

The Bugey Missions

'So you want to be missionaries?' the bishop of Belley asked Jean-Claude Colin. 'Then go to the parishes of the Bugey.'

The mountainous region of Bugey is part of the great massif bordering Switzerland in south-eastern France. Its rural parishioners had suffered much during the French Revolution. Priests had been killed or exiled; others remained disheartened and ineffective. The spiritual needs of the people were immense. It was to these remote communities that the Marists were sent to restore faith and hope and to bring the mercy of God.

On Oct 29, 1824, in the village of Cerdon, high in the mountains of the northern Bugey, the Colin brothers, Pierre and Jean-Claude, welcomed to their presbytery a third companion, Etienne Déclas. That same day Pierre Colin wrote to the bishop: 'Today the Society of Mary has begun!' Ten weeks later the Marist missions commenced.

In rural districts after 1815, missions became part of a revival of religion throughout France. In Belley, Bishop Devie urged all his priests to have missions in their parishes. At his request, the Marists, too, shared in this project of rekindling faith among the people, but with their own special spirit.

Their missions were possible only during the harsh months of the Bugey winters when farmers and their stock were housebound. Many villages were 500 to 1,000 metres above sea-level and 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 spite of such severe 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 for Jean-Claude Colin during the mission at Ruffieu (1829) when he was called by the bishop to lead the minor seminary of Belley.