

Miracles, Apparitions, Sacramentals



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CNS Photos by Gregory A. Shemitz

VERNERATION — People gather around a reliquary (above) containing the incorrupt heart of St. John Vianney at Cure of Ars Church in Merrick, N.Y., Oct. 7. Thousands have traveled to the church to venerate the relic of the 19th-century French saint. The relic (at right) is in the U.S. for the first time and is also scheduled to be on view in the Archdiocese of Boston Oct. 12-14 before it is returned to Ars, France.

Thousands Visit Church to See Sainted Priest's Heart

By LENA PENNINO
Catholic News Service

MERRICK, N.Y. — More than 5,000 people entered Cure of Ars Church in Merrick Oct. 7-9 to pray before St. John Vianney's heart, and the pastor expected thousands more by Oct. 11, when the incorrupt relic of the sainted 19th-century French priest would end its visit and be taken to Boston.

St. John (Jean-Marie Baptiste) Vianney, who died in 1859, is widely known to Catholics as the Cure (parish priest) of Ars. He won over the hearts of his villagers in France by visiting with them, teaching them about God and reconciling people to the Lord in the confessional.

This was the first time that his heart has been brought to the United States. It is usually kept in the basilica in Ars near the incorrupt — miraculously undecayed — body of the saint.

Pilgrims who wanted to see the relic waited in a long line leading up to the church entrance. After kneeling before the heart in prayer, many stayed to go to confession. In his life St. John Vianney often heard confessions for 16 to 18 hours a day.

Some of those waiting in line described an overwhelming need to see a real miracle. Others said it was a historic moment. And still others — many seminarians and priests — came to thank the Cure

of Ars, patron saint of parish priests, for answered prayers during times they struggled with their vocation or ministry.

"I came here to see a miracle," said Laura Musto, 46, of St. Mary of the Isle Church in Long Beach, referring to the incorrupt heart. "And we need miracles in today's world."

"I came to see the heart of a saint," said Maria Gilmore, 82, of Sacred Heart Church in North Merrick. "I thought everyone turned to dust but I guess not."

"We came here on a minipilgrimage to be close to his heart, to have a moment of intimacy with the saint," said Charlie Gallagher, 23, a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Washington who was joined by two classmates, Ted Hegnayer and Rick Nicholas.

"This relic represents who St. John Vianney was and who we aspire to be. When I kneel before the heart, I will ask St. John Vianney to replace my heart with his heart so I can emulate him," Gallagher told *The Long Island Catholic*, newspaper of the Rockville Centre Diocese.

Patricia Coughlin was surprised when her three grandchildren — Kim, 11, Mike, 13, and Peter DeMeo, 16 — wanted to venerate the heart with her.

"This is pretty cool," said Peter. He was wearing a "hoodie," or hooded sweatshirt, had iPod headphones in his ears and men-



tioned that he loved science and magic tricks. "It's something you don't hear about every day, that a heart is that old and still preserved," he said.

"I was surprised they wanted to come," said Coughlin, who teaches math at Holy Family parish school in Hicksville. "I thought they'd be watching cartoons. ... As a grandmother, I was really impressed. When we get there, we'll say some prayers and I hope they go to confession."

Each day of its five-day stay in Merrick, four Knights of Columbus carried the relic into the church on a platform topped by a golden canopy. Other Knights, in full regalia with swords drawn, lined the aisles to form an honor guard as the relic passed.

A constant at each Mass and devotional event was a contingent from France that included Bishop Guy Bagnard of Belley-Ars and the pastor of Cure of Ars Parish, Father Charles Mangano. The parish — the first church in the United States to be named for the French priest after he was proclaimed a saint in 1925 — celebrated its 80th anniversary Oct. 8.

"This is a homecoming for St. John Vianney," said Father Mangano at the anniversary Mass. "I believe with all my heart that the heart coming here was the plan of God and the desire of St. John Vianney."

"I take no credit for bringing it here," Father Mangano said. "I did not even

come up with the idea." A fellow priest made the suggestion — "like a lightning bolt that interrupted our conversation" — he said. Father Mangano then asked Bishop Bagnard if the heart could visit the parish. Two weeks later, when the visit was approved, "I cried," he said.

"Why did God choose to preserve St. John Vianney's body?" he asked the congregation. "He chose to leave evidence for my sake, for your sake. This is a small example of God's power that may hint at our own preservation of souls that we cannot see."

"What did you come to see?" Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre asked more than 250 priests, seminarians and deacons who gathered for Mass and veneration of the relic Oct. 9, a day reserved for them. "One whose life affirms yours ... a man who followed Christ the high priest like you do."

St. John Vianney was once dismissed from the seminary because of his difficulties with academic studies. But he persevered and was ordained in 1815. Three years later he was named pastor in Ars, a tiny village near Lyon.

Within a few years he transformed the religious life of the village, and his fame as a preacher, confessor and spiritual counselor soon spread throughout France and around the world.