

4. BUGEY MOUNTAIN VILLAGES: 1825-29 **By Fr. David Kennerley, SM**

A Prayer

Jesus, loving savior and friend, your Gospel is indeed Good News for all who listen to it and receive it as the word of life. You yourself are that Word, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life for all the world.

Mary, compassionate and caring mother, give us eyes and hearts that are so taken by the needs of others around us that we will gladly forget our own interests in order to be Good News to them.

Ministering as Marists

In 1823, the diocese of Belley was created in a largely mountainous corner of the diocese of Lyon. The new diocese included Cerdon, the parish of the two Colin brothers. Bishop Devie had very few priests and yet large parts of his new diocese were suffering from long years of pastoral neglect. Many people, especially in the isolated Bugey, had abandoned the Church and were even hostile towards it. Bishop Devie's response, like many other bishops then in France, was to introduce missions. So, something that the aspiring Marists had dreamt of doing in the seminary, was now actually asked of them. A particularly graced coincidence.

Jean Claude Colin was horrified at first, thinking that he personally, was quite unsuitable. However, he was equally convinced that this was something Mary wanted and that he and the other Marists assigned the task had to put their trust in her and endeavor to be her presence to these people. And so, in part the Bugey missions reinforced for Marists that their spirituality is less about prayers and devotions and more to do with us noticing, accepting, attuning ourselves to think, judge, feel and act as Mary in all things.

As was expected, the Marist 'catechists' as they called themselves were frequently met with apathy, suspicion and hostility. On occasion, their missions began with only one or two people present. However, by respectfully and carefully getting alongside the villagers in the typical three weeks of a mission, almost inevitably, they saw the church fill!

It wasn't as if these results came easily! To start with, the only feasible time for missions were the harsh winter months when the snow-bound people had to forgo work on their farms and instead, took to spinning wool or lace-making at home. The snow and the cold also meant that just getting to the villages was taxing and difficult.

At a human level, the team of two, at most three catechists, began by recognizing that they were no better than those to whom they were sent. Uppermost for them was the image of Mary as a mother wanting to reach out and help the child who was hurting the most. This encouraged the Marists to do all they could to speak to the hearts of people, not bash them about with Commandments or regulations.

But at the human level, these first Marists were quite contrasting, even clashing in their personalities. They weren't necessarily easy 'bed-fellows' and at times they indeed had to share the same bed! On the other hand, they noticed that there was a certain strength in their differences because some people in each village were more inclined to one missionary than to another. In short, while striving to evangelize the villagers, the missionaries allowed themselves to be evangelized and formed as well!

Given so many obstacles, our early Marists quickly came to see that prayer was the absolute key to the turn-around in people and to any good they achieved. So crucial did they see prayer that in addition to their own many prayers, they made a point of asking others to pray for them and the villagers to whom they were sent as "instruments of God's mercy."

As Bishop Devie noticed, the turn-around achieved by the Marists was often in stark contrast to other mission bands working in supposedly more favorable territory. The Marists did their best, and with that done, grace and Mary did the rest.

An Insight

“We used to pray, and we had others pray; that is what I would like for us to remember well. If we should happen to forget the spirit of prayer, we will forget the very basis for success in the missions.

We always began the mission with the little children. The catechist would ask them if they wanted to choose the Blessed Virgin as their advocate, their protectress. He then told them to ask pardon of their parents for all their acts of disobedience. After that he would ask the parents to retract all the curses that they had unfortunately pronounced against their children. Then he would invite the parents to extend their hands over their children and the pastor and missionaries, with their hands extended, would consecrate all these children to the Blessed Virgin.

In the first mission we stirred up the whole parish by doing so, and I don't believe there was a single inhabitant left who was not won over” (Fr. Colin, 1844).

The Practice

“In the theology of the day, God was a demanding God of justice and atonement rather than a God of love and infinite mercy. The rigorist approach then in vogue in France was what Colin had learned at the seminary and one of its characteristics was either to delay giving absolution or to refuse it altogether. Yet Colin wrote later, ‘On account of poor human nature, the Society of Mary shall profess all those opinions which leave most scope to God's mercy.’ The importance of the change in confessional approach cannot be overstated” (Donal Kerr, JEAN CLAUDE COLIN MARIST, pp.225-26).

Possible Questions

1. Which weather extreme, the very hot or very cold, makes you more mindful of your own interests and needs and to what effect? Now compare that to social extremes: human warmth and/or a frigid cold shoulder. How vulnerable would you have been as one of the first Marists in the Bugey?
2. What does the Marist Bugey experience tell us about God and what is the message of the Bugey for us today?

