

ALL STEAMED UP

On October 29th, 1824, Pierre Colin, the pastor of Cerdon, wrote to his bishop, Bsp. Devie of Belley. “My Lord, this is the day the little Society of Mary begins. Monsieur Declas arrived in Cerdon.” Today, the Society begins, Monsieur Declas has come to Cerdon.

As it happens, we know that this letter was received in Belley and answered the very next day, (they had a very good postage service there!) and the reply granted Declas faculties for hearing confessions which parts of the letter had requested.

However, we may well wonder whether Bsp. Devie considered the Society was beginning. Did he really think that Fr. Declas was really going to make all that much of a difference?

We too might wonder did the Society begin back in 1824? Normally we look back to Fourviere as the true beginnings of the Society, or perhaps in 1836 when the Marists made their first professions and elected a Superior General.

What was special about the October 29th, 1824? Moreover, we know that Bsp. Devie was a new bishop in a new diocese. He was a very good bishop, full of apostolic zeal and great pastoral concern. He realized that his diocese was very much a backwater, a rural area cut off from the great diocese of Lyon. His pastoral strategy was to form small bands of apostolic priests to go throughout the whole of the diocese, preaching missions and restoring the people to fervor and pastoral concern. In his eyes, this little band of so-called Marists was merely one of several groups he was setting up. He wanted a diocesan congregation. Fr. Colin and the pioneers had bigger ideas. This was the beginning of the great clash between the two.

However, this is a significant time for us. Prior to this, Fr. Champagnat had already established several schools of the teaching brothers branch. The Marist Sisters had come to Cerdon and they were a flourishing little community there and they were also ready to move to Belley. Fr. Courveille had been working at setting up the lay branch of the Society. As we know, Fr. Jean Claude Colin was preparing a Rule for the Marist Father’s branch. So things were already happening.

But for our branch of the Marist family, the significant event indeed was the addition of another member to the Colin brothers – Monsieur Declas.

Bsp. Devie had no difficulty really in giving Fr. Declas to the Colin brothers. When Jean Claude had first asked for him, the bishops reply had been “What will you do with him, he’s got no talent” (Keel, 392.56) Later, as we know, Fr. Colin would be severely embarrassed by Fr. Declas and his rude and rough way of preaching. He would only allow him to go to the rude, rough parishes. But nevertheless, it was a milestone for the infant Society when, as it were, it attracted its first member.

A few weeks later, shortly after Christmas, Jean Claude Colin and Etienne Declas set off up into the mountains of the Bugey on their first mission. This was the first practical work of the Society and that’s why it’s of such symbolic significance for us today. It was the first work the Society as such did.

Their first work was going round rural, abandoned areas, among desperately poor people who had been abandoned by the Church ever since the Revolution. Most of the villages they visited

did not have a resident pastor and many of the ones which they did visit had a pastor who also was not a great example of Christian living. In the big towns too, there was a need for missions but Bsp. Devie's other bands of missionaries were quite happy to work the bigger towns.

No-one seemed to want the small rural parishes. They were difficult, the terrain was difficult, they had to walk everywhere. The roads were not good enough for a carriage and anyway, our Marists were too poor to own carriages. They didn't have a horse. I suspect that when Colin told us that not even the Superior General was allowed to have a horse, he was harking back to those early days when he and Pierre Colin and Declas had to go on foot.

The first village they went to was one called La Balme, about two hours walk up the hills from Cerdon. It was January, the middle of winter, desperately cold. La Balme was another abandoned parish. The rectory was a mess, more like a pig sty. It was a wreck. The windows had no glass in them, the wind was howling through at night. The bed was pretty primitive and there were two of them in the one bed, and that caused great difficulties for Fr. Colin. But nevertheless, they were happy, they were full of zeal.

There are many stories which Fr. Colin used to tell of those early missions. For him they were the happiest days of his life. Much of his after dinner conversation was reminiscing about the good old days which were tough, which were really hard, but which brought great fruit to the Church.

For us though, Bugey has now a symbolic significance. For us it symbolizes our call to mission. There are many lessons that we can learn from Colin and those early pioneers and their early experiences in the Bugey.

After about a year they were joined by Fr. Jallon, another of our early pioneers whom you've almost forgotten. But he was one of those heroic ones too who would go marching through the hills, through the mountains from village to village announcing the Word of God, forgiving sins, reconciling and bringing the mercy of God.

Jallon had been a theology professor. He had actually taught Fr. Colin but Colin was the superior. Like all theology professors, Jallon used to preach a bit long-windedly and every now and then, his superior, his former pupil, had to say from the front of the Church, "That's enough, get down now."

Also he was quite a trial to Fr. Colin when they had to find their accommodation in the tumble down rectory or in the local inn, often in one room and as I said in the one bed. For very good reasons they had to each lie at the far extremes of the bed in an awkward way so as they got no sleep. But also, Fr. Jallon had very bad breath we're told and that was a big trial for Fr. Colin.

There are lots of wonderful stories about it in this book of Ed Keel's "Texts". After "A Founder Speaks" I find it the greatest treasure that we've got. It's wonderful!

There's another lovely story Colin tells about hearing confessions and being struck with a rather stumbling, churlish sort of fellow who wasn't making a good fist of his confession. Colin lost patience with him, we're told it was a primo primus movement so he gave him a good cuff across the ear. Then immediately, realizing what he'd done, he started patting him gently and the fellow thought it was a pat of encouragement. I don't know. I hope we don't do things like that!

What do we learn though from the Bugey? Many things I think. First of all, it was quite clear that for Colin and those early pioneers, they were being sent on mission. As Colin later said, “Is there not an analogy between the mission of the apostles and our mission? On the one hand it is the Son who sends, on the other, the Mother, and is not the spirit of the Mother that of the Son? It is she who called you, it is she who sends you out, she who promises and gives you her spirit. She is saying to us, “Go, proclaim my divine Son to the world.’ Go everywhere, Mary our mother will be with you.” (FS 176.3)

That wasn't a few words of pious encouragement on the part of Father Founder, peculiar to him. It was their deep conviction that they were indeed apostles, ones sent out, and sent by Mary, sent to do her work, to make sure that she could intervene in the world today. Intervene on behalf of her Son. There was a mission, there was a sending, forth and ultimately that comes from Mary.

That too must sustain us in our vocation today, in our ministry. That sense in the back of our minds that I am being sent. I didn't make up this job –or I shouldn't have anyway!- I didn't. It was chosen for me, ultimately by Mary because she wants to bring the mercy of God to this little part of the world where I am.

That's the first and I suspect the most important aspect of the Bugey symbol for us - being sent by Mary, to do her work. Each of us today must reflect on our work and see where the hand of Mary is pointing us there.

In my own province (New Zealand), at our last chapter, one of our members said something which I think in his mind was just a sort of casual remark, but I think it was something very significant for the rest of us. He said, “In any work I look around to see where Mary's already working and then I try to get alongside.” That sort of expresses it pretty well. We're not going to be actually starting it up for Mary, she would already have got there before us. It takes eyes of great discernment though to see where Mary's already working, but then its our job to get alongside.

Another facet of the Bugey symbol I suspect for us, is that whole notion of zeal. The missions of the Bugey were hard work. The going was tough, it was rough terrain, the people were rough and they were not enthusiastically welcoming missionaries or religion. There was no hero's welcome for any of our missioners when they first arrived in the village. People often wondered what they were there for. There was no prior advertisement. It was Colin's practice to go through the streets ringing a little bell and people would wonder what all this was about and that was the way he sort of started. A bit like the ice-cream man going around – entice them with false promises perhaps. Anything for souls he would say.

No, the work was hard but there was no doubting their zeal. “You've seen how boiling water leaps and bubbles: that is zeal, but it must be pure. The water evaporates ... we must become spiritualized, we must grow and spread ... When completely changed to steam the water seems to make no noise, to be completely still, but it burns, it is strong. That is how we must be.” (FS 53.3,4)

He was aware at that time that steam could drive mighty engines, it was powerful stuff. But what attracted him to the image was that when it completely evaporated, it was quiet and still but it burns. The “hidden and unknown,” but how powerful it can be. Steam is invisible, yet it can be a great force, a great power.

That's his notion of zeal: a great fire, a zeal for souls. It's not as though we can count them and take them away as trophies, so many converts here, so many baptisms there, so many confessions, heard etc, etc. Souls aren't trophies, scalps to put on our belts.

It's a zeal which is a form of love, a divine love, the zeal, the energy Christ had, a practical love. A love in that basic sense of wanting the good of the other. Coming from the conviction that what God had worked for the world in Christ is a good thing, meant to be shared by everyone. In wanting the good of the other, one wants that they know the mercy of God. Desires it, wants it and has enough energy to try to bring it about. That's what zeal is, it's an energy, an energetic, dynamic love wanting the best for the other and the best that the missionary can offer are the gifts of God.

So, the Marist missionary is to be zealous. He is also to be joyful. These were the happiest days of Colin's life. They were also the hardest and probably they were the ones which wrecked his health so that he was fairly sickly for the rest of his life, prone to colds and flu all the time. The drafty presbyteries in the middle of winter were no help. The meager diet: at times Colin had to cook himself and he had no talent for cooking. The first time he tried, even soup, it was inedible. Lord knows what he did to it!

Tough times but happy times and the happiness came as all happiness. It's never a direct object. You can't strive for happiness. It's always a by-product. It's always what comes to you when you are achieving a purpose, when something else is being fulfilled. Indeed yes, the Bugey symbolizes for us that aspect of our vocation which is our mission.

Constitutions numbers 12 and 14 are crucial for our understanding of who we are and what we're called to be. Let's ponder these two numbers today also. They're very deliberate, these are very seriously considered numbers. No word is wasted.

"Their call is to be truly missionary." That means our call as Marists, and that applies to each one of us, it's not just for the select few who go off to foreign lands. Every Marist is called to be missionary. I think it's very significant, if I've been told correctly, that at that brief audience that the General Chapter had with Pope John Paul, the pope seemed to think that we were primarily a congregation for education and our Superior General reminded him, "No, we are a missionary congregation." Perhaps that gives us a clue to our direction in the future. Certainly the previous administration put before us, time and time again, that we are a communion for mission.

So, our call is truly missionary. What does that mean? "They are to go from place to place" – we are mobile. "Announcing the word of God, reconciling, (a more modern word for hearing confessions) catechizing, visiting the sick (hospital chaplains are good) and the imprisoned, and doing the works of mercy." This is a clear echo of Colin's description in round about Constitutions 12 or 13.

"They attend especially to the most neglected." What's meant by that is neglected not necessarily by the social services of the State, but perhaps most especially those neglected by the Church. "The most neglected, the poor, and those who suffer injustice."

"They are ready to carry out these tasks anywhere and at any time." A clear echo of the *in quavis mundi plaga* of the old constitutions. That's what it's all about, called to be truly missionary, going from place to place, doing the works of mercy, wherever the need is greatest, wherever

there are people missing out on the mercy of God mediated through the Church, that's where we go and we're ready to do that anywhere, any time. That's what we say.

Then the companion number, number 14. (By the way, number 13 is to do with education which is also okay). "Marists are called to establish the Church where it doesn't exist and to renew existing communities rather than to participate in its activities in places where it is already established." We are called to where the Church doesn't yet exist or if it does exist, to renew the Church in those places. We are not called though, to participate in its activities when the Church is already quite well established and doing okay, thank you. That's not the special note of Marist work. "The Society is no longer true to its calling wherever it becomes so caught up in particular works as to seek cease to be available for more urgent needs to which it may be called by its mission."

Those too are solemn words in our Constitutions and harsh words. We are no longer true to our vocation when we get so caught up in what we're doing that we can't respond to more urgent needs.

Those numbers though were not meant to be anti-parish. But they were meant to remind us that no matter where we are, whether we are in an institution we've had for a hundred years, or whether we are in something quite new, they are indicative of the attitude and the spirit we must bring that the work.

Even if we've been there for a hundred years, we are still to bring the mind of the missionary there, seeking out the disadvantaged, looking for the neglected, doing the works of mercy but always being ready to move on to where there is a greater need. We must be careful we don't get bogged down in ministry, doing something which is simply to our advantage. It's always for the honor of Mary and the glory of God. That's our mission. That's what it means to be Marist and missionary.

Being missionary these days has changed a little from the time of Fr. Colin. He himself noticed that people didn't particularly like to be preached at. People were being conscious of their dignity as human beings, but also as members of the Church. They didn't like being told what to do and so he was careful to ingratiate himself before hand, to make sure that the message was acceptable. We can learn quite a lot from the way in which he told us to conduct missions.

The new evangelization that Pope John Paul has called for, and which Fr. Jago called the Society to, also shifts the emphasis a little from direct preaching of the word, button-holding people on the corner and telling them that God loves them. That's the not the Marist way, but primarily through, as Fr. Jago says, the personal witness of a personal life and through relationship. The missionary today, throughout the world, the missionary no matter where he or she works, is going to primarily effective through personal witness. Pope Paul VI made it very clear in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. "Modern man (or woman) listens more readily to witnesses than to teachers; and if he listens to teachers its only because they are witnesses" (n.41)

It is the witness of our life that is going to be the most powerful way in which we can touch others and that suits us particularly well as Marists. The 'hidden and unknown' is very suited to the idea of witness.

I myself personally was very sorry when the Society withdrew from Pakistan after only five years there. There was a place where we had a good opportunity to be modern evangelizers. We

were forbidden by law to proselytize. We weren't allowed to preach, we weren't allowed to make any converts. All we could do was witness to a Christian way of life in a Muslim land. No chance of vocations, no chance of converts, purely and simply witnessing, purely and simply being missionary. These were glorious years for the Society in being able to do that. It's a pity we couldn't sustain it.

That was being missionary today pure and simple. After we left, one of our sister congregations, one founded at the same time as ourselves and largely through the support of the Marist Fathers, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, they moved into Pakistan and they too are trying to do the sort of work that we were doing.

Finally, I think it's important to realize from the Bugey symbol that the Society as a whole has a mission. Not just individual missions for individual Marists. The mission of the Society is not just the sum total of the work and apostolates' that we individuals do. There is something much bigger than that amongst us.

The Society as a whole has a mission. As Fr. Jago put it, to form a Marian people of God. A new Church, one in which the face of Mary is more evident and of course, this ties in very well with modern Vatican II theology. The deepest essence of the Church is not its Petrine faith, the hierarchical structure but as Pope John Paul reminded the cardinals of the curia, it's more important that it shows a marian face. No doubt he had good reason telling the cardinals and bishops that the petrine hierarchical thing is not the most important aspect of the Church, but it is the Marian face of mercy, mother, community, reconciliation, forgiveness etc.

That's our vocation as a whole. Somehow or other, to form a People of God which is truly one in heart and mind and which bears the features of Mary. This is not just a Marist thing, this is the deepest destiny of the Church itself. The Church is to be modeled on the first disciples. It is a community of those disciples and the archetype is Mary.

So, in working to make the church Marian, we are seeking to bring the church to its fulfillment, to the eschaton, the end time when there will be everyone in one heart and one mind. One people brought into the one Kingdom of God.

Now all of us, all our vocations, all of our ministries are subordinate to that. "At the heart of these stirrings of new life lies the central source of our hope, the conviction that beyond the vocation of each individual there is the *vocation of the Society* as a whole: the call to create a Marian people of God. We are not meant merely to do in a modest and hidden way the ordinary work of the Church. We are called to make a special contribution to the life of the Church, to encourage all that is Marian, servant and pilgrim, to form new groupings, to teach a way of following the Lord, Mary's way, the way of the first and most faithful disciple." (Fr. John Jago, *MARY MOTHER OF OUR HOPE*, pp. 19 – 20)

There are two numbers in the Constitutions which we can gloss over or miss out because they're actually in the section on formation but they apply to each of us. They have to do with the discernment of vocation. The first is directed to the provincial. "The provincial engages those preparing for ministry in an ongoing dialogue (and I venture to suggest it's not just those in formation but all of us). Understandably, he is concerned about the needs of the province and its commitments; he must, however, make every effort to balance this concern with an openness to the gifts and hopes of each member and with support for the work of the Society throughout the world." (n.82)

The provincial's in the unenviable position of having to look after the individuals on this side of it and has to look after the Society as a whole on the other side. He's a pivotal figure in our structure. But nevertheless, our Constitutions urge him, that despite his concerns for the good of the province, the commitments of the province, to look to the individual and his hopes and aspirations.

But the next number reminds us that, "The individual, naturally aware of his own aspirations and insights into the needs of the world, (and we all look out on the world, and we all have our own ideas of what Mary wants and what we should do) must be careful to relate his life and work to the broader perspectives of his province and of the whole Society. (n. 83)

In these days of development in religious life, the place of the religious community can be seen in two ways. Certainly in my own country, we've got congregations which have gone both ways. The congregation can be there to facilitate and support the individual mission and vocation of each member. The responsibility is primarily on the member to discern the call from God and where God is calling him or her. The role of the congregation is to enable that to happen.

On the other hand, there are congregations which have a mission, a specific work, a specific calling and the individual makes himself or herself available for the fulfillment of that mission. It's quite clear by our Constitutions and by what our leadership has been giving us in recent years that we are one of the second sort of congregations. The Society has a mission. The Society has a work to do and all of us by joining the Society, promise to make ourselves available for the doing of that work. The Society is not there so much for me as I am there for the Society.

So the call of Bugey is a call to each one of us to examine our mission, to examine our apostolate. It's not to call it into question, whether it's good or not, there's no doubt that it is good work we are doing. We are fulfilling needs. But the Society with it's limited resources and its huge mission has had to make some choices. The choice in the heart of each one of us is whether we go along with the choices made by our province for its mission, or whether we want the province to go along with our choice for my mission.

Fr. Jago was encouraged by the signs that he sees throughout the Society that beyond the vocation of each individual people are realizing that there is a vocation for the Society as a whole. We are here to do Mary's work. We are sent by Mary who wants to intervene in our world, bringing the compassion and mercy of God. That's our mission, that's the touchstone of all we do. I urge each one of us today, to reflect on what he is doing and to see how it fits in with this mission of Mary.

Source: Fr. Pat Bearsley, Video Conference 5 Boston Province Retreat, 1994.