The only people who generally came were those who, according to the custom of the time, wanted to receive Holy Communion at Mass on Sunday and for that reason came to confession the previous day. And since the people in Ars, like in most of the Catholic world at the time, sought to approach the altar rail only once or a few times a year, the martyrdom St. John Vianney experienced in the confessional during his first ten years as pastor of this tiny village of 230 was, like many priests today, a martyrdom of abandoned, expectant waiting.

- Adding to his agony as a pastor, while doubtless providing some consolation as a priest, was the fact that in parishes other than his own, people were coming to his confessional in great numbers.
- In Ecully, the parish he was assigned upon his ordination, the people literally couldn't wait to go to confession to him. Just as it is one of the great ironies of Catholic history that the future patron saint of priests was dismissed from the Lyons seminary by the priests on the faculty, so, too, it is hagiographically incongruous that the future martyr of the confessional was not given the faculties to hear confessions until months after his priestly ordination.
- Yes, it's true. For the first few months of his priesthood, the future "extraordinary apostle of the confessional," as Pope John Paul II would later call him, needed to tell the people of Ecully who asked him to hear their confessions that he had not yet received proper authorization. That changed when his mentor and first pastor, the saintly and learned Fr. Charles Balley, approached the ecclesiastical authorities in Lyons and persuaded them that his curate was ready. As soon as he returned to give Fr. Vianney the good news, he put him to work. The pastor dropped to his knees at the feet of his parochial vicar and asked Fr. Vianney not only to hear his confession but to become his spiritual director.
- Once the people of the village discovered that the 29-year old priest they had known for a decade was now a confessor, they began to crowd his confessional, and the sick also began to call for him preferentially to come to hear their confessions at their homes. It's routine that young priests get more than their average share of work in the confessional because many penitents anticipate that priestly rookies will be easier on them out of inexperience. This was not, however, what was going on in Ecully. They were asking for Fr. Vianney because they knew that there was something extraordinarily special about him, even in comparison to Fr. Balley, their holy and ascetic pastor.
- It must have been quite a shock for Fr. Vianney, therefore, after Fr. Balley's death, to be transferred from a parish in which he was inundated with penitents to one in which he barely heard any confessions.
- Even still, Catholics in other places saw, and took advantage of, what his own parishioners failed or refused to see. During his first several years in Ars, St. John Vianney — and all the pastors of the area — would assist the Carthusian monks who would come into the area to preach lengthy missions trying to bring the people back to the practice of the faith. Because so many Carthusians had been killed during the terror of the French Revolution, and because the state of the knowledge and practice of the faith had collapsed due to the brainwashing and persecutions of the revolutionaries, the Carthusians needed all the priests of the area to help them in the pulpit and in the confessional. So the priests of surrounding villages would leave their parishes during the week to assist the Carthusians in these missions taking place in the region.
- The holy monks recognized that there was something special about the pastor of Ars as a confessor. Their preaching would almost always be effective in getting people to return to the sacraments, but they began to notice on their missions that the lines for Fr. Vianney were always much longer than the lines for other priests. Moreover, long after the other priests had called it a day after hearing confessions for hours to return for a late dinner in the rectory, St. John Vianney would remain in the confessional, sometimes until long after midnight, to reconcile those who were still waiting. On occasion, the local pastor would come to try to "rescue" him about 9 p.m., but doing so would almost always cause a revolt. Pastors admitted that they loved his assistance, because, as one said, "He worked hard and ate nothing."
- Once, on the night before the mission was scheduled to end, the crush of people who had waited to the last second to go to confession, as well as those who were returning to Fr. Vianney after a previous experience with him in the sacrament, surged around his confessional so much that they pushed over both the confessional and the confessor within it.
- On another occasion, because he was so exhausted after a marathon in the holy ice-box, he collapsed in the snow trying to make his way home. The rumor soon spread around Ars, however,

that their pastor, in fact, was dead, having died of exhaustion in the coffin of his missionary confessional.

- Despite his hearing confessions almost non-stop in other places, when he returned to Ars, there was still only a trickle. In 1827, he was hearing, at most, 20 confessions a day, with those numbers buttressed by penitents coming from surrounding villages.
- After ten years of prayer, mortification, preaching and hard work, that would soon change. What had been a mustard seed would soon become a tree in which not only the people of Ars but all the penitents of France would be able to find refuge.
- His eventual success after a martyrdom of waiting for ten years should give hope to all priests who are still, in many cases, waiting...
- Praying People into the Confessional
  - But there is another lessons we can take from the various things St. John Vianney did and learned before his confessional was besieged.
  - While only God knows all the reasons why St. John Vianney's confessional was teeming while so many other confessionals in France were vacant, it seems plausible that the fundamental reason was that God himself was drawing them there. I like to think, moreover, that one of the reasons God was moving his sons and daughters to confess to this simple priest in a tiny village was because St. John Vianney "earned" and "deserved" them far more than other priests.
  - God, who cannot be outdone in generosity, seemed reward the constant prayers and heroic sacrifices of St. John Vianney for the conversion of others. Just as no other confessor in history has heard so many confessions for so many years as the Curé of Ars, so probably no other priest prayed and sacrificed as much for the conversion necessary to bring sinners to the confessional.
  - As I've noted earlier, when the future patron saint of priests arrived in Ars, the practice of the faith was quite weak. His confessional was, for the most part, dormant. Rather than deter or discourage him, this absence of fidelity on the part of others spurred him on.
    - He would spend most of the night in his Church alone with the Lord, begging, "O my God, grant me the conversion of my parish! I consent to suffer whatever you wish for as long as I live."
    - He would fast and do other types of bodily penance in prayerful reparation to God for the sins others were not confessing.
    - He would wait patiently in his confessional, praying for those who should be on the other side, but who, for one reason or another, had not yet come to conversion.
    - He did this for a decade before there was a steady flow of penitents.
  - Even after he began to be overwhelmed by the number of penitents, however, he kept praying and doing sacrifices for the conversion of others. While in most matters he was reticent about his own interior life, in terms of his praying for sinners, he was very open, because he wanted to enlist others in the effort to imitate him in praying for those in need of God's mercy.
  - "I can't stop praying for poor sinners who are on the road to hell," he once said. "If they come to die in that state, they will be lost for all eternity. What a pity! We have to pray for sinners!"
  - He said that praying for sinners was the "most beautiful and useful of prayers" because "the just are on the way to heaven, the souls of purgatory are sure to enter there, but the poor sinners" will be lost forever. He said that all devotions are good but "there is no better one" than such prayer for sinners.
  - "What souls we can convert by our prayers," he said on another occasion. Paraphrasing the Lord's words to the Prophet Ezekiel, he added, "The one who saves a soul from hell saves this soul and his own as well."
  - He passed these truths on to all who would listen, because he knew that one did not have to be a priest absolving sins in God's name in the confessional to save sinners; by God's design, one could also do so through prayer.

- When he talked about praying for sinners, he wasn't describing merely a short invocation, but a serious program of persistent supplication.
  - When a parishioner asked him how more effectively to pray for sinners, the patron saint of priests responded with a list of things that seem to have an autobiographical tone to them. "One can offer himself as a victim for 8-15 days for the conversion of sinners. One can suffer cold, heat, deprive oneself of looking at something, go visit someone who would appreciate it, make a novena, attend daily Mass for this intention in places where it is possible. Not only would one contribute to God's glory by this holy practice [of praying for sinners], but one would obtain an abundance of grace."
  - To a brother priest who complained that his efforts to get his people to return to the Sacrament of Penance through his ministry in the pulpit had so far borne little fruit, St. John Vianney replied, with a response that likely featured much self-revelation, "You have preached, you have prayed, but have you fasted? Have you taken the discipline [a self-imposed penitential scourging]? Have you slept on the floor? So long as you have done none of these things, you have no right to complain."
- Whenever someone he met refused to repent, the Curé of Ars redoubled his prayers and penances for that person's conversion. He would, moreover, do "preventative" prayer and penance prior to the scheduled debauched dances (the *vogues*) to beg God's grace to help people falling in sin. He would also do post-confessional prayer and sacrifice for reconciled sinners, giving them easier penances and doing the rest himself, so that no one would be afraid to return to the sacrament of God's mercy because of the fear of a harsh penance.
- He prayed so much and so insistently precisely because he was convinced that the conversion of some from the state of mortal sin to grace was a true miracle that only God can work. "A great miracle is needed to raise a poor soul in that state," he taught in one of his catechism lessons. "Yes, a greater miracle than what the Lord did to raise Lazarus!" To resuscitate a dead body pales, he thought, to resurrecting a soul from death; every absolution is in fact a resurrection, when God the Father says to his prodigal son, "My son was dead and has come back to life again."
- St. John Vianney never lost the wonder of being God's instrument for these most important miracles. When his fame began to grow through his being the instrument for some miraculous bodily cures, he downplayed their significance, saying that the "body is so very little" and adding, "It is a beautiful thought, my children, that we have a sacrament that heals the wounds of our soul!"
- St. John Vianney's existence, like Christ's before him, became one great prayer for the miracle of the conversion of sinners. "I am only content," he said, "when I'm praying for sinners." One of the reasons for his was that he knew, by what seems to be a divine intimation, that such prayer pleased God immensely. "The good God has made me see," he said to one of his friends, "how much he loves that I pray for poor sinners. . . . I don't know if it were really a voice I heard or a dream, but, whatever it was, it woke me up and told me that to save a soul in the state of sin is more pleasing to God than all sacrifices. For that reason, I do all my resolutions for penance."
- His heroic praying for sinners was the prehistory for so many of the miracles of conversion that took place in his confessional. His confessional had the longest continuous lines in Church history because he prayed more than anyone in history that people would get in that line of salvation.
- His example is an inspiration to all priests to imitate him in this prayer. The same Lord who was pleased to answer his persevering pleas so lavishly stands ready to respond to ours.
- Preaching and Pulling People into the Confessional
  - But St. John Vianney didn't stop with prayer.
  - While prayer should always be the first act of a Christian, it's not meant to be the only action. Accordingly, the patron saint of priests did not stop at praying for sinners, but constantly labored to invite, persuade, and, when the circumstances demanded it, push and pull people to take advantage of God's great sacrament of mercy.

- Whenever he heard that there was someone in need of the sacrament who was reluctant to come, he went out in search of him. Once a wife who had brought her ill boy to him told him that her husband was standing at the door, unwilling even to enter the Church. The Curé of Ars left the sacristy and started calling for him by name, asking others to bring him to him. At the third call, the husband entered the Church and approached the saint, who grabbed him by the hand and led him behind the altar where there was a special confessional normally reserved for bishops and priests. He pointed to the confessional and said, “Put yourself there.” “I don’t feel like it,” the husband replied. The priest looked at him and with loving firmness said, “Begin.” At that point, overcome by the supernatural force of the emaciated cleric, the man began and the saint helped him make his first confession in 14 years.
- On another occasion, he heard of a boatman who had transported a large group of penitents but who refused to accompany them to the Church because, he told them, he was a hardened sinner with no intention of changing his behavior. The pastor of Ars went to see him at his hotel room. “I have not come here to play the devotee,” the boatman said to him after opening the door. “Leave me in peace! I am anxious to be off.” St. John Vianney grabbed his hand and with tender concern said, “So you do not want to have pity on your soul, my friend?” The saint left, but his words continued to resonate in the heart of the boatman. The following morning the boatman was in line for confession.
- A third occasion shows how creative St. John Vianney could be in trying to meet sinners where they were at and lead them back to the Father’s house. A young man tried to persuade his friend to come with him to confession in Ars. The friend replied that he would accompany him, but, insofar as he had no desire or need to confess, stated that he would go hunting while the other was in line for the sacrament. When they arrived in the village, St. John Vianney was crossing the square. He stopped before the friend, who had his rifle in one hand and the leash to his hunting dog in the other. St. John Vianney looked at the dog and then turned to its owner. “Monsieur,” he said, “would that your soul was as beautiful as your dog!” The vain young man blushed. After some time reflecting on the saint’s words, he entrusted his gun and pet to townspeople, entered the Church and with great tears, made his confession. His conversion was so thorough that, a few years later, he himself was captured by the Hound of Heaven and became a Cistercian monk.
- The most notable means St. John Vianney’s used to draw people to the confessional, however, was through regularly preaching about the need for the sacrament in the pulpit. His customary style would be to speak about God’s mercy; when times warranted, however, he could also thunder with the fierceness of an Old Testament prophet.
- He would generally begin with a focus on what a great gift the sacrament of confession is. “My children,” he preached once, “we cannot comprehend the goodness of God towards us in instituting this great Sacrament of Penance. If we had had a favor to ask of our Lord, we should never have thought of asking him that. But he foresaw our frailty and our inconstancy in well-doing, and his love led him to do what we should not have dared to ask.”
- The essence of the sacrament, he continued, is an encounter between God’s mercy and our misery, where the love of God “heals the wounds of our soul.” He labored to eradicate the popular Jansenist conception of an angry God, an image that would scare people away from the sacrament. “The good God will pardon a repentant sinner,” he countered, “faster than a mother will grab her child out of a fire.” In the sacrament, he said, “it’s not the sinner who comes back to God to ask for forgiveness, but God himself who runs after the sinner to make him return.” The Father of the prodigal son “comes after you, he pursues you after you have abandoned him.” Basing himself on Jesus’ words about the great eruption of joy in heaven for one repentant sinner, St. John Vianney stressed, “God’s greatest pleasure is to forgive us.”
- Anticipating almost verbatim some of what Christ himself said to St. Faustina a century later about his Divine Mercy, he continued, “How good God is! His good heart is an ocean of mercy. Even though we can be great sinners, we should never despair of our salvation. It is so easy to be saved!”



God's mercy is much greater than our misery. "What are our sins," he asked, "if we compare them to God's mercy?" This mercy extends not just to the past but to the future: "The good God knows all things. It knows that after you confess, you will sin again, but he will pardon you. What love God has that he will even voluntarily forget the future to forgive us."

- But there were times when the honey of God's mercy was not enough to attract people to the sacrament. On those occasions, he didn't hesitate to resort to fire-and-brimstone to let his parishioners know the consequences of sin and the failure to come to have sins forgiven. "Scaring them" into the sacrament was preferable to letting them live and die without it. He preached about the realities of the Last Judgment and Hell just like Jesus himself frequently did before him. Sometimes he would describe what sinners were doing to themselves, like carrying their souls to Hell by unnecessary work on Sunday. At other times, he would beg those who refused to repent at least to "commit as few mortal sins as possible, so as not to add to their everlasting punishment." Most often he would just start sobbing in the pulpit, for as much as 15 minutes at a time, contemplating the fate of damned souls, and saying, "Cursed by God! Cursed by God! What a pity!"
- It was almost impossible not to be moved. He would always conclude his homilies by inviting his listeners to action. "If the poor people who are damned had the time that we lose," he said once, "what good use they'd make of it!" He would remind them of the words of "God does not will the death of the sinner" and call them to take advantage of the means they have to meet the mercy of God in confession before they meet his justice at the judgment. Most did. "Without the sacrament of penance, it would be fitting to weep," he said; because of God's love in founding the sacrament, however, there was an opportunity to turn those tears into joy.
- JP II said in 1986: The Cure had the courage to denounce evil in all its forms; he did not keep silent, for it was a question of the eternal salvation of his faithful people: "If a pastor remains silent when he sees God insulted and souls going astray, woe to him! If he does not want to be damned, and if there is some disorder in his parish, he must trample upon human respect and the fear of being despised or hated." This responsibility was his anguish as a parish priest. But as a rule, "he preferred to show the attractive side of virtue rather than the ugliness of vice," and if he spoke - sometimes in tears - about sin and the danger for salvation, he insisted on the tenderness of God who has been offended, and the happiness of being loved by God, united to God, living in his presence and for him
- In sum, St. John Vianney was not content to remain in the confessional waiting for people to come, but actively went in search of Christ's lost sheep to bring them home to God. His courageous example of holy preaching and persistent personal invitation remain an imitable lesson for all priests and faithful today.
- Catechesis on Confession to help people to confess better
  - During his fruitful decades as the Curé of Ars, St. John Vianney not only labored to get his people to come to confession but to help them become good and better penitents. In his instructions on making good confessions — by which he meant not merely minimally "valid" ones but truly fruitful and life-changing experiences of conversion — he drew on the traditional teachings of the Church, his own experience as a penitent, and mainly on the unparalleled expertise he gained from confessing so many people from so many walks of life for so many years. He was a privileged witness not only to hundreds of thousands of beautiful confessions, but also scores of poorly done and even invalid ones. He synthesized this accumulated wisdom in catechetical instructions and sermons and this spiritual coaching remains eminently practical and helpful for Catholics today.
  - Since many penitents would need to wait several days in line to go to confession, he wanted them to spend that time well, and hence gave them regular conferences on making better confessions. He phrased the general dispositions needed to confess well in terms of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. The first virtue is a "faith that sees God in the priest." To believe in Christ means to believe in what he said and did, and our faith in Christ needs to take seriously that Christ established a concrete means by which sins can be forgiven, when on Easter Sunday evening he breathed the Holy

- Spirit on his ministers and sent them out to forgive sins just as God the Father had sent him (John 20:19-23).
- The second preparatory virtue is “hope that can make us believe that God will give us the grace of forgiveness.” Hope is a trust that God will make good on his promises. In the Gospel, Jesus repeatedly reminds us that God does not wish the death of the sinner, that his merciful love is everlasting and that heaven rejoices more in the return of one of God’s “lost and dead” sons or daughters than basically everything else. The Curé of Ars said that, without ever presumptuously taking God’s mercy for granted, we should approach the sacrament with confidence that God will joyfully welcome us back.
  - The third virtue is “love that brings us to love God and makes us regret in the heart ever having offended him.” This love helps us to form genuine sorrow for sins and moves us to seek reconciliation with the Beloved we’ve displeased by choosing other persons or things ahead of him and what he asks of us. Without this love, confession remains just an exercise in shameful self-disclosure, akin to a child’s being forced against his will to apologize in order to avoid further punishment. With love, the Sacrament of Penance facilitates a real reconciliation with the God who loves us first.
  - Vianney applied these virtues to the three traditional areas of preparation for confession: how to make a thorough and prayerful examination of conscience, how to grow in sorrow for our sins out of love for God, and how to make a firm game plan to overcome in the present and future the sins to which we’ve succumbed in the past.
  - The examination of conscience.
    - Many of the parishioners of Ars had really never been trained how to make a good examination of conscience. The indoctrination of the French Revolution worsened the situation and deformed many consciences, by pretending that some sins were in fact good actions, like executing priests and religious. St. John Vianney therefore needed to begin his training on how to examine the conscience well with a thorough catechesis on what sin is before he was able to teach them about specific sins.
    - Pope John Paul II wrote about the importance of the catechesis that John Vianney needed to do in his apostolic exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance*. “First of all,” the Pope stated, “an indispensable condition [for a good preparation for confession] is the rectitude and clarity of the penitent’s conscience. People cannot come to true and genuine repentance until they realize that sin is contrary to the ethical norm written in their inmost being; until they admit that they have had a personal and responsible experience of this contrast; until they say not only that ‘sin exists’ but also ‘I have sinned’; until they admit that sin has introduced a division into their consciences, which then pervades their whole being and separates them from God and from their brothers and sisters. The sacramental sign of this clarity of conscience is the act traditionally called the examination of conscience, an act that must never be one of anxious psychological introspection but a sincere and calm comparison with the interior moral law, with the evangelical norms proposed by the Church, with Jesus Christ himself who is our Teacher and Model of life, and with the heavenly Father, who calls us to goodness and perfection” (31).
    - The patron saint of priests tried to help his people achieve this clarity of conscience in his own inimitable way. He began by describing what sin is without mincing words: sin “is the executioner of the good God and the assassin of the soul.” By sin we give “blows to the face of our Father” and choose the most horrible Barabbas over Christ. Vianney once asked, “If you were to see a man building a large pyre, piling up the piece of wood one on top of the other, and you asked him what he was doing and he replied, ‘I am preparing the fire that will burn me,’ what would you think? In committing sin, that’s however what we do. It’s not God who throws us in hell; we do that by our sins. The damned will say: I lost God by my fault.” St. John Vianney admitted, “We are weak and can fall into sin,” but stressed that we should never despair because we are still free moral agents to whom “the good God doesn’t refuse us his grace.” To examine our conscience well, therefore, we need to begin with what St. John Vianney called a “holy horror” for the sins committed and for what sin does to God and to our souls.
    - Next, in our examination, we need to focus on particular sins. That’s why he routinely preached on various vices and their corresponding virtues, to help their consciences become sensitive.

- Third, he cautioned them to look not just at the sins but at the relationship they wound. We need to look at our correspondence to the God of the commandments and not just the commandments of God. An examination of conscience is far more than a forensic accounting of moral deficits, but a look at how and why we've chosen against God and those he loves.
- Fourth, he said that the examination nevertheless needs to be a thorough and regular accounting. The Curé of Ars once counseled a businessman who had made a poor examination, "It is necessary to put your conscience in better order than you put in order your business affairs." The stakes of one's soul are far more important than of one's money. If we're going to take our "moral bottom line" more seriously than a businessman takes his economic health, Vianney taught, "we will do well to make an examination of conscience every night." It is easier to make reconciliations on a daily basis, after all, than to try to do it over the course of a week, months or years. A general examination of conscience at night before going to bed is a crucially important practice in the Christian spiritual life in general and a *sine qua non* for becoming a holy penitent.
- Lastly, he taught that we need to beware of our tendency to make excuses or exculpations for the sins we commit. To a priest who once said, "but my intentions are good," St. John Vianney replied in a phrase that's since become famous. "O my friend, good intentions! Hell is paved with them!" The spirit may indeed be willing, but if the flesh is weak, we still end up betraying the Lord and need to repent like St. Peter.
- Contraction
  - The next act of the penitent is contrition, which is the most important part of our preparation.
  - That last sentence in intended to be somewhat provocative, because many people — both today and at the time of the Curé of Ars — think that the most important element in preparing for a good confession is the examination of conscience. The examination is, after all, what most Catholics spend the majority of their time on before coming to confession. While it is certainly good that people spend time doing a quality examination of conscience, there is something more important, both quantitatively and qualitatively: contrition.
  - "It is necessary to spend more time asking for contrition than making the examination of conscience," St. John Vianney used to preach unambiguously to his people. He counseled them to spend a great deal of time in prayer before God asking him to grant them true sorrow for their sins. He knew, first, that it was sorrow that would help turn their confession into a real occasion of conversion. He also recognized that it was contrition that would transform the experience of confession from a dry accounting of one's transgressions into an opening for profound reconciliation with a merciful Father against whom one has sinned and to whom one says "sorry" in the sacrament.
  - Pope John Paul II, in the 1984 Apostolic Exhortation "Reconciliation and Penance," the most extensive treatment in the history of the magisterium on the Sacrament of Penance, called contrition the "essential act of Penance on the part of the penitent." He defined it as "a clear and decisive rejection of the sin committed, together with a resolution not to commit in again, out of the love that one has for God and that is reborn with repentance." He went on to say that contrition is the "beginning and the heart of conversion, of that evangelical metanoia [total revolution in one's way of thinking] that brings the person back to God like the Prodigal Son returning to his Father."
  - John Paul II particularly wished to emphasize the connection how true contrition brings about the "radical change of life" called conversion. He said that traditionally people regard the conversion to which true contrition leads as a "mortification" in which we try to eradicate the roots of sin from life. Jesus used the image of cutting off our limbs and plucking out our eyes if they're leading to sin. That Pope said that there's an aspect of this "death" involved, but he stressed that "contrition and conversion are even more a drawing near to the holiness of God, a rediscovery of one's true identity that has been upset and disturbed by sin, a liberation in the very depth of self and thus a regaining of lost joy, the joy of being saved." Contrition and conversion is meant, in other words, to bring us true joy, the joy that comes from experiencing anew the full depth of the merciful love of God. This is the reason why St. John Vianney would call contrition, "the balm of the soul."

- John Paul II worried that “the majority of people in our time are no longer capable of experiencing” that balm because they are no longer sufficiently motivated by the love of God to experience true sorrow, and without that sorrow, they won’t be able to have the type of conversion that draws them anew into the depth of God’s holiness. This is the reason why helping people form true contrition out of love for God is so important to help people experience the full power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- St. John Vianney realized this and worked so hard, both in the pulpit and in the confessional, to help people achieve this sorrow.
- On one occasion a penitent was confessing his sins matter-of-factly without sorrow. The Curé of Ars began to weep on his side of the confessional. The penitent was startled and asked him, as any of us might, “Father, why are you crying?” St. John Vianney responded, with words that soon became famous, “I am crying because you are not.”
- He would often break down in the confessional over the sins that people were confessing. His tears routinely became contagious as penitents discovered what the proper interior response should be to what they had done. Witnessing this priest’s weeping over their sins often was enough to bring them to profound repentance, and it was common a common sight to see people sobbing from sorrow and joy as they leave the saint’s confessional.
- On other occasions, St. John Vianney would point to the confessional crucifix — indicating the price Jesus had paid for the sins the penitent was confessing at that moment — and begin to weep. Most penitents soon joined him. To one man who had only what Church tradition called “imperfect contrition” — the “contrition of fear” of eternal damnation and the other consequences of sin — he replied in a way that brought him quickly to “perfect contrition,” which is a sorrow based on love for God. “Save your poor soul!” Vianney said with infinite tenderness. “What a pity to lose a soul that has cost our Lord so much. What harm has he done to you that you would treat him in this way?”
- Many penitents attested that even when they were confessing their sins with sorrow and tears, each of their admissions would provoke from him a profound and seemingly uncontrollable sigh or groan. He taught them indelible lessons of the horror a son or daughter should have for sin against his or her all-loving Father. Once a young priest who had come to the patron saint of priests for confession left not only with his sins absolved but with a much deeper realization of the sorrow that should characterize both penitent and confessor. He stated, many years later, “Every one of my accusations provoked on his part an exclamation of faith, commiseration and horror for the smallest sin. ‘What a pity,’ he would say, over and over again. I was particularly struck by the accent of tenderness with which he uttered the words. That simple ‘What a pity!’ in all its beauty showed what damage sin had done to my soul.”
- St. John Vianney would say that contrition not only should precede a good confession and follow it, since true contrition will lead to acts of penance, reparation, the firm purpose of amendment necessary for a radical change in life. Using a domestic analogy, he taught, ““You see a house that is all filthy. It is the same with your soul. After the examination, even after confession, it is necessary to have contrition to wash it.” The tears of contrition become like a second baptismal path washing the dirt of the soul, even the most embedded, away.
- The contrition St. John Vianney had for sins extended also to his own. He often confided that his one great aspiration was to retire to a monastery where he could “weep over his sins” and “poor life.” That genuine sorrow out of love for God was something he couldn’t help passing on to all those who heard him speak about the mercy of God and all those who received it through him in the confessional.
- Firm Purpose of Amendment
  - St. John Vianney knew that the greater one’s examination of conscience — identifying not just the sins but the various factors and occasions that led to the sin — the greater the game plan one would be able to form to seek to avoid these sins and occasions in the future. Likewise, the more contrite someone was for the sins committed, the greater the resolve that person would have not to wound the Lord, himself and others again by sin.

- But even so, it's not automatic that someone who has made a good examination of conscience and who is filled with sorrow will make a solid plan to amend one's life. They might not necessarily be intending to commit sins in the future; they may even have a positive desire not to commit similar sins in the future; but they will lack the type of strategy and resolve to be brutal with themselves in seeking to avoid them.
- When St. John Vianney encountered penitents with insufficient purposes of amendment, he did whatever he could to help them to achieve it. Many times this took the form of guidance and encouragement. Sometimes it took the form of strictness in helping them — to use Jesus' image from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:29-30) — to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes if they were causing them to sin. In all circumstances his goal was to help his penitents not merely confess their sins but achieve real conversion. He knew, as he said in one homily, that there are “many who confess but few who convert ... because there are few who confess with repentance.” He hoped that, by his preaching and his priestly work in the confessional, everyone who came to confession in Ars would leave converted.
- One time St. John Vianney was returning from a sick call and met a woman from Paris in the village square of Ars. She had no intention to go to confession; she merely wanted to observe the curious phenomenon of the Curé of Ars. When the saint met her, he asked her to follow him to a place they could converse privately. Much like Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4), the saint revealed to her, with a divine light that we'll have a chance to talk about in future columns, all that she had ever done. The woman's first reaction was stunned silence, not knowing what to say, as all that she had tried to conceal to the world was now out in the open in her conversation with the pastor of Ars. When she finally spoke, she said, “Father, will you hear my confession?” After all, she thought, he already knew her sins; since this tough was out of the way, there was nothing stopping her from receiving absolution.
- “Your confession would be useless,” St. John Vianney shockingly replied. With the same interior light with which he had seen her sins, he continued: “I can read in your soul and there I see two devils that enslave it, the devil of pride and the devil of impurity. I can only absolve you on the condition that you do not go back to Paris; seeing your dispositions, I know that you will return there.” Paris was an irresistible occasion of sin for this woman and she needed to be willing to cut Paris off from her life in order to make a valid confession. She was unwilling at this point, however, to do something so “drastic.” She told the priest that she thought he was exaggerating the dangers. So he prophetically revealed to her how low she would fall in Paris. She responded that she thought herself incapable of such abominations. Vianney assured her that she would commit them, but also told her what she had to do when she eventually hit this spiritual rock bottom: she was to leave Paris, begin certain practices of penance, and return to the south of France where she would meet him again. Everything happened precisely as he described. When he saw her three months later, she was chastened, humble and ready to make a firm purpose of conversion of life. She finally received absolution and the joy of reconciliation with God.
- The Curé of Ars was as strong as steel in requiring a firm purpose of amendment, because without it, he knew that the sacrament would be invalid due to insufficient “matter.” He was consequently unyielding with those who deliberately lived in the occasion of sin, refusing to give them absolution until they had eliminated what was the cause of the spiritual downfall.
- To a woman who repeatedly was falling into sin because of evil books in her library, he required her to burn the books before he would give her absolution. Those in illicit relationships needed to end them. Drunks had to eliminate the booze from their home and stop going to the bars.
- To those who frequented the *vogues* — the sensual dances that he believed were volcanoes of lust that led to all sorts of sins — he refused to give absolution until the penitent would make a promise never to attend another one. A woman testified at his canonization that she was refused absolution for six years because as a teenager she was unwilling to make a commitment to forsake those dances in the future. She said that St. John Vianney was always kind to her, would give her his blessing and promise to pray

for her, but was adamant about the conversion required in the sacrament of penance. When the girl's mother said that her daughter could go to another confessor, the Curé replied, "As you like," but said that he hoped that she wouldn't, because that would just be ducking the issue of the conversion the daughter needed. Eventually the girl recognized the seriousness of what she was doing and began to hate the sins that were keeping her from the Lord's mercy in the confessional and his body and blood in Holy Communion. She returned to the sacraments with a firm resolution and lived a good life thereafter.

- With inveterate sinners who refused to give up the near occasions of their ruin, the saint would remind them of the eternal consequences of their stubbornness. "Unless you avoid such an occasion," he would say, "you will be damned." Hearing those words would be enough, on many occasions, bring people to their senses. One such penitent, François Bourdin, left the confessional repeating, "What, I will be damned! Cursed by God forever!" This became a flash of light that led to his conversion, return to the confessional and good life from that point forward.
- In helping the people to make a firm purpose of amendment, he was not encouraging them principally to use their willpower, but to trust in the power of God. "We trust too much in our resolutions and promises," he said from experience, "and not enough on the good God." He helped them to see that, even though it might seem impossible to them to eliminate a sinful occasion from their life, it was not impossible for God.
- This is the wisdom that continues to underlie the act of contrition to this day: "I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace..." We need God's help to eliminate the near occasions of sin, but, as St. John Vianney always taught, that help is never absent.
- Penances given
  - If the patron saint of priests was tough with penitents in terms of the forming resolutions not to sin, he was exceedingly mild in terms of the penances he would impose. This was a huge source of concern to his brother priests who accused him of being too soft and of lowering the standards of the type of penance that should correspond to the gravity of sins committed.
  - The penance that a priest gives an absolved penitent is not supposed to be arbitrary; rather, it's meant to be a form of "spiritual medicine" that the penitent does in order to repair some of the damage caused by sin. As the Catechism says, "Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sins. This satisfaction is also called 'penance'" (1459).
  - Like a doctor giving a prescription to a sick patient to bring about the restoration of health, the confessor, in prescribing a penance, needs to adapt it to the state of the person and the seriousness of the spiritual infection. "The penance the confessor imposes," the Catechism continues, "must take into account the penitent's personal situation and must seek his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Such penances help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all" (1460).
  - The colleagues of the Curé of Ars thought that the penances people were saying they received in Ars were not corresponding to the "gravity and the nature of the sins committed." Many of them tried to talk to him about it directly. Others reported him to the bishop. The light penances of the pastor of Ars were a common topic in clergy get-togethers.
  - St. John Vianney was aware of the criticism. "I am accused of being somewhat easy with certain pilgrims," he admitted to Brother Athanasius, one of his chief helpers in his later years in Ars. But he had a ready defense: "Surely I must take into account the trouble it costs them to come from so far and the expense to which they are put." Making expensive journeys to Ars and waiting in line for up to eight days to go to confession, St. John Vianney believed, was already powerful medicine for most of the

penitents. “They reproach me,” he continued, “but can I really be hard on people who come from so far, and who, in order to do so, have made so many sacrifices?”

- He thought that the more effective medicine to spur penitents on to repair the damage due to sin was to prescribe honey rather than vinegar. “Were I to impose severer penances,” he said, “I should discourage them.”
- This doesn’t mean, however, as some thought at the time, that his behavior was akin to bleeding heart judges who dole out slaps on the wrists for serious felonies. He knew that out of justice, reparation needed to be made; he didn’t want to put the full burden of that reparation, however, on his penitents.
- When a priest who was a defender of rigorous penances came to visit him and asked, “How can we strike a happy medium in this matter?,” the Curé of Ars let him on a secret that revealed how much he had become configured to Christ through his work in the confessional. “My friend,” he replied, “here is my recipe: I give them a small penance and the remainder I myself perform in their stead.”
- Through his rigorous fasts, bodily mortifications, vigils of prayer and especially his heroic stamina in the confessional, St. John Vianney did the vast majority of the penances corresponding to the gravity of his penitents’ sins. Just as Christ paid the price for our sins on the Cross, so St. John Vianney was paying most of the cost for his penitents’ penances through his cruciform life. We can say that St. John Vianney understood the inherent “logic” of the penances to be imposed far better than his colleagues, because, as the Catechism passage above describes, the ultimate penance was paid for by Christ.
- That said, when the good of penitents demanded it, St. John Vianney could be as creative and challenging with medicinal penances as any priest in the history of the Church.
- To a future nun who was battling pride and begged his help to grow in humility, St. John Vianney assigned as a penance to kneel on the steps of the Church with her arms extended in the form of a Cross as people were leaving Sunday Mass. It was a quick cure, as most looked at her as crazy!
- To an elderly gentleman who confessed that an excessive desire for worldly respect was inhibiting his leading a publicly Christian life, he told him to go pray the Rosary out loud in the front of the Church. By the end he had learned that he could survive without the cheap esteem of those who value the wrong things.
- To a worldly young man whose principal fault was vanity — which terrified him from giving witness to the faith — he prescribed a penance that was like a burst of radiation for the cancer that was killing his soul. After having him pray acts of faith, hope and love before leaving Church, St. John Vianney assigned him to participate in the upcoming Corpus Christi procession in his hometown. He was to secure a place as close as possible to the Blessed Sacrament, right behind the canopy. Since he and his friends had been known to make fun of those who took part in the procession, he dreaded their seeing him now participating in it, and prayed during the two weeks between his confession and Corpus Christi that rain would cancel the procession. The rain didn’t come. “Were I to live a hundred years,” the young man said years later, “I should never forget those two hours spent walking behind the canopy. Cold perspiration bathed my forehead; my knees shook under me.” But the experience not only made him bolder in his own living of the faith, but his example touched the heart of his friends and many others and brought them to examine the immature state of their own spiritual life. Within two years, he had founded a St. Vincent de Paul Conference in his hometown comprised of 30 of his friends who had been won over by his example on that Corpus Christi.
- Most of the penances he gave, however, were simple, straightforward and light: a few prayers asking the help of God and the saints to continue to correspond to grace just as they had corresponded to the grace that had brought them back to confession.
- His medicinal penances, both those he gave and those he did on behalf of those who had come to him, remain a model for doctors of the soul today.
- Practical Tips
  - We can conclude this talk on the Curé of Ars and the Sacrament of Penance by focusing briefly on a few other aspects of his confessional ministry.

- The first concerns the practical tips he gave on how to go to confession. He encouraged penitents to be candid, clear, concise and contrite. With proper preparation, he said, the confession even of someone who had been away for years should be able to be done within a few minutes. He tried to help those who were prone to loquacity, especially in giving non-essential details, to prune their confession and give just those circumstances that were directly relevant to committing the sin. This was not so much to save time, but because he generally saw that the greater the details, the less sorrowful the penitent; rather than identifying the root causes of sins, the extra details were normally employed to “explain” or “excuse” them. That’s why he counseled from the pulpit, “Avoid all the useless accusations. They waste the confessor’s time, fatigue those who are waiting to confess and extinguish devotion.”
- Second, he sought to remove whatever fears people might have in coming to confession. He knew that many were reluctant to confess because they worried what the priest might think of them. He sought to reassure them, first, by telling them that there was nothing that they could say that would surprise the priest. “Is it really humiliating to accuse yourself of your sins?” he asked. “The priest knows well what you’re capable of.” Then he told them what the priest’s reaction would be to their humble self-accusation and trust in God’s mercy. “The priest will have mercy on you. He will cry with you,” as often St. John Vianney did.
- Third, he sought to help them to receive sacramental absolution prayerfully, by getting them to grasp what it really meant. “When the priest gives absolution, it’s necessary to think of only one thing: that the blood of the good God is flowing through our soul to wash it, purify it and make it as beautiful as it was after baptism.” Absolution is a great miracle, just like the miracle of baptism, when the soul that was deadened by sin experiences the miracle of the resurrection. It is not uncommon in some places, especially where confessional lines are long, for priests to have penitents to say their act of contrition simultaneously with the prayer of absolution, or for penitents to begin praying their penance while the absolution is being given. The Curé of Ars wanted no such multi-tasking. He tried to help his penitents slow down to reflect on what was occurring, which he was convinced would help them grow to love the sacrament more and experience more of its fruits.
- Fourth, St. John Vianney tried to get his parishioners and penitents to pray for their confessors. “The penitent should pray,” he suggested repeatedly, “that the good God give to his confessor the necessary light and grace.” Just as he was praying and fasting for penitents, so he was asking them to do the same for him and his brother confessors. He knew, perhaps more than any other priest in Church history, how much priests are in need of prayer to act to act effectively in the person of the Divine Physician with each penitent who comes. They need God’s grace to understand not just the sins but the sinners who come before him, to remain patient with those who try their patience, to be gentle with those who are particularly sensitive, to be firm with those who need a good spiritual kick in the pants, to cry with those who lack contrition, to give hope to those in despair, to guide with clarity those who are lost and confused, and to know what to say and what not to say in order to help the penitent turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.
- Fifth, the patron saint of priests always reminded his penitents that, if they wanted to receive God’s mercy, they had to be merciful with others. “Unless you forgive others their sins,” Jesus said in the Gospel, “your Heavenly Father will not forgive yours” (Mt 6:15). St. John Vianney helped them to see that their absolution required forgiving others 70 times 7 times. “The good God will pardon only those who pardon,” he said. “That’s the law.” He helped his parishioners to live by it.
- Finally, he not only sought to help them forgive others but to bring others to receive the same forgiveness they had received from God. He tried to make them cheerful apostles of the sacrament of reconciliation, spreading the joy of being forgiven to their family members, friends and neighbors. Far more effective than 100 homilies on confession is the witness of a satisfied customer. The geometric explosion in the number of penitents in the tiny, barely accessible hamlet of Ars, was ascribable not only to God’s grace and the Curé’s prayers but to the testimonies of so many penitents whose joyful personal tales were compelling advertisements.



- That's a great lesson for all of us today with regard to those we know who are in great need of God's mercy. The most effective means in getting them to return is, in most cases, not to point the finger at them and tell them that they need to go to confession. It's to go to confession ourselves and then to share with them the incredible joy we have in being reconciled with the Father.