

A PEASANT PRIEST.

Childlike humility, insatiable love for souls, and absolute confidence in God, is the secret of the great sanctity to which God raised the Curé of Ars. He found two faithful friends in Jesus and Mary; and was wont to say that we must go to Jesus through Mary, for through Mary Jesus came to us. This was his way, for he fostered through his whole life a tender devotion to Mary, and followed fathfully in the blood stained foot prints of his Crucified Saviour.

Jean Maria Vianney was born in the year 1786. At that time it was a crime for Christians publicly to practice their religion. If a priest dared to celebrate Mass he was taking life in his own hands. On this account religion was suffering, but not so in the home of Jean Maria. His Mother, Marie Beluse, and his father, Matthieu Vianney, were honest and devout Christians who tenderly fostered all Catholic practices in their home. From childhood Jean had shown a love of religion, and even as a mere babe he had learned to lisp the names of Jesus and Mary. At three the child loved to go into solitude where he would say the prayers which his Mother had taught him. The name of

Mary and all devotions in her honor were the special devotions of his heart. At the call of the Angelus bell and at the evening Rosary, which was always recited in the Vianney home, he was the first to kneel down. In after life when he was asked how he had such great devotion to Mary he used to reply. "Oh I loved Mary even before I knew her."

As was the custom of the children round about Dardilly, Jean watched his father's flock. The first present his mother ever gave him was a small statue of the Blessed Virgin, which he always carried with him. While tending the sheep he would take the statue from his pocket, place it in a niche of some tree and say his Rosary before it. Here too would he gather the other children about him, speak to them of God and His Blessed Mother, and teach them the Our Father and Hail Mary. It was a happy day for Jean when old Father Balley, who loved his people so tenderly as not to leave them, said Mass in an old barn and here allowed him to receive his Lord and Saviour for the first time. This holy priest observed the boy's tender piety and purity of life and felt that it would benefit Jean Maria as well as the clergy to have

him trained for the priesthood.

Vianney was overjoyed when he heard the good news. This had been his one prayer, that God might allow him some day to approach His altar and bring sinners back to Him. But his intellectual attainments were as weak as his spirituality was strong. The Latin that he learned to-day, he forgot to-morrow. Undaunted by this he plodded along placing full confidence in God, knowing that if He wished him to be a priest He would aid him to acquire sufficient learning. He increased his prayers, mortifications, almsgivings, and even made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. John Francis Regis. Would God let such heroic sancity go unrewarded?

By the year 1810, he had mastered sufficient Latin to enable him to enter the Seminary at the age of four and twenty. Throughout his course he had the same obstacle, a poor memory. Several times he was to be dismissed from the Seminary but, increasing his prayers, he was given another trial. Were it not for the Blessed Virgin and St. Philomena, he afterwards said "I would not have been allowed to remain one year." His constant application, religious fervor and evenness of temper won for him the admiration of professors and comrades, who did

all they could to help him in his studies, but to little avail. Ordination nearing, he was to be dismissed, when the Vicar General interceded for him and had him ordained. Three years after his ordination he was sent to take charge of the spiritual affairs of the parish of Ars.

On his arrival at Ars he was not discouraged to find a dilapidated church that was little frequented by the peasant folk, who spent most of their time in amusements. Even on Sundays they caroused, danced, and attended to their temporal affairs. He saw that he must win these people back to the church; if they would not come to him then he must go to them. From early morning till late at night, the noon hour excepted, he was prostrate before the altar asking God to give these souls back to him, for they had been redeemed at a great price. At noon ceasing his prayers, he would go forth to the homes of the people. On entering he would salute the parents, pray with the children, and while the peasant folk ate their frugal meal, he would tell them of the goodness and mercy of God. The poor people felt the truth of his words and desired to do better, to amend their lives and to return again to their God. After the men returned to the fields the Curé would return to

his prayers, thanking God for the success he had attained. The good Curé's solicitude for his people was not in vain, for in a short time he induced a few to attend daily Mass and to assist at the Rosary in the evening. These few people would always bring one or two others with them until there was not an hour of the day that did not find some one adoring the Blessed Sacrament.

The people, however, were loath to frequent the Sacraments, especially Holy Communion, giving as excuses their unworthiness, their troubles, or lack of time. But the holy man would not listen to these excuses. "Go to Communion," he constantly told them, "go, live by Jesus, so that you may live for Him." The Saviour Himself had said as much; "Come to Me all ye that labor." "Do not say you are unworthy, though it is true. Do you think I would have instituted this Sacrament of Love if I had in view your worthiness? Do not say you have too many trials for that is just the time I wish to help you. "Come to Me, all you that labor, and are burdened, and I will refresh you."

The change that took place in the Parish of Ars in six years was marvelous. At first the people showed no inclination towards religion, but indulged themselves in all kinds of pleasures; now, the

Parish was a model to the world. A traveller who spent several days there saw no signs of drunkenness, nor was vulgarity or any irreverent exclamations used by the good people. He spoke of the fact to one of the inhabitants who answered: "We are no better than other people, but we should be ashamed to indulge in such pastimes when we have a saint in our midst." When Father Vianney arrived at Ars, he found it difficult to fill his Church; now he found it necessary to add four chapels to accommodate the crowds. Many of them, among whom was the celebrated preacher of Notre Dame, Pere Lacordaire, were visitors who came to see and hear the Holy Man of Ars.

The life of the Curé was one of perfect self-abnegation a living martyrdom; trials, temptations, and ills were numerous. But for them all he thanked God; "The Lord hath given and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." His life was an example of what he preached. His bedroom was bare even of necessities; his bed was a bundle of straw. Even this "luxury," as he called it, was denied when he wished a special favor from God, then the hard floor was his resting place. One cassock, threadbare and patched; shoes that yawned at the seams, and a hat, the laughing stock of even his fellow

priests, constituted his entire wardrobe. His small means were spent on the House of Providence, which he established for poor girls. This institution was the object of his tender solicitude. He kept no servant and worried so little for the morrow that, were it not for the good people who looked out for his modest wants, his fast would seldom be broken. One poor meal, consisting of herbs and dry brown bread, bought from a beggar, was all he took each day. His unselfishness was appreciated by the people who sent him money, which he immediately gave to the poor.

His day was a strenuous one. It began shortly after midnight, the greater part of which was spent in the confessional. Many penitents would travel all night to reach Ars, and from midnight until seven o'clock he would hear the confessions of those who had travelled a great distance. Promptly at seven he left his confessional, to say Mass. Mass finished, he returned to the confessional, remaining there until eleven o'clock. Coming out he mounted the pulpit, to give the people an instruction, the force of which came not from rhetorical periods but from the fervor and sanctity of the priest delivering it. The sermon concluded with the Angelus. He then left the Church, partook of a morsal of food, and

was in the Tribuna of Penance again before one o'clock. Men and women of all ranks and stations met him here, where he remained till late at night, instructing, warning and advising in spiritual and temporal affairs. The Curé of Ars never failed to send his penitents to the Chapel of St. Philomena, his patron, for he said St. Philomena did more for him before the Throne of God than any other saint.

But these bodily mortifications soon began to tell on him. He was stricken on several occasions; each time the doctors said would be his last. He never took the rest or nourishment prescribed so eager was he to bring back sinners to Christ. Certainly it could be said of him that he thirsted for souls. In August, 1858, having been ill for some time he told those around that he would live only another year, and his prophecy was fulfilled. On the eve of the feast of St. Dominic, when the office of that illustrious Saint was being chanted in in the nearby churches, the Curé of Ars breathed forth his soul into the hands of his Maker. Like the Holy Dominic, the Curé of Ars despised all worldly honors to serve God. He died as he had lived, in utter poverty, leaving nothing but his priestly blessing to his spiritual children.

Stanislaus McDermott, O. P.