

## *The Bugey missions*

On October 29, 1824 Pierre Colin wrote to his Bishop: "My Lord, today the little Society of Mary begins...." One may well ask why he considered *that* day as the foundation day. It was, after all, eight years since the little group had made a promise to begin the Society; already Marcellin Champagnat had a group of Brothers gathered round him at La Valla. This day is never commemorated in Marist anniversaries. But it was the day that a third person, Étienne Déclas, joined Pierre Colin and Jean-Claude Colin at Cerdon, and a team was formed to do mission work in the outlying mountain areas of the Bugey. Bugey is the general name for all the area between the Ain river and Gex, near to the border of Geneva. The area is mountainous and under snow for a good part of the winter. The Marist missionaries could do their work only in these winter months because it was the only time of the year when they could bring the country people together. The Bugey was a neglected area: priests didn't want to go there, and many of those who did were not up to the task. Some were described as schismatic or apostates to the faith; at least one had significant moral and personality problems. Many of the churches had been abandoned and uncared for since the Revolution: buildings and steeples that had been knocked down during the troubles had not been rebuilt. Marriages entered into unlawfully had not been rectified. Though the land was fruitful and fertile and the people lived reasonably well materially, their spiritual needs were immense. Colin spent five years in this terribly difficult work, but he looked back on those years with great affection and nostalgia. For him, it had been a fourfold experience: of the mercy of God, of a team ministry, of the extreme poverty of their resources, and of the immense power of God at work in them. He saw this period of time as representing a key feature of Marist life, that the "place" where Marists should find themselves most at home is among the abandoned, those on the margins, those in danger of being left aside. While Oceania represents the call to Marists to be at the very margins of the world, the missions of the Bugey represent their call to seek out and gather those in their own country who find themselves for whatever reason at the margins and beyond the margins of the Church; those who find themselves alienated from the practice of the faith; those who may be searching for the face of God, but cannot see that face in the Church as they perceive it.

*In June, 1844 Father Colin said to me: "I especially want there to be in the Society some record of our beginnings, not just so that we shall be talked about... but so that in the future people will conform to our way of acting and imitate the simplicity that God blessed. Later, when the Society has grown and certain people will be tempted to discard this way of acting, the written records will serve as a rallying point."*

*The Mayet Memoirs*

### *Powerful instrument*

Étienne Déclas was the first seminarian to whom Jean-Claude Courveille revealed his dream of beginning a religious group dedicated to Mary. It was he who passed the word on to Jean-Claude Colin. Déclas remained faithful to the project, and when he joined the Colin brothers at Cerdon in 1824, this was simply the fulfilment of the promise he had made in 1816 to work at beginning the Society. Déclas was of simple and rough stock, and was never anything but a bad speaker. "At first I couldn't bear to listen to him, he made so many mistakes", said Colin. "But then I realized something else: despite Déclas' mistakes in French, God blessed the preaching." At the same time, Colin forbade Déclas to preach in any of the towns, or to say Mass in public, "because he said it in a way that provoked ridicule." Yet God blessed his work. "No one else is surrounded by so many people". Colin said. Déclas spent over 30 years preaching in the country area, and he gained the title of "Apostle of the Bugey". Towards the end of his own life, Colin said, "Look at our first confrères, Fathers Déclas, Humbert and Jallon. They were humble, straightforward and simple souls. See how the good Lord blessed them. Everything in their lives reflected poverty. We ate with peasants, we slept all together. Their preaching was utterly simple, and the people fell at their feet. We were overwhelmed in the Confessional."

## Country mission

Izenave is one of the villages in the Bugey area. The Bugey is not poor and infertile. But it is isolated, difficult, and, in the time of the Marists, it had been left somewhat abandoned by the Church. The Marist missionaries preached at Izenave in March of 1825. In general, the Marists preferred to call themselves catechists rather than missionaries. The mission usually lasted three to four weeks. On arrival at a village where they were to preach, the first thing the Marists did was to visit the church; then they visited the Parish Priest; then they heard the children's confessions. The first instruction to the people was a friendly invitation to come to the mission. The



sermons in the first week were on the mercy of God, and other subjects calculated to win the confidence of the faithful. Later, they preached on the commandments, and when most of the confessions were over they preached on sin. It was the goodness of the priest, Colin claimed, not the fear he engendered, that brought people to Christ. So he insisted that there should be no diatribes against those who were failing in their obligations or refusing to come to the mission. *"Speak with esteem and respect of those who have not made the mission,"* he said. *"Excuse them by attributing their absence to the pressure of business or other responsibilities."* The guiding principle of the missionaries was: "We must win souls by submitting to them."

## Hard times

There were many stories told of those hard times in the Bugey missions. Most of the travelling was done on foot through snow and mud. The living conditions were extremely difficult. Often the Marists had to sleep in the local inn, and this brought its own problems of vermin and poor food and limited accommodation. Sometimes the three priests had to be content with two small beds. On one occasion, the only bedroom belonged to the landlady, and the shy priests discovered that she planned to share it with them! Looking back on those days, Colin told Mayet: *"Never were we so happy. Never did we laugh with such good heart. I have always been nostalgic for those days. They were good times.... Often we had to get our own meals. Once, we arrived in a parish where there had been no priest since the Revolution. The presbytery was uninhabited. We set to to sweep it, as best we could, laughing all the time. There were no windows, the ceiling was open, the cracks were stuffed with hay. We went to bed. We were really cold, but we laughed about it."*

*Marist tradition can continue to be a living reality only if it offers an experience of the Gospel similar to that of Jean-Claude Colin and his companions.... In the mountains of Bugey the first Marist missionaries experienced the joy of proclaiming the Good News to forgotten people.*

*Marist Fathers' Constitutions nn.50,54*