100th Anniversary of the October 10, 1926 Establishment of Cure of Ars Parish (Merrick, New York on Long Island) as the First Parish in the United States of America Named after St. John Vianney after the May 17, 1925 Canonization of St. John Vianney by Pope Pius XI

Homily of Bishop John Barres

Cure of Ars Parish

October 10, 2026

On Saturday, September 26, 2026, I was the celebrant and homilist at a Beatification Mass of Thanksgiving at St. Mary's Church in El Paso, Illinois.

I was asked because St. Mary's is where Bishop Sheen was baptized as a baby on May 12, 1895 and because I was baptized as a baby by Bishop Sheen on October 2, 1960 at St. Augustine's Church in Larchmont, New York.

Bishop Louis Tylka, the Bishop of Peoria, concelebrated the Mass with me. There were only about 35-50 people at the Mass but Bishop Tylka and I both felt something very powerful and cosmic was happening.

After all, Bishop Sheen himself was cosmic!

You could feel it in the air – the relationship between the Sacrament of Baptism and global Catholic worldwide mission in the life of Blessed Fulton Sheen and in our lives, in our moment of 21st century history.

I had to stop for a full minute during my homily because I was so moved about what was happening.

Then Bishop Tylka got up to speak at the end of the Mass. He had to stop for a moment because he was so deeply moved to announce the establishment of **Blessed Fulton Sheen parish** right at the Church of his Baptism, the first parish in the United States and in the World to be named for the Blessed!

And now we come to another historic moment of Catholic Church history.

On May 27, 1925, Pope Pius XI canonized St. John Vianney (1786-1859).

One year later on October 10, 1926, this parish – Cure of Ars parish in Merrick, New York on Long Island -- was erected and dedicated as the first parish in the United States of America to have as its patron St. John Vianney.

So we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Cure of Ars parish not only to the year but to the day! Leave it to your pastor, Msgr. Caldwell, to make that happen!

We celebrate the evangelizing history of the People of God of Cure of Ars parish and the sons of the parish who have embraced vocations to the priesthood as well as the many priests who have served here with dedication and zeal. Many of these priests are present with us here today. Please join me in thanking them!

On May 28, 2025 at the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope Leo XIV celebrated with the French bishops the 100th anniversary of the canonizations of St. John Eudes (1601-1680), St. John Vianney (1786-1859) and St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), all three on the same day of May 17, 1925.

In addressing the French Bishops, Pope Leo said: "The scale of the challenges facing the Church in France a century later, and the continuing relevance of these three holy figures in meeting them, lead me to invite you to give special prominence to this anniversary...I express the hope that these celebrations will not merely evoke nostalgia for the past that might seem bygone, but that they will awaken hope and give rise to a new missionary impetus."

Pope Leo's dedication to the Church in France was expressed powerfully in his recent evangelizing pilgrimage there which revealed many signs of missionary grace and hope.

I was intrigued to discover that the Cure of Ars and St. Therese were canonized together.

St. John Vianney died in 1859 and St. Therese was born in 1873 so only a 14 year difference between his death and her birth.

He was not aware of her, but she certainly must have heard of him.

St. Therese, Doctor of the Church and co-patroness of Catholic global worldwide mission, had a great love for priests and so we seek her intercession as well today!

How much St. John Vianney and St. Therese had in common!

On this historic day, we pray for a rich harvest of vocations to the priesthood on Long Island and throughout the universal Church.

We celebrate that this parish and all of our 129 parishes on Long Island have a special claim on the intercession of the Cure of Ars.

St. John Vianney was born in 1786 right before the French Revolution and he died in 1859 just before our American Civil War began.

When he was assigned to the parish in Ars, France, he had been warned that the spiritual life of the parish was barren and that he would face almost insurmountable challenges.

In his Vespers homily given here at Cure of Ars parish on August 4, 2025, Fr. John McCartney gave this very helpful historical context: "St. John Vianney lived and ministered in a time with enormous spiritual obstacles. He was born in 1786; when he was three years old the *Bastille* was stormed, and the French Revolution began. When he was seven the Reign of Terror began, and the persecution of the Church produces thousands of martyrs for the Faith. Many priests, out of fear and lack of faith, swore an oath of allegiance to the atheistic revolutionary government. As a boy, Vianney made his First Holy Communion in the middle of the night in a farmhouse, while the farmers placed hay wagons in front of the windows so no one would see the candlelight and suspect that an illegal Mass was being celebrated. After many travails, he was ordained on August 13, 1815, less than two months after Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo. The Revolution and the Napoleonic years which followed left the nation and the Church in France a ruin in every way. Both had achieved their aims of a complete secularization of society and a devastation of faith and belief. This is the time and place Vianney was called to serve the Lord as a Catholic priest."[1]

[1] Fr. John McCartney Evening Prayer Homily preached on the Feast of St. John Vianney at Cure of Ars parish in Merrick, New York on August 4, 2025.

St. John Vianney's life was framed by world crisis after world crisis, Church crisis after Church crisis.

Blessed Fulton Sheen writes: "Every (world) crisis is a rehearsal for the final judgment.[2]…The Church…has been through a thousand resurrections after a thousand crucifixions. The bell is always sounding for its execution, which, by some great power of God, is everlastingly postponed. The world is ready to chant a requiem over its grave, and it rises to chant a requiem over their graves."[3]

The life and holiness of St. John Vianney illustrates an essential point of World history, Church history and Salvation history.

Just when it seems like the Catholic Church is breaking down, collapsing and dying at a certain moment in history, the tongues of flame and the driving winds of the Holy Spirit are helping the Church to break through[4] to a new era of reform, a new era of creative evangelization and global worldwide mission, a new era of rediscovering the cosmic Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, and yes, a new era of rediscovering the Catholic confessional.

The Holy Spirit uses saints like St. John Vianney to be the instruments of these holy breakthroughs.

All of us are familiar with the 1807 oil painting "The Coronation of Napoleon" by Jacques-Louis David which is on display at the Louvre in Paris.

The painting captures the moment on December 2, 1804 in Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris when Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned Emperor of the French. Pope Pius VII was respectfully present trying to mend diplomatic fences.

But as we all remember at the key moment of the Coronation, Napoleon crassly seized the crown and placed it on his own head (and then on Empress Josephine's head) to symbolize that his power came from his own accomplishments and the French people rather than from the Catholic Church and Pope Pius VII.[5]

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[2] Bishop Sheen, *Thoughts for Daily Living*, (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1955), 183.
[3] Bishop Sheen, *Three to Get Married*, (New York: Scepter Publishers, 1951 originally, 1996), 154.

[4] I am indebted to Fr. George Rutler for this insight (which I have expanded) expressed in his book, *Saint John Vianney: Cure of Ars Today*, (San Franciso: Ignatius Press, 1988), 29
[5] See Ambrogio A. Caiani, *To Kidnap a Pope: Napoleon and Pius VII*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 127; see also Wikipedia on the Coronation of Napoleon.

I can only begin to imagine the range of feelings that Pope Pius VII felt at that moment.

The holy Cure of Ars, who I am sure prayed for Pius VII daily, searched for another type of Crown quite different from the crown on Napoleon Bonaparte's head, the Crown that can only be won and bestowed at the Foot of the Cross.

The Cure lived with the Paschal Mystery – the Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ -- deeply seared and imprinted on his ontology, the change in his being that had occurred at his Ordination to the Catholic priesthood.

Napoleon Bonaparte followed the logic of the world.

St. John Vianney followed the logic of the Kingdom of God and the logic of the Cross.

What do we mean when we say that Catholics follow the logic of the Cross?

Blessed Fulton Sheen writes: "Unless there is a Good Friday in our lives, there will never be an Easter Sunday; unless there is a cross, there will never be an empty tomb; unless there is the torn flesh, there will never be the glorified body. The crown of thorns is the condition of the halo of light, and every resurrection presupposes a death, as every death is the antecedent of resurrection. Unless we die to the world, we shall never live to Christ; unless we lose our life, we shall never save it. The whole cross is easier to carry than half of it; it is only its splinters and its shadows which frighten…The symbol of love as Christ understands it, is the cross with its arms outstretched even unto eternity to embrace all souls within its grasp."[6]

Napoleon Bonaparte and St. John Vianney were both conquerors, but very different types of conquerors.

Napoleon conquered, sacked and pillaged countries, governments, people, treasuries and antiquities.

In his configuration to Christ crucified, the Cure of Ars humbly conquered the People of God he served and continues to conquer all of us in the 21st century.

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[6] Bishop Sheen, *The Life of All Living: The Philosophy of Life*, (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1951), 148-150.

His priestly virtue, holiness and humility conquered the lukewarmness, cynicism and lack of Faith in Ars and sent apostolic vibrations through Europe and the rest of the world that last to this day in this Mass and in this historic celebration.[7]

He lived and breathed the supernatural and invisible realities and truths that we will all proclaim in a moment when we profess together the Nicene Creed.

St. John Vianney's ecstatic and mystical light stirs our hope, stirs our prayer and stirs our missionary spirit.

As a pastor and Good Shepherd of his flock, St. John Vianney invited his people to the earthly Banquet of holiness in this life and the Heavenly Banquet of Eternal Life described in Isaiah 25 and Matthew 22.

He was aware that human nature often rejects the moment-by-moment invitations God the Father gives each of us to his earthly banquet and His call to conversion and holiness.

That is why St. John Vianney was a living expression of the Divine Mercy as he devoted 15+ hours a day to hearing confessions.

He was aware of how we can all be distracted and diverted from responding to God the Father's call to His Heavenly Banquet and the gift of Eternal Life.

Matthew 22 reminds us, as all the parables do and as the Cure of Ars does, not to delay our response, not to refuse the invitation, and not to forget our wedding garment.

St. John Vianney was totally dependent on the Holy Trinity to work through him.

He understood with Philippians 4 that "God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

I have always loved this excerpt from the catechetical instructions of Saint John Marie Vianney from the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for his memorial on August 4: "Prayer is nothing else but union with God. When one has a heart that is pure and united with God, he is given a kind of serenity and sweetness that makes

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[7] Cf. Bishop John O. Barres' August 4, 2009 Pastoral Letter to the Priests and entire People of God of the Diocese of Allentown, Pennsylvania on "St. John Marie Vianney, the Patron of Priests on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of his Death and the Year of the Priest proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI."

him ecstatic, a light that surrounds him with marvelous brightness. In this intimate union, God and the soul are fused together like two bits of wax that no one can ever pull apart. This union of God with a tiny creature is a lovely thing. It is a happiness beyond understanding."

It was St. John Vianney's rich and ecstatic interior life and evangelizing reverence in his celebration of the Mass and the sacraments, his sacrifices and mortification for souls, his intercessory prayer for his parishioners, his priestly exercise of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy that were the instruments of the Holy Spirit transforming his parish and transforming the world to this day and in this historic moment and celebration.

Happy 100th anniversary and happy Cure of Ars!