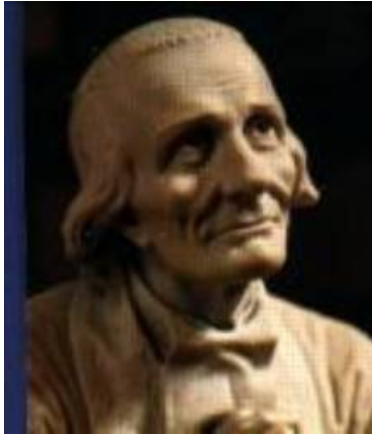


Jean Mariè Vianney

Saint Cur d'Ars

Passages from the book - Ritratti di Santi by Antonio Sicari ed. Jaca Book.



Henri Ghèon, a French poet and playwright, born more than a hundred years ago, wrote a biography on the Cur d'Ars.

In the first chapter of his book, the author says that the life of the Saint Cur d'Ars was so full of ingeniousness and marvel that he was tempted to write it as you would a fairy tale. And the fairy tale, he wrote, would be like this:

"Once upon a time in France, in the province of Lyon, there lived a small Christian country boy who, from his earliest childhood, loved solitude and God. And since those gentlemen in Paris, who had fought the revolution, they forbade the people to pray; the boy and his parents went to hear Mass hidden in a barn. In those times, priests had to hide and when

they were caught, their heads were chopped off.

This was the reason why Jean Mariè Vianney dreamt of becoming a priest. But if the boy knew how to pray, he lacked in education. He shepherded the sheep and worked in the fields.

He entered the Seminary too late and stumbled in all the exams. However, as vocations were rare, in those times, in the end, he was accepted. He was given the name of Cur d'Ars, and this remained his name up to the day he died. The 'last' Curate of France, in the 'last' village of France. He was a Curate in heart and soul, which does not often happen. He was so completely so, that the last village of France had the first Curate of France and the people of France began a journey to go and see him.

Now, he converted all those who reached his village, and if he had not died, he would have converted the whole of France.

He healed both soul and body. He read the hearts of people as you would a book.

The Blessed Virgin appeared to him and Satan did spiteful things to annoy him, but he could never prevent him from being a saintly man.

He was promoted Canon, then Knight of the Legion of Honour, then he was considered a Saint.

But for as long as he lived, he could never understand why!

This was the most beautiful proof that he really deserved all that glory.

All this was happening in the XIX century, and in Heaven, where the true value of man is known, it was called the century of the Cur d'Ars, but France could not imagine such an event.

In this narration you can hear the artist's voice, who with brief strokes is capable of describing an almost the complete profile of his character. Then the author stops and warns that in reality, that behind this ingenuousness lies a profound drama, the intensity of which at first sight, you would not suspect. The episodes that have been mentioned are all true. The young country boy from the province of Lyon, was seven years old at the time when in Paris, Terror reigned and all priests, who did not bend to schism under the threat of death, were exiled, along with the thousands who were massacred. The Convention troops marched through the small town of Dardilly, where the boy lived, while on their way to repress the insurrection of Lyon. The Church was closed and the parish priest surrendered to all the oaths he was asked to take, and then he gave up being a priest. The Vianney family, every now and then, gave hospitality, risking their lives in doing so, to some clandestine priest; and

in a room with shutters ajar and protected by a hay cart which was parked opportunely outside the house, (while some farmers stood on watch at the doors), Jean Marie received his First Holy Communion, at the age of thirteen: this was during the so-called "second Terror."

He received his vocation at a very early age, as he himself will tell later, *"following a meeting I had had with a confessor of the faith"*, namely when he came to understand that to become a priest also meant to be ready to die for your ministry.

But if the boy could not frequent the parish church, even less was the possibility to frequent a school, which were just non-existent.

When for the first time he finally succeeded in attending a school he was seventeen years old.

He tried desperately to learn, with the help of a friendly priest who believed in the boy's vocation, but the results were poor. The Cur d'Ars, will later say about that priest, *"he tried for about five or six years to teach me something, but it was just a waste of time and fatigue, because he never succeeded in getting anything into my head"*. There is a lot of humility in this expression, but also a great deal of truth.

The difficulties then became overwhelming when it came to facing the studies of philosophy and theology, moreover in a seminary, where these were studied using Latin scripts and explained in Latin.

It was thanks to the parish priest of Ecuilly, who was highly esteemed in the Diocese, who made it possible for him to obtain all the facilities (both of study and exams) and made his sacerdotal ordination possible, by appointing him, himself, as vicar.

He was ordained at the age of 29, in 1815, the same year in which Don Bosco was born in Turin.

His first years of ministry were spent in the school of the saintly priest who had helped and educated him with such zeal: *"He is guilty of one thing, Jean Marie Vianney will say later, one which I think will be difficult for him to justify when he will stand before God: to have allowed me to enter the Holy Order"*.

This is to be clearly understood, Jean Marie desired with all his heart to become a priest, but he felt deeply unworthy. The parish priest of Ecuilly, on the other hand, perfectly understood Jean Marie

he protected and spurred him because he was convinced he had an excellent vocation, and that his scarceness of instruction would be compensated by his particular intelligence of faith. He was proven to be right, Jean Marie, on his part, was convinced that he had received an enormous and unmerited gift.

"I think, he will say, that the Lord wanted to choose the most stubborn parish priest in order to obtain the best. If He had found one worse than me, he would ha replaced me, in order to show His great mercy."

These words contain his spiritual drama, a mystical drama so deep, which needs to be perceived by intuition

This young priest's charisma will be his total disappearance in ministry, only to be a priest, Gods minister, to such a point where his person is totally mixed and blended with the gift of priesthood.

The Cur d'Ars will become the patron Saint of all parishes of the world, because he will live with a desperate longing to be annulled before the unmerited gift that he had received, to consume his every human substance in practising it; and he will do so in penitence, in physical consumption, and in the hardest of mortification's.

I said with: "a desperate longing". The Cur d'Ars will say, that he himself was not able to understand the temptation of pride, whereas he well understand the temptation of despair, that of the deep uncomfortable feeling of inadequacy which only total abandon in God can soothe

It is very important that we understand the roots of the drama, by beginning from some of our own experiences.

Many times Christians fell almost obstructed by the human limitation of their priest.

They say: *He isn't able to preach*", or *"he isn't capable of human relationships"* or *"he isn't a saint"* or *"he is a sinner like everyone else"...*, *"why should I confess to him, he is worse than me...?"* and similar complaints.

Put together for an instant all the objections, more or less instinctive, that you have felt or heard or in your experience, as far as priests are concerned. Well: the most serious aspect of these objections consist in the fact that take us back to the bare objectivity of the ministry: the only important point is the sacred action of God, who acts through this man-priest.

This ineffable drama, is personally incarnated by the Cur d'Ars, before his own person and before God.

He said: "*From a certain point of view, a priest shall only be understood in Heaven. If we were to understand him here on earth, we would die, not from fear but from love...After God a priest is everything: Leave a parish without a parish priest for twenty years and they will adore beasts.*"

But on the other hand, he added:

"How frightening it is to be a priest! How he is to pitied when he says Mass as just something ordinary! How unfortunate a priest who has no spiritual life!"

To tell the truth, this is not his problem. Not likely, when he says mass he seems to see God, that so intense and moving are his celebrations

He will live with a constant fear, until up to a few days before his death, to be overcome by the temptation to despair.

Three times he will try to flee, during the night, and try to reach the Bishop and ask his permission to retire in solitude "to repent his sins"

The last time he tried to 'run away' was when he was famous and well known in France, three years before his death. He 'ran away' during the night, while his parishioners were awake, on watch in order to stop him. The liveliest collaborators hindered him in every way possible, asking him to recite their morning prayers with them, and hiding his breviary, until the crowd of parishioners blocked the road and crying they begged him to remain.

"Master Cur, if we have displeased you in any way, tell us, we will do anything you want to please you.", they cried.

He allowed them to lead him back into the Church, to his confessional, "*condemned*", in the most spiritual sense of the word, saying to himself: "*what would become of these poor sinners, if not?*".

To those, who the day after reminded him of the *happenings* of the night before, he humbly said: "

"I acted like a child".

But he was not fleeing from weariness or fatigue; he fled from the fear of not being worthy.

He said: "*I do not regret being a priest because I can say mass, but I would rather not be a parish priest.*"

He thought that his nomination depended on the fact that the Bishop had been mistaken in judging his capacities, and so he was a hypocrite, because he was able to hide his worthlessness.

"How unfortunate I am! There isn't a person who isn't deceived as far as I am concerned, even Monsignor is deceived. I must be a real hypocrite!"

To tell the truth, there was more than one person how despised him. A parish priest who lived in a village nearby, and saw the number of penitents on their way towards Ars, wrote to him saying: "*Master Cur when one possesses such little knowledge of theology as you, they should never enter a confessional"*

And others went as far as preaching in disfavour of him.

To this the Cur of d'Ars replied:

" My dearest and beloved brother, I have so many reasons to love you! You, alone, are the only one that has known me so well!"

And asked him with insistency to help him be released by the Bishop from this parish of which he was in charge so that he would be free "*to go to a corner and grieve over my miserable life, having been replaced of the charge of which I am not worthy to hold because of my ignorance"*

But this humble and suffered concept of self, take note, was not caused by a sad, melancholy or anguished character, On the contrary, he is a vivacious man, capable infact of sense of humour.

Rather, in its formation, there are two factors of different entity in competition.

One is, undouthfully a social-historical factor: he received a very strict education, marked by a Jansenist rigour, very worried and troubled about the mystery of predestination and damnation

At the start of his priesthood, he will use the same rigour with his penitents and in his preaching, which however, will leave place for a vibrant and diligent exaltation of the love of God. But there is also the mystical factor. Which is stronger.

It will be he, himself, who reveals it to one of his penitents:

"My child, never ask God for the full conscience of your misery. I asked Him once for it, and I obtained it. But if God had not given me the strength I would have immediately fallen in despair."

And to one of pastoral collaborators:

"I ask God to give me conscience of my misery. I obtained it; I was so overcome by my misery that I prayed that the pain it caused me would be lessened. I did not think I could bare it."

And again he confided:

"I was so frightened by the knowledge of my misery that I immediately implored the grace to forget it. God listened to my plea, but he left me sufficient light of my misery to make me understand that I am a good for nothing."

We must be very careful here. In the lives of many mystics this experience is to be found, it is a sort of *"spiritual night"* which is necessary in order to take part in the mystery of the passion of Christ and be totally abandoned in the hands of the Father and so filled with his Love.

The same expression used: *"God is all, I am nothing"*, by Saint Augustine, Saint Frances, Saint Catherine of Siena and some young Saints of our times

This experience in the Cur d'Ars life, intimately binds to that mission, of which I have spoken: to become a priest, that is, totally and gloriously, with which no human pride can ever again interfere, this, by the power of grace which God bestows on his creature.

"Dear God, does not need anyone, he uses me for his great work, even though I am a priest without science. If he had had another parish priest at hand who had had more reasons than I had to humiliate himself, he would have chosen him and done good a hundred times more, through him."



But, in this *"spiritual night"*, how does the Cur d'Ars live? First of all, he is certainly not one who loses time in 'pondering over his wounds' (which inevitably happens when, we are dealing with what is only a complex psychic and not holy humility).

Rather, he offers his entire humanity to the service of God. Before all with the knowledge that he must "sacrifice himself".

Even today, the sight of the instruments of penance that he used, to hear the style of life he choose, the fasting he practised, the night-watches, the abstinence of every minimum physical comfort, are impressive.

If he sleeps a few hours on bare wooden boards, if his food is scarce, taking boiled potatoes from a pot which have to last for days, if he whips himself to the point of fainting, he does so overall because he is the parish priest, and so, its up to him to ask for forgiveness of his

children's sins; he hears a lot of confessions, and it is up to him to do the penance that would be too hard for the sinners even if they deserve it.

"My God, grant me the conversion of my parish. I am willing to suffer all that you want, for as long as I live, if only they be converted".

From another point of view, if he had not dominated his body and his senses to such an extent,

how could he have ever resisted a vocation that nailed him, without interruption for more than twenty years to a confessional, to the point of exhaustion, for 15-17 hours a day, without ever succeeding in getting to the end of the rows of penitents who arrived from all over France and persistently asked to be heard.

Every detail, in the lives of Saints, in order not to seem ambiguous, must be looked on keeping in mind the design that God has for them.

In second place, the Cur d'Ars lived with the preoccupation that he must be for his faithful, the good shepherd.

First of all to instruct them.

The parish priest who had preceded him, in one of his rapport's, left written that the people of this parish were so ignorant, so void of religious education, that the major part of the children: *"were no different than animals, if not only for the fact that they were Christened"*. And the same goes for the adult men. They were far from the teaching of the Church or however passive attendees and rarely even that.

He meets them everywhere, he knows them all personally, and he keeps them in Church by preaching sometimes for as long as an hour. At times he is confusing, sometimes he is touched. Sometimes he interrupts and, pointing to the Tabernacle says, with a tone of voice that is sheer torture: *"He is there."*

He speaks to them 'face to face', using their language, their yardstick. We must be careful in saying that the Cur d'Ars wasn't intelligent. In his sermons he revelled vivacity and planning of language that caused amazement.

This the way he spoke to his faithful about their unwillingness to pray, describing a typical family:

"In the home, they never dream or think of saying 'prayers before meals', or the prayer of thanksgiving after meals, not even the Angeles. If they happen to say them, out of habit, to watch them pray, would made you feel ill: the women recite them in a hurried fashion while at the same time they call their children or domestic help, the men while they twist their caps or hats in their hands as if they were looking for holes in them."

"They think of God as if they knew for certain the He does not exist and is something to laugh about."

And again about the love of God:

"Our Lord on earth is like a mother who carries her child in her arms. This child is naughty, he kicks his mother, he bites her, he scratches her, but the mother takes no notice of this because she knows that if she lets him go, the child will fall, he cannot walk on his own."

"Now you know what our Lord is like; He bears all our ill-treatments, he bears all our arrogance, and He forgives all our silliness, He has pity on us, notwithstanding our faults."

And then again on pride:

"Here is someone who torments himself, he agitates himself, he makes a lot of noise, he wants to domineer everything, he thinks that he is something, he seems to say to the sun: "get out of there, let me light the world in your place!..."There will be a day when this proud man will be reduced to nothing more than a pinch of ashes and will be carried away by river to river...to the sea."

This is pastoral culture of the Cur d'Ars.

Other times he will tell them:

"We cannot wait for the moment to rid ourselves of the Lord, as you would a pebble in a shoe."

Or: *"The poor sinner is like a pumpkin that the housewife splits in four and inside she finds nothing but worms."*

Or: *"Sinners are as black as stovepipes."*

One thing is to make a list of the phrases, another is to see and hear how these phrases come from his heart, and how they dig deep into the soul.

The fact is that on their way out of Church everyone was saying: *"They say that the Cur d'Ars is not educated, I do not know if this true but I do know that the Holy Spirit has taken the task of enlightening him."*

Apart from the building of an orphanage for abandoned children and an Institute for the education of boys, his pastoral activity regards three aspects of parish life, which he immediately identifies as signs of the profound dischristianization, which France at the time was subject to.

On one side: working on Feast days and the habit of cursing, as signs of an outcoming atheist practice with which you deny by fact that God exists, while you also claim and say to believe in Him.

The Cur d'Ars knows that working on feast days and Sundays means attachment to money, for his farmers, it means making time and life inhuman. Casually, the gentlemen of Paris are tempting, in the meantime, to abolish all feast days and Sundays and replace them with decades, one lay day of rest every ten, in order to make them forget the Lord's day and the feast days of Saints.

Jean Marie Vianney will not be in peace until he may write in his parishes' 'questionnaire' that on feast days you only 'rarely' work, and until strangers passing through his village will not be marvelled in seeing three carters trying to calm a restive horse who has overturned its load, and that, never the less they are calm and not cursing.

The are so impressed that they take note of it as news to be spread around.

Another battle that the Cur d'Ars fights is against the brothels, which he sees as, 'the devil's shops', the school where hell proposes and teaches its doctrine, the place where souls are sold, where families are destroyed, where health is lost, where rows begin and where murder is committed.

Before we smile at this, we must first think of a village with a population of 270 people, 40 houses, of which four of these are taverns, two of these right beside the Church.

Let us imagine these as alternatives to the Church on Sundays and alternatives to ones home during the long evenings and nights. Let us think of these as the place in which the only possible drug of the times was sold, wine; where the money earned for the family's upkeep was spent, and where during sprees of wild drunkenness, hatred and rows were alimanted

The preaching and the intervention of the Cur are so decisive that first the two taverns beside the Church are forced to close and then followed the closing of the further allocated.

Later on, seven attempts to open new taverns will fail.

The third pastoral question in cause is that of "dances": the Cur d'Ars said: that the devil surrounded the dance halls like a wall that closes a garden, and those who entered them *"leave their Guardian Angel outside the door, while the demon takes on his task and takes his place, so that at a certain point there are as many demons as dancers in the hall"*.

In the situation of the times, the country dances and the incursions of dancers from one village to another are really the only concrete vehicle that succeeds in imposing a certain dishonesty of attitude and custom, that the family are unable to embank. And for as much as they wanted to be modern, the mimed or camouflaged means of certain types of dances. the impurity of the youth, the conjugal infidelity and lust, have never been Christian virtues, not even today.

These social vices also slowly disappear, almost completely thanks to the love and respect that the people had for that saintly man, who prayed and did penitence for them

But above all, it was in the confessional that the educational activity of the Saintly Cur took place.

Towards the year 1827 the fame of his holiness began to spread. In the beginning there were only fifteen or twenty pilgrims a day. In the year 1834 they were counted to be three

thousand a year and during the last years of his life, they counted eighty thousand to a hundred thousand.

It became necessary to organise a regular daily transport service from Lyon to Ars. A special ticket window where return tickets for Ars, with an eight-day validity, were sold at the railway station, (tickets which in those days were an exception) had to be opened, because the average time needed in succeeding in getting into the confessional was a week

And so the real mission of the Cur d'Ars began: his "martyrdom of the confessional"

During the last twenty years he would remain an average of 17 hours, beginning towards one or two o'clock at night during the good season, or towards 4 o'clock in the bad season, finishing late in the evening.

The only pauses were to celebrate Mass, the recital of the breviary, catechism and a few minutes for something to eat

During the summer the air was so suffocating that the pilgrims, in turns, had to go outside in order to breathe and so resist; in winter the cold was torture.

"I asked him how could he remain for some many hours in such a position, in such rigid weather, with nothing to heat his feet". "My friend", he said, "the fact is that from All Saints Day up to Easter, I cannot feel my feet."

But the sacrifice of being there almost dragged and nailed by the crowds, in whatever sort of weather, and at whatever hour of day or night, was not yet his greatest sufferance.

The greatest sufferance was the waves of the vile sins, which poured over him like a sea of oppressive slime.

All I know about sin, he said, I learned it from them.

He listened to them, he read their minds as you would an open book, but above all he converted them.

Often he had time for very few words and towards the end his voice was so faint that it was almost impossible to hear him. Non the less, the penitents came from his confessional distraught.

"If the Lord was not so good, but He is infinitely! What harm did Our Lord do you that you must threaten Him in such a way!"

or: *"Why did you offend me so? This Our Lord will say to you one day, and you will not know what to answer Him".*

Frequently, above all when he had sinners before him, who were scarily aware of their sin and so were also scarily sorry for their sins, the Saint Cur would begin to cry. And it was an ineffable experience to see, with your own eyes, a true pain, a real sufferance, a real objective passion, made "experience": it was as if for an instant you could see the suffering of God for your badness, incarnate on the face of the priest who was confessing you.

Preaching at a spiritual retreat for priests in the piazza of Ars, last October, John Paul II spoke to them of the necessity to give back to the faithful this same experience of forgiveness.

He said:

"I am aware that you encounter a lot of difficulty: the lack of priests and above all the dissatisfaction of the faithful in regards to the Sacrament of Pardon. You say:

"It has been a long time since I last went to confession! This is the real problem. Does this not hide perhaps, a lack of faith, a lack of the sense of sin, of the sense of mediation of Christ and the Church, contempt towards a practice of which only remains the deformations tied to habit"

We note that the Cur d'Ars general Vicar had said to him:

"There is not much love of God in this parish, you shall give it." And the Saint Cur d'Ars also found penitents with little fervour. It was thanks to what secret that he attracted, believers and non-believers, saints and sinners? It is true that if the Cur d'Ars was harsh in some of his preaching in order to flog sin, he was, like Jesus, full of mercy in his meetings with each and every sinner. Abbot Monnin had this to say about the Cur d'Ars:

"He is a hearth of tenderness and mercy. He is flamed with the mercy of Christ"

He had grown to be an old man of 73, with long white hair, a slender and worn-out body, but his eyes were even deeper and brighter; in that torrid summer of 1859, on the 4th of August, he passed away without the pangs of death, fearless, *"like a lamp that goes out because it has no oil left to burn"*, a witness to his death says: " his eyes were filled with an extraordinary expression of Faith and bliss".

His parishioners crowded together around his poor parsonage, they even went to the trouble of covering the entire building with ten sheets of cloth which were kept wet, so the he would suffer less from the oppressive heat, at least during his last days on earth.

For ten days and ten nights his mortal remains were exposed to the public, in that chapel where he had listened to some many confessions, and millions of pilgrims paid homage to his remains.

With reference to the speech made a few months ago, in Ars, the Pope paraphrased the title of a well-known Italian novel, but in the opposite sense:

"Christ truly stopped in Ars, in an epoch in which the curate was Jean Marie Vianney. Yes, He did stop and saw the crowds of tired and worn-out men and women of the last century as sheep without a shepherd. Christ stopped here as the Good Shepherd. Jean Marie Vianney, use to say that a good shepherd, according to the heart of God, is the greatest treasure that God can grant a parish, it is one of the most precious gifts of the Divine Mercy."

We have need of all of this even nowadays.