

The missions were possible only during the harsh months of the Bugey winters when farmers and their stock were housebound. Conditions were severe, the Marists evangelising villages 500 to 1,000 metres above sea-level and mostly under snow between November and March. Fr Colin and his confrères were often housed in deserted, run-down presbyteries and preached in unheated churches. In such conditions Fr Colin was to say *'never was life so difficult, yet never were we happier.'*

From 1825 to 1829 the Marists who made up the mission teams were Frs Jean-Claude Colin, Etienne Déclas, Antoine Jallon and Jean-Marie Humbert. Pierre Colin helped at various times. Twenty-seven parish missions can be identified. In addition there were several Jubilee missions and retreats given by the Marists.

This period ended suddenly for Jean-Claude Colin during the mission at Ruffieu in the Easter of 1829 when he was called by the bishop to take charge of the minor seminary of Belley.

The Bugey missions continued, thanks notably to the ministry of Etienne Déclas. In 1836, when the Society of Mary was officially approved by Rome, he was part of the group professing their vows as Marists and spent the rest of his life preaching parish retreats in rural villages. He was acknowledged as 'the doyen and the first Marist of the Society of Mary.'

In subsequent years Marist missionaries were called to other regions of rural France continuing the work of renewal in the spirit of Mary and of the Bugey.

Further reading:

www.jeanclaudecolin.org/

Resources/Themes...**'Etienne Déclas, Apostle of the Bugey'**

Resources/Pilgrimage...**'Options for Pilgrims. 2: The Bugey Missions.'**



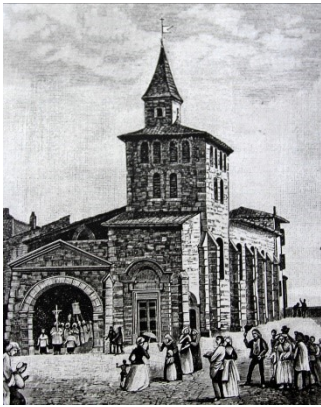
Ven Jean-Claude Colin, Founder of the Society of Mary.



Front: Steps to the presbytery of Cerdon; Bugey church of Innimont. Text and images: Christian Ngoura SM, Joseph Ondoua SM, Ron Nissen SM

Oct 29, 1824
and the
beginnings of
the first Marist
missions





On Jul 23, 1816, twelve young men climbed the hill of Fourvière overlooking the city of Lyons, France, to the ancient chapel of the Blessed Virgin. To this shrine for centuries Catholics would come to seek the intercession of Mary for their future dreams.

Here, then, the youthful group pledged to form the Society of Mary as soon as they could. Their dream was

The chapel of Fourvière at the time of the early Marists

a family of Marists, a tree with several branches: priests, sisters, brothers and laity.

One of the twelve, the newly-ordained Jean-Claude Colin, was to play a key role towards making the dream come true. Along with his older brother, Pierre, the shy young priest was appointed to the remote parish of Cerdon in the Bugey mountains to the east of France.

He was to spend the first nine years of his priesthood in this community of wine-growers and farmers. Their welcome and love coaxed the diffident young man to grow in confidence as he planned for the Society of Mary to be born.

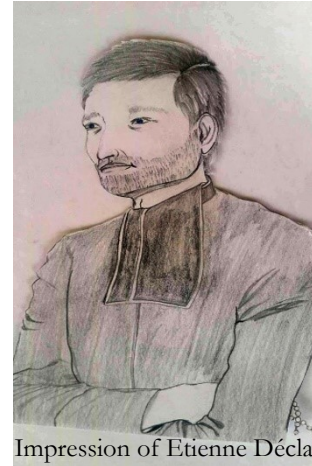
Colin was convinced that the Blessed Virgin was calling men and women to make her Son better known and loved throughout the world and in a way which belonged to her own gentle spirit.

Alexander Devie was bishop of the newly-restored diocese of Belley. Missions in rural areas of France were part of the huge revival of the Catholic religion during the period after 1815. Bishop Devie urged his priests to have missions in their parishes damaged by the tyranny of recent decades.

In due course Jean-Claude Colin approached the bishop seeking permission to form a congregation, worldwide in its vision. The bishop refused but Colin persisted in his requests. The conversations between them continued, often tense, sometimes fiery.

At last Bishop Devie said to Colin: *'So, if you want to be missionaries, then start here. Go the parishes of the Bugey. Bring the people back to the faith... and be careful to do so with gentleness. Bring them the mercy of the Lord.'* In their spirituality both he and Colin were influenced by St Alphonsus Liguori and his theology of a merciful God. The bishop's message sat easily with Fr Colin. But who would be the first Bugey missionaries?

Etienne Déclas was born on Dec 01, 1783 in Belmont, Loire. He came from a family of strong Christian and moral values and love for education, studying logic in the school of logicians and then theology in seminary years. In 1814 he received tonsure and sub-diaconate and the following year was ordained deacon, then priest on Jul 22, 1816, the eve of the Fourvière promise. The next day he pledged to help form the Society of Mary.



Impression of Etienne Déclas

The young Fr Etienne began his pastoral life as curate in the parish of Saint-Igny-de-Vers, west of Lyons. In Jul 1821, he was appointed parish priest of Saint-Julien-sur-Veyre, much closer to Cerdon and so easier for him to visit the Fathers Colin. On Oct 16, 1824, he signed the registers at Saint-Julien for the last time.



The presbytery of Cerdon

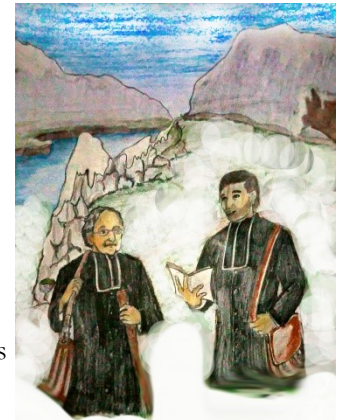
Devie: *'Aujourd'hui la Société de Marie a commencé'* "Today the Society of Mary has begun."

On Oct 29, 1824, Etienne Déclas arrived in Cerdon to take up residence with the two Colins. And so was formed the first community of Marist priests. That day Pierre Colin wrote to Bishop

Jean-Claude Colin was to keep this date as the effective beginning of the Society of Mary.

The Marist missions commenced ten weeks later with Frs Jean-Claude Colin and Etienne Déclas climbing the steep, rocky path from Cerdon to the parish of La Balme.

The mountainous region of the Bugey is part of a great *massif* separating France from Switzerland. Its many rural parishioners had been ill-treated by the French Revolution. Priests had been killed or exiled by the revolutionaries while others remained disheartened and ineffective.



Impression of Frs Colin and Déclas climbing to La Balme

It was to these remote communities that the first Marists were sent to restore faith and hope and bring the mercy of God to a neglected people. Their spiritual needs were immense, with many marriages irregular and sacraments forgotten.

At Bishop Devie's urging the Marists shared in the project of rekindling faith among the people, but with their own special spirit.



Church of La Balme, site of the first Bugey mission, Jan 1825