

“Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues” (Mt 9:35). With August, we anticipate a return to school. Teachers who may have been away for the summer, return to cities and villages and the schools normally open their doors. This year is anything but normal. Every school district around the country is asking, ‘When will we open school as normal?’

Today is the Memorial of Saint Jean Marie Vianney, the patron saint of diocesan priests. He was born in 1786, three years before the start of the French Revolution. The revolution’s goal was to abolish the government, a monarchy, and replace it with a fairer system of government. As often happens in times of political upheaval, there is often a lot of collateral damage. Churches closed, priests were exiled, and the education system, at the time primarily Catholic Schools, was dismantled. Catholics were persecuted and children were forbidden from going to school. The revolution lasted for a decade and throughout that time, schools remained closed.

The church survived. Priests held Mass in secret for the brave Catholics willing to risk death for the opportunity to practice their faith. Persecutions stopped with a treaty (concordat) between the Pope and Napoleon Bonaparte in 1801. French Catholics had freedom to worship openly once again and children could return to school.

Jean Vianney felt called by God to study for the priesthood at the same time the church was free to reopen seminaries and begin the lengthy task of rebuilding the church. The lack of schooling in his formative years made it very difficult for Jean Vianney. He competed with students who were much younger. They could easily learn and adapt, but Jean struggled, and struggled and struggled. The only way that he made it through his studies was to have a priest privately teach him. It was only by the grace of God and his mentor, Fr Bailey, that he made it through the seminary. After a period of apprenticeship with Fr Bailey, the bishop, who had little confidence in Fr Jean, sent him to the farthest corner of the diocese where he could do the least damage.

“The Lord sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor and to proclaim liberty to captives” (Luke 4:18). Ready or not, Fr Jean went to Ars, France in a small community the size of Teller. Fr Jean had a rich prayer life. Where he had failed to learn on his own, the Lord supplied him with deep spiritual insights to lead people back to God. So, Fr Jean was ready, but the people of Ars were not.

They had existed so long without a priest that they really did not appreciate having their own pastor. Saturday nights were usually set aside for parties and dancing and as a result no one had energy to get up on Sunday. He challenged people to put God first in their life. He won the hearts and minds of the people, by starting a school so that the young could learn to read and write. Slowly people came around.

The prophet Ezekiel tells us, “If I say to the wicked man, you shall surely die; and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his wicked conduct so that he may live: the wicked man shall die for his sins” (3:18). Having the spiritual gift to read souls, Fr Jean was an extraordinary confessor. People felt liberated from their sins and word spread far and wide. People would come to Ars just to go to confession and stand in line for hours if not days to receive the healing power of God through the forgiveness of sins.

The Gospel calls each of us, to “Go out to all the world and tell the Good News” (Mark 6:15). Fr Jean Marie Vianney served as a “faithful, zealous, and loving parish priest” in the community of Ars for 41 years until his death. Although he never travelled far from his parish, he is a model of holiness and “an inspiration” for every priest and parishioner. God calls each one of us – “to love always, to pray without ceasing, and to bring others to Him.”

“Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20).

Source: Gurnick, Michael. clepriesthood.org/what-is-the-catholic-priesthood/life-with-saint-john-vianney/