



# PRIESTHOOD

*“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life?’” -MATTHEW 16:24-26<sup>[1]</sup>*

## READING

### A TOWN TRANSFORMED BY A HUMBLE PRIEST

*The story of St. John Vianney, as told by Madame Des Garrets*

This is my country. It’s flat. It rains a lot. The soil doesn’t drain very well, so you will often see puddles everywhere. The rain also makes a lot of mist and fog. I have always thought it was beautiful, but it is also pretty plain.

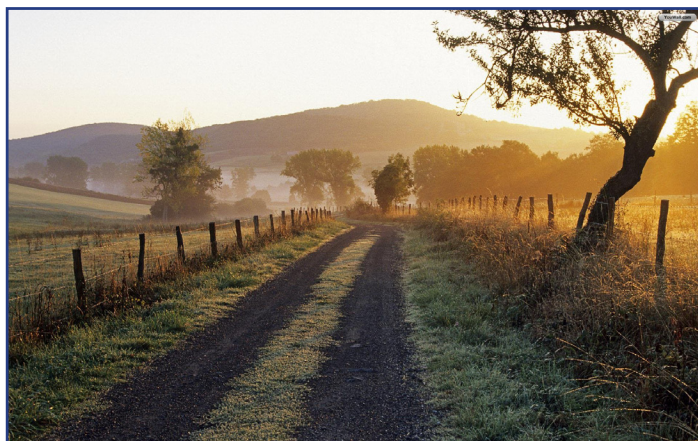
My town, called Ars, is so small, some nearby towns don’t even know we’re here. Only forty families or so live here. Forty families and four bars. You can draw your own conclusions.

Until just a few years ago, the Catholic religion was outlawed; although it is possible to practice again, religion has not really made a comeback. It has been almost eighteen years since this town had a priest. The vestments for Mass have fallen apart. The church smells like mold. After the church closed, a local club used it for meetings, maybe even for occult magic. We don’t know. It is a mess.

The government made Sunday a work day. People might have been upset at first, but that was more than fifteen years ago. All the young people can barely remember when it used to be normal to go to Mass. The children cannot remember at all. Even if we had a priest, most of us would prefer to work or relax, rather than going to Sunday mass. There is no Catholic school, no religious education, and many children have not even been baptized.

Although it’s this small, Ars has the same problems as the worst city: domestic violence, abuse, alcoholism, plenty of violent language and blasphemy.<sup>[2]</sup> It is not a place to raise children. It is not the worst town, just mediocre. In forty years, it’s likely that no one will be left to care about the things that matter.

Before the revolution, there were 60,000 priests in the country;



now there are less than 25,000. One-third of those priests are over sixty.<sup>[3]</sup> Since there are 30 million people in France, I can see why the bishop would not send a priest to Ars; there are too few priests and they are needed in bigger, more important cities.<sup>[4]</sup> No one who wanted to do something with his life would ever stay here, let alone come here.

I’m praying for a miracle. My name is Mlle. Des Garets. I am almost seventy and the lady of the manor. I never married and have no children. I have some power and considerable wealth. I pray every day and I spend my life taking care of the poor and sick in this area. I have done something needed. But I could not do everything. I might have been able to teach the Faith, but there was only so much time. And even if I had taught the Faith, it would not have been enough. Because we need the sacraments—we need a priest! There will never be life without the Blessed Sacrament, and for that we need a priest. There will never be life if we are stuck in our sins—we need confession, and for that we need a priest.

We need a priest but not just any priest. We need someone who can be an outstanding leader, a magnificent orator, someone clever and brilliant. Would the Church waste a priest like that on us?

<sup>[1]</sup> Scripture taken from the New American Bible, Revised Edition, available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/>.

<sup>[2]</sup> See <http://olrl.org/lives/vianney.shtml>

<sup>[3]</sup> Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: the French 1799-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 120.

<sup>[4]</sup> W. Scott Haine, *Culture and Customs of France* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 12.



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Our new priest came this February, 1818. I can guess why he has been sent. I suspect his superiors think him a priest that can be “wasted.” When he preaches, he sounds scratchy. He does not come from an educated family, and it is certain that he failed his seminary exams at least once. He got lost trying to get here. I’m depressed. I will help him; even if he is not the priest we need, he is a priest.

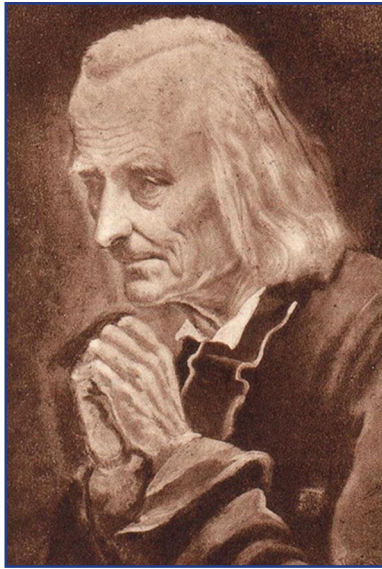
But if I could see the future, I would be ashamed of my doubts. We did not deserve this priest.

From his first arrival, our new priest tramped all over the area meeting people and talking to families. He was terribly poor—ate only bread and potatoes, sometimes eggs. He stayed poor on purpose to pray for us. He gave most of his furniture and his mattress away; he slept on the floor. He once prayed, “Lord, let me achieve the conversion of my parish, and I am ready to suffer whatever you decide all the rest of my life.”<sup>[5]</sup>

He cleaned up the church and reopened it. He bought a new altar and new vestments with his own money. He hand-painted the woodwork. He brought back the Mass. He spent nights writing homilies; he memorized them so he could give them with proper feeling, although he always found memorizing extremely hard. He started a school for girls. He spent a lot of time encouraging the young women of the town to stand up for themselves and avoid dangerous situations with young men, like drinking at dance parties.

He began Sunday vespers, he trained the altar servers, and he dedicated the parish to Our Lady. He promoted a town-wide procession and celebration for the Feast of Corpus Christi. In the last year of his life, the mayor and the whole town planned a special gift for the Feast of Corpus Christi. The mayor got a brass band to play for the procession. When they began to play, they say our priest was so happy he could not even talk.

The main thing was the time he spent in the confessional. Sometimes he spent as many as 16 hours a day hearing confessions. One would have to try it to see how hard that would be—sitting in a chair with few breaks, no windows, nothing to read, just giving total attention to others, hour after hour.



He was an amazing confessor. The kindest listener, the best advice. He was truly an *alter Christus*. Thousands of people were converted or returned to the faith. Pilgrims came from all over Europe to ask his advice. The last year of his life, more than 100,000 people traveled to our town just to go to confession.

It was not easy—three times, he tried to leave our town forever. He had a different plan each time, but each time he came back. After the third time, he decided once and for all that God would not let him go, and that he would live and die with us. He lived six more years. When he received the Last Sacraments, they say his words were: “Oh! it is sad to receive Holy Communion for the last time!”

Three hundred priests and thousands of others attended the funeral. This priest had been with us 41 years; he was the “Curé of Ars.” In French, *curé* is another word for priest. I like how it resembles the English word “cure.” That’s what Fr. John Vianney—St. John Vianney—was for us, our cure. The town of Ars was sick and dying, and he brought us back to life. He put us in touch with God, and God came back to Ars.

St. John Vianney is now the patron of all parish priests. He did struggle to pass his seminary exams. He did get sent to a seemingly impossible and unimportant assignment. And none of that seems to matter anymore. Fr. Vianney was incredibly happy and heroically holy. He saved us. He was just what Ars needed; he was what every town needs: a good priest.



<sup>[5]</sup> Taken from a film documentary of the saint’s life. See <http://youtu.be/SQOi88ZmTm0>



## OPTIONAL READING

### PRIESTS BURY THE DEAD<sup>[6]</sup>

*Excerpted from To Save a Thousand Souls*

The couple spoke to me as they were leaving the Saturday Vigil Mass. They were a lovely couple and their twelve-year-old son was with them. He said excitedly, “Father, we’re going to get a hamburger at my favorite place and then we’re going bowling tonight!” This couple had tried to have children for many years and they spent a lot of money going to different specialists. Finally, they conceived and had a son, but the baby had some complications, including a hole in his heart at birth which took several surgeries to repair. But he was doing great. He was attending our parish school and living the life of a normal twelve-year-old boy.

At nine o’clock that night, a nurse from the hospital emergency room called me and told me to come quickly. I later learned what had happened. While at the bowling alley, the boy had stood up and walked to the lane to bowl. After he bowled his ball down the lane, he turned around, grabbed his chest and fell. The doctors said that he was dead before he hit the ground. His heart had simply burst.

Later that night, I was kneeling in the church with a very heavy heart. I felt so badly for the family and for their suffering. I said, “Jesus, I don’t think I have the strength to bury a child right now. I can’t do this. Please help me. Please give me the grace to do this funeral and to minister to this family.”

I had never seen the Church more packed than it was the day of the funeral. God helped me. He gave me the grace and I made it through the homily. After the consecration and Communion, I remember thinking, “Jesus, it is almost over. Thank you Lord.”

The Catholic Rite of Committal at the cemetery is very brief, though it took a long time for all the people to park and make

their way to the grave. Once I had blessed the grave and finished the final commendation, the mother looked at me and said, “Father, please open the casket so I can say goodbye.” I thought to myself, “Oh no. Please don’t do this.” But what could I do? How could I deny the request of a mother burying her only child? So I nodded to the funeral director to go ahead and it was just as I suspected. The mother began to scream and cry, hugging her child in the casket. Her husband was there holding her and crying, and the family was all huddled around. It was a terrible, sad, unforgettable moment in their lives—and in mine.

Emotionally, I could not take it and tears poured down my cheeks. The funeral was officially over, so I just turned away and started walking slowly among the graves, acting as if I were

looking for a certain name on a tombstone. I was really trying to compose myself. After a few minutes, I suddenly heard Jesus speak to me very clearly. The Lord has spoken to me many times in my life, but there have been only a few instances where his voice and message were so clear.

Jesus said, “Thank you.”

And I understood in that instant that he was saying, “Thank you for being a priest.

Thank you for burying this child for me, and thank you for ministering to his parents.” I knew without any doubt that it was Jesus because his voice totally and immediately restored my emotional and spiritual strength. I went from being heavy-hearted and sad—one of the lowest moments in my life—to being emotionally strong, filled with joy and happiness. I immediately began to thank and praise God, “No Jesus, I should be thanking you. Thank you, Jesus, for being my Savior. Thank you for dying for me. Thank you...” But again the Lord communicated to me very clearly and this time he said, “Stop. Be quiet. Right now, I just want you to let *me* thank *you*.”

As I walked through the cemetery my heart was full, and I prayed quietly, “You’re welcome Jesus. You’re welcome. I am so glad that I am a priest.”



[6] Excerpts from Chapter 1 of *To Save a Thousand Souls: A Guide for Discerning a Vocation to Diocesan Priesthood*, by Fr. Brett Brannen)



# PRIESTHOOD

## DISCUSSION

### THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF PRIESTHOOD

All Christians share in the priesthood of Jesus, who is priest, prophet, and king. But ordained priests share in this reality in a special way.

Look over these lists of what a priest does, and think about the highs and lows of this vocation.

#### A priest sanctifies and mediates grace:

- He offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
- He feeds the People of God with the Body and Blood of Jesus
- He forgives sins
- He baptizes
- He witnesses marriages
- He prays with and for the People of God



The lows? People will need you and ask you for the sacraments even when you are sick, lonely, or tired. Like Christ, you may have enemies, and you will have to lovingly hear their confessions and offer them communion. That could be very hard. People may often be indifferent to you and you will have to work hard to convince them that they need the sacraments. For example, with John Vianney, at first nobody cared about the sacraments and he had to work very hard to inspire people. Once they cared, he then had to minister to these needs all the time in an age with very few brother priests to help him and support him.

The highs? These tasks are highs in themselves; imagine being part of these moments, the tears, the happiness, the excitement, the awesomeness of people finding happiness in Christ, the Church, and the sacraments. Is there a greater mission than saving souls?

St. John Vianney prayed, “Lord, let me achieve the conversion of my parish, and I am ready to suffer whatever you decide all the rest of my life.”<sup>[8]</sup>

#### As “prophet,” a priest teaches and preaches:

- He preaches the Gospel of Christ
- He instructs others about Jesus and His Teachings
- He evangelizes, bringing the Gospel to the whole world
- He counsels and guides the suffering
- A priest instructs his people.

The lows? People will not always be receptive to you; they might criticize you or try to trip you with questions they don’t actually want to know about. You might be disappointed when you do not have as much time as you want to prepare a homily, class, or talk, and then you may be embarrassed at your presentation. And you’ll just have to put it in God’s hands because you will not always have time to write the greatest homily ever. You might not be able to answer a question as well as you wanted to and you will feel badly about not doing better. You will hear stories of incredible suffering, and it might be hard at times for you to cope with the weight of other people’s sorrows. St. John Vianney surely knew that he was not the best public speaker and he was well aware of how long it took him to prepare a good homily. Sometimes he stayed up all night.

The highs? These tasks are highs in themselves. Sometimes you will be successful through God’s grace. People will tell you that

<sup>[8]</sup> Taken from a film documentary of the saint’s life. See <http://youtu.be/SQOi88ZmTm0> [return to text]



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they finally get it—that they wish to become Catholic, that they can now make sense of their life, cope with their suffering, or make an important decision. You will feel honored, humbled, and...just great! It is a huge honor to be allowed to spend all your time thinking about and trying to preach the Gospel and help people. St. John Vianney's happiest moments were seeing that the town had ceased to be indifferent; a town that had once cared nothing for God, was now marching in a public town-wide procession through the streets, the mayor having assembled a brass band, all to honor the Lord. What a transformation!

## As “king,” a priest leads, defends, and cares for the People of God:

- He visits the sick
- He cares for the Dying
- He buries the dead
- He stays with God's people in good times and in bad
- He defends the people of God from the Evil One
- He fights for the souls of God's people

The lows? You will see a lot of suffering and death as a priest. People will turn to you in their worst hour and that may be a lot for you to handle. Our famous enemies, “the world, the flesh, and the devil”, will target you more the more you serve the Lord. You may be the victim of vicious criticism and slander. You may find yourself in conflict with bad laws or demonic activity. You will have to keep a strong prayer life and firm resolutions to live virtuously in order to withstand such sorrow and opposition. Being a priest is hard work; three times St. John Vianney decided to leave Ars—it was so hard, and he was the only priest they had.

The highs? You will be God's own instrument in the lives of people. There are few things harder to cope with than death, and no enemy more dangerous than the world, the flesh, and the devil. You will be God's own soldier in the very front ranks, providing the most difficult and most needed defense of the human race possible. If you have ever watched a super-hero movie and felt some desire to be the one to save the city, you will understand what inspires a man to take on the dangerous but marvelous role of the priesthood. Three times after deciding to leave, St. John Vianney went back to Ars and decided to stay there until the end. The people needed him; God had called him. In the end, he loved God enough to stick to his calling.





## CLOSING READING

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### ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI (1182-1226)

Although Francis of Assisi was ordained a deacon, he never felt called to become a priest, and he remained all his life a religious brother. He always had a great reverence for the priesthood.

One story collected about St. Francis tells how he helped a priest who was in trouble. This remarkable story is helpful for us now, because it reminds us that priests are human just like anyone else. Our response should always be to redouble our prayers for them.

St. Francis shows us why:

“I have heard that once, while Saint Francis was traveling through Lombardy, he entered into a church to pray, when a certain man went up to him. Now this man, who was . . . a Manichean . . . decided to take advantage of his visit to attract people to his own sect, subvert their faith, and bring the priestly office into contempt. For the parish priest there was notorious for his immoral life, it being known throughout the district that he kept a concubine. And so this man said to the saint: ‘Look, should we believe what a priest says and reverence the sacraments he administers, when he maintains a concubine and his hands are polluted?’ . . . [Francis], realizing the evil intent of the heretic, went up to the priest in the presence of all the parishioners, knelt down before him and said: ‘I do not know whether these hands are such as this man says they are. But even if they were, I know that this can in no way lessen the power and the efficacy of the sacraments of God. These hands remain the means through which many of God’s benefits and graces flow to the people. That is why I kiss them, out of respect for the things they administer and out of reverence for him by whose authority they do so.’ Having said this, he knelt down in front of that priest and kissed his hands.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Several versions of this story say that the priest was overwhelmed by St. Francis’ support and converted to a purer life immediately. Mercy to the priest helped him fulfill his vocation. St. Francis always stressed that we must love priests most of all because they bring us Christ. Here he explains to his brother friars:

“If I were at the same time to meet some saint coming down from heaven and any poor little priest, I would first pay my respects to the priest and proceed to kiss his hands first. I would say, ‘Ah, just a moment, St. Lawrence, because this person’s hands handle the Word of Life and possess something that is more than human.’

“These hands have touched my Lord, and no matter what they be like, they could not soil Him or lessen His virtue. To honor the Lord, honor his minister. He can be bad for himself, but for me he is good.”



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<sup>[10]</sup> From the anecdotes of Stephen of Bourbon (1250-1261) in *Testimonia Minora*, 93-94, included in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume 2*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Vayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New York City Press, 2000), 787-788.



## OPTIONAL CLOSING READING

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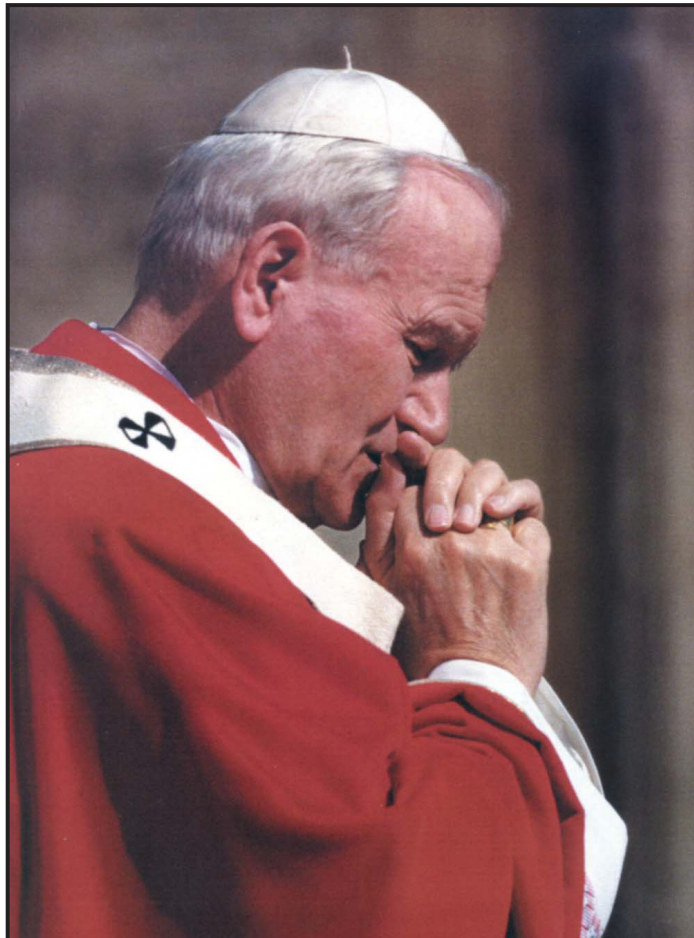
### POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II (1920-2005)

The Pope is a bishop and a bishop has the fullness of the priesthood. Sometimes we forget that the vocation of the Pope is ultimately the same vocation of the priesthood. Pope Saint John Paul II can teach us much about the priesthood.

In *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, St. John Paul II tells of first learning that he would be made a bishop. Here he shows how much his own vocation depended on the goodness of other people. He speaks of gratitude to the monastery which provided him a place to pray. He is grateful to the bishops who came before him: “how could I fail to be moved by this heroic spiritual heritage?” He is grateful for the happiness of working with other priests. He continues: “the Eucharist [is] linked with the vocation to the priesthood and the episcopate by a bond so strong and deep that it constantly reveals new riches to our grateful hearts.”<sup>[11]</sup>

He was always showing gratitude for the priceless gift of life, the Faith, and each human experience, even suffering. In 1994 after he broke his hip, he said, “Through Mary I would like to express my gratitude today for this gift of suffering.... I am grateful for this gift. I have understood that it is a necessary gift... the Pope has to suffer, so that every family and the world may see that there is, I would say, a higher Gospel: the Gospel of suffering by which the future is prepared, the third millennium of families, of every family and of all families.”<sup>[12]</sup>

St. John Paul II saw that his own vocation was a gift; it was the fruit of other people living out their vocations. Inspired with gratitude, St. John Paul II welcomed every opportunity to live



his vocation for other vocations. Practicing gratitude helped him take his place in the great chain of salvation, and it gave him humility and the strength to give himself completely to God and to the world.

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<sup>[11]</sup> John Paul II, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, translated by Walter Ziemba (New York: Time Warner Book Group, 2004).

<sup>[12]</sup> See 29 May 1994 Trinity Sunday Angelus message (in Italian) at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/angelus/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_ang\\_19940529\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/angelus/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19940529_it.html)



## HOMEWORK

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### YOU DIOCESAN VOCATION OFFICE WEBSITE

Research and write about the Vocation Office website for your diocese. Answer the questions below.

1. What is the web address for your diocesan vocations website? Does it have its own website or is it part of the main diocesan site?
2. Who is the diocesan Director of Vocations, and how can he be contacted?
3. Does the website offer information about just priestly vocations, or is there information on other vocations as well?
4. Describe some of the sections and subsections of the website. Does it have a FAQ section? Interviews with priests or religious? Prayers? Links? Tips for discernment? If so, what? If links, links to what?
5. What information is given for anyone who might want to look into a priestly vocation? What should he do first?
6. What was something that caught your eye or seemed interesting in this website? Write about this—what was it, why did it get your attention, what did you learn from it?

