

Local Solemnity of St. John Vianney – August 4, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – Mass for Vocations, 10:00am – 950 words

Throughout this year of St. Joseph, here at the Cathedral, we are praying in a special way for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In doing this, we fulfill the Lord's gospel command to "ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest". St. Joseph is a powerful intercessor and a model of manhood, and so we may have confidence that he will answer our prayers in a powerful way, by helping the good young men in our midst to respond to God's call. But he is not our only intercessor in this area – therefore, today, on the feast of our diocesan co-patron, St. John Vianney, we seek his help as well. He is the patron saint of parish priests: a sure model for any priest to follow and precisely the kind of priest that we need.

A collection of the homilies that St. John Vianney gave in the small town of Ars, France is available in a book that I highly recommend, entitled "The Sermons of the Curé of Ars". As you look through the table of contents, you can see how he earnestly tried to cover all the bases, guiding his people in their life with Christ by warning them about temptation and pitfalls and helping them to internalize and assimilate more fully our wonderful Catholic faith. We see, in fact, how St. John Vianney fulfilled the role of "watchman" that was spoken of in the first reading. "Son of man," the Lord said to Ezekiel, "I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, you shall warn them for me."

Indeed, many spiritual writers down through the ages have reflected upon how the priest, in fulfilling his duty of preaching and teaching, occupies the post of a watchman. He is first of all to listen to what God is speaking. But he is also to do so in light of what he sees from that outpost of contemplation that he occupies. In other words, he is to read the signs of the times and apply the word of God to them – and then share, exhort, and even warn concerning what he sees. This is often a thankless task; my mind goes back to yesterday's daily Mass gospel, where our Lord said that a "prophet is not welcome in his native place" and Jeremiah, in the first reading, related the persecution the prophets endured.

Indeed, it would be good to recall the exact words of Jeremiah that we heard yesterday: "Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the house of the Lord and speak to the people...; whatever I command you, tell them, and omit nothing. Perhaps they will listen and turn back, each from his evil way, so that I may repent of the evil I have planned to inflict upon them for their evil deeds." Sin merits punishment, but the priest, when he fulfills his role of watchman correctly, can help avert God's justice by leading people away from sin and toward virtue, toward the good. St. John Vianney fulfilled this role in a marvelous way, as his sermons attest and as his biography clearly demonstrates.

The priest's preaching and teaching not only happens from the pulpit; no, he also preaches and teaches – albeit in a far more discreet way – in the confessional. And St. John Vianney, as we well know, was renowned for this also. Just imagine what the people of the village of Ars must have thought as men and women arrived from all over France and beyond to visit their priest, confess their sins, and seek his counsel and absolution! And there he was, sometimes for sixteen hours a day, receiving all who came to him without respect for persons. It did not matter whether they were poor or rich, learned or simple, male or female: all were given the same treatment; he was a watchman who spoke the word of God for and to all.

But remember well what the prerequisite for being a watchman is: it is first listening to what the Lord is saying. St. John Vianney accomplished this through a deep life of prayer. Life was a fair amount different then: parish priests did not have near the amount of administrative duties that they do today; moreover, normally a parish priest would have only had one assignment, not being pulled in multiple directions. Our reality is different in many respects

today, but the priesthood – and the function of being a watchman – remains the same. Priests today must find the time to pray, to listen to God. One cannot give what one does not have! Let us ask St. John Vianney to obtain the grace of a deep life of prayer for all our priests.

Let us also, then, ask him to look after, even now, those young men whom God is calling – whether they yet know it or not. Prayer is God’s work – not ours. May he work in their hearts and call them to deeper union with him. May he teach them to hear his voice. And may they have the courage to respond to his call. Our need for good priests – for good watchman – is very great. I am convinced, as I get to know more of the young men in our community, that there are several in our midst who are called. Today we beg St. John Vianney for special intercessory prayers on our behalf, joining his prayers to those of St. Joseph, whom we invoke each day throughout this year dedicated to him, so that the master of the harvest will send out more laborers to his harvest.