

Being Transformed by God's Incredible Love

Odds are people at work, or in your neighborhood might know you are Catholic. But what does it mean to really embrace and live out the faith? How are we different as Catholics?

Saint Paul in our second reading this weekend from Ephesians says we should live “no longer as the Gentiles do” and we should “put away the old self of your former way of life.” If there was ever a saint who helped people to do just that, it was Saint John Vianney.

This upcoming week on Friday, August 4th, we honor Saint John Vianney. He's the patron saint of parish priests, and his life story is an incredible testament to what it means to truly have your life centered around God.

For one, he had a deep love for the God and His Church. Born in the wake of the French revolution, as a child he lived in a period when the Catholic church was persecuted in France. His family had to travel to go to a Mass in secret often in a barn. He made his First Communion in a kitchen that had its windows covered. His family taught him that true freedom comes in having a loving relationship with God who is far greater than any nation state, and this had a lasting impact on his life. He regarded the priests who were in hiding as heroes for providing the sacraments. By the time he was in his teens and Napoleon came to power the Church was restored. Throughout his life, this active faith of prayer, confession, and going to Mass and living out his faith in action would be a part of his life. People would be drawn to him because of his holiness. With respect to ourselves, sometimes as we go through life Church can seem like a chore, or a bit of an obligation, or we can become kind of lukewarm in our faith. While there's nothing wrong with having an active life with work, hobbies and other activities, for us when our lives center around God we have the proper sense of where we are ultimately going. We make time for God by coming to know Him, and in response He gives us direction, peace and love. It's good to regularly examine our conscience, to celebrate confession, and to ask ourselves how we are doing with the sins we battle, seeking God's help in confronting them, and asking ourselves how can I grow in loving God in my life. The Church is there to help us on that journey through the Mass and the sacraments. God is with us step by step through life. Hopefully we never lose sight of that.

Second, he persevered. Like many saints his life wasn't easy. He felt a call to priesthood, but was drafted into Napoleon's army. He became an inadvertent deserter when he fell ill, his unit left, and he ran across another soldier who told him he'd lead him to where they were. Instead he took him to where a bunch of other deserters were where he lived for a time. When the Napoleonic wars ended, he was allowed to resume his studies. But even this was a challenge; some Church leaders said he was too slow to become a priest as academics and Latin could be a challenge. He got private tutoring, worked hard, and managed to be ordained when a bishop said his holiness would make up for what he might be lacking in “book smarts.” And so he was ordained.

He'd be assigned to Ars, France, a tiny country town of about 232 people at the time. Here, he found people who were Catholic in name, but religion wasn't really at the top of their list of priorities. And so for the rest of his life, he'd try to re-evangelize people. He tried to set a good example for others by being there for them and worked hard, long hours. He set up a home for girls with two women. He'd hear confessions 11 to 12 hours a day in winter and up to 16 hours a day in summer. Word got out about a man who cared for the people and was helping them to grow in holiness, and so a bit like with John the Baptist people would come from all over to see this parish priest who truly got to know his flock and their stories. None of this was of course easy; but his hard work helped many mustard seeds to grow, both in his own soul and in the souls of the people he ministered to. Perseverance for us is a must. We make steps forward and steps back. But when we keep at it, we can see true spiritual progress. The same is true with the people God puts into our lives. When we persevere in living out our faith, in talking about our faith and helping and challenging others along with our acts of kindness and mercy, we can do so much to help the faith grow little by little. However the key is to not give up on ourselves, one another, or on the world, but to keep at it.

As the hymn goes, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." Love though is something we grow into, not just a saying, but a way of life. As Jesus says in this week's Gospel, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst." May we let Jesus feed us, and may His love help us to transform ourselves into the people we want to become, and may He also help us, like Saint John Vianney, feed a hungry world.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul