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The project came from God

After their ordination to the priesthood, Jean-Claude Colin, Jean-Claude Courveille and Marcellin Champagnat were scattered to the edges of the diocese. To add to the precariousness of their situation, the huge diocese of Lyon was divided in 1822. Colin was now in the new diocese of Belley, and the others, Champagnat and Courveille, were in the diocese of Lyon. The group was not only separated by distance, but was now divided into two separate dioceses, and it was not easy for priests to travel from one diocese to the other. In Lyon, Champagnat continued to work for the development of the Brothers and acted as the rallying point for the priests of Lyons who wished to be Marists.

At Cerdon, Jean-Claude Colin began to let the master idea mature. What he had heard and understood Mary to have said to Courveille at Le Puy was simply this: "I was the support of the early Church at its beginning. I shall be also at the end of time. My embrace will be open to all who wish to come to me." During these years, which Colin says were years of great consolation, this idea and its consequences began to develop into a living human organism: a body of men and women – and children, too, even the unborn – who would have a special work to do in the church. A sign, perhaps, of the extraordinary graces he experienced during these years was the transformation that took place in him: from a shy, wooden, and deadly dull preacher into someone able to fire up even the hard-bitten men of an area referred to by the clergy as a distinct backwater of the diocese.

Marie Jotillon and Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn had arrived at Cerdon in 1817 at the invitation of the

Colin brothers. In 1819 Marie Jotillon was sent to help Courveille whose Sisters of Mary were experiencing difficulties. Jeanne-Marie Chavoïn became housekeeper of the priests, moving into the presbytery with her two nephews aged 10 and 3. She lived here from 1818 to 1823, in daily contact with the two Colin brothers, sharing their preoccupation with the Marist project and helping them where she could. This explains how she understood so deeply the thinking of Jean-Claude Colin.

Colin, meanwhile, working at night and sometimes into the early morning, in a little closet five feet square, began to jot down ideas for a rule for the congregation of Marists. He was later to declare that the only guide he had in this work was the life of the family at Nazareth and the first mission of the Apostles. The Society of Mary was to be like no other religious congregation the Church had seen.

The transformation

COLIN: When I began as a curate, for two months I never said one word louder than the other... On all sides, people complained that I was cold, that I was dead... I've certainly changed. One day I began talking forcefully in the pulpit, and from then on...

MAYET: Father Colin preached the word of God with vigour and the men liked him. When he went up to preach, the men said, "It's the curate; it's the curate." And they were quite pleased.

CHAVOIN: When the Fathers Colin were at Cerdon, they were revered by all the inhabitants. Had they remained there, the whole parish

would soon have been like a religious community; already a fervent group of 30 men used to meet in the presbytery.

The graces of Cerdon

COLIN: Over a period of six years, I experienced extraordinary serenity when thinking of the Society, with a clear feeling that it was the work of God... I experienced tangible comfort just at the thought of it; when I heard a piece of news, I glowed all over, my face became radiant. But nature was too much at work,... I bless God.... He really cured me.... There were trials....

CHAVOIN: When the Fathers were almost overwhelmed by these annoying difficulties, I felt full of courage and cheered them up. At other times, when they were untroubled, my turn came. Ah! Those were our finest hours. One day - they received a letter which upset them very much, and the same post brought an important answer. The Fathers were discouraged, I said to them, "Let's go to the church." We all three went. We prayed for an hour, or an hour and a half, and we came out feeling peaceful and contented.

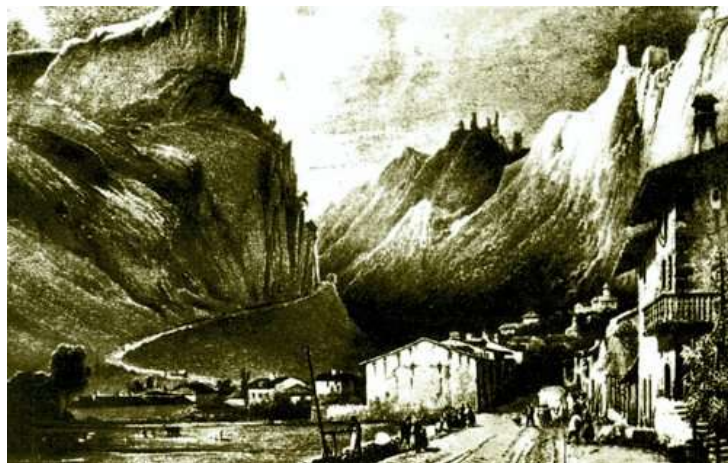
COLIN: In one of the trips I made for the Society, and I made many, I felt that all the devils were after me to stop me from making it, Yes, so I believed.... I felt an over powering repugnance... After twenty minutes of walking, I threw myself on my knees, in the moonlight, in the middle of the road, and I said, "My God.... if you want me to do this, give me back my strength, and in that way show me whether it is your will." All of a sudden, I felt relieved, happy, light hearted. I ran like a hare.

MAYET: That's what a senior priest told me that Father Colin had said to him: when he prayed, the Blessed Virgin appeared to him, and he felt filled with a heavenly joy and a superhuman courage... and this was a confirmation of the will of God for the Society.... At the spot where Jesus Christ appeared to St Ignatius (in Rome) a chapel has been built. It would be good if a chapel were built on the site where Mary appeared.

Certainty about the project

MAYET: Father Colin told me one day, at the end of 1845, that he had always had the thought, the trust, the assurance, amid the opposition we met in the beginning that the Society would succeed. He said that he felt interiorly that the work to which he was devoting himself came from God and was not a figment of the imagination or one of those not uncommon youthful ideas.

COLIN: Yes, young men often have ideas of this sort. I felt a great difference between this work and what we call young men's ideas, which I never did like.... On the other hand, I felt impelled to this work, not by the ardour of youth, such as you often see, but by an impulse that I felt came from above. *The Mayet Memoirs*



The stylised sketch of Cerdon made in 1824 gives some idea of the feel of the place: a town at the edge of the diocese, on the meeting point of three valleys, on the main Lyon-Geneva road. In the time of the Colin brothers there were about 1500 residents at Cerdon. The presbytery build by the Colins in 1822 still stands. It was in this presbytery that Jean-Colin sketched the first ideas of a Rule. He later said: 'If I were to return to Cerdon, I would go to see the little closet five feet square which I had at the foot of my bed. It's there that I passed nights and where I wrote the first ideas of the Society.'