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Toward a Theology of the Body: An Analysis of the Letters of Maria Domenica Mazzarello

Edna Mary MacDonald, FMA

Introduction

Western dualistic philosophy views humanity's ability to think and make choices as characteristic of its spiritual essence. Knowledge, truth and goodness best come through the process of speculation. The more hampered one is by feelings or subjective desires, the less truth and goodness are found. Feelings of attraction or connection especially obstruct the pursuit of knowledge and the practice of morality. Within this framework the dominance of mind over body is associated with maleness. The representation of the "feminine" is connected with matter, understood as unknowable or conceived as controllable nature.¹

Feminist writers argue that the dichotomy between body and soul, the latter strengthened at the expense of the former, is a patriarchal construction which has dominated Western philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology and spirituality for thousands of years and allowed to remain normative.² It is this

¹See: Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996), 49-55; Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26, 31-33, 37-37; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3-5.

²Riane Eisler, "Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body" (Sydney: Doubleday, 1996). From *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, edited by Catherine Mowry La Cugna (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), see articles by Anne Carr, "The New vision of Feminist Theology," 5-29; Mary E. Hines, "Community for liberation," 161-84; Catherine Mowry La

general argument that I seek to develop through an analysis of the specific tenets of embodied spirituality against the background of the Catholic Church's ascetical practice. By embodied spirituality I mean a spirituality which includes the body as an integral part of the spiritual process.³ In specific terms this disclosure will show how a woman of nineteenth-century northern Italy, Maria Domenica Mazzarello,⁴ constructed a holistic approach to spirituality rather than a dualism between body and soul. Firstly, I will state my position regarding a feminist Christian spirituality in relation to embodiment. Secondly, I will situate the figure of Maria Mazzarello within the context of Italian spirituality by succinctly exploring some major notions of nineteenth-century Italian asceticism with its particular impact on women. In the final section a critique of the autobiographical works of Maria in reference to embodiment spirituality will be explored.⁵ The analysis will highlight two issues: how Maria broke with convention on significant philosophical and consequently theological-ascetical orientations, and it will also indicate the retrieval of an embodied spirituality.

Embodiment and Christian Spirituality

The role of the body in Catholic spirituality has always been a significant one. Theological anthropology, christology, sacramental theology, ethics and ecclesiology all imply an understanding of the embodied person. The ambivalence toward the body found throughout the history of Christian spirituality has not developed a positive theology of the body.⁶ Feminist theology is in-

Cugna, "God in Communion with us: the Trinity," 83-114; Mary Aquin O'Neill, "The Mystery of being Human Together," 139-60; Sandra Schneiders, "The Bible and Feminism," 31-57.

³Cf. Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*, 168-9.

⁴Maria Domenica Mazzarello (1837-1881) was a nineteenth century Italian peasant woman who as a lay person and then as co-founder of a religious congregation of women, worked for the Catholic education of pre-adolescent and adolescent girls of the poorer classes from approximately 1855-1881. She is noted for her initiatives within the field of professional and academic education and contributed to an optimistic and joyful approach to nineteenth century Catholic spirituality for young people and adults alike. Since her death in 1881 much has been written about her in the form of biographical accounts and critical studies.

⁵The autobiographical works consist of sixty-eight known letters written by Maria Mazzarello from 1874 to 1881. To date three editions (1975, 1980, 1994) of Maria's correspondence have been published. The only English translation is dated 1978: *Letters of St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello Cofoundress of the institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, A translation from the original (Shilling: Auxilium, 1978). I will extract quotations from that text but will adhere to the format of the 1994 Italian edition in reference to the numbering of the letters and grouping of paragraphs.

⁶See: Susan A. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women," in *Freeing Theology*:

formed by the central Christian belief that God has come to dwell in humanity and by the conviction, in its diverse differentiations, that women's experience of connections between body and soul, physical and spiritual, represents a significant resource for expressing this belief.

Feminist Christian spirituality grows out of theology as a critical theology of liberation. The function of such a theology is twofold. In the first instance, to critique Christian theological traditions that maintain sexist ideologies and alienation. In the second, to reconstruct religious traditions by reinterpreting them to make theology meaningful to women as well as to men. These two functions will be employed in this article. I will adopt the methodological construct of Rebecca Chopp, and employ a "feminist hermeneutics of marginality."⁷ Chopp declares that feminists read the bible from the place most accessible to them, that of the margins. She sites two locations of marginality, "the social-symbolic order and the margins of Christianity."⁸ In both places the notion of woman has been cast as less than and "other" than man. While these two positions are acknowledged as oppressive to actual women, Chopp declares that the words of the bible are accepted as "words of plenitude in the Word as perfectly open sign."⁹ In this instance the bible is read as proclamation and transformation. In the former orientation patriarchal oppression in relation to women is acknowledged; in the latter emancipatory discourses which value women are proclaimed. A feminist hermeneutics of marginality strives to locate discourses in the text which scholars have ignored or misread. This method allows for the reading of the bible which traverses the realm of modernity, namely, to be factual and "objective." It opens the possibility to examine the text from some of the tenets of a postmodern paradigm, that is, language, difference, specificity, embodiment, and mutuality.¹⁰ Chopp concedes that a

The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective, edited by Catherine Mowry La Cugna (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 185-209.

⁷Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 43.

⁸*Ibid.*, 43.

⁹*Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰Postmodernist thinking is not in total opposition to Enlightenment (modernist) theory since it depends on the modern for its meaning but does challenge its assumptions. Postmodernism disputes the absolutising of hierarchical dualities, both the notion that knowledge is the product of the knowing subject and the known object and that there is only one way in which knowledge can be constituted. In a postmodernist paradigm knowledge is not "absolute" or "true" but relative. Its uses and meanings become contested politically and are the means by which relationships of power are constructed. The "unified self," is accepted only in so far as it is also allowed to be challenged, creating what is called in Post-Enlightenment terms the "decentred self." The "self" becomes problematised in "decentred" modes of discourse. This would mean that the "self," is not absolutely self-constitutive but seen also as a product of a variety of variables: ideology, discourse, the unconscious and language. The primary paradigm shift within this con-

feminist postmodern standpoint does not reject the critique of women's historical past or present but allows women, as women, to articulate, in new ways, modes of emancipation and liberation.¹¹

I will read the epistolary literature of Maria Mazzarello with suspicion and proclamation. In the first instance, I will examine how Christian asceticism has devalued the notion of the body. This construction of the body is connected to the depreciation of the notion of woman and the reality of actual women. In the second instance, through an analysis of the correspondence of Maria Mazzarello I will retrieve a theology of the body which views the body as integral to the spiritual process. It is important to remember that all theology should be grounded in "lived religious experience."¹² From a feminist perspective the question arises how far the experience of women has remained in the past an untapped source of traditional theology. Theological formulations which found official, institutional sanction and were handed down in the codified teachings of established theological schools were entirely the creation of men. How can the creation and formulation of one sex alone possibly be universally valid for all people, women as well as men? This article is an attempt

struction focuses not on consciousness but on language which provides new ways of analyzing constructions of meaning and relationships of power that call unitary, universal categories into question. See: Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*; Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*; Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*; Susan J. Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990).

¹¹Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 44. While the merger of postmodernism with feminism has not been a smooth alliance, the fusion implies that the gender issue take center stage. Postmodernist feminist inquiry does not take the category "woman" assumed but investigates the categorical representation and recognizes that gender relations are a prime force in the dynamics of shaping knowledge. A Post-Enlightenment feminist perspective argues that knowledge as we perceive it is "patriarchy's self-image", that is, it is understood through masculine categories which are considered as universally normative. Feminist postmodern epistemologies deconstruct the "universal" categories disclosing their specificity. Difference within this feminist paradigm calls into question the notions of a dualistic ontology and a woman's experience considered both as artificial (male) constructs and explores the crucial differences between and among women and men. I am not taking a postmodern paradigm to its ultimate conclusions, that is, the three "death" theses: the death of Man (negation of any form of autonomy with regard to the "self"); the death of history (denial of oppressed groups to construct their past); the death of metaphysics (refusal of all "global" narratives in favor of "local" narratives). In doing so I would eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women's movement altogether. See: Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*; Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*; Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*; Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the self: gender, community, and postmodernism in contemporary ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹²Cf. Sandra Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners?" *Horizons* 13.2 (Fall 1986): 270.

to retrieve untapped sources of the experience of women, and in particular, of those experiences of Maria Mazzarello, in relation to embodied spirituality.

Susan A. Ross affirms that it is through the senses that humans as embodied beings experience and acquire knowledge. She points out that while women have traditionally been allied with bodiless and the material, research in the areas of psychology and medicine today demonstrate the close association between the mind and body for both women and men. In the scientific world she states that "objective" thinking is being disputed as the goal of "disembodied rationality" is challenged. She maintains that the notion of "embodied thinking," reasoning grounded in actual situations and directed towards practical results, assists rather than hinders, theological and moral investigations. It assists human beings to acquire a balanced awareness of self, others, God and the world.¹³ Elizabeth Grosz advocates an analysis of the body which moves away from the dichotomous dualism of the person which divide the subject into restricted categories of mind and body and a monism which neglects to critique the problematics of dualism. She believes that corporeality must no longer be ascribed to one sex, the female sex, while the other sex, the male, is allowed to privilege speculative theorizing at the expense of the female sex. There is a need to move away from the concept that there is one type of body as normative, towards considering a pluriformity of models. Grosz maintains that the body must not be analyzed solely in its biological dimension but be referred to as a locus of "social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, productions, or constitution."¹⁴

If we translate Grosz's analysis of the body into spirituality, several ideas emerge. A spirituality fundamentally related to the body is a spirituality that recognizes the human person in the multiple dimensions of one's contextuality—constraints and possibilities—without imprisoning the individual in the demands and needs of the body. For women particularly, the inclusion of the body in a spiritual paradigm is essential since women and the body have been associated with temptation, sin, death. Within the realm of spirituality today

¹³Cf. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women," 199. See also: Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*, 169-72.

¹⁴Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 21-3. While my study will not extensively engage in psychoanalysis as developed by Grosz in recent works (1995, 1994), I adhere to her philosophical orientation which refuses to privilege mind at the expense of body. Grosz considers the body as the mediation between what is perceived as internal and accessible to the subject and what is external and publicly discernible. The metaphors she employs in considering the body are hinge and threshold. She states, "[t]he body can be regarded as a kind of *hinge* or threshold: it is placed between a psyche or lived inferiority and a more sociopolitical exteriority that produces inferiority through the *inscription* of the body's outer surface" (Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, 33); "[t]he body is neither—while also being both—the private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 23).

the notion of human embodiment, in all its various forms, is considered as the place where humans encounter God. An analysis of the letters of Maria Mazzarello will disclose one form of an embodied spirituality.

Nineteenth-century Italian Catholic Ascetical Practice

The Century of Asceticism

In the nineteenth century the emphasis on the ascetic life in seeking union with God and achieving human perfection was the consequence of the disassociation of spirituality with theology.¹⁵ Asceticism consisted in the acquisition of virtues, a life of prayer and the fulfillment of one's duties. According to Tullo Goffi that asceticism was based on the seventeenth-century spiritual works of Francis de Sales (1567-1622)¹⁶ and Louis Lallemant (1587-1635)¹⁷ of the Salesian and Jesuit traditions respectively.¹⁸ From this Salesian-Jesuit root, nineteenth-century spirituality acknowledged that through the grace of the Spirit it was possible for Christians to reach perfection. The quest for individual perfection meant attaining strength of will, moral virility and self-control

¹⁵In its defense against the Enlightenment philosophies, theology was fundamentally preoccupied with apologetics. It retained as sound anything that related to the past tradition and erroneous anything beyond that demarcation. Christian thought, theology, and Christian practice, spirituality, remained disconnected [cf. Regina Bechtle, "Convergences in Theology and Spirituality," *The Way* 28 (1985): 305]. Most spiritualists of the day did not have recourse to dogmatic theology but centered their attention on spiritual meditation. Moral theologizing remained undisturbed in its quest to ethically perfect the individual Christian. Priests were instructed by the episcopal hierarchy to form an ethical conscience in their faithful in opposition to the revolutionary, enlightened and socialist mentalities of the secular world.

¹⁶Born into nobility in Thorens, Savoy, Francis de Sales became bishop of Geneva in 1602. Together with Jane Frances de Chantal as cofounder, he founded the *Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary*. Other than his written work on his mission in the Savoian state of Chablais, his writings are centered on spirituality which can be grouped into works on devotion, sermons and letters of direction. He was declared doctor of the Church by Pius IX in 1877.

¹⁷As a French Jesuit, Louis Lallemant became professor of philosophy and theology and later master of novices. Lallemant left no written treatises to posterity but one of his students gathered notes that were preserved, arranged and published in Paris in 1694, almost sixty years after his death. While it is thought that the time lapse between his death and the publication of his thought was damaging to Lallemant's teaching, *Doctrine spirituelle*, is regarded as the true thought of Lallemant.

¹⁸Cf. Tullo Goffi, *La Spiritualità dell'Ottocento*, Storia della Spiritualità, no. 7 (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1989), 63.

over one's passions, desires and thoughts, actualized in giving good example and involvement in charitable works. The body became the field of deconstruction in order to "reach perfection." As Riane Eisler affirms, "religious asceticism [...] is also an effective way of accustoming the body to dominance and submission."¹⁹ The examination of one's life was based not on doctrinal content but on one's concrete spiritual conduct and the practice of specific devotions. The good Christian was defined as one who observed all the regulations laid down by canon law. In this era there was scant awareness of passive abandonment to the Spirit, the mystical experience in its traditional understanding. The Spirit of Christ was invoked to give strength to fulfill one's ascetical practices and not to allow the action of the Spirit to permeate one's entire life.²⁰ Asceticism germinated a plenitude of private and public devotional practices, many initiated by the laity, while the liturgy remained untouched.²¹ The liturgical dimension of the Church's life was viewed as worship offered to God on behalf of the Church with no active participation of the faithful.

Nineteenth-century Italian Asceticism and its Impact on Women

In Europe during the nineteenth century there was a general ideological conflict against women promoted by male religious, politicians, philosophers and artists. The "good" woman was portrayed as asexual. Her "virtue" lay in guarding virginity above all else and her "nobility" rested on her dependence and docility to men. As recorded by Eisler, the cultural historian Bram Dijkstra termed the nineteenth-century woman as "the household angel."²² This nineteenth-century genderised construction is verifiable when considering asceticism and its impact on women in the Italian peninsula. Few women in nineteenth-century Italy participated in its political life and in the administrative functions of the Catholic Church. In relation to asceticism Goffi delineates three factors confronting women in relation to nineteenth-century Italian asceticism. Firstly, women were relegated to domestic duties in the home and inculcated to be recollected and at the service of others. Secondly, women were considered morally fragile which necessitated strict moral guidance by Church and State. Thirdly, viewed as a temptation to men, women were watched either by their parents or their husbands or local clergy leaving little room for self-direction. Fourthly,

¹⁹Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*, 166.

²⁰Cf. Goffi, *La Spiritualità dell'Ottocento*, 65.

²¹Piety gave homage to the crucified Christ (the five wounds, the seven last words), to Christ's "Sacred Heart" and the adoration of Christ outside the Eucharistic celebration; it nurtured personal prayer (novenas, triduum) and celebrated the saints, particularly Mary, the Mother of Jesus, through feasts, processions, blessings and the pledge of vows. Cf. Goffi, *La Spiritualità dell'Ottocento*, 220.

²²Cf. Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*, 272.

in any social institution, be it within the State or Church, women were held subordinate to men and instilled to practice the passive virtues of humility, obedience, self-sacrifice, and mortification. Whether they formed lay associations or founded religious congregations, they were dependent on male clergy and/or religious men.²³ The above factors illustrate why women religious particularly were instructed to cherish virginity and purity above all else shunning any form of “vanità femminile” in dress, speech or comportment.²⁴ Women religious were trained to avoid as dangerous, secular literature, encounters with men, and any engagement in particular friendships.

It must be questioned why sexual relationship was not considered as a condition in which dramatic spiritual growth in self-understanding and ability to love could take place. In brief it stems from the hierarchical dualism of body-soul and gender differentiation. In the first instance, the body was considered as a trap which prevented spiritual development. In the second case, the assumptions of male superiority within Christianity allowed no leeway to envision equal relationship between women and men. Male perspectives being the norm, they associated females with bodiliness, vulnerability, dependence over and against “male” reason and the pursuits of spiritual progress. Translated into history, women were not represented as human beings with subjectivity but as threat to men’s spiritual integrity and as daily temptation.²⁵

Several reasons indicate why during the nineteenth century there was an accelerated devotion to Mary, Mother of Jesus, representing Mary in distinguished and celebrated isolation from the rest of the faithful.²⁶ The glorification of Mary left unaffected the subordinate condition of women within the Church. Numerous Marian apparitions occurred in Europe.²⁷ The apparitions intensified the believers’ spirituality to prayer and mortification for the conversion of the faithful. Numerous congregations of women and men were founded under the patronage of Mary.²⁸ New devotions were consolidated.²⁹ The great-

²³Cf. Goffi, *La Spiritualità dell’Ottocento*, 265.

²⁴Cf. Goffi, *La Spiritualità dell’Ottocento*, 343.

²⁵Cf. Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*, 203-209.

²⁶Cf. Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Saints and Mary,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, edited by Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Calvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 2:145-177.

²⁷Apparitions of Mary occurred in Paris to Catherine Laboure (1830); to two children of Savoy in La Salette (1845); to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes (1858); Pontmain (1871); to a group in Knock, Ireland (1879).

²⁸The religious congregation of women which Maria Mazzarello co-founded in 1872 was named under the patronage of Mary: *The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.

²⁹The local practice at the beginning of the eighteenth century of honoring Mary during the month of May became universal during the nineteenth century. The first Saturday of every month was set aside for specific Marian devotion in acts of reparation and atonement. The feast of Our Lady of Sorrows became universal in 1814 by Pius VII. Through magisterial teachings (1893-1901) Pope Leo XIII pro-

est impact upon women in relation to devotion to Mary was the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary proclaimed in 1854 by Pius IX with the decree, *Ineffabilis Deus*. The decree declared that from the first instant of her conception, by the grace of God and the merits of Christ, Mary was preserved from original sin. By implication the dogma widens the spiritual relationship between Mary and all other women. Theologically, in declaring Mary's "immaculate" conception, and stressing the universality of "original" sin, Mary is freed from the effects of sexual reproduction, that is, "original" sin. This placed Mary, as the title of Marina Warner's ground-breaking book states, "alone of all her sex."³⁰ In the Catholic Christian tradition sexual intercourse has been associated with the transmission of "original" sin. To a very large extent the sexual act was sinful and could only be remitted through conception. Women were considered as sexually dangerous because of their association with the material, carnal world in opposition to men's world of rationality and "objectivity." The connections of women with bodiliness, and bodiliness with sin, mitigated women's commonality with and imitation of Mary. Devotionally, women in particular were urged, through preachers, ascetical writers, confessors, all of whom were generally male, to turn to Mary in order to become and remain "pure." Culturally, the citizen-mother for the emerging Italian State became the spiritual-mother for the Church. Pope Pius IX invoked the positive power of educated and influential women when he called for the proclamation of the dogma. He understood and hoped to harness the power of Christian women in forming souls for the Church. The mother-educator, as spouse and mother, was to be submissive to the husband as head of the family and instill prayer and devotion into her children as the principal means of Christian formation.³¹

A Theology of the Body: an Analysis of the Autobiographical Works of Maria Domenica Mazzarello

In this section I will explore some notions of nineteenth-century asceticism, and their correlation to the correspondence of Maria Mazzarello. The conceptualisations of nineteenth-century asceticism will center on the ascetical paradigm of the disembodied spiritual life: distrust of the body, the body as an obstacle to overcome through the practice of purity, and the punitive understanding of the spiritual experience. Three questions in relation to these conceptualizations

moted devotion to the rosary.

³⁰Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976).

³¹Michela De Giorgio, "Il modello cattolico," in *Storia della donna: L'ottocento*, edited by Genevieve Fraisse and Michelle Perrot, *Storia della donna in Occidente*, edited by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, vol. 4 (Roma: Laterza, 1991), 161-162.

will be explored: How did Maria Mazzarello incorporate the notion of the body into her asceticism? What notions of nineteenth-century asceticism did she exclude from that construction? What implications do these eliminations have in relation to her understanding of reality and the construction of an embodied spirituality today?

Care for the Body not Distrust of the Body

One of the underlying motifs evident throughout the correspondence of Maria Mazzarello is the notion of an embodied spirituality. This is defined as a spirituality which includes the body as an integral part of the spiritual process. This motif has been deduced from an extensive comparative analysis between the ascetical texts Maria is known to have read and the examination of her correspondence.³² The ascetical texts under scrutiny stem from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries written by women and men from the regions of the Netherlands, Spain and Italy.³³ In varying degrees each writer considered the body in

³²As noted above, unless otherwise indicated, I will cite the English translation of Maria Mazzarello's correspondence, using as my text: *Letters of St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello Cofoundress of the institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, A translation from the original (Shilling: Auxilium, 1978). In the notes that follow, I shall cite this text as *Letters*, followed by the number of the letter and paragraph(s), as arranged in the 1994 Italian edition.

³³The texts under examination included *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis; a timeless classic for contemporary readers [translated by: William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1989)]; the autobiography of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) as well as her commentary on religious life and her classic on ascetical and mystical prayer [English versions: S. Teresa of Jesus, "The Book of Her Life," in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez, 2d rev. ed. (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1987), 1:1-365; "The Way of Perfection," in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), 2:15-204; "The Interior Castle," in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980), 2:261-452]; the collected conferences on religious life by the second-generation Jesuit novice master Alphonsus Rodriguez (1526-1616) first published in 1609 [English version: Alfonso Rodriguez, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection* (Dublin: James Duffy and Sons, 1882): 3 vols.]; from the ascetical works of the recently canonized Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787): *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo, tratta dalle parole di S. Paolo*; the *Massime Eterne*, and *La Vera Sposa di Gesù Cristo* [English editions: S. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, translated by W. Frean (Ballarat: Majellan Press, 1963); "Maxims of Eternity, or Meditations for Every Day in the Week." in *Preparation for death; or, Considerations on the eternal truths (Maxims of eternity—Rule of life)*, edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm. The complete works of Saint Alphonsus Liguori Series, trans-

dualistic terms — the body must be brought into subjection by soul/spirit.³⁴ In Catholic Christian practice this orientation was promulgated through the virtue of purity.

lated from the Italian, edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm, *The ascetical works*, no. 1 (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1926), 387-406; *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ; or, The Nun Sanctified by the Virtues of Her State*, translated by Eugene Grimm, 2d rev. ed. *The Complete Ascetical Works of St. Alphonsus Liguori Series*, translated from the Italian, edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm, nos. 10-11 (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1929)]; a number of books and pamphlets by Giuseppe Frassinetti (1804-1868): *La rosa senza spine: memorie sulla vita della pia zitella Rosa Cordone morta in Genova ai 26 novembre 1853*. 3d ed. (Torino: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1882); *Il modello della povera fanciulla Rosina Pedemonte morta in Genova in età di 20 anni il 30 gennaio, 1860* (Torino: Tipografia G.B. Paravia, 1860); and writings found in his collected works: *La monaca in casa; Regole della pia unione delle Figlie di Maria Immacolata; Ricordi per una figlia che vuol essere tutta di Gesù; Il giardinetto di Maria; Industrie spirituali; Amicizie spirituali; L'arte di farsi santi* — all found in Giuseppe Frassinetti, *Opere Ascetiche*, 2 vols. (Roma: Postulazione Generale FSMI, 1978); two practical books by John Bosco (1815-1888), founder of the Salesians: *The Companion of Youth and The Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* [Giovanni Bosco, *Il Giovane Provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri negli Esercizi di Cristiana Pietà per la Recita dell'Uffizio della Beata Vergine e de' principali Vespri dell'anno, coll'aggiunta di una Scelta di Laudi Sacre ecc.* (Torino: Paravia, 1847); *La Figlia Provveduta per la pratica dei suoi doveri negli Esercizi di Cristiana Pietà per la Recita dell'Uffizio della Beata Vergine e de' Vespri di tutto l'anno e dell'Uffizio dei Morti, coll'aggiunta di una Scelta di Laudi Sacre* (Torino: Tipografia e Libreria Salesiana, 1883); *Costituzioni per L'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice [1872-1885]*, critical texts and notes by Cecilia Romero, Istituto Storico Salesiano, Fonti, I-2 (Roma: LAS, 1983)]; a guidebook for nurturing the piety of young women written by Elisabetta Girelli (1839-1919) and reprinted: Elisabetta Girelli, *Indirizzo e Pascolo alla Pietà delle Giovani*, 24th ed. (Brescia: Tipografia e Libreria Vescovile Queriniana, 1896); and by Angela Maccagno (1832-1891), Maria Mazzarello's contemporary and fellow townswoman: *Rules of the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate*.

³⁴Thomas à Kempis regarded the totality of one's humanness, "in the flesh," as a hindrance to spiritual experience [*The Imitation of Christ*, 51]. For Teresa of Avila the body was at the service of the soul, at times it was considered as the prisoner of the soul [cf. S. Teresa of Jesus, "The Book of Her Life," 1:11, 15]. Rodriguez declared that the body was a source of evil which must be brought under subjection by the soul [cf. Rodriguez, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, 3:205-206]; Liguori admonished that the body should be treated with contempt, refusing it all pleasures [S. Alphonsus Liguori, *Preparation for death; or, Considerations on the eternal truths (Maxims of eternity—Rule of life)*, edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm, The complete works of Saint Alphonsus Liguori Series, translated from the Italian, edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm, *The Ascetical Works*, no. 1 (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1926), 31-32]; In a great number of works Frassinetti considered chastity as a singular means to experience holiness. It was to be lived "angelically" through the mortification of the senses [Giuseppe Frassi-

In Maria Mazzarello's correspondence there is a repeated insistence on the concern for the body, in what she termed the care of one's health.³⁵ It is connected with the destabilization of binary oppositions. When she spoke of caring for one's health it was coupled either with the concept of work,³⁶ with one's spiritual and temporal well-being,³⁷ or one's psychological state.³⁸

netti, "La monaca in casa," in *Opere Ascetiche* (Roma: Postulazione Generale FSMI, 1978), 2:22-27]. The "salvation of one's soul" for Bosco meant that the body was subordinate to the soul; one must conserve purity through restraining from familiarity with the opposite sex and mortify the senses especially one's sight and appetite [cf. Bosco, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, 51-54]. Girelli's hierarchical framework rested on a dualistic tension of heaven over earth and she viewed the world as full of dangers [Elisabetta Girelli, *Indirizzo e Pascolo alla Pietà delle Giovani*, 24th ed. (Brescia: Tipografia e Libreria Vescovile Queriniana, 1896), 86].

³⁵"Take care of your health, do not waste it unduly..." (*Letters*, 5:12); "I have written enough for now, take courage, and look after your health" (*Letters*, 7:11); "I had forgotten one recommendation, [...] please inform the others [religious women] [...] tell all to be very careful about their health, for if this is wanting we will be able to do nothing for ourselves or for others" (*Letters*, 28:2); "...have regard for your health" (*Letters*, 33:11); "Take care of your health too" (*Letters*, 37:3); "I am very sorry to hear that you are not keeping well. Take care of your health and provide all that is needed" (*Letters*, 39:5); "Are you all well? Take care of your health" (*Letters*, 42:4); "I pray and will always pray that He [Jesus] may keep you fervent and zealous and give you good health" (*Letters*, 25:5).

³⁶"While I recommend you to work, I also advise you to take care of your health" (*Letters*, 25, 5); "Have a bit of consideration for your health and work always to please Jesus" (*Letters*, 31, 1).

³⁷"She [Sr. David] seems to be physically well, let's hope her spiritual life is the same" (*Letters*, 7, 9); "The others [religious women], God be praised, are all physically well. On the spiritual side, there are always [...] some that give trouble, but there is nothing really serious. I shall tell you [Fr. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne] the rest in person" (*Letters*, 21, 6); "Be happy always; healthy in body and soul..." (*Letters*, 32, 5); "Courage, and as a good sister, help and work for the Lord, animate each other for the spiritual and temporal good" (*Letters*, 35, 8); "Oh, let us thank Our Lord because He keeps us healthy and gives us good will to continue walking in the path of perfection" (*Letters*, 47, 1); "How many more things I would like to tell you my good sisters! Take courage; take care of your health, and make yourselves saints together with all those good girls whom you will [greet] for me" (*Letters*, 52, 3); "I pray and will always pray [to the] Infant Jesus that He may reciprocate the wishes that you sent me, give you His choicest blessings: first of all, spiritual and them bodily health" (*Letters*, 56, 5).

³⁸"Eulalia and Clementine [boarders] are well and happy" (*Letters*, 13, 1); "God grant that things go well with regard to health and good will" (*Letters*, 15, 9); "Giacinta [boarder] is well, pray that she may remain good and be tranquil that I will care for her" (*Letters*, 19, 2); "...the others are all well and cheerful" (*Letters*, 22, 6); "Be cheerful, encourage all the Sisters, take care of their health and be humble" (*Letters*, 28, 9); "Are you happy? are you well? [...] but I hope that by now you will already be restored to health. Take courage; be happy..." (*Letters*, 34, 1); "My good daughters, are all the four of you happy? Are you well? Do you still love each

While she consistently counseled women in the practice of virtue,³⁹ Maria viewed the care of the body as an integral part of the spiritual process.

Maria's correspondence indicates that entertainment was encouraged. Concerts were organized. Maria was disappointed when young women joined the religious congregation and did not have a sense of humour.⁴⁰ She wanted the girls in her schools to "jump, laugh and sing."⁴¹ She invited women to keep cheerful, and "keep the Sisters and girls cheerful."⁴² With respect to entertainment the bodily senses are not mortified but used to enrich oneself and others in pleasurable activities. The non negation of the senses forms part of Maria's spirituality. Vanity, "proper to her sex" is hardly mentioned. The notion of vanity is not highlighted solely in its sexual-social connotations of the devaluation of the woman's body subjugated to a state of severe control as promulgated by Catholic theology and spirituality throughout much of the nineteenth century. Vanity for Maria was considered as any hindrance which blocked one's motivational orientation towards God.⁴³ This denotes a non-genderised concept of spiritual development. It is Maria's biographers and current analysts who continue to stress the Catholic tradition that vanity is a "feminine" characteristic which must be brought under control.⁴⁴ All the above

other?" (*Letters*, 51, 3).

³⁹Maria considered virtues as a lived experience not so much as "practices" to be fulfilled, "Please be kind enough to pray for us so that this spirit [tranquillity and happiness] may be preserved and grow ever more, and also for the virtues to be more interior than exterior" (*Letters*, 7, 2); "[S]ince God sees the heart, you must give yourself more to the interior than exterior practice of these [humility, charity, obedience] virtues" (*Letters*, 22, 1).

⁴⁰"We have many Postulants [young women in initial formation] and what's more, they stage many concerts. One of them who is a teacher always plays the part of a harlequin and she kept us in fits of laughter. Another teacher came who is long-faced and seems to have no devotion whatsoever" (*Letters*, 9:8).

⁴¹*Letters*, 49:8.

⁴²*Letters*, 58:5.

⁴³"Caprice, pride, vanity in wanting to know everything and of not wanting to submit to those who are less gifted than others will be a cause of great confusion at the hour of death" (*Letters*, 27:10) [translation mine]; "Try to be in touch with each other by writing to the superiors. By doing so, everything will go well. Go ahead always with good example, living detached from self, not seeking flattery, rather despise these foolish things; we must be the first to show that our heart is made only to love God and not to love our own sweet self" (*Letters*, 63:4).

⁴⁴Giovanni Battista Francesia, *Suor Maria Mazzarello ed i primi due lustri delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice: Memorie raccolte e pubblicate* (S. Benigno Canavese: Libreria Salesiana Editrice, 1906), 36-38; Ferdinand Maccono, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello: Co-Foundress and First Superior of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, translated from the 2d [1934] ed. by Catherine Hurley (Paterson: Alexander Hamilton Printing, 1980) 1.22; Eugenio Ceria, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello: Confondatrice dell' Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, 2d ed. (Torino: Societa Editrice Internazionale, 1952), 27; Maria Pia Giudici, *Una donna di*

examples point to the fact that notwithstanding Maria's absorption of ascetic dualism it is not absolutised.⁴⁵ She moves beyond it in the direction of an embodied spirituality.

The Body Viewed Within the Realm of Self-motivational Choices and Constant Re-evaluation of Life-style, not an Obstacle to Overcome through the Practice of Purity

Maria's care of the body as demonstrable through her correspondence is connected with the non prioritizing of the virtue of purity or the vow of chastity.⁴⁶ This discloses a significant deviation from nineteenth-century spirituality. Catholic Church teaching regarding the moral identity of women

ieri e di oggi: Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello, 1837-1881 (Torino: Elle Di Ci, 1980), 12; Carlo Colli, *The Contribution of Don Bosco and of Mother Mazzarello to the Charism of the Foundation of the F.M.A. Institute*, translated by John Ayers (Scoresby: St. Paul Publications, 1981), 82-83, 91,108; Egidio Viganò, "Rediscovering the Spirit of Mornese: Letter of the Rector Major Father Egidio Viganò on the occasion of the centenary of the death of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello," *Acts of the Superior Council* 62.300 (April-June 1981): 62.

⁴⁵Ascetic dualism is noted in Maria Mazzarello's correspondence in the dualities heaven/earth: "We have become sisters to ensure ourselves of heaven, but for this there is need of sacrifice. Let us carry the cross courageously and one day we shall be happy" (*Letters*, 25:5); time/eternity: "But this life is a continual verifier and we must never give up trying if we wish to win heaven" (*Letters*, 19:1); love of self/love of God: "Endeavor [...] to love God and conquer self; then you will learn all the rest very easily" (*Letters*, 23:6).

⁴⁶Throughout Maria's correspondence there is scant reference to either the virtue or vow of chastity. The vow was referred to together with poverty and obedience when Maria spoke of the "three vows" (*Letters*, 49:5; 51:13) without classifying them or expanding on their meaning. Chastity was mentioned with no explanation when she explicitly names the vows "poverty, chastity, obedience" (*Letters*, 16:3; 52:2). In Maria's correspondence it is obedience that is singled out above poverty and chastity. Obedience is understood as oblation (*Letters*, 5:6; 11:2; 67:3); its correlation to authority (*Letters*, 18:4; 25:4; 33:9; 42:4; 49:3; 58:6); the practice of the "Holy Rule" (*Letters*, 60:4); or is mentioned along with other virtues. There is an other worldly character about Maria's understanding of obedience. If one found obedience difficult to fulfill one should think of heaven and the reward that was waiting (*Letters*, 19:1). Purity is mentioned once in a letter to the girls at Las Piedras, Uruguay, South America. Maria advised them to be devote to the Mother of God and imitate "her" virtues of humility, purity and reserve (*Letters*, 44:3) without any account of how to practice them. There is one reference to modesty. Maria exhorted the women to "let piety and modesty be dear to you [...]. You must make it [modesty] outstanding in your demeanor before all" (*Letters*, 67:2) [translation mine].

during the nineteenth century focused on the woman's body which was disciplined in order to remain "pure." Michella De Giorgio points out that nineteenth-century Italian hagiographical writers represented women's beauty in the virtues of the soul, with little reference to the body. She contends that the Catholic ideology of the time devalued the body of the woman subjugating it to the state of severe control.⁴⁷

The ascetic literature Maria read made specific mention to avoid people of the opposite sex and, if religious, to have little contact with one's family and relations.⁴⁸ Throughout Maria's correspondence sexual relationships were not considered as a hindrance to an ascetic life. She advised students to interact with family members,⁴⁹ and establish good friendships;⁵⁰ parents were appraised about their children;⁵¹ religious women living overseas were informed about their parents and family members.⁵² She asked for prayers for parents who had died,⁵³ was pleased when parents visited the religious women,⁵⁴ and was concerned about the health of the parents of Salesian priests.⁵⁵ With pleasure she sent women of the same family background to be together in the same religious community or near by.⁵⁶ Maria herself returned to Mornese, her native town, to assist her dying father.⁵⁷ The above exposition demonstrates that Maria's construction of reality encompassed connectedness between humans against the backdrop of an asceticism that shunned the deepening of interpersonal relationships.

Linked with Maria's non prioritising of chastity was her conception of the imitation of Mary, the Mother of God. As mentioned previously, in the nineteenth century the image of Mary was represented as one of submission to God and Mary was presented to the faithful as the "feminine" ideal. The "feminine" was anchored in images of passivity: submissiveness to God's will, self-sacrifice, humility, obedience. Women discovered that their role in "imitation of Mary" was one of passive receptivity. Mary's virginity was projected to the faithful, especially to women, as a model of asceticism, the victory of the spirit over the flesh. Ascetic writers admonished the faithful to

⁴⁷Cf. De Giorgio, "Il modello cattolico," 157-158.

⁴⁸Rodriguez, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, 2:338-359; Bosco, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, 52.

⁴⁹Cf. *Letters*, 13:3.

⁵⁰Cf. *Letters*, 44:2.

⁵¹Cf. *Letters*, 10:12, 30.

⁵²Cf. *Letters*, 17:3; 19:2; 21:4:11, 12; 27:13; 33:7, 9; 37:4, 6; 41:2; 47:11, 12; 55:12.

⁵³Cf. *Letters*, 17:3.

⁵⁴Cf. *Letters*, 51:6.

⁵⁵Cf. *Letters*, 21:2.

⁵⁶Cf. *Letters*, 19:2.

⁵⁷Cf. *Letters*, 27:12.

practice purity. The known literature Maria read regarding the Mother of God attests to the above orientations.⁵⁸

The “feminine” ideal as delineated above is discernible in Maria’s correspondence. She exhorted to have “total detachment from all that is not God,”⁵⁹ “to crush our self-love at all costs,”⁶⁰ and promoted the virtues of patient suffering, sacrifice, obedience and humility.⁶¹ Maria’s exhortations concur with the notions of nineteenth-century piety and femininity but when she referred specifically to Mary, there is no repeated correlation between devotion to Mary and the practice of purity. Most of Maria’s correspondence was directed to religious women. When she wrote to them she did not equate devotion to Mary with the virtue of purity. She coupled Mary with Jesus asking the women to increase their love for them;⁶² she advised the religious to have trust in Mary in all necessities of life.⁶³ Maria prayed for the women’s intentions through Mary’s intercession,⁶⁴ and asked them to assist the girls to have devotion to

⁵⁸*The Imitation of Christ* made only two references to Mary which are found in book four. Mary was considered as virgin in relation to the celebration of the Eucharist and reception of Holy Communion [*Imitation of Christ*, bk. IV, chp. 2; chp. 17]. The writer spoke of Mary’s womb and not the personhood of Mary in relation to Christ’s incarnation and the fact that women would never be able to imitate Mary’s “unblemished love” [*Imitation of Christ*, bk. IV, chp. 17]. In *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, Rodriguez did not set aside a specific treatise on Mary. His most extensive reflection is found in the treatise on chastity referring to Mary’s virginity. He advised that Mary was the person to invoke to preserve one’s purity [Rodriguez, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, 3:202]. Alphonsus Liguori wrote about Mary in all his spiritual works. His notion of the role of Mary was based on his theological understanding of Mary’s “immaculate” conception. In *The Practice of the Love of God*, Liguori stated that after Jesus only Mary loved God perfectly since she was “free from the stain of original sin” [S. Alphonsus Liguori, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, translated by W. Frean (Ballarat: Majellan Press, 1963), 153]. Like Liguori, the theme of devotion to Mary held a prominent place in the writings of Frassinetti. In *La monaca in casa* Frassinetti suggested that devotion to Mary was one way to live a chaste life [Frassinetti, “La monaca in casa,” in *Opere Ascetiche*, 2:22]. Bosco considered purity as the “queen of all virtues,” the “angelic virtue” [Pietro Stella, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*, vol. 2: *Mentalità Religiosa e Spiritualità*, 2d ed., Centro Studi Don Bosco — Studi Storici, no. 4 (Roma: LAS, 1981), 407]. In the *Companion of Youth* Bosco links devotion to Mary with the virtue of purity (cf. Bosco, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, 51-54). In *Guide and Nourishment for Youthful Piety*, Girelli admonished young women to imitate Mary in her purity through the mortification of the senses (Girelli, *Indirizzo e Pascolo alla Pietà delle Giovani*, 107).

⁵⁹*Letters*, 33:1.

⁶⁰*Letters*, 16:2.

⁶¹*Letters*, 22:2; 24:2.

⁶²*Letters*, 18:2; 26:6; 34:2; 64:1, 2; 66:4.

⁶³*Letters*, 23:3; 34:2; 64:1; 66:4.

⁶⁴*Letters*, 26:10.

her.⁶⁵ In preparatory time (novena) for the ecclesial feasts of the Immaculate Conception (8 December) and Mary Help of Christians (24 May), Maria demonstrated how she employed novenas for the spiritual formation of women religious. Letters 16, 27 and 52, all written prior to the feast of the Immaculate in 1878, 1879, 1880, respectively, were reminders to the women to increase devotion to Mary not through their purity but by re-evaluating their entire religious life.⁶⁶ Marian celebrations for Maria were strong moments of re-evaluation and self-motivation regarding one's life-choices.⁶⁷ The virtue of purity is not central to Maria's spirituality as expressed through her correspondence. From a feminist perspective this implies that Maria would not adhere to an institutional Christianity which demanded that women inhabit a constrictive patriarchal space which seeks to control, regulate and possess, particularly in the area of sexuality.

The Body Considered Within the Notion of a Developing Self invested in Material Conditions not as a Punitive Understanding of the Spiritual Experience

In all of Maria's correspondence there is scant mention of the concept of sin⁶⁸ in its legalistic classification as employed by nineteenth-century Italian Catholic morality.⁶⁹ The literature she read was replete with distinctions between

⁶⁵*Letters*, 47:10.

⁶⁶An extract from letter 52 illustrates how Maria employed novenas to empower self-evaluation and self-motivation. "Since the feast of our dear Mother Mary Immaculate is fast approaching, I would like to tell you two words in order to spend the novena well; with the greatest possible fervor, as our holy Rule exhorts us. Let us put all our effort then in enriching ourselves in true humility and charity bearing with each other's defects; let us exercise ourselves more and more in the practices of piety receiving Holy Communion and saying our prayers with eagerness and fervor together with the faithful practice of our holy Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. If you will do this, you may rest assured my good daughters that Our Lady will be pleased with us and will obtain for us from Jesus all the graces we stand in need of in order to become saints. In these days let us also renew our resolutions which we made during our Holy Retreat and finally let us pray for our Congregation, for our Rev. Superiors [Salesian priests], for our congregation, for our departed Sisters and for all the Sisters far and near." (*Letters*, 52:1 -2).

⁶⁷*Letters*, 16:1, 3; 27:7, 8, 10; 40:6; 52:1, 2.

⁶⁸"Above all, beg Him [Jesus] never to allow anyone in this house to offend Him even slightly if it is possible" (*Letters*, 4:11). Maria wrote about the phenomenon of evil rather than a classification of sins, "For without God, we are capable of doing nothing but evil" (*Letters*, 66:2).

⁶⁹In the main, nineteenth-century Catholic morality based its teaching on the eighteenth-century moralist, Alphonsus Liguori. His three-volume treatise on

grave and minor transgressions.⁷⁰ Maria's correspondence reveals a more humane understanding of human fragility.

Let's consider the garden—compare it to your own heart; if you cultivate it well, it will be full of good fruits and if we are not careful in cultivating a bit of it each day, it will be full of weeds. Courage then, [...] it is necessary to stay alert to see if there is anything that hinders us, some feelings and if you find them we must get rid of them.⁷¹

Maria does not explain the kind or degree of sin one should avoid but is concerned with the process each individual must take in order to be perfected.⁷² She was severe when giving recommendations particularly to women in leadership positions. She advised that no human defect be left uncorrected least it become the cause of future behavioral disfunctioning. She urged that the correction be administered with kindness.⁷³ When she directed her attention to specific people with individual problems her advice was to correct what could be

moral theology (first published in 1757) was directed to Catholic priests engaged in pastoral work especially for use in the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation. The contents of his work proclaimed the *via media* between rigorous moralism and unruly laxism in Church practice prevalent in his day [cf. Joseph Oppitz, "Introduction," in *Alphonsus Liguori—the Redeeming Love of Christ: Selected Spiritual Writings*, edited by Joseph Oppitz (New York: New City Press, 1992), 19]. Notwithstanding the pastoral stance on moral practice, handbooks were created for the use of confessors which listed sins and penances due.

⁷⁰See: *Imitation of Christ*, 89, 107, 114, 141, 153; S. Teresa of Jesus, "The Book of Her Life," 1:66-69; Rodriguez, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*, 1:31-2, 39, 42-43, 355; S. Alphonsus Liguori, *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ; or, The Nun Sanctified by the Virtues of Her State*, translated by Eugene Grimm, 2d rev. ed. The Complete Ascetical Works of St. Alphonsus Liguori Series, translated from the Italian, edited by Rev. Eugene Grimm, nos. 10-11 (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1929), 99, 141, 381, 404, 498; Giuseppe Frassinetti, "L'arte di farsi santi," in *Opere Ascetiche* (Roma: Postulazione Generale FSMI, 1978), 1:84; Bosco, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, 34, 43, 47, 53, 56; Girelli, *Indirizzo e Passolo alla Pietà delle Giovani*, 80, 100.

⁷¹*Letters*, 50:1 [translation mine].

⁷²"Keep cheerful, do not worry about not being able to correct your defects all at once, but if you have the good will to fight against them, you will certainly overcome them little by little, provided that you do not come to terms with them" (*Letters*, 17:4); "I am pleased that you have the good will to become holy. However, remember that it is not enough to begin; you must continue; you must strive indefatigably always, every day" (*Letters*, 19:1); "Do not be discouraged if you see yourself so full of misery; let us work with real, resolute good will and God will do the rest" (*Letters*, 28:5).

⁷³"[A]lways correct them with kindness, but do not overlook any defect; a defect corrected immediately is often a mere nothing; but if it is overlooked, it takes root and becomes very difficult to uproot" (*Letters*, 17:1).

remedied and leave what was of little consequence. Directing her attention to a community difficulty experienced by a woman in leadership she counseled.

I regret to hear that things are not going on so well in the new house of Las Piedras [Uruguay, South America]. Sr Giovanna is too young, and is not as yet capable of taking the place of the Superior. However, there is no need to worry, remember, that there will always be defects, we must correct and remedy whatever we can, but always with great calm, leaving everything in the hands of God. However, do not pay too much attention to trifles. Sometimes in the effort to keep track of so many small things, matters of importance are let pass... Correct, warn always, but with great compassion and kindness to all.⁷⁴

Maria saw as paramount the need to understand the temperament of each person in order to be of support and encouragement. This belief rested on a deepening in trust,⁷⁵ particularly in times of personal difficulties.⁷⁶

The negative emphasis of spirituality promoted in certain Catholic circles (sin, temptations, passions, devil, hell) are not assumed by Maria into her spirituality as revealed in her correspondence. There is only scant references to the devil.⁷⁷ When she pictured the Christian life as a battle it was not against the demoniac forces of evil.⁷⁸ The notions of temptations and hell are not mentioned at all. Maria used the word passions once in the traditional pejorative sense. She viewed them as hindrances to the spiritual life but in that instance did not specify individual passions.⁷⁹ Throughout her correspondence she did speak about typical devious orientations which the Catholic tradition consid-

⁷⁴*Letters*, 25:2.

⁷⁵Cf. *Letters*, 25:3.

⁷⁶Cf. *Letters*, 26:5.

⁷⁷The Christian monastic tradition stressed the operations of demons in the spiritual journey and accentuated the notion that Christian life as spiritual warfare with the forces of evil [cf. J. Mary Luti, *Teresa of Avila's Way*, Way of the Christian Mystics Series, no. 13 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 21]. Among the sixty-eight known letters of Maria, there are only two references regarding the interaction of the devil, "The fact that the world speaks thus [adversely against Catholic religious, teachers, clergy, educational institutions] is that we are on God's side, and the devil is furious with us[. S]o we must go ahead with greater courage" (*Letters*, 28:1); "But very soon tables turned and we realized that she [a woman in initial formation] was possessed by the devil, and finding no other remedy, we sent her to Rome to perform some of her miracles" (*Letters*, 6:7).

⁷⁸Cf. *Letters*, 18:3; 19:1; 57:2.

⁷⁹"The novices and postulants are many, but all need to be followed and instructed very carefully, as many of them have brought a number of passions with them which if not corrected, will be obstacles in reaching perfection and in the long run, these passions will be imitated by others" (*Letters*, 48:9) [translation mine].

ered as detrimental to spiritual growth: pride,⁸⁰ self-love,⁸¹ tepidity,⁸² melancholy,⁸³ jealousy,⁸⁴ vanity,⁸⁵ falsehood,⁸⁶ flattery.⁸⁷ All of the above are to be considered in Maria's understanding of human vulnerability. The human person is not perfect; each one has deficiencies distinct from others,⁸⁸ one's defectiveness can not be corrected all at once;⁸⁹ neither should one accept the human condition without some effort towards self-development and self actualization,⁹⁰ love must be the motivational force in assisting others to grow.⁹¹ In relation to the sacrament of Reconciliation and in matters of conscience there was no mention of kinds of sins, guilt, shame or scruples but the emphasis lay on trust in one's confessor/spiritual director.⁹² Maria did not neglect to stress the trusting relationship between religious women and the woman in leadership.⁹³ She did not consider that all one encountered, both externally and internally, was potentially or actually hostile or threatening. Maria adopted a nondualistic understanding of the interaction of God's gift of grace and the human response to that gift. A belief in the ability of human beings to grow and develop confidence in an incarnational God who journeys with them in birth, life and death.⁹⁴ Maria manifested an orientation that considered holiness as becoming perfect instead of being perfect as advocated by ascetical literature of the time.⁹⁵ From a feminist perspective I argue Maria is implying that creation is ultimately good, despite all its painfulness and that Christianity does not stand so much for the restraint of passion and feeling, as patriarchal religion

⁸⁰Cf. *Letters*, 5:3; 27:10.

⁸¹Cf. *Letters*, 9:9; 16:2; 19:1; 23:1; 27:9; 28:5; 33:4; 47:11; 51:12; 59:3; 67:5.

⁸²Cf. *Letters*, 27:11; 31:1.

⁸³Cf. *Letters*, 24:3; 47:12; 49:7; 63:2.

⁸⁴Cf. *Letters*, 35:2.

⁸⁵Cf. *Letters*, 27:10.

⁸⁶Cf. *Letters*, 53:4.

⁸⁷Cf. *Letters*, 63:4; 64:4.

⁸⁸Cf. *Letters*, 25:2.

⁸⁹Cf. *Letters*, 25:3.

⁹⁰Cf. *Letters*, 17:4.

⁹¹Cf. *Letters*, 17:1; 49:4.

⁹²"I recommend to all of you, great confidence in your confessor" (*Letters*, 26:6; see also: 29:2; 31:1; 58:4; 62:3).

⁹³Cf. *Letters*, 27:6; 29:2; 31:1.

⁹⁴"Do not be discouraged if you see yourself so full of misery; let us work with real, resolute good will and God will do the rest" (*Letters*, 28:5; see also: 4:1; 11:2; 16:2; 17:4; 19:1; 25:3; 26:4; 28:5; 29:1; 35:3; 37:3; 52:2; 54:2, 3; 55:7; 57:2; 58:3; 64:1; 66:4).

⁹⁵"Our defects, if fought against with good will, will be those that will help us to go on in perfection, provided we have true humility" (*Letters*, 28:5; see 19:1; 50:2).

has upheld for thousands of years, as for its development of the human condition based on love and understanding.

Conclusion

The disparaging of one's body, other people and the world in favor of souls, God and heaven negates the fundamental principles upon which Christianity is based: creation, incarnation and redemption. The article retrieves these fundamental principles through the application of a "feminist hermeneutics of marginality." The use of this methodology demonstrated how nineteenth-century mainstream Christian asceticism deprecated the body. This approach was employed to reconstruct a theology of the body through an analysis of the autobiographical works of Maria Mazzarello. The construction acclaims that what is natural along the spiritual path is beneficial, not detrimental to human, Christian growth.

Maria operated out of a distinct sociocultural and religiopolitical framework which acted upon the way she wrote and the way she interpreted human and divine realities.

Society and the Church denied her the education, political and economic status afforded to her male counterparts. She was conditioned by the role and status of women in her time. This did not prevent her from writing about spirituality which moved across hierarchical boundaries. She included the notion of the body as an integral part within the spiritual process. She advanced an asceticism beyond individualism and rigid codified morality characterized by a sense of communion and participation rather than domination and hierarchical order. Maria was as much at home with self-evaluation, self-motivation, laughter, joy, health, as she was with passive renunciation—detachment and humility. She encouraged ties with family members. She acknowledged that the human condition was defective and that inclinations were not "naturally bad" or "perverse." Hers was an optimistic understanding that human transformation will never be perfect and change occurs gradually according to each person's receptivity and capabilities. The above conceptualization denotes a deconstruction of hierarchical dualities which moves towards a more integral and holistic understanding of reality.

Women's spiritual pursuits have a number of foci based on what has been denied them through the androcentric, dualistic bipolarised worldview of Western culture. They emphasize an interconnectedness with all dimensions of life; a bonding relationship with other women; a just recognition of the body and the dynamic energizing forces within women.⁹⁶ I maintain that the above

⁹⁶Cf. Eisler, *Sacred Pleasure*; Lee 1995, Joann Wolski Conn, "A Discipleship of Equals: Past, Present, Future," in *Horizons on Catholic Feminist Theology*, edited by Joanne Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 3-36; Joan H. Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*

analysis demonstrates how feminist theory can be applied to the correspondence of Maria Mazzarello and retrieve emancipatory and liberating traditions of her spirituality which have been denied her.⁹⁷ Joann Wolski Conn maintains that although women have been disregarded and misunderstood in the field of spirituality, they must not only be recognized, but texts and traditions must be reinterpreted to include women by redetermining the boundaries of inquiry and being less discriminatory towards any oppressed group.⁹⁸ I contend that a re-reading of the correspondence of Maria Mazzarello from a feminist hermeneutical perspective allows the text of her letters to speak again, in this instance, to retrieve Maria's experience as the locus of connectedness with the divine, others and self through an embodied spirituality.

(New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁹⁷Traditionally authors dealing with the life of Maria Mazzarello have couched the components of her spirituality in nineteenth century terms which were predominantly patriarchal in theology and pastoral practice. Feminine consciousness-raising is a contemporary issue promulgated by the religious congregation Maria Mazzarello co-founded [cf. *Acts of the XIX General Chapter*, 19 September - 17 November 1990, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Rome: FMA, 1991), 70-73, 76-77]. This consciousness raising does not go beyond the static concept of "women's role." No feminist scholarly research and very little analysis of Maria Mazzarello's spirituality in terms of late twentieth century spiritualities have been undertaken.

⁹⁸Cf. Conn, "A Discipleship of Equals: Past, Present, Future," 241-242.