



Vianney

Many of us in Klamath Falls, Redmond, Hermiston, LaGrande, Baker City, and Burns came to see *Vianney*, Leonardo DiFilippis' powerful drama about the son of French peasants who became the patron saint of parish priests. With soul-stirring artistry Leonardo brought this amazing story to life in a way that leaves much to remember.

Born in 1786, John Vianney grew up in the decade when the French Revolution brutally persecuted public practice of the Catholic faith. Undeterred and determined, John's parents handed on Catholicism within the family. Their unbending fidelity was the seedbed for their young son's vocation to the priesthood.

Not well schooled, John was a terrible student. His seminary professors despaired of his chances and sent him home. But he persisted against what seemed impossible odds and was finally ordained at age 32. Expecting the least from this undistinguished new priest, his bishop sent him to the small, out-of-the-way village of Ars, where it was thought he could do little harm. There, for nearly half a century, he did immense, unforgettable good.

When the new Cure of Ars arrived, the spiritual state of his parishioners was as dilapidated as their run-down parish church. Visiting them in their homes, the new pastor

noted the toll taken by years of Revolutionary upheaval: Sunday work instead of Sunday Mass; drunken fathers wasting wages in the tavern as wives and children went hungry for bread and religious instruction; young people throwing away their future for the pleasures of the moment at village entertainments.

Father Vianney promptly set to work to rouse his flock from religious and moral slumber. If God exists, the pastor thundered from the pulpit, then hell exists too; and the way to it was being paved by the sins his parishioners had grown used to committing—sins he described with piercing clarity. To make it less easy to commit these sins, the determined shepherd paid the fiddler twice his normal fee *not* to play at the dance and gave the tavern-keeper money to start another business. Before long, these well-worn paths to self-destruction were closed off to the straying of his sheep.

Ridiculed at first, the new priest's uncompromising preaching began to take hold with the indifferent and with hardened sinners alike. They came to confession and changed their ways. Life in Ars took a notable turn back to the God the Revolution had banished.

France took notice. From across the country pilgrims came in droves to see the humble priest who had changed his village. The pressure of their visitations made John Vianney a willing prisoner of the confessional. For years he would enter it at one o'clock in the morning, and remain listening, apart from several short breaks, for 15 to 17 hours a day. He was Cure of Ars for 42 years. In 1859, the year of his

death, nearly 100,000 pilgrims came to his parish.

They entrusted their secrets to St. John Vianney because they sensed that he could help them change their lives decisively. He said little, but his words struck to the heart of indecisiveness. With an acute sensitivity to *occasions of sin* he quickly brought to light his penitents' well-disguised weakness of will and elicited from them a life-changing admission: as often as they knowingly put themselves in situations where Satan the Tempter set soul-sapping traps, they would fall into sin. There was no getting around it: to avoid sin they had to avoid the occasions of sin. Countless sinners left his confessional resolved to do just that.

So must we resolve. Whether it be coffee-break character assassination, impulsive shopping with reckless spending, or idle curiosity before a computer primed with pornography, we must attune our souls to sense the danger ahead and turn away before it engulfs us.

Once we admit how familiar we are with occasions of sin and how much we need help to avoid them, we can begin to appreciate why people came in such great numbers to the confessional of the Cure of Ars.