

**Homily for the Patronal Feast of St. John Vianney Parish
Sherman, Illinois**

August 2, 2016

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Father [and Deacon(s)],
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The celebration of the lives of any one of the saints on a Sunday is a rare occurrence in the life of the Church, yet I am happy to be with you today to celebrate the life of one of these heroes of the faith. It sometimes happens that the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul falls on a Sunday and takes precedence over the usual Sunday liturgy, but this happens more by exception than it does by rule. Why is it, then, that today we offer the Holy Mass in honor of Saint John Vianney when the universal Church offered this Mass a few days ago?

Well, first of all, my schedule prevented me from being with you on the actual feast day of Saint John Vianney, August 4th, as well as last Sunday. Moreover, according to the ranking of liturgical days, the commemoration of Saint John Vianney is not a solemnity, but only a memorial. As such, it does not normally take precedence over a Sunday; if

the memorial of Saint John Vianney – which is assigned to August 4th - happens to fall on a Sunday in a given year, it is simply not observed liturgically and gives way to the Sunday Mass. However, because this particular parish is dedicated to God and to Saint John Vianney, his liturgical celebration here ranks as a solemnity and, “for the pastoral advantage of the people, it is permissible to observe on the Sundays in Ordinary Time those celebrations that fall during the week and have special appeal to the devotion of the faithful.”¹

As the patron of your parish, the memorial of Saint John Vianney has a very special appeal to your devotion as you look to him for guidance and a sure path on which to walk as you follow the Lord Jesus. It was this devotion that led your Pastor, Father George Nellikunnel, to request permission to celebrate this Solemnity of Saint John Vianney on a Sunday so that more of you might be able participate in the joy of this day. I was happy to grant his request and even happier to accept his invitation to celebrate this day with you.

The life of your patron saint is probably well known to you. Born in 1786 to a peasant family in Dardily, France, John Vianney received little education as a boy and had not yet learned to read when he was seventeen.

Still, his parents instilled the Catholic faith in their son and taught him well; he knew his prayers and loved the faith. He wanted to be a priest, but thought it too high above him. After great and many difficulties in the seminary, he was ordained to the priesthood and sent to the tiny village of Ars, where it was thought this simple priest could do as little harm as possible. But through his humility and genuine love for others, Saint John Vianney surprised his superiors and converted the village of Ars to the Lord. He became renowned as a confessor and as a holy priest throughout Europe and countless men and women flocked to him to confess their sins, to receive his spiritual counsel, and his blessing. It is said he spent up to sixteen hours a day hearing confessions during the summer, eleven hours a day during the winter. He died on August 4, 1859, when, at the end of his life, the words he once spoke to his mother when he was boy were assuredly fulfilled: "If I were to become a priest, I would like to win many souls" to Christ. This was the driving desire of his life; it should be driving desire of our lives, as well.

The devotion of the faithful to Saint John Vianney has not lessened after his death and entrance into the Father's house. Indeed, what inspires so many in the life of this holy priest is that he

was so successful in identifying with his ministry that he became, even in a visibly and universally recognizable manner, an *alter Christus*, an image of the Good Shepherd who, unlike the hired hand, lays down his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10: 11). After the example of the Good Shepherd, he gave his life in the decades of his priestly service. His existence was a living catechesis that acquired a very special effectiveness when people saw him celebrating Mass, pausing before the tabernacle in adoration or spending hour after hour in the confessional.

Therefore the center of his entire life was the Eucharist, which he celebrated and adored with devotion and respect. Another fundamental characteristic of this extraordinary priestly figure was his diligent ministry of confession. He recognized in the practice of the sacrament of penance the logical and natural fulfilment of the priestly apostolate, in obedience to Christ's mandate: "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (cf. Jn 20: 23). St John Mary Vianney thus distinguished himself as an excellent, tireless confessor and spiritual director. Passing "with a single inner impulse from the altar to the confessional," where he spent a large part of the day, he did his utmost with preaching and persuasive advice to help his parishioners rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence.²

What we learn from his life is simple and so sometimes forgotten: the life of the parish must always revolve around and be centered on the worthy celebration and reception of the Eucharist and the sincere and honest confession of sins. This path leads to a holy life, to a life of joy and peace founded on love.

Saint John Vianney grew up in the midst of the French Revolution, which wreaked great havoc upon the Church and threatened the existence of the faith in France. Through the simple faith of men and women like his parents and himself, the faith remained despite the hardships Catholics endured. We might say that our own

...contemporary society is facing challenges that are just as demanding and may have become even more complex. If in his time the "dictatorship of rationalism" existed, in the current epoch a sort of "dictatorship of relativism" is evident in many contexts. Both seem inadequate responses to the human being's justifiable request to use his reason as a distinctive and constitutive element of his own identity. Rationalism was inadequate because it failed to take into account human limitations and claims to make reason alone the criterion of all things, transforming it into a goddess; contemporary relativism humiliates reason because it arrives de facto at affirming that the human being can know nothing with certainty outside the positive scientific field. Today however, as in that time, man, "a beggar for meaning and fulfilment," is constantly in quest of exhaustive answers to the basic questions that he never ceases to ask himself.³

The one who is "a beggar for meaning and fulfilment" is the one who recognizes his or her own dignity, who seeks the purpose of life and looks outside of himself or herself to find the answer to this central question of life. The one who is a beggar for meaning and fulfilment asks three simple questions; 1) Where am I?; 2) Why am I here?; and, 3) Where am I going?

Saint John Vianney knew he was in Ars to win souls by helping them break free from the dictatorship of rationalism and to show them the way to heaven where the deepest desires of the human heart will be fulfilled by Christ Jesus. Let us ask Saint John Vianney to teach us by the example of his life and through assistance of his prayers to seek nothing more than to win souls for Jesus and lead them to heaven.

St. John Vianney would often say: "Private prayer is like straw scattered here and there: If you set it on fire, it makes a lot of little flames. But gather these straws into a bundle and light them, and you get a mighty fire, rising like a column into the sky; public prayer is like that." If we, like Saint John Vianney, live our lives centered on the Eucharist and on the confession of sins, then, at the end of our lives, the desire of our hearts will also be fulfilled.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, 58.

² Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, August 5, 2009.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience Address, August 5, 2009.