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## The Curé of Ars and Perseverance in the Priestly Vocation

- Introduction
  - Sometimes when we think about the Curé of Ars, we can focus on what perhaps is inimitable: his 35 years of battles with the devil, the sheer amount of time in the confessional, the infused knowledge he demonstrated on occasion. But when Pope Benedict in his letter to begin the Year for Priests lifted St. John Vianney up as a model for all priests and future priests to follow, he focused on what was imitable: how he was a humble pastor after God's heart, a good shepherd, a man of prayer, pervaded by the Word of God, who loved his priesthood and identified himself completely with his ministry, who centered his life on Jesus in the Eucharist, who out of love for his people heard their confessions, who visited the sick and families, cared for orphans, provided for the education of children, founded fraternities and enlisted lay people to work at his side. These are all things he not only did, but did in a holy way, finding in them ways to love God and to love others. They were all parts of the path God had given him to bring about his spiritual perfection on the basis of which he bore so much fruit.
  - During our days together, we're going to focus on a few aspects of the life of the Curé of Ars that each of us in our own priestly way can imitate, such as how Jesus in the Eucharist was the source and the summit of his life and constituted the pastoral plan for the renewal of his parish, his fidelity as a penitent and confessor, and his charity.
  - But in this first conference, I'd like to focus on the virtue that made possible all his effective ministry in these ways, one of the most important virtues for a Christian and for a priest: the virtue of perseverance.
  - We need perseverance to live by faith especially when we confront tests and obstacles. We need perseverance in proclaiming the Gospel, especially when others do not need to be receiving it on good soil. We need perseverance to participate in the reform of the Church, to get out of ourselves, our comforts, our issues, our excuses, and go yoked with Christ to save the people on the margins. St. John Vianney can show us the path and intercede for us for the graces to follow him on that path.
- Introduction to perseverance
  - We live in an age in which many people give up. They give up on prayer. They give up on the Mass. They give up on the Sacrament of Confession. They give up on fighting sin. They give up on their marriages. They give up on suffering. They give up on their religious vows. And yes, they give up on their priestly vocations.
  - Every priest has probably been crushed by the news that a seminary classmate or close priest friend has left the priesthood. Some senior priests here may have had up to half their seminary class leave. Even for some priests who stay, on many occasions they've lost what Jesus in the Book of Revelation calls "their first love." When their initial zeal met tepid responses, when people didn't show up to Bible studies or other initiatives, when parishioners seemed not to notice or care much about the hours of preparation they put into Sunday homilies, they began to put in less of an effort. Perhaps their commitment to prayer has waned, or to fasting and mortification, or to one-on-one time with potential converts. They've ceased over time, in other words, to seek that spiritual perfection on which pastoral effectiveness depends.
  - That's why the virtue of perseverance is so important. Never to give up. Never to stop running the race, to fighting the good fight, to keeping the faith and growing in faith.
  - Jesus told us in the Gospel, "He who endures to the end will be saved." (Mt 24:13).

- St. Paul, in his second letter to St. Timothy, talks about the choice before us as a choice between perseverance and denial: “If we endure, we shall reign with him; if we deny him, he will deny us” (2 Tim 2:12)
- We face that choice every day. The more we choose to persevere, the better priests we will be. St. Paul said, “Suffering produces endurance, that endurance produces character, that character produces hope and hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:4-5). It’s perseverance that will forge our priestly character to be like Christ’s, to be like the holy martyrs, men and women like us who remained faithful under trial.
- Let’s see what we can learn about this virtue from our priestly patron.
- Perseverance
  - SJV’s early life
    - SJV’s perseverance is the way most priests and future priests come to relate to him. Most of us read the life of the Curé of Ars for the first time when they’re discerning a vocation to the priesthood or when we’re in our first years of seminary. His chronicle of perseverance through so many obstacles often serves as a powerful inspiration to us when we’re struggling through academic, formational or other challenges. The fact that the future patron saint of priests was once kicked out of the seminary is, after all, a witness that occasionally priests on faculty can make spectacularly wrong judgment calls!
    - Having received very little formal schooling, Vianney began his formal studies to the priesthood at the age of 19 in the presbytery school of Fr. Balley. He was not unintelligent, just uneducated, but most of his fellow students didn’t know the difference. All they knew was that they, though many years his junior, learned things far more easily. No matter how hard Vianney labored, and he did so diligently for months, he couldn’t master Latin. He eventually thought it better for him to return home than continue to frustrate both his teachers and fellow students.
    - This was the first time he thought it could be over. Fr. Balley, however, persuaded him not to give up. He made a 120-mile round-trip pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Francis Regis, begging for his intercession that he might learn enough Latin to do theology. He returned no longer dismayed.
    - As he began to apply himself once again, his studies were interrupted when he drafted into the Napoleonic army, an 18-month odyssey that was the second time his vocation was almost ended.
    - After he had returned, Fr. Balley was impatient to see this much older candidate move formally to the seminary, to do the one year of philosophy and two years of theology that were required at the time. When he arrived in Verrières to begin his philosophy studies, Vianney found that he couldn’t even understand the Latin queries posed by the priest professor who was younger than he was. With a few others, he was separated for classes in French, but despite his increased comprehension, he still received on his report card the overall grade of “a weak student to the extreme.” This was the third major temptation. He persevered through it, however, and was assigned to the Major Seminary in Lyons to do his theology.
    - There again the problem of his weak Latin comprehension got him into trouble. He was so hopeless in responding to the professors’ questions in class that they stopped calling on him altogether. He was assigned a tutor, to review the lessons with him in French. After six months, however, the faculty came to the conclusion that there was no hope that he would ever know enough Latin to become a priest, so they dismissed the future patron saint of the clergy from the seminary. The fourth major obstacle.
    - After he began, reluctantly, to think of becoming a religious brother, Fr. Balley again intervened, tutoring him in Latin and in French and preparing him outside of the seminary for the canonical examinations. Fr. Balley was faithfully gambling on his own reputation and

the hopes that an exception might be made, or a miracle given. The exams were another total failure; Vianney did not even know what questions were being asked of him. This was the fifth crisis.

- Even though Vianney saw no path forward, Fr. Balley spoke to the examiners and used his reputation to secure that two of them come to examine Vianney in French the following day at the rectory. In his native tongue, he did well, but it would be an uphill battle to find a bishop who would ordain a man with so little knowledge of the language of the Church.
- Fr. Balley arranged an interview with the vicar general of Lyons, Msgr. Courbon, who was administering the Archdiocese during the archbishop's exile. He informed him of Vianney's history and asked him to call him to holy orders. The Vicar General, doubtless inspired by God, asked, "Is he pious? Does he have a devotion to our Lady? Does he know how to say the Rosary?" Upon being told by Fr. Balley that young Vianney was exemplary in his piety, Msgr. Courbon prophetically replied, "'Very well, I summon him to come up for ordination. The grace of God will do the rest.
- The grace of God, which had helped John Vianney persevere until then, did in fact do the rest.
- There were so many times he could have given up. But he never did. And even though none of his professors or even fellow students likely thought he would ever be ordained, he would turn out to become the patron of every priest who has ever lived. That occurred because of his perseverance.
- SJV's priestly life
  - But his perseverance didn't end them. He persevered usque ad finem in his priestly work. By way of introduction and illustration, I can briefly mention **ten** ways:
    - He persevered in prayer
      - All night vigils, praying for the conversion of his parish, asking God for all the help he needed.
      - There's a great lesson here for all of us.
        - Jesus, of course, used to pray unceasingly at night.
        - Sometimes we can become content "saying our prayers," but God wants more. We're not called, necessarily, to imitate the Curé of Ars in sleeping fewer than 2 hours a night for 41 years in order to pray, but we are called to persevere in the presence of God.
        - We'll have a chance to talk more about his prayer in a later conference
    - He persevered in removing the near occasions of sin from his people
      - Against the profanation of Sunday
      - Against blasphemy
      - Against the taverns, not just open on Sunday but the place where husbands wasted what their families needed.
      - Against the vogues or dances.
      - It took him 25 years to make this total turnaround.
      - For us, now, we need with God's help to make the commitment to persevere in the commitment to root out sin. Jesus tells us to pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands lest it lead us to sin.
      - Many penitents will say they get frustrated because they say they are confessing the same sins all the time. While the sins may vary, most people do commit the same sins over and over again, because they're vulnerable to particular temptations.
      - We need to work at it and have the courage never to throw in the towel.
      - The particular examination of conscience is a great help in this regard. Sometimes you have to keep a particular examination for months or years.
  - He persevered in the confessional

- We'll talk more about this tomorrow, but no one has persevered in the confessional the way that SJV did.
- In the early days, he waited in the confessional when virtually no one was coming.
- Beginning about 1830, he almost could never leave. That began 31 years of 12-hour days in the winter, 18-hour days in the summer. His confessional became almost a coffin, it was his cross on which he persevered in cold and in heat as Jesus persevered during the way of the Cross and as he was dying.
- He persevered in his priestly assignment.
  - Many times he would have preferred to run away to the Trappists to weep for his poor life, but he stayed at the task, never complaining about his lack of free time.
  - We need to be willing to be “all in” to the duties that the Lord has given us for the sake of others’ salvation.
- He persevered in mortification
  - While even he in his later years would confess that the mortifications of his youth were extreme and imprudent, he had a great desire to tame his lower appetites so that he could aspire to the ones of God.
  - With the appetite for food, in his early priesthood he survived on a few boiled potatoes a week. After about 11 years of this, when he had founded the orphanage called La Providence, he would eat there some small meals and drink some milk. He knew food was a great good and gift of God, but he gave up much of his desire for food as a holocaust in order to gain self-discipline to live off of every word that came from the mouth of God.
  - He used the discipline and cilice, to unite himself to the Lord’s passion, to do reparation for his sins and the sins of his penitents. He himself would admit that he used these traditional instruments excessively in his younger years, but the principle of mortification to help him be crucified to the world and the world to him so that Christ could live in him was real.
  - His greatest mortification, though, was in putting to death his lower instincts with regards to responding to others with anything short of love. He sought to show infinite patience with others who were trying his patience, through cutting his hair or his cassock while he was walking from the Church to the rectory, who wanted to take up all his time “getting to know him” so that they could name drop later, who wanted to treat him like a celebrity, autographing pictures with his likeness, etc.
  - We learn from him that we need to persevere, too, in putting to death the “old Adam” so that the “new Adam” can reign. This is a never-ending battle, but we need, like SJV, to recognize God’s help will always be present to help us to deny ourselves, pick up the Crosses that will help us to die to ourselves, so that we can follow Christ not merely externally but internally. We need to be generous in this self-denial, as SJV was.
- He persevered in the face of criticism
  - One of the things that most of us are not sufficiently prepared for in seminary is the barrage of criticism that comes with the priestly life. Sure, there are occasional references in formation talks, but many of us can somehow believe naively that if we just do our job, if we try to be the love of the heart of Jesus, then somehow we’ll be the exception. We anticipate that we’ll be treated with similar love and esteem to that with which so many of us have treated the priests before us. We expect that we’ll be thanked for efforts and appreciated, that people will admire our fidelity, be grateful for the efforts we make, understand that we can’t do everything, be everywhere, please everyone, etc. And there are obviously some who are grateful for our priesthood and some who still treat us with the unmerited affection and respect due

to the priestly office. But criticism, oppositions and difficulties are, for many priests, much more a part of their priestly life than they would ever have expected. Since the eruption of the clergy sexual abuse crisis, many have taken it as a green light to go after us for literally everything. It's hard enough when we're criticized justly and constructively. When the criticism is unmerited, off-base, intended to injure, or worst of all a calumny, it is infinitely harder to endure.

- One of the most important things a future priest in particular has to learn is how to respond in a holy way to the barrage of criticism that will accompany his priesthood. Every priest knows, in some way, that if Jesus himself were repeatedly criticized and calumniated, if all the prophets suffered disdain and rejection, and if even Mother Teresa's charity toward the poorest of the poor day was attacked as selfish, there's no way he'll be spared. But no matter how great a future priest's preparation might be, when the criticism begins, it's always jarring.
- The criticism takes many forms. Some of it is unquestionably deserved, and, when given, takes the form of the fraternal correction that everyone needs to overcome moral and character defects (Mt 18:15-18). Some of it is just as obviously undeserved, such as when a newly ordained priest is pilloried for the sins of priests in previous generations, new pastors are disparaged because they do not imitate — or change — everything their predecessors did, or preachers are faulted because they cannot give homilies as eloquent as Fulton J. Sheen and as succinct or developed as the particular listener desires.
- With regard to this, St. John Vianney has much to teach us all. He was the subject of enormous criticism and even outright opposition at his parish, among his presbyterate, even in his own rectory. His reaction to these contradictions constitutes a primer for us priests on how to respond to the conflicts, criticism and even calumny we face in a Christian way.
- Criticism and opposition in his parish
  - In his first several years in Ars, St. John Vianney received an incredible barrage of opposition and criticism. Some of the antagonism he received came from the anti-clericalist “free-thinkers,” but most of it came from those Catholics who really did not want a holy pastor. Those walking in darkness abhorred the light he was radiating and began to act toward him as the Book of Wisdom had predicted more than 2,400 years earlier: “Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us; he sets himself against our doings, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training. . . . To us, he is the censure of our thoughts; merely to see him is a hardship for us, because his life is not like other men's, and his ways are different” (Wis 2:12-15).
  - Among his biggest critics were the patrons of the taverns, the partisans of the raunchy dances called the *vogues*, and those who were not able to receive absolution because they refused to give up the occasions of their sins. Since he was a faithful priest, he also became a proxy punching bag for all those who had a problem with any Catholic teaching or practice.
  - For 18 months a man used to stand outside the rectory each night and excoriate Vianney for as long as his voice could shout.
  - To such detractors, Vianney would occasionally respond, “My friend, you know me well!” This was more than a means to disarm them; the saint knew that even if the particular things for which they were faulting him were totally unfounded, there was so much more for which he could be faulted that the deprecators did not know.

- Normally, however, his strategy was to remain silent, as Christ himself did before the Sanhedrin. He once confided to a priest friend, who himself was experiencing similar opposition: “Do as I did: I let them say all they wished and in this way, they ended up by holding their tongues.”
- When verbal insults failed to get him to leave Ars or at least stop his crusade to convert the populace, Vianney’s denigrators began to resort to violence.
  - One day a man approached and savagely slapped him in the face. Stung, the Curé took a moment to gain his composure. He then turned to the man, smiled, and said, “My friend, the other cheek is jealous.”
- Most difficult to endure were the calumny and character assassination.
  - Some young men, disappointed that their former dance partners had been converted by the priest, began to spread rumors that the reason behind his emaciation and pallor was because he had a sexually transmitted disease caught through a hidden life of sordid debauchery.
  - As ludicrous as the accusation was, they thought that if they repeated it enough it would eventually stick. They composed beer songs mocking him for these supposed sins, plastered posters around town and even on the rectory door labeling him a pervert, and wrote anonymous letters to the bishop accusing him of almost every degeneracy possible.
  - When a young woman living in a house close to the rectory became pregnant, these young men started the rumor that the pastor himself was the father. His front door was splashed repeatedly with filth and many of the people of the village began to treat him as a guilty hypocrite. His new bishop, having received so many anonymous letters and not knowing the Curé well at the time, felt obliged to send a priest to investigate the charges. The allegations were unsurprisingly determined to be total fabrications.
  - St. John Vianney’s response to all of this suffering was to abandon himself into God’s hands. He did not care in particular that his own good name was being besmirched — if God didn’t need his reputation, who was he to think he did? — but he was sickened by the attacks on the honor of the priesthood. In a weak moment, he considered leaving Ars for the spiritual health of the people who were being scandalized, until he was convinced that by doing so, he would be give plausibility to the notorious rumors.
  - The mayor, who knew him to be innocent, pressed him to make a defense and expose the slanderers. Vianney responded, rather, “We must pray for them.” He forgave his accusers and never revealed their names, even though he knew who they were. When one of the calumniators hit hard times, Vianney brought the family money. Eventually, the force of the evidence of his holiness and confidence in God began to bring sanity and truth back to Ars.
- Toward the end of his life, he summed up all that he had suffered, admitting, “If on my arrival at Ars, I had foreseen all that I was to suffer there, I should have died on the spot.” He confessed that he had expected that eventually “a time would come when people would rout me out of Ars with sticks, when the Bishop would suspend me and I would end my days in prison.”

- As hard as it was, however, he counted all of this suffering a “grace.” He converted the pain into prayer. “Never have I been so happy,” he divulged at the end of his life, “as in moments when I was being persecuted and calumniated. At such times God would flood me with consolation. God granted me everything I asked him.”
- Jesus taught that it’s easy to love those who love us. What distinguishes his followers, however, is that we love even our enemies and pray for our persecutors. In the way he dealt with his critics, St. John Vianney proved himself to be a Christian not just in name but in fact.
- Criticism from his brother priests
  - Many of St. John Vianney’s priest brothers did not want a holy colleague.
  - The opposition began with Fr. Tripier, the cleric who was appointed Curé of Ecully after the death of the Fr. Vianney’s mentor and first pastor, Fr. Charles Balley. When Fr. Tripier arrived, he found the rectory more like an austere monastery than a place of priestly comfort. Even though the people loved their parochial vicar, Fr. Triper thought that Fr. Vianney — in his tattered and patched cassock, unpolished shoes, and drooping hat — was disgracefully attired for a priest, especially one near Lyons, where priests were famous for their external deportment. He was upset that Fr. Vianney did not share his interest in good food and drink, preferring instead to fast or to eat the smallest portions possible. He was particularly perturbed that the curate did not share his pastoral priority to give preferential care to the well-to-do families of the parish. All of these offenses led Fr. Tripier to conclude that there was something wrong with the future patron saint of priests — he was too “rigid” and eccentric — and to ask for him to be transferred.
  - After he had been appointed to Ars, many of the priests from the surrounding districts echoed Fr. Tripier’s censures. The well-dressed clergy thought that he was vested more like a beggar than as a priest. Some teased him about it; others criticized him and even judged him, claiming that he dressed shabbily in order to attract attention by pretending to be humble and holy. One priest refused to remain near him until he put on a better hat. Another denounced him in his presence to the bishop for not wearing a sash on his cassock. His eccentricity was confirmed, the priests asserted, when on a parish mission they bought him a pair of warm velvet trousers to wear under his thin cassock on his long wintry walk home. Along the way, he met a shivering beggar and exchanged his warm new pants for the beggars’ cold, old ones. Such actions, which were somewhat routine, elicited derision and disapproval from his brother priests rather than admiration for his charity and selflessness.
  - Things got worse once the lay faithful from throughout the region, during parish missions, started going to confession preferentially to Fr. Vianney, and especially when they started to make pilgrimages to Ars to confess to him there. Many of his brother priests — at least a few, blinded by envy — deemed such choices by the lay people “spiritually dangerous.” The Curé of Ars, after all, had spent only five months total in seminary, had been dismissed from it for being an “exceptionally poor student,” and still barely knew Latin. The situation was aggravated when some mentally unstable people returned from Ars proclaiming that Fr. Vianney was a better priest than their pastors and often inventing words to put in the Curé of Ars’ mouth to justify their foolish behavior. One pastor received a stipend from a

- lady to pray for a special intention, only to discover later that the special intention was that he be removed and Fr. Vianney take his place!
- Several of the surrounding pastors, alarmed that the people were esteeming a colleague whom they believed too simple-minded, began to take action. Many forbade their parishioners to go to Ars. Others wrote to the bishop. Several used their Sunday sermon to preach, not about the good news, but against the Curé of Ars. Fr. Vianney got wind of what his colleagues were doing and it wounded him, as silly as it was. “Poor little Curé of Ars,” he said. “What do they not make him say! What do they not make him do! They are now preaching on him and no longer on the Gospel!”
  - He started receiving “hate mail” from his brother priests. One of the more famous examples came from Fr. Jean-Louis Borjon, a newly ordained priest in a village five miles from Ars. Jealous that so many of his parishioners were going to Ars, Fr. Borjon denounced him from the pulpit. He then wrote to his neighbor, charging, among other things: “When a man knows as little theology as you, he should not go into the confessional.”
  - Fr. Vianney was grieved and wondered whether God might indeed be offended by his service in Ars. He wrote the young priest back, “Most dear and most venerated confrere, what good reasons I have for loving you! You are the only person who really knows me. Since you are so good and kind as to take an interest in my poor soul, do help me to obtain the favor for which I have been asking for so long a time: that being released from a post which I am not worthy to hold by reason of my ignorance, I may be allowed to retire into a little corner, there to weep over my poor life.”
  - Fr. Vianney’s sincerity and humility deeply moved Fr. Borjon, who, pierced with compunction, ran to Ars to beg Fr. Vianney’s forgiveness. Vianney warmly embraced him. Thereafter the young priest became one of the Curé of Ars’ greatest supporters.
  - The priests of the region eventually composed a circular petition calling on the bishop to remove Fr. Vianney because of his supposed ignorance. By accident the petition was sent to Ars. Fr. Vianney read it and saw the names and denunciations. His response? He signed his own name to it and sent it off to the bishop, hoping that the bishop would react by sending someone more “capable” to Ars. The prelate, however, seeing Vianney’s signature, and marveling at his humility, decided — as a means by which to justify Fr. Vianney in the eyes of his colleague — to send a canon of the cathedral to examine the situation. During the visitation, Fr. Vianney submitted a list of 200 difficult cases of conscience he had confronted along with his solutions. The prelate found the solutions unflinchingly correct.
  - After the examination, when priests continued to call Vianney “mad,” the bishop routinely replied, “Gentlemen, I wish that all my clergy had a small grain of the same madness!” The bishop granted him faculties, rare at the time, to hear confessions anywhere throughout the diocese. With time the bishop’s support and admiration began to be emulated by most of the presbyterate. The greatest redemption of St. John Vianney’s reputation among his brother priests occurred in subsequent clergy convocations where, even though he was listed as one of many official confessors, most of his brother priests chose to confess to him.
  - They began to see, in short, that having a holy priest as a neighbor is not a “bad development” but a grace for faithful and priests alike
- Opposition in the rectory



- As excruciating as these first two sources of antagonisms were, they paled to an even more difficult test that occurred much closer to home. It occurred, in fact, in the rectory, at the hands of a priest assistant, Fr. Antoine Raymond.
- One of the most seldom discussed challenges of priestly life is what modern Church sociologists called “rectory living.” The very fact that a bishop assigns two or more men to live and work together does not mean that they will cohabitate and collaborate easily. There are, of course, rectory situations — like St. John Vianney experienced with his first pastor and mentor, Fr. Charles Balley — in which pastor and curate become true friends who inspire each other to become better priests. There are many more in which the priests get along just fine and treat each other with professional respect and genuine fraternity.
- There are occasions, however, in which living and working together can become a crucifixion for one or both. An in-depth study by Georgetown’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) examining why some young priests abandon the priesthood showed that one of the chief reasons was because they couldn’t get along with their pastor. It’s hard enough to work for a boss with whom one does not see eye-to-eye; it’s doubly difficult to live with him. Rectory tensions often lead young priests to seek outlets and some of these outlets are not conducive to priestly perseverance. On the flip side, there are many pastors who admit that, as exhausting as it is to be the only priest in a parish, they prefer to live and work alone, rather than have a curate assigned to them who might be a pastoral and personal cross. Some priests provide more harm than help. That’s what happened for Fr. Vianney when his first assistant arrived.
- For his first 27 years in Ars, Fr. Vianney was the only priest. After recovering from a serious illness, he asked the bishop for two weeks off to travel to his native Dardilly to rest with his brother and his family. The bishop granted his permission provided that he was able to find coverage. That task proved much easier than anticipated, because Fr. Antoine Raymond, a young pastor of Savigneux, volunteered.
- Fr. Vianney had known Antoine Raymond from the time he was in high school seminary in Meximieux and generously volunteered to pay the latter’s college and major seminary costs. Visiting Ars and seeing the throngs of pilgrims coming to confession, the future Fr. Raymond began to dream of becoming Curé of Ars one day himself. He must have believed that people were coming for some other reason than Fr. Vianney.
- When Fr. Vianney was planning to make his home visit, Fr. Raymond jumped at the chance to offer himself to the bishop as his successor. The bishop declined, but accepted the young priest’s offer to cover for Fr. Vianney while he was away. When the holy Curé returned, he discovered that Fr. Raymond had already taken up a quasi-permanent residence in Ars, despite remaining being pastor in Savigneux.
- Fr. Vianney soon recognized the obvious, that the young priest longed to remain in Ars. Since he had paid for his seminary education and therefore felt a responsibility for him, and since it was obvious that he could benefit from having another priest in Ars to help out with the daily pilgrimages, he wrote the bishop asking that Fr. Raymond be assigned with him. At the diocesan headquarters, this request was well-received. The bishop and his chief collaborators knew that Fr. Vianney didn’t have the time or skill set to

give adequate attention to administration. He also had developed a reputation of giving alms not only to those truly in need but to those who were routinely taking advantage of his goodness. They figured Fr. Raymond, who was a capable organizer and a zealous teacher, would be able to bring some order.

- The bishop assigned him as curate but gave him some authority to look after the administrative affairs. He took that inch and tried to stretch it to a marathon. As soon as Fr. Raymond received his letters, he went to the rectory and said that he wished to take the room where the Curé had slept for the previous nearly three decades. The Curé was diligently moving his few things down to a damp room on the first floor before the parishioners got wind of it and came to stop it. Fr. Raymond began to identify himself as the pastor or “curé” to parishioners and in the Church registers. He started almost immediately changing parish customs that had been long established. He was brazen, preemptory, arrogant, and some parishioners said even a little tyrannical. What bothered the people of Ars the most was how disrespectful he was to their pastor. Within a few weeks, the leading parishioners couldn’t take it anymore and went to see the bishop. His administrative duties were removed.
- For the next eight years as Fr. Vianney’s assistant, Fr. Raymond routinely berated the great confessor in private and in public, badmouthed him to parishioners and pilgrims, occasionally contradicted him from the pulpit and declared everywhere that Fr. Vianney was “entering his second childhood.” He even tried to take credit for all the good that was happening in Ars.
- Fr. Vianney tolerated it all with great patience. At first he tried to assert himself, but learned that that only made Fr. Raymond more belligerent. From that point forward, he resolved to keep him informed, to consult him, and to give in to him as much as possible.
- He saw Fr. Raymond as the antidote to all the praise he got from the crowds. “While there is some incensing, there are also quite a few kicks,” he confided to a friend. “He’s not afraid to tell me the truth about myself,” he said, gratefully, to the bishop. “Without him it would have been difficult for me to know that I loved the good God a little.” He judged his love for God on how much he was able to love Fr. Raymond. He routinely defended him when others were justly criticizing the curate’s behavior.
- One Holy Week, when Fr. Raymond’s behavior was particularly obnoxious, the saint was persuaded to dictate a letter to the bishop asking for him to be transferred. After reviewing the letter, however, Fr. Vianney decided to tear it up, saying, “The good God carried his Cross this week. I can certainly carry my own.”
- It was Fr. Raymond who, anticipating that he would likely never succeed the Curé of Ars, finally asked for a transfer. The bishop appointed him pastor of Polliat. A missionary priest, Fr. Toccanier, took his place. It was, in a sense, an earthly recompense for the Curé of Ars. Fr. Toccanier loved and revered him, took care of him, and inspired him to continue giving heroically until the finish line of his life.
- God always brings good out of evil. He used Fr. Raymond’s vices to help sculpt Fr. Vianney into an even greater saint.
- He persevered in his battle against the devil
  - His fights against *le grappin* are legendary. 35 years he was infested.

- He would hear the curtains around his bed tearing, an angry blasphemous mob “outside” his window, the sound of rats and mice running around his room and even running over his body, during the couple of hours of sleep he was allowed. Later he would be dragged across the room and suffer other types of battles in which he would feel the presence of malevolence.
- At first he tried to look for other explanations as to what was causing the disturbances, but eventually he realized that it was the devil. He took advantage of the means of prayer, of sacramentals like holy hour, of confidence in the BVM, of despising rather than fearing the one whom St. Michael defeated. He began to realize that the trials were the hardest on the eve of occasions when “gros poissons” or big fish were coming to the confessional, so he began to treat these disturbances with hope, saying how stupid the devil was to let him know ahead of time that he would be God’s instrument to reconcile a great sinner and have heaven, which rejoices more over one repentant sinner, erupt with joy.
- Few saints in history have suffered this type of infestation, and probably none of us will to that degree. But we can learn from it how we, too, need to battle against the devil with the means God gives us until the end.
- We know that the devil never sleeps and, as we pray at Tuesday compline, prowls like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. We must persevere with faith through temptation, persevere with God until the end, knowing that until the end the devil will be trying to gain us.
- We must persevere as Christ did in the desert, responding with faith to the manipulations of the evil one, trying to hit on our weaknesses. One of the ways to do that is through the evangelical counsels which will become your vows. As many saints have shown, these correspond to the three great temptations Christ suffered.
- He persevered in study
  - We’ve already talked about how challenging it was for him to get through seminary because he only learned how to read and write when he was 17 and always struggled with Latin.
  - But he persevered in study after his ordination. He studied the great manuals of his day to learn theology better. He studied various books to help him write out his homilies, which would be 30 pages long and last an hour. (This was in his early days when he still had time to write out his homilies).
  - When he would go to bed, he would always spend some time reading and learning.
  - This is a tremendous lesson for us, who have been given more by God in terms of an education. We need to persevere in our studies, wise enough to know how much we don’t know.
  - One of the plagues of the priesthood is that many priests give up studying and it easily leads to an overall tepidity in their discipleship and apostolate. Study is one means to prevent ourselves from becoming lukewarm.
- He persevered in his trust of divine providence
  - There were so many times when he did what needed to be done despite not having human means.
  - With the orphanage of La Providence, there were many times when he had no money and no food to go on, but he continued to count on God’s help and the kids’ prayers, and God would not let him down.
  - Miracle of the corn.
  - We, too, need to persevere in trusting God. The great defect of the Jews’ was to forget what God had done for them before. We can have that short memory. St.

Paul tells us that if God didn't even spare his own Son, he'll give us all we really need.

- Sometimes it's easy to just give up and to depend solely on human means and when they're not there, give in. SJV shows us another way.
- He persevered in charity
  - There would be many ways to describe this.
  - He persevered in his love for God, which was shown in his prayer even when exhausted, in his celebrating the Mass even when sick, in fulfilling his vocation and mission, even when he wanted to run away to dedicate himself exclusively to prayer at La Trappe.
  - He persevered in his love for others in the confessional, often returning to the confessional when people arrived after he thought he was done for the evening.
  - He persevered in giving all he had for others. He sold his furniture and personal goods to adorn the Church. He used his salary and what was given him to endow missions, and to help build la Providence, to relieve the poor, to help out his critics. He never kept anything for himself. As soon as his pockets were being filled, they were being emptied.
- St. John Vianney persevered in all aspects of his life and by his perseverance he not only saved his own soul but saved countless others.
- I remember the saying of my spiritual director during college. His name was Fr. Sal Ferigle. He was there for me at times when I may have been tempted away from my priestly vocation. When I was receiving death threats because of a magazine I had founded. When after finally discerning that God was in fact calling me to the priesthood, suffering through not even getting an application from the vocation director of my own diocese. All Fr. Sal kept saying to me was a Latin expression, "Usque ad finem!" "Until the end." It was something he lived by. It was something he wanted me to live by. It was something that he thought all Christians, not to mention all priests, should live by. "Usque ad finem!" Never give up.
- At the beginning of this retreat, we ask SJV's intercession, first, that we will
  - Persevere, usque ad finem, throughout this Seminarian Summer Seminar in making ourselves totally at God's disposal, totally receptive to his graces to transform us in whatever way he sees fit.
  - Persevere, usque ad finem, in the wonderful vocation God has given us to become holy, to become spiritually perfect as he is perfect;
  - Persevere, usque ad finem, in the specific vocation God has given us as the path to become one with him in his eternal high priesthood and with him help save the world; and
  - Persevere, usque ad finem with the grace of final perseverance, so that we, with SJV, might have the joy of praising God forever.