

Readings: *Ezekiel 3: 16 – 21; Psalm 116 (117); Matthew 9: 35 – 10: 1.*

Jean-Marie Vianney was born into a farming family near Lyons in 1786 – three years before the storming of the Bastille, which marks the beginning of the French Revolution. He grew up as a shepherd boy on his father's farm and had very little education. His family assisted at the secret masses of priests loyal to Rome. When he was twenty he went to a neighbouring priest to begin training for the priesthood, but his lack of education – especially of Latin – made his studies hard and discouraging, but he persevered. In 1806 he was confirmed and took the additional name Baptiste. In 1809 (aged 23) he was called up for the army but was taken ill and missed the draft. He tried to follow but was misled by a deserter and had to hide until Napoleon offered an amnesty in the following year.

From 1810 to 1815 he continued his studies and was ordained priest in August of that year, to serve as assistant to his tutor, Fr Balley. In 1817 Fr Balley died and Fr Vianney was appointed parish priest (curé) of the remote and depressing parish of Ars-en-Dombes, with some 250 inhabitants. He would remain there for the rest of his life.

He visited every house in the village and set up a catechism class for children. He then began his plan to convert the whole parish to a religious way of life. His plan included both opposition to practices which drew people away from the Church and active help to those in need.

He spent long hours in the confessional and preached simple but forceful sermons. He fought for Sunday observance. A campaign led to the closure of all the village taverns. He insisted on modest dress and opposed dances – placing a notice over the chapel of St John the Baptist – “His head was the price of a dance”. He set up a free school for girls, which later became a shelter for orphans and homeless children. When fellow priests reported him as mad the Bishop replied “Gentlemen, I wish all my clergy had a grain of the same madness.”

Ars became a place of pilgrimage, with hundreds of penitents keeping him busy with spiritual direction for eleven hours a day in winter and sixteen in summer.

He died on 4th August 1859, worn out by his austere life and the endless stream of those who came to him for advice. He was canonized in 1925 and named patron of the parish clergy.