

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Vespers, Baptism of the Lord, Priestly Renewal

*Baptism of the Lord, Priestly Renewal*

*Veneration of the Relic of St. John Vianney's Heart*

*Cathedral of Mary Our Queen*

*Jan. 13, 2019*

It is always a wonderful blessing when we gather to pray, for prayer is at the very heart of our vocation both as baptized members of God's Holy People and as priests ordained for their service. We pray not only because we are obliged to do so, as if prayer were some mere professional responsibility. Rather, we pray because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit. We pray because we've been touched in the depth of our being with Christ's love of which we are to be the credible representatives and living instruments. We pray to be renewed in our vocation, to discern what we should say and do, to intercede for the people we are privileged to serve, to support and heal the Church in a time of crisis, to further its mission, and to support one another in the challenges of ministry.

Yes, it is always good to pray together but never more so than on this Feast of the Lord's Baptism and in the presence of the relic of St. John Vianney's priestly heart, St. John Vianney who is our patron as parish priests. We are especially blessed to have with us today the present-day Cure of Ars, the successor of St. John Vianney, Fr. Patrice Chocholski. We welcome you most warmly to the Presbyterate of Baltimore!

## **Jesus Prayed**

As preachers of the Word of God, we know that we cannot simply skim the Gospel if indeed we hope to break it open in a meaningful way for God's people. Rather, we must contemplate the Word, often line by line, word for word. For hidden in the Word of God are treasures we might otherwise miss. For example, in St. Luke's

narrative on the Lord's baptism, the evangelist, almost in passing, drops in the words, "Jesus prayed". Before and as he was being baptized, Jesus the beloved Son, prayed and from his communication with the Father knew what he must do. Thus he presented himself for baptism so that all of us might be baptized and in the Spirit become the beloved children of God the Father. Searching the Gospels we see how often Jesus withdrew to pray. Before he did anything important, Jesus prayed, such as the appointment of the Twelve. Often, after performing a sign such as feeding the multitudes, he withdrew to a deserted place and spent the night in prayer. Before his baptism of blood on the Cross, he withdrew in anguished prayer. In his humanity Jesus experienced incredibly deep contemplative prayer. Prayer and action were not two parallel tracks in Jesus' life. Rather, what he said and did flowed from his prayer.

John Vianney, the Cure of Ars, prayed deeply. He described prayer as "...the inner bath into which the soul plunges itself." On another occasion he said that "Prayer is to our soul what rain is to the soil. You can fertilize the soil ever so richly but it will remain barren unless fed by frequent rains." Prayer formed the priestly heart of St. John Vianney such that his heart was shaped, conformed, to the priestly love of Jesus. And that is why his ministry bore such abundant fruit in so many other hearts.

## **Baptism of Fire**

Whether we like it or not, we are undergoing a baptism of fire. These days the Church and its leadership are under intense scrutiny and even if some of the initial anger of our parishioners has cooled, you and I know that it smolders just beneath the surface. It would be different, I sometimes think, if we were being persecuted 'because of righteousness' (Mt. 5:10) but often the opprobrium we experience is because of scandal.

It is up to us to decide if this crucible will be redeeming or destructive. As we experience this burdensome test in this local church, it is prayer, our prayer, that will make all the difference in the world. Like the Lord and like St. John Vianney prayer has to come first. If we fail to pray we will simply be the victims of what others have done - both those in our ranks and those in secular society or we may be the victims of our own anger, anxiety, and frustration. If we pray daily and deeply,

and allow the Lord continually to purify our hearts, then we will become what we were called to be in Christ: priests and victims – but a priesthood and victimhood that leads to resurrection and new life.

Let me add that administrative measures, important as they may be, as ardently demanded by our people as they may be, are not enough. The whole point of the Mundelein bishops' retreat, at least as I understand it, is this: that we bishops not rush into making decisions about transparency & accountability, and then, once they're in place, ask God to make them effective. The Pope is telling us it has to work the other way around: action flows from prayer.

When John Vianney arrived at Ars the Church in France was a shambles and the little parish to which he was assigned was all but dead. The Cure of Ars did not throw up his hands but rolled up his sleeves. Purified by God's mercy and fortified by the Spirit, he revived his parish to a degree that even he thought unimaginable. Our situation is not the same as the one he faced but no less dire. Sometimes we may have the sense that decline is inevitable and or even that the Church itself is falling apart. Prayer is not a magic cure-all but it is the path to the heart of God whence comes our help, whence comes the fruitfulness of our ministry. Prayer is how and where we are daily renewed. Prayer, our prayer, is how the Church will be renewed.

## **Priorities**

We rightly protest that we are busy and so we are. We are indeed stretched thin. All the more reason why you & I must spend an hour a day in prayer before the Lord, in quiet contemplation, reading the Word, letting it resound in our hearts, allowing the Lord's mercy to touch and transform our hearts. If we were in a hurry to reach a destination and discovered along the way that our gas tank were empty, we wouldn't think it a waste of time to stop and buy gas. Let us not imagine we are wasting time when we stop to be alone with God. It is there that he fills our hearts with the gifts and graces we need to do his work. It is there that his Holy Spirit shows us what we should do and how we should do it. It is there that we priests grow in a holy solidarity which the Holy Spirit can employ to renew the face of this local Church.

St. John Vianney, pray for us! Mary Our Queen, pray for us!