

CHAPTER XIV

THE PILGRIMAGE TO ARS (*continued*): III. THE CURÉ D'ARS AS A CONFESSOR

DURING the space of thirty years ever changing crowds of pilgrims invaded the old church of Ars; the flags of which became polished and worn by the feet of visitors, even as the boulders over which the waves of the sea pass and repass without ceasing.

And let no one imagine that there was an appreciable diminution in the number of visitors during the winter months when the cold makes itself so cruelly felt on the uplands of La Dombes. From November to March M. Vianney spent not less than eleven or twelve hours each day in the confessional.¹ "Even were he never to leave the church at all," Catherine Lassagne writes, "he would not be able to satisfy all those who come. For this reason he always keeps on his rochet when going out, for, were he to enter the sacristy to take it off, he would have to remain, because of the crowds that would at once press round him." On the margin of Catherine's manuscript the Abbé Renard has jotted down this commentary: "The narrative of the directress is quite according to facts; I have often come to Ars in the summer, the spring, the autumn, and even the winter, and have myself witnessed what she describes."² M. Dufour, missionary of Pont-d'Ain, writes: "The first time that I entered the church of Ars—it was in 1851—there were two rows of women penitents, from the chapel of the Blessed Virgin to that of St John the Baptist, and I never saw a gap in those two rows."

M. Jean-Félix des Garets, brother of the Mayor of Ars, writes in his turn: "The concourse of pilgrims increased steadily between the years 1830 and 1845, in which year it reached its climax. At that time the number of daily arrivals amounted to some three or four hundred. At the railway

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 300.

² *Petit mémoire*, première rédaction, p. 8.

station of Perrache, the most important of Lyons, a special booking-office was always open for the sole purpose of issuing tickets for Ars. These tickets were good for eight days, for it was generally known that it took all that time before a pilgrim's turn would come to see M. Vianney for the purpose of obtaining from him a word or an absolution."¹

For the unbeliever who did not know that "the true history of the world is the history of God's grace in the world,"² such eagerness remained an enigma. All that multitude was made up of souls longing for pardon, for greater spiritual illumination, for more profound abnegation.

"The overwhelming majority of visitors," M. des Garets adds, "were attracted by faith, piety, or repentance, and if a few sightseers mingled with the crowd, the indifferent were often won over to God by a gesture, a look, or a tear of the venerable Curé. Persons of every age and condition formed that throng: bishops, priests, religious—many Jesuits and Marists, Capuchins, Franciscans, Dominicans—nobles and plebeians, learned and ignorant, some accustomed to discussing the weightiest of problems, others impelled solely by the simplicity of their faith. Among the last named I have seen whole families of peasants come in carts from distant provinces, even from as far as the mountains of Auvergne, in order to visit the servant of God and to perform their devotions in the church of Ars. For the surrounding district Ars was a centre to which people journeyed on foot and by carriage, by road and by river."³

One whose information was reliable, François Pertinand, hotel-keeper and carter at Ars, states that in 1836 a service of conveyances between Ars and Trévoux was organized and ran on three days in the week. In 1840 a daily service was introduced between Ars and Lyons. Finally, according to a report of M. de Castellane, *sous-préfet* of Trévoux, dated June 28, 1855, starting that year, "two omnibuses performed the journey between Ars and Lyons each day; two others went twice a day to the station of Villefranche to meet the trains on the Paris-Lyons line; a fifth omnibus.

¹ *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 413.

² Louis Perroy, *L'humble Vierge Marie*, Paris, Lethielleux, p. 75.

³ *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 414.

which ran between Villars and Villefranche, called at the place of pilgrimage itself." During the last year of the saint's life (1858-1859) "the number of pilgrims," according to François Pertinand, "reached 80,000, counting those only who travelled by public conveyance. As for the total number of pilgrims, I reckon it to have been between 100,000 and 120,000."¹

In the meantime the village of Ars had not grown in proportion to the spread of its fame, hence the crowd had to find lodgings as best it might. There were, indeed, five houses dignified by the pompous name of hotel, but they could barely accommodate a hundred and fifty persons. The others quartered themselves "on the natives"; and the quarters were not luxurious. "On our arrival at Ars, on May 8, 1845," Chanoine Camille Lenfant relates, "we found all the hotels full. Everyone had to shift for himself. As for me, Providence took me to the house of Mlle. Ricotier, a woman full of faith and simplicity. In exchange for two francs and a half a day, she gave me board and lodging; I must say I had my money's worth."

In May, 1854, the Bishop of Birmingham² heard it rumoured that "some penitents spent the whole night lying in the meadows, to the number of as many as fifty persons, either in order to get an earlier chance of going into the confessional, or because there was no room for them in the hostelryes."³

At no time were the crowds noisy or troublesome. They had come to see a saint, to go to confession to him, to fulfil some vow made to St Philomena. A spirit of recollection, made up of expectation and hope, brooded over this unique village. There were those who entered it as people enter a sanctuary. So soon as they espied the brick tower of the church, many pilgrims bared their heads or made the sign of the cross. Even though the church was only closed between nine o'clock in the evening and midnight, it was not easy at any time to get inside. In March, 1859, Georges Seigneur, editor of the *Croisé* newspaper, had perforce to

¹ "Un pèlerinage à Ars en 1858," *Annales d'Ars*, Février, 1906, p. 342.

² Bishop Ullathorne, O.S.B.

³ Marie des Brulais, *Suite de l'Echo de la sainte Montagne*, Nantes, p. 175.

arm himself with patience as he very slowly mounted the flight of steps that lead to the great door. "Strangers in great numbers were standing in the old cemetery, and even in the lanes near by, awaiting their turn. . . . They bought medals and rosaries which they intended to have blessed, or candles destined to burn before the altar of St Philomena. In order to while away the time of waiting, several of them were contemplating the portraits of the holy priest, or they conversed together about him as children might talk of their father, though they had not as yet seen him."¹

These portraits of the Curé d'Ars were exhibited everywhere, in shop windows, on the low wall of the cemetery, in the baskets of small tradeswomen who mingled with the pilgrims. They were of every shape, from the diminutive engraving destined to be placed in the pages of the missal to the brightly coloured "*Epinal*" image, which showed divers episodes of the saint's life, reproduced with very little regard for accuracy. The likeness, it will be readily understood, could only be approximate, for M. Vianney always refused to pose for his portrait.² But what did that matter! Every pilgrim wished to take away with him "the portrait of the *saint*" as a precious remembrance of the pious journey.

However long they might have to wait before finding a place in the church, the visitors, with rare exceptions, never gave in to weariness. Cost what it might, they were determined to hear the saint, and for the majority, the main, if not the only motive of their pilgrimage was to have a private interview with him in the confessional.

Once in the church, a fresh period of waiting began. It should be stated that "M. Vianney devoted to each confession only the time strictly required,"³ that when he had a long day he heard confessions for as many as sixteen and eighteen hours; yet for all that the majority of pilgrims were compelled, during the last ten years of his life, to wait thirty, fifty, seventy hours before reaching the blessed

¹ *Le Croisé*, 20 Août, 1859, première année, No. 3.

² Comtesse des Garets, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 917.

³ Abbé Toccanier, *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 266.

tribunal. "It happened many times that visitors paid some poor persons to keep their places for them."¹ All were not able to do this, so they just waited in the church, which was stiflingly hot in summer and icy cold in winter. People who wanted to go outside and yet not lose their place made suitable arrangements either with those next to them or with the guardians of the church. At night there was nothing for it but to leave, since the church would be locked. People numbered themselves in order not to miss their turn, and went to spend in the open or in the vestibule close to the tower, the few hours that intervened between the rising of the Curé d'Ars and his going to bed.²

Mlle. Sophie Gros, of Besançon, was able to recollect in her old age how her maid, Clémentine Viney, had been obliged, in July, 1853, to wait two days, with a basket of provisions on her arm, before her opportunity came to present herself in the confessional. During the course of the year 1855, a demoiselle Louise Dortan, of l'Hôpital (Puy-de-Dôme), who later on became a nun under the name of Sister Marie de Jésus, came to consult the Curé d'Ars on the subject of her vocation. She waited three whole days for her turn. At last, in despair of ever getting as far as the confessional, she was about to leave, in a flood of tears, when M. Vianney spoke to her as he came out of the chapel of St John the Baptist, "You are not very patient, my child: you have been here only three days and you want to go home? You must remain fifteen days. Go and pray to St Philomena to tell you what is your vocation, and after that come and see me." The girl followed the advice and was the better for it.

At about nine o'clock in the morning the saint set aside some time for interviews with religious and priests. As a rule he heard them in a confessional placed behind the high altar. "A bishop, and it was the diocesan, has been seen awaiting his turn just like the others."³

¹ Guillaume Villier, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 636.

² Mme. Christine de Cibeins, *Procès apostolique continuatif*, p. 144. "As many as eighty persons have been known to spend the night in the porch or in the neighbourhood of the church, so as to retain their place for the following day" (Abbé Dufour, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 340).

³ Catherine Lassagne, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 111.

At times it looked as if the Curé's task were done at last; as if he might take a little rest, were it only for one day. It was a vain hope! One evening in May, 1853, three nuns and a lady, who had recently lost her husband, drove up in François Pertinand's carriage, and went rapidly up the steps that lead to the church. It so happened that M. Vianney was leaving his confessional after absolving the very last penitent. The nave was emptying. The lady in deep mourning went up to the saint, who at once consented to hear her. "Would you also like to speak to M. le Curé now that he is disengaged?" someone asked the three nuns. "No, to-morrow," they answered, "for we must look for lodgings." "Oh! to-morrow," they were told, "perhaps to-morrow will not be like to-day."

"It happened, in fact," one of the nuns, Sister Dosithée, of the Providence of Vitteaux, relates "that the following day there was such a concourse of pilgrims that I was carried, rather than walked, up to the confessional. At last I was able to speak to M. le Curé, for, knowing that I was ill"—she was in consumption and had attacks of hæmorrhage—"he saw me before my turn."

It is true that if M. Vianney, once he had taken his seat in the tribunal of mercy, "showed no favour to anyone, he nevertheless made exceptions for his own people, for the sick and infirm and others who were unable to wait." Here the gift of intuition which God had bestowed on him in so large a measure guided his eyes. "I have heard it said of a great number of former pilgrims," relates M. Claude Rougemont, who was vicaire at Ars in 1871, "that M. le Curé had singled them out from among the crowd and summoned them either into the confessional or the sacristy because, though he had no other knowledge of them, he had seen by means of an interior light that it was necessary that these persons should speak to him without further delay." Such was the saint's prestige that only on rare occasions did this exceptional treatment give rise to murmuring. "Let it be!" he said to Frère Athanase, who, no doubt, had repeated to him the echo of some complaint, "I am accused of being somewhat easy with certain pilgrims. Surely I must take into account the trouble it costs them to come from so far and the

expense to which they are put. There are some who come secretly and who do not wish to be recognized; these are in a great hurry to leave."¹

A woman who was the mother of sixteen children had succeeded in getting a place in the middle of the nave. Suddenly the saint appeared outside his confessional, and, pointing his finger towards her, he said: "You, madame, you are in a hurry. Come at once!"²

In 1833, or thereabouts, Marguerite Humbert, of Ecully, now Madame Fayolle, paid a visit—the first in fifteen years—to her cousin, Jean-Marie Vianney. He had asked the daughters of the *Providence* to treat her well, because she had taken good care of him during the time of his studies. "Now, before leaving," Marguerite tells us, "I returned to the church, and I asked myself whether I should go to confession to my cousin. At that very moment someone came to tell me that he was waiting for me. I was greatly surprised because he could not see me where I was. . . . I left Ars full of a great interior joy"³

"One day the servant of God was hearing confessions in the sacristy," M. Oriol records. "All of a sudden he appeared on the threshold, and, addressing me, he said: 'My friend, get a lady who is quite at the back of the church to come to me.' And he told me how I should know her. Now, I could not find the lady at the place to which he had directed me, so I returned and told him. 'Run quickly,' said he, 'she is in front of such a house.' I ran and overtook the lady, who was going away, grievously disappointed, for she could wait no longer."⁴

A poor woman, whose timidity had evidently caused her to miss her turn for confession two or three times in succession, had been at Ars eight days without succeeding in seeing M. Vianney. Finally the saint himself summoned her; more than that, he went to fetch her, and led her through the crowd to the chapel of St. John the Baptist. "Quite happy now, she held on to his cassock and slipped through the passage he opened for her."

¹ Frère Athanase, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1013.

² *Annales d'Ars*, Juillet, 1905, p. 91.

³ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1325.

⁴ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 759.

The saint knew from personal experience that grace has its moments, and that it may go by without coming back. Hence, on occasion, he literally caught souls "on the wing."

About the year 1853 a cheery band of young men set out from Lyons to go on pilgrimage to Ars. They were good Christians; all save one, an old man who had joined the group, "solely to please the young people." The village was reached at about three o'clock in the afternoon. "Go to church, if you like," said the unbeliever on leaving the carriage; "as for me, I shall order dinner." He walked a few yards, then stopped. "No, on second thoughts, I will go with you," he said, "you will not be long!" So the whole band filed into the church. Now at that very moment M. Vianney came out of the sacristy and entered the chancel. He knelt down, stood up and turned round; his eyes were looking for someone in the direction of the holy water basin, and finally he signalled to someone to come up. "It is you he wants," the youths told the astonished unbeliever. So he walked up, obviously feeling very embarrassed, we are told by the nun to whom we owe this story. "As for us, we were chuckling inwardly, for we understood that the bird had been caught. M. le Curé shook his hand, saying: 'It is a long time since you were at confession?' 'My good Curé, it is something like thirty years, I believe.' 'Thirty years, my friend? Just think. . . . It is thirty-three years; you were then at such a place. . . .'

"'You are right, M. le Curé.'

"'Ah, well, so we are going to confession now, are we not?'

"The old man confessed afterwards that he was so taken aback by the invitation that he dared not say no; but he added: 'I at once experienced a sensation of indefinable comfort.' The confession took twenty minutes, and made a new man of him."¹

The way in which another sinner was won over is quite typical. About the year 1840 a certain *Père* Rochette took his son, who was sick, to the wonder-worker of Ars. His wife accompanied him; she went to confession and received

¹ *Letters of an Ursuline of Cracow to Mgr. Convert, June 1, 1902.*

Holy Communion. As for *Père* Rochette, he had but one concern—namely, to obtain the cure of his boy. He paid, indeed, a few visits to the church, but he kept in the neighbourhood of the holy water stoup. There he was when the saint, coming from behind the altar where he was hearing the confessions of priests, began to call him. He refused to budge. At that moment his wife and his son were close to the altar rails. "Is he then such an unbeliever?" M. Vianney asked the wife. At last, at the third summons, the man decided to walk up the nave. "After all," he thought, "the *Curé* d'Ars will not eat me!" He went with M. Vianney behind the altar. There was no time to lose. "This is for both of us, *Père* Rochette," said the *Curé*, and, pointing to the confessional: "Put yourself there," he said.

"Oh!" the other replied, "I don't feel like it." "Well, begin."

Incapable of offering resistance to so sudden an attack, *Père* Rochette had fallen on his knees.

"My father," he stammered, "it is some time . . . ten years. . . ."

"Make it a little more."

"Twelve years. . . ."

"Yet a little more."

"Yes, since the great jubilee of 1826."

"Ah! there we are! One finds by dint of seeking."

Père Rochette made his confession like a child. The following day saw him kneeling by the side of his wife at the altar rails. Their boy, the faithful chronicler adds, left in the church of Ars two crutches, for which he had no further use.¹

Thus for countless souls the road to Ars became the road to Damascus, nor should anyone imagine that, in addition to his personal prayers and penances, the saint had recourse to any unusual means to bring about their conversion. They were moved, at first, by the fire of his preaching, so that, when he came to close quarters with them in the privacy of the confessional, a few words were enough to deal them the blow that prostrates the spirit of man in order to raise it again. Moreover, except in special cases, such as a general

¹ *Annales d'Ars*, Janvier, 1915, pp. 254-255.

confession, he was expeditious, and he required a like conduct from the penitent. "Five minutes sufficed to pour out my soul into his," said *Père* Combalot on leaving the confessional of the *Curé d'Ars*. He did not mince matters in dealing with sinners; his sublime faith raised him far above the fear of men, and, putting all his trust in God alone, he knew, when necessary, how to say to men, irrespective of their condition: "It is not lawful!" Who can tell the number of souls whom the lancet of his word freed from the hidden virus that poisoned their life? He knew the spot which it was necessary to touch, and he rarely missed his aim.

"Ah! if God were not so good," he sighed; "but he is so good!" Or: "Save your poor soul! What a pity to lose a soul that has cost our Lord so much! What harm then has he done to you that you treat him thus?"¹

"Alas!" the holy confessor said to M. Valpinson, a merchant of La Ferté-Macé, "you have a vice that will be your damnation—namely, pride." The penitent owned to it and began to reflect. That simple word changed his soul, and his life became that of a meek and humble Christian. He could never recall his memories of *Ars* without shedding tears.²

In order to move big sinners, M. Vianney, without other exhortation, contented himself with uttering one phrase, simple but terrible on the lips of one who read the future: "My friend, you are damned!" It was short, but it was eloquent. Obviously the saint intended to speak conditionally, and meant to say: "Unless you avoid such an occasion, if you persist in such a habit, if you do not follow such and such advice, you will be damned."³ "What, I

¹ Abbé Monnin, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1122.

² *Annales d'Ars*, Janvier, 1901, p. 251. From some of the facts that we relate here, certain readers might suspect that the *Curé d'Ars* had violated, more or less directly, the most sacred seal of confession; this would be a monstrous error. Let them reassure themselves! It was the persons most concerned who, sooner or later, after their confession to the *Curé*, made these revelations and allowed them to be divulged for the honour of the servant of God.

³ *Procès apostolique in genere*, pp. 347 and 391. "One day," the Abbé Raymond relates, "I brought to him a woman who fancied she had heard him declare that she would be damned. The good *Curé* had no difficulty in reassuring her" (*Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 306).

damned! I cursed by God! for ever!" François Bourdin, of Villebois, kept repeating to himself on coming out of the confessional. In 1856, in consequence of bad business transactions, this man, though still young—he was thirty-five years old—had gone, full of despair, to live with his father-in-law at Ambutrix. A mission happened to be taking place at the time, but, notwithstanding the entreaties of his family, he refused to attend it. His faith, nevertheless, was far from extinct, but the despairing thoughts that haunted him turned him away from God. In the end he was touched by grace: "I want to go to confession," he announced, "but to the great confessor, the Curé d'Ars." Yet by way of encouragement, after the avowal of his sins and miseries, all he heard was the terrifying answer: "My boy, you are damned!" But the threat became a flash of light. The man was converted, and to the end of his life remained a fervent Christian.¹

As a rule the direction of pious souls did not demand many more words. But here also his utterances were fiery darts that buried themselves in the heart for all time. "Love your priests much!" was all he said to Mgr. de Langalerie, his own Bishop, when he knelt at his feet.²

"I have been somewhat careless when doing such-and-such a thing," Frère Athanase told him in confession, "but in the main, my intentions are good." "O my friend, good intentions! Hell is paved with them." That was all.

Frère Amédée, the future Superior-General of the Brothers of the Holy Family, had just concluded his confession: "Oh! love, love the good God very much!" exclaimed M. Vianney, at the same time folding his hands; and he gave him absolution without adding another word.

"He twice heard my confession," says the Abbé Monnin. "Every one of my accusations provoked on his part this exclamation of faith, commiseration, and horror for the smallest sin: 'What a pity!' I was particularly struck by the accent of tenderness with which he uttered the words.

¹ We owe these details to M. l'Abbé Joly, curé of Benonces (Ain), who had them directly from François Bourdin himself (*Relations*, in the archives of the presbytery of Ars).

² Mgr. de Langalerie, when Archbishop of Auch, related the incident during the clergy retreat.

That simple 'what a pity!' in all its beauty showed what damage sin had done to the soul."¹

The Abbé Denis, who lived in retirement at Neuville-sur-Saône, addressed himself fairly often to the saintly confessor: "He was short, very short," he declared; "a word of exhortation and it was over."

It was the holiness of the Curé d'Ars that imparted to his words their power and efficacy; on the lips of other men they might have seemed commonplace, but with what expression he uttered them! In addition to words, there was about M. Vianney something even more irresistible—namely, his tears. To soften a hardened heart, it was at times enough for him to point, in the midst of his tears, to the crucifix that hung on the wall. "From his confessional proceeded groans and sighs that escaped him against his will, and which moved the penitent to repentance and love."² "One day," we are told by the Abbé Dubouis, curé of Fareins, "some priests of a neighbouring diocese indulged in criticism of certain directions given by the servant of God. A magistrate, who had been a penitent of M. Vianney's, was present at the conversation. 'There is one thing of which I can assure you, gentlemen,' he said, 'it is that the Curé d'Ars weeps and one weeps with him; that does not happen everywhere.'"³

"Why do you weep so much, Father?" the saint was asked by a sinner kneeling by his side.

"Ah! my friend, I weep because you do not weep enough."⁴

The Rev. F. Cyril Faivre, himself a great confessor, relates how persons converted by the Curé d'Ars had told him that what had most deeply impressed them was to behold the man of God weeping for their sins.

Small wonder after this that both "men and women came out of his confessional with their eyes full of tears; some there were who even broke out into loud sobs and cries."⁵

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1089.

² Catherine Lassagne, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 123.

³ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1238.

⁴ Frère Athanase, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 224.

⁵ Abbé Tailhades, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1508.

In a corner of the sacristy the pilgrim venerates to this day the rude seat with its high elbow-rests on which the saint sat to hear the men's confessions. This dark corner witnessed some very moving scenes, for it was perhaps here that the greatest number of returns to God took place, for, in the words of Mgr. Devie, "the good Curé had received from God a special gift for converting men."

In order to make sure of an audience, the men ranged themselves as close as possible to the sacristy; in fact, they penetrated even into the chancel, where benches were specially reserved for them. They never came in such numbers as the women, hence they had not so long to wait for their turns; but even they were forced to spend long hours in church. Frère Athanase relates that "Frère Jérôme, the sacristan, has counted as many as seventy-two waiting together, and I myself have seen a man wait for his turn from five o'clock in the morning until the same hour in the evening."¹

Several devoted women acted as guardians, and took up their post among the ranks of the women. In like manner for the men also, a kind of police arrangement was set up, thanks to certain men of good will who never failed. Several excellent men who were free to dispose of their time—such as MM. Thèbre, Oriol, Pagès, Viret, and others—went on duty in relays, from seven o'clock in the morning until night. One of them stationed himself between the kneeling-stools that stood on either side of the door. An iron rod barred the way. As soon as one penitent came out, the watchman on duty let in another.

On the walls of the present-day basilica, a fresco of powerful draughtsmanship evokes memories of those days, already far off, when in that darksome corner divine grace wrought such marvels. Men of every rank are there, gathered from every part of France, their cloaks still powdered with the dust of the long journey. On the faces of some we may read the effects of grace—they are prepared for every avowal, for every expiation; others, led thither by remorse, by the prayers of a beloved wife or daughter, hesitate; perhaps they even draw back and are about to take once more the shame-

¹ *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 207.

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In a corner of the sacristy the pilgrim venerates to this day the rude seat with its high elbow-rests on which the saint sat to hear the men's confessions. This dark corner witnessed some very moving scenes, for it was perhaps here that the greatest number of returns to God took place, for, in the words of Mgr. Devie, "the good Curé had received from God a special gift for converting men."

In order to make sure of an audience, the men ranged themselves as close as possible to the sacristy; in fact, they penetrated even into the chancel, where benches were specially reserved for them. They never came in such numbers as the women, hence they had not so long to wait for their turns; but even they were forced to spend long hours in church. Frère Athanase relates that "Frère Jérôme, the sacristan, has counted as many as seventy-two waiting together, and I myself have seen a man wait for his turn from five o'clock in the morning until the same hour in the evening."¹

Several devoted women acted as guardians, and took up their post among the ranks of the women. In like manner for the men also, a kind of police arrangement was set up, thanks to certain men of good will who never failed. Several excellent men who were free to dispose of their time—such as MM. Thèbre, Oriol, Pagès, Viret, and others—went on duty in relays, from seven o'clock in the morning until night. One of them stationed himself between the kneeling-stools that stood on either side of the door. An iron rod barred the way. As soon as one penitent came out, the watchman on duty let in another.

On the walls of the present-day basilica, a fresco of powerful draughtsmanship evokes memories of those days, already far off, when in that darksome corner divine grace wrought such marvels. Men of every rank are there, gathered from every part of France, their cloaks still powdered with the dust of the long journey. On the faces of some we may read the effects of grace—they are prepared for every avowal, for every expiation; others, led thither by remorse, by the prayers of a beloved wife or daughter, hesitate; perhaps they even draw back and are about to take once more the shame-

¹ *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 207.

ful road of sin. . . . Perhaps it is in that very group that we may look for that libertine who hoped, on entering the church, to find indeed the Curé d'Ars, but dead!¹ Suddenly, within the frame of the redoubtable door, a white figure appears. An old man, emaciated, worn out by his penances, fixes on the waiting men a look by which his whole personality seems, as it were, to express itself. He has espied the soul on which pardon is about to descend, as the eagle swoops down upon its prey. The man thus marked rises. The door is shut upon him and the Curé d'Ars. Will he be the same sinner when he reappears? No, the man we behold is a penitent whose breast is shaken by his sobs, and who, having found the way home to God, hastens to throw himself at the feet of our Lady of Ars, who, close by, holds out her arms to him.

"The great miracle of the Curé d'Ars," someone has said, "was his confessional, besieged day and night."² It might be said with equal truth that his greatest miracle was the conversion of sinners: "I have seen numerous and remarkable ones," the Abbé Raymond assures us, "and they form the most beautiful chapter of the life of the Curé d'Ars. 'Oh, my friend,' he often told me, 'only at the last judgment will it become known how many souls have here found their salvation.'"³ "In reality," Jeanne-Marie Chanay writes, "he made but small account of miraculous cures. 'The body is so very little,' he used to repeat. That which truly filled him with joy was the return of souls to God."⁴ How many occasions he had for such joy! M. Prosper des Garets relates: "I asked him one day how many big sinners he had converted in the course of the year. 'Over seven hundred,' was his reply."⁵ Hence it is easy to understand the wish expressed by a curé who made the pilgrimage to Ars: "Those of my parishioners who go to M. Vianney become models. I wish I could take my whole parish to him."⁶

¹ Comte des Garets, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 989.

² *Sermons* of Mgr. Martin, preached on August 4, 1865, on the occasion of the blessing of the basilica of Ars.

³ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 337.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 988.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 709.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 369.

"The Curé d'Ars felt a special attraction to the work of converting sinners,"¹ says M. Toccanier. He loved them, we might say, with all the hatred which he felt for their sins. He loathed evil, and "spoke of it with horror and indignation," but for the guilty ones he felt boundless compassion, and his lamentations over the loss of souls were heart-rending: "My God," he cried out in his room one day in Lent, 1841, "my God, is it possible that thou shouldst have endured so many torments for their salvation and that they should nevertheless be damned!"² And in his catechisms he said: "What bitter grief to think that there are men who will die without loving God!" Day after day his sobs were such that he was hardly able to recite the phrase which occurs in the night prayers: "*My God, who willest not the death of the sinner.*"³ "*Ah! the poor sinners!*" and one should have heard the accents in which he uttered those two words—"if only *I* could go to confession for them!"⁴ And Mme. des Garets shuddered when she one day heard him from the pulpit "conjure those of his listeners who wished to be damned to commit as few mortal sins as possible, so as not to add to their everlasting punishments! To the end of my life," the pious countess adds, "I shall remember the instruction on the last judgement in which he repeated several times: 'Cursed by God! cursed by God! What a misfortune! what a misfortune!' It was no longer words we heard, but sobs that brought tears to the eyes of all present."⁵

The *poor sinners!* It was when one of them refused to surrender that the saint redoubled his prayers and penances. "I am only content when praying for sinners," was a charming remark of his.⁶ At the approach of the great feasts, and especially during paschal time, he imposed upon himself extraordinary fasts. It was assuredly his zeal for the salvation of so many sinful souls "that made him undertake, during the whole of a long life, a crushing ministry, that

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 137.

² Catherine Lassagne, *Petit mémoire*, première rédaction, p. 7.

³ Mlle Marthe des Garets, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 297.

⁴ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 584.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 780-781.

⁶ *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 301.

knew no interruption, no relaxation, no mitigation; it was his zeal that compelled him to rise at midnight or one o'clock in the morning, and only to leave the church late at night; it was his zeal that robbed him almost completely of sleep, and that enabled him to preserve an unfailing patience in the midst of the most trying importunities." Thus M. le Comte des Garets, Mayor of Ars.¹

Let it not be imagined, however, that the gentleness with which M. Vianney welcomed sinners degenerated at any time into weakness. He absolved them only after he had assured himself of the sincerity of their contrition. Until 1840 he certainly followed the *rigorism* which at that time prevailed in most of the confessionals in France. He still applied the principles that were taught in 1815 in the Grand Séminaire of Lyons. From 1840 onwards, thanks to some conversations with M. Tailhades, a pious priest, and one inclined to leniency; thanks to the counsels of M. Camelet, superior of the diocesan missionaries, who, whilst evangelizing the country, had acquired a profound experience of souls; above all, thanks to a study of the theology of St Alphonsus, which had just been published in French by Cardinal Gousset, the Curé d'Ars showed himself 'sensibly less strict':² barring quite extraordinary cases, it never again happened, as it had in former days, that the same sinner was compelled to return to his confessional as often as five, six, or seven times. Moreover, so many confessions had shown him "the misery of man"; it was the object of his most profound pity; he understood at last that when dealing with men kindness is required above all else. "As we advance in life," the saintly Cardinal Richard said, "we have not the conception of virtue which we had formed when we were younger."³

However, to the very end of his life, before he would consent to absolve an inveterate sinner, M. Vianney always insisted on adequate signs of conversion. According to the

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 958.

² The interpretations of St Alphonsus must have come to his knowledge by word of mouth or, maybe, someone lent him the works of that eminent moralist. The edition of Gousset (*Théologie morale à l'usage des curés et des confesseurs*, 2 vols. in 8, Paris, Lecoffre), which the Curé d'Ars had on his bookshelves, bears the date 1845.

³ Mgr. Odelin, *Le Cardinal Richard*, Paris, de Gigord, p. 25.

testimony of a priest, "those who obstinately refused to give up circumstances which for them constituted a state of damnation, found him inexorable. He rigorously imposed the necessary sacrifices. Thus he obliged a lady of Paris to consign to the flames all the bad books in her library before he consented to give her absolution.

Another lady, likewise of Paris, passed through Ars on her way home from the South, where she had been on a holiday. A priest who knew of her irregular life had suggested that break in the journey: "There, madame, you will see something altogether out of the common: a country priest whose name is known throughout the world. You will not regret having gone out of your way." Now this prophecy came true in a strange manner. In the course of the afternoon the lady was walking up and down in the village square with a stranger whom she had chanced to meet. M. Vianney passed them on his return from a sick-call. "You, madame," he said to the Parisian lady, "follow me"; and to the other: "You may go, you have no need of my ministrations." Having taken the sinful woman apart, he revealed to that new Samaritan all her shameful life. Thunderstruck at such penetration, she kept silence. At last she said: "M. le Curé, will you hear my confession?"

"Your confession would be useless," was his reply. "I can read in your soul, and there I see two devils that enslave it, the devil of pride and the devil of impurity. I can only absolve you on condition that you do not go back to Paris, and, seeing your dispositions, I know that you will return thither."

And then, in the spirit of prophecy, the man of God showed her how she would sink down to the very lowest depths of evil.

"But, Monsieur le Curé, I am incapable of committing abominations such as these! So I am damned!"

"I do not say that, but, from now onwards, how hard it will be for you to save your soul!"

"What, then, must I do?"

"Come to-morrow morning and I will tell you."

During the night that followed, that he might prevent the loss of a soul which God had created for the heights, but

which was engulfed in the mire, the Curé d'Ars prayed for a long time and scourged himself to the blood.

In the morning he admitted this unusual penitent before her turn and gave her his answer:

"Well, you will leave Paris against your will, to return to the house from which you have now come. There, if you wish to save your poor soul, you must practise such-and-such mortifications."

The lady departed from Ars without absolution. For a moment Paris claimed her once more, and she saw with horror that the abyss of sin was again yawning under her feet. Seized with loathing, she cried to God and fled. Hiding herself in her villa on the Mediterranean, she resolved to pursue the straight road, notwithstanding the rebelliousness of a nature spoilt by passions that she had too long gratified. She recalled to memory the counsels of the Curé d'Ars. A strong interior grace spurred her on and helped her to carry them into practice. "On the road of abnegation," M. Vianney was wont to say, "it is only the first step that is difficult; once we have started we go on almost mechanically."¹ Our penitent had the happiness of experiencing the truth of those words. "At the end of three months," says Chanoine Ball, who collected the details of this story, "her conversion was so complete, the dispositions of her mind and heart were so profoundly altered, that she felt unable to understand how she ever could have loved that which now filled her with such loathing."²

When once the Curé d'Ars had obtained from his penitents the indispensable signs of amendment, he showed himself exceedingly gentle in the application of the sacramental penance. "They reproach me with it," he confided to Frère Athanase, "but can I really be hard on people who come from so far, and who, in order to do so, have made so many sacrifices?"³ "Were I to impose severer penances, I should discourage them," he said another time. "But how can we strike a happy middle course in this matter?" a brother priest inquired. "My friend," the saint replied, "here is

¹ *Spirit of the Curé d'Ars*, p. 209.

² Archives of the presbytery of Ars.

³ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 832.

my receipt: I give them a small penance and the remainder I myself perform in their stead."¹ We can guess what that must have meant.

Nevertheless, M. Vianney by no means forgot that the sacramental penance must be *medicinal*. In this matter the saint exhibited great ability in touching the weak spot: such a sin had to be expiated, such a defect had to be corrected—very well, an appropriate expiation must be undertaken.

In the case of young people capable of attaining to great heights of virtue, vanity and unconscious pride may just prove the one obstacle on the road of perfection. In such souls M. Vianney sought to cut asunder the last remaining ties of self-love. A choice soul, but of excessive sensitiveness, Mlle. Caroline Lioger, of Lyons, who, under the name of Mère Marie-Véronique, was to become the foundress of the "Sœurs Victimes du Sacré-Cœur," came with her mother several years in succession, to stay for a time at Ars. Now M. Vianney sought to fit this young girl for a great mission, and with this end in view he took pleasure in testing her humility, and he did so unsparingly. Among other things, he commanded her to kneel on the threshold of the church, with her arms extended crosswise, at the time when people came out from Mass.²

Generally speaking, men sin a great deal through human respect. The Curé d'Ars, after hearing their confession, used to tell them to go into the church to pray publicly.

"What a touching sight it was," writes the Abbé Raymond, "to see white-haired men, who had deserted the Church, neglected prayer and devotion to Mary, holding their rosary proudly and reciting it with fervour. Not one of them could remain deaf to the injunction of the holy priest, always to carry a rosary on their person, and to make use of it. It was useless for a man to object that he no longer knew how to use it; that, after all, he was able to read. . . . 'My friend,' M. Vianney would reply, 'a good Christian is always armed with his rosary: mine never leaves me; go and

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1140.

² "Le Curé d'Ars et la Mère Véronique," *Annales d'Ars*, Juillet, 1904, p. 62.

buy one. I will attach to it the indulgences of which you are in such great need in order to supplement an inadequate penance.' In fact, he generally presented the men with a rosary, which all accepted as a precious keepsake."¹

"Do you live in your native town?" the Curé d'Ars asked after hearing the confession of M. Georges L——, a worldly young man of twenty-six years of age.

"Yes, Father."

"What is its population?"

"Twenty-five thousand inhabitants."

"You are known there?"

"Quite well, and by nearly everybody."

"Very well, my child. For your penance you will say, before you leave this church, the acts of faith, hope, and charity. That is not all. On one of the two Sundays, when the procession of Corpus Christi takes place in your town, you will walk in the procession, taking care to secure a place immediately behind the canopy. Go, my child." The young man did not dare to protest: surprise and emotion held his lips. Now he was a victim to human respect; but he had the faith: here was his penance! When the Sunday of the first procession arrived, he put it off until the following week. When that day came round, the rain, for which he had hoped, refused to fall; so there was nothing for it but to obey. "Were I to live a hundred years," he stated later on, "I should never forget those two hours spent by me walking behind the canopy. Cold perspiration bathed my forehead; my knees shook under me. From time to time I roused my faith and endeavoured to pray. My lips alone uttered the words of the liturgy." But this act of courage drew on him the attention of his Catholic fellow-citizens. Two years later, when he had become a fearless Christian, he found himself at the head of a conference of St Vincent de Paul, which comprised thirty young men, every one of whom had been won over by his example.²

When we remember the weakness of human nature we can understand that it would have been too much to expect that all M. Vianney's penitents would display the perse-

¹ *Vie MSS.*, p. 168.

² *Documents*, Ball (Archives of the presbytery of Ars).

verance of this young man. Yet we may take it for granted that in nearly every instance the impression made was so deep, the blow dealt by grace so strong, that they remained faithful to duty. It is certain that the saint triumphed in cases of extreme difficulty and obtained perseverance in instances where, as a rule, one dared not so much as hope for it.

"M. Niermont, Superior of the Grand Séminaire of Brou, asked me one day," the Abbé Toccanier relates, "to question M. le Curé as to whether he had ever converted a drunkard. I carried out my commission in the sacristy, in the presence of several witnesses. This is the answer I received: 'Yes, my friend, only quite recently a woman came to thank me in the following terms: "Until lately I lived very unhappily with my husband; I received more blows than kind words. Well, since he has been to see you he has become as meek as a lamb."' A vicaire who had listened to this account related in his turn a similar case: a man of his parish, formerly addicted to drink, had recourse, since his pilgrimage to Ars, to heroic means to bring about his amendment. When he went to Mass he always went a long way round, so as to avoid passing the tavern, the sight of which was a constant temptation to him."¹

In the *Procès*, Mgr. Mermod, who was curé of Gex at the time, relates the following incident: "An incorrigible drunkard of Chaleins, my former parish, was converted by M. Vianney. During the three years that he lived afterwards that man never drank a drop of wine, and led an exemplary life. Now a striking thing happened. One day the good man called at the presbytery; he was quite well, yet he wished to go to confession, giving as his reason that he was going to die. As he persisted in his request, I gave him absolution and Holy Communion. An hour later he was dead."²

Thanks to the Curé d'Ars, divided households recovered their harmony, proud sceptics became humble believers, libertines died like the predestined or sought the holy solitude of the cloister.

¹ Abbé Toccanier, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 153.

² *Procès apostolique ne pereant*, p. 951.

An architect of Lyons was frequently the object of only too well-deserved reproaches on the part of his wife. One morning, after a sharp quarrel, the guilty husband exclaimed: "You shall not see me again!" On this he slammed the door and went out into the square. There he saw an omnibus that had just come to a standstill; it bore the inscription: *Correspondance d'Ars*.¹ "What place is that?" he asked a passer-by. Ars, he was told, was a village in the Ain to which people went in order to see an extraordinary curé. Feeling that he needed a change to calm his nerves, even more than to satisfy his curiosity, the man took his place in the coach, which started almost immediately. The moment of departure was arranged so as to enable travellers to reach Ars a short time before the eleven o'clock catechism.

Our architect entered the church, saw the saint, and listened to his words. When he came out he was profoundly moved by what he had seen and heard. "Monsieur," he said to the Abbé Toccanier with whom he presently fell in, "that priest is so plunged in the love of God, his words are so burning, that, if I hear him another time, *I, too, shall take the plunge* just like the others!" The good missionary assured him that he saw no objection to such a course, far from it. In the afternoon the man took up his post in the queue of penitents. When he issued from the sacristy he felt transformed and the happiest of mortals; he hastened back to Lyons, where, like the prodigal, he threw himself into the arms of the woman who was *not to have seen him again*. He was, in fact, no longer the same man.²

Some twelve or fifteen years earlier—it was certainly before M. Toccanier's appointment to Ars—another conversion had caused a great stir in the city of Lyons. M. Maissiat, a drawing-master in the school of Arts and Crafts, was likewise a geologist of note; he loved to describe himself as a *philosopher*, by which he meant to let people know that he was guided by reason alone. His first Communion was made devoutly, at the very height of the Terror, but he subsequently abandoned the Catholic faith to embrace in

¹ Coach connecting with Ars.

² Abbé Toccanier, *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 152.

turn the tenets of Mohammedanism, Judaism, Protestantism, spiritualism, Saint-Simonianism, and finally communism, His life was truly a romance.

One day in June, 1841, our *philosopher* set out from Lyons for a month's tour among the hills of the Beaujolais. In the coach for Villefranche-sur-Saône he met an old friend who was going from that town to Ars. "Come with me," the friend said; "you shall see a priest who works miracles."

"Miracles!" the geologist exclaimed with a sneer, "I do not believe in them."

"Come, I say, you shall both see and believe."

"Very well! I do not mind making a trip to Ars!" And, playing on the words, he added: "*Ars* is a name that pleases me, for I am an *artist*."

The following morning M. Maissiat, out of curiosity, assisted at M. Vianney's Mass. On his way from the sacristy to the altar the saint fixed his glance on the sceptic. Mass was no sooner over than he made straight for him, and, placing his bony hand on his shoulder, signed to the man to follow him. On entering the sacristy our philosopher beheld the confessional, but when a gesture of the Curé invited him to kneel down in it: "Oh! as for that," he exclaimed, "no!" All this time the man of God never took his eyes off him. M. Maissiat finally went on his knees. After all, what did it matter? He was alone with that priest; so he might as well tell him coldly, like a man who relates a tale, the miserable story of his soul. The holy confessor listened, but without any illusion as to the real feelings of this strange penitent. "My friend, come back and talk to me to-morrow. In the meantime go before the altar of St Philomena and tell her to ask our Lord for your conversion."

M. Maissiat uttered no protest, but went and stood erect on the appointed spot. But, oh mystery! Suddenly he was overcome with tears. Why? He could not explain. Rushing through the crowd, he left the church bathed in tears. "Oh! what sweetness there was in those tears!" he subsequently confessed.

There was no longer question of the projected trip to the hills of the Beaujolais. On the following morning the geologist found himself once more at the feet of the Curé

d'Ars. "Father," he said, already overcome by grace, "I do not believe in anything. . . . Help me!" And the saint helped him so effectively that after nine days spent with him, M. Maissiat returned to Lyons full of faith. The Abbé Raymond, who knew him well, assures us that when he rejoined his colleagues, who did not share his beliefs, he set human respect at defiance and proved himself one of the most fervent and zealous Catholics of Lyons. Another of his friends, M. Gaillard, curé of Montagnat, tells us that he died in the beautiful dispositions which can only spring from Christian piety.¹

About the middle of November, 1855, a young man of Clermont-l'Hérault, Sylvain Dutheil by name, and his mother, took rooms at the hotel Pertinand. At the age of only sixteen Sylvain had enlisted in the army, but in consequence of his excesses, he contracted a pulmonary disease that compelled him to return home. Some strange occurrences had impelled him to undertake the long and painful journey to Ars.

"One day, as he passed through a street of Montpellier," Frère Athanase relates, "the young man noticed a portrait of the Curé d'Ars and made fun of it. His sister, who was with him, rebuked him, and when she added: 'You might obtain your cure were you to put your trust in that holy man!' the young man scoffed only the more. That night the holy Curé appeared to him, holding in his hand an apple more than half rotten. The dream made an impression on the youth, and he asked to be taken to Ars.

"His mother took him thither. Every day M. Vianney visited him at the hotel. On the morning of December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Sylvain, at last converted and absolved from his sins, was carried to the foot of the altar. The temperature was icy cold. After his Communion the sick man, now quite exhausted, was carried into the sacristy and placed near the stove. 'Oh! how happy I am,' he exclaimed; 'never in all my life have I felt such happiness.'

"When he had been taken back to the hotel, he threw

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, pp. 1427-1429, and Abbé Raymond, *Vie MSS.*, p. 158.

himself into the arms of his mother and told her amid his tears: 'The joy of this Communion makes me forget all my sufferings. I do not wish to leave this holy man; I want to die here!' He did, in fact, die that same night."¹

In 1859 an old boatman on the river Saône, who was a hardened sinner, was inveigled into the village. When he beheld the church full of pilgrims and the confessional beleaguered by penitents, he understood that he had been tricked, so he started cursing, and was for leaving on the spot. The objection was raised that the hour was late, that, willy nilly, he would be forced to spend the night in the hateful village. In the meantime someone had succeeded in letting M. Vianney know of the arrival of this "big fish."

At nightfall the Curé d'Ars called at the room occupied by the boatman. "I have not come here to play the devotee," shouted the infuriated man. "Leave me in peace! I am anxious to be off."

"So you do not want to have pity on your soul, my friend," was M. Vianney's gentle reply, whilst at the same time he grasped his hand.

Having uttered these simple words, he left him. What happened during the night? No one knows; but in the morning the saint found *his* sinner, weeping and grasping a crucifix. "His conversion was a complete and signal one." M. Vianney told him—at least so rumour had it—that confessor and penitent would follow each other to the grave. Be this as it may, "shortly after the death of the servant of God the old boatman was found kneeling on his bed, dead."²

One day during the autumn of 1852 François Dorel, a plasterer, of Villefranche-sur-Saône, was walking with a friend on the road to Ars. Dorel was a jovial young man of thirty-two years. No one seeing him, accoutred as he was, would have taken him for a pilgrim. Gaitered, with a gun slung over his shoulder, he whistled every now and again to a magnificent hound. The fact was that our man had no desire at all to be taken for a devotee in quest of a confessor. His friend had casually asked him the day before: "Will

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 871.

² *Procès apostolique in genere*, p. 153.

you come to Ars to-morrow? There is a curé there who works miracles, and who hears confessions night and day. It is worth seeing."

"So you, too, have a mind to? . . ."

"Eh? why not?"

"As you like. Listen: I am willing enough to go with you, but I shall take my gun and my dog. And after seeing that wonderful curé, I shall shoot a few ducks on the ponds of La Dombes. As for you, well, if it gives you pleasure, you may go to confession!"

The two travellers entered the village just in time to see the Curé cross the square between two rows of pilgrims. He advanced slowly, as usual, blessing the people. François Dorel, full of curiosity, had mingled with the crowd. What a surprise awaited him! When he came to him, the holy old man stood still, and, looking in turn at the dog and the sportsman, he gravely said to the stranger: "Monsieur, it is greatly to be wished that your soul were as beautiful as your dog!"

The man blushed and hung his head. His dog had remained what God had made him, faithful; but he, a Christian, had spoilt the work of God in his soul! Terrified by this unexpected revelation, he reflected for a long time. At last, entrusting to some villagers both gun and dog, he entered the church and went to confession to M. Vianney. "Such was his repentance that he burst into tears. Realizing at last the value of his soul, the vanity of the world, and the seriousness of life, he decided to enter religion. "Go to La Trappe!" the Curé d'Ars told him authoritatively. Thus it came about that on December 18, 1852, François Dorel presented himself at Notre Dame d'Aiguebelle, where he took the habit a year later; after a delay of sixteen years he made his solemn profession under the name of Frère Arsène. He died a holy death on December 18, 1888.¹

¹ From an *Account* of eight Trappist vocations inspired by the Curé d'Ars, addressed to Mgr. Convert on May 21, 1901, by the Abbot of Aiguebelle.