



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

## Founder of Opus Dei

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## The Founder of Opus Dei in Ars

### A special traffic office for Ars

For many years in the nineteenth century, Ars, a little French village, was the center of the religious life of the whole of France. Between 1818 and 1859, such huge crowds of pilgrims went there that the train company that covered the district had to open a special office in Lyons to organize the trains between the big city and the little village.

The reason for this was the village priest, John Baptiste Marie Vianney, who was born in 1786. He had had to overcome very many difficulties to be ordained to the priesthood, and when he was sent to the church in Ars, he infused a new zeal for holiness into the village by his preaching, penance, prayer and charity.

For forty-two years St John Marie Vianney's life was marked by his limitless love for his vocation to the priesthood and his dedication to souls. The Curé of Ars, as he is commonly known, ended up spending over sixteen hours a day in the confessional, forgiving sins in God's name, offering people encouragement and the warmth of his human affection and his identification with Jesus Christ the Priest. Pope Pius XI canonized him in 1925 and declared him the patron of all the secular clergy.

### St Josemaria in Ars, France

St Josemaria always had recourse to the intercession of St John Marie Vianney with great faith, and talked a lot about the features of his priesthood. St Josemaria's first journey to Ars, to see the places where St John Marie Vianney had carried out his priestly work so faithfully, and to pray before his tomb, was in 1953. Afterwards, always accompanied by Don Alvaro del Portillo, he went back often: in 1955, 1956, 1958, 1959 and 1960.

St Josemaria, speaking of priests' dedication to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, said: "Go and sit in the confessional every day, or at least two or three times a week, waiting for souls there like the fisherman waits for fish. At first maybe

no-one will come. Take along your breviary, a spiritual reading book or something for your meditation. The first few days you'll be able to use it. Then a little old lady will come and you'll explain to her that it's not enough just for her to be good, she needs to bring her grand-children. After four or five days two little girls will come, then an adolescent boy, and then a man, almost secretly. And at the end of two months they'll give you no peace, you won't have time to pray in the confessional, because your anointed hands will be busy, like Christ's – configured with Christ's, because you are Christ – saying, 'I absolve you'." And he wound up, "Love the confessional. Love it, love it! (...) That's the way to atone to God our Lord for so many of our brother priests who don't want to sit in the confessional now, or listen to souls, or administer God's forgiveness" (St Josemaria, notes from a meeting with priests in Oporto, Portugal, October 31, 1972. AGP, P04, vol. II, p. 758).

For the 150th anniversary of the death of the Curé of Ars Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed a Year for Priests, "to encourage priests in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends" (Speech to participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy, March 16, 2009).

Ars has currently under one thousand inhabitants, but every year it attracts 500,000 pilgrims from around the world.