



Saint John Vianney

(1786–1859)

August 4

Imagine this scene: It's a warm summer day in the village of Ars, France, in 1850. A stranger strolls up to a fruit stand at the open market.

"Can I help you, sir?" the fruit seller asks.

"Well, yes. I'm looking for the priest, John Vianney. People in my village are saying strange things about him, and I would like to know if the reports are true."

The fruit seller offers the man some grapes and smiles. "What have you heard?" he inquires.

"Someone told me that the devil set fire to his bed a few weeks ago," the visitor replies. "And that he has seen the Blessed Virgin Mary and spoken to her. Are these stories true?"

"Why don't you go over there to his church and get in that long line waiting to go to confession to Father Vianney?"

"Confession? What will that tell me?"

"Try it. Father Vianney will most likely tell you about some secret sins that you committed long ago. Talk to him, and then come back and let me know what you think about him. We call him a saint."

At the age of 19, John Vianney decided to enter a seminary to study for the priesthood. After several months he had to leave because his previous schooling had not prepared him to attend lectures in Latin. He went to live with a friend who was a priest and who was able to tutor him. This priest finally persuaded the

bishop to ordain John, not for his learning, but for his holiness.

After a few years, Father Vianney was assigned to Ars, a village of about 50 families in rural France. The people there were careless about practicing their faith, so they were not happy with this new priest who was eager to draw them back to God and the Commandments. Some parish members lied about him, acted violently against him, and refused to cooperate with him. They were hoping that he would give up and leave. But instead, Father Vianney responded with prayers and penance. And God's love began to reach people's hearts.

Gradually people began to come to celebrate the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance, and to listen to Father Vianney's simple homilies. Within a few years, Father Vianney was spending 10 hours a day in the confessional during the winter months, and almost 15 hours every day during the summer. People came from all over France, and even from other countries, to consult him and to ask for help. In fact the French government built a special railroad line to Ars just to accommodate all the pilgrims.

Father Vianney paid no attention to these signs of honor. He continued his hard yet simple life of prayer and service to the people. He was strict with his parishioners, but a hundred times more strict with himself. People were calling him a saint long before he died. He was canonized in 1925 and is the patron saint of parish priests.

LOOK THROUGH GOD'S EYES

John lacked proper schooling and a natural ability for learning. Yet he became a priest and a saint. Guide the students to see that God's love for individuals is not based on a person's intelligence, talents, personality, grades, popularity, or money. Help them to appreciate the value that each person has in God's eyes. Have each student write his or her name at the top of a sheet of paper. Direct students to find a partner. Tell them to exchange papers and write down something that they think God loves about the other person. Each student then takes his or her own paper and finds another partner. Repeat the process until each child has partnered with every other child. Give the students time to look over the comments on their papers. Then ask them to write a short prayer thanking God for his love.

SEND PRAYERS AND GREETINGS TO PRIESTS

Father Vianney is the patron of parish priests. Encourage the students to decide on prayers to offer for the priests of the local parish. Have one student design the front of a card for these priests. Guide the class to compose an inside message that mentions the feast of John Vianney, includes a note of encouragement, and explains that prayers have been offered for the priests by the class. Finally have every student sign the card and have a volunteer deliver the card to the priests.

REVIEW THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

John heard confessions from midnight to the following evening on a regular basis. He stopped only to celebrate the Eucharist, to pray a lot, and to eat and sleep a bit. Every day he had people waiting in line. John seemed to have the gift of reaching people's hearts and telling them about their past sins. Have the students consider whether they would have chosen to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance with Father Vianney. Then review the steps for celebrating the Sacrament of Penance.

RAISE MONEY FOR THE POOR

John gave away his furnishings, his belongings, and the clothes and food that the neighbors brought him. Once he received a black velvet cape as an award and sold it to buy food for the poor. Tell the students that in 1979 Mother Teresa of Calcutta won the Nobel Peace Prize and used the money to help the poor. Then have the class decide on a project to raise money to help the poor.

DRAW OTHERS TO CHRIST

John drew people to Christ by praying and sacrificing for them. In this way he was a channel through which God's grace could work within the hearts of the people. Encourage the students to think of one person whom they want to draw to Christ. Have them write in their journals a resolution about prayer and sacrifice that they might offer daily for this person.