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HEART *of a* PRIEST

Thousands of Catholics venerate the incorrupt heart of St. Jean Vianney as it makes a nationwide pilgrimage

by Columbia staff

Some 17,000 young people gathered for Mass Jan. 12 at the annual conference of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). They stood in reverence as a reliquary holding the incorrupt heart of St. Jean-Marie Vianney was solemnly processed into the convention center in Indianapolis. Throughout the conference, participants waited in long lines to approach the relic for personal veneration.

There have been similar scenes in churches and chapels across the United States since the “Heart of a Priest” pilgrimage, organized by the Knights of Columbus, began last November. The relic has been entrusted to the Order by the Shrine of Ars, France, where St. Jean Vianney (1786-1859) served for more than 40 years.

The possibility of the pilgrimage was first presented last spring, before the clergy sexual abuse crisis erupted. In September, Supreme Knight Carl Anderson suggested that the pilgrimage would serve as a “spiritual response” to the crisis, remarking, “We welcome as providential this opportunity to invoke the intercession of

the patron of parish priests, whose holiness and integrity are a singular model for clergy.”

Father Patrice Chocholski, St. Jean Vianney’s successor as *curé*, or pastor, of Ars and rector of the shrine there, brought the relic to the 136th Supreme Convention in Baltimore last August. The pilgrimage officially began

Nov. 10 at St. Mary’s Spiritual Center in Baltimore, in the chapel where Venerable Father Michael J. McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus, prayed during his seminary studies. While in Baltimore, the relic was present at the U.S. bishops’ Fall General Assembly during a full day of spiritual discernment and prayer, as well as at two area seminaries.

Following stops in New Haven, Conn., where Father Chocholski offered a series of reflections at St. Mary’s Church

and the Knights of Columbus Museum, the relic has visited dozens of cities from New Orleans to Atlanta to Washington, D.C.

The pilgrimage continues until early June. Visit kofc.org/vianney for the schedule and more information.



Above: Supreme Knight Carl Anderson and Father Patrice Chocholski, rector of the Shrine of Ars, hold a reliquary containing the incorrupt heart of St. Jean Vianney and a chalice that belonged to the saint, during Father Chocholski’s visit to the Supreme Council headquarters April 14, 2018. Behind them hangs a painting of another model for parish priests, Father Michael J. McGivney. • Opposite page: The heart relic is seen at the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Washington, D.C., with a mosaic of Christ the High Priest in the background.



‘Alive in Christ’

An interview with St. Jean Vianney’s successor about the patron saint of parish priests

Father Patrice Chocholski, a native of northeastern France, was ordained in 1989 in Rome. The pastor and rector of the shrine in Ars since 2014, he has extensively studied the life of his predecessor, St. Jean Vianney. Educated in France, Italy, Poland and Jerusalem, Father Chocholski teaches at the International Seminary of Ars and has served as the general secretary for the World Apostolic Congress on Mercy in Rome (2008), Kraków (2011), Bogotá (2014) and Manila (2017).

When Father Chocholski visited the United States last November to give a series of reflections coinciding with the pilgrimage of the St. Jean Vianney’s heart, *Columbia* editor Alton Pelowski interviewed him about the saintly Curé of Ars and the significance of the pilgrimage.

COLUMBIA: The French Revolution began in 1789, shortly after St. Jean-Marie Vianney’s birth. What effect did it have on his family and on his vocation?

FATHER PATRICE CHOCHOLSKI: During the French Revolution, it was very dangerous for priests who remained faithful

to Rome, and many Christians died as martyrs, especially in Lyon. The Vianney family followed the Church, which was forced underground, and Jean-Marie received his first Communion during a clandestine Mass.

The transition in the years that followed was difficult. Jean-Marie was later allowed to enter seminary, but he was then forced to join the Napoleonic army. Somehow he got lost in the mountains on the way to Spain and received the status of deserter. We do not know how it really happened, but we do know he remained more than one year in the village of Les Noës, where he taught children and was appreciated by the people there.

When he returned home, his father refused to let him into the house because of how much the family had suffered in his absence. His brother, Francis, had to take his place in the army and later died on the German front. With both sons gone, his mother died of grief. His father told him to go pray at his mother’s tomb. Jean Vianney felt guilty and wounded and later wrote letters to his father begging for his pardon.



Father Chocholski gives a reflection at St. Mary's Church in New Haven during a prayer vigil Nov. 18. The vigil concluded three nights of prayer at the parish for healing, reparation and purification.

We can see how this impacted his future as a priest. This sensitive man was able to relieve so many people of their guilt by welcoming them with the tenderness of God in the sacrament of confession. And he helped them experience the healing of Divine Mercy through absolution.

COLUMBIA: What other challenges did Jean-Marie face in pursuing his vocation?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: His father hoped that he would become a farmer like him. He didn't give Jean-Marie the opportunity to go to school and learn Latin like other boys. When Jean-Marie eventually entered the seminary, he was told he needed nine years of study, and

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

As the relic of St. Jean Vianney has made its way across the country, the Supreme Council has received many notes expressing gratitude for sponsoring the pilgrimage.

"A few months ago we read a biography of the saint in the refectory. I was impressed by his humility and pastoral love, but now I feel like I've experienced these myself because he wanted to come here to us!

"While I was praying with the heart, I found this verse in John 18: 'This was to fulfill the word which he had spoken, *Of those whom thou gavest me I lost not one.*' This thought seems so fitting for a pastor who 'lost not one' of the multitude of souls entrusted to him and who will lose not one of the intentions entrusted to him on this tour."

— *Sister Dominic Mary of Mercy, O.P., Monastery of Our Lady of Grace, North Guilford, Conn.*

"I am very touched and humbled to be in the presence of my great-great-great-grand uncle, St. John Vianney. Someday, I hope to visit Ars, France. I hope and pray for a blessed tour and great healing and hope."

— *Wade Anders Vianney, West Hartford, Conn.*

"It was an amazing experience for us in Pensacola. We estimated that 600 visitors passed through the doors of the Basilica between our four Masses, vespers and extended hours of being open. I could not have been more pleased with the response of the Catholics in the area, plus those who joined us from outside Florida.

"As I observed people in prayer before the relic, the intensity of their prayer was quite visible. We have received a number of expressions of gratitude for having the relic present in our diocese."

— *Very Rev. Joseph P. Callipare, rector of the Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel, Pensacola, Fla.*

"To see a heart that was totally in love, a heart that was undivided and purified by love of the Cross, was an inspirational event. It was amazing to be able to see the heart of the parish priest who lived the life we are seeking to emulate. It reminded me that, with the grace of God, it is possible to become a saint despite any challenges that might be in our way."

— *Louis McHale, seminarian for the Archdiocese of Washington at the Saint John Paul II Seminary and a member of The Catholic University of America Council 9542*

"Welcoming the holy and incorrupt heart of the Curé of Ars was a historic moment for the Apostolate for Family Consecration. At this time in the Church when so many hearts yearn for healing, it was a privilege to provide the over 400 faithful in attendance — families, students, priests and religious — with an opportunity to encounter the heart of a man whose love for God and his Church was unshakable.

"As a Knight, it's my personal prayer that God, through the intercession of St. John Vianney and Venerable Michael J. McGivney, grant me a heart like the Curé of Ars."

— *J. Basil Dannebohm, vice president of advancement and evangelization for the Apostolate of Family Consecration in Bloomingdale, Ohio*

"What an incredible blessing for us to have St. John Vianney's incorrupt heart at the recent SEEK conference! Priest after priest told me how powerful it was to have the relic there. The thousands of young people present loved it too, venerating it in the eucharistic adoration chapel. We are very grateful for the Knights for making this possible."

— *Curtis Martin, founder and CEO of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) and a member of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Council 7502 in Northglenn, Colo.*



Above: Father Mark Ivany, director of spiritual formation at the Saint John Paul II Seminary and director of vocations for the Archdiocese of Washington, leads seminarians in prayer before the relic. • Left: Parishioners stand in line to venerate the relic at St. Mary's Church in New Haven.



he had difficulty keeping up. He would not have been allowed to become a priest if Abbé Balley, the priest of Écully, had not told the bishop he would take him in and prepare him.

There were a lot of humiliations. One of his fellow seminarians was young Mathias Loras, who had no problem with his studies. Mathias once became impatient and lashed out at Jean-Marie, who instead of getting angry knelt down and asked for forgiveness. Mathias immediately reconciled with him, weeping. He later became the first bishop of Dubuque, Iowa, and the two remained lifelong friends.

COLUMBIA: How did St. Jean Vianney have such an impact on Ars and become so popular during his lifetime?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: When he arrived in Ars, he found an abandoned, disheveled parish. There were fewer priests in France at that time, and some were swept up in the spirit of the Enlightenment. But a new clergy began to organize missions to the villages and towns in each diocese — evangelizing, preaching and hearing confessions.

Jean Vianney's popularity began with his involvement in these missions. He did not preach because his theology was considered weak, so he was asked to hear confessions instead. He had a gift for listening and understanding with the ten-



Supreme Chaplain Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore celebrates Mass at Baltimore's Basilica of the Assumption Jan. 11. The major relic of St. Jean Vianney was also present for veneration in the basilica's crypt church (pictured below) before the Mass and at a reflection that followed.

derness of Christ, and so it was in the confessional that the people encountered a saint. More and more people came to him. In Trévoux, for example, it is said that the pressure of the waiting crowd moved his confessional.

Then people began coming to Ars for his spiritual guidance. Before long, penitents were arriving from all around France, as well as from Italy. Some had to wait a week to go to confession. People were also attracted to his teaching, which was simple and inspired by the Gospel and the Fathers of the Church. He spoke in a language that both children and adults understood. So Ars became a shrine and place of pilgrimage.

But Jean Vianney tried to be very poor and free from this

fame. He went through terrible trials, and there were petitions against him. People in the village wanted to get rid of him. He even had to endure a false accusation that he had fathered a child. It was not an easy fame.

COLUMBIA: Four years after canonizing him in 1925, Pope Pius the XI declared St. Jean Vianney the patron saint of parish priests. Why is his witness so exemplary?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: I believe that St. Jean Vianney became configured to Christ in a very special way. Christ is universal, and the more Jean Vianney became similar to Christ, the more his life and message became universal.

Because Jean Vianney emptied himself in humility and poverty, Christ could find a free space to dwell in him. And so what he was experiencing, living and expressing was more and more Christ. Christ alone.

When my bishop asked me to become a successor to St. Jean Vianney, I was afraid, and I told him, "Please, find somebody else." Since coming to Ars, I've witnessed the graces received by pilgrims all over the whole world. They give testimony to what Christ has done in their lives, and I feel poor, somehow like Jean Vianney.

COLUMBIA: The life of St. Jean Vianney overlapped with that of Father Michael McGivney. Do you see any similarities between them?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: They each bore witness to Christ's love for everyone in their parish, and they paid special attention to

Photos by Kevin Parks/Archdiocese of Baltimore



the poorest people. They were not self-centered. They encouraged a communion of saints around them.

The nucleus of St. Jean Vianney's spirituality was the Divine Mercy. Experiencing and sharing Divine Mercy with others — this is what will attract hearts, and transform them, and make them run to Christ. He was convinced that the renewal of the Church would come through mercy, not the fear of hell.

I see something similar in the spirituality of Father McGivney and the Knights of Columbus. They trust in the Divine Mercy, and they work to build a civilization of love.

Also, we cannot imagine Jean Vianney as a priest alone in his shrine. Like Father McGivney, he was a priest carrying a community. Jean Vianney was revolutionary in his day, working together with the lay people. He used to find a place, a mission for everybody in his village, even for those



From top: Father Jack Campbell, parochial vicar of St. Paul Church in Pensacola, Fla., concludes the procession of the heart relic before Mass at the Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel Dec. 3. Father Joseph P. Callipare, rector of the basilica, is seen at right. • The relic is displayed for veneration Jan. 8 at the St. John Vianney Chapel and Welcome Center, operated by the Apostolate for Family Consecration in Bloomingdale, Ohio. • Catholic schoolchildren pray before the relic of St. Jean Vianney at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Atlanta Dec. 7. • Dominican Father Patrick Mary Briscoe carries the reliquary in procession before Mass at SEEK 2019, a conference of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) that drew more than 17,000 participants to Indianapolis in January.



From top: Photo courtesy of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee — Photo by Daniel Lappert — Photo courtesy of the Archdiocese of Atlanta — Photo courtesy of FOCUS

A MAN OF PRAYER, A MISSION OF LOVE

Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States and a native of France, celebrated Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Dec. 9, 2018, on the occasion of the reception and veneration of the relic of St. Jean Vianney. Below are excerpts from his homily.

WHEN I WAS 15 YEARS OLD, my family traveled to Ars for a few days during the summer. I remember stopping to pray before the famous sculpture by Émilien Cabuchet.

St. Jean-Marie Vianney has been and remains an attractive figure to me. And why? What did I see there in the image? That image incarnated what he was — a man of prayer.

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

These are profound words of St. Jean-Marie Vianney. I desired this happiness, and he inspired me to seek this deeper union with God. ...

After signing his letter of appointment [to Ars], the vicar general reportedly said to him, “There is not much love for God in that parish; you will bring some into it.” That was his mission.

Indeed, St. Jean Vianney brought so much love to it that a tiny village became the center of the world in just a few short years. ...

Once during an exorcism, the devil cried out, “Three more like Vianney and



our whole kingdom will be ruined.” Perhaps, there will be three men here — or even more — whom the Lord will raise up to be his faithful priests! ♦

who did not practice their faith. For Jean Vianney, everybody was important in the mission of the Church. I am sure he would have been very happy working together with the Knights of Columbus.

COLUMBIA: How did St. Jean Vianney’s heart become a relic?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: His body was exhumed in the early 20th century in view of his beatification, and it was a surprise to discover it to be incorrupt. Some parts were kept for veneration.

Why did the Church pay special attention to his heart? First, because it was incorrupt, but also because it related to his spirituality. He used to say that priesthood is the love of Jesus’ heart. For Jean Vianney, the mission of the priest is to be a heart in the middle of a community, to represent actually and sacramentally the love of Jesus. So his heart truly defined his presence as a priest.



COLUMBIA: What do you tell people who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the Church’s veneration of relics?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: As Christians, we believe in the Incarnation, “the Word became flesh.” It is an ancient tradition in the Church to keep physical signs of this closeness of the saints.

As a priest, St. Jean Vianney was a friend of God and a

friend to his people. He used to pray and intercede for them. Though dead, he is alive in Christ and is still a friend to his people. This physical presence reminds us of his intercession, of his prayer for us.

COLUMBIA: Can you share how this pilgrimage came about, and speak of its significance at this time when the Church faces so many challenges?

FATHER CHOCHOLSKI: Yes, it is providential that it is happening now. The inspiration came from the Knights of Columbus in New Haven, and it was intended to help people rediscover the beauty of being a priest — to encourage priests in their ministry and to promote vocations. It is very hard to organize such a pilgrimage, and it had been planned for some time.

St. Jean Vianney was very drawn to the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. At a certain time, he wished to become a Capuchin. We could say that he is a kind of Franciscan — his devotion to Jesus crucified, his poverty, the repentance of the penitents and so on.

We recall how the Lord said to St. Francis that his mission was to rebuild the Church. We can see how St. Jean Vianney helped to rebuild the Church in France after the revolution. He can also help rebuild the Church today. ♦