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THE CURÉ D'ARS



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THE CURÉ D'ARS ON HIS DEATHBED

THE CURÉ D'ARS

A shorter biography

by

FRANCIS TROCHU

THE NEWMAN PRESS

Westminster, Maryland

BRANCH ISSUE

This translation from the original French of *L'admirable
vie du Curé d'Ars* (Vitte, Lyons, 1951) was made by

RONALD MATTHEWS

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

First published 1955

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

WE published an English translation of the standard life of the Curé d'Ars by Mgr Trochu in 1927 and subsequent issues appeared in 1930, 1949, 1950 and again in 1951. The work is now out of print, but in 1951 Mgr Trochu published a shorter life entitled *L'admirable vie du Curé d'Ars* in which he used the same extensive scholarship and research but in a much more concise form. It is this latter work which is here made available in translation.

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I

A SOUL AWAKENS

IT was in the darkest days of 1794, the year of the Terror, just outside a small country town near Lyons called Dardilly. In the Chante-Merle valley, a green-clad fold between two hills, a band of children was playing. You may think there was little enough to inspire high spirits in children at a moment when every circumstance of life combined to distil sadness and desolation. Once the roads and the paths round Dardilly had been dotted with crucifixes, erected by the devout of bygone days; today they lay rotting in the grass, cast down by order of the Revolutionary boss of Lyons, the famous Fouché. The shut and silent church was without priest and without Mass; the lamp had ceased to burn in the desecrated sanctuary, the bell sounded no more. All the same, these children were happy.

After they had sung and shouted their way all down the undistinguished rivulet called the Planches, which winds along the bottom of the Chante-Merle valley amid irises, watercress and wild mint, the children suddenly fell silent. They had sat down round a grassy knoll where one of them had taken his stand as if he had been about to make a speech to them. And indeed the little boy—he was barely eight years old—had begun to preach to his playmates.

Preaching is a strictly accurate word, for he was repeating to his companions phrases from the gospels,

scriptural stories which were purely and simply scraps of sermons. It would be a natural assumption that little Jean Marie Vianney, for that was his name, had learned these things at his catechism. It would be a wrong one, however, for as long ago as 1791 the Abbé Rey, the curé of Dardilly, had refused to take the sacrilegious oath to the civil power which was exacted under the new Church constitution the Revolutionaries had voted, and had taken refuge in Italy. All Jean Marie knew of the catechism was what he had learned from his mother or from his elder sister Catherine.

Under cover of night, though, he had accompanied his parents to the barns, often a long tramp away, where priests who had to disguise themselves as if they were criminals could still celebrate a secret Mass. He had listened with his ears wide open to those confessors of the faith who risked death every day in order to administer the sacraments or give religious instruction to France's persecuted Catholics.

He had listened and he had absorbed, for as some children display from their earliest years a passion for music and others a thirst for mechanical knowledge, Jean Marie had manifested from the very first a passion for God. That passion he translated into terms dictated by his own knowledge and the nature of his audience. One of his child companions said long afterwards that the principal theme on which the little Vianney preached was the obedience a child owes its parents. He also urged his listeners, most of whom had already started work as shepherds or cowherds, not to lose their tempers or quarrel among themselves, not to use coarse language, and, above all, never to blaspheme. The miniature sermons could have been one of two things: embarrassingly priggish or really

moving. Children are instant to detect a prig among themselves, and the best tribute to the genuineness of the feeling Jean Marie communicated is that though his audiences included boys four or five years older than himself, and though he constantly used the phrase 'my children' to them, no one ever dreamed of laughing.

Miniature, of course, the sermons had to be, for the children were all itching to be on the move in some new game. But Jean Marie's imagination was equal to that; he had a talent for transforming games into simple-minded religious ceremonies, and getting his companions to enjoy them, too. He would make a processional cross out of a couple of small branches, distribute wild flowers to the younger members of the party and form the older into two choirs, and the procession would gravely move off down some aisle of alders or willows. 'It was almost always I who took the curé', Jean Marie Vianney was to say long after, when he had become a curé in earnest. His hands joined, serious and concentrated, he would wind up the procession, reciting his rosary or lifting his voice with the rest in some popular hymn.

An altar of repose had been arranged in the hollow of an old willow. On its cloth of green moss, embowered in branches and flowers, was a statuette of Our Lady. That belonged to Jean Marie; indeed it was the only treasure he had: it had been a present from his mother and he always carried it on him. The whole band fell on their knees before the unpretentious altar, and the 'celebrant' began the *Pater* and the *Ave*, which the 'congregation' took up from him.

Next moment the children were back at their games with as much energy as ever. If you had looked for

young Vianney in the village at this time, you would, perhaps, have been quite as likely to find him praying as playing. But he was a perfectly happy and high-spirited boy and never said 'no' when his contemporaries asked him to join in a game. One of them, indeed, André Provin, remembers that he was very good at quoits and almost always won at it, but he showed no sign of side. He would pick up his winnings—for the children played for halfpence—and then, looking at the long faces of the losers, would hand them back, saying with a smile of gentle malice: 'Well, you shouldn't have started me playing.'

The band of children was breaking up now: those of them with jobs were returning to watch over their animals. They had listened perfectly seriously as Jean Marie told them only to use the stick when it was necessary and never out of temper, had not dreamed of disputing when he assured them that temper was a sin. Left to himself, the child, with an occasional eye for the herd of cows and of sheep he was looking after, would either return to his prayers or—for he was clever with his hands—set to work making little devotional objects from the clay he scooped up out of the bed of the stream. Some of them were statuettes of the saints, some of them little chapels, and occasionally he would bring them back to the house, where his father would fire them in the oven. His sister Marguerite said that a Virgin modelled by Jean Marie was preserved for years at the Vianney farm.

It was no common upbringing that had given the child his deep sense of religion and his extraordinary influence over his companions. Dedicated to the Blessed Virgin before his birth, baptized the day he entered the world, May 8, 1786, Jean Marie Vianney,

fourth child of Matthieu Vianney and of his wife Marie, had been his mother's favourite from the first and she had thrown herself into training his heart and his mind as if she had a presentiment of the high calling that awaited him. He was barely twelve months old when, guiding his tiny hand, she helped him make the sign of the cross before she gave him his food. The child learned the lesson so well that he would refuse to eat or drink until it had been done. He was very little older when he insisted on joining the family group that recited evening prayers together before the open hearth. He would not have gone to sleep if his mother had not bent down over his pillow to kiss him goodnight and to commend him to his guardian angel.

From an early age he liked to be told stories of God and His servants, especially those from the Bible which his big sister Catherine knew by heart and repeated so vividly. His mother, too, would spare every moment she could from the cooking and the housework to instruct him. She talked to him of God and of the wicked who did not love Him; she taught him his prayers and explained to him the mysteries of the life of Our Lord. Bright-eyed and attentive, the child easily absorbed everything.

Indeed, he already grasped the meaning of the faith well enough to realize that the truths of religion have got to be lived and practised. Marguerite, the youngest of his sisters, tells the story of how, when he was about four, Jean Marie disappeared from the house one afternoon, and for some time his mother, more and more worried, searched for him in vain. There was a moment when her heart stopped at the thought that he might have fallen into the deep pond where the cattle came to drink. In the end, taking a

closer look at the stable, she saw to her amazement the little boy kneeling in a dark corner there, lost in prayer before his statuette of the Virgin, which he was holding up in front of him in his clasped hands. Four-year-old Jean Marie had already discovered the joys of prayer and, in order to taste them the better, he had sought out a place where he could be alone.

At the age of five he was getting up from his cot like a man to accompany his mother to early Mass. Only too soon the parish church was shut, by the wicked his mother had told him about. When they had driven the faithful priest into exile, Jean Marie was no less stout-hearted in accompanying his parents to those mysterious hide-outs, known to good Christians, where the Mass was still celebrated. François and Catherine, his elder brother and sister, would sometimes complain of the length of the walk. 'Try and be like Jean Marie,' their mother would tell them; 'there's an example for you.'

It was there, in the barn where a few smoky candles dispensed a wavering light, that the future saint came to understand the necessity of the priesthood and its unspeakable greatness. The little boy of seven was seeing for himself these men of God who lived for only one idea, the salvation of souls. The priest who lifted his hands in the familiar ceremonial was a hunted man, hunted by the enemies of the Catholic religion, and he had dared a thousand dangers to get to this lost corner of the Lyons countryside. The faces in the flickering shadows shone with an incredulous joy: men and women alternated between smiles and unashamed tears as they found themselves once more at the foot of the altar. It was only a makeshift altar, a table or a chest of drawers carried in from the neighbouring farm,

on which loving hands had laid the whitest cloth they could find. Clasped to his mother's side, Jean Marie watched the priest, the deep lines on whose face bespoke his night watches and his weariness.

Sometimes the Vianneys' own home had the honour of sheltering one of these outlaws. The house stood on the outskirts of the village and it had a number of outbuildings where it was easy to hide the sacred vessels. Mass was, therefore, said at night in the living-room of the farm.

II

FIRST COMMUNION

IT was after a Mass celebrated at night in his parents' home that Jean Marie Vianney made his first confession. The Abbé Groboz, who at the beginning of the Revolution had been an assistant priest at St Croix in Lyons, was travelling round in disguise in the outskirts of the city. His usual headquarters was at Ecully, but he often visited the neighbouring parish of Dardilly. When he came to the Vianneys one day in 1797 he noticed how attentively Jean Marie was looking at him. He wanted to have a private talk to this child, whose frank and open looks attracted him.

'How old are you?' he asked the boy.

'Eleven, M. l'Abbé.'

'Tell me, how long is it since you last confessed?'

'But I haven't confessed yet,' replied Jean Marie, opening his eyes wide.

'Very well, my child, let's do it right away.'

The Abbé Groboz took the little Vianney to the foot of the grandfather clock, whose great copper pendulum dismissed the seconds sonorously with its solemn swing and return. But the young penitent, his eyes lowered, had no thoughts except for the priest to whom he was revealing his soul, and who was no less impressed than astonished by the things he heard.

As soon as it was over, the Abbé took Matthieu Vianney and his wife aside. 'Do you know what a treasure of a child you've got?' he said. 'He's already

grasped all the essential ideas of the faith: all that's necessary is to give him a bit more religious instruction.'

'Why, M. l'Abbé, that's just what we feel. Unfortunately, what with all this work on the farm . . .'

'Don't worry. Haven't you got relations in the parish of Ecully?'

'Yes,' replied Marie Vianney, 'there's one of my sisters, who married François Humbert; she lives at the Point du Jour.'

'Just as I thought. I've found some good folk in Ecully who are willing to prepare the local children in secret for their first communion. Send Jean Marie to his uncle's and leave the rest to me.'

Monsieur and Madame Vianney promised, but all the same they waited a little before sending the child to Ecully. First of all, it was winter. Then they felt it would be a good thing if the boy had a few more months at school. The Dardilly school, which had been run up to 1791 by a Christian teacher, had shut down then; a new teacher, Citizen Dumas, had reopened it four years later, and Jean Marie had just about learned to read and write. Intelligent and wide awake as he was, he would have forged ahead rapidly in less troubled times. Unfortunately, the two previous years, 1795 and 1796, when he was nine and ten, he had only been to school in the winter, when the beasts were safely in the byres and his job as a cowherd made no calls on him. He therefore took lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic for another six months. Finally, in April or May 1798, Marie Vianney took her son to the Humberts.

The 'good folk' of whom the Abbé Groboz had spoken were two nuns of the order of St Charles whom the Revolution had driven out of their convent

and who, wearing lay clothes now, continued their work for the souls of children at the risk of their lives. Under the very nose of the Lyons Vigilance Committee, whose agents often went on tour in the countryside, they had found means of collecting round them some fifteen or so children and held catechism classes both for boys and for girls. On the introduction of the Abbé Groboz, the nuns welcomed Jean Marie Vianney joyfully, and his immediate preparation for the great day lasted just over a year.

It is too often thought that the execution of the fanatical Robespierre (9 Thermidor of the Year II; July 27, 1794) put an end to religious persecution in France, and indeed to the whole Terror. There was, indeed, a lull in it; blood ceased to flow and Catholics started to breathe again. But this relative peace did not last long. The freemasonic lodges, which had been the inspiration of the whole onslaught against Catholicism, resumed their unholy work by less direct means. Having failed to stamp out religious faith in France, they set about trying to substitute other creeds, no matter how jejune and half-baked, for the religion of Jesus Christ.

As Theanthropophily stepped into the shoes of Theophilanthropy,¹ the Government of the Directory tried to introduce the decadal religion. Under the new calendar on which it was based, the day of rest fell every ten days; men must halt their labours, not on Sunday but on *decadi*, if they were to obey the law of

¹ The two words refer to the same thing, as near as makes no difference. Derived from the Greek, both mean 'love of God and of man'. Theophilanthropy, a cult founded by the disciples of Voltaire and of Rousseau, had as its sole basis a belief in God as the source of private ethics and public order. It called for no form of worship and was soon killed by ridicule.

14 Germinal of the Year VI (April 4, 1798). On certain 'decadal feasts', townspeople were to gather round greybeards and hear them laud 'the wonders of the Revolution'; in country villages, the farmer was to 'assemble round the still humid vat or the toilsome winepress the active and faithful cohorts who had helped him ravish from the hillsides their most glittering spoils'. That at least was how the official programmes put it, with the orotund verbiage proper to Latin revolutionary orators. It was as wearisome as the rain, as empty as the void.

The people, particularly the country people, greeted these buffooneries with the contempt they deserved. In the Lyons area the peasants continued to observe Sunday as a day of rest, and Jean Marie Vianney's father never failed to do so. Naturally, the Directory hit back at the defaulters, and the severity of its punishments progressively increased. But it was principally against the leadership of the Church that these blows were aimed. Just about the time that General Berthier, on February 10, 1798, was seizing Rome and snatching from the Vatican the octogenarian Pius VI, whom the Directory allowed to die in exile, a prisoner in the citadel of Valence, nearly three hundred French priests were being deported to Guiana; twelve hundred others were flung into the convict prisons of Ré or of Oléron, while the main body of the clergy, whether they had never left their country or had returned to it from exile, were ordered to leave France without delay. Such was the atmosphere of the period which historians have understandably christened the Little Terror or the Second Terror.

All this did not prevent the Abbé Groboz from staying on in his parish at Ecully. He had already been

through the ordeal of deportation, for refusing to take the schismatic oath to the 'constitutional Church'; he had returned from Italy, risking death to do so, as soon as he had been able to make his way across the Alps. Today he lived only for his flock. He was determined that the first communion ceremony should be carried out with the most impressive possible solemnity, and the date he had chosen for it fell in the period when the days are longest, the time of the hay harvest. So, very early in the morning one day towards the end of June 1799, a series of little groups, who appeared to show not the slightest interest in each other, gathered at Ecully in the home of Madame de Pignon, mother-in-law of the famous Claude de Jouffroy, co-inventor of the steamboat.

A big room on the ground floor had been decked out for the ceremony. There had been some fear that the light of the candles might filter out into the street through the closed shutters, so the Abbé Groboz had asked that barrows loaded with hay should be placed in front of the high windows. Thanks to these precautions, the moving occasion went off without a shadow of interference by the authorities. As in the days before the persecution, the days of tranquil festivals in churches laden with the scent of flowers and of incense, the little girls were wearing their white veils, the boys their white brassards, and boy and girl communicants alike held candles in their hands.

The sentiments of love and of devotion which filled Jean Marie Vianney as he received his God can be imagined from the account given by his sister Marguerite, his junior by a year. She says that 'her brother was so happy that he did not want to leave the room where he had had the joy of communicating for

the first time'. To the end of his life he preserved as a treasure his simple little communicant's rosary.

From that moment on, Jean Marie was no longer treated as a child. He may not have looked big, but he was more than thirteen. There was nothing wrong with his health, either, though he was a little small for his age. The evening of his first communion his parents took him back with them to Dardilly. He was to have no more time for reading now, much though he loved it. The next morning he got up in working clothes and went out with his father and his elder brother François into the fields.

III

VOCATION

AT long last a ray of hope had brightened the horizon of France, darkened for ten years by the clouds of terror and of hate. Entering the city of Milan as a conqueror, Napoleon Bonaparte, then First Consul, had uttered words of peace that promised well for his Catholic countrymen, and all through the year 1800 a stream of priests who had remained faithful to their vocation, and whom the revolutionary decrees had exiled, was pouring back into the parishes. Boldly the Abbé Groboz and a companion of the underground apostolate, the Abbé Charles Balley, a former monk, reopened the church at Ecully, and, after a rapid restoration of the building, began to celebrate the offices openly once more.

It was there first of all that Jean Marie and his parents returned to their regular Sunday Mass. In the spring of 1802, thanks to the Concordat, the former curé of Dardilly, the Abbé Rey, officially resumed possession of his presbytery. That very year the annual Corpus Christi procession started up again in the parish, and Jean Marie Vianney, immensely proud at being accepted as one of the volunteer assistants, helped to set up masts crowned with oriflammes, and arranged festoons of leaves and of flowers. The changed atmosphere gave the young man, who was just turning sixteen, twice the energy for his work. Merely to hear the Angelus, calling to mind across the quiet fields those

thoughts of the faith that the Revolution had sought so relentlessly to proscribe, filled his heart with joy. He knelt down where he was and recited the three Hail Marys with hands clasped, then returned to his job.

Since he was still unconscious of his true vocation, he had exactly the same working day as his father and his brother; there were the fields to be ploughed, the vines to be hoed, the hay or the corn to be got in. Everything he did was done quietly and deliberately, with no bustle and no loitering; you would have said he was entirely taken up with his job. Indeed, he did give himself up to it, for it was his duty, but his thoughts rose above it to the Father in heaven, whose invisible presence he could feel. A glimpse of his vision of life in those early days as a farm labourer is given in a passage that came from him much later, on the happiness of the man who associates God with all his activities. 'If you are working with God,' the Curé says, 'it may be you who will be doing the work, but God will be blessing it; you will be walking, but He will be blessing your steps . . . There are people who make the best of everything this way, even the winter; it's cold, so they offer God their shivers. What a wonderful thing it is to offer oneself every morning to God as a sacrifice.'

Jean Marie, in fact, never lost sight of his soul, but that did not mean he was a glum or a melancholy companion. It is true he was not attracted by noisy games or knockabout fun; loose talk and doubtful company he shunned. But in the family circle, or with friends such as Fleury Véricel, François Duclos and André Provin, who were to stay on at Dardilly as honest farmers, with Jean Dumond, who was one day to be a Brother of the Christian Schools, the young Vianney

relaxed as easily as anyone. All the same, his laughter was never boisterous; he seemed to prefer silence to the gayest of conversations and solitude to the best of company. For he needed peace and withdrawal in order to be able to talk with God.

He had never ceased to regret the shortness of his time at school, and he did his best to add to his knowledge by solitary study. On Sundays he would shut himself up to read, either in the garden or in a corner of the stables where he had installed his 'room', a little cubicle separated by a plank partition from the animals' stalls. He had fixed a shelf on the wall to hold his favourite books, and was devoted above all to the gospels and the *Imitation of Christ*. In the evenings, again, he would read himself to sleep.

It was when he tried to pass on to his workaday companions the lessons his reading had taught him that the shock came. Quite a lot of them seemed never to have heard of the most elementary truths of the faith: motherless children, young shepherds, little servants whom no one had ever worried to look after, farmers' sons, stuffed like their fathers with the fashionable ideas of the time, were all alike in one thing—they had never even been to catechism. Jean Marie looked back on the days when he had preached to his fellow-children in the Chante-Merle valley, but no mere childish homilies would have answered the needs of his comrades of today. Their bewilderment and ignorance called for serious teaching, for the eloquence of a priest. If only there could be more priests for these souls in the twilight.

And so little by little an idea that had probably been born as a vague and timid dream amid his thoughts as a child began to haunt Jean Marie Vianney. The

Church in France was clamouring for more priests: well, why should not he answer the call? The reason was all too clear. What was he after all but a poor little peasant with dreams above his station? Did it begin to sound like common sense, to want to become a priest at seventeen, when all the education he had received had been one year at school? Even were the idea less chimerical, where should he go for his education: were there still seminaries in existence today? There was, of course, the Abbé Rey, the curé of Dardilly, but he was a sick man—the years of exile had been too much for him—he had talked of resigning, and people said he was going to retire to Lyons. That was not all either, Jean Marie must have told himself: would his father listen to his request for a moment? Education costs money, and his father had made enough fuss already about the money he had to spend on the dowry of Catherine, his eldest daughter, now a married woman at Ecully, and even more about the sums he had paid out purchasing release from conscript service for François, whose labour was necessary for the farm. Jean Marie knew that his pair of hands was no less essential: what was to be done?

Instinctively, the boy confided his secret to his mother and she understood him at once. ‘I’d always thought it when I saw you at your prayers, dear,’ she said. ‘Yes, it’s God who’s calling you. But how are you going to be able to answer?’ It was her constant encouragement that for two long years sustained the resolution of the son who, without her, might never have become a priest, and one of the holiest among priests. In the end his father gave in.

It remained to find a priest who would agree to take charge of the young man. At this very moment the

news reached the Vianneys' farm that the Abbé Balley, who had helped the Abbé Groboz reopen the church at Ecully, had been appointed curé there, and that his first thought, once he had settled into his presbytery, had been to set up a school where he taught the Latin himself. Already several children from Lyons itself, in particular the little Lorases, whose father had been guillotined for his faith during the Revolution, were attending the curé's classes.

Jean Marie did not feel at ease till his mother had gone to see the Abbé Balley. The Abbé was none too keen to take on an extra pupil, particularly one who was so old and who had had so little schooling. But as soon as he had seen the boy—for he insisted that he should be brought along to see him—he was won over at once. 'If it's this lad,' he said, 'I'll take him on right away.'

So the young man came back to live at Ecully, at the home of the Humberts. But it was a changed being whom his uncle and aunt took in this time. There was no trace of the engaging child who six years before had been the life and soul of their household. Before them was a young man with the face of an ascetic, behind which it was easy to guess the disciplined will concentrated on a lofty objective, which he trembled to think he might not be able to attain. It was at this period that Jean Marie, to stir the divine compassion, began to practise some at least of the mortifications which were to make him a new Desert Father in the heart of the nineteenth century. A plate of soup, without any salt or seasoning, was all he ate at midday and at supper.

For his school work was going to be such a crushing burden. The Abbé Balley's first pupils were children

of eleven and twelve. They were naturally gifted, they had already been taught in their families and they seemed to absorb everything without effort. The very same lessons they sailed through so easily had Jean Marie on the rack. He would think he had learned everything, only to find that his memory, which had been unemployed too long, had retained nothing at all. The weeks passed by and became months, and he made almost no progress.

The young man might try, for politeness sake, to put a smiling face on it all, but at heart he was bitterly unhappy. In the worst moments the image of his father's farm and of the fields around it would invade his mind irresistibly, full of pathos and of reproach. 'Why did you leave us all?' he would seem to hear the silent voices say. 'Farm work didn't give you this sort of trouble at Dardilly. Come back to us!' In the end there happened what the Abbé Balley had most feared. Jean Marie came to him one day and told him: 'I want to go home'. The Abbé Balley might appear distant and severe, but for a long time he had guessed and understood everything, and he made a supreme effort to compose his awkward pupil. 'But what do you want to do, my dear child?' he said. 'You'll only be going to meet unhappiness halfway . . . You know your father wants nothing better than to have you on the farm; when he sees you in such low spirits, he'll keep you at the house. And if he does that, it's good-bye to all your dreams, Jean Marie; good-bye to the priesthood, good-bye to the care of souls.'

The Abbé Balley had hit on the sensitive point. The twenty-year-old schoolboy stayed on at Ecully. Nevertheless, since he did not dare to hope anything more of his 'horrible head', as he called his memory, he

flung himself even more passionately into prayer. Before going back to class, he took a vow to go on foot, begging his bread, to the faraway church of La Louvesc, where are preserved the bones of St François Régis, who died of exhaustion in this parish of the Viviers countryside on December 31, 1640. There he would ask the intercession of this great missionary for the grace to attain the priesthood.

Though he made his pilgrimage under a kindly sky—it was the spring of 1806—Jean Marie Vianney found it a painful experience. He looked able-bodied, his clothes were clean and neat, he was old enough and strong enough to be at work, and everywhere the doors at which he begged for the charity of a bit of bread were shut in his face. He had to live, till he reached La Louvesc, on practically nothing but the roots he dug up in the fields. It was no wonder that the confessor before whom he knelt at the shrine advised him to fulfil his vow on the return journey in another way: to give, that is to say, instead of asking. Jean Marie, who had learned from his hard experience, did not protest. But an immense compassion filled him, feeling for the poor as he already did, at the thought of the thousands of beggars who were tramping the roads of France without a place to lay their heads.

The young pilgrim prayed a long time before the reliquary in walnut where the relics of the canonized Jesuit could then be venerated; then, his soul at peace, he took the road for Lyons once more. 'From that moment on,' declared someone who knew him well, 'he made enough headway not to lose heart any more.' That was all that either he or his master had hoped for, indifferent as they both were to the mere outward show of success.

It was in the following year that Jean Marie Vianney, on the eve of his twenty-first birthday, received the sacrament of confirmation at the hands of Cardinal Fesch, Archbishop of Lyons and uncle of the Emperor Napoleon I. From that day on, the Abbé Balley's pupil added to the names he had received at his baptism that of Baptiste. He already had a special devotion for the holy Precursor.

IV

THE 'INVOLUNTARY DESERTER'

IT was the autumn of 1809, with Jean Marie Vianney a young man of twenty-three. At that time, under the provisions of a decree dated March 7, 1806, 'clerks in holy orders were exempt both from military conscription and from service in the National Guard'. The call-up was only obligatory on such seminarists as had reached military age without receiving ordination, or who had only received minor orders. However, by a special dispensation, due to the intervention of Cardinal Fesch with his nephew the Emperor, seminarists in the diocese of Lyons, no matter what their status, were completely exempt from military service; even those who had got no further than studying in presbyteries could benefit from this privilege, provided they were entered as seminarists in the recruiting authorities' records. The Abbé Balley had carried out this formality in 1807 and 1808 on behalf of his pupil Jean Marie Vianney.

Did he forget to register his name as exempted in 1809? It seems highly probable. In any case, at the beginning of October, Jean Marie Vianney received an order summoning him to present himself on the 26th of the month at a barracks in Lyons. With him were to be called up most of the young people who had managed to get out of conscription since 1806. The reason was that the Emperor needed more man-power to face up to the calls of the Peninsular War on the

one hand and the Austrian campaign on the other. The papers young Vianney received informed him that he was posted to the depot at Bayonne, from which the 'army of the Marshals' fighting Wellington and the Spanish troops was taking its drafts.

Jean Marie duly entered the Lyons barracks on October 26. Two days later he was taken to hospital seriously ill. When his parents came to visit him there, 'he talked of almost nothing but God and the necessity of doing his holy will.'

On November 12 a detachment of the newly-incorporated men was ordered to Roanne, where they were to continue their military training. Recruit Vianney formed part of the column, but he was still too weak to march. The baggage wagon in which he travelled took him straight to hospital, for he had caught a chill on the way, and since he was barely convalescent, a relapse was inevitable. The rest, the good food and the kindly nursing of the Sisters who looked after him cured him of his fever and set him on the road to recovery, but he was still far from having regained his strength. The medical officer did not worry about that, and when early on the morning of the following January 6 the unit set out to march to Bayonne, Jean Marie Vianney was ordered to leave with the rest.

It was an incident which must have appeared completely insignificant that changed the destiny of the young man who was to be one day the Curé d'Ars and a saint. On the eve of the unit's departure, going from the hospital to the office of the captain where he was to get his marching orders, Jean Marie stopped at a church and became lost in prayer, so lost that when he finally arrived at the office he found it shut. By the

time he reported there on the following morning, the column was already on the march. The unhappy recruit—it was not till Bayonne that he would acquire the uniform and the title of a soldier—had to listen to a vigorous dressing-down and was sent out alone on the Clermont-Ferrand road which the detachment had taken with orders to overtake it and report to it at the first long halt. The only military equipment he had so far drawn was the heavy regulation pack. It seemed to weigh a hundredweight; all the same, Jean Marie Vianney pressed on, reciting Hail Marys as he went, to beg for strength. He soon saw that he would never overtake his comrades the same day. Just beyond Valmontais he had to stop, and leaving the main road he picked a place on the edge of a little wood to sleep the night.

He was still saying his prayers when a young man appeared on the scene. He was a conscript who had deserted and who had found refuge in those parts. His presence there was no chance, for the place was almost at the foot of the Forez mountains on whose arduous slopes, covered to the summit with woods and with dense thickets, a whole band of deserters had found a hide-out. The young man who was introducing himself to Jean Marie Vianney was a native of St Priest-la-Prugne, a little town in the neighbourhood, and his name was Guy.

‘What are you doing here, all alone, with that pack?’ he asked.

Without the least suspicion, Jean Marie began to tell his story.

‘You come with me. I’ll find you a doss for the night,’ Guy cut him short, and picking up the pack he helped Vianney to his feet. Then, picking his way

along the mountain tracks, he led him to a charcoal-burner's hut, where the two spent the night.

The only proper course in the circumstances for the conscript Vianney, who was already probably a deserter in the eyes of the law—for his unit was by now miles ahead on the road—was to present himself to the authorities, that is to say the local mayor. The mayor of the commune of Les Noës, where Guy had taken his chance companion, was a Monsieur Paul Fayot, who lived in the hamlet of Les Robins, a mile and a half from the little administrative centre. Jean Marie was to meet with another shock when he came before him. He doubtless expected to be put in the hands of the gendarmes and escorted, with handcuffs on his wrists, from station to station till he was handed over at the Bayonne depot. Far from it. The mayor had only one thing to hold against him: that without wanting it or even dreaming of it he had added to the already embarrassing number of deserters in the village. The mayor himself, who appeared to feel no overbrimming loyalty to the Emperor, was already hiding two conscripts on the run in the outbuildings of his own home, and he handed the new arrival over to the keeping of one of his cousins. She was Claudine Fayot, the mother of a little family, who was going to be a second mother to Jean Marie Vianney. The unhappy fugitive, sick, harassed and confused, let them do what they would with him.

Jean Marie Vianney had now become, it is fair to say, a deserter in spite of himself, and he was to stay at Les Noës till the January of the following year. He spent these twelve months, which he was later to refer to as his 'time of exile', his 'time of gloom and of outlawry',

winning the hearts and inspiring the lives of all who met him. For the first few weeks he had to hide in the stables of the farm; only when night fell did he slip out cautiously and join the family circle in the house. It was he who read the Bible aloud, who told the children stories out of the Old and New Testament; he who led the family in evening prayers in front of the hearth, and who, as he prayed, kept an eye on the youngest of the children to make sure that they behaved.

To disguise his identity, he had taken the name of Jérôme Vincent, and it was under this name that, towards the middle of March, he started a village school in the house that had taken him in. He already had a high idea of education, but for him its first objective was to perfect the religious knowledge of the pupils. The children of the hamlet of Les Robins, the young people and even grown men took their place on the benches under the eyes of Monsieur Jérôme. It was out of a prayer-book that he taught them to read, and each reading lesson ended with a lesson in the catechism.

Dressed as he was, like the peasants who surrounded him, the involuntary deserter could safely go to church now. Madame Fayot passed him off as one of her cousins, and Jean Marie was soon able to move about freely in the parish of Les Noës. When the snow melted and the work in the fields resumed, he relegated his classes to the evenings and took his place during the daytime in the ranks of the farm-workers who were his hosts. Few of them did not open their eyes wide when they saw the 'schoolmaster' handling spade and sickle as if he had been born to it.

Though the authorities had no idea of his presence in

the isolated mountain village, the woods round Les Robins were known to be full of deserters, and every now and then a party of gendarmes would come up to hunt them, without much success. One day in the summer of 1810 Jérôme Vincent nearly got himself put in the bag, and was only saved by diving at the last moment under the hay in the stables. Finally, thanks to the amnesty which Napoleon I issued to 'absentees of the conscript classes from 1806 to 1810' to celebrate his marriage with the Austrian Archduchess Marie-Louise, the exile of Les Robins was able to resume his identity as Jean Marie Vianney. In January 1811 he returned at long last to his parents' home.

It was with joy in his heart that a week or two later he set out once more for Ecully, where the Abbé Balley welcomed him with equal pleasure and decided that his favourite pupil should stay from then on in the presbytery. Today that pupil was twenty-five, and he found his Latin more difficult than ever. But he plunged into his studies, determined that no work should be too exhausting for him, no prayer too long, no sacrifice too great. Jean Marie's only recreations were digging in the Abbé's garden and reading the lives of the saints.

The arrangement, however, could not go on indefinitely. Sooner or later the timid student had to pass more searching tests. He could not be admitted to ordination as a priest unless he had passed through a seminary and done a year of philosophy and two years of theology. Such were the minimum requirements in France in the year 1811.

V

THE ASCENT TO THE PRIESTHOOD

FOR his year of philosophy, Jean Marie Vianney, who was already wearing the cassock and had received the tonsure on May 8, 1811, was sent to the junior seminary of Verrières, near Montbrison. With its 200 pupils, Verrières had only one class, which was divided into two sections of a hundred philosophy students each. In such circumstances, it was obviously next to impossible for the masters to do their work. Jean Marie, at twenty-six, was easily the oldest in his section. He was questioned first in Latin, as was the practice then, and he had the greatest difficulty in even understanding what the questions were about. An exception was made for him; the master addressed him in French and he was able to find the answers. All the same, the senior member of the class was almost always at the tail of it.

What he had to put up with in this twelve months, nervous, homesick, sometimes even laughed at as he was, only God knows. 'At Verrières,' the unfortunate seminarist was to admit later, 'I did have to go through it a bit.' All the same he found consolation in the friendship of the more serious among his fellow-students and above all in pouring out his heart before the tabernacle in the unimpressive little chapel, where he spent far more time than anyone else.

Verrières was no more than the preparatory department of St Irénée of Lyons, where Jean Marie must

finish his course, and trusting in the God who had called him rather than in the men who judge by appearances, he entered the seminary proper in October 1813. His previous failures had neither blunted his determination nor troubled the confident spontaneity of his prayers. But at the seminary, as at the secondary school, he was to be up against it, and the trial was to be incomparably more exacting.

His industry was indefatigable, as a fellow-pupil of those days relates; the results were nil. The masters took an interest in him, gave him private tuition. He seemed to grasp the lessons, but as soon as he was questioned in Latin, he was lost. The only course open to the Superior of St Irénée was to await the results of the first examination before taking any decision.

The results for Jean Marie Vianney were lamentable. It was the practice in seminaries at that time to mark papers, as at Oxford, with letters of the alphabet: a capital *A* signified 'excellent', a little *a* 'very good', and the scale of marks went down the alphabet to small *d*, which was equivalent to 0. The small *d* was, in fact, more of an interjection than a mark, and the examiners practically never awarded it. Providence, however, permitted it to be awarded to the young Vianney. He accepted it humbly and with resignation, but in his heart he was terrified. The little *d* automatically ruled out the candidate who obtained it from acceptance for the priesthood.

The heads of St Irénée did not consider that their twenty-seven-year-old seminarist's devotion made up for his absence of knowledge. In December 1813 the Abbé Balley's protégé left the seminary. 'Many of his fellow-pupils,' one of them said, 'were very

unhappy' at seeing him go. For him there arose the urgent question of what to do next. Without even waiting to go back to Ecully and consult his protector, Jean Marie Vianney presented himself at the Lyons novitiate of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He had a childhood friend there, and to him he put up the new idea that had occurred to him. Maybe he could never become a priest, but could he not spread the gospel all the same by teaching children? Jean Dumond, who had become Brother Gérard, advised the frustrated postulant to think it over again.

So Jean Marie went back to the presbytery at Ecully, where he was welcomed with more warmth and affection than ever. This time he had suffered not merely a defeat, but a disaster, and the Abbé Balley's tact and tenderness found the exact words needed to rebuild his pupil's faith in his vocation. Once that was done, he gave him a piece of advice which showed all his wisdom and experience. 'Write to your friend in Lyons,' he said, 'and tell him to say nothing, for I want you to continue your studies.'

Heroically, Jean Marie obeyed and returned to his books. Heroically, for his memory remained as treacherous as ever. Had he not persevered in prayer he might have given up his ambitions for good, but he did persevere and heaven came to his aid. 'When I was at my books,' he was to recount later, 'I was worn out with misery. I simply didn't know what to do next . . . I can still see the place at Ecully where I heard the words, as if someone had whispered into my ear: "Don't worry; you will be a priest one day".'

The assurance came as an echo to the exhortations of the Abbé Balley, whose silent admiration of his 'dear Vianney' continued to grow. Was it possible for such

perseverance amid such difficulties not to touch the heart of God? he asked himself. In those days as in ours, the prayer for more priests was a constant petition of the Church. The Revolution had almost dried up the sources that fed the priesthood. Could it be believed that one who offered himself so unreservedly for the salvation of his brothers would never be permitted to intercede for them at the altar? The Abbé Balley did not think so, but there was little time to be lost. From the beginning of March to the end of May he gave Jean Marie regular coaching, and at long last his pupil seemed to grasp his lessons, which were given this time in French.

All the same, Jean Marie had to go back to St Irénée, where a board of examiners composed of the most learned theologians of the diocese was preparing to interrogate such of the seminarists as were candidates for ordination. The president of the board was the Abbé Bochart, a vicar-general who was a friend of the Abbé Balley, and the Abbé Balley, as was his right, took the opportunity to sing the praises of his twenty-seven-year-old pupil. All the omens for this decisive test were favourable, provided the candidate did not allow himself to get stage fright.

That, of course, was exactly what did happen. The memory of his recent failure was still fresh in Jean Marie's mind; he was confused by the fact that the examination was conducted in Latin. His marks were not as low as they had been the previous time, but they were very low. Since, in addition, he had not been a regular attendant at the lectures in the seminary, what was there to do?

The Abbé Bochart had no doubt, though he tried to put his decision in as friendly a fashion as possible.

'We've heard a lot of good things about you, my boy,' he said. 'I've no doubt a place will be found for you—in another diocese.'

The very next day found the Abbé Balley knocking at the Abbé Bochard's office in the archbishop's palace. 'The poor boy was simply tongue-tied in front of all you grand folk,' he said. 'Come to my place, I beg you, and bring the superior of the seminary with you, if you possibly can; then you'll see. We've absolutely got to keep a man like him in the diocese.'

The Abbé Balley had his way. When he was examined at the presbytery Jean Marie 'answered the questions put to him very well'. And when the Abbé Bochard consulted his colleague, the Abbé Courbon, the latter, with whom rested the final responsibility for selecting candidates for ordination, simply asked: 'Is Monsieur Vianney devout? . . . Has he a special veneration for Our Lady? . . . Can he say his rosary?'

'Yes, he's a model of devotion,' the Abbé Bochard replied.

'Very well, I will take him. The grace of God will do the rest.'

Jean Marie Vianney had won through. On July 2, 1814, the feast of the Visitation of Our Lady, he presented himself, after a fervent retreat, at the cathedral of Lyons, the metropolitan church of all France, and there he received not only the four minor orders, but the major order of the sub-diaconate. On June 23, 1815, at Lyons once more, he was ordained deacon. On the following August 13, in the chapel of the seminary at Grenoble, he became a priest for all eternity.

That unforgettable morning saw the reward of his

heroic perseverance, and it might have been a symbol of his achievement that to get to the ceremony he had to traverse a countryside infested with enemy troops. They were the Austrian forces who had taken part in the invasion of France that had followed the Hundred Days, Napoleon's final bid for power, and detachments of them dotted the roads over which the ordinand insisted on walking the sixty-odd miles that separated Ecully and Grenoble. For more than a year there had been no archbishop at Lyons, since Cardinal Fesch, uncle of the deposed Emperor, had been forced to flee to Rome. Jean Marie, who by an exceptional measure was being called to the priesthood a matter of weeks after his diaconate, had gone to the bishop, who had conferred on him his earlier ordinations.

When Mgr Simon appeared in the sacristy of the Grenoble seminary, someone pointed out to him that there was only one ordinand, and what was more, he came from Lyons. 'It's never too much trouble to ordain a good priest,' the bishop replied gently. The Abbé Vianney had put on the simple alb that he had brought with him and that is still kept in the treasury at Ars. The three days that followed his ordination he spent in thanksgiving at Grenoble, and the August 15 that saw him saying his second mass gave him a first opportunity of expressing his gratitude to Our Lady, who had preserved him for the altar. He can have had only one sorrow: that his earthly mother, taken from him five years before, was not there to see the crowning of her prayers. But he knew that she was watching him from heaven and rejoicing there.

Early on the morning of August 16 he took the road, on foot as he had come, for Ecully and Dardilly. He was all eagerness to thank, and to bless, his old master,

then his old father. The happiness was hardly less at the farm than it was at the presbytery.

The Abbé Vianney was twenty-nine years and three months old. He felt all the ardour of youth in his unspoiled heart. 'If I were ever to become a priest,' he had told his mother long ago, 'I should want to win many, many souls.' That great ambition he was now destined to realize.

VI

CURATE AT ECULLY

THE archdiocesan authorities at Lyons had had the kindly thought of appointing the Abbé Vianney assistant priest at Ecully. He knew the parish and was known there. 'The Abbé Vianney set us a fine example when he was doing his studies here,' the inhabitants of the little town said to each other. 'Let's see how things are going to be now he's a priest.'

The Abbé Balley was the first to be delighted at the appointment. He had lived through the terrible years of the Revolution in France, and though he had a strong constitution he still felt the after-effects of those dreadful days: he was only sixty-three, but he looked much more. And now providence was providing him with a helper in the person of the young man whom he called his 'dear child'. The new assistant looked up to his curé as a saint: it was by a saint that he was to be initiated into the ministry of souls. 'Nobody ever showed me more clearly how the soul can free itself from the senses and man draw near the angelic,' the Abbé Vianney was to testify of him one day. 'It was enough to hear him say: "My God, I love You with all my heart" to be filled with the desire to love God.'

Living in his company, the future Curé d'Ars, who already lived such an austere life, went even further in the path of mortification. The Abbé Balley wore a hair shirt: his assistant had secretly made for himself a horsehair vest, which he wore next his skin. The

Abbé Balley ate almost no meat: the Abbé Vianney was delighted to follow his example. The boiled beef that was served to them on Sunday stayed on the table till Thursday, Curé and assistant passing it politely from one to the other and contenting themselves with vegetables, till they found that in the end it turned quite black, and decided of a common accord that it would be more sensible in the future to give it direct to the poor.

The assistant priest's charity was soon a byword, and sometimes led him into the most sublime of exaggerations. 'One winter's day,' Marguerite Vianney relates, 'the Abbé Balley said to my brother: "Go and see Madame So-and-so at Lyons. Smarten yourself up, there's a good fellow, and put on the new breeches you got as a present the other day".' (It should, perhaps, be explained that the French clergy at this period did not wear the long cassock of today, but a clerical frock-coat which showed their knee-breeches and black stockings.) When the Abbé Vianney returned home wearing a disgraceful pair of breeches, his curé naturally asked him what had happened. He replied quite simply that on the way he had seen a poor man shivering with cold and had made him take his own new pair of breeches in exchange for the man's own miserable rags.

Simple, smiling and kindly as he was in his relations with the parishioners, the Abbé Vianney, nevertheless, retained an indefinable reserve. He was like that to the end of his days, always accessible but never loquacious, too thrifty of his time to waste it on idle talk, able to maintain a certain distance, even with people he met every day. To keep temptations at bay, he had made a vow, at this Ecully period, to recite the *Regina caeli* every day and to say six times a day the

prayer: 'Blessed be the most holy and Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of God, for ever and ever. Amen.'

But if he was able to do such magnificent work in this, his first parish, the reason went far deeper: the Abbé Vianney possessed a gift beside which book-learning and brilliance alike count for nothing. He possessed the divine charity, the supernatural love of God, without which, though he spoke with every tongue that men and angels use, the teacher of the gospel would be no better than echoing bronze or the clash of cymbals.

Maybe he had not yet acquired the pulpit eloquence of the Abbé Balley. His sister Marguerite, who came over from Dardilly from time to time and mixed with the congregation, made no bones about it: she said that, in her opinion, Jean Marie 'was not a good preacher yet'. Her postscript, as is the way with women, was far more interesting. 'For all that,' she said, 'it was on the days when he was preaching that people flocked to the church.'

He paid particular attention to the teaching of the children. We have something on that from Colombe Bibost, a girl whose mother came to work at the vicarage of Ecully before becoming, for all too short a time, the housekeeper at the presbytery of Ars. Colombe Bibost was amazed, as she testified at the Abbé Vianney's canonization process, at the way in which he managed to make himself understood even by the children, who were almost deficient, and the tireless patience with which he taught their prayers and the elements of religion to all of these little ones, who were his favourites above all.

He had, indeed, to wait several months before

receiving from the vicars-general of Lyons the authority to hear confessions, but he had only to receive it to show his powers. His first penitent was his own curé: a saint at the feet of another saint. From that time on, Marguerite tells us, penitents and sick almost always asked for him. Far from displaying any jealousy, the Abbé Balley, who was an ailing man, was only too thankful that God had blessed with the power of drawing such throngs the pupil he had trained at so much pains for the altar. Moreover, there were tangible results to be seen in the conversion of sinner after sinner. Colombe Bibost avers that 'a great number of people whose conduct had not up till then been an example to the parish changed their lives after having confessed to the Abbé Vianney'.

And happily the Abbé Balley was able to make some return to his 'dear child' for all the good he was doing in the parish. He set out to develop his intelligence, to make him a shrewd and practical priest. He realized that unsuspected treasure lay hid in the depths of his rich personality. Why had he appeared such a dunce all the time he was studying for the priesthood? The answer seemed obvious: since he was slow to grasp the meaning of the Latin words, his teacher had been forced to appeal almost entirely to his memory. The Abbé Balley now set about appealing to his reason.

Whether it was in the gardens of the presbytery or on the roads of the parish, the old master would talk theology to the pupil, who was more attentive than he had ever been. The pupil's look was illumined with a new light and from time to time the master's eye would be traversed with a flash of triumph as his 'dear Vianney' found the right solution to some particularly involved case of conscience. After God, it was the

Abbé Balley who made of the Curé d'Ars the miraculous confessor and director of souls that he was.

It was through the Abbé Balley again, indirectly at least, that the Abbé Vianney came to know and to venerate a young martyr whose bones had been discovered fifteen years earlier in the catacomb of St Priscilla at Rome. The name of St Philomena was then almost entirely unknown in France. The Abbé Balley, however, numbered among his benefactors M. Antoine Jaricot, of Lyons, whose eldest daughter, Mme Perrin, lived next door to Ecully. A younger sister of Mme Perrin's, named Pauline, came to stay with her sister from time to time, and it was on visits that the Abbé Balley and his assistant made to Mme Perrin that the name of St Philomena was mentioned. Pauline knew her story and was only too glad to talk of her miracles, for the virgin martyr, whose relics were honoured at Mugnano, near Naples, had worked a number of wonders. The Abbé Vianney felt an immediate and spontaneous attraction for this young saint of the apostolic age and from that moment on consecrated a special devotion to her.

It was not for long that the parishioners of Ecully were to see the saint who was their parish priest and the saint who was his assistant trudging the roads together side by side, sometimes under the same umbrella, for there was only one for the two of them at the presbytery. In February 1817 the Abbé Balley had to stop all parochial work. He had an ulcer of the leg, little by little his blood became infected and a long torture lay before him. He died in as holy a fashion as he had lived, on December 17, attended to the very end by his beloved assistant. He left his disciple an example

that he would never forget—and his hair shirt and discipline.

The parishioners of Ecully asked nothing better than to have the Abbé Vianney as their new curé, but the archbishopric had other views. As for Jean Marie himself, he continued his ministry as if nothing had changed, with no thought of his future. Another priest of the diocese, the Abbé Tripier, a man who was still young and full of energy, replaced the Abbé Balley. It was only for a matter of weeks that he was allowed to keep his assistant. At the beginning of February 1818 the Abbé Vianney was summoned to the office of the Abbé Courbon, the first vicar-general.

‘Twenty-two miles from here, my dear fellow,’ the Abbé Courbon told him, ‘there’s a little place in the arrondissement of Trévoux, the village of Ars, that’s in need of a priest in charge. Ars is no more than a chapel of ease, with about two hundred and ten souls. We’ve decided to send you there, to replace a young priest who was only twenty-six, the Abbé Déplace, and who has just died there only a few days after his appointment. Come, my dear boy, don’t be disheartened. You won’t be without friends. There’s a chateau in the chaplaincy of Ars where the lady of the manor is a good and a charitable woman.’

The vicar-general took a long last look at this humble priest who was agreeing, without the least objection and in a pure spirit of faith, to leave the rich and lively suburbs of Lyons and shut himself up, at thirty-two, perhaps for the rest of his days, in the lowliest preferment in the diocese, in this forgotten village to which one could only get by cart-track. The Abbé Courbon reflected again, and then, surely inspired, he concluded: ‘There’s not very much love of God in this village. It is for you to teach it them.’

VII

THE CHAPLAIN OF ARS

IT is true that there was not very much love of God in the forgotten village of Ars. There had, indeed, been a time, before the crimes and the scandals of the Revolution, when Ars had been a parish and had known its years, perhaps its centuries of vigorous religious life. In the eighteenth century, if we may judge by contemporary surveys of church-going, religion was very much alive and fraternities were flourishing; ardent priests such as the Abbé François Hescalle had defended and indeed strengthened the hold of the faith. The storm had broken: there had been an end of priests, an end of the sacraments, an end of every kind of religious ceremony. True, the old folk had done something to keep belief alive, and when from time to time a priest made his appearance in what they continued to call 'the parish', they filled the church, with tears in their eyes. Little by little, however, these sturdy Christians of the old days died out, and the adults who had been the young people of Ars under the Revolution had slipped into indifference because they had never been taught to understand their religion. As for the younger generation, they thought of nothing but pleasure. With a few splendid exceptions—families whose names still survive at Ars—an icy chill had touched the souls of the villagers.

The Abbé Vianney had an almost physical impression of it at the moment he came into contact with

the village for the first time, on the evening of Wednesday, February 9, 1818. Immediately after his morning mass, he had left the Ecully presbytery and set out on foot, followed by a carter who was bringing his clothes, his books and the Abbé Balley's bed. An overcast sky, heavy with mist, added to the desolation of the already melancholy countryside. As he descended one more cart-track, the new chaplain of Ars—or the Curé d'Ars, as we can surely already call him—saw the light of a few narrow windows glimmering through the fog. That was it. There are new parish priests who find enthusiastic crowds waiting to greet them, a forest of friendly hands outstretched to grasp theirs. For him, there was no one, except perhaps at the chateau, who even knew that he was coming. Not a soul, in any case, was waiting to greet him.

The moment he saw the lights which told him he was entering his 'parish', he flung himself on his knees to implore the help of his guardian angel. The first place he went was his church. It had a narrow nave with a low roof and a circular choir, and there were no side chapels or steeple, for the latter had been destroyed by the revolutionaries in 1793. But the thing that chilled the Abbé Vianney's heart the most was to find the lamp before the sanctuary out and the tabernacle empty.

It was not yet light the next day when he set himself to work. After a long prayer he began his ministry in Ars by celebrating Mass. He himself tolled the Angelus, and at the call of the single bell, suspended from its crazy rafters, a few devout women had hurried to the church. Then the young curé had rekindled in front of the altar the lamp that was henceforth never to go out.

There was hardly a single bright side to the situation in which the new chaplain found himself. Strictly speaking, his title should have been that of assistant priest, since his chapel of ease came under the curé of Mizérieux, and the Abbé Vianney received what had become an assistant priest's usual pay in the re-established Church: 500 francs¹ a year, paid by the local administrative unit, the commune. Ars had ceased to be a parish, but it still counted as a commune and by the grace of God had returned as its mayor a good Christian, M. Antoine Mandy. There was also a parish council, but the annual accounts of the chapel of ease of Ars were no trouble to understand. The year of his arrival, the Abbé Vianney carried out six baptisms, two marriages and three burials; the next year, 1819, baptisms increased to twelve and there were five burials, but no marriages; in 1820 there were thirteen baptisms, four marriages and burials nil—and so it went on, with very little variation. As can be imagined, the fees at Ars amounted to very little. If we look at the accounts that the Abbé Vianney drew up later, at a time when the chapel of ease had become a parish again, we find that in 1831, for example, the receipts, at 115 francs, were 13 francs more than the expenses, at 102 francs, while in 1832 there was a deficit of 35 francs, receipts being 76 francs and expenses 111. It is hard to believe, but down to the year 1859, the year of the Curé's death, the Ars parish accounts more often than not showed a deficit.

The Abbé Vianney, however, did not worry his head over these material details. From the very moment of his arrival the question he had asked himself had been

¹ Throughout the nineteenth century the value of the franc was stable at 25.22 to the £; one franc was roughly 9½d.

what he could do for the souls of the village. 'Ecully,' he told himself, 'was too big, and just for that reason I shouldn't have liked to stay there as curé. In this village, I've got exactly the job I need—and in any case, it is God who has sent me here. People talk a lot more ill than good of my poor parishioners: that only means that there's work to be done to make them better. Most of them don't know the way to church, or have forgotten it. Whatever the cost, I must get them there. And to do that, after all, haven't I got prayer at my disposal?'

From now on the house of God remained open to Him night and day, and the Abbé Vianney became its constant guest, for how can a priest accomplish his pastoral task better than by praying? Rising very early, he would light himself with a lantern to his meeting with God. The way from the presbytery to the church at that time led through a corner of the churchyard, and the curé gave a thought to the dead. Then he entered the sanctuary, and under the dim light of its perpetual lamp he offered up his soul of a priest, whose burning love was another, if less visible flame in honour of Jesus present in the Eucharist. Prostrate on the flags, at the foot of the steps leading up to the altar, he would recall one by one the mercies of God, would praise Him and bless Him and then, his body racked with sobs, would intercede for the souls of Ars. 'My God,' he would cry, 'grant me the conversion of my parish!'

There were people whom curiosity led at such hours noiselessly to open the door of the church. A man who lived close by, a witness has related, wanted to know what the Abbé Vianney was really doing so early in the morning. He found him praying, and when he came

back he told his neighbours: 'He's not a man like us.' Indeed, the new chaplain, as a woman parishioner put it, seemed to have taken up his abode in the church: he was there before daybreak, he only came out when his duties called him and he stayed there till the Angelus sounded in the evening.

All the same, the Abbé Vianney who, as Count Prosper des Garets d'Ars testifies, 'set to work immediately to make his parish completely Christian', was at pains always to accompany prayer with action. That is why he made a point of calling on those of his parishioners who refused to call on him.

The population of the village consisted almost entirely of farmers, so the only moment he could pay his calls was at mealtimes. That was hardly the sort of time one would have chosen for spiritual talks or reminders of the other world. But following in the footsteps of St Paul, the young Curé had made up his mind to be all things to all men, to talk about the weather, the ploughing and the crops. His language was as simple as his manners: he introduced himself to people without affectation, with a cordial handshake and a friendly smile. If occasionally he was ill received, which was exceptional, he was able to contain his feelings; for all he was by nature quick-tempered, 'born', as one of the witnesses of his life remarks, 'with an impetuous character', he had already acquired sufficient dominance of himself not to let his irritation appear.

It was rare for him to leave a house without saying a few words about God and religion. He would give an affectionate blessing to the younger members of the family and would ask the parents to be certain to send

their children to catechism. Going about as he did, the Abbé Vianney soon won the sympathies of his parishioners, and there was hardly a Sunday when a new face was not to be seen in church.

The Curé d'Ars paved the way for these timid returns to the faith which would soon be sincere conversions by his opening contact with his people, and he consolidated the successes by prayer. But he became convinced that the complete transformation of his parish demanded something more. What that was he indicated later on to a priest who came to him to complain of the disappointing results of his missionary work: 'You tell me you've done everything you can think of to convert your parishioners,' the Curé said, 'but have you fasted, have you used the discipline on yourself, have you tried sleeping on bare boards?' He himself practised these cruel penances to a degree rarely seen since the days of the Desert Fathers.

The presbytery was a peasant house built of the local clayey mud. On the ground floor there were two rooms: one of them was the dining-room and the other, paved with large irregular flags, could serve at once as kitchen, store-room and box-room. The upper floor was divided into three rooms, of which the nearest to the church had been the bedroom of successive curés of the parish and the other two could be used as spare rooms. Finally, the garret above was itself divided into three parts. The Abbé Vianney, however, did not dream of spending the night in the room intended for him. Sometimes he would sleep in a corner of the damp and cold ground-floor room, whose flags he would cover with a thin layer of straw mixed with vine shoots; sometimes he would choose a space in the

garret, where he would lie on the planks with a log under his head for pillow.

But even this could not satisfy his thirst for penance. The Curé d'Ars subjected himself to the most savage abstinence. In the Holy Week that followed his arrival in the parish he only ate twice; there were other times when he remained for several days together without taking any food. He wanted to make expiation for the souls in purgatory, to call down the divine mercy on them. That did not end the story either. He needed an almost superhuman energy to hold good in the midst of his solitude, far from his friends of the old days and from the family he never thought to see again. But his heart held more than endurance and strength: there was love there, too. And because there was love, he felt the call to offer himself up, for God and for the good of souls, on the pattern of Him who loved to the point of giving all His blood.

When night fell the Curé d'Ars would regretfully leave his church for his room. There, in a little box which was a mystery during his lifetime, and which has been preserved, were hidden away his iron disciplines: chains, at one end of which was a ring through which to put a finger, and at the other a bolt or a key. It was with one of these instruments that night after night the Abbé Vianney would flagellate himself, sometimes to the point of losing consciousness. In the corner of his room, opposite the door, if you lift the blue and white striped serge curtain that covers the wall from prying eyes you will find that the plaster is splashed with bloodstains. You can see how the blood spurted under his lashes, how blood stained the hands of the ascetic, whose prints can still be seen, how blood flowed from the ravaged shoulder with which he leant

against the wall, how the blood trickled down in fine threads to the floor. Here was the price of souls.

When he had done, the saint, for all his exhaustion, would lie down to sleep, not in a reposeful bed, but on the damp paving of the ground floor or the boards of the garret. Later in his life, unbearable attacks of neuralgia, caused by what he would laughingly refer to as 'the follies of my youth', forced him to go to his room to sleep. But even then he would only tolerate the thinnest of mattresses in his bed, and between the sheet and the mattress he slipped a broad plank.

VIII

CONVERTING THE PARISH

ARS was a victim to three besetting sins: religious ignorance, the passion for pleasure and Sunday work. The new Curé set out boldly to attack these three great evils.

It is in his church that a priest teaches his people. The appearance of the Ars church, however, was both mean and unattractive. The walls were peeling, the woodwork was faded: there were none of those statues, gilt or blazing with colours, which fascinate the eyes of the young and the poor. The flat roof, which stretched a bare twenty-one feet above the single nave, was criss-crossed with cracks and stained with the leakages of many past downpours. And it was not possible even for the ceremonies to be beautiful, for the state of the vestments for Mass and for vespers 'was enough to make one weep'.

The Abbé Vianney's dreams did not rise to replacing the building, but he did try to make it less unworthy of its Divine Host. A detail that speaks to his supreme devotion to the Blessed Sacrament was that he insisted on beginning with the high altar; he got a more handsome one from Lyons and paid for it out of his own poor stipend. Helped by the lady of the manor, Mlle d'Ars, he bought for vestments 'the best that could be got'.

Naturally, the story got around; people came 'to have a look', and as they could only have a look on

Sundays and feast days these occasions saw a fair congregation at the services. That gave the Abbé Vianney the opportunity he needed to go into the pulpit and teach his people, and his words were so clear and so forthright that within the week every detail of his sermon, repeated from mouth to mouth, had made the round of the parish. As he was talking chiefly for the benefit of those who were not there, everyone in Ars, whether they wanted to or not, was certain of hearing his teaching.

It may be asked what was the usual subject of his sermons. First of all came the duty of attending Mass and the place of the Blessed Sacrament as the centre and the food of any Christian life. Then followed the great truths of the faith: the immortal destiny of the soul, the heaven that could be won and the hell whose mouth yawned, the hatefulness and the terrible consequences of sin. The Abbé Vianney followed to the letter the advice of St Paul to Titus: 'Be strict in taking them to task, so that their faith may be soundly established.' Strict the Curé certainly was while sin continued to hold Ars in its grip. He had to shake the good out of their easy-going outlook if he was to break down the final defences of evil. For this insignificant chaplain of the last village in the department had set no ordinary aim before him. He was determined by his personal virtues and his apostolic labours to convert and to save every single soul in his flock.

The Curé d'Ars had a special fondness for the children. Up to his arrival they had for the most part been completely neglected. There was no school, except in winter, when the teacher, who was a farm-labourer for the rest of the year, opened a mixed class

of boys and girls that lasted for three months: despite his efforts, very few children learned to read. Winter was also the season for catechism classes, but since such of the children whom their parents deigned to send could not read the lessons in the book, they were merely bored; the others ran wild or stayed behind working on the farms. It was just as difficult to get them to Mass on Sunday. The youth of Ars was a youth without God.

It was heartbreaking for the Abbé Vianney to have these facts borne in on him. But his mind was made up at once: till the moment arrived when it was possible to open church schools—and that moment would not long be delayed—he would do the work himself. If the pupils of the catechism class could not read, he would teach them. Patiently he set about it, with no book to help him, mingling with his lessons all the most beautiful stories from the Bible or the lives of the saints. And it was not merely once or twice a week he taught: it was every day, Sundays included.

From All Saints' Day to the moment of the first communions there was a catechism class every day at six in the morning, with holy pictures given as prizes to the most punctual and the most attentive. In the midst of his children the Abbé Vianney forgot a good deal of his severity and soon, one attracted by another, all the children of an age to communicate had rallied round their parish priest. A few years later the Bishop of Belley, who had come down for a confirmation, declared after questioning them at length that the children of Ars were the best taught of the whole countryside, while priests called to the bedside of sick people who had come from Ars were astonished to hear

such humble Christians talk of religion with so much knowledge and understanding.

The second sin of Ars, a natural consequence of the lapse into religious ignorance of a place once so fervent in its faith and so honourable in its conduct, was the frenzied pursuit of pleasure. Naturally, the evil was not universal; some families stood out as islands of faith in the midst of the mass indifference. Nor had it as great a hold on the old folk or the people in the prime of life. With most of the young men and girls, however, 'it was', witnesses have affirmed, 'a veritable rage; it had gone to their heads'. The granddaughters of the Christian housewives of pre-Revolutionary days who, a contemporary Curé testified, made their regular meditation and kept the feast days with great devotion, had become no more than pagans whose moral sense was so blunted that they accepted real crimes as the most ordinary thing in the world. The Curé d'Ars sadly bore witness that among the inhabitants of the village 'practices that were in honour in the high days of paganism were being brought back to life'.

Dances were the chief occasion of sin for them. In this part of the country popular festivities go on to all hours; the very feast days of the local saints have degenerated. Here is an example of what is still going on today in a commune next door to Ars: it is an extract from a poster which does not refer either to the patron saint or to his Mass, but which is headed all the same PATRON SAINT'S DAY.

SATURDAY, at 9.30 p.m., great torchlight tattoo.

SUNDAY morning, from seven o'clock on, concert by military band. Afternoon, at 3.30, great public

dance [which is the principal item in the programme]. At 9 p.m., resumption of the dance till a late hour of the night.

MONDAY, after lunch, public games; at 4.30, public dance; at 9.30, resumption of the dance.

It needs no Solomon to guess from such a programme that the festivities are likely to go beyond allowable pleasure and to offer a genuine danger to the innocent. Slackening moral standards and declining faith are natural sequels. And Ars by no means confined itself to the yearly celebration of the feast of its patron, St Sixtus, when there was a series of dances in which people from all the neighbouring communes joined in. There was hardly any occasion that did not provide the inhabitants with an excuse for dancing. On ordinary Sunday afternoons, men and girls dressed up, the village cafés were filled, and then couples would set about organizing an open-air dance a few yards away from the churchyard and the church in a little square lined with walnut trees, to the tune of some local violinists. Whether it was in a room of some local inn or in a barn, proceedings would only end, to quote the words of the poster already cited, 'at a late hour of the night'.

That was not all: the inhabitants of Ars had thrown themselves with such wholeheartedness into their favourite enjoyment that their village had become a rendezvous for dancers for miles around. Naturally, they were asked back and they did not miss a single one of the 'patron saints' days' in the neighbourhood. It is easy to understand the sorrow the Curé felt when he looked on at such extravagances, and the energy he threw into fighting them: he was convinced that the

souls of his children were at stake. The evil was a deep-rooted one, so in his war on impurity the Abbé Vianney was utterly uncompromising. He bound himself not to lay down his arms until he had won an outright victory, and he kept his word.

In the pulpit he was never afraid to call a spade a spade. Maybe the dancers were not in the church, but at least some of their relatives were there. The parents who did not look after their boys or their girls were the first to need a lesson: if their children took the path to perdition through their negligence, what a crushing responsibility was theirs. 'Depart, accursed fathers and mothers,' the Abbé Vianney cried; 'depart into the hell where the wrath of God awaits you, you and the good actions that you have done, while all the time you have let your children run wild; depart into hell, they will not be long in joining you there.'

The Curé deliberately spoke in terrifying images which could not fail to make the culprits think when they were repeated to them. 'The devil surrounds a dance as a wall surrounds a garden', he said, and again: 'People who go to a dance leave their guardian angel at the door, where a devil takes his place, so that there are soon as many devils as dancers in the room.' 'My God,' he said once more, 'can a man's eyes be so bewitched as to believe there is no evil in dancing when it is the cord by which the devil drags the greater part of his souls to hell?'

It may be asked why the Abbé Vianney was so implacable in his condemnation of a physical recreation which St Francis de Sales describes as being in principle 'morally indifferent'. The reason is that—and here is another quotation from the old-fashioned language of the kindly Bishop of Geneva—'according to the

ordinary manner in which this diversion is carried out it disposeth and inclineth gravely towards the doing of evil and is by consequence full of danger and of peril'. Now it is morally impossible that dances that go on far into the night and take place in a semi-darkened room, even if they are not indecorous in themselves, shall not become evil and thus a grave cause of guilt. For, first, they are an immediate occasion of sin, and, secondly, some people go to them for that very reason.

That is why the Abbé Vianney refused absolution, even for a single lapse, to anyone who had danced and was not absolutely determined to shun all dances in the future. There were Ars girls who had waited for absolution for whole months in this way. When they finally surrendered and became converted, however, the transformation in them, their enthusiasm for well-doing and for a Christian life had to be seen to be believed. When he deprived them of the sacraments, their parish priest had forced them to search their hearts; they conceived a horror of passing pleasures and a completely new life opened before them.

Naturally, the Abbé Vianney came up against resistance: more than once he had recourse to a trick or a piece of bluff to gain his ends. One feast day when there was dancing in the air he took the offensive; placing himself on the route by which the violinist would come, he stood and waited.

'How much do you get for playing at a dance?' he asked the man on his arrival. The violinist named a sum and the Curé promptly paid him double. The musician immediately retraced his steps, delighted at his excellent stroke of business and the dancers, who had already gathered on the square, stood about kicking

their heels and ended by dispersing with a hang-dog air.

On another occasion the stern parish priest merely appeared as a dance was beginning, and showed his indignation, and the gathering broke up at once.

It took the Curé d'Ars more than ten years to completely wipe out dancing in his parish, but almost from the beginning he had won the more modest girls to a Christian life; when the few scapegraces who stood out wanted to get up a dance, they could only count on unfortunate farm hands or strangers to the village to help them out. By the time that what was called 'the pilgrimage' had started, the constant coming and going of people of every country who had flocked to Ars to see and to hear a saint, the battle was won. The Abbé Vianney had become such a king in his parish that, even if there had been nothing else, the mere idea that it might cause him pain would have been enough to prevent the least unseemliness.

The saint waged a war just as bitter against the cafés, which were habitual meeting-places of the dancers and which on feast days and Sundays were deadly competitors of the church. One after the other, the four publicans of Ars had either to put up their shutters or change their job. Later, as we shall see, quiet hostelries were set up where the pilgrims could get a simple bed and board.

With the tipsy song of the drunkard, blasphemy also disappeared from the streets and the houses of Ars. Blasphemy had infected even the children, who had picked the habit up out of mere imitation, understanding nothing of the vile words they innocently brought out. The Abbé Vianney mingled tears with his entreaties in such a way as to fill them with a horror

of it. The day came when you could be next to certain that the name of God was never pronounced in Ars, except when it was pronounced in prayer.

Another evil, the third sin of Ars, which also called for long and arduous battles before it disappeared, was the desecration of Sunday. When he tackled this subject for the first time from his pulpit, the Abbé Vianney spoke with a sorrow and a saintly indignation which profoundly stirred a congregation that was still but a sparse one. His burning enthusiasm soon led him to more direct action: he fearlessly bearded the violaters of the divine commandment, the men who when they carted their manure or their crops on a Sunday afternoon 'were carting their souls to hell, robbing the Lord of the day He set aside for Himself'. He would sometimes go out after vespers on the paths where he was likely to meet the Sunday workers: he could already claim at least an acquaintance with them, since he had called on them at their homes. Doubtless it was annoying for them to be caught in the act of sin by this priest for whose character, whatever else they thought of him, they had the highest respect. But after all St Paul recommends his beloved Timothy to 'preach the word of God, dwelling upon it continually, welcome or unwelcome; bring home wrongdoing, comfort the waverer, rebuke the sinner with all the patience of a teacher'.

It was thus that one Sunday in July he saw coming along the road towards him a cart loaded with sheaves which seemed to have no driver. The man was trying to hide himself behind it, but the Abbé Vianney had recognized the beasts and called him by name, and he had no choice but to come into the open. 'My dear

fellow,' the priest told him in a gentle voice that trembled with feeling, 'you think you've been properly caught because you've found me here. But God sees you always; it's of Him that you must be afraid.'

Little by little the inhabitants of Ars learned to understand their duty and, with very few exceptions, faithfully observed their Sunday rest.

All this is looking ahead, however. For the moment we are only at the beginning of the Abbé Vianney's work in his little chaplaincy. The year 1818 had already brought about striking changes in the moral life of the population. A stone cross set up that year on the road that leads to Savigneux, the nearest adjoining parish, is still there to speak of what was probably a first reawakening of faith in souls that had been so long sunk in sleep. Towards the end of 1819 a missionary from the Carthusians of Lyons came over, on the Abbé Vianney's invitation, to give a mission in the Ars church. Another priest of the same order had already preached there in the course of the year and his sermon, as the saint wrote to the Superior of the Carthusians, 'did a lot of good. Which', he added, 'makes me very hopeful that you will convert the people'.

But almost ten years would have to go by before that triumphant exclamation could be uttered: 'My brethren, Ars is no longer Ars!'

IX

VICTORY

NEVER in his whole pastoral career did the Abbé Vianney find himself with time on his hands. Even in the first two years of his ministry, when there was in appearance so little for him to do, he discovered constant outlets for his burning zeal and the hours he devoted to penance and prayer must surely be considered, not only as excellently spent, but as among the best and the most fruitful of his career.

In 1820 he decided to provide the church with a real belfry: since the demolition of the old one the parishioners had confined themselves to rigging up above the choir four beams surmounted by a cross-beam, from which hung the single bell, The Dove, which had been presented by Mlle d'Ars and her brother, the Viscount. A brick tower, squat and square, was soon erected, while a subscription list was passed from hand to hand in the village, the Abbé Vianney heading the names with his own. The subscription brought in a total of 265 francs: the lady of the manor provided a good part of the materials direct and the budget of the village council covered the rest of the debt, so that for the sum of 1,106 francs Ars had a new clock tower. In it The Dove was hung, and alongside it the chaplain, the very same year, installed, at his own expense, the bell of the Holy Rosary.

While the belfry was going up, the Abbé Vianney opened a little side chapel in the church itself, next door

to the sacristy. Blessed on August 6, the feast day of St Sixtus, the patron saint of Ars, it was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. The next task was the restoration of the roof of the nave, and then came the construction of a second chapel, dedicated to St John the Baptist. The Abbé Vianney had a special love for the Forerunner. He had chosen this great preacher of repentance as his patron at his confirmation, and since then he had habitually signed himself Jean Marie Baptiste Vianney. It was in this chapel, built at his own expense, and solemnly inaugurated on June 24, 1823, that the Curé d'Ars established his confessional. The place was soon to become famous and to be witness to a thousand-and-one wonders.

The other three side chapels which are still honoured in the village church to our day, the chapel of St Philomena, the chapel of the Ecce Homo and the chapel of the Holy Angels, were only built much later.

The fact that he was building did not prevent the Abbé Vianney from replenishing what he called with a charming simplicity 'God's wardrobe'. He dreamed of sumptuous chasubles and copes, of elaborate sacred vessels, of marble altars with fine sculpture in order that the rejuvenated church might be the scene of solemnities whose beauty should make them even more moving. Unfortunately, he had ruined himself in stone and mortar and there was nothing to be hoped from a fresh subscription list, for the crops had been more than poor. Help was to come to him from Paris.

Though Viscount François Garnier des Garets d'Ars spent his life almost entirely in the Parisian parish of St Sulpice, he had never completely lost interest in the

village where he had his mother and his family domains. The dowager Countess des Garets had become, in 1808, patron of the former living of Ars, and she was eager for a titular curé to be placed there and for the village, which had remained a commune, to become a parish again. The Viscount for his part did not waste his time in the capital; he employed it so well, indeed, that a royal decree of June 20, 1821, separated the chaplaincy of Ars from the parish of Mizérieux. With its independence, Ars recovered its title of parish.

We have no evidence to show whether the Abbé Vianney was pleased with this change, which gave him a step up in status. Everything goes to show that he was far happier over the superb presents that followed it. In the spring of 1819 the Viscount had spent a few weeks holiday in the family château and he returned to Paris filled with the liveliest admiration for the Abbé Vianney. He was determined to help him with his plans, and in particular to finish the embellishment of the interior of the church.

From 1823 to 1828 a whole succession of gifts were to arrive from the capital, filling the hearts of the Curé and his parishioners with delight. There were splendid banners of silk embroidered with silver, magnificent vestments in silk, in velvet and in cloth of gold, and a canopy of garnet-red silk embroidered with gold which, it was true, was too big to get through the west door, but which was to oblige the generous Viscount to widen it by eight feet and give it a new façade. Then there were beautiful reliquaries for the chapels of Our Lady and of St John the Baptist, a silver-gilt monstrance and a dome and tabernacle in gilded copper for the high altar. It was a pleasure to see the Curé d'Ars as each new consignment arrived: he laughed and cried

by turns as the wonders dispatched from Paris were unpacked. One day a big case was being opened in front of the presbytery when a good old woman happened to pass through the square. 'Mother,' the Abbé Vianney called to her, 'come here, mother, and see something really beautiful before you die.'

It was not only the church of stones and mortar the Curé was enriching. With his spirit urging it on, a transformation just as sweeping was taking place in the souls of the people of Ars. It began, as all the big things begin, in a small way: a little group of girls were its grain of mustard seed. The Abbé Vianney had noticed them one Sunday evening, in 1818, staying on in church after vespers while their companions were dancing in the square, and he invited them into his garden, which he almost never visited himself, to eat currants. 'I took the liberty of following them,' relates Catherine Lassagne, who was soon to be the right hand of her parish priest and who was then only twelve, 'and the Curé stayed with us for a few moments. I remember him saying: "Aren't you happier than the girls who are dancing in the square?"' Then he took us into the presbytery, into the kitchen, where he read us the life of my patron saint, and then he talked to us about God.'

Nothing out of the ordinary had happened: just a quiet chat in a stone-flagged kitchen. But the little handful of girls has grasped the essential of the simple words they had heard. With the least possible fuss or talk, they started spreading the light about them by the mere force of their good example. For them and for the friends they brought in, the Abbé Vianney revived, on February 23, 1820, the Confraternity of the Holy

Rosary, which had done so much good before the Revolution. The next thing was to train up a similar élite among the men. Paradoxically enough, though the confraternities of women had all disappeared in the days of the Terror, the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, which was designed for men and youths, had not completely broken up, as the Abbé Vianney discovered when, organizing his first Corpus Christi procession, he saw one or two men with candles in their hands. It is true this practice was the only one the few surviving brothers still observed, but they had kept the faith, and one of them very soon attracted the attention of his Curé. The moving story of how this happened was told later by the Abbé Vianney in one of his catechism classes.

‘We had here in this parish,’ he said, ‘a man who died a few years ago. One day, coming into the church to say his prayers before going out to work in the fields, he left his mattock at the door and lost all thought of himself before God. One of his neighbours, who worked a few fields away and was used to seeing him every morning, started to wonder why he hadn’t turned up. Going back to the village, he had the idea of looking into the church in case he was there, and there he was, of course. “What have you been doing there all this time?” he asked him, and the man replied: “I looks at God and God looks at me.” He was looking at God and God was looking at him. That’s the key to everything, my children.’

This silent worshipper had died in October 1825. Louis Chaffangeon, for that was his name, had gone to meet his God with the confidence of an absolute faith, a hymn of hope on his lips.

Thus five or six years at the most after the Abbé

Vianney's arrival in the parish, sanctity was already to be found there.

The Curé was determined that the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament should fulfil a missionary as well as a purely devotional function. He therefore made use of its meetings for the religious instruction of the promising men and youths whom he wanted to turn into leaders and models for his flock. He preached to them the habits of frequent communion and of family prayers and the Christian practices of grace at meals, the Angelus, the lifting of the hat to wayside crucifixes, the recitation of the rosary on the way to and from work, and of religious reading. His words struck home. His hearers' faith grew, their concern over what the neighbours would say vanished.

On August 6, 1823, the Abbé Vianney must have experienced a gentle satisfaction when he was able to take about two-thirds of his parishioners on a pilgrimage to the ancient chapel of Fourvière at Lyons. It was a magnificent day. The pilgrims left the village in procession, singing hymns as they went and with the resplendent banners given by the Viscount d'Ars at their head. At Trévoux they embarked on two great barges which were drawn by horses down the Saône to Lyons, and they walked in procession once more to Fourvière, where the Curé d'Ars celebrated Mass and where a number of the pilgrims received Holy Communion from his hands.

There was, indeed, a real change going on in his flock, and the happy Curé, who was forgivably enough a little blinded by his affection, could write three months later to Claudine Fayot, whom he still called 'his little mother of les Noës': 'I've got a little parish that's full of religion.' Naturally, everything was not

perfect, for the young people were, many of them, still under the spell of dancing, and the desecration of Sunday had not yet been stopped.

But the jubilee extended to the whole Christian world by Leo XII in 1826 and a mission preached at Ars in the following year coming in quick succession resulted in some sensational conversions. Mlle Catherine Lassagne has given us a wonderful picture of this mission of 1827 in her *Petit mémoire sur M. Vianney*.

‘It is impossible to imagine,’ she writes, ‘the graces of conversion which the Curé won by his prayers and above all by the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice. There was a real revolution in men’s hearts: the power of grace was so overwhelming that few indeed could resist it. Respect for convention was turned upside down: people began to be ashamed of not doing good and of not practising their religion. You saw men going about with serious expressions, with a thoughtful look in their eyes; you could even hear some of them, who had not sought the divine clemency for many a long day, saying unashamedly in the street: “I’ve got to go to confession”. There was not one of them who was not in a holy disposition. In one of his sermons, the Curé pronounced these words to them: “My brothers, Ars is no longer Ars”.’

It was true. Ars had ‘changed beyond recognition’. The phrase was that of a blacksmith, Jean Picard, who came from Montceaux, in the Saône-et-Loire, and who had settled down in the village. He had had dealings with people there in the past and had visited it on business, so he felt a certain trepidation at making his home there. But when he found himself in the midst of the decent, friendly people that the villagers had become under the Abbé Vianney’s influence, surrounded

by men and women who took it as a matter of course to go to Mass even on ordinary working days and who regularly laid down their work even on the minor feast days, without their pocket suffering for it, he could hardly believe his eyes. 'In the old days,' Jean Picard said, 'this parish was just like its neighbours'—which could hardly be taken as a compliment. It was now, added a priest who often visited the village, 'incomparably superior to all the others'.

You had a feeling, when you entered the village of Ars, as if the soul of the saint who had transformed its souls was hovering over men and things alike. 'The first thing that struck us,' said a Lyons lawyer who made the pilgrimage, 'was the complete restfulness and peace of the surroundings. You seemed to be breathing a milder air . . . How kindly the inhabitants greeted us. Christian hospitality and brotherly relations came out in everything they did. We noticed that the houses were decorated with a statue of the Virgin or with images of the saints.'

The same visitor, who attended High Mass on Sunday in the Ars church, remarked that 'the recollection that reigned there was quite extraordinary'.

Welcomed as eagerly as he was in every home, the Abbé Vianney was, indeed, the good shepherd who knows all his sheep and whom all his sheep know. No one in his flock could feel neglected: no sooner had a boy or a young man gone into service with a family than the Curé d'Ars concerned himself with him, discovered how far his religious instruction had gone, asked that he be sent to the catechism class or to Mass, as the case might be, and insisted that he be treated on an equal footing with the children of the house, since

he also had a soul which was precious in the eyes of God. There was nothing in which he did not take an interest, whether it was health, work or crops; he would greet people with the familiarity of a father and, as the wife of the mayor, the Countess des Garets, observed, 'would talk to them of their affairs, with which he was as familiar as they were'. He shared wholeheartedly in his people's joys and successes, always adding that thanks must be given to God; but also there was no one who could bring consolation as he could in the midst of reverses or revive the failing courage of the broken heart.

The grace that had transformed the souls of the inhabitants of Ars shone through in their features. Many visitors could not get it out of their heads; they said Ars gave them an idea of what the first Christians must have been. Mgr Convert, who was appointed curé of the parish in July 1889, exactly thirty years after the death of the saint, had the good fortune to know a great many of those whom the Abbé Vianney had baptized, married, preached to or taught by his example. 'Their faces,' he wrote, 'bore an imprint of holiness which I have rarely seen to such a degree: they had a calm, a serenity, a sort of radiation of heavenly happiness which would have enabled one to pick them out in no matter how large a crowd.'

X

THE 'HOUSE OF PROVIDENCE'

THE Providence home at Ars played a very special part in the life of the Abbé Vianney. This educational institution, which was born of his charity, had nothing but his charity to live on, and to it he gave a very great deal of his heart.

It will be remembered that when he arrived in the parish he had found no schools worthy of the name. He set about straightway laying plans for the foundation of two schools, to be staffed by masters and mistresses whom he would choose himself. He began with the girls' school, for he knew he would have no difficulty in finding mistresses for it. But he did not find it necessary to have recourse to any teachers' college: two good women of the village, Mlle Benoîte Lardet and Mlle Catherine Lassagne, seemed to him to possess all the necessary qualifications. In 1823 he sent them to finish their studies at the school run by the Sisters of St Joseph at Bourg, paying for their board and their teaching himself.

For this first school of his, he bought a house facing right on the church square, and it opened at Martinmas 1824 under the management of Benoîte and Catherine. The curriculum was a simple one and there were no fees: the mistresses received no pay but their board and lodging and the satisfaction of knowing they were doing good.

The school was successful beyond all expectation.

'People sent us their children from Mizérieux, from Savigneux and from Villeneuve,' Catherine Lassagne records. 'We had to turn the garret into a dormitory. The first year we boarded sixteen girls.' Without realizing what he was doing, the Abbé Vianney had founded a boarding-school. The board also was free, the only obligation on the parents being to supply beds and linen for their children, since the school had not got any of its own. When fathers and mothers came to see their children, they also brought food with them.

But a plan yet more far-reaching was already taking shape in the Abbé Vianney's always active imagination. One Sunday in January 1827 he confided to his parishioners his wish to add to the house a home for orphaned or abandoned girls, for he had run into a number of them in the village and round about and he had found the sight heartbreaking. So the Curé d'Ars bought a little plot of land next door to the school. He himself drew up the plans for the building of his dreams: to speed up the job, he took a hand with the workmen, helped dress the stone, mixed the mortar and carried the planks and the beams. Once the annex had been added, the Abbé Vianney decided only to accept day pupils for the school. Dormitory and refectory were reserved for the children taken in out of charity, and the saint gave the new home the beautiful name of Providence.

The number of 'orphans'—for that was the name by which all the boarders came to be known—soon rose to more than sixty, for only one qualification was necessary to be sheltered under this roof blessed by God: misfortune or poverty. There was very little scrutiny of the age of the candidates: poor girls of eighteen and twenty appeared at the doors of

Providence and were admitted. It did not matter that they did not know a word of their catechism, had never made their communion: they were hungry and they were begging. The Abbé Vianney had a limitless compassion for these abandoned girls.

As long as there was a single place free—and self-sacrifice and ingenuity could always make one, even though caution might insist that accommodation had been stretched to the limit—not a single child was left without shelter. When things became most difficult, the saint was able to breathe into his helpers something of his own heroism. One night he himself brought to Providence a poor little girl he had met in the street.

‘Find a place for this child whom God has sent you,’ he said to Catherine Lassagne.

‘But, Monsieur le Curé, there isn’t a single bed left.’

And the Curé d’Ars, certain of being listened to, replied: ‘Surely there’s yours.’

Without a word more, the compassionate woman held out her arms to the orphan.

Even babes in arms were saved in this way by the Abbé Vianney. ‘It happened one day that I found a new-born child left in the church porch,’ a woman working at the orphanage said. ‘The Curé told us to take it in and to put it out to wet-nurse when we had made some little clothes for it. Another time when he heard that a woman who had suffered terrible misfortunes was dying in a neighbouring parish, he sent me over with one of my comrades to take charge of her baby, which we then brought up.’

The Curé d’Ars put into his ‘house of Providence’ all the little money that had come to him from his family. When his inheritance was spent to the last

penny, he started selling his furniture and his household goods and then holding out his hand for alms, and the lady of the manor and benefactors from Lyons came to his aid. The seventy mouths there were to feed meant that a hundred bushels of wheat a month were needed. There were hours when disaster seemed at the door, when it appeared as if the only thing to do was to admit: It's all up, there's nothing left to go on with. At moments like this Benoîte Lardet or Catherine Lassagne would go and see the Curé and ask him how many orphans he thought they could keep on.

'But what are you thinking of? We're keeping them all,' he would cry.

He would be more anxious than he had appeared, however, and once left to himself he would redouble his prayers and ask God to come to his help with a miracle. And God would answer his appeal.

One day in 1829, finding that the wheat destined for the orphans' bread had dwindled to a mere couple of handfuls, he hid a relic of St Francis Regis in this pitiful remnant of grain. He had made a pilgrimage years before to the tomb of the great missionary at La Louvesc, and had obtained of him the grace of being able to continue his studies; today he asked him for bread for his children. The next day the granary was so full that the staff of the home trembled lest its worm-eaten floor should give way, just as St Peter's net, in the Sea of Galilee, was at the point of breaking under the miraculous draught of fishes.

But that was not the only wonder that occurred at Providence. One day when Jeanne Marie Chanay, who was by turn gardener, cook, washerwoman and baker at the orphanage, mentioned to Catherine

Lassagne that there was not enough flour for three loaves whereas she had to make ten, Catherine replied without another thought:

‘If only the Curé were to ask God, I believe he could arrange for our remnant of flour to give us a batch.’

Jeanne Marie went straight to the Abbé Vianney and told him the position.

‘You must pray and bake your bread,’ he told her.

‘I set to work, though I was still very worried,’ Jeanne Marie recounted later. ‘I started by pouring very little water and flour into the kneading trough, but I saw that my flour was still much too thick. So I added more water and then more flour, but my little reserve was never exhausted.

‘And then I saw the trough was full of dough, just like it was on the days when we put a great sackful into it. We made ten big loaves, each weighing between 20 and 22 lbs, and we filled the oven as if nothing had happened, to the astonishment of everyone who saw it.

‘We told the Curé what had happened, and all he said was: “God is very good. He looks after the poor!”’

The Ars orphanage did an enormous amount of good. ‘I’ve often heard people telling the Curé,’ Catherine Lassagne relates, ‘that only on the Day of Judgment would men realize all the good that had been done by this house.’ Of the children taken in by the Abbé Vianney ‘a great number’, Catherine goes on, ‘profited admirably from his teaching: they became good mothers or good servants and quite a number even took their vows as nuns.’

The Curé associated the orphans in his prayers and

his sacrifices. At the period when he was fighting with such determination against the dances, when scandal was wounding his heart most bitterly, the devoted girls asked their mistresses for permission to relay each other on their knees all through the night so as to unite themselves round the clock with the supplications of their beloved parish priest.

The Lyons lawyer, who has already been quoted, will give some idea of what sort of training was imparted in this very special kind of boarding-school.

Its very existence had seemed to him a wonder in itself, and there was no lessening in his admiration when he came to see the working of the Curé's favourite institution from close to. Its inmates numbered at this time 'fifty or sixty girls. Coming from every part of the country and admitted without money, they spent an indefinite time at Providence and were then placed in employment in the surrounding farms. During their stay there, they learned to know, to love and to serve God before anything else. The range of teaching was not very wide, but the faith, the love of God and the docility that reigned there were quite wonderful. It was in no sort of sense an ordinary institution; it was rather a veritable emanation of the saintliness of its founder. Its resources, its life, its spirit and its direction all came from him. It was an institution which bore the imprint of the supernatural and which could only live through the immediate influence of the outstanding soul who had called it into existence.'

The education given at Providence was primarily practical. The children who were being brought up there would not live on their investments, so they learned to sew, to knit, to wash and to iron, and Catherine even taught some of them to spin and to

weave. The elementary teaching given was, however, quite adequate: the girls who came out of the orphanage could all read, write and do their sums; they might take some liberties with their spelling, for Catherine herself was no genius at this, but at any rate they knew their catechism thoroughly. An official document which no one will suspect of partiality will speak more eloquently than any flatteries to the value of the work done at the foundation of St Jean Marie Vianney.

‘It is true,’ the Trévoux Primary School Inspector wrote in one of his reports, ‘that the worthy ladies who are at the head of this institution do not possess a very extensive education, but they have something that can replace knowledge and is worth more than it: goodness. The children who are being trained under their guidance resemble them.’

For many years the House of Providence was visited every day by its holy founder. From 1827 on, when the orphanage was sufficiently organized, the Abbé Vianney made it the regular place of his midday meal, which was, incidentally, the only one he ate in the course of the day. There was no one to wait on him at table, however, and no napkin laid for him: just a little earthen pot in the embers of the hearth where some milk or a little soup was kept warm for him. The Curé helped himself and only sat down if he was too tired to stand.

From the kitchen he passed into the courtyard, and then you could see a scene which brought to life again the pages of the gospels that portray Jesus in the midst of the children. All the games stopped for a minute while the orphans thronged round their adopted father.

He knew them all and called them by their Christian names in his gentle voice; he looked in their candid eyes and relaxed for a few moments in their midst: it was his only rest, his best recreation. He liked to put questions to the smallest girls, and their simple-minded replies lit up his austere features. It need hardly be said what comfort and strength the mistresses drew from these daily visits of the Curé.

The Abbé Vianney allowed some of the orphans to take temporary work in the surrounding farms, but only during the winter. When the children left Providence for the last time, they had no need to worry where to go: the Curé had already found them a place. They were only too glad of the opportunity to come back and ask his advice. To those who married he gave a little dowry, a few articles for their trousseau: he spared neither his encouragements nor his prayers for those who felt a vocation to the religious life.

He proved in his own person the truth of one of his remarks: that the charity of the saints is an overflow from the heart of God.

XI

THE DEVIL HITS BACK

THE Abbé Vianney had said it in one of his very earliest sermons. 'If a parish priest doesn't want to be damned, and if there is any loose living in his parish, he must spurn the very thought of public opinion and the fear of being despised or hated by his parishioners. Even if he were certain of being lynched when he came down from the pulpit, that must not stop him speaking out against it.'

The Curé d'Ars quite certainly did not want to be damned, and he had no ambition at all to win for himself those purely human sympathies which are only too often the shabby wages of a tactful truckling to evil. He was out to show sin the door, even were it to draw down upon him the hatred and the thirst for vengeance of those who had given themselves to it past repenting. And that is just what it did bring him.

'We didn't ask him to come here.' That was the phrase constantly to be heard on the lips of the drinkers in the cafés, chiming in on the publicans' indignation, venting their fury between potations. 'Why, there's not a girl in Ars now who's not at church or safely attached to her mother's apron-strings. Let him go back where he came from, the spoil-sport,' the chorus went on. 'Why can't he let us drink and dance and enjoy ourselves in peace?'

But the Curé's enemies went further than this. They wove his name into licentious verses which they

sung under his window coming home from their revels. They called him a hypocrite and a humbug; with knowing winks they spread the story that his ascetic pallor was really due to his nights of debauchery; they defiled the door of the presbytery with their dirt. Anonymous letters of an unspeakable character poured in on the ecclesiastical authorities accusing him of the most loathsome vices; the Bishop of Belley, who had only recently been installed in his diocese, sent over the curé of Trévoux, the Abbé Vianney's superior, to hold an inquiry into his conduct. The unhappy saint had to drink the cup to the dregs.

Simultaneously he was visited by an insupportable anguish from within. He was beset by the fear that he was not equal to his duties, that he was betraying God's plans, finally that he was on the road to damnation. He continued to pray as long and as ardently as ever, but heaven remained silent. The temptation to give up came upon him, he wanted to leave Ars, to shut himself up in a Trappist monastery, never to look on his fellow human beings again. The strength that faith inspires held him back. He schooled himself to the habit of meditating on the Passion of Our Lord and of lifting his thoughts to the Cross, and at last peace returned to him. He himself told the story of how it happened.

'You must pray for the grace to love your crosses,' he confided to some of his friends, 'then they become dear to you. I went through the experience myself for four or five years, I had to meet with every sort of slander and opposition. I had my crosses then, sure enough; I had almost more than I could carry. I began to pray that I might love my crosses, and I was happy. I ended by saying to myself: "Really, this is the only happiness there is".'

It was only a tiny minority, of course, who were responsible for the slander and the sabotage, but they wounded the Abbé Vianney in the most sensitive point in his soul: allegations that cast aspersions on his priestly honour threatened to bring him into discredit and to paralyse his action for good. Nevertheless, taking his example from the Jesus who was abused and mocked at by His enemies, he did not open his mouth. He contented himself with disclosing the wounds that scarred his heart to God, alone face to face with Him in his vigils before the tabernacle. He rose from his knees to go on with his daily duties. 'You are doing far more for God,' he said, 'when you are doing things although they give you no pleasure or satisfaction. It is possible they may show me the door; in the meantime, I'm going ahead as if I were staying here to the end of my days.'

The slanders in the end died out of their own. In any case, as Catherine Lassagne bears witness, 'the stories told against the Abbé Vianney by malicious and dishonest people never received the least credence' among the decent part of the population. With even unbelievers taking his defence, there was no wonder that the Catholics of Ars replied to such tales in words like those of young Antoine Mandy: 'You're quite mistaken; I've watched him for a long time myself. Our Curé is a saint.'

He was a saint; that was just what infuriated the one irreconcilable enemy of the Curé d'Ars. The others would be converted sooner or later and would own up to their errors: this one never.

For things did not end with human opposition: the angel of darkness had to take a hand. In the ordinary

course of events, Satan is too cunning to let himself be seen: his temptations come to most people as a suggestion that crosses the mind here, a whisper there, whose origin not the finest ear could identify. When he comes up against certain souls, however, souls better or more lofty, he realizes he is defeated in advance and he is seized by a frenzy of rage. Seeing his habitual tricks sidestepped, he throws his normal tactics to the winds, gives himself up to a wild fury and testifies by cries, by unearthly noises, even by blows to his invisible presence.

For more than thirty years the nights of Ars were witnesses of this impotent fury.

When the story began to go around the village and its neighbouring hamlets that the Abbé Vianney was being plagued by the Evil One, there were naturally sceptics who argued that, if anything were wrong, it was the saint's fasts and vigils that were to blame. The best answer to them is given by two doctors, Doctors Saunier and Michel, who on various occasions had the Curé d'Ars under their professional care and who testified to the perfect equilibrium of his temperament. 'Serenity of outlook . . . delicacy of perception . . . soundness of judgment and of opinion . . . complete self-possession . . . miraculous health', these are some of the phrases used of him by Dr Saunier, who treated him in his last seventeen years. His colleague speaks of him in almost identical terms. 'Everything I have seen or heard said about the Curé d'Ars,' Dr Michel declared, 'convinced me that he enjoyed complete possession of himself and an unerring judgment, and nothing could ever make me believe that he was the victim of illusions or hallucinations. As to the attacks of the devil, I have heard talk about them, and if the

Abbé Vianney says they took place, then I believe they did.'

Moreover, there were other witnesses of this extraordinary pestering. The Abbé Denis Chaland, who was brought up at Ars as a boy, not only collected statements from the villagers, he had also, as will be seen below, been in a position to form a personal opinion on the matter. He testifies that 'everyone was persuaded that the noises came from the devil. I never doubted it myself, and neither years nor reflection have changed my conviction on this point. There is no question of any trickery. If any practical jokers or people interested in promoting a hoax had been concerned, they would have been very soon unmasked.'

With this preface, let us come to the facts.

'When the Curé was thinking out the plan of his Providence, for which he had just bought a house, he started to hear loud noises at the presbytery.' These were the words of Catherine Lassagne, giving evidence at the canonization process. 'Thinking that it might be thieves, he spoke to a few young men, who kept watch at the presbytery and in the belfry. One night a man named Verchère was mounting guard.'

Here the story passes to André Verchère, whose own experience began when he arrived at the presbytery with a loaded gun. 'I talked to the Curé and warmed myself up till ten o'clock,' Verchère stated, 'and finally he said: "Let's go to bed". He gave me his own room and went to the one next door, but I did not go to sleep. About one o'clock I heard a violent shaking of the latch and the handle of the door that gives on the courtyard. At the same time a shower of cudgel blows rang out, while the presbytery itself was filled with a

noise of thunder, like the rumbling of a series of carriages.

‘I took my gun and ran to the window, which I opened, but when I looked out there was nothing to see. The house trembled for about a quarter of an hour. My legs were in the same state, and I felt the effect for a week after. As soon as the noise began the Curé had lit a lamp, and came to me.’

‘“Did you hear it?” he asked me.

‘“Of course I heard it, otherwise I shouldn’t have got up and got my gun.”

‘The presbytery was shaking as if there had been an earthquake.

‘“Are you afraid, then?” the Curé asked me.

‘“No, I’m not afraid, but I can feel my legs giving way,” I said. “The presbytery’s going to collapse.”

‘“What d’you think it is?”

‘“I think it’s the devil.”

‘When the noise finally stopped, we both went back to bed. The Abbé Vianney came to me the following evening and asked me to go back with him. I told him: “Monsieur le Curé, I’ve had enough of it as it is”.’

Following this refusal of the village wheelwright, Antoine Mandy, son of the mayor, and Jean Cotton, gardener at the château, mounted guard at the presbytery for a dozen nights or so. They heard blood-curdling noises, nothing more, but they did not see a trace of thieves.

When the noises showed no signs of stopping, the Abbé Vianney became convinced that he had to do with something more than mortal malice, and worried no further about guards. He alone was the object of the devil’s attacks: it was for him to stand up to them

on his own. He soon discovered that these mysterious visitations redoubled in their ferocity if any happy change, any new conversion were taking place in Ars. The Curé began to be glad of them, almost to take them as a game. He gave the devilish trouble-maker a nickname, and would remark: 'Old Snatch ¹ is in a temper. So much the worse for him.'

The Evil One had a perfectly logical plan in giving vent to his fury as he did. His aim was to wear the Abbé Vianney's resistance down by depriving him of any kind of rest or of sleep, to make his ministry impossible and to sicken him of his parish—in a word, to get rid of him. But as things turned out, it was he who gave in first and abandoned the field to his adversary.

It was only by constancy of heroic quality that the Curé d'Ars held his ground against this terrible ordeal. In 1824 he had given up spending his nights—or rather the few hours of each night that he allowed for his spartan sleep—in the garret or in the damp ground-floor room. Acute facial neuralgia obliged him to pay a little attention to his health, so he lay down on a mattress in his own room. Hardly had he blown out his candle, however, when the witches' sabbath would begin. A thunder of blows would threaten to club down the doors and almost immediately the Abbé Vianney would have the sensation that *he* was there. He knew, without knowing how, that the Evil One had penetrated into the quiet room, and though he might remain invisible—apart from very occasional manifestations in the form of clusters of bats, a swarm of bees

¹ The Curé's nickname was *le grappin*. The primary meaning of *grappin* is grapnel or hook, but it is also used figuratively in the phrase *jeter le grappin sur quelqu'un*, to cast a spell over someone.

or an army of rats—the piercing cries, the bellows, groans and roars that could be heard spoke clearly enough to his presence.

Then the furniture would begin to dance about and the curtains round the lurching bed seemed on the point of being torn into a thousand pieces. Or the noise would come from the garret, and the floor above the bedroom would sound with the continuous trot of a flock of sheep or the hammering hooves of a cavalry charge, or an army of men in iron-shod boots would be climbing the stairs. Sometimes the hubbub would stop quite suddenly and the Abbé Vianney would be on the point of dropping off to sleep when the whole inferno would begin again and keep the saint awake till the moment it was time for him to get up.

The devil showed no lack of imagination in the variety of his monstrous pranks. Although most of the time he acted as if his name, as in the gospel, was Legion, it would sometimes appear as if there were only a single spirit present. That happened when a harsh singing of extraordinary power would seem to issue from the fireplace, and the Abbé Vianney would comment next day: ‘Old Snatch has got an extraordinarily ugly voice.’ Then fingers of an astonishing agility would beat a tattoo on the water-pot, or a heavy hammer would seem to be knocking nails into the floor or fixing iron hoops in place round a cask. Again it might be that the shrill voice that the Curé d’Ars could never hear without a shudder would insult him, and the invisible being, in the wildness of its excitement, would at one moment speak from less than arm’s breadth, at the next from a mile away. ‘Ha ha! Vianney!’ the mocking words would ring out. ‘Not dead yet, eh, Vianney? I’ll have you in the end.’

And from his meagre bed the saint, strong in his trust in God, would reply: 'I'm not afraid of you.'

There is no question of these cries being imaginary: they were heard by people outside. One of the pieces of evidence on this is that of the gendarme Napoly, who thought the Curé was in danger and was on the point of going to help him. Another comes from Denis Chaland, who with some of his friends was playing truant from the school where he was a boarder. Chaland had glued his ears to the Curé's door and 'had heard the ironic challenge "Vianney! Vianney!" repeated twenty times and more'. Marguerite, the Curé's sister, had sometimes slept in the so-called 'guest room'. On one of the nights she spent there, she recounted, 'an extremely violent noise started up near my bed, as if five or six men were hammering with all their might on the table or the chest of drawers'. Naturally, she told her brother. 'You needn't have been scared, my dear,' the Curé d'Ars reassured her. 'It's only Old Snatch. He can't do anything to you; it's just his way of tormenting me. Sometimes he takes me by the feet and drags me into my room. It's because I've been converting souls to God.' He made the same kind of reply to Mlle Marie Ricotier, when she asked him about the strange noises she had heard even from her house, far away as it was. 'They haven't escaped my notice either,' replied the saint with a gentle smile. 'It's probably some sinners who are on the way to Ars.'

Time and again the Abbé Vianney was to show proof of his power over the devil. While exorcists need long prayers to cast out an evil spirit, a simple sign of the cross or a brief order was usually sufficient for it to obey the Curé d'Ars. He fought the devil wherever he

could find him, but above all in the souls where the Evil One reigns through the slavery of sin. He pursued him, too, into the darkness where he flees from prying eyes by condemning occultism, spiritualism and table turning, all activities which, if they are not outright fraud, fall into the field of forbidden things. The Curé d'Ars forbade them then as the Church condemns them today.¹

As the years went by, these diabolic visitations became less frequent and less tormenting. In the final months of his life, the Abbé Vianney at last came to know peace.

¹ By a decision of April 24, 1917, which clarifies the condemnation issued on August 4, 1856—three years to a day before the death of the Curé d'Ars—the tribunal of the Holy Office forbids any Catholic 'to participate, whether with or without the aid of a medium, in spiritualist seances or activities, even if they present an appearance of being honest and reverent, whether the activity consist in interrogating souls or spirits, or in listening to the answers given, or in merely observing what is going on, notwithstanding that those present protest tacitly or expressly that they want to have no kind of relation with evil spirits'. It will be seen that this condemnation is absolute, and admits of no kind of exception.

XII

THE CROWDS COME TO ARS

THERE were certain singular happenings in his life which the Abbé Vianney always did his best to keep dark. All the same, at moments when affection broke down his reserve he would relax into a confidence. It was at such a moment that, telling the story of his arrival in the parish on the evening of February 9, 1818, he admitted: 'When I saw Ars for the first time, I said to myself: "How small it is!" Then quite suddenly the idea occurred to me: "There will come a time when this parish will not be able to hold the crowds who visit it."'

This supernatural presentiment was to come true a matter of ten years later. In 1827 the young Countess Laure des Garets, who went every evening to benediction during the octave of Corpus Christi, wrote to her father, M. du Colombier: 'The church is full of worshippers, among whom there are a great number of visitors.' The pilgrimage had begun, and it was to gather way continuously right up to the Abbé Vianney's death.

It may be asked what all these visitors were doing. They were not sightseers in the ordinary sense of the word, or even tourists, a species then comparatively rare. These people really had come on pilgrimage, in the hope of seeing a saint. Most of them wanted to make their confessions to him and to receive Holy Communion from his hands, for already the whisper

was beginning to get about that the Curé d'Ars worked miracles.

It was true. To begin with he had worked miracles of conversion: the inhabitants of Ars were not only witnesses of his power, but a living proof of it. Other living proofs were to be found in parish after parish round about which the Abbé Vianney had evangelized in the course of a mission, a series of lenten sermons or a jubilee: the parish priests of Villefranche-sur-Saône and Limas in the department of the Rhone and of Trévoux, Montmerle, Chaneins, Saint Trivier, Saint Bernard, Savigneux and Mizérieux in the Ain had one after the other seen for themselves the supernatural power for good of their colleague from Ars. The faithful of these parishes were even more enthusiastic about the Curé d'Ars than their clergy. Many were determined to pay another visit to the man who had shown them the light so clearly and who had given them such penetrating advice, whether from the pulpit or in the confessional. They flocked into the village, and people even came from Ecully and Dardilly, so profound was the impression that the Abbé Vianney had left there. From 1827 on, an inhabitant of Ars said, visitors were arriving in the village at the rate of twenty a day.

Then the stories of miracles started to spread among the villagers and their guests. The pilgrims would go to the house of Providence to see the kneading-trough where the flour had been miraculously multiplied: sick people would have mixed with the crowd that surrounded the Abbé Vianney and there would be talk of improvements and amazing cures which could be due to nothing but his intercession. It was in vain for the servant of God to impose silence on those who

found themselves cured after having solicited his prayers.

He was much too humble not to become alarmed at the turn in events. While he was still an assistant priest at Ecully he had begun to invoke the aid of the young saint of the catacombs of whose discovery and whose miracles Mlle Pauline Jaricot had told him. Since 1805 there had been no end to the wonders that had taken place in front of the bones of the little martyr, which had been removed from Rome to Naples and from Naples to Mugnano. It was to this young saint that the Abbé Vianney prayed with most assurance—after the Blessed Virgin, it is true—when he wanted to obtain some favour that had been asked of him. It therefore came quite naturally to him to attribute to St Philomena the miraculous events that took place at Ars, and by doing so he hoped he might be left in peace again.

The cult of St Philomena was as popular in France as in Italy in the nineteenth century, and if this unobtrusive star has grown paler in the sky since then, it is because others have risen which have drawn more attention. But in the time of the Abbé Vianney, and, indeed, thanks to him, the Roman martyr was venerated all over France. The Curé d'Ars called her his 'dear little saint', his 'consul', his 'chargé d'affaires at the court of God'. Hardly a day passed without him talking of her: 'You ask her,' he would reply when someone asked him for a miracle.

He communicated something of the fervour of his confidence to his congregation and to the pilgrims who came to Ars. No sooner was the cult of the little saint authorized by Pope Gregory XVI than he hastened to open a chapel dedicated to her at the side of his

church. More people went to it than to any other, and it was there that the greatest number of cures took place.

It was the saint first of all, however, that the crowds came to see. They may have thought of him as the worker of miracles, but over and above that they sought in him the confessor, the director of consciences, the adviser and the comforter. From 1829 on, there were very few hours of the day when the Abbé Vianney was able to leave his confessional: all the rest of his time he was the prey, it might almost be said the victim, of sinners. Though he retained the title of curé and took as keen an interest as ever in the parish he loved so much—it was not till 1843 that the authorities sent him an assistant—he gave himself with both hands to an enormous task, of which the whole Church enjoyed the fruits.

That, then, was to be his vocation for the rest of his life: to shut himself up in a narrow box, to remain seated hour after hour on the rough wooden seat and to listen, listen, listen once again to the voices that accused themselves of every sin under the sun: then to turn the souls to the light and to call down on them in endless succession the divine pardon. He could never have remained faithful to this beneficent and terrible vocation had it not been for a special grace, which his own indomitable enthusiasm and energy went out to meet. Sometimes this prisoner of sinners would be traversed by a wave of natural revolt: his lungs would cry out for air, his eyes for a sight of the blue sky, all his being for a little freedom and happiness, solitude and rest. He found the strength to submit these more than human moments of rebellion to the orders of providence. The

sinner had come in their crowds to find him: it was for him to chain himself there and wait for the sinners.

From 1830 to 1859 a daily average of some 400 travellers arrived at Ars. The distance from Lyons to Ars is no more than twenty-three miles, but the return tickets for Ars delivered at Perrache station—by railway and connecting coach—were valid for a week. The railway administration rightly judged that it would be impossible for a traveller to reach his turn to see the Abbé Vianney and start on his return journey in less than that time. But the railways were not the only carriers involved in the pilgrimage: a whole service of coaches sprang into being round Ars. According to a report prepared in 1855 by the sub-prefect of Trévoux, 'two omnibuses were daily plying from Lyons to Ars; two others made a connection twice a day with the Paris-Lyons railway at Villefranche station and a fifth omnibus, which ran from Villars to Villefranche, made a regular stop at the place of the pilgrimage.' And that is taking no account of the private carriages, the travellers who arrived by boat down the Saône and the scores of pilgrims who, impelled by their devotion or inspired by a spirit of penitence, preferred to come on their feet, however long the road they had to tread.

And all this commotion and bustle, in the heart of the nineteenth century, just to fall at the knees of a humble priest in an obscure little country parish . . . 120,000 souls, maybe 130,000, drawn there every year by a special grace of God. 'Monsieur le Curé', Catherine Lassagne once observed naïvely to the Abbé, 'other missionaries go out and hunt sinners, even in far-away countries, but with you it's the sinners who do the hunting.' And the saint, who could not deny the facts, was forced to reply: 'There's something in that, too.'

For M. Jean Félix des Garets, a brother of the mayor of Ars,¹ was speaking no more than the truth when he said that 'the immense majority of the visitors made their visit at the bidding of faith, devotion or repentance, and if a few mere sightseers were mingled with the crowd, it was nothing out of the ordinary for the most indifferent to be won to God by a gesture, a look or a tear of the venerable Curé. People of all ages and of every station,' M. des Garets went on, 'were to be found in this multitude, bishops and priests, monks and nuns, nobility and commoners, scholars and illiterates, the former accustomed to discuss the weightiest problems, the latter brought to Ars by nothing but the simplicity of their faith. Among the latter I have seen entire families of peasants arriving in farm-carts from provinces as far away as the mountains of the Auvergne, merely to see the servant of God and to worship in the Ars church.'

The crowd was no mob, noisy and bent on its pleasures. The very village of Ars had become a sort of shrine. When those on foot reached the crest of the hill from which the church becomes visible, most of them stopped and many of them flung themselves on their knees and prayed. In the inside and on the upper deck of the clumsy coaches, a sudden silence fell on men and women, and faces became intent. The whole length of the route, there had been only one subject of conversation between the travellers, or rather the pilgrims: the saint.

And now they were going to see him, to hear him, to talk to him. Was 'talk' the word? Their hope was

¹ In the whole of the Abbé Vianney's forty-one years of ministry at Ars, there were only three mayors at the head of the commune: MM. Antoine Mandy, Michel Sève and Count Claude Prosper des Garets.

to throw their whole soul into his and to receive from his lips the answer that would transform the present and illuminate the future. So there were few indeed whose first concern when they arrived in the village was to book a room; they turned their steps at once to the ascent of the incline that leads to the church, if indeed it was possible to get there. A Paris journalist who made the pilgrimage in March 1859 found 'visitors standing, in great numbers, in the old churchyard and even in the adjoining streets, waiting their turn'. All he could do was to take his place in the queue and to move forward, at snail's pace, to the steps before the west door.

Many of the pilgrims must have heaved a sigh of relief when at last they entered the church, but their wait was not over yet. The nave, the side chapels, even the choir, everything would be packed. The saint sometimes heard confessions in the chapel of St John the Baptist, sometimes in the sacristy, sometimes behind the high altar. From time to time his slender form could be seen gliding by, always clad in white—for it was only when he undressed for bed that he took off the surplice he put on in the morning to go to the confessional. At such moments there would be a stir in the church: men and women would rise spontaneously. But they would have long hours yet before them to tell their beads, to turn over again and again their sins in their memory, before they went on their knees before the man of God.

Generally speaking women, of whom there would be more than men, would have to wait two or three days: the Abbé Vianney would confess them in the chapel of St John the Baptist. If they did not want to lose their turn, they would either have to pay place-holders or to

spend the night hours in the belfry porch and the hours of the day in the church: it was only at mealtimes that they could keep their places by getting a numbered card. A man who wanted to confess to the saint in the evening would have to arrive early in the morning. No exceptions were made, except for the sick and for people for whom it was materially impossible to wait: the Curé d'Ars had a supernatural intuition which enabled him to detect them, and he would often go and pick them out of the crowd himself.

The village cafés, which had not been able to hold out against the Abbé Vianney's denunciations, had been replaced by modest hostelries: there was the Hôtel Pertinand—today the Hôtel de la Basilique—the Hôtel Blanc, the Hôtel Robert, the Hôtel de la Croix, the Hôtel Notre Dame des Graces . . . It was possible to live there for a reasonable sum, for the proprietors did not hold the pilgrims to ransom. Pilgrims also boarded with private families. One day in 1858 a canon who had vainly sought a bed in all the hotels, and at a number of private homes too, was overjoyed to end up by finding accommodation in the little house of the sisters Ricotier, who kept a small shop for devotional articles not far from Providence. They supplied him with board and lodging for 2 francs 50 a day, and 'I got good value for my money', he used to say with a smile. Even in the chilly nights of May, there would be as many as fifty or sixty pilgrims camping out all night in the fields round the village for lack of shelter. In August and September even greater numbers would spend their nights in this way, waiting for the church doors to open.

XIII

MASS AND CATECHISM CLASSES

IF the Abbé Vianney had spent his entire life in the confessional, a parishioner who was also a friend said, 'he would have been busy the whole time.' The Curé was well aware of it, and if he had any illusions at the beginning, they were very soon dissipated. It did happen on an occasional evening, before the pilgrimage had reached its full flood, that he would find his church almost empty and his confessional with no more penitents. But if he had told himself that he had at last got a little breathing-space, it was only to find on the morrow that more pilgrims had arrived during the night and that there were as many penitents besieging the confessional as ever. The Abbé Vianney, indeed, no longer belonged to himself, but to his mission of pardon. All the same he had to find some time for his offices, his prayers, his meals and his sleep. Here, according to M. Pierre Oriol, a witness who lived in retirement in the village, is his daily timetable during the pilgrimage.

'At one in the morning, sometimes even at midnight, he would go to the church to hear the confessions of the crowds of pilgrims who would be waiting for him. He would go on hearing confessions till six or seven in the morning.

'Then, after having made his preparation before the high altar, he would say Mass.

'Next he would bless the devotional objects which

people had brought for the purpose and would address a few words of comfort to people who had managed to get near him.

‘After giving thanks, he would return to the confessional, where he would stay till 10.30.

‘At 10.30 he would recite his breviary.

‘At eleven o’clock he would give his catechism class.

‘That would still leave him time to confess a few people who could not wait any longer, after which he would go and eat his modest meal, snatch a few moments of rest, and go to Providence to visit the sick.

‘Coming back to the church, he would recite his office, and would then confess women till about four o’clock and afterwards men till half past seven or eight.

‘He would leave the confessional for the pulpit to recite the rosary of the Immaculate Conception and to lead evening prayers, after which he would go back to the presbytery, where there would still be a few men, priests or laymen, to see.

‘Only then did he shut himself up alone in his room. What he did with his night I don’t know, but I believe he spent most of that, too, in prayer. Indeed, in addition to reading the lives of the saints, he had still his matins and lauds to recite from his breviary.

‘The next day he would begin all over again, and he observed the same time-table all the time I knew him. He confided in me one day that during the forty years he had lived in the parish up till then, he had never had as much as half a day to himself.’

To spend every day like this, with the supernatural desire that it should go on as long as God would have it, ‘till the end of the world’ if such was the divine will, was a sublime and terrifying programme, the rule of

life of a hero and a saint. The day it provided for was a day almost entirely devoted, it might be thought, to an active ministry, to the apostolate of souls, but it was at the same time and in just as real a sense the day of a mystic and a contemplative. To be convinced of this it is only necessary to study the Curé d'Ars in his discharge of three essential functions of a priest: the celebration of mass, preaching and the direction of consciences.

The profundity of his religious feeling and the respect with which he surrounded the divine office have already been seen: he was content with an earthen bowl for his own meals, but for the celebration of the Mass he would have liked a chalice of solid gold. His own clothes were so patched and mended that it was impossible to tell which was patch and which the original cloth, but when he went to the Lyons embroiderers and cloth of gold dealers, from the earliest days of his ministry on, it was always the most splendid vestments that he chose. One day in 1825 he went to the town with his benefactress, the venerable Mlle des Garets d'Ars. At each fresh vestment he was shown, he said: 'It's not good enough. You must find something better than that.' Another day his sacristan, Brother Jérôme of the Holy Family of Belley, told him that the alb he was putting on hid a much less satisfactory garment. The Curé replied with complete seriousness: 'There's nothing that goes better than an old cassock with a fine chasuble.'

The same Brother Jérôme often served his mass. 'I thought I was seeing another St Francis de Sales,' he testified at the canonization process. 'I found myself most deeply moved of all when, at the moment of

consecration or of communion, I would see on his face an indefinable expression of faith, of devotion, of love and of joy which seemed to be consuming him. That was the moment I loved to see him.'

The Abbé Vianney never took more than half an hour, the normal time, to say his mass—'neither too long nor too hasty', as Brother Jérôme remarked. But his manner of saying it was unforgettable. Lost completely in God, he seemed to belong no longer to this world, yet the casual glance saw nothing extraordinary, just the familiar gestures performed by a devout and recollected priest. 'I have heard him say,' Catherine Lassagne reports, '“I'm not glad to have the responsibility of a parish because of my limited capacities and the judgment I shall have to undergo for it, but I am glad to be a priest, because it enables me to say Mass”.'

At the altar he felt himself invaded by comfort and consolation; a joy that is not of this world shone in his eyes, which would soon be full of tears. 'I've several times seen him weeping while he was saying Mass,' reported an inhabitant of Ars, Guillaume Villier. 'There was such a fire shining in his gaze that you would have said he could see God.' Naturally, people tried to watch him while he was celebrating. 'If you want to learn to follow the Mass well,' an inhabitant of Ars advised the Baronne de Belvey, 'get a place that will permit you to see our Curé at the altar.' More than once this simple sight of itself was enough to convert a sinner. It is easy to imagine how fervent was the Curé's thanksgiving after a Mass celebrated with such devotion. The heart-to-heart communication between the Master and the servant went on. The Abbé Vianney had drawn a draught of unspeakable

happiness, of courage and of heroism that would last him all the length of the day.

At eleven o'clock every weekday the church was the scene of an exercise which drew big crowds, and which continued up to the Curé's death to be called 'the catechism class', though in fact it was a sermon, as engaging as it was extraordinary. Visitors who could not stay on long enough in the village to get to the Abbé Vianney in his confessional would not leave before having heard at least one of his catechism classes, and the time-tables of the coaches were fixed with this in mind.

The visitor who had managed to get into the nave at the moment when the catechism class started would probably begin by being surprised that only the head and shoulders of the Abbé Vianney appeared above the packed and attentive congregation. For this familiar exercise the saint deserted the pulpit, which was reserved for Sunday and feast-day sermons, in favour of a sort of stall composed of a plank seat, an elbow-rest and a foot-rest, and with only a simple barrier rail separating the catechist from his hearers. Starting in 1845, the year when he enlarged the choir of his church to more than double its former size, he talked here every day to the assembled pilgrims. Before that date the procedure had been a little different, for the celebrated catechism classes of Ars had very humble origins.

In order to give the children of his Providence as full a religious education as possible, the Abbé Vianney had started the practice of talking to them every day in one of the rooms of the orphanage. These talks were treated as a completely family affair: the mistresses went on with their weaving and the chickens which

were pecking for their food in the courtyard came in or left by door or window as they pleased. Little by little, visitors began to join the Abbé Vianney's audience, and the priest did not send them away. The space was so restricted that the listeners were soon stretching right out into the street. Finally, it became necessary to find a larger room for the catechism classes, and the church was naturally chosen.

There is no difficulty in getting an idea of what the Curé d'Ars was like as a preacher. For ten years and more he forced himself to write all his sermons and to learn them by heart, and a great number of these Sunday homilies, which cost the young priest so much midnight oil, have been preserved. There are pages that are full of vigour, teaching that is full of practical sense, all the marks of an immense enthusiasm, but of the fire with which they were delivered there is not a trace. As for the catechism classes they defy mere pedestrian analysis. The entire vision of a soul shines through them in sudden flashes of lightning. By this time other masters than the Abbé Vianney were teaching the children their catechism; he had set himself the task of teaching it to the pilgrims, but there was hardly a moment when he was not straying from his strict subject or being led on far beyond it. An irresistible impulse was constantly bearing him on to speak of the Eucharist, of the love of God, of the ingratitude of sinners and of the tireless mercy which is stretching out its hands to them to the very end.

In his final years the saint's voice had worn out; it had become difficult for him to articulate words, and it was no more than cries that his congregation could hear. But the feeling he communicated in those cries: 'Unhappy sinners . . . God . . . the love of

God' was such that the breathless congregation wept as freely as its preacher.

An enchanting collection of notes taken during the Abbé Vianney's preaching—for in his last thirty years he always improvised—was published in 1864 by the Abbé Alfred Monnin under the title *L'Esprit du Curé d'Ars*. It is to this collection, so rich in sudden illuminations, that we must go to find the clearest expression of the Curé's thought, the flavour almost, of his sanctity. The simple and natural eloquence to be found in it recalls the gospels: it is full of pictures, of comparisons taken from daily life, of allusions to the country things that the Abbé Vianney knew so well. Then, suddenly, the saint seems to take wing, and we are with him among the mountain-tops. Here are some of his phrases through which we may, if we listen with an attentive ear, hope to catch perhaps an overtone of the voice which we would have given so much to listen to while he was alive.

ON CONFESSION AND INDULGENCES

My children, when we have a little stain on our souls we must do like a person who has a beautiful crystal globe of which she takes great care. If the globe gets a little dusty, when she sees it, she will pass a sponge over it, and there is the globe bright and shining again.

My children, it's like a person who is suffering from a slight illness. She has no need to go and see a doctor, she can get well alone. If she has got a headache, she has only to lie down; if she is hungry, she has only got to eat. But if it is a serious illness, if it is a dangerous wound, then the doctor must be called in, and after the doctor come the medicines. When we have fallen

into some grave sin, we must go to the doctor, who is the priest, and take the medicine which is confession.

We must thank God for all these indulgences which purge us of our sins. But we don't pay enough attention to them. You might almost say that we walk on indulgences, just as after the harvest we walk on the sheaves of wheat.

Our sins are nothing but a grain of sand alongside the great mountain of the mercies of God.

ON SUFFERING

You say it's hard? No, it's easy; it's comforting; it's happiness! . . . Only you've got to love while you're suffering and suffer while you're loving.

On the road to the cross, it's only the first few yards that hurt.

Souls who give themselves completely to God in their suffering feel an extraordinary contentment. Vinegar will always be vinegar, but oil softens its sharpness so that you scarcely taste it.

There was a little boy, quite near here, in one of the neighbouring parishes, who was lying in his bed a mass of sores, very sick and in great pain. I said to him: 'My poor boy, you must be suffering!' He replied: 'No, Monsieur le Curé, today I don't feel my pain of yesterday, and tomorrow I shan't feel my pain of today.' 'But surely you'd like to get well?' 'No, I was bad before I was ill and I might become bad again. I'm all right as I am.' There was vinegar there, sure enough, but the oil had drowned the taste of it . . . We don't understand that, because we're too earthly. Children in whom the Holy Spirit takes up His Home put us to shame.

The cross is the ladder to heaven.

The crosses we meet on the road to heaven are like a fine stone bridge on which you can cross a river. Christians who don't suffer cross this river on a shaky bridge that's always in danger of giving way under their feet.

Once they've been transformed in the flames of love, crosses are like a bundle of hawthorn that you throw on the fire and that the fire reduces to ashes. The hawthorn is thorny, but the ashes are soft.

Hawthorn exudes balm and the cross exudes sweetness. But you've got to press the thorns in your hands and clasp the cross to your heart if you want them to distil the essence they contain.

Put a good bunch of grapes under the wine-press, and a delicious juice will come out. Under the wine-press of the cross our soul produces a juice which feeds and strengthens it. When we haven't got any crosses, we are dry: if we carry them with resignation, what happiness, what sweetness we feel!

The cross is the gift God makes to his friends.

Contrarities bring us to the foot of the cross and the cross to the gate of heaven.

ON PRAYER

Prayer releases our soul from matter; it helps it to rise like the gas with which they fill balloons.

There's an irresistible contentment that comes with prayer . . . The more you pray, the more you want to pray . . . It's like a fish which starts by swimming near the surface of the water, then plunges and goes on swimming deeper and deeper. The soul plunges, is swallowed up, loses itself in the delights of conversation with God.

A man who doesn't pray is like a chicken or a turkey,

which can't rise into the air. They may fly a little, but they soon have to come down, they scratch the earth and get deeper and deeper in it, they cover their heads with it and they don't seem to take pleasure in anything else. The man who prays, on the other hand, is like a fearless eagle, and seems always to want to get closer to the sun. There you have a picture of the good Christian on the wings of prayer.

ON PRIESTS

When people want to destroy religion, they start by attacking priests, because where there are no priests there is no sacrifice, and where there is no sacrifice there is no religion.

After God the priest, that sums up everything. Leave a parish twenty years without a priest and they'll be worshipping the animals.

Priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus. When you see a priest, think of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

ON THE EUCHARIST

Without the Holy Eucharist there would be no happiness in this world, and life wouldn't be bearable. When we receive Holy Communion, we receive our joy and our happiness.

The man who communicates loses himself in God like a drop of water in the ocean: it's impossible to separate them any more. If you only thought of it, in these vast deeps of love, there's enough to lose yourself for eternity.

I don't like people who, when they leave the Holy Table, immediately start to read. That's not the way: what is the value of human words when it's God who is speaking? The proper way to behave is to imitate

someone who's got an irresistible curiosity and who listens at keyholes. You must listen to everything God says at the keyhole of your heart.

There's nothing so great, my children, as the Eucharist. If you were to put all the good actions in the world against a communion well made, it would be like a grain of dust against a mountain.

How happy are the pure souls who are fortunate enough to unite themselves to Our Lord in communion. They will shine in heaven like diamonds of the finest water, because God will see Himself in them.

XIV

IN THE CONFESSIONAL

EVEN in the months between November and March the Curé spent eleven or twelve hours a day in the confessional; when the fine weather returned it would be fifteen, sixteen or even eighteen hours. It has been calculated that from 1830, when the Ars pilgrimage was already drawing crowds that were never to stop arriving, to 1859, the date of his death, the time spent by the Abbé Vianney hearing confessions must have reached a total of eighteen years. It might be irreverent, but it would be strictly accurate to use of him the sporting phrase, and say that the Curé d'Ars as a confessor beat all the records. In the course of his life he accomplished single-handed what five or six priests together would not have been able to do, and as the Abbé Raymond, who was for eight years his assistant, observed, his labours in the sacred tribunal alone were sufficient to win him canonization. It is, indeed, impossible to weigh up the sum of sacrifices and the degree of heroism that this voluntary imprisonment in a confessional must have demanded from a weak human nature which, even in a saint, has its moments of rebellion and its dreams of freedom and of rest.

And it was not as if the Abbé Vianney did nothing but shut himself up there; the conversion of sinners called for an evenness of temper, a warmth of welcome to penitents, a clarity and a soundness in the advice

given to them and the capacity to communicate the ardour of a heart burning with the love of God. The Curé d'Ars possessed all these qualities, and for thirty years he was to exert them to the uttermost.

Not a single penitent did he ever rebuff or turn away. It is true he did sometimes ask certain pilgrims to retire, but that was only because he felt them to be worthy of communicating without confession. He paid the same attention to the confessions of a child as to those of an old man. He granted every soul the minutes necessary for it, never worrying whether there were many or few penitents waiting, never listening to the voice of his own fatigue.

Generally speaking, except where he had to hear a general confession or comfort someone suffering from a great sorrow, his questions were brief and his advice short. Every one of his words counted. If he were confronted with a point of conscience, even of the most complicated character, he would find the solution immediately. Should a penitent make excuses for himself over a sin, he would cut him short by interposing: 'That's not allowed.' If a pilgrim were to dilate on the difficulties he met with in the practice of certain virtues, he would often content himself with answering: 'Save your poor soul!' When a man or a woman accused themselves of grave sins, he would say with a sigh: 'What a pity that is!' These comments may sound not only simple, but trite, but they were made in a tone of such supplication or such sorrow that no one could resist them. A single word from the Curé d'Ars was of far more effect than a whole course of the most brilliant and incisive sermons.

Sometimes also, it must be admitted, he found himself confronted with a certain sort of refusal, of rebellion

or of silence. He had put his finger on the sore spot, and the patient refused to be cured. The saint could envisage already the final consequences of this voluntary blindness, and at such moments he would hurl in the face of the recalcitrant the terrible phrase: 'You are damned!' Sometimes the effect of this threat was immediate: the penitent would search his heart and, seeing hell yawning before him, would come back to the feet of the priest to implore his pardon and pledge himself to a changed life. That is what happened to a man of thirty-five who lived in the parish of Villebois, in the Ain department. Just before he came to Ars, he had refused to take part in the exercises of a mission, but he must have been haunted by remorse, for he had a remnant of faith, and one day in 1856 he presented himself at the Abbé Vianney's confessional. Apparently, he obstinately declined to take some piece of advice from the saint; whatever happened, as the grille shut down before him he heard these final words, which froze him with terror: 'My good fellow, you are damned!'

'I, damned . . . I, accursed of God . . . for ever and ever', the man from Villebois repeated to himself as he left the confessional. He had been touched by grace, however, and he came back as many as six times during his stay in the village and made a general confession. The last time he saw the saint, François Bourdin, for that was his name, received an unheard-of privilege. He had just arrived to take his place in the confessional in the sacristy when, as he was about to go in, he found the Abbé Vianney standing and talking to a lady who was also on her feet. This lady, whose face was of an incomparable beauty, was dressed in blue, and as François Bourdin entered she fixed her

eyes on him with a look of infinite goodness. The penitent did not, in fact, need to confess this time; he had received absolution the day before and was only coming back for some final counsels. Through his return, however, he was tasting the joy of being present at an apparition of the Blessed Virgin. When the mysterious conversation ended and the vision vanished, the Curé did not trouble to sit down. He contented himself with saying: 'Go, my dear fellow, go in peace! You are certainly in a state of grace with God.'

Not all the sinners, of course, before whom the Curé d'Ars held out the prospect of hell surrendered on the spot. Perhaps there were among them some who refused conversion to the very end: that is God's secret. In any case, many of them, once they were back home again, started to think and other priests reaped the repentance that the saint had sown. Many people again, even after their conversion, retained a feeling of terror for the threat they had heard on that one occasion, and they would admit that this inner fear had preserved them from relapses. There were others who believed that the Abbé Vianney had regarded them as accursed, however changed their lives; there was little difficulty in persuading them that it was just that transformation in their conduct that the Curé d'Ars had in mind, and that he had chosen to bring them to it by fear because he knew that love would only come afterwards.

However that may be, the saint neglected no weapon in his war on sin. Sometimes he might use that marvellous gift of intuition which allowed him to read a man's heart like an open book; sometimes it would be his goodness and his tireless enthusiasm that he

employed to bring to the lips of penitents evil actions they thought they would never dare utter, but every day he knew the joy of winning at least some souls for God. 'I asked him once,' said Count Prosper des Garets, 'how many grave sinners he had converted during the year. "More than seven hundred," he replied. It was, indeed, the hope that the following day would bring one or two "big fish" into the net of the divine mercy that helped to make the devil's violence endurable. The Curé would sometimes openly twit the Evil One on his lack of guile. "Old Snatch is a very stupid fellow," he told one of his parishioners. "Why, it's he himself who warns me when there are grave sinners on the way."'

It was above all for the grave sinners, the 'unhappy sinners' that the Curé d'Ars was waiting. In the uninterrupted queue of men and women penitents who waited before his confessional there were, indeed, very many who had come there only for advice and for spiritual direction, for the few phrases which would help them find their way towards a loftier life, but hidden in the patient ranks there were also souls who had a heavy burden of guilt to carry. When they drew near, the saint, it seemed, felt something of the tremor of Jesus before the approach of Mary Magdalen or of the woman of Samaria, and his heart, too, filled with a divine pity. Time and again it sufficed for him to burst into sobs to open to repentance hardened hearts which, till then, neither the tears nor the prayers of a wife had softened. 'One thing I can tell you for certain,' a magistrate who had been through the saving experience said to some priests, 'the Curé d'Ars weeps . . . and you weep with him.' 'Converts of the Curé d'Ars have admitted to me,' a missionary said,

'that what had impressed them most was to see the saint in tears over their sins.'

Once the sinners had been restored to a state of grace, it remained to make sure that they would persevere. Here the Abbé Vianney broke no new ground; he did what any real spiritual director ought to do and told the penitent to do away with the obstacle that stood in the way of his salvation or the purification of his soul. In this delicate task, however, his deep knowledge and long experience of the human heart had given him a mastery that was all his own. Often enough, by a veritable miracle of intuition, the gaze of the servant of God would penetrate right to the root of the evil, whether it were a wicked passion to be bridled or an occasion of wrong-doing to be shunned, without the penitent having pronounced a word, and then it was easy for him to point out the remedy.

He never indulged, however, in any kind of circumlocution, since he believed that no sort of compromise is possible between virtue and sin. Because of this, more than one penitent found him very severe, but, in fact, the Curé d'Ars was doing no more than apply the great principle of gospel morality: If thine eye is an occasion of falling to thee, pluck it out. A few examples will show how he set to work.

A Paris society woman who was living a loose life had stopped at Ars, not for anything so simple-minded as a confession, of course, but because she had heard speak of the Abbé Vianney as being an exceptional man whose advice was very far-seeing. She had no need to go to the confessional, however, for the saint, who ran into her on the square, went straight up to her

and reproached her with a malicious thought she had had about him only that morning; she had seen pilgrims presenting the Curé with alms for his charities and had said to herself: 'One more priest who's on the make.' The saint gave her a thorough dressing-down, and all she could do was to stammer: 'Monsieur le Curé, will you hear my confession?'

'It would be waste of time for you to confess,' the Abbé Vianney replied. 'I can read your soul, and I can see that there are two devils who hold it prisoner, a devil of pride and a devil of impurity. I can only give you absolution on condition you don't return to Paris, and knowing the way your mind is working, I know you will return there . . . You will go right down to the lowest depths of evil.'

'But I'm incapable of committing such abominations,' the woman protested . . . 'Then I'm damned?'

'I never said that, but how hard it is going to be for you at this stage to save yourself!'

'What must I do, then?'

'Come tomorrow morning and I'll tell you.'

The next day, by a special favour, she was admitted into the confessional.

'If you want to save your unhappy soul,' the Abbé Vianney told her, 'you must carry out such and such mortifications.'

The moral régime the saint had laid down for the society woman was an exacting one. When she got back to Paris, she could not bring herself to start it, she fell into sin again and she was soon wallowing in the very ignominies of which she had thought herself incapable. During a stay at the seaside, she was seized by a sudden panic at her abject life, and she went to a priest and confessed everything, both her crimes

and the advice she had once received about them from the lips of the saint.

‘You must follow that advice, cost what may,’ the priest told her. ‘I in my turn order you to do so.’

She obeyed: the effort was unspeakably repugnant to her at first, but she had the strength to persevere. God blessed her endeavours, and the remedies prescribed by the Curé d’Ars cured this unhappy woman so successfully, ‘the inclinations of her heart and her mind were so radically changed that she was at a loss to understand how she had once been able to take pleasure in things which now inspired only horror in her’.

Another Paris woman who had gone to the Curé d’Ars and had accused herself of licentious reading was told that, if she wanted to receive absolution, she must eliminate the occasion of the sin once for all; in other words, she must burn all the lascivious books in her library and make up her mind, naturally, never to buy any more.

A writer, who had also accused himself of sins concerning his past reading, declared to the Curé d’Ars that he thought for the future he had nothing to fear from this temptation. But that had not ended the story for the servant of God. ‘Will you please tell me what books you’ve got at home?’ he asked, and the writer named a few.

‘Well,’ the Abbé Vianney went on, ‘you will destroy this one . . . and that . . . and the other,’ without making a single mistake about the moral value of the books, of whose very titles he had certainly never heard before they were repeated to him in the confessional.

Another man, a drunkard, was forbidden, if he

wanted to make a real repentance, not only to go to his habitual café, but even to pass it, for all it meant going a long way out of his way. A young man who found dances an occasion of grave sin was not only prohibited from going to them, but even from attending a wedding party. Two artists, one a musician and the other a writer of comedies, had been responsible for works which offended against morality; the Curé told them to 'go back by another way and not return to Herod', a delicate way of bringing home to them that they must seek their inspiration rather higher. All these were methods, as the old-time catechisms would say, of endowing a firm resolution with efficacy and constancy.

There are obstacles to conversion, but there are obstacles to perfection, too. The Abbé Vianney employed the same methods for bringing sinners back to God and for urging souls that were already Christian onwards to the heights: thus with a man penitent he would attack fear of public opinion, with a woman vanity. He advised fasting and the discipline to one of his colleagues in the priesthood who was in charge of a parish where the church-goers were few; another, whose earnestness was threatened by the pursuit of amusements, he ordered never even to touch a pack of cards. And people obeyed him, so strong was his ascendancy over souls, so deep the impression made by the contact with sanctity.

He drew the attention of the devout to the way their minds wandered when they were praying; he wanted them to come out of themselves more, to leave the security of their little routine and their treasured little habits where so much egoism can lie hidden. He pushed them into the parish charities, into Catholic

action and lay apostleship. He had small liking for those nursery-talk devotions that furnish so little food for real religious feeling. He preached the great traditional devotions, as few in number as they are sanctifying in effect for those who use them well: the Eucharist—Mass, communion and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament—the stations of the Cross and meditation on the sufferings of Our Lord, and the filial cult of the Blessed Virgin, ‘the door to heaven . . . better than the best of mothers . . . who, if hell could only repent, would win its pardon for it’.

XV

THE LAST TWENTY YEARS

I. THE ATTEMPTS AT FLIGHT

THE life of a priest which has been spent almost entirely in the confessional can hardly be expected to number many startling events. From 1830 on, the existence of the Curé d'Ars was one of a sublime and crucifying monotony. At intervals over the years, however, there are one or two facts that stand out.

It seemed a settled thing now that he was never to leave his parish again. In the year 1835 he went once more to the diocesan seminary to take part with his colleagues in the exercises of the annual retreat. Mgr Devie made him go back to Ars before the exercises had even started. 'They need you too much there,' the Bishop of Belley told him, 'and, as for you, you stand in no need of a retreat.' Indeed, the saint felt he needed one: his heart thirsted for those few hours of recollection and of solitude. It was of no avail, the favour was refused him. Without a word of protest, without a single phrase that would have betrayed his disappointment, the Abbé Vianney humbly obeyed his orders. He went back and once more shut himself up in his confessional.

Five years went by, with never a day or even an hour he could call his own. The Curé d'Ars could not refrain sometimes from giving expression to the feelings that haunted him and that were becoming an obsession,

a real martyrdom. His responsibilities as priest in charge of a parish, as confessor of such a host of souls, appalled him. 'It isn't the work I'm afraid of,' he lamented before some priests who were trying to raise his spirits, 'it is the account I shall have to give of my life as a curé.' A little while before his death he was heard to say with a sigh: 'You don't know what it is to go from a curé of souls to the judgment seat of God.' He wanted to go away and 'hide himself in some obscure corner where he could weep for his poor life'.

'Oh, if I could do that,' he added, 'how I would love God.' For that was all he wanted: he thought that though he was working, as he was, only for God, he did not love Him enough because he had not the time to tell Him of his love at every other moment. It is an astonishing picture: here was a saint, the Curé d'Ars, who had given himself up body and soul, like St Paul, to the grace of God, who was wearing himself out in the labours of his amazing apostleship, and yet who felt that the only thing that could ensure his salvation was to leave Ars. It was, of course, as events were to prove, an illusion, perhaps even, let us not shirk the word, a temptation; in any case it was a horribly distressing trial. But God permits such things in the lives of His saints.

More than once the Abbé Vianney asked Mgr Devie's permission to retire into a monastery: sometimes he suggested a Trappist house, sometimes a Carthusian. Mgr Devie refused. 'God gives me almost everything I ask, except when I pray for myself,' the Curé admitted ingenuously to the headmistress of his Providence.

'That's only because you ask God to take you away

from Ars and God doesn't want it,' Mlle Catherine replied.

In any event, one fine day—or rather one fine night—in 1840, the Abbé Vianney made up his mind in earnest to retire. He put a letter in the post asking the bishop for an *exeat*, which he can hardly have hoped for, and then, about two o'clock in the morning, he set out on the Villefranche-sur-Saône road. It seems that he had it in mind to seek admission to the Trappist monastery of St Lieu, at Septfons, where Benoît Joseph Labre, the holy mendicant whom his grandfather, Pierre Vianney, had put up seventy years before at the Dardilly farm, had left the memory of his wonderful character. The saint set off at a brisk pace; nobody gave the alarm and there was no obstacle on the road. Quite suddenly, however, after he had gone about three-quarters of a mile, the fugitive stopped. At the point where he came to a halt stands the humble cross of Les Combes, which marks the boundary of the commune of Ars. 'Is what I am doing now really the work of God?' he asked himself. 'Isn't the conversion of a single soul worth more than all the prayers I could say in solitude?'

Resigned and reassured, he retraced his steps in the direction of the church, which he entered a little later than his usual hour of arrival. None of the penitents who were waiting their turn can have had the ghost of a suspicion of the poignant conflict which had just been tearing this little priest, to all outward appearance so tranquil, who had already taken his place in the confessional where he was beginning his eighteen-hour day.

But the obsession woke to life again on the occasion of a serious illness in May 1843. The Abbé Vianney

was carrying out his crushing sacerdotal task single-handed, he was worn out with overwork that might well have knocked him up long before, and one evening when he was preaching the Month of Mary, he collapsed in the pulpit. He was carried to his room; doctors diagnosed bronchial pneumonia, and for nine days he hovered between life and death. While a priest, who was one of his friends, was celebrating the first of a hundred Masses which he had himself vowed to St Philomena, quite suddenly he said he was cured.

His convalescence, however, was a long one, and while he was regaining his strength, the ideas that had harried him before returned. On May 27 the Count des Garets paid a call on him. He found him in his room, sitting on his exiguous bed, and the saint's eyes were filled with tears.

'Why, what's the matter?' the Count asked.

'Nobody has any idea of the quantity of tears I have shed on this little bed,' the Abbé Vianney replied. 'Ever since I was eleven, I've wanted solitude, and it's always been refused me.'

And the story began to spread in the chateau and then in the village of Ars that the Curé wanted to leave his parish. 'It's no use our hiding from ourselves the fact that the holy man believes he has come to the end of his labours,' the Countess des Garets wrote to her father, M. du Colombier. 'He had promised himself: "I'll go on till I drop", and now he has dropped. If he prayed for his life, it was for himself, in order that he might have time to prepare for death in silence and in solitude.'

It is certain that after such a shock the Abbé Vianney was in need of rest. His doctor, Dr Saunier, recom-

mended a change of air; his bishop, Mgr Devie, advised him to take at least the fifteen days of holidays then authorised by the diocesan regulations, and more if it was necessary. The Curé d'Ars did not contradict them, but the longing to leave the parish once for all was stronger than any other sentiment. He made up his mind to go.

On Monday, September 11, he gave his neighbour, the curé of Savigneux, a letter for Mgr Devie, and when midnight struck he set off. This time once again he set out down the road alone, with a bundle in his hand, and took the route that leads by a footbridge over the stream to the main Lyons road. Someone, however, had detected him slipping out into the dark, and a young man of Ars overtook him, not to stop him but to carry his baggage and to accompany him to the end of his journey. They recited rosary after rosary on their way and finally in the evening, after they had walked nearly twenty miles, they arrived at Dardilly. The Abbé Vianney, who was deeply moved, went back at once to his old home.

But he had reckoned without the pilgrims. Hot on his heels, they began to arrive by the score. His young travelling companion had given him away, and they demanded that the saint should resume his confessions in the Dardilly church. Just at this moment the curé of Savigneux appeared, with the bishop's reply. There was no question, it said, of the Abbé Vianney leaving the diocese of Belley; however, if it should be agreeable to him, Mgr Devie was willing to offer him charge of the pilgrimage of Our Lady of Beaumont, down among the marshes of the Dombes.

He went there, celebrated Mass, and when he had finished giving thanks, he announced firmly to the

curé of Savigneux that he had made up his mind. 'Let's go back to Ars,' he said.

The jubilation in the village when the bells pealed out for the return of its beloved priest was unimaginable. 'The crowd of pilgrims has melted away,' the Countess des Garets had written to her father six days before. 'The church is almost deserted. Here and there a few unhappy women are praying in front of a lighted candle. I can't tell you the sadness that fills one's heart at the spectacle of such an utter change. It is a real transformation from life to death.' That dazzling afternoon of September 19, 1843, on the contrary, saw a transformation from death to life. 'You can't begin to imagine how happy people were,' Mlle Catherine Lassagne reported. 'There wasn't a soul who didn't hurry down to have a sight of the man they had lost for eight long days; the very threshers flocked in from the barns in their working clothes.'

Never can a man or a parish priest have inspired such affection and loyalty. Maybe it was only at long intervals that these good folk of Ars saw their Curé to speak to, but nothing could quench their pride in him and their love for him. Leaning on his walking-stick, the Abbé Vianney made the round of the square, going from one parishioner to another, blessing, weeping, hardly able to articulate the few affectionate words he pronounced. 'Everything was lost, was it then?' he said. 'Well, it's all found again now. I'll never leave you any more, my children . . . I'll never leave you any more.'

'There we had our saint returned to our affection, then,' Catherine Lassagne observes. 'He had a few days of rest after it, for the crowd of pilgrims had dis-

persed during his absence and he took up his ordinary duties among us. As soon as the news was known, penitents started arriving from every direction, and he resumed his life.' It is already clear enough what these last words meant: he returned to his confessional.

'I'll never leave you any more,' he had promised, but he had not bound himself for ever. Ten years almost to the day after his promise, he came near breaking it; the human heart, even if it beats in a breast full of the love of God, cannot escape its conflicts and its moments of weakness.

The stern Mgr Devie, who would never listen to the Curé, had died: his successor in the see of Belley, Mgr Chalandon, might well prove more accommodating. A dream—for it had started as no more than a beautiful dream—had been haunting the Abbé Vianney's mind. One of his former fellow-pupils in the seminary who had remained one of his greatest friends was the Abbé Jean Claude Colin, founder of the Society of Marists, and he had just added on to his house at La Neylière, in the Rhone department, a sort of modified Trappist monastery. Here priests and lay brothers were to spend their days and a part of their nights, too, in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and as soon as the Curé d'Ars heard the news his heart leapt. What would he not give to finish in the peace of adoring prayer an existence which had been harried for more than half its length by the interminable mutter of the sins of men? He begged the Abbé Colin for the privilege of being received.

The founder could not but be delighted at such an acquisition, which would greatly strengthen the new-born institution. All the same, he asked the Abbé

Vianney to think things over carefully and not to be in too much of a hurry. Finally, on the insistence of the saint, he agreed to receive him, and the entry of the Curé d'Ars into Our Lady of La Neylière was fixed for Monday, September 5, 1853.

There is no knowing how things might not have turned out if the saint in his open-heartedness had not revealed his intentions to Catherine Lassagne, who betrayed his confidence, a happy betrayal if there ever was one. The Abbé Vianney's plan was to go to Lyons, where he had a brother-in-law and whence he would go on to La Neylière by carriage. It never occurred to him that it would be simpler to take a carriage at Ars itself and to drive direct to the place where he planned to take up his abode. God willed, however, that the holy man, who was so clear-sighted when it was his neighbour's good that was concerned, should bungle the organization of his own departure, which was to have been for good and all.

It was about midnight on September 5 when he said good-bye to his presbytery. Only two people accompanied him: Catherine Lassagne, who carried a lantern, was to light him as far as the footbridge over the stream, and Marie Filliat, Catherine's assistant at Providence, who carried the food, was to accompany her Curé as far as possible on the Lyons road. But the Abbé Toccanier, the Curé's assistant, had been told. So had Brothers Jérôme and Athanase. So had the mayor; so had the pilgrims and parishioners. The dismal notes of the tocsin clanged out from the belfry, and when the Abbé Vianney arrived at the footbridge, it was to find his way barred by the crowd. There was no going on, and when the fugitive insisted, the Abbé Toccanier took his breviary from him.

That would not stop him, he said, he would go back to his presbytery and get another.

The moment he had said that, he had lost the game. Men and women threw themselves at his feet, they begged him not to leave so many souls fatherless. He wept. He went back to the sacristy, resumed his surplice and his stole, and shut himself up once more in his confessional. The Abbé Vianney's great dream of solitude was finished. Whatever he might feel, he was to die as he had lived, a curé.

XVI

THE LAST TWENTY YEARS

II. THE CLOSING OF THE GIRLS' ORPHANAGE—THE BOYS' SCHOOL—MISSIONS—HONOURS COME UPON THE CURÉ

IN the midst of his personal trials a new idea had occurred to the Curé. If the bishop wanted to keep him at all costs in the diocese, he could at least arrange to resign the cure of Ars while staying on in the village. His plan was a simple one. Far from stopping the pilgrimage, he would continue to be the inspiration of it and would retain his confessional. But the confessional would be removed just across the way to a chapel which he planned to build on the communal land adjoining the House of Providence at Ars.

The saint, it will be recalled, was devoted to this orphanage, which he founded himself in his earliest years in the parish and where so many poor girls had received a Christian education. His dream then—or one of his dreams—was to take up his retirement in the home of his adopted family. He would live in an adjoining house, and the municipal council would gladly provide the few square yards of land necessary for the building of the chapel. The land was given and the chapel was built, and on November 5, 1848, Mgr Devie, Bishop of Belley, supported by clerical dignitaries and village notables, conducted the solemn ceremony of consecration. The day should have been a day of wonderful happiness for the Curé, but there

was something missing. The congregation was a crowded one, but there was not a sign of his beloved orphans. Nor was Catherine Lassagne to be seen in the front row, where everyone would have expected her. The life of Ars had lost one of its most cherished institutions.

It was a group of strangers to Ars—Sisters of St Joseph of Bourg, serious and recollected—who occupied the front row. They were the new Superior of what was now the school and her assistants. For Providence had ceased to be an orphanage; it had become a school reserved for the village girls. The bishop had spoken; there had been no choice but to obey.

The decision had come as a terrible shock to the Abbé Vianney. He had loved his creation just as it was, with its simplicity and its spartan comfort: after all, how well the orphans prayed there. There had been complaints, however; suggestions that if the village children were to get proper teaching they needed mistresses better qualified educationally and more meticulous in their cleanliness. Finally, there were mothers of families who did not like the idea of their children mixing with orphans who had come from heaven knew where. The complaints found their mark, and the Sisters arrived. Out of obedience, the Abbé Vianney submitted without reservation or query to the bishop's orders; there was nothing he could not turn into an occasion of merit. But once the change had come about, he had nowhere to live but his presbytery, and he remained the Curé d'Ars and continued hearing confessions in his church to the end.

But this apparent defeat did not mean that the servant of God ceased to be the man of action and of

practical planning he had always shown himself. He had for a long time been playing with the idea of a free school for boys which should take in boarders as well, and he wanted to put this important institution in the hands of Brothers. It is true there was already a school run by a native of the parish, Jean Pertinand, the nephew of a priest, but the Abbé Vianney stuck out for his Brothers. He found Jean Pertinand a position as manager in the mines at Serrières, in the Isère department, and in March 1849 three Brothers of the Holy Family of Belley, for whose upkeep the Abbé Vianney had made himself responsible, took over the running of the Ars school.

The Superior, Brother Athanase, was only twenty-four, and he was to remain in the parish sixty-three years, teaching in class, singing bass in the choir or playing the organ, giving music lessons and acting as master of ceremonies. On top of all that he was secretary to the Ars municipality, and the Abbé Vianney, whose every word and deed he was to follow for ten years, always displayed a warm affection for him. In May 1856 the Curé had the satisfaction of blessing the first stone of the future boarding-school. But the regard he felt for education was such that he did not confine his activities to his own parish, and he contributed money to the foundation of a number of schools in the dioceses of Belley, Lyons and Valence.

Missions were another cause which aroused the enthusiasm of the Curé d'Ars. He had hardly arrived in his parish than he had had a mission preached, and he knew from experience how fruitful such courses of sermons can be. Even if the missionaries feel at the beginning that they are talking in the void, sooner or

later a tide of conversion begins to flow, and almost every time soul after soul is brought home to God. 'How much I regret that I've only thought of this magnificent work so late in my life,' the Abbé Vianney confessed in 1850, and he started saving up for it at once. It did not mean that he was less generous to the poor: what it did mean was that he began to ask for offerings for mission work and that nothing gave him so much pleasure as to watch his little hoard grow. 'I'm becoming a miser on God's behalf,' he would say with a smile. 'I love missions so much,' he cried one day in one of his catechism classes, 'that if I could sell my body to found one more, I would sell it.'

One day in July 1855 his assistant, the Abbé Toccanier, relates, he came into the dining-room of the Ars missionaries at lunch-time, his face wreathed in smiles.

'I've never seen you look so happy, Monsieur le Curé,' said the Abbé Alfred Monnin, his future historian.

'I should think I am. I discovered this morning that I had 200,000 francs worth of savings.'

'Two hundred thousand francs!'

'Yes, my dear fellow. And this capital is invested in the soundest bank in the world: I've lent it to the three richest people there are.'

'Who are these three people?'

The Abbé Vianney seemed a little surprised that the young missionary had not guessed already, but the Abbé Monnin doubtless wanted to have the pleasure of hearing the secret from the great saint himself.

'Well, my dear fellow,' the Curé resumed after a moment's silence, 'they are the three Persons of the most Blessed Trinity.'

He had, indeed, no idea but Their glory in mind while he had been scraping the huge sum together, penny by penny. As soon as he had enough money to provide for a foundation he sent it off at once to the bishop's palace, which used it for the benefit of a parish: thus, though he never left his confessional, his apostleship extended far and wide.

He sold everything he could lay his hands on, 'went into every kind of trade', as he said jokingly one day to Brother Athanase. He had, of course, found in his own parish a good number of men and women buyers who were always on the look-out for a good, and holy, bargain. Long before his death, people had started trying to get hold of things he had used, for no one had any doubt that any souvenir coming from the Curé d'Ars would soon be venerated as a relic. He sold the books in his library, his cassocks, his towels, his handkerchiefs, and such of the albs as were his personal property. He sold one for 200 francs to Mlle Ricotier, who ended up with a whole museum of souvenirs. Later on, as will be seen, she bought another treasure, which was probably the least commonplace of her whole career.

The Curé was prudent by character no less than by grace, but he sometimes showed himself of a supernatural imprudence, so complete was his faith in the help of providence, and he had no hesitation in floating loans in order to make up the sum necessary for the foundation of a permanent mission. There was no question of his counting on the Ars parochial income to repay the money, for the flow of pilgrims had not increased it. In 1850 the parish budget showed a deficit of 972 francs 98 centimes; the next year this had gone down to 413 francs 58, while in 1852 there was a surplus of

482 francs: but in 1855, the year of the loans, the surplus stood at no more than 191 francs 70. The Abbé Vianney could only count on private charity to pay off his debts. On June 14, 1855, he good humouredly confided his worries to Brothers Athanase and Jérôme, after he had just provided for three religious institutions by means of a loan. 'If nobody helps me to pay the money back this time,' he said, 'I'll have to sell my rags, and if they don't fetch enough, I shall find myself in Toulon gaol.'

He was no less of an enthusiast for foreign missions, and succeeded in getting every single family in Ars on the subscription list of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith. He had known the founder of this organization, Mlle Pauline Marie Jaricot, while he was a curate at Ecully; indeed, it was to her that he owed his devotion to St Philomena. The total population of Ars was barely four hundred, yet the little parish had no less than a hundred associates of the foreign missionary societies. Though the saint had no time to read, he trenched on his meagre hours of sleep to look through the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, whose blue-covered numbers, as the crumpled copies he thrust into his library testify eloquently, he often carried about in his pockets; he kept them on him to lend to pilgrims in need of reading matter.

The Curé d'Ars never gave a thought to honours; he did not lift a finger to solicit them and they were in no hurry to thrust themselves on him. The civil and religious authorities doubtless thought it would be mere painting the lily to single out for honorific distinctions a character whose loftiness and renown no official sanction could enhance. Mgr Devie, the

Bishop of Belley, who had ordered an inquiry into the Abbé Vianney's conduct after receiving malicious reports on him, had not only dismissed these odious insinuations for what they were worth; he had given all his affection and respect to the man he himself had christened 'my holy Curé'. All the same, he had never appointed him an honorary canon of his chapter. At this time there was still a distinction made between curés and simple priests in charge, and it was contrary to practice for a priest in charge to be nominated to a canonry.

Mgr Devie's successor, Mgr Chalandon, did not feel himself bound by custom to the same extent. During the six years he passed in the see of Belley, he was only to create two honorary canons. Both of them were priests in charge, if outstanding ones: the Abbé Vianney and the Abbé Gorini.¹

On the afternoon of Monday, October 25, 1852, the Abbé Vianney, who had turned sixty-six five months before, was confessing as usual when he was informed that the new bishop had come to call on him. He lost no time in going out to the entrance of his church to offer holy water to him and to greet him with a few

¹ The Abbé Jean Marie Gorini, born in Bourg in 1803, and endowed with talents the full extent of which has probably still to be realized, was appointed curé of one of the humblest parishes of the diocese, which then formed part of the diocese of Lyons. La Tranchière, like Ars, had just over two hundred inhabitants, and the Abbé Gorini consoled himself for his isolation by reading and filled the time that lay heavy on his hands by writing books that made him famous. Perhaps the most celebrated of these was his *Défense de l'Eglise*, which appeared in 1853, and in which the little parish priest of the Ain fearlessly assailed the most respected of contemporary errors. Even those he attacked, who included such distinguished figures as Guizot, Michelet and Quinet, paid tribute to his fairness, his profundity and the soundness of his scholarship, and it was then that the ecclesiastical authorities of Belley appointed him to the bigger parish of Saint-Denis, with 900 inhabitants. The Abbé Gorini, who was made a canon in 1855, was to die in 1859, three months after the Curé d'Ars.

words of respectful welcome. The Curé d'Ars was a master at this sort of improvised eloquence, but he was not given the time for a long speech. He had barely opened his mouth when Mgr Chalandon smilingly pulled out from under his violet mozzetta a black mozzetta decorated with a band of purple silk and two bands of ermine.

'No, no, my Lord,' the saint cried; 'give that to my assistant. He'll look far better in it than I should.'

The Abbé Raymond, the assistant priest at Ars, was a fine figure of a man, and his superior's remark set everyone laughing, for the vicar-general, Mgr Poncet, was there, M. des Garets, the Mayor of Ars, and a whole crowd of pilgrims who had clustered round the bishop. The Abbé Vianney had to submit, whether he wanted or no, and the bishop, the vicar-general and his own assistant priest finally succeeded in putting the cape round the shoulders of the Curé d'Ars. The bishop managed to button the top, and, intoning the *Veni Creator*, entered the church. At his side, his head hanging, paced Canon Vianney who, as Mme des Garets described, 'looked like a condemned man being led to the scaffold with a rope round his neck'.

When the episcopal procession reached the level of the sacristy, the saint, who had never had the occasion to study the ceremonial of the installation of canons, and who anyway was not interested in it, since it was only he who was concerned, ducked through the door to refuge. He obviously wanted to get rid of the new insignia, which was far too distinguished and far too conspicuous for his liking, but the mayor caught up with him just in time to fasten the cape round his shoulders again. 'Don't take it off, please,' the Count des Garets said; 'if you do you'll hurt his Lordship's

feelings.' Finally, everything went off smoothly. The new Canon submitted to listening to the encomiums of his bishop and even wore his cape to accompany him to the presbytery, where there was a reception as cordial as it was homely.

Once Mgr Chalandon had gone, the Abbé Vianney could not resist taking a closer look at the beautiful present the bishop had just given him. As soon as he did so, an idea flashed into his head, not of conceit, but of hard cash. 'I shouldn't wonder if I could make quite a bit of money for my charities with that,' he said to himself. Fortunately, there is a witness who can describe exactly what happened.

'I had just come back from Villefranche,' said Mlle Marie Ricotier, who had a richer stock of recollections than anyone in Ars, 'and I went to the Curé to tell him about a commission he'd asked me to do for him.

"You've arrived in the nick of time," he said to me. "I want to sell you my cape. I've offered it to the curé of Ambérieux, but he won't even give me twelve francs for it. I'm sure you'll give me at least fifteen."

"But it's worth more than that . . ."

"What about twenty, then?"

Mlle Ricotier was no miser, so she paid the Curé d'Ars twenty-five francs. But she was also no ordinary purchaser; her conscience pricked her and she declared: 'I don't think I've given you its real value even now.' The cape, which had been made in strict secrecy at Bourg by the novices of the community of St Joseph, had actually cost fifty francs, and as soon as Mlle Ricotier learned the facts, she paid over another twenty-five francs to the Abbé Vianney. 'The Curé

was so pleased,' she said, 'that he burst out: "Oh if his Lordship would only give me another, I *should* make some money".'

However, he insisted that no one but himself should break to the bishop the news of how he had used his present. 'Your Lordship,' he wrote to the palace at Belley ten days after his installation as a canon, 'the cape which you had the great charity to give me has afforded me great pleasure; for since I had not quite got in all the money I needed for an institution [a parish mission] I sold it for fifty francs. I was pleased with this price.' If the Abbé Vianney 'was pleased with this price', the bishop did not show any displeasure either. He even consented to hide his surprise when the next time he visited Ars the Curé, whom he had made a canon, received him clad in the plain surplice he wore in the confessional. Saints have the gift of getting themselves forgiven anything.

It was with the same charming off-handedness that the Curé three years later greeted his nomination to the Legion of Honour. In concert with Mgr Chalandon, the sub-prefect of Trévoux, the Marquis de Castellane, and the prefect of the Ain, the Count de Coetlogon, submitted a recommendation to the Minister of Public Worship urging the conferment of this honour on the 'worthy Curé d'Ars'.

'The commune of Ars,' wrote M. de Castellane, 'which was formerly the least known of all those in my *arrondissement*, is today drawing to it a prodigious crowd of pilgrims. This stream of people, which has been going on for years now and is due entirely to the reputation for sanctity of a humble country priest, is an amazing fact in a century which has seen the spread

of anti-religious teachings, hostile to the Christian faith. The people have an unlimited confidence in the priest in charge of Ars; he possesses the evangelical faith which moves mountains . . . The Abbé Vianney is a second St Vincent de Paul, whose charity works wonders. From a purely material point of view, therefore, he is a man of outstanding value to the community.

‘I therefore have the honour, Monsieur le Préfet, to request you to be good enough, on the occasion of the approaching birthday of his Majesty, to propose the nomination of the Abbé Vianney, Curé d’Ars, for the rank of chevalier in the Imperial Order of the Legion of Honour.’

A decree of August 11, 1855, was the answer to this more than well-earned recommendation, and it only remained to confer the cross on the new chevalier. Mgr Chalandon, who was himself an officer of the Imperial Order, would have seemed ideally qualified to do so, but possibly recalling the fate that had befallen the beautiful new cape, he delegated the task to the Abbé Toccanier, the Abbé Vianney’s assistant. Supported, then, by the teaching Brothers, the Brother sacristan and the former headmistresses of Providence, Catherine Lassagne and Jeanne Marie Chanay, the Abbé Toccanier presented himself one lunch-time at the new chevalier’s door just as he had gone up to his room. The assistant priest was holding in his hand the box sealed with red sealing-wax which contained the cross of the Legion, and the Abbé Vianney looked at him interrogatively.

‘Perhaps . . . perhaps it’s some relics they’ve sent you,’ stammered the Abbé Toccanier, who in his nervousness had completely forgotten the pretty little

speech he had prepared. The Curé broke the seal and saw the gilt and enamel cross.

‘It’s only that!’ he exclaimed, as if he were bitterly disappointed. However, as the crown which surmounted the star of the decoration contained a cross, he consented to bless it. But nothing would persuade him to let it be pinned on his breast. He protested that such an honour was too much for him. Then, without a moment’s concern or a qualm of conscience, he made the Abbé Toccanier a present of the coveted insignia.

XVII

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE CURÉ D'ARS

THERE were few pilgrims who did not experience a profound emotion as they waited for their first meeting with the Curé d'Ars. There were few hearts that did not feel an overpowering excitement as the successive cries mounted from the crowd: 'The saint is coming. It's him. There he is!'

What the pilgrims saw was a little priest, his shoulders rather bent, his face furrowed with deep wrinkles and set in a frame of long white hair. A common tourist would have failed completely to understand the scene that followed, for the entire crowd would fall on its knees before the little old man. If, however, such a free-thinking visitor had looked as closely as the Ars pilgrims at those features, through which exquisite goodness shone as a light through a lantern, above all at the supernatural candour, the amazing lucidity of those great blue eyes which seemed to be able to read into the very depths of men's hearts, he, too, would have exclaimed: 'This Curé d'Ars isn't a man like us.'

For his soul radiated in his gaze. The onlooker could sometimes detect in it a certain natural quickness of temper, which was moderated at once by a gentleness which bitter struggles and force of character had won. But there was no more sign of effort or of strain in his invariably gracious manners than there was of affectation in his politeness.

One day a young man of noble family came to confess to him. The penitent, who must have been somewhat simple-minded, addressed himself as soon as he had left the confessional to Brother Athanase, headmaster of the school, who once his classes were over was always to be found in the church where his Curé was confessing. Brother Athanase found himself in for nothing less than a complete questionnaire. 'Of what rank were the Abbé Vianney's parents?' the young man asked. 'Where had he been educated? In what circles of society had he mixed? What post was he occupying when he was sent to this parish?'

'Well,' the Brother replied with complete simplicity, 'the parents of the Curé d'Ars were farmers at Dardilly-lès-Lyon; he hardly had any education to speak of, and what there was of it was in the simplest of schools. He was a farm worker as a young man, and he mixed with people like himself. Before he came here, he was assistant priest at Ecully, in the Lyons suburbs, which was the only post he held before coming to the parish of Ars, and he was there three years. For perhaps I ought to explain that our Curé had what is called a late vocation and wasn't ordained priest till he was twenty-nine . . .' Since the young man appeared too stupefied to say a word, Brother Athanase went on: 'But, after all, why are you asking me all these questions?'

'The reason, Brother,' the pilgrim replied, 'is that I was so struck by the exquisite politeness with which the Abbé Vianney received me. As I entered the sacristy, he greeted me with great kindness: he only sat down himself after he had placed a prie-dieu for me. When the confession was over, he got up first, led me out and said good-bye to me and then, with no less politeness, led in the pilgrim next in the line.'

'But our Curé behaves like that to everyone.'

'I understand now, Brother. He's a saint. He's got the charity which is at the root of real politeness.'

The simple-minded visitor was right. A man who could receive every single day for thirty years such a stream of people of every class, character and intelligence without once complaining of fatigue or showing impatience could only be a saint. The word 'saint' defines the essence of the Curé d'Ars.

But the saint in him—and the same is true of all the servants of God—had neither killed nor even lessened the man; grace grafted on nature had raised it up and transfigured it. It is, indeed, in this process of transfiguration that consists the work of grace in the soul of man.

Some people who will freely admit the invariable soundness of his judgment seem to fancy the Curé suffered from a heavy-footed imagination and a limited intelligence. It is true that his education had cost him untold efforts and that his memory, which he had neglected so long, had been a terrible handicap. Relentless work, however, had enormously increased his capacity, and since his mind was naturally a subtle one, he was never at a loss for charming expressions and apt repartees. Something has been seen already of the images and the similes, as novel as they were appropriate, as graceful as they were engaging, which he used in his sermons on confession, suffering, prayer, the priesthood and the Eucharist. In his private conversations with parishioners or pilgrims there were just as many unexpected ideas, full of gentle good nature and often with a touch of innocent mischief.

One day a visitor, doubtless with the intention of paying a compliment, referred to the fact that he was

the first and so far the only honorary canon whom Mgr Chalandon had created. 'I don't wonder at that,' the Curé replied; 'his Lordship was a bit unlucky. He saw he'd made a mistake and he's scared of doing it again.' A similar story concerns a former novice of the Daughters of Charity who was looking out for a new vocation and had met a priest just back from the Holy Land. The priest advised her to try the Eastern Missions, and then asked the Curé d'Ars whether he had answered right; 'Send her to Paradise,' was the reply, 'she won't get out of there, anyway.' 'Monsieur le Curé,' said one of the priests from Pont d'Ain who was temporarily attached to Ars for duty with the pilgrimage, 'since you're fond of your missionaries, when you go you'll leave the mantle of Elias to them, won't you?' 'My friend,' the Curé retorted, 'it's no use asking a mantle from someone who hasn't even got a shirt.'

Coming back from a journey one day, Brother Athanase told the Abbé Vianney how he had been thrown out of the carriage when the horse had shied. 'I'm so sorry,' the Curé said kindly, then added with a smile: 'My dear fellow, St Antony never had a carriage accident. You should have imitated him.'

'What did St Antony do, then, Monsieur le Curé?' Brother Athanase asked naïvely.

'He always went on foot.'

'What month of the year do you talk least, my good woman?' the Abbé Vianney asked an irrepressible chatterbox, providing unconsciously a joke for future Christmas-cracker mottoes. When the pilgrim, for the first time in her life at a loss for words, stared at him dumbly, the saint answered himself, with a smile:

‘Well, the answer is February, because it has only twenty-eight days.’ Mlle Berthe des Garets, a future Daughter of Charity, was another woman who had the experience of being teased by the Curé. When she asked him one day for some relics, his mischievous reply was: ‘Make some yourself.’

There was a chatterbox among the Curé’s parishioners, too; she was the best of women and her assistance to the Ars charities had been as disinterested as it was valuable, but she was a little too fond of intruding her advice with a: ‘Monsieur le Curé, if I were you, this is what I would do.’ In the middle of one of these sessions of gratuitous good counsel, the saint interrupted her with a laugh. ‘Come, come, we’re not in England yet,’ he said.

‘In England? Whatever do you mean, Monsieur le Curé?’

‘In England it’s Queen Victoria who rules. Here, it’s me.’

These light-hearted bits of repartee of the saint were no more, however, than the occasional flashes of a mind that had got to relax. What was far more vital and far more impressive in the Curé d’Ars was his heart. A man without a heart scarcely deserves the name of man. The saints, those representatives of mankind who more than any others have been the glory of humanity, have all been men of great and noble hearts.

The Abbé Vianney may have had to get to grips with his temper to make it gentle and equable, but in his ascent to holiness there had never been any need for him to change his heart. Feelings of resentment or of vengeance were foreign to him; though he was far

from being insensitive, he never showed a sign of hatred or even of antipathy. His tact and his delicacy were no mask of good manners; they came naturally to him. The words he found to express them were completely unforced and would sometimes, when he was brought face to face with the afflicted or the bereaved, the sick or the orphan, become 'an outpouring of compassion'.

The woman who used this expression, the Countess des Garets, had experienced her parish priest's gentle and supernatural goodness in a series of personal tragedies. When a little boy of hers had died at the age of five, he had been able to comfort her by reminding her of the truths of the faith, by asking her to be sure that her grief was not egoistic, when her son had been spared all the disappointments of life and promoted so young to eternal happiness. When a second of the Garets, the eldest, had died, as admirably as he had lived, at the age of twenty-five, the Abbé Vianney again had only to talk to his mother of the reunion that heaven promised her. When, however, only five months after this second bereavement, a third came to reopen a wound that had barely closed, Madame des Garets was plunged into a despair that saw nothing to hope for but death.

For this third child she had lost was Johannny, her favourite son, Johannny, the young officer whose courage and charm had won him the friendship of the saint himself, Johannny who had left in such high spirits for the Crimean War, and all the news she had of him was the curt official message that he had been killed in action. As soon as he heard, the Abbé Vianney left his penitents for an hour and hastened to the château, and he was weeping as unashamedly as

Madame des Garets as he flung himself on his knees beside her.

But when he rose to his feet this time, it was not to tell her that her ordeal was easy, it was to insist that it was hard. She was utterly miserable, he knew, but let her accept her misery with open arms. For it meant that Jesus had accepted her into the little group round His cross; he had deigned to make of her another Mother of Sorrows. 'Mother of Sorrows,' he repeated, as if to guide the despairing mother's thoughts into the mind of Mary standing heartbroken on Calvary; the break in his voice made it plain that her feelings were his, too. As he spoke, Madame des Garets felt the courage to live for those who remained behind flowing back, and it was eagerly that she kissed the crucifix which the holy Curé d'Ars held out for her lips.

The sick and the crippled would often beg the Abbé Vianney to work a miracle on them. He did not merely teach them resignation; he made them love their affliction. 'I feel more sure of going to heaven if I stay as I am,' said a blind girl coming out of a talk with the saint. 'The Curé told me so. I'm going back very happy.' Asked to help a woman who was an almost helpless invalid, he had replied: 'She is a devout woman; her cross has been placed on the right shoulders. For her it will be a ladder that will lead her to heaven.' When his cousin Marguerite Humbert came from Ecully to ask him to pray for one of her little daughters who was dangerously ill, he replied gravely: 'She is a fruit ripe for heaven. As for you, cousin, you need crosses, too, if you are not to forget God.'

His were no wordy consolations, for his minutes were

precious, but the few words he said lingered on like a soothing salve on the most cruel wounds. He realized fully that words that are inspired by human pity only produce but a transitory effect; his aim was to leave in the wounded heart a thought that would remain with it for always. The result was that, as a priest who was a contemporary testified, 'the Curé d'Ars would often do with a single word what others would have needed whole sermons to accomplish.' 'May God's will be done!' he would say simply, or perhaps: 'We must be pleased with what God sends us. We must want what He wants . . .'

A priest in charge of a parish which was giving him great difficulties one day asked him his advice. All he got by way of reply was a single sentence, but it was a sentence that transformed his life: 'My friend, dig down to the patience of Our Lord.'

It is difficult not to experience when we read of a saint what we must so often feel when we turn the pages of the gospels: a regret that we could not have been there to see with the eyes of a friend one who walked with God. Few figures evoke this regret as readily as St Jean Marie Vianney. For the Curé d'Ars, reserved though he might be with the successive servants in his household, relaxed with visible pleasure in the company of his colleagues and immediate assistants. He had little enough time for this relaxation—a few minutes with the missionaries at the end of their mid-day meal, the quarter of an hour or maybe half an hour in the evening when he chatted in his room to the Brother who was escorting him back, one of the missionaries, a few priests who were on a visit and a distinguished layman or two, among which last class the foremost place was occupied by the faithful mayor,

M. des Garets. Moments like this were almost a necessity to him.

Standing by his table, or in front of the fireplace, where a fire of vine branches would be blazing in the winter, he would unbend mentally and open his heart in front of the little circle, and there would be a friendly word or a felicitous phrase for everyone. In those treasured minutes he would descend from the heights where he had spent the length of the day, raising his hand in blessing and in absolution. For the Curé d'Ars was not one of those theoreticians who affect, out of philosophy—or misanthropy—to despise earthly affairs. It is after all in this lowly world that man must fight, suffer and win merit or blame; it is on this tiny globe in the midst of the immensity of space that the Church of Jesus Christ exists in its militant form. So nothing that had to do with the life and progress, the trials and the triumphs of this Church he loved so much left the Curé d'Ars indifferent, and he showed a particular interest in the course of events in Italy and France. He never concealed his happiness when a priest who had come on the pilgrimage told him of a successful mission in his parish or of a conversion which had turned the tide against threatening evil; indeed, he would burst unashamedly into thanksgiving before everyone. For the Curé lived in such constant communion with God that it would have been unnatural for him not to have spoken as constantly of what he had most in mind. 'He was so filled with the love of God,' the Count des Garets said, 'that he brought Him into every conversation and would often interrupt a sentence, clasping his hands and lifting his eyes to heaven, to exclaim: "My God, how good you are!"'

The Abbé Vianney was keenly observant, and even without the marvellous gift of reading the depths of a soul which he had received would divine almost at once the interests, the weaknesses and the defects of everyone he met. Except when he was acting as a confessor, however, when duty called on him to help a soul to change and to amend its ways, he never made the least reference to the secrets he had surprised.

That did not mean, however, that he hesitated in the least on occasion to put certain people in their place. When he did, his repartees were calculated to make their objects think. One day a young man with a sly smile called out to him from the crowd: 'Monsieur le Curé, I'd like to have a bit of a chat with you about religion.' 'You, my friend,' retorted the Abbé Vianney, 'you talk about religion? But you don't know as much about it as a child in a catechism class! You're a dunce, my friend, just a dunce!' On another occasion, a lady who insisted on entering the confessional before her turn said to him stiffly: 'I'm not in the habit of being kept waiting anywhere, not even in the Vatican.' 'I'm very sorry, madam,' replied the saint with a low bow, 'you'll simply have to wait at the confessional of the poor Curé d'Ars.'

One day again, while he was crossing the square between a double row of pilgrims, someone shouted an insult from the crowd. 'Who are you, my friend?' the Abbé Vianney asked the author of the impertinence.—'A Protestant'—'Oh, my *poor friend*,' the priest replied, emphasizing these last words, 'yes, you are *poor, really poor*. You Protestants, you haven't got in the whole of your Reformation a saint whose name you can give to your children. You're obliged to borrow your Christian names from the Catholic Church.'

The most enchanting sight of all was the Curé d'Ars surrounded by little children. Those who saw him at such moments might have believed themselves back in the times when Jesus Himself called to Him and blessed these favourites of His divine heart. And, indeed, the disciple loved them as the Master had loved them because of their innocence. He saw heaven in their eyes, grace in their souls. His greatest relaxation, it will be remembered, was to look on at the playtime of the orphans at Providence. He would arrive just about the end of recreation, and the pleasure of the little girls can be imagined as, trooping back to class, they passed one by one in front of their holy Curé and bent their guileless foreheads for him to make the sign of the cross.

The priests in many of the neighbouring parishes, and even in some that were quite a way off, had got into the habit of bringing their first communicants to him. The pilgrimage was a holiday for the children, and it was a holiday for the Abbé Vianney, too, to welcome the little boys with their white arm-bands and the little girls in their white dresses. More than one of them, on days such as this, heard the call of God to a higher and holier life, at the moment when the saint of Ars placed his trembling hands on their heads.

XVIII

THE SAINT

THE evidence for the sanctity of the Curé d'Ars is down in black and white. The witnesses had nothing to gain; the only thing that brought them to the witness-stand was concern for the truth. Let us hear them as they testified at the canonization process.

Dr Jean Baptiste Saunier, who was the Curé d'Ars's last doctor and who visited him from 1842 to 1859, said: 'My relations with the servant of God were those of the closest friendship, and I never thought of him as anything but a perfect model of all the virtues.'

'If he isn't a saint, there never will be one,' testified the Ars wheelwright, André Verchère.

'He was always and everywhere, in the fullest sense of the word, a perfect priest, a model curé and a man of God,' declared Viscount Jean Félix des Garets.

'I have never seen a truer copy of the divine Master,' added a priest, the Abbé Dubouis, curé of Fareins.

'I saw in him the perfection of virtues . . . He was the living image of the supernatural life . . . The motive of all his actions and of all his life was faith': these were the words of other ecclesiastics, the Abbés Descôtes, Gardette and Raymond.

'I've seen God in a man,' was the magnificent exclamation of a simple vinegrower of the Mâcon country as he left Ars.

'He was not heroic only in one virtue, but in all, and not only for a time, but all his life . . . Even the

reading of the life of the saints had not given me such an exalted idea of sanctity.' These were the admiring phrases—in which the ecclesiastical court held there was no exaggeration—of two faithful penitents of the Abbé Vianney's.

Finally, after the penitents, here is the testimony of the Curé's own confessor, the Abbé Louis Beau, curé of Jassans: 'I do not believe he relaxed for a single day. He fulfilled his duties as a priest and a shepherd of souls with an admirable scrupulousness of conscience, and he persisted till his death in the strict discharge of all his duties. Words fail me. I do not think it would be possible to go further in the practice of the heroic virtues. He was surrounded with an aureole of sanctity. It would be impossible for me to express the degree to which he inspired me with veneration and respect. He had, in my judgment, preserved the grace of baptism and had constantly increased this grace by the outstanding sanctity of his life.'

The Curé d'Ars possessed virtue to a heroic degree; there was no question of his experiencing merely transitory inclinations to perform virtuous acts. Faith, charity, humility, love of poverty, patience, mortification and zeal were habits or virtues of the Christian and sacerdotal life that he practised throughout his existence in an outstanding fashion.

'Faith,' he said once, summing up in a single phrase the ideal of prayer, 'faith is when you talk to God as you would to a man.' For him the riddles and the obscurities of our earthly exile seemed to have disappeared; when he talked before his congregations of the great mystery of the world to come, they might have thought he was already in the Homeland.

Wherever he was and whenever he spoke, he displayed the faith in his mind. It was impossible to conceive a situation, however humble and commonplace in outward appearance, into which he would not slip a lofty thought or a phrase with overtones of the divine. One day he was crossing the little yard of his presbytery where some chickens, which had got there from one of the village farms, were pecking about in the grass. He stopped to look at them and then began jokingly to compare their way of living to his, reflecting on their freedom of movement and their heedlessness. 'How lucky they are!' he said, and then, correcting himself: 'No, they haven't got souls and they can't know what it means to love God.' And the saint continued on his way to the church and the confessional, the prison where he passed all his days and a great part of his nights. Another time, on his way from the presbytery, he stopped to listen to the birds singing in the elder-trees in the yard, and this time he sighed, for they had made him think of sinners. 'Poor little birds,' he said, 'you were created to sing, and you do sing. Man was created to love God, and he doesn't love Him!' The same thing happened to him on the Savigneux road, he related in one of his catechism classes. 'One day,' said the Abbé Toccanier, his assistant, 'I remarked to him in passing: "Fine day today, Monsieur le Curé." "It's always fine for the good," he replied; "it's only bad weather for sinners."'

In ways like this he brought everything with which he came into contact under a Christian, a supernatural light, as effortlessly as a plant bears its flowers. What is more, he had taught this divine art to the farmers and the workmen of his parish. For them, as well as for him, the skyline of Ars, its undistinguished hills and

the cool valley of the Fontblin, the harvests and the flowers talked a mysterious language: creation made them think of the Creator. Attentive to the tolling of the hours, as their Curé had instructed them, they interrupted their work ten times in the day to recite the Hail Mary.

For the unbeliever, an existence like that of the Abbé Vianney must remain inexplicable, and even for Christians of the shallow and tepid kind there will probably be an element of mystery about it. For it is impossible for anyone to understand such a life who has not penetrated to its ultimate source: in addition to a faith that would move mountains, the Curé d'Ars, in the simple and all-embracing phrase of St Paul, 'had charity'. The ardour of his gaze when he was at the altar spoke plainly enough of this love. In conversation, when the talk strayed from the interests and the glory of God, he seemed tongue-tied; it was obvious that his inspiration had left him. On the other hand, if it were a question of religious festivals, of missions or conversions or of current events that reflected honour on religion, he came to life at once, would be by turns all excitement and all smiles and would spontaneously exclaim his thanks to God.

He was a wonderful preacher, because his sermons came straight from a heart overflowing with love. 'I heard him preach in the concluding years of his life,' Mlle Marthe des Garets, daughter of the Mayor of Ars, testified at the canonization process. 'His preaching by then was nothing but an outburst of faith and of love, often accompanied by an uninterrupted flow of tears. His sermons conveyed the impression of a prayer, indeed almost of an ecstasy.' When he talked of the

Eucharist—and he never took a single catechism class when he did not talk of It—‘his gestures,’ said Brother Athanase, ‘his gestures became livelier and his voice stronger and there was more fire in his look. He would turn towards the tabernacle clasping his hands or pointing his finger, and then he would burst into tears till his voice was often drowned in sobs.’

He had a love for the Blessed Virgin that was as tender as it was fervent, as filial as it was tender. He celebrated all her feast days as if it had been his own mother whom he could see before his eyes. One evening he took the opportunity of recounting from the pulpit all the things he had done for the glory of the Queen of Heaven. ‘If it were possible to sell myself in order to give something else to the Blessed Virgin, sell myself I would,’ he concluded. The day when the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was proclaimed in Rome—Friday, December 8, 1854—he organized in his village of Ars what Mme des Garets described as ‘an enormous demonstration of joy’. In the morning he insisted on singing high mass himself, robed for the occasion in magnificent vestments of blue velvet embroidered with gold. In the evening the whole village was illuminated and the Abbé Vianney himself sounded the big bell to give the signal for the rejoicings. That evening he ‘took a holiday’: he abandoned the confessional and, in the words of Catherine Lassagne, ‘strolled about happily by the light of the torches amid the priests who were there and the Brothers.’

It was his love of God and his enthusiasm for the glory of God that inspired in the Curé d’Ars such an immeasurable devotion for souls and such a compassion

for sinners. 'What a tragedy it is to think that there are men who will die without loving God,' he exclaimed in one of his catechism classes. 'Unhappy sinners,' he said on another occasion, in tones it is impossible to describe, 'if only I could confess for them.' Confess for them, of course, he could not, but there was a sense in which he could suffer and expiate for them, sacrifice himself in order to win for them a feeling of repentance and the grace of pardon. The devil, we have seen, redoubled his attacks on the Abbé Vianney in the fury he felt when he foresaw the arrival of some great sinner who had already been brushed by the wing of remorse; the servant of God, for his part, redoubled his prayers and penances. In the days preceding the great feasts, and especially at Easter-time, relates the school teacher Jean Pertinand, he imposed the most extraordinary fasts on himself. The Mayor of Ars, M. des Garets, declared that it was, indeed, his love of souls 'that led him to dedicate himself for the whole length of his long life to a crushing ministry, without interruption, without stint, without relief of any kind; that made him get up at midnight or one in the morning and leave the church very late; that condemned him to an almost complete privation of sleep and that nevertheless preserved in him an unvarying patience in the midst of the most nerve-racking solicitations.'

These lines present a whole programme of asceticism and sanctity and they are a moving epitome of the Abbé Vianney's existence during the forty-one years of his pastorate at Ars. But it may help us to see into the secrets of his inner life if we follow him in his daily practice of the virtues he exemplified.

For the last twenty years of his life the Curé lived in

an atmosphere of admiration and of celebrity. He was quite conscious of it. But he also realized the reason. What people had come to see in him was a saint, that is to say the living result of the grace of God. Believing this as he did, he directed all the tributes he received to God. 'I never once detected a sign of pride in his heart or heard a word of pride on his lips,' was the testimony of the priest who had seen him from closest to and who felt no exaggerated friendliness for him. The reason was that he never lost consciousness of his own nothingness, never forgot his condition as a creature. He had, on his own admission, received from heaven the grace of knowing his own destitution. 'I was so terrified by the revelation,' he confessed one day to Brother Athanase, 'that I immediately begged for the grace to forget it. God heard me, but He left me with enough knowledge of my own worthlessness to make me understand that I am capable of nothing.'

Descending deeper yet into this abyss of humility, the Curé, after referring to God all the good, would reflect on all the evil that he, poor creature as he was, might have committed if God in His mercy had not preserved him. 'I am the last of men,' he would groan. 'If God had not spared me, what might I not have become?' Moreover, he believed what he said. When he asked his bishop for permission to hide himself away in some obscure corner—a Trappist or a Carthusian monastery—to weep there over his 'unhappy life', it was because he was ready to go. He even talked sometimes of presenting himself some day at the gate of some faraway monastery and asking for admission without saying whence he came or who he was, as if the thing were possible: in fact, there was not

a place in the country where the most celebrated priest in France would not have been recognized.

His characteristic features had become known everywhere, thanks to the pictures of every kind that the Ars shopkeepers sold to pilgrims. It is no exaggeration to say that these pictures, in their various degrees of likeness, had been circulated throughout the Catholic world by the million. The Curé was very unhappy about it at first and would have liked to put a stop to these representations of him. There were, however, poor children who went about with trayfuls of them attached to their necks and who helped their parents eke out a living by selling the pictures. The Abbé Vianney's heart was touched he gave in, and in the end he brought himself to laugh at this pictorial persecution.

'How much are you selling that for?' he would ask a little girl hawker. 'That' was a coloured picture in which the Curé, a high flush on his face, was represented between the verses of a broadsheet ballad.

'Two sous, Monsieur le Curé,' the child replied.

'Two sous. That's more than enough for the figure of fun it makes me.'

There were other kinds of intrusion, however, that always distressed him. The pilgrims wanted relics, and they had no scruples about the way they got them. When the saint passed through their ranks, more than one of the men and women who bowed their heads before his blessing would be holding a pair of scissors with which they would snip a piece off his surplice or his cassock. When he was taking his catechism class in the low stall which is still to be seen in the church, it was nothing out of the way for the book he placed beside him to vanish as if by magic;

several times he even lost one or the other volume of his breviary, while people would actually pull his hair out to get a relic. All this, Mme des Garets said, 'caused him real unhappiness'. 'What mistaken devotion!' he murmured one day when he found the skirt of his cassock tattered with holes and tears whose origin he knew only too well.

The diet the Abbé Vianney adopted when he first arrived at the presbytery was spartan in its austerity. It was a penance that he continued for the rest of his life: he never touched anything he liked. He had been brought up in the country and as a boy he had a hearty appetite that asked for nothing better than farmhouse food, but even this food now seemed too luxurious for him.

As long as he was his own master, as he would say when talking of the years when his time had been a little freer and he could cook for himself, he lived on plain boiled potatoes. He would eat them cold, and all he had to do with them was to scrape off the mould as the supply he prepared once a week neared its end. The time came, however, when penitents began flocking to his confessional in such numbers that he had no time to do anything else but say his Mass, recite his breviary and sleep perhaps two hours a night. When that moment came, the Curé turned to the headmistress of Providence, whom he asked for the charity of a little soup and some vegetables. He would eat this meal in the middle of the day, and he would take nothing else till the next day. Even his doctor could not persuade him to drink a little milk in the evening: he would take nothing, not even half a glass of water, after confessing without a stop for eight long hours.

Yet, in summer, the nave of his church, with its low roof and the throngs of pilgrims that always filled it, became an oven.

In his final years it would quite likely have been impossible for him to adopt a more plentiful diet, for his stomach had shrunk and would not have taken it. But that cannot have been the case till he was gone sixty, and it was through a continuous act of will and of heroism that he suffered hunger and thirst. One evening a number of his parishioners turned up to deposit the supply of grain needed for the orphanage in the presbytery garret. The Abbé Vianney, who had come back to the presbytery for the occasion, received them in what before his time had been the dining-room, and insisted on offering them a drink: one of them commented later on the tiredness of his face and the dryness of his lips. When all the glasses but one had been filled, someone proposed a toast. The Abbé Vianney quickly lifted the empty glass, and explained with a smile that disarmed any susceptibilities: 'Wine doesn't agree with me.' Even on the most sultry evening, he would not so much as wet his lips with a drop of water.

One day when he had something to talk over with Jean Cinier, who had a farm opposite the old church, the saint found the family about to sit down to their midday meal. At the moment he entered, the mistress of the house had just served up a huge dish of smoking potatoes. 'They look very good,' the Curé could not help remarking. Mme Cinier was very pleased and was not in the least surprised when her visitor helped himself to a potato. But much to everyone's astonishment, the Abbé Vianney, after keeping it and looking at it for a moment, put it back in the dish. 'It was a

penance he was imposing on himself,' said Antoine Cinier, one of the children who were witnesses of the little scene.

During the last five years of his life the Curé did finally consent, on the orders of his physician, Dr Saunier, to abate his austerities a little—and he promptly accused himself of 'gluttony'. Here is the evidence on this 'gluttony' of his confessor, the Abbé Beau, curé of Jassans, who was present time and again at his famous penitent's meals. 'He took his meals in his room once the Sisters of St Joseph of Bourg started to run Providence,' the Abbé Beau reports, 'and he never sat down. On the table, which had no tablecloth, was an earthen plate containing a few vegetables, sometimes two eggs, or a little meat if he was really tired (he never ate meat without asking my permission), a jug of water, a bottle of red wine and a little bread.

'The meal was over in less than ten minutes: the Abbé Vianney ate so as not to taste what he was eating. The greater part of the food that had been served up was always left over in the dish, and he had only drunk a little water barely coloured with wine and eaten a few mouthfuls of bread. I was enormously impressed by this inordinate abstemiousness.'

'To become what he had become,' the Count des Garets testifies finally, 'had cost him an unimaginable effort.' For the Curé d'Ars was a creature of flesh and blood like ourselves; his human nature, too, urged him to satisfy his appetites and to seek his comfort. In order to imitate his divine Master and to win souls for Him, he had preferred to live a life of mortification and of living martyrdom. St Jean Marie Vianney offers us in his way of life one of the noblest examples of the victory of grace over nature.

Moreover, while he was tormenting his 'poor corpse' by this heroic abstinence, he was continuing, in the secret of his room, to scourge himself for the good of souls. Only God knows how many disciplines he used on his macerated flesh. When it is realized that these disciplines were made of links of iron, it is easy to share the feelings of Catherine Lassagne or of Brother Athanase when they found under his furniture odd links of chain that had been broken off by the violence of the blows he struck.

One day when he had fainted in the church, a group of men carried him up to his room and discovered when they undressed him that he was wearing round his waist an iron chain an inch thick with spikes sticking out of it. He used in addition to wear iron bracelets, also bristling with sharp spikes, on both his arms, and the final touch was a long horsehair shirt whose rubbing had caused what must have been an extremely painful sore. When the saint was undressed after his death, witnesses saw with astonishment that he had never taken off this rough hair shirt, day or night. Made of horsehair and rope woven together, the penitential garment was so worn that only a few fragments survived, which the witnesses, led by Brother Athanase, took and kept as precious relics.

One can but endorse the opinion of a man accustomed to penance in all its severity—a monk of the Grande Chartreuse—when he exclaimed with profound humility: 'All of us, solitaries, hermits, penitents of every kind, must confess that if we dare follow the Curé d'Ars, it is only with our eyes, and that we are not worthy to kiss his footprints or the dust of his shoes.'

XIX

MIRACLES IN THE LIFE OF THE CURÉ D'ARS

I. MIRACULOUS CURES AND INTUITIONS

IT does not necessarily happen that a saint's outstanding virtue manifests itself by extraordinary facts during his lifetime. It was St Paul himself who wrote to his Corinthians that it is better to have charity than to move mountains. Miracles, it must be remembered, provide evidence of sanctity: they do not constitute it. There have been men and women of surpassing holiness who have not worked a single wonder in the course of their earthly existence. St Thérèse of the Child Jesus is an excellent example: though she was favoured with certain extraordinary graces, she never accomplished a single miracle in her lifetime. The nearest she came to it was to predict to one of her sisters, in a conversation a little before her death, her own heavenly mission of benefactress and converter of souls. That was the only time in her life she showed any sign of the wonderful gift of supernatural intuition.

Things were different with the Curé d'Ars. It was the will of God that his sanctity should be proclaimed during his life by a whole series of miracles. His mission was to attract to his confessional sinners in need of conversion, and the marvellous became in his hands a redoubtable instrument of apostleship. His

miracles were of more than one kind. By his prayers he obtained the immediate cure of the crippled and the sick and the instantaneous transformation of guilty souls—and these latter wonders, which the eye could not detect, and to which reference has already been made, were probably the most numerous of all. In addition the Curé d'Ars, with the aid of enlightenment from above, revealed the secrets of consciences, foretold the future and pierced with his gaze into the mysteries of the next world.

Up to the moment of his death, the Abbé Vianney would never ask for a miracle of healing except through the intercession of his 'dear little saint' of the catacombs. 'Go and ask St Philomena,' he would tell sick people who came to him. 'I don't work miracles. I'm nothing but a poor ignoramus who used to keep sheep.' With phrases like this he was able to hide his humility behind the renown of the young martyr.

All the same, quite a number of the cures occurred spontaneously. Here it was somebody on whom he had just laid his hands and who got up completely recovered. There it was someone for whom he had promised to pray and who was relieved of his affliction before he had time to stammer his thanks. At moments such as these the Curé would be embarrassed, almost annoyed, and would hasten to refer all the credit for the wonder and its solicitation to his 'chargé d'affaires', his 'consul at the court of God'. He did not always succeed in imposing on people in this way. His admirers settled things by accepting the fact that the saint on earth and the little saint in heaven were associates in prayer, and that thus the miracles that were done in the village of Ars were the work of two pairs of hands.

A certain Mme Raymond-Corcevay, of Chalon-sur-Saône, had been suffering for eight years from tuberculous laryngitis. She had got to the point where she could not utter a word without horrible suffering; reduced to complete dumbness by her pain, she made use of signs to communicate with people or wrote on a slate. In May 1843 she came to Ars. 'My child,' the saint told her, 'go and leave your slate on the altar of St Philomena.' She had no sooner left it than she found she was cured, and on August 11 of the same year, on the feast of St Philomena, it was she who intoned the chants and led the singing at the Mass. Not dissimilar was the experience of a paralysed woman of Charlieu, in the department of the Loire, who started to reel off the whole long story of her woes to the Abbé Vianney, whose time was so precious. The servant of God interrupted her before she had time to pronounce more than a couple of sentences. 'Go and tell all that to St Philomena,' he said. The woman hobbled round to the chapel of the little saint and told her story. She had barely finished it when she found herself completely cured, and at the Providence orphanage, where she ran with her news, the whole staff joined in her rejoicing.

A poor woman who could only walk with the help of crutches had put herself in the Abbé Vianney's way between the presbytery and the church when the saint appeared, accompanied by his curate, the Abbé Toccanier. This time the Curé d'Ars had no recourse, in appearance at least, to his dear little saint; he simply said to the cripple, 'Well, my good woman, walk!' When the woman hesitated to abandon her crutches, the Abbé Toccanier, in a tone as much of

amusement as of reproof, added: 'Why not walk when you're told to?' The woman dropped the crutches: her legs were as sound as her neighbours', and her first steps were firm. Pointing to the now useless crutches, which spoke only too eloquently to the fact of the miracle, the Abbé Vianney concluded: 'And now take those away with you'; it was the best way he could think of to cut short the applause of the crowd.

One morning in 1854 a M. and Mme Besançon were attending the Curé's Mass at the Ars church. They had brought with them their five-year-old daughter Mathilde, who was pitiful to see. One day the poor child had been lifted off the ground by a bigger friend, who had seized her by the head, and the trick had crippled her; the only way she could hold her head straight now was by wearing an iron collar lined with leather which imprisoned her neck up to the chin. Every doctor her parents had called in had agreed that the affliction was incurable, and all this had happened many months before. The Abbé Vianney had promised to pray for Mathilde, and M. and Mme Besançon were also praying fervently. Suddenly, at the moment of the elevation, the child exclaimed: 'Mummy, I'm cured! Look!' It was quite true; Mathilde was smilingly turning her head with complete freedom, and all that remained to do was to take her torturing collar off.

A girl from the Saône-et-Loire department had begged the Abbé Vianney to cure one of her legs, which was almost three inches shorter than the other. The Curé did not refuse to pray for the cure, but he asked God to make it at the same time profitable to

the girl's soul, for he had read into her conscience. 'You disobey your mother too often,' he told her. 'If you want God to cure you, you must get rid of that ugly habit. You'll have to make a big effort, too. Remember this: you will be cured, but it will be little by little, according as you try to turn over a new leaf.' The lesson went home. The harder the girl tried to be obedient, the more her crippled leg grew. The day she had learned to obey without question, she found herself completely cured.

The same sort of thing happened to a young man from the Puy-de-Dôme whose legs were paralysed and who could not move without crutches. His faith was no stronger than his limbs. His relatives took him to the village of Ars, where the Curé advised him to make a novena to St Philomena. The advice was fruitless: the novena terminated with the young man showing no more devotion than before. The Abbé Vianney ordered a second novena and promised that if it were well done, the cripple would be able to lay his crutches before St Philomena and would never need them again. Little by little the young man began to change. He prayed better and was preparing to celebrate devoutly the feast of the Assumption, which happened to coincide with the end of his second novena.

In the morning he attended the Abbé Vianney's Mass, and after it was over dragged himself as best he could through a crowd that was thicker even than usual and entered the sacristy.

'Come now, Monsieur le Curé,' he said to the Curé, 'tell me yes or no: is it today that I'm going to be able to offer my crutches to St Philomena?'

'Off with you, my good fellow,' the saint ordered.

The young man was cured on the spot, and the first

thing he did was to lay his crutches as a votive offering before the Curé d'Ars's little saint. That was not the end of it, however. The cripple had not only been cured; he had been converted in such earnest that he was soon after received as a novice by the Brothers of the Holy Family of Belley.

The power which God had bestowed on St Jean Marie Vianney for the relief of human sufferings extended to an even wider field, and particularly to the world of souls, in which, indeed, he seemed to live. Time and again writers who talked about him have called him the Seer. That was the term used of certain Old Testament prophets, and the Ars pilgrims treated the Abbé Vianney as if he had inherited the gifts of these great figures, whose mission had been to convert or to lead Israel, when they came and asked him either to enlighten their consciences or to unveil the future.

'I have heard many people say,' a missionary who was called as a witness at the canonization process testified, 'that they had consulted the Curé d'Ars on their vocation, on lawsuits, on family difficulties, on sicknesses and on decisions which they had got to take, and that he had always answered with extraordinary accuracy. To a number of them he foretold events which occurred later. He showed his knowledge of the conscience and spiritual dispositions of many of them in a way that overwhelmed them with astonishment.'

Facts of this kind in the life of the saint would almost certainly run into thousands if a complete collection could be made. A certain number became known through stories told by pilgrims, and some were taken into account at the canonization process. Investiga-

tions carried out since then by Canon Ball, vice-postulator of the cause of the Curé d'Ars and his third successor in the parish, have verified several hundreds of these supernatural facts. Those of which the circumstances are known in some detail, therefore, probably number quite five hundred, which means that a writer who wishes to give examples has almost too much material to choose from.

One day in 1857 or 1858 a very worried father set out for Ars. His son, who was in the top form of the junior seminary at Autun, was going in for the baccalaureate examination, and his masters said he had very little chance of getting through. As for the headmaster, he was equally concerned about a number of other candidates.

The father had only to enter the Ars church to see that he would have to wait for his information, supposing the Abbé Vianney could give him any help at all about the approaching examination, for the building was overflowing with pilgrims. Since he was a civil servant, he had not got unlimited time at his disposal, and he had no success in getting near the servant of God. So on the evening of the day after his arrival, he begged Brother Jérôme to get the Abbé Vianney to see him, if it were only for a minute.

There was no certainty that his request would be granted, for the confessional was besieged and Brother Jérôme could promise no more than that he would do his best. A moment or two later he came out wreathed in smiles and whispered a message into the anxious pilgrim's ear. 'The Curé told me to tell you that your son will pass and all the other candidates at the junior seminary will pass, too,' he said.

'But the Curé doesn't even know what I was going

to ask him,' stammered the father, who was as delighted as he was thunderstruck.

'Oh, the Curé doesn't need people to go into details like that,' said the Brother, without showing the least surprise.

Naturally, not a word about the prediction was said to the boys of the top form, and the father and the few people he had told waited for its fulfilment with a confidence in which there was not a little curiosity. When the official results were announced, of course, every one of the candidates entered by the Autun junior seminary was found to have passed, as St Jean Marie Vianney had calmly foretold from the obscurity of his confessional.

Just as astonishing is another story of which a school-boy is the hero. One day in June 1855 a boy was lying in the infirmary of a Lons-le-Saunier boarding-school dying of typhoid fever. His mother had hurried to his sick-bed, and on her entreaty the headmaster had just sent his form master off to the village of Ars. Ars was a long way away, however, and the agonizing question on everyone's lips at Lons-le-Saunier was whether he would be able to arrive in time. Hope had almost faded when, on the afternoon of the following day, the patient suddenly emerged from his coma, opened his eyes and said he wanted to get up. The doctor was sent for at once and said immediately that the boy was not only out of danger but already on the way to convalescence.

It may be asked what had been happening meanwhile at Ars. It was an astonishing story. It was already night when the form master reached the village, to find the church closed and surrounded by a crowd several hundreds strong. When day came, he soon

gave up hope of getting to the Abbé Vianney by joining the queue for his confessional, and decided to wait for him outside. As things turned out, he found himself in the way of the saint as he was returning from a visit to a sick parishioner, and the Curé, who did not even know of his existence, beckoned to him to approach.

‘I think you’ve come to see me about Joseph Vaucher, the schoolboy who is ill?’ he said. ‘Write and tell his parents from me that he won’t die.’

It was at the precise moment when the saint was saying these words, as was learned later, that Joseph had sat up in his bed.

The fact that the Abbé Vianney had known without ever being told of it, not only the fact that the boy was ill, but even his name, admits of no purely human explanation, but it does not stand alone in the life of the saint. One day in 1855 a country gentleman of Cézeryriat, in the Ain, a M. de la Barge, was calling on his old friend the Abbé Alliot, curé of Ambérieux-en-Dombes. Ambérieux was about four miles from Ars, and in the course of the two men’s conversation the name of the Abbé Vianney came up.

‘You really don’t know him then?’ the Abbé Alliot asked.

‘Never even seen him,’ M. de la Barge replied. ‘I’ve never set foot in that part of the department.’

‘Suppose we go over there?’

‘I should be delighted.’

The priest and the country gentleman set off then, but the end of the story will be best left to Canon Ball, vice-postulator of the Curé d’Ars’s canonization cause.

‘As soon as they arrived in the village and before going to see the Abbé Vianney,’ he says, ‘the two men went to the missionaries. A few moments later the

Curé arrived there, too, to pay his daily call on his assistants. Everyone rose when he entered, but to the astonishment of M. de la Barge, the Abbé Vianney, after passing the time of the day with those present in the ordinary way, came over to him, shook his hand warmly and greeted him by his name, as if he had been an old acquaintance. Now M. de la Barge knew for a fact that he had not only never met the Curé d'Ars before but had never had any sort of dealings with him, either by correspondence or in any other way. Since no one had the chance of giving the Abbé Vianney the least hint of the new pilgrim's arrival, M. de la Barge was overcome with surprise. What had happened, of course, had been that the Abbé Vianney had given a new proof of the gift of supernatural intuition with which heaven had so richly endowed him, and none of those who were present could conceive any other explanation of the facts that had occurred before their eyes.'

A similar case happened in 1859, when a Lyons cobbler who went in for spiritualism had mingled as a mere sightseer in the crowd that thronged round the Curé d'Ars as he was leaving his church.

'Dufour,' the Curé addressed him, 'go back home at once. Your wife is waiting for you impatiently: at this very moment the bailiffs are in your house.'

The flabbergasted Dufour, for that was his name, seemed unable to take in the words he had heard.

'Yes, off with you, my friend,' the servant of God continued in kindly tones, 'you'll be back here next year.'

There was hardly one of the pilgrims who was not in a hurry to see and to talk to the Curé d'Ars, but it

was not infrequent for him to pick out from the crowd those who were really more pressed for time than the rest, and to ask them or send a message to them to come to the confessional before their turn. Such an incident happened, one vigil of the Ascension, to a M. Godfert, a schoolteacher of Bourg-St-Christophe, in the Ain. M. Godfert had come to Ars with the intention of staying till the Saturday, and his wife was taking his place in the school as best she could. He was no higher than thirtieth in the queue of men waiting in the choir of the church, when the Abbé Vianney beckoned to him to come straight to the confessional. M. Godfert confessed, but did not receive absolution. 'Come back tomorrow after vespers,' the Curé told him.

The schoolteacher duly returned, and when the Abbé Vianney had given him absolution he told him in tones that admitted of no argument: 'My child, you must set off home tomorrow.'

M. Godfert did as he was told, though he could not help worrying what could be happening at Bourg-St-Christophe that made his prompt return so imperative. He arrived back on the Friday evening, however, after a forced march of twenty-five miles, to find his wife well and his school in perfect order.

Mme Godfert was as baffled as her husband at the Curé's peremptory orders, but the morning of Saturday had hardly begun when the mystery was cleared up in a flash. Seven o'clock was just striking as a touring inspector of education arrived in his carriage; shortly after the pupils appeared. The inspector soon satisfied himself that everything was in perfect order at Bourg-St-Christophe, with well-behaved children and a model schoolteacher, always at his post. M. Godfert listened to his chief's compliments without turning a

hair, but as soon as the inspector's carriage had disappeared round the corner the Godfert couple looked each other in the eyes with an incredulous air, and after a sigh of relief burst into laughter.

Had it not been for the Curé's supernatural intuition, the 'model teacher', who had gone off to Ars without getting leave, would have been absent when his superior arrived to visit him.

More than one extraordinary chain of events reveals how the Curé d'Ars could read the secrets of men's hearts. About 1855 an Avignon priest, the Abbé Bernard, found himself up against an extremely difficult point of conscience which it was his duty as a confessor to solve. The nature of the facts was such that it was impossible to seek advice locally, and in any case the Abbé Bernard did not feel that any of his colleagues would be able to help him. Suddenly he remembered the Curé d'Ars and set out to see him.

The Abbé Bernard's intention had been to spend no more than a bare hour in the village, for all he had been warned that many pilgrims had to wait three days and more before they got to the saint's confessional. He had only to arrive in Ars to see for himself how true the warning was. He had got to be back in Avignon as soon as he possibly could, but he had also got to solve his problem, so he finally reconciled himself to staying on and took a room in the little Hotel of Notre Dame des Grâces, almost next door to the old presbytery.

Next day, about one o'clock in the afternoon, the Abbé Vianney was returning from a visit to a sick-bed. He was crossing the square lined with walnut trees that gave on to the churchyard and the old church, on his way back to his confessional, when onlookers saw him

break all his usual habits and make for the hotel where the Abbé Bernard was staying. It is easy to understand the visitor's feeling of amazement when a quiet tap at his door was followed by the entry into his room of a white-haired priest whom he recognized immediately—so familiar had pictures made the saint's features up and down the country—as the Curé d'Ars.

'My dear fellow,' the Abbé Vianney greeted him, 'I think you've come to consult me over such and such a question. I thought I wouldn't keep you waiting.'

The Curé unravelled the point of conscience with an astonishing rapidity, soundness and clarity, bade good-bye to the still stupefied visitor and disappeared with a smile on his lips to hurry back to his confessional.

A nun whose community was not very far from Ars had long wanted to make the pilgrimage there. She had, of course, a religious motive, for she felt a special devotion for St Philomena and had dreamed of being able to pray, as so many others had, in her chapel. She had, however, two other reasons and there was more than a little curiosity in them: she wanted to see the Curé, of whom she only knew by hearsay, and to look at the vestments of the church, whose magnificence was renowned far and wide. She was likely enough the sacristan of her convent. She finally got to Ars and had the good luck to be between the presbytery and the church just as the Curé was crossing the way to go to his confessional.

'Sister So-and-so,' he said, 'come with me,' and the nun's own story is the best account of what followed.

'He took me to the chapel of St Philomena,' she said, 'and after a few moments of prayer before the statue of the saint, he showed me into the sacristy, where he

laid out all the vestments for me to see. Finally he said to me: "Sister, you came here to say a prayer to St Philomena: I've taken you to her chapel. Another reason you came was to look at the vestments: there they are, before your eyes. The last reason you came was to see the Curé d'Ars: here he is in front of you. You've had everything you wanted. I wish you a very good day." "

The Sister could do no more than follow the Curé's explanations and thank him with a smile. But when she left her chief source of satisfaction was that she had seen a saint.

One day at the very beginning of February 1859 a pilgrim of a very unusual kind had just entered the Ars church, elbowing his way roughly through the crowd. He wanted to see the Abbé Vianney at once, he said, he had not a moment to waste. From his gloomy air and feverish eyes he might have been taken for a madman, but in fact he was a spiritualist, or claimed to be. Antoine Saubin, for that was his name, was a Lyons workman who had started by summoning up the spirits of the dead and ended by fearing that he might have succeeded only too well. He was being hounded by horrible dreams, and he had come to tell the Curé d'Ars about them.

The worst of it was he had to wait. The Abbé Vianney, who had interrupted his confessions for a moment, had left the chapel of St John the Baptist for the chapel of St Philomena, and there he was now quietly reciting his breviary. Antoine Saubin had managed to get up within a few feet of him. The spiritualist was familiar enough with the Curé d'Ars's reputation as a saint. His knowledge of mystical

theology was, however, more limited than his acquaintance with spiritualism, and for him a saint meant a man whose business it is to help all men and whose gift it is to read every secret. On that point he was not so very far out, but as he sat, fuming with impatience, he merely said to himself: 'If this priest really walked with God as they say he does, he couldn't help knowing that I want to talk to him and that I'm in a hurry.' The thought had hardly entered his mind when the Curé d'Ars turned round and answered the words he had never even spoken. 'Don't worry, my dear fellow,' he said; 'give me a moment and I'll be with you.'

Antoine Saubin lost no time in pouring out his nightmares to the servant of God. 'All these fancies of yours,' the Curé told him, 'are illusions sent by the devil to mislead you. Do a novena to Our Lady of Fourvière, and I assure you it will all stop.' Antoine did not confess to the Abbé Vianney, but on his advice he went up to Our Lady of Fourvière as soon as he returned and laid down the load of his sins at the feet of a Jesuit Father.

On the following March 19 the former spiritualist presented himself humbly at the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of the Snows and begged for the privilege of being received as a novice. He became Brother Joachim, and later was one of the Cistercian colony who founded near Ars the magnificent abbey of Our Lady of the Dombes, where he died in the calling to which God had summoned him.

XX

MIRACLES IN THE LIFE OF THE CURÉ D'ARS

II. INTUITIONS AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

TIME and again the Abbé Vianney was called on to reveal their vocations to young people eager for well-doing but uncertain of the future. There was probably no subject on which he was consulted more often, and on which his replies to his visitors were more astounding and, indeed, more moving.

On August 14, 1828, Marie Duclout and Eugénie Bernard, two young women of Fareins, a parish not far from Ars, came to confess to him in preparation for the feast of the Assumption. His reputation for sanctity was already spreading from parish to parish; it was soon to penetrate far beyond the boundaries of the diocese of Belley and even of France. It was only Eugénie Bernard who wanted the advice of the Curé d'Ars on her vocation. She wanted to enter a convent, but her parents absolutely refused to consider it. They had married off their elder daughter, Jeanne Marie, and they expected their younger daughter to bring them a new son-in-law; after all, Jeanne Marie, who had married one of her cousins, Etienne Bernard, was so happy.

The Curé d'Ars did not hesitate for a moment over his reply. 'No, my child,' he told Eugénie, 'you won't become a nun. You'll stay with your parents

and you'll die with your family. It's your sister who will be the nun.'

'I beg your pardon, Monsieur le Curé?' the astonished girl replied.

'I said your sister and not you.'

The announcement left the penitent flabbergasted: it was so utterly incredible. In any case she had no time to protest, for the shutter closed on her at once. On her way back she told the strange story to her friend, and Marie Duclout, who looked on the Abbé Vianney as a real saint, could only reply: 'There's nothing for it but to do as you were told.'

'Yes, I'll wait and see what happens,' replied the unhappy Eugénie, and she reconciled herself to staying on at home. She made up her mind, though, that never, whatever happened, would she reveal to her sister Jeanne Marie the prediction of the Curé d'Ars.

A year had hardly passed when Etienne Bernard died. A few months later his widow entered the Ursuline convent of Villefranche-sur-Saône. Eugénie stayed with her old parents, waited on them, cared for them, closed their eyes and died like a saint with the happy dream of her girlhood still no more than a dream. The Curé d'Ars had made no mistake.

Another prediction of the same kind dates from almost exactly nineteen years later. About midday on July 28, 1847, the Abbé Vianney was leaving his church for his presbytery after spending twelve hours on end in his confessional. On his way he was stopped by a poor woman who had flung herself on her knees and held out for his blessing her seven-months-old baby son.

'The child you are holding in yours arms,' the Curé told her, weighing every word, 'has been chosen by

God for His glory. His vocation is to the religious life. He will become a Brother of the Christian Schools and will do much good.'

The child, Paul Bargel, became Brother PÉrial Etienne, a religious of outstanding spirituality who was successively Visitor of his order and assistant to the Superior-General.

A story in which the saint's foreknowledge condescended to the very details of the future was that of Mlle Ernestine Durand. Mlle Durand, the daughter of a well-to-do business man who lived in the outskirts of Lyons, wanted to become a Little Sister of the Poor. She had the gravest doubts, however, whether her parents would give their consent, and she had to have advice. Since it was summer, she got leave to go on a few days' visit to a girl cousin and the pair lost no time in setting out on a pilgrimage to Ars.

As soon as she was in the confessional, Mlle Durand confided her dream to the saint. 'Yes, my child,' he reassured her at once, 'your wish will come true. You are going to be a Little Sister of the Poor.'

'Thank you, Monsieur le Curé: how can I thank you enough?' Mlle Durand stammered.

'But, my child, you'll hardly have entered the convent than you'll have to come out,' the Abbé Vianney went on.

'In that case, Monsieur le Curé, I'd rather not go in at all.'

'No, no: you go ahead with your plans. Three days after you've come out, your mother herself will take you back.'

Mlle Durand meekly did as she was told and pressed her family till they consented to her taking her vows.

They finally agreed, with no great enthusiasm, and she began her period of postulancy with the Little Sisters in Lyons. She was very happy, but she could not help asking herself just how it was to happen that her convent life would be cut short, only to begin again, for she never for a moment doubted the prediction of the Curé d'Ars.

The beginning of the answer to her questions came one day when she was summoned urgently to the visiting-room, to find two men waiting for her who were the last people she had expected to see. One was her brother, but a brother whose manner was a mixture of the moody, the agitated and the peremptory; the other was a police officer. The brother told her to come with him at once; if she refused, his companion would see to it that she did as she was told.

Ernestine gave way, in a flood of tears, and left the convent with her brother on one side and the police superintendent on the other. At home she found a prodigal's welcome waiting for her. But it was in vain for her father and mother to vie with each other in kindness, to ply her with wonderful dishes 'to take the taste of the convent skilly out of her mouth', to tuck her up with kisses in the downiest of beds: never for a moment did she stop weeping.

Three days of this flood, and Mme Durand could only surrender. 'I only acted for your good, my dear girl,' she said. 'But if you really feel like that about it . . . There now, I'll hand you back to your beloved nuns.'

And it was Mme Durand herself, as the Curé d'Ars had predicted, who took her now radiant Ernestine back to the Lyons house of the Little Sisters of the Poor exactly three days after she had left it. Ernestine

became Sister Marie of St Celestine and died with a smile on her lips, full of years and merits, in the Poitiers convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

The piercing gaze of the Curé d'Ars penetrated even deeper than the world of souls. There is irrefutable evidence that it saw clean through into the mysterious regions of the Beyond: into heaven, into purgatory, perhaps even into hell with which, it has already been seen, the saint had his frequent brushes on earth.

On Friday, October 7, 1853, there died at Bordeaux the Reverend Mother St Joseph, founder of the Order of St Joseph, whose parent establishment stands round the corner from the cathedral. This deeply-respected nun had been born at Villefranche-sur-Saône and was a cousin of one of the headmistresses of the Ars Providence, and she was well known to the Abbé Vianney.

The next morning, a girl from the Isère who was on the point of entering the order, and who had heard about its foundress's illness managed to reach the Curé, who had already vested himself for his Mass. 'M. l'Abbé,' she asked him, 'may I ask you to pray for the recovery of Mother St Joseph?'

'My child,' replied the Abbé Vianney, lifting his eyes to the sky with a smile, 'Mother St Joseph doesn't need it any more: she is dead.'

'But, Monsieur l'Abbé, in that case won't you pray for her soul?' the girl insisted.

The only answer the Curé d'Ars gave was to lift his eyes to the sky once more. Now nobody had even spoken to him of the illness, much less the death of the saintly nun, whose cause was to be brought one day before the Holy Office, yet he was 'canonizing' her by

a supernatural intuition within a matter of hours of her passing.

One day a young woman in deep mourning got into a railway compartment where there were a number of pilgrims on their way to Ars. A priest, the Abbé Guillaumet, Superior of the house of the Immaculate Conception of St Dizier, in the Haute Marne, seemed to be in charge of the little group. As the train started to pull into Villefranche-sur-Saône, the nearest station to Ars, the pilgrims began to get their belongings down.

‘Monsieur l’Abbé,’ said the woman in mourning, ‘would you mind if I were to come along wherever you’re going? I might as well go there as anywhere else: I’m travelling for pleasure, you see. And could you tell me about things when we get there?’

‘I’ll do my best,’ the priest replied. ‘You can join our party if you like.’

‘You were talking about a saint who works miracles whom you’re going to see. Do you think, Monsieur l’Abbé, you could arrange for me to meet him?’

‘There again, I’ll do what I can,’ the Abbé Guillaumet assured her.

The carriage into which the travellers got outside Villefranche station set them down in front of the church at Ars between eleven o’clock and midday. ‘We couldn’t have arrived at a better time,’ commented the priest, who had made the pilgrimage before and knew the village time-table. ‘The Curé will be just ending his catechism class. We’ll try and put ourselves in his way when he goes over from his church to his presbytery, any moment now.’ The woman in mourning, pale with emotion, slipped into the ranks of

the pilgrims and, thanks to the Abbé Guillaumet, was able to get a good place, in the front row.

Suddenly, the Curé d'Ars appeared. There was a kindly smile on his face and his deep blue eyes, burning with an inner fire, darted keenly to left and to right. Only he can have known how many exalted hopes and hidden sorrows that piercing gaze discerned, but evidently one of his pilgrims seemed to him to be in despair, for he went straight to her. He stopped before the woman in mourning, who had fallen on her knees. He bent down and whispered into her ear. And what he said was: 'He is saved. Yes, he is saved.'

The unhappy woman shook her head desperately, as if to say: But it can't be true. And the Curé's low voice continued, in even more emphatic tones.

'I tell you he is saved,' he insisted. 'His soul is in purgatory and you must pray for him. Between the parapet of the bridge and the water he had the time to make a dying act of repentance. It was the Most Blessed Virgin who won him his pardon. Do you remember the Month of Mary you had put up in your room? Your husband may have been irreligious, but he didn't try to stop you; sometimes he even joined in your prayers. It was that which earned him mercy in his final hour.'

The saint passed on to his presbytery. The young widow, without another word, stumbled into the church. She wanted to be alone and to weep, but above all she wanted to thank God for His infinite compassion. Her husband was saved, was saved, though every circumstance of his death had overwhelmed her with the certainty that he was lost for ever.

It was only the next day, when she met the Abbé Guillaumet and thanked him for his great kindness, that she told him her story and revealed the message of comfort the Abbé Vianney had whispered in her ear. 'My husband is saved,' she ended up. 'I shall really see him in heaven. Monsieur l'Abbé, the doctors had ordered me to travel for my health, but all that was really wrong with me was my horrible misery at that dreadful death. He's saved now—and I'm cured . . .'

Facts so remarkable, so out of the ordinary and so numerous as these could only be the manifestation of an incontestable sanctity. There is, however, another class of facts more distinctive still, which may be said to denote of a soul that it has attained perfection. Wonders of this kind also are to be found in the story of the Curé d'Ars, and they link him in fellowship with the greatest of the mystics. For time and again the Curé was seized up into an ecstasy, and snatched away by contemplation from all awareness of the senses.

One day in Holy Week, a nun who was confessing to him suddenly heard his voice stop. His last words had been: 'Ah, my child! . . .'

spoken with a deep sigh; then silence had fallen. When he began to speak again, it was in an unknown language. 'I was so astounded,' the nun said, 'that I looked him in the face. He seemed to be out of his body. I believed he was seeing God. I thought I was unworthy to remain in the presence of such a great saint, so I came out all scared.'

The Curé had just opened the shutter to hear the confession of another nun, when she saw that he was

what she could only describe as permeated with light. He was motionless and for almost an hour maintained a silence more impressive than any words and which he only broke in the end to impart to the penitent a revelation which lighted up the very depths of her soul.

On May 8, 1840, a devout woman who was bringing the Curé a gift for his charities was witness of an apparition which she later described at length to the prelates who were investigating the Ars cause. The story is best told in her own words.

‘The clock had just struck one o’clock in the afternoon,’ she said, ‘and the Curé was alone in his room. Catherine Lassagne opened the door of the presbytery to me, and I had already started to climb the stairs when I heard the Abbé Vianney talking as if there was someone with him. I went up on tiptoe and I listened. Someone was saying to him in a gentle voice: “What do you want?”’

‘“My sweet mother,” I heard the Curé’s voice answer, “I want the conversion of sinners, the consolation of mourners, and the relief of my sick, and especially of one of them who has been ill for a long time and who is praying that she may either die or be cured.”’

‘The other voice replied: “She will be cured, but later.”’

‘At these words, I suddenly entered the room, for the door was standing just ajar. As I was suffering from cancer, I was certain that the last words I heard had been about me. What was my surprise when I saw standing in front of the fireplace a lady clad in a dress of dazzling whiteness sown with golden roses. Her shoes seemed to me as white as snow, round her

head was a crown of stars which shone like the sun and I was almost blinded.

‘When I was able to lift my eyes on her again, I saw she was smiling most kindly. “Dear mother,” I blurted out, “take me to heaven.”’

‘“Later,” was all she said.

‘“Oh, mother, it’s time now!” I answered.

‘“You will always be my child and I will always be your mother,” she said, and with these words she disappeared. For a moment I was riveted where I stood, I was so dumbfounded at the privilege I had been granted. When I came to myself, I saw the Curé still standing motionless in front of his table, his hands clasped on his breast. I was terrified lest he might be dead, so I went up to him and pulled him by a fold of his cassock.

‘“My God,” was all he said, “is it You?”’

‘“No, Monsieur l’Abbé, it’s me,” I replied, and as I spoke he came to himself and seemed to shake off his rigidity. “Where were you all this time, Monsieur l’Abbé?” I went on. “What did you see?”’

‘“I saw a lady.”’

‘“I saw her, too,” I said. “Who is she, this lady?”’

‘“If you say a single word about it,” the Abbé Vianney replied sternly, “you’ll never set foot here again.”’

‘“May I tell you what I thought, Monsieur l’Abbe?” I said. “I thought it was the Blessed Virgin.”’

‘“You weren’t mistaken either. So you think you saw her, too?”’

‘“Yes, I saw her and I talked to her,” I answered. “But now you tell me what sort of state you were in when I thought you were dead.”’

“No, no. I was simply so happy at seeing my mother.”

“Monsieur l'Abbé,” I said, “it's only thanks to you that I've seen her. When she comes back, consecrate me to her, so that she may consecrate me herself to her divine Son.”

The servant of God promised he would, and then added: “You'll get better.”

“When, Monsieur l'Abbé?” I insisted.

“A little later. Don't press me too hard.” Then in a gentler tone he added: “What with the Blessed Virgin and St Philomena, we know each other quite well.”

Almost more astonishing than these extraordinary appearances themselves was the simplicity, it might almost be said the good-natured air, with which their recipient accepted them. The truth was that for the Curé d'Ars, by an unexampled grace, the extraordinary had become the ordinary. The supernatural formed the very air he breathed: the partners of his everyday conversation were the angels and the saints of God, and even God Himself. It was their absence that he found astonishing, and when a day or two passed without his having met one of these visitors from above, he became unhappy. One lunch-time at Providence, when he had evidently not noticed that there was someone else in the gloomy room where he ate his apology for a meal, he murmured with a sigh: ‘Really, I haven't seen God since Sunday.’

From her corner the cook, Jeanne Marie Chanay, spoke up: ‘Did you used to see him before Sunday then, Monsieur le Curé?’ she asked.

The servant of God, who had given himself away

without realizing it, blushed with embarrassment and held his peace.

Another way in which the exceptional sanctity of the Curé d'Ars revealed itself was by the gift of tears. Sometimes this grace would lead him to weep over the sad lot of the 'unhappy sinners', sometimes it would flood his heart with unspeakable tenderness at the thought of the goodness and the mercies of God, in front of the tabernacle where he was adoring Jesus Christ.

A girl from Bessenay, in the Rhone department, had come to consult him in the sacristy about a very serious problem. She saw him, Canon Ball, vice-postulator of the Ars cause, records, 'clasping his hands, fixing his eyes on the heavens and rising from the ground to a height of about a foot.' When his ecstasy was over, he gave her a reply of astonishing clarity. The Abbé Gardette, curé of the church of St Vincent at Chalon-sur-Saône, had a similar experience. He saw the Abbé Vianney, who was reciting the act of charity in the evening prayers, rising slowly above the pulpit where he had been kneeling, as if he had been lifted up and borne by angels. His face was transfigured, and his head was surrounded by a halo. The unearthly light was but a reflection of the immortal felicity which grace had permitted him to begin here below and which was to find its full flowering in the glory of paradise.

XXI

DEATH AND GLORIFICATION

IT was not far short of being another miracle of God that the Abbé Vianney had continued to the age of seventy-three to get up every day about midnight and to shoulder without a moment's respite his overwhelming burden of work and his heroic penances. At last, however, the good servant was going to receive his reward.

All the same, like St Martin when he was at the point of death, the saint of Ars might be exhausted but he 'did not refuse the job'. One day in 1858 the Abbé Toccanier put the question to him. 'Monsieur l'Abbé,' he asked, 'if God gave you the choice between going to heaven at once and going on working as you are for the conversion of sinners, which would you choose?'

'I'd stay, my dear fellow.'

'But in heaven the saints are so happy. No more troubles, no more temptations!'

'Yes, the saints are happy enough,' the Curé replied, 'but they're capitalists. They've worked well, of course, because God punishes idleness and only rewards hard work, but they can't win souls for God by their labours and their sufferings as we can.'

'If God were to leave you here below till the end of the world, you'd have all the time you wanted in front of you. Tell me, would you still get up so early?'

'Yes, my dear fellow, I shall always get up at mid-

night. I'm not afraid of a little tiredness. I should be the happiest of priests if it weren't for the thought that I shall have to appear as a curé before the judgment seat of God.' And the tears rolled down his cheeks.

All the Curé d'Ars was in that simple conversation—his unearthly humility, his utter abnegation—his complete devotion to the salvation of his fellow-men. Earth cannot lightheartedly part with its saints, yet the time must come when heaven claims them for its own.

The Curé's death was no lingering one: it came on him as swiftly as it comes on the soldier in the heat of the battle.

There were, indeed, moments in his last year when he might have seemed to be at his last gasp, worn out as he was by a racking cough. All the same, as the Abbé Toccanier testified at the canonization process, 'he showed no signs of care, his face was as calm and smiling as ever and there was nothing from which the pilgrims could guess the cruel suffering he was going through.' He was as active and as full of plans as he had ever been: he was thinking of rebuilding his church and arranging for a mission to be preached in the parish. Nevertheless, his presentiments did not deceive him: he had little more time left on earth. On July 18, 1859, he declared quite plainly the very day of his death: it would be, he said, one of the opening days of the coming August.

Friday, July 29, was a particularly exhausting day for him. There was not a moment when the church was not packed to overflowing with pilgrims, and the atmosphere became as close as a Turkish bath. The saint had woken up ill, but that did not prevent him

from going down to the church at one in the morning. He was on fire with fever; he was seized with fits of suffocation in the confessional, and more than once he had to be led outside to recover in the open air. All the same, he confessed for sixteen hours before he went up again to his room, leaning on the arm of Brother Jérôme.

Midnight sounded from the church tower, then one o'clock, but the broken athlete did not get up. At length he called out, and Catherine Lassagne who, unknown to him, had been waiting in the next room, hurried to his bedside.

'My humble end has come,' he whispered; 'you must send for the curé of Jassans.'

'I'll go and get the doctor, too,' Catherine said.

'It would be waste of time; the doctor can't do anything.'

The Abbé Toccanier was the next to arrive. 'M. le Curé,' he tried to tell his superior, in the tones of a son talking to an adored father, 'St Philomena, who cured you sixteen years ago, will cure you this time, too.'

'St Philomena won't be able to do anything now,' the Curé said.

As he spoke, the tide of pilgrims was lapping against the threshold of the presbytery. They could not believe the news that was beginning to be whispered around. They had come to see the saint of Ars, and now, perhaps, he was to be taken from mortal sight for ever. There were tears in the voices that called for him.

The Abbé Vianney, in the words of the Abbé Beau, his confessor, 'was completely conscious and remained so to the very end. He made his confession to me with

his accustomed devoutness, with no sort of agitation and no recalling of his past anxieties.' He gave his permission for his parishioners to come up and see him. The honest folk stood rooted on the landing and looked at him in silence, but he summoned up just enough strength to smile at them once more and to raise his hand in a last blessing. 'I saw him in bed on the last day of his life,' a peasant in his parish said, 'and he was as peaceful and as calm as an angel.' 'I could not see his lips moving,' his confessor added, 'but his eyes were gazing fixedly above and I could not help thinking that he was in contemplation. I believe that something extraordinary was going on in him during these hours.'

In the afternoon of August 2, the Abbé Beau was preparing to administer him the last sacraments, which he had indeed asked for himself. 'How good God is,' he said in a whisper. 'When you can't go to see Him any more, it's He who comes to you,' and the tears streamed down his burning cheeks.

'Monsieur le Curé, why are you crying?' asked the Brother who was watching at his bedside.

'It's so sad to receive communion for the last time,' sighed the dying man, for whom the Eucharist had been his greatest joy.

On the evening of Wednesday, August 3, the Bishop of Belley, Mgr de Langalerie, arrived to take the Curé d'Ars a last time in his arms. The missionaries, who had been called in from the parishes where they were preaching, kept watch in prayer beside the dying man. The next day, at two o'clock in the morning, St Jean Marie Vianney passed peacefully away, at the very moment when the priest who was reading aloud the

prayers for the dying had reached the words: 'May the angels of God come to meet him and lead him into the heavenly Jerusalem.'

The tolling of the death-knell plunged Ars and the parishes all round into the deepest mourning: the pilgrims who thronged the church could hardly believe the ill news as they repeated to themselves that their father and their comforter was no more. Something else had come to an end, too, that might never more be seen on earth: crowds so enormous, pressing for thirty years together to the feet of a saint so great.

They gathered for the last time, the crowds, on the morning of Saturday August 6, 1859, to escort the saint's coffin to its last rest. Six thousand laymen and three hundred priests—and many priests had not been able to come on account of their Saturday confessions—trod in a procession that was a single silent prayer. Mgr de Langalerie, who presided at the obsequies, spoke a magnificent panegyric of the servant of God.

'How many years, nay how many centuries have passed over the world,' he asked, 'since it has seen the spectacle of a priestly life lived on such lines, so utterly and continuously dedicated and devoted, with such fruitfulness and such holiness, to the service of God? Well done, good and faithful servant,' the Bishop of Belley continued—and there were few in the congregation who did not see a prophetic meaning in his use of the text, taken as it was from the Church's ritual in honour of a new saint—'well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. Your working day is over, the Lord is telling you; you have done enough, toiled all you can. Come, here is your recompense and the reward of your labours . . .

'And speaking to you, my dear, my venerated Curé,

I say: Be assured that the greatest, the most ardently awaited day of my episcopate will be the day that the infallible voice of the Church permits me to hail you solemnly and to intone in your honour: Good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!’

The Church knew it and Rome knew it: a saintly priest, one of the little band whose life calls out for canonization, had rendered up his soul on the soil of France. Indeed, the voice of the people, which—when it speaks under right guidance—is the voice of God, had already spoken, and had canonized the Curé d’Ars thirty years before his death. ‘Where is the saint?’ or ‘We want to see your saint’ had often been the first words of pilgrims arriving in the village. Now the Church, in her turn, was to speak.

While the Abbé Alfred Monnin was writing the biography which was to make the kindly features of the Abbé Vianney even better known to the world and the Abbé Toccanier was beginning to build the ‘fine church’ in honour of St Philomena of which his saintly predecessor had dreamed, Mgr de Langalerie was getting together the evidence necessary for his canonization. November 21, 1862, saw the official establishment of an ecclesiastical court which was to carry out what is known as ‘the Ordinary’s Process’, that is to say a searching enquiry, presided over by the bishop of the diocese, into the life, virtues, miracles and writings of the servant of God. The court concluded its work on March 6, 1865, and the next stage, the ‘Apostolic Process’, was opened by a decree of Pius IX dated February 6, 1866. On October 3, 1872, the Curé d’Ars was declared Venerable. On January 8, 1905, Pius X raised him to the glory of the altars by pronouncing his beatification and gave him as patron to

all the parish priests of France and the French colonies. Finally, on May 31, 1925, the year that saw the canonization of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, the Curé d'Ars terminated the series of Holy Year canonizations when he became St Jean Marie Vianney.

Seventy thousand people of every tongue and nation thronged the great basilica of St Peter's for the ceremony, and when there appeared, towering over the heads of the enraptured crowd, the banner bearing the likeness of the new saint, the universal shout of welcome might have been an echo of the old days at Ars. Then thousands of throats took up the jubilant *Te Deum* that was the response to the pontifical decree of canonization. St Peter's became a blaze of triumphant light; it was impossible to remain untouched by the great outburst of joy.

For the memory of St Jean Marie Vianney had lived on in the hearts of the common people among whom his cult had taken deep and ineradicable root. The obscure village where he passed forty-one years of his life never ceased to be a place of pilgrimage, from the day of his death on. Up to June 17, 1904, the day when the body of the Curé d'Ars was exhumed from his grave, pilgrims had to content themselves with praying on the slab of black marble that covered his remains, and many miracles, of healing no less than of conversion, occurred here. The number of visitors increased following the beatification ceremonies of 1905, for there was a new attraction to bring pilgrims to Ars. Mgr Convert, the fourth successor of the holy Curé, not only added to the choir of the new church built in honour of St Philomena a transept dedicated to St Jean Marie Vianney himself, he installed a superb reliquary over the white marble altar there.

Through the crystal pane of this more than royal lying in state, all who came might look on the saint sunk in the sleep of death. From then on there was not a day when pilgrims did not wait their turn to kneel in front of the shrine; there was hardly a morning when some visiting priest, often with a long journey behind him, was not saying his Mass at the altar, and often in the summer such masses succeeded each other without an interval from five in the morning to eleven and even later.

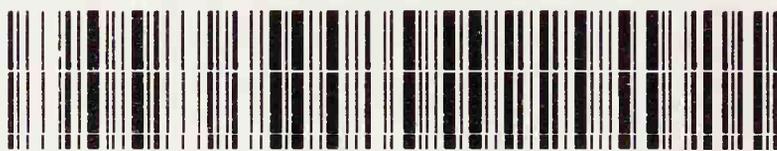
More and more Ars was to become the supreme place of pilgrimage for priests. Singly or in groups, priests and even bishops came to recollect themselves in this atmosphere of holiness that they might gain new strength to practise the virtues and show the spirit of their calling. They came from every country, too, for Pius XI, by a brief of April 23, 1929, had made the Curé d'Ars 'patron of all the parish priests in the world'.

Thus the humble village of Ars has become one of the holy places of France, and indeed of Christendom. Humble as the village are the places the pilgrims most flock to see: the old church, with the Curé's rude confessional just as he left it; the old presbytery, untenanted since his death, with the simple room he died in left just as it was. The high watermark of the pilgrimage comes on August 4, the feast day of the uneducated farmer's son who, with a hundred obstacles to fight against, won his way to the priesthood; of the simple parish priest whom we invoke today as St Jean Marie Vianney.

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