St. John Vianney’s Pastoral Plan for Eucharistic Revival

COMMENTARY: The Curé d’Ars’ pastoral strategy to get his people to return to their Eucharistic Lord is a model of practical wisdom that can guide the Church today.

Canvas depicting the Curé of Ars exhibited in the chapel of Providence in Ars

As Catholics in the United States enter more deeply into the three-year Eucharistic Revival inaugurated by the bishops last month on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, there are many lessons and much hope to be gained by successful Eucharistic renewals that have taken place in Church history. One of the most important was led by the patron saint of parish priests, St. John Vianney, in his parish of Ars, France, in the 19th century.

When St. John Vianney arrived at St. Sixtus Church in 1818, most of the 230 residents of the village assembled the next Sunday to learn the identity of their new shepherd. Few presented themselves, however, for Holy Communion at Mass — and the following week, few presented themselves at Mass at all. As spring came, songs of praise for God on the Lord’s Day were

regularly routed by the cacophony of anvils, carts and workers in the fields — and morning revelry in the taverns.

The lack of love for God, and almost total lack of awareness of the gift of God in the Holy Eucharist, flummoxed Father Vianney. As a young boy during the bloodiest years of the French Revolution, he used to travel furtively with his parents in the middle of the night to isolated barns for clandestine Masses with hunted priests as volunteer sentinels kept vigil. The penalty for getting caught — for clergy, hosts and attendees alike — was the guillotine. Nevertheless, the Vianney family, the heroic fugitive clergy and the rest of the faithful all deemed attending Mass, worshipping the Son of God-made-man in the Eucharist, and receiving him important enough to die for. That those in Ars, after the atrocities of the Terror had passed, would not use their freedom to give God thanks and praise on the Lord's Day, was a faith crisis St. John Vianney could not duck.

His pastoral strategy to get his people to return to their Eucharistic Lord is a model of practical wisdom that can guide the Church today. It involved four essential steps.

The first was to help his people recover a sense of importance of sanctifying the Lord's Day. From the earliest days of the Church, Sunday has been treated as a "little Easter," and if people don't recognize the importance of celebrating Easter or prioritize other activities over it, they do not really grasp the basics of the Christian faith. The Curé of Ars, both in the pulpit with those who came to Mass and in walks throughout the village for those who didn't, would stress the importance of Sunday as a divine gift to help us become who we're supposed to be.

"The Sabbath was made for man," Father Vianney said, repeating Jesus' words. "Man is not only a work horse, but is also a spirit created in the image of God! He has not only material needs and basic appetites but needs of the soul and appetites of the heart. He lives not only by bread, but by prayer, faith, adoration and love." He didn't hesitate to use fire and brimstone when necessary or to go out before Mass to find people in the fields. One farmer tried to hide himself behind one of his carts. Father Vianney reminded him, "My friend, you seem very much surprised to find me here, but the good God sees you at all times!"

Eventually, his persevering efforts worked, and the majority of the villagers returned to Sunday Mass. That allowed the real work of forming them to live Eucharistic lives to begin.

The second step was to teach them what the Mass really is. “Attending Mass is the greatest action we can do,” he repeated, until they grasped the profound truth of those words. “All the good works taken together do not equal the sacrifice of the Mass, because they are the works of men and the Holy Mass is the work of God. The martyr is nothing in comparison, because martyrdom is the sacrifice that man makes to God of his life; the Mass is the sacrifice that God makes for man of his Body and Blood.”

He helped them to recognize that in the sacrifice of the Mass, we participate in Christ’s sacrifice from the Upper Room and Calvary that made salvation possible, and that in the consecration, bread and wine are totally changed into Jesus Christ, really, truly and substantially present under sacramental appearances, who gives that Body and Blood for us. “The tongue of the priest, and a piece of bread, makes God!” he said. “That’s more than creating the world!”

Once he had restored a sense of holy awe at what happens in the Mass, he was able to pass to a **third stage**: to help them grow in practical appreciation of the Lord’s real presence in the Eucharist. “He is there!” Father Vianney would often preach amid tears, reminding his people that God himself was among them on the altar and in the tabernacle. “If we had one favor to ask of Our Lord, we would never have thought … to ask God for his own Son, … to have his son die for us, to give us his body to eat, his blood to drink. But what man couldn’t say or conceive, what he never would have dared desire, God in his love has said, conceived and acted on.”

By his own reverence in the celebration of the Mass and his own example of prayer before the tabernacle, he helped them to see that Jesus in the Eucharist “awaits us night and day,” “waiting for us to go to him to say our needs and to receive him,” accommodating “himself to our weakness: if he appeared in glory before us, we would never have dared approach.” He urged them to make more time for prayerful adoration of the Lord’s wondrous self-gift, visiting him like we would a beloved friend.

The last step was to help them make frequent holy Communion. His 31 years of famous 12-to-18-hour days spent hearing confessions was all to help his parishioners — and those coming from all over France — to be able to receive Jesus with clean souls. At the time in France, people seldom received. He tried to help his people prepare inwardly to receive Jesus worthily not just every Sunday, but as frequently as possible, even every day.

He described the power of Jesus in the Eucharist to make them holy. “Next to this sacrament, we are like someone who dies of thirst next to a river, just needing to bend down the head to drink, or like a poor man next to a treasure chest, when all that is needed is to stretch out the hand.”

The Eucharist, he stressed, is the Living Water welling to eternal life and the world's greatest treasure. He told his people that if they communicated more often and with greater love, "they would be saints." He passed on to them his own astonishment over what happens in Holy Communion: "God gives himself to you! He makes himself one with you!" saying that if they really understood their happiness, they "would not be able to live" but "would die of love." And so he urged his people, "Come to Communion, come to Jesus, come to live off him, in order to live for him!"

After years of patient work and prayer for the conversion of his people, St. John Vianney eventually rejoiced that every day the 7am Mass was packed with Catholics receiving the Lord as the source, summit, root, center and treasure of their life. Pilgrims to Ars soon began to be amazed not just with Ars' saintly Curé but with Ars' holy Catholics.

The simple, straightforward paradigm for Eucharistic revitalization of the patron saint of parish priest — whose feast day the Church celebrates on Aug. 4 — has no expiration date.

Father Roger Landry Father Roger Landry, a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts, has been appointed by the U.S. bishops a "National Eucharistic Preacher."