

CHAPTER XII

THE PILGRIMAGE TO ARS: I. THE BEGINNING— ST PHILOMENA

THAT even during his lifetime a man should be the object of a pilgrimage, and that crowds should pay him the veneration usually bestowed on the relics of saints, is assuredly a rare occurrence, and one that reminds us of the Fathers of the Desert and their far-away Thebaid. Now, it is a fact that for a period of thirty years the humble village of Ars witnessed the marvellous spectacle of ever-fresh crowds prostrating themselves at the feet of its holy parish priest. From 1827 until 1859 the saint's church of Ars was never empty.

However, those who first spread the Curé's fame were, without exception, "simple and devout people." Those first rumours were subsequently re-echoed "by persons whose opinion was the more weighty by reason of their character, age, and condition."¹

At Dardilly, where M. Vianney was born, and at Ecully, where, for three years, he had been vicaire, he had left behind him a fragrance of sanctity. As early as 1818 visitors came to Ars from both those villages; some even came from as far as Les Noës. A journey of a hundred kilometres could not damp their eagerness to behold, once more, "M. Jérôme, now a priest and a curé. The majority of these visitors made a retreat under his direction; three or four eventually settled in the village.

From that time onward the fame of M. Vianney spread rapidly. "In 1822," Mgr. Mermod relates, "I was a professor at the Petit Séminaire of Meximieux. One day M. Vianney came to pay a visit to M. Loras, a former fellow-student of his, and at that time superior of the establishment. He crossed our playground and went at once into the chapel to visit the Blessed Sacrament, after which he called on M. le Supérieur. The moment he appeared on the playground, Antoine Raymond, then one of the students, and

¹ Pierre Oriol, *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 757.

destined later on to be his assistant, exclaimed: 'It is the holy Curé d'Ars!''

Instantly play was stopped, all eyes being fixed on him. Antoine Raymond, a native of Fareins, was then sixteen years of age. At home he had heard people talk of M. Vianney, for the protestations, insidious or violent, of some of the people of Ars, and the enthusiastic admiration of others, could not fail to find an echo in the neighbouring villages. Everybody wanted to know this curé of whom his flock had so much to say that was good—or bad. Well-disposed persons had no difficulty in finding out on which side lay uprightness and truth.

Trévoux, the chief town of Les Dombes, was not slow in forming a most favourable opinion of M. Vianney. We have already seen how, during the great mission of 1823, the majority of those who went to confession crowded round his confessional. The same scenes were re-enacted in 1826, on the occasion of the universal jubilee granted by Pope Leo XII. The priests of Savigneux, Montmerle, Saint-Trivier, Chanéins, Saint-Bernard, and many others, to whom he lent his aid both in the confessional and in the pulpit, wondered at the success he obtained, and loudly proclaimed his great virtues. They did not as yet foresee that on the eve of holidays, and even oftener, many persons, and those the best of their parishes, would soon undertake the journey to Ars so as to enjoy a continuation of M. Vianney's guidance.

As early as 1827 people began to come from a distance in order to seek the advice of the enlightened priest. "In that year," Mgr. Mermod records, "I was appointed curé of Chaleins. Everyone was speaking of the sanctity of M. Vianney. Several persons of my parish were in the habit of going to confession to him, and I must say they were a source of edification to all."¹ In 1827, according to Jean Pertinand, the number of daily visitors to Ars amounted to twenty people.² During the Octave of Corpus Christi the young Comtesse Laure des Garets made a first stay in the old château, in which she definitely took up residence in 1834. Every evening she went to Benediction. "The little

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1032.

² *ibid.*, p. 368.

church of Ars," she wrote to her father, M. du Colombier, "was full of people, many strangers being among the congregation. . . . The walls draped with the canopy and with banners, the tabernacle resplendent with its gilding, the monstrance glittering with precious stones, a multitude of candles, a priest worn out by fasts and night-watches, reciting in feeble tones a prayer in which he gives utterance to his love; such is," the pious lady wrote, "the thrilling spectacle exhibited before our eyes night after night."

From the testimony of old inhabitants we know that already in 1828 the pilgrimage was large. The following year clinched matters; henceforth the saintly priest was to be the slave of souls; death alone would free him from this holy servitude. M. Mermod, the curé of Chaleins, was wont to pay him an occasional visit. "Your good angel," M. Vianney told him one day, "put a happy thought into your mind when he prompted you to come and see me." The other replied: "It seems that your angel never suggests to you to return my visit." "I cannot; all my time is taken up."¹

All those who visited Ars did not come for the purpose of going to confession. Curiosity was a factor in the movement. Was it not rumoured that the Curé d'Ars could read people's consciences and that he wrought miracles? To think that in a corner of France there lived a *saint*, a real saint! The desire to gaze on him set the crowds in motion. "Men—unbelievers even—feel the need of holiness to such a degree that they flock to it as soon as they know where it is to be found," says René Bazin.² But the grace of God knows more than one approach to the heart of man. At the beginning of the pilgrimage the curious were fairly numerous, but many of them came away shriven and converted. Moreover, if some sinners felt themselves drawn to Ars by an attraction for which they were unable to account, others went there in the hope of finding, at the feet of a saint, the courage to avow their sins and a remedy against a future relapse.

"Monsieur le Curé," Catherine Lassagne told him naïvely, "other missionaries run after sinners, even into

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, p. 1035.

² *Pèlerinage à Ars*, Annales d'Ars, Avril, 1908, p. 322.

foreign countries, but as for you, it is the sinners who are after you." And, full of a supernatural joy, for he saw the truth of the assertion, he replied in the same strain: "It certainly looks very much like it—*c'est bien quasi vrai*."¹ He had early proofs of the accuracy of Catherine's assertion, notably on a certain evening, either in 1828 or 1829. Night prayers had been recited in church, and M. Vianney had just gone up to his room. Suddenly a powerful fist was heard thundering against the gate of the courtyard. After two or three summonses, repeated with increasing energy, the holy man, who, to be sure, had excellent reasons for caution, decided to go down and open the door. He saw, waiting there, a carman who had left his horse and cart standing in front of the church porch. "Come," said he, "the thing is quite simple: I want to go to confession, and at once!"

At what period did people begin to attribute a miraculous efficacy to the prayers of M. Vianney? Without doubt the very first prodigies—viz., the multiplication of the corn and the flour, which had taken place about the year 1830—soon came to the knowledge of the inhabitants and of the strangers who already flocked to Ars in considerable numbers. The stir caused by those extraordinary events worried the Curé; he trembled lest men should attribute to him the glory of having been their author.

At an early date the sick and infirm were found mingling with the crowd. After they had asked the prayers of the Curé d'Ars, some of these testified to a feeling of relief, and not a few were completely cured. These things, of course, got talked about. "However," says Pertinand, the schoolmaster, "M. le Curé recommended silence, so that people were afraid to give him pain by proclaiming the favours they had received. But a change took place when the cult of St Philomena came to be established in the parish. From that moment the servant of God gave to her all the credit of the marvels that were being accomplished, so that he took delight in proclaiming them. To her he attributed all the prodigies that made the pilgrimage so famous. Thanks to

¹ Catherine Lassagne, *Petit mémoire*, troisième rédaction, p. 56.

him, devotion to the youthful saint spread rapidly, both in the surrounding district and all over France."¹

It is likely enough that if the Curé d'Ars had not sounded her praises for the space of thirty years, St Philomena would not have enjoyed the immense popularity that came to her in the nineteenth century.² Prior to 1830 very few people had heard her name. As recently as May 24, 1802, a workman, whilst engaged in clearing a gallery in the catacomb of St Priscilla, in Rome, had discovered her tomb—viz., a *loculus*, or cavity, hewn out of the live rock and closed with three bricks, on which was to be read the inscription, written in minium :

PAX TECUM FILUMENA.

The bones were those of a girl between fourteen and fifteen years of age. Near the head was found, shattered into several fragments, the glass phial which, no doubt, had contained a few drops of blood, and which the Church holds to be a proof of martyrdom. The remains of *Filumena* were translated to the *Custodia* of the Sacred Relics. They were destined to remain there, in comparative oblivion, until June, 1805, when they were given to Don Francesco di Lucia, a missionary of Mugnano. At Mugnano, a small village in the kingdom of Naples, *Filumena*, whose arrival had been honoured by the entire population, at once displayed her power by astounding prodigies.

However, the echo of these marvels only reached France about 1815. At that time the *Benfratelli*, or Brothers of St John of God, having been expelled by the revolutionary storm, were visiting the villages and towns of the whole of France. They were on a begging tour in behalf of their work, but whilst asking for alms they likewise sang the praises of St Philomena. Their superior, Père de Mongallon, passed through Lyons, where he enjoyed the hospitality of the wealthy Jaricot family. Yielding to the entreaties of Pauline Jaricot, then seventeen years of age, he gave her a relic which he had brought from Mugnano. Of this relic

¹ *Procès de l'Ordinaire*, pp. 375, 159, 236.

² About the extraordinary devotion of the Curé d'Ars to this saint, see our book, *Sainte Philomène*, ch. vi.

M. Vianney in turn obtained a small fragment. In this way, very humbly indeed, little *Filumena* entered Ars, where she was destined to play a twofold role—one public, the other private and intimate. In the eyes of the crowd she would be the heavenly wonder-worker at whose intercession any miracle would be granted, but, in addition, a pure and mysterious affection was to link her to the saintly parish priest; she would be “his Beatrice, his ideal, his sweet star, his guide, his comforter, his pure light.”¹ This mystic friendship was destined to become so strong and so deep that it could be described in the following astonishing lines: “From the start the beloved saint responded to the affection of her servant. As time went on the harmony between their hearts also grew, so that, in the best years of his life there obtained between them not merely a distant relationship, but a close and direct intercourse. Henceforth the saint on earth enjoyed with the saint in heaven a most sweet and intimate familiarity. On the one hand we see a ceaseless invocation, on the other a sensible assistance and a kind of real presence.”²

This “ardent and almost chivalrous love” could not remain hidden in his heart. The pilgrims were admitted to the secret; they reaped its benefits. Many times a day, in the pulpit, in the confessional, in the square in front of the church, M. Vianney exhorted his hearers to call upon his *dear little saint*, his *consul*, his *representative*, his *agent with God*.

Thus it came about that whilst he was still misunderstood and contradicted by men and subjected to the vexations of the devil, the Curé d’Ars, visited and comforted by his immortal friend, retained even in extreme old age that moral vigour, that freshness of the heart which in him were the presage of the unfailing youthfulness of the elect.

¹ Chanoine Poulain, *Les Parfums d’Ars*, Annales d’Ars, August 1922, p. 78.

² Monnin, *Life of the Cure d’Ars*.