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# **Something About Mary**

## **Reflections on Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello and the Development of the “Spirit of Mornese”**

**Kaoru Tamura**

### **I. Introduction**

It seemed as though we two had but one soul; and though we must not hold that all things are in all things, yet you must believe that we were two in one and each in the other, having the one aim: to practice virtue and to center our life on eternity, thus passing beyond this mortal life while still in the world.<sup>63</sup>

The passage above,<sup>64</sup> quoted by St. Francis de Sales in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, was a glowing description by St. Gregory Nazianzen of his friendship with St. Basil. There was no such warm “friendship,” so much as personal closeness, between Don Bosco and Mother Mary Mazzarello. There is no element of the spiritual familiarity that one finds in the lives of saints, such as between St. Francis and St. Clare, St. Benedict and his sister St. Scholastica, or even between Don Bosco’s own patron St. Francis de Sales and St. Jeanne Frances de Chantal. If anything,

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<sup>63</sup> St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. by Michael Day, (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), 141.

<sup>64</sup> This paper is a personal synthesis of the lectures, readings and course materials in the one-week course on Mother Mazzarello taught by Sr. Mary Greenan, FMA, at the Institute of Salesian Spirituality, Don Bosco Hall, Berkeley, Calif. in January, 2002. I have borrowed freely from her lectures and class discussions throughout this paper; her class was my first intensive introduction to the life and thought of St. Mary Mazzarello, and I am thankful to her to have learned about this wonderful saint.

as can be seen in the two published letters that Mother Mazzarello sent to Don Bosco (and she also laments to Fr. Cagliero that “Don Bosco never writes a word either”<sup>65</sup>), their association appears to have been nothing if not entirely professional, as prosaic and deferential as between a division manager of a modern company with the CEO.<sup>66</sup>

Having thus qualified my remarks, the above description by St. Gregory Nazianzen well describes the collaboration between Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello as Founder and Co-Foundress of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. When consulted by Don Bosco about his plans concerning a religious institute for women, Pope Pius IX gave his approval, saying that “[...] the sisters’ main goal should be to do for girls what the Salesians are now doing for boys.” In this essay, I would like to explore how serendipitous it was that Don Bosco should have “discovered” Mary Mazzarello and eventually chose her to co-found the Salesian institute for women, in light of (1) her spiritual preparation and life experiences that closely corresponded to those of Don Bosco, (2) their first contact in 1864, when Don Bosco seems not to have determined yet that this humble community of women in Mornese would in fact become the future institute of the Salesian Sisters, and (3) how Mary Mazzarello’s nascent spirituality almost naturally flowered into “the Spirit of Mornese” once it came under the Salesian eaves.

Even though Don Bosco was said to have had many “lightning bolt” flashes of prophetic intuitions about people and future events, his decision to incorporate Mary Mazzarello and her community in Mornese as the feminine branch of the Salesian family was neither quick nor instantaneous. The

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<sup>65</sup> See M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglia, eds., *I Will Never Forget You: Letters of Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, trans. FMA English-language Translation Group (Rome: Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, 2000), [*Posada, Letters*] Letter #9, 71.

<sup>66</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #3, 40, and Letter #48, 173.

discernment was arrived at only gradually and in a somewhat unspectacular fashion, as he seems to have been evaluating various possibilities in trying to realize his plans. Ultimately, Don Bosco's judgment was proved to be sound, because Mother Mazzarello's leadership turned out to be truly providential for the future growth of the Salesian family. As Pius XI wrote:

Humility was verily the characteristic trait of the Venerable Mary Mazzarello, and a profound humility at that! She never lost sight of her humble birth, state of life and undistinguished work. Her humility was such that we wonder what God could find, so to speak, in a humble soul—a truly deeply humble soul—to entice Him and lead Him to perform lofty miracles through so lowly a channel.

This frail, simple, poor, peasant girl, who had hardly an elementary education, soon manifested a singular, distinguished talent—that of leadership. It was a rich talent indeed! And she had it to such a degree that St. John Bosco, the famous Don Bosco, an expert appraiser of individuals and a master in the art of government, saw it without delay and put it to good use. The wisdom and effectiveness of that choice were proven both in the firm, sound foundation of the new Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and in its rapid, surprising growth and development.<sup>67</sup>

To ponder on the life and person of Mother Mazzarello gives us reasons to understand why this simple, lowly peasant girl from Mornese was chosen by providence and by Don Bosco to be the co-Foundress. There was, indeed, “something about Mary” that was different from all the rest.

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<sup>67</sup> Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, Angelo Amadei, and Eugenio Ceria. *Biographical Memoirs of St. John Bosco*, vols. I-XIX, trans. & ed. Diego Borgatello, SDB. (New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1965-2003), *[EBM]* X, 291-292.



## II. Mother Mazzarello's Spiritual Preparation, and Life Experiences

Mary Mazzarello had not seen Don Bosco until October of 1864, when he visited Mornese. In fact, it was not until 1871, some seven years later, that she came under the direct authority of the Founder, when the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was founded. However, she seems to have been well-prepared for her work with Don Bosco and the Salesians, both in her philosophical formation and her life experiences. As Angelo Amadei observed:

[...]even though she shared Don Bosco's hopes, she would not have been able then and there to assume leadership of a large group of girls who aspired to a formal religious life, nor could she have instantly absorbed Don Bosco's spirit if she had not always devoted herself to those same ideals. On this score too, the Lord prepared her in a surprising way.<sup>68</sup>

How then was a simple woman of peasant origins, with no formal schooling, prepared to co-found and lead the sisters of Don Bosco's order? Her biographies show that she was prepared ideologically, through the spiritual guidance of Fr. Dominic Pestarino at Mornese; and practically, through her life experiences and activities which had many parallels in the life of Don Bosco.

### Ideological Formation

Throughout her formative years, Mary Mazzarello was taught and guided by Fr. Pestarino, whom she regarded as teacher, friend and confessor ever since she was 11 or 12 years old. This was fortuitous, because Fr. Pestarino's spiritual outlook was aligned with Don Bosco's own spirituality, even before he had

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<sup>68</sup> *EBM*, X, 249.

come into the circle of Don Bosco. During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an intense dispute in schools of moral and pastoral theology between what was called “Rigorist” and “Benignist” approaches:

In the Church, the clash centered around two currents in moral theology. One took a very strict view of sin and the way moral norms were to be interpreted. This “rigorist” current and its strict requirements for salvation are usually associated with Jansenism—though it could more accurately be called probabiliorism. The other, more “benign” attitude allowed probable opinions to be used more easily, after the teaching of St. Alphonsus Liguori. The rigorists were, at least implicitly, proponents of the ideas of the French Revolution. The rigorists dominated the University of Turin, with which the archdiocesan seminary was associated. The principal proponents of the benign currents were the Jesuits, the Oblates of the Virgin Mary (founded by Fr. Pius Bruno Lanteri), and the faculty of the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, and they were associated with the *ancien régime*.<sup>69</sup>

Don Bosco had studied at the Convitto Ecclesiastico, which trained priests along the “benignist” or Alphonsian pastoral

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<sup>69</sup> Commentary entitled “Comment on the Turin Seminaries,” in St. John Bosco, *Memoirs of the Oratory of Saint Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855: the Autobiography of Saint John Bosco*, tr. by Daniel Lyons, SDB, with notes and commentary by Eugenio Ceria, SDB., Lawrence Castelvechi, SDB, and Michael Mendl, SDB. (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Don Bosco Publications, 1989), [*Bosco, MO*] 137-138. Also see Arthur Lenti, SDB, “The *Convitto Ecclesiastico*—“Where One Learnt to be a Priest,” in *Journal of Salesian Studies*, [*JSS*] 3:1, (Spring 1992), 40-48. For a detailed study of the prevailing theological currents in Don Bosco’s lifetime, see Pietro Stella, SDB, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, tr. John Drury, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications 1985. [*Stella, DB*]

model.<sup>70</sup> In turn, Fr. Pestarino had studied for the priesthood in Genoa, and was a disciple of Fr. Giuseppe Frassinetti,<sup>71</sup> who had turned to St. Alphonsus Liguori<sup>72</sup> in both ascetic and moral

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<sup>70</sup> Bosco, *MO*, 181. There, Don Bosco describes the *Convitto Ecclesiastico* where he completed his advanced studies: "(Guala) founded that extraordinary seedbed where young priests fresh from their seminary courses could learn the practical aspects of their sacred ministry. This proved very valuable to the Church, especially as a means of eradicating the vestiges of Jansenism that still persisted in our midst. Amongst other topics the most controversial was the question of Probabilism and Probabiliorism. Chief amongst the former's advocates were Alasia and Antoine, along with other rigorist authors. The practice of this doctrine can lead to Jansenism. The Probabilists followed the teaching of St. Alphonsus, who has now been proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. His authority can be called the theology of the Pope since the Church has proclaimed that his work can be taught, preached, and practiced, as they contain nothing worthy of censure [...] thanks to Doctor Guala, St. Alphonsus (became) our theological patron [...]." It is interesting to note that both Fr. Guala, the rector of the *Convitto* when Don Bosco was student there, and Archbishop Fransoni who ordained him, were also Genovese who were "more Italian than French." For a fascinating study of the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*, its theological orientation and history, see A. Lenti, "The *Convitto Ecclesiastico*," in *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 3:1, (Spring 1992), 39-77.

<sup>71</sup> Arthur Lenti, SDB, Notes ("Biographical Sketches"), unpublished, 23-26, for biographical information on Fr. Frassinetti and Fr. Pestarino.

<sup>72</sup> St. Alphonsus Liguori lived in Naples from 1696 to 1787. He was a lawyer and jurist before he became a priest. He founded the Redemptorist Order and later was ordained a bishop. St. Alphonsus initially contemplated joining the Oratorians, founded by St. Phillip Neri. The Oratorians were probably the first to set up "festive oratories" where young boys could go and play, have wholesome fun, enjoy music and at the same time learn Christian doctrine (the word "Oratorio," sacred texts set to music, apparently has its origins in the activities sponsored by the Oratorians). St. Alphonsus gave up the idea of joining the Oratorians when his father demanded that he become a

theology, writing a compendium of the works of St. Alphonsus and promoting his “benignist” or “equi-probabilist” approach. In fact, Don Bosco had been acquainted with Fr. Pestarino’s teacher, and thought so highly of his writings that he had invited Fr. Frassinetti to write articles for his Catholic Readings, which he did some eight times.<sup>73</sup>

A political dispute of the post-Napoleonic era exiled Fr. Frassinetti from Genoa and sent Fr. Pestarino back to Mornese, his hometown, in 1847. When he returned, he found that the people were hardly taking part in the sacraments. From the “benignist” view, this was regarded as a decline in spiritual

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diocesan priest, as a condition of his concession to his son becoming a priest. A. Foy, CSsR, *A Man of Vision: St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787)* (Bournemouth, U.K.: Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, 1996).

Don Bosco drew great inspiration from St. Alphonsus Liguori (as well as from St. Phillip Neri, as seen in his “Eulogy on St. Phillip Neri” of 1868), and there are great similarities in St. Alphonsus’ founding of the Redemptorists and the founding of the Salesian Society. Because of the prohibition by the state against the founding of monastic-style orders, St. Alphonsus resorted to founding a “congregation” or a group of already ordained diocesan priests who would live under a set rule of regimen and penance. In fact, when Don Bosco appealed to Pope Pius IX for privileges for the Salesian Congregation in 1875, the Roman Congregation first gave him the Marist privileges. Since these were not ‘original,’ however, he asked for the same privileges granted to the Redemptorists to be granted to his Congregation, probably because the restrictions and difficulties that Don Bosco had to face in trying to found the Salesian Society were very much the same obstacles that St. Alphonsus had to contend with.

<sup>73</sup> Don Bosco had met the Genovese clergyman in 1857 when he visited Rome for the first time, and invited him to write articles for the *Letture Cattoliche*. In the 1864 outing to Genoa, at St. Sabina, Don Bosco visited Fr. Frassinetti, who personally accompanied Don Bosco and the boys to the lighthouse and pier although he was known to dislike going out. See *EBM*, VII, 447.

fervor, caused by “rigoristic” influences (by this time, the word “Jansenist” had become a byword for any priest who would refuse absolution to a penitent, or who would not permit one the reception of Communion.) To counter the spiritual indifference which he regarded as a consequence of “rigorism,” Fr. Pestarino encouraged the villagers to go to the sacraments often, e.g., receiving Communion daily. But old habits die hard, and he met resistance from the older folk; perhaps because of that, he turned to the younger generation.<sup>74</sup> Under his guidance, Mary Mazzarello and the adolescents of Mornese began to walk everyday to attend Mass before the sun was up, even in bitter cold. This in turn caused a change in the hearts of the adults; in fact, Mary’s father was one of the first Mornese villagers to respond to Fr. Pestarino’s exhortation by beginning to receive frequent communion. Thus, spiritual fervor was rekindled among the villagers of Mornese, thanks to his efforts.

Some 15 years after he began his work in Mornese, Fr. Pestarino saw Don Bosco in 1862 at a priests’ conference in Acqui, and they talked on the train ride back from Acqui to Alessandria. During this conversation, Fr. Pestarino told Don Bosco about his ministry in Mornese, and Don Bosco invited him to visit the Oratory in Turin. Fr. Pestarino accepted the invitation, and liked what he saw.<sup>75</sup> He kept in close contact with Don Bosco, and it is thought that Fr. Pestarino actually became a Salesian.<sup>76</sup> In fact, Fr. Pestarino came to the General

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<sup>74</sup> Pietro Stella, SDB, *Don Bosco: Life and Work*, [Stella, DB] tr. John Drury, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications 1985, 212-215.

<sup>75</sup> *EBM*, VII, 175-176; Maria Pia Giudici, *A Woman for All Time: Saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, English translator not identified, Rome: Esse-Gi-Esse (?) 1981, 84-86; Eugenio Ceria, SDB, *La Beata Maria Mazzarello: Confondatrice dell’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1938, 25-26. Please see text accompanying footnote 50 ff., below, for fuller discussion.

<sup>76</sup> Lenti, Notes (“Biographical Sketches”), 23-26.

Conferences of the Salesians, from 1865 until his death in 1874, while Don Bosco encouraged him to continue his work in Mornese. In that way, Fr. Pestarino absorbed the Salesian spirit<sup>77</sup> through his contact with Don Bosco and the Salesians from 1862 onwards.

No doubt, from this time on, Fr. Pestarino began to transmit what he assimilated of the Salesian spirit to Mary Mazzarello, and paved the spiritual foundation for what was to come. Though she had learned to write only later in life, she knew how to read, and meditated on “such books as *The*

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<sup>77</sup> Aside from the influence of Alphonsian orientation, Don Bosco was also drawn most powerfully to St. Francis de Sales, the Bishop of Geneva, whose virtues and life he imitated. In Don Bosco’s youth, there already had existed a great interest in and devotion to St. Francis de Sales in Piedmont, partly because St. Francis de Sales was a Savoyard, part of the Kingdom of Sardinia of which Piedmont was one section. Bishop de Sales had spent a great deal of time in Turin and in various cities of Piedmont, including Chieri. There had been a confraternity devoted to St. Francis de Sales, of which the faculty and students at Chieri were members. Don Bosco had resolved at his ordination that “The charity and gentleness of Saint Francis de Sales are to be my guide.” He even named his Congregation after St. Francis de Sales, partly owing to Marchioness Barolo’s desire to form a congregation named after him, and more due to Don Bosco’s admiration of the gentleness and patience of St. Francis de Sales, who by nature had been hot-tempered and strove to cultivate these virtues. See Arnaldo Pedrini, SDB, *St. Francis de Sales: Don Bosco’s Patron*, (New Rochelle: New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1988).

In his memoir, he explains: “We began to call it after St. Francis de Sales for two reasons: first, because Marchioness Barolo had in mind to found a congregation of priests under his patronage, and with this intention she had a painting of this saint done, which can still be seen at the entrance to this area; second, because we had put our own ministry, which called for great calm and meekness, under the protection of this saint in the hope that he might obtain for us from God the grace of being able to imitate him in his extraordinary meekness and in winning souls.” Bosco, *MO*, 217-218.

*Practice of Loving Jesus Christ, The Eternal Maxims* by St. Alphonsus, and *The Directory of St. Francis de Sales*, drawing from them inspiration and practical ways to live in union with God.”<sup>78</sup> Domenico Agasso, her modern biographer, writes that “She always had ready a quotation from the *Imitation of Christ* or St. Alphonsus de Liguori [...] or even from the 17th century book *The Exercise of Perfection and Christian Virtue*, by the Jesuit Alfonso Rodriguez, the lives of saints and other texts to which Fr. Pestarino was gradually introducing her.”<sup>79</sup>

She was also a member of a women’s sodality in Mornese called the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, which was established by Angela Maccagno under Fr. Pestarino’s guidance. Its *Rules of the Pious Union of the New Ursulines* had been compiled by Fr. Frassinetti in 1855. According to Angelo Amadei, this spirituality was an option for “devout maidens who cannot leave their families or are not well schooled, but would like to become nuns.”<sup>80</sup> To describe the spirit of the group, Amadei quotes from St. Alphonsus’ discourse:

Holiness does not consist mainly in living in a convent or spending the whole day in church, but in praying, receiving Communion whenever possible, obeying and helping out with the house chores, avoiding worldly amusements, and patiently bearing fatigue and contempt [...]. Everyone praises convent life and overlooks the fact that pious spinsters would find it much easier to dedicate themselves to prayer and to the pursuit of sanctity by practicing poverty in their homes than by entering a convent [...].<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *EBM*, X, 248.

<sup>79</sup> Domenico Agasso, *Saint Mary Mazzarello: the Spirit of Joy*, trans. Sr. Louise Passero, FMA (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), [*Agasso, MMJ*] 28.

<sup>80</sup> *EBM*, X, 249-250.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* This seems to suggest that, in this era, either: (1) girls from working-class homes were often unable to enter a convent due to



Together, the women read various works of Elizabeth Girelli, including her guide to holiness for young women called *Indirizzo e pascolo della giovane alla pietà*.<sup>82</sup> Amadei believes that they also might have read a book called *Callings Open to Maidens: Celibacy, Motives for Choosing It and Means for Its Holy Observance While Remaining In the World* which was a free translation from the French with the addition of a discourse drawn from St. Alphonsus' *Treasury of Sermon Material*. Without a doubt they would also have had access to Fr. Frassinetti's, *La Monaca in Casa*, living as a religious in one's own home.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, under the guidance of Fr. Pestarino, heavily influenced by Alphonsian orientation, Mary Mazzarello's spiritual and ideological foundations were already being formed in conformity with "Salesian" spirituality, even before she had any direct contact with Don Bosco.

### Life Experiences and Activities

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lack of means or education, or, (2) there was a kind of a built-in caste or class system existing inside the convents which were not conducive to girls from working-class homes. See Lenti, Notes ("Brief Story"), 20, which quotes one of the articles from the Constitutions of the Society of St. Anne which Don Bosco looked at in trying to formulate the Rules for the Daughters: "3° They may, however, admit to their houses girls of middle class (*di mediocre condizione*); but they shall never provide for them instruction in such of the sciences and the arts as are appropriate to the education of the daughters of noble and rich families. All their care shall be to train them in piety and in all that is apt to make them into good Christian women and good mothers to their family." The Notes comment that this "reflects the class-bound and sexist mentality prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century."

<sup>82</sup> Stella, *DB*, 215.

<sup>83</sup> *EBM*, X, 249-25.



A reading of their biographies show that there were a number of events in Mary Mazzarello's life that closely paralleled Don Bosco's, which further reinforced these ideological foundations that Fr. Pestarino had prepared in her. These life experiences also would have prepared her to endure the formidable demands of the difficult early years in the founding of the new Institute.

On one hand, it may be an exercise in inductive logic with a foregone conclusion to compare the similarities between these two saints based on their biographies, because hagiographies are written to illustrate moral paradigms, and it is in their nature to be "revisionist" histories. Having said that, it is also a historical fact that the Institute came into existence and grew with astonishing speed under Mother Mazzarello's leadership, which tends to show that she had the right set of personal qualities and experiences to work within the Founder's requirements. This essay will not attempt a critico-historical analysis of her biographies. With that caveat, if the incidents reported in the biographies are to be accepted at face value, Mother Mazzarello seems to have lived through an amazing number of life experiences which were extraordinarily similar to Don Bosco's. It is said that, "In spite of the fact that the contacts and exchanges between the two saints were few, there was immediate *mutual intuition*, which gradually developed into the *partnership* which led to the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians."<sup>84</sup> On one level, a "mutual intuition" between two saints would indicate a recognition of sanctity in the other (as in Mary Mazzarello's exclamation when she first heard Don Bosco: "He is a saint and I feel it.") On another, more mundane level, "mutual intuition" can also mean that experience which almost everyone has had in one form or another, i.e., of meeting someone for the first time

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<sup>84</sup> Lenti, Notes ("Mary Mazzarello: Spiritual Development in Historical Context"), 32.

yet feeling that you already know the person.<sup>85</sup> As melodramatic as this may sound, there is not much mystery in a “mutual intuition” insofar as certain people think alike simply because they have had a similar upbringing, have come from the same geographical region or social milieu.

These common life experiences would tend to engender similar values and attitudes toward life. Here are just some parallels that can be extrapolated from their biographies:

1. **Brought up on the farm:** They both labored in the fields in their youth, Don Bosco tending cows since he was a small boy, and Mother Mazzarello tending grapes. “Without the hope of any type of schooling, she entered the workforce as soon as possible. [...] Very soon, she began to work in the vineyards with her father and the farmhands. The schedule of the good weather was linked to the course of the sun.”<sup>86</sup> These experiences helped them to develop a closeness to nature, which (1) on the spiritual level, allowed them to develop an awareness of God’s presence in nature, and (2) on the practical level, made them responsive to contingencies and opportunities as they unfolded, which farmers must do in living with close attention to the natural environment around them. Their farm upbringing also made them the butt of derision in school, because, bright as they were, others saw them as country bumpkins: “At Castelnuovo d’Asti a teacher accused the student John Bosco of having copied in class because his work was too well done for ‘someone who comes from Becchi’. [...] When little Mary Mazzarello stood out for her quick learning and exact answers,

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<sup>85</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 62 quotes Ferdinand Maccono’s somewhat novel description: “For her, it seemed as though Don Bosco’s words were like an echo of an inexpressible language which she felt in her heart. It was like a translation of her very sentiments, like something which had been yearned for and had now finally come.”

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

some marveled: ‘How bright the little one is [...] and to think, she comes from a farm [...].’<sup>87</sup>

**2. Apprenticed to work in manual trade as adolescents:** In their adolescence, they both went through financial difficulties where they had to engage in manual trades to make ends meet. Don Bosco took on part-time work in Chieri as bartender, in Castelnuovo as tailor, blacksmith, cabinetmaker, and waiter, etc. to pay for school.<sup>88</sup> Mary went with her cousin Petronilla to the men’s tailor Valentino Campi to learn the sewing trade, after recovering from an illness and losing physical strength to work in the fields. She and Petronilla would later be ready to start a sewing workshop: “We will be able to support ourselves [...] and we can also spend our whole lives for the good of young girls.”<sup>89</sup> By chance, the only seamstress in Mornese moved out of town, so that Mary and Petronilla inherited the clientele. Most importantly, some of the mothers brought their little girls to learn to sew.

Both Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello went on to teach practical trades to young people, to help them to “earn an honest living” and at the same time to teach them religion. These experiences must have taught them business sense, the value of money, work ethic, the know-how to contract and deal with their clients and employers, and the attitude of always being open to opportunities. These traits certainly came into the fore as the Salesian Order expanded and grew at an astonishing rate in the lifetimes of these two saints.

**3. Influenced by bourgeois diocesan priests:** They were both guided by diocesan priests who came from the rural, land-owning middle-class: Don Bosco by Fr. Cafasso, whose family though they were freeholders and owned a farm in

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>88</sup> *EBM*, I, 174-175, 193, 217.

<sup>89</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 45-46.

Castelnuovo were not rich, and Mother Mazzarello by Fr. Pestarino, whose family was well-off and owned a farm in Mornese. This gave a certain “earthy” flavor to their spirituality that dovetailed well with the benignant orientation, in contrast to the rigoristic tendencies that prevailed in the University and seminary of Turin at that time.<sup>90</sup> Their “active” approach to ministry also differed in emphasis from the contemplative models of the older monastic orders. The priests who had the greatest impact in the life of Don Bosco, e.g., Fr. Calosso, Fr. Luigi Guala, Fr. Cafasso and Fr. Borel, were diocesan priests who had a practical frame of mind, initiative and enterprising drive at a time when the Church in Turin was in a state of crisis, with the Archbishop imprisoned and in exile. Their spirituality was a dynamic, apostolic one that refused to be insulated from the world at large. It reached out to the sufferings of the poor, especially the young, who came into cities by the droves, in search of jobs and facing the dangers of urban life.

Fr. Pestarino, Mother Mazzarello’s mentor, also used his own funds and family estate to begin the building of the Collegio, leading the people of Mornese in the project as a member of the town council.

**4. Independence to envision a new model of religious life:** After the death of his mentor Fr. Calosso, Don Bosco was hurt by the reserve of the parish priests, although “In those days

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<sup>90</sup> Fr. Cafasso, Don Bosco’s guide, was in the forefront of the battle against rigorism in Turin. See Bosco, *MO*, 56 (note entitled “Comment on Saint Joseph Cafasso”): “Following his ordination, Fr. Cafasso went to Turin for further studies. He quickly became disenchanted with the Jansenistic rigorism of the seminary there, [...] and of the University of Turin, whose theology department was closely allied with the seminary. So Fr. Cafasso took up his studies in the pastoral program that Fr. Louis Guala had organized at the *Convitto Ecclesiastico*. [...] He soon became a renowned preacher and confessor, admired for simplicity and moderation; he was a leader in Piedmont’s long fight against Jansenism.”

a grave demeanor was considered to be a requisite for ecclesiastics. Such reserve produced fear and not love in John,"<sup>91</sup> which, perhaps, in his young impressionable heart had him seek a "new" image or model of priest, whose distance was caused by their having abandoned the world and human compassion along with it.<sup>92</sup> He told his mother: "If I ever become a priest, I will give my whole life to youngsters. They'll never see me looking stern and forbidding. I'll always be the first to speak to them."<sup>93</sup> Then Don Bosco thought about joining the Franciscans in Chieri, but had a dream that stopped him from joining.<sup>94</sup> Once he became a diocesan priest, Don Bosco was laughed at by his fellow classmates when he shared his dreams of establishing his own order where his priests would "wear shirt sleeves" as their habit.

Mary Mazzarello joined Angela Maccagno's "New Ursulines" or the Pious Union of the Immaculate, or "religious living at home," which worked like a modern Third Order. However, it eventually came to pass that "the activity and quasi-community life of Mary's group were different from the original aims and strict rules of the Pious Union."<sup>95</sup> She eventually branched off from Maccagno's group to move into the *Casa*

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<sup>91</sup> *EBMI*, 169-170.

<sup>92</sup> Don Bosco wrote: "I would see good priests working at their sacred ministry, but I could not strike up a close relationship with them. Often I would meet on the road our parish priest and his curate, I would greet them at a distance and bow to them as they passed. In their distant and courteous manner, they would return my greeting and go on their way. Often, I used to cry and say to myself and even to others, 'If I were a priest, I would act differently. I would approach the children, say some kind words to them, and give them good advice. How happy I would be if I could talk with my parish priest as I used to talk with Fr. Calosso.'" Bosco, *MO*, 48.

<sup>93</sup> *EBMI*, 170.

<sup>94</sup> Bosco, *MO*, 110-111.

<sup>95</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 57.

*Immaculata*, and “It seemed almost as though [Maria and Petronilla] had formed a new mini-community.”<sup>96</sup>

**5. Inspired by the experience of working with young people:** Their work with young people was what diverted them away from their original framework. Don Bosco was “carried away” by his lads from his employment under Marchioness Barolo, which eventually led to the departure from the influential Marchioness. Mary Mazzarello branched off from Angela Maccagno’s Pious Union as she was spending too much time working with the girls in the village, and this led to the divergence in their spiritual paths which became, though amicable and respectful, irreconcilable. “At other times she had no time to take part in the specific moments of common prayer of the Daughters of the Immaculate. There was no contest when choosing between the children to be cared for and a conference of the Pious Union.”<sup>97</sup>

**6. Initiating festive oratories:** They both began “festive oratories” where kids could make a racket and enjoy themselves, planning outings where they could have wholesome fun. They brought young people back to church through festivities, trying to connect religion and fun in the minds of children. This demonstrates an understanding of children’s psychology, recognizing that kids need to laugh and have fun; it is reminiscent of St. Francis de Sales’ saying, that it is easier to attract flies with syrup rather than vinegar. Thus, Don Bosco would have the kids enjoy themselves with games and food, then teach them catechism. Mary Mazzarello in turn held “carnevale” feasts with flour, eggs and wine donated by the families, then teach the girls catechism.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 50.

They were both motivated by the desire to provide the boys and girls a place where they could have fun without moral danger. Mary Mazzarello “was not afraid of noise, nor the racket they made nor any other disturbance, as long as there was no danger for body or soul.”<sup>99</sup> For Don Bosco, one of the most beautiful moments of the day was to listen to all the hub-bub, when the courtyards and playgrounds of Valdocco were filled with yelling boys. As Agasso wrote, Mary Mazzarello “enjoyed the same contentment with the noise and laughter of the girls at the Maccagno house, in the small courtyard which could be called an oratory.[...] When the weather permitted, she organized outings to more open, freer surroundings. *Even this was one of Don Bosco’s famous customs* (italics mine).”<sup>100</sup>

**7. Zeal and generosity, in face of dangers:** They both had close brushes with death because of their overzealous dedication to their ministries; however, the danger of death did not deter them from pursuing their ministry, but reaffirmed a commitment to serve the young for all their days. (By the end of their respective lives, they both wore themselves out and died from overwork, and incidentally, both from pleurisy.) In 1845, Don Bosco contracted petechial typhoid after visiting the wards at the *Piccola Casa della Divina Provvidenza*. He bore traces of it for the rest of his life. In the following year, overwork caused him to suffer a fainting spell which forced him to bed; his illness soon developed into bronchitis, and within a week, Don Bosco was at death’s door. He was resigned to death but prayed for recovery only after Fr. Borel, who was moved by the barrage of weeping boys praying for his life, urged him to do so. When he recovered, Don Bosco said to his boys, “I am convinced that God granted me an extension of life in answer to your prayers. Therefore gratitude demands that I spend it all for your temporal

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 49-50.



and spiritual welfare. This I promise to do as long as the Lord will permit me to remain in this world.”<sup>101</sup>

In 1860, Mary Mazzarello was stricken with typhus, which she caught while attending to victims of the epidemic at Mazzarelli di Qua. She recovered after fifty days of confinement to bed, and she prayed “Lord, if You have willed to give me still some years of life, grant that I may pass them ignored and forgotten by all, except You.”<sup>102</sup> Then she began to think about teaching the girls some useful trade and dedicating herself to the young.<sup>103</sup> Her generous and courageous attitude of service in spite of danger, and spirit of dedication, find close parallel in Don Bosco as well as in Salesians such as John Cagliero, whom Don Bosco sent out to help the victims of the cholera epidemic in Turin.<sup>104</sup>

**8. Developing an active spirituality:** Their spirituality placed emphasis on active and apostolic work rather than contemplation. Don Bosco sought dispensation from the requirement to pray the breviary, due to declining eyesight. Mary Mazzarello “had no time to take part in the specific moments of common prayer of the Daughters of the Immaculate”<sup>105</sup> because she too was occupied with her care for the children. Their idea of religious life turns the Benedictine adage, “To pray is to work,” on its head, and changes apostolic work itself into a form of “moving prayer.” It is said that one of Don Bosco’s critics quipped, “When does he ever have the time to pray?” and his supporter retorted, “When is Don Bosco not praying?” In that sense, under Don Bosco’s interpretation of

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<sup>101</sup> *EBM*, II, 386.

<sup>102</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 45.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>104</sup> *EBM*, V, 64 ff.

<sup>105</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 51.



spirituality, work under certain circumstances becomes a form of prayer, where “To work is to pray.”<sup>106</sup>

Considering Mother Mazzarello’s spiritual formation under Fr. Pestarino, together with the common biographical episodes, their “mutual intuition” was simply something that providence alone had to bring together.

### III. Convergence: First Contact with Don Bosco

Now we arrive at the point where, in October of 1864, Don Bosco goes to Mornese and Mary Mazzarello hears him in person for the first time. 1864 was a turbulent year for Turin. Marchioness Barolo, Don Bosco’s first benefactress and Foundress of great charitable institutions in Turin, had died. This was also the year in which the capital was moved from Turin to Florence, and mob violence had triggered violent military and police reactions that left 26 dead and some 200 wounded.

In spite of the tumult in the city, as he usually did around the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, Don Bosco decided to take

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<sup>106</sup> It is interesting to note that the most widely-read book written by St. Francis de Sales, Don Bosco’s patron, was written for the laity who could not practice a spiritual life dedicated to contemplation and asceticism. St. Francis writes in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*: “The practice of devotion must differ for the gentleman and the artisan, the servant and the prince, for widow, young girl or wife. Further, it must be accommodated to their particular strength, circumstances and duties. [...] True devotion, Philothea, never causes harm, but rather perfects everything we do; a devotion which conflicts with anyone’s state of life is undoubtedly false. [...] Devotion goes further, not only is it not harmful to any state of life, it adorns and beautifies it.” de Sales, *Introduction*, 11-12. After all, the French Revolution had taken place only a quarter of a century before Don Bosco was born. Therefore, it is probably no accident that Don Bosco and his contemporaries took inspiration from St. Francis de Sales in an age when the traditional monastic models of religious life came under severe scrutiny and attack under the Liberal movement.

one hundred of his boys for an outing to his home village of Becchi and the surrounding territory. This was to be the last time that Don Bosco took his boys for this outing, and they went all the way to Genoa. Of this 1864 outing, Lemoyne highlights three goals that Don Bosco accomplished: delivering a successful parish mission, discussing the establishment of a boys' school at Borgoalto with Fr. Pestarino, and accepting ten boys from Mornese to Valdocco. However, in hindsight, meeting the Daughters of the Immaculate was perhaps another important goal he accomplished, though it was not listed as such. Of the first meeting between Mother Mazzarello and Don Bosco, Lemoyne only wrote:

On Saturday, October 8, Don Bosco said Mass at dawn. Every morning during his stay the church was packed as on solemn feast days. [...] When he was through with confessions, Fr. Pestarino introduced to him a number of young girls who were looked after by a parish sodality, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate [...] (Angela Maccagno) was present with the older members, among them Mary Mazzarello, whom the Lord destined to be the first mother general of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Fr. Pestarino had eagerly insisted that Don Bosco visit Mornese, particularly to bless this girls' sodality, which he now warmly urged him to adopt as his own spiritual family. Noting their excellent spirit, their piety, and their mutual charity, as well as the great deal of good they were doing for Mornese's girls, Don Bosco consented and gave them his blessing.<sup>107</sup>

Lemoyne does not give any more detail about Don Bosco's 1864 meeting with the Daughters (although Amadei, in the tenth volume of the Biographical Memoirs, goes into more detail about this first meeting). Compare Lemoyne's brief paragraph to the description of the same event in the *Cronistoria* (Chronicles) of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In it, Don Bosco rides

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<sup>107</sup> *EBM*, VII, 450.

into Mornese mounted on a white horse (!). Fr. Pestarino presents the Daughters to Don Bosco on Saturday the 8th of October, where he “exhorted them to be constant in doing good and in seeing that good was done.” Cronistoria further mentions that “The young Fr. John Cagliero was present at this first meeting between the resolute Daughters and the apostle of youth. Don Bosco himself had called him saying affectionately, ‘You come too.’”<sup>108</sup> The Cronistoria describes Mary’s reaction to this meeting as follows:

Mary was especially affected. Soon afterwards she confided to Petronilla that she had sensed something more extraordinary than she had ever known before. She could not explain herself, but her soul was filled with heavenly joy. It seemed to her that Don Bosco’s words echoed a language she heard in her heart without being able to explain. They seemed to be a translation of her own sentiments, as if something long awaited had finally appeared.

It was wonderful to see her in the evening when at sunset Don Bosco gave his boys the good-night! She was always a quick worker but at that time she seemed to have wings and worked for three. Then tidying herself she would go and stand in that part of the courtyard where she would be better able to see and hear Don

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<sup>108</sup> Griselda Capetti, *Cronistoria: Chronicles of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Don Bosco Publications, 1981), vol. I, 145. Neither Lemoyne nor Amadei mentions the presence of Fr. Cagliero at this first 1864 meeting described in the *Cronistoria*. John Cagliero was six months younger than Mary Mazzarello, and later, when Fr. Cagliero was Spiritual Director of the Sisters they became good friends (see Posada, *Letters*, Letters #4 -7 at 42-66, Letter #9 at 69 and Letter #15 at 85 addressed to Cagliero). One of Mother Mazzarello’s last two wishes was to talk with Cagliero before she died (the other was to die on a Saturday), both of which were granted her. See Lenti, Notes (“Mary Mazzarello—Testimonies in the Diocesan Process of Beatification”), 34, quoting the Testimony of Mother Catherine Daghero in the Ordinary Process.

Bosco. She stood there with her soul in her eyes straining her ears not to miss a word.

All the Daughters of Mary Immaculate [...] came to hear him. He had made a very good impression [...] on us all. No one, however, was as happy as Mary. If anyone asked her in wonder, "Where do you find the boldness to intrude where there are so many men and boys?" she would answer, "But Don Bosco is a saint! He is a saint and I feel it!"<sup>109</sup>

It must have looked somewhat like a pious version of the arrival of the Beatles in the United States. The Mornese villagers were excited about the chance to hear "the famous Don Bosco," who was already renowned as a preacher. ("Bosco-mania" will be played out in bigger dimensions in 1883, when Don Bosco arrives in Paris being mobbed by crowds wanting to snip pieces of his hair and cassock, packing the pews some eight hours ahead to listen to him deliver a relatively mundane speech requesting donations for his charitable institution.) The Cronistoria goes on to state:

If Mary had been [...] able to express her sentiments fully, or had read the Life of St. Jeanne Frances de Chantal, she might have made her own the saint's words regarding St. Francis de Sales: "I admired all that he said and did and I regarded him as an angel. His appearance was so decorous and so holy that it affected me to the extent of my being unable to take my eyes from him. He spoke little but with a wisdom and gentleness able to satisfy all who heard him. I felt that there was no good fortune worthy to compare with remaining close to him and listening to the words issuing from his mouth. For this reason I would have deemed myself only too happy to be the least of his servants."<sup>110</sup>

The personal drama of this encounter is brought out more vividly in the Cronistoria than in the Biographical Memoirs. We will

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<sup>109</sup> Capetti, *Cronistoria*, 145-146.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 146.

never know how either Don Bosco or Mother Mazzarello herself would have described the event in these ways. The Polish people have a saying that the most difficult thing to predict is what history will say, but sometimes there is a feeling that the later FMAs and the SDBs were perhaps sometimes reading too much or too little into the events. In contrast to the Cronistoria's account, Fr. Lemoyne's chapter on this 1864 visit to Mornese in the Biographical Memoirs dedicates less words to this important first contact between Don Bosco and the Daughters of Mary Immaculate than to his description of other (important) incidents—that is, of the first meetings between Don Bosco and Lemoyne himself, of which he narrates three meetings in all.

Don Bosco was no doubt impressed by Mary Mazzarello and the women whom Fr. Pestarino nurtured spiritually, mostly because of the hospitality and the welcome that they and the villagers of Mornese had accorded to his mob of one hundred boys. However, at least at the time of this 1864 visit, Don Bosco has most definitely not made any decision to incorporate the community into the Salesian Society. Rather, it appears that he came to have a look, and kept them in mind. His final decision to adopt the Mornese community into the Salesian framework took shape only gradually after some time, and after the Salesian Constitutions for the men's congregation became formalized.

A specific mention of a women's apostolate appears as early as July (5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>?), 1862, in the "Dream of the Red Horse," in which Don Bosco dreams about discussing a program for girls with Marchioness Barolo. They are interrupted in their conversation by an appearance of a monstrous red horse.<sup>111</sup> There

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<sup>111</sup> Lenti, Notes ("Key Dates"), 10. Don Bosco described the dream: "Last night I had a strange dream. With Marchioness Barolo I seemed to be strolling about a small plaza which opened into a vast plain where the Oratory boys were happily playing. As I respectfully attempted to move to her left, she stopped me, saying, 'No, stay where you are.' She then began talking about my boys. 'It's wonderful that you look after boys,' she said. 'Let me care for the girls. Leave that to

are hints that Don Bosco was already contemplating possibilities with regard to the community in Mornese when he had this dream, since it was sometime before October of 1862 that Fr. Pestarino had an extensive conversation with Don Bosco about his ministry in Mornese (and about the women's communities there), on the train ride from Acqui to Alessandria. There are even suggestions that this train ride was not the first time Don Bosco and Fr. Pestarino had met. Giudici writes, "according to Cardinal Cagliero, the *previn*, or *little priest* [Fr. Pestarino] knew the Turin apostle since 1860, having met him in the house of Fr. Giuseppe Frassinetti." Ceria states likewise.<sup>112</sup>

Giudici believes that this train-ride happened between August and October:

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me, so that there'll be no disagreements.' 'Well,' I replied, 'didn't Our Lord come into this world to redeem both boys *and* girls?' 'Of course,' she rejoined. [Bosco replied,] 'Then I must see to it that His Blood be not uselessly shed for either group.' " Then an enormous red horse alights upon the ground and Marchioness Barolo faints at the sight. *EBM*, VII, 128.

Fr. Lenti suggests that Don Bosco may have been thinking of a women's community even as early as 1856, after the death of Margaret Bosco, when he felt that a women's community may be needed to continue the household work that Mama Margaret had been providing for the boys. Lenti, Notes ("Brief Story of the Founding"), 16.

<sup>112</sup> Maria Pia Giudici, *A Woman for All Time: Saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, English translator not identified, Rome: SGS 1981, 84-86. Eugenio Ceria wrote: "*Don Pestarino, essendosi recato ad Acqui per partecipare a una riunione del clero, vi s'imbattè nel Servo di Dio, che però egli aveva già conosciuto a Genova in casa del teologo Frassinetti. Con piacere si rividero; anzi nel ritorno viaggiarono insieme fino ad Alessandria, dove nel separarsi Don Bosco invitò il compagno di viaggio a fargli una visita in Torino. Quegli vi si recò nel novembre del 1862.*" Eugenio Ceria, *SDB, La Beata Maria Mazzarello: Confondatrice dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1938, 25-26.

[...] a meeting designed to lead to deeper mutual relationships took place between August and October 1862, as the *Chronicle* tells us. In all probability they met at 'a feast or conference at which the clergy took part, presided over by Mons. Contralto, bishop of Acqui.' This we have from Fr. Lemoyne and it is borne out by Fr. Giuseppe Campi.<sup>113</sup>

Since Fr. Pestarino's visit to the Oratory took place sometime between late October to November 1862, after Don Bosco came back from his annual outing,<sup>114</sup> they must have met on the train in or before the summer of that year. In the train ride, Giudici writes that it was "Don Bosco who brought up his idea of an Institute for women, which many bishops and distinguished priests had urged him to undertake. Fr. Pestarino then, half in a joke proposed his devout and zealous Mornesian girls: 'If some time [...] although ignorant and uncouth.'" <sup>115</sup>

If Don Bosco and Fr. Pestarino met on or before July 5<sup>th</sup>, before the time of the dream, then it would suggest that his conversation with "the *previn*" may have caused him to start thinking seriously about a women's community, and it might even suggest that Don Bosco began to think about adopting the Mornese community as early as July of 1862. Conversely, if the two priests met after the time of the dream, some might suggest that the "Dream of the Red Horse" was a prophetic dream, which gave premonition to Don Bosco that Fr. Pestarino would be the instrument through which the Salesian women's apostolate would materialize. Either way, Don Bosco did not actually put his theories into practice until some seven years

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. However, Ceria does not pin down the date for the train ride or the priests' conference.

<sup>114</sup> *EBM*, VII, 175-176 says that Don Bosco found Fr. Pestarino waiting for him at the Oratory when he returned from his fall outing.

<sup>115</sup> Giudici, 86. Unfortunately, the English translation does not show Giudici's citations or sources. However, she cites the *Cronistoria* as the source for this incident.



later. It is probably more likely that the Mornese community was one of the options to be kept on the burner, while Don Bosco bided his time to see what else might be on the horizon, and meanwhile, to get better acquainted with this community.

Likewise, when later in 1863 he advised Caroline Provera of Mirabello: "If you can wait a little while, Don Bosco will have Salesian sisters just as he now has Salesian clerics and priests,"<sup>116</sup> it still seemed to be a vague, unspecific notion, such that Miss Provera soon after joined the Faithful Companions of Jesus in France. Even later, on his name day celebration in June 1866, Lemoyne cautiously mused about nuns for the Salesian Society for the first time, to sound out what Don Bosco's reaction might be. Lemoyne says that he was surprised at Don Bosco's reply: "Yes, this too, will be done. We will have sisters, not now, but later on." On that occasion he did not make any specific mention of the community in Mornese, at least not according to Fr. Lemoyne's account.

It was not until 1869, when Don Bosco visited Mornese to see the progress of the boys' school, that he seems to have begun testing his "intuitions" with concrete actions. He probably had been pondering various possibilities in his mind from 1864 to 1869, and visited the community when he went to Mornese. For instance, on November 9, 1867 Don Bosco went to Mornese to bless the chapel of the *Casa Immacolata*, where Mary had moved in with the women to form the Daughters of the Immaculate, and spoke with them privately. But at that time, his energies were focused on the building of the Basilica, which was not consecrated until 1868. Further, before 1874, his mind was first and foremost preoccupied with obtaining approval of the Salesian Constitutions. It was not until after he achieved that goal, and when Fr. Pestarino began to look to him for guidance after the death of Frassinetti in 1868, that Don Bosco really began to take a closer look at the community in Mornese, even writing out a twenty-page daily "program" for them to follow, in

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<sup>116</sup> *EBM*, VII, 175-176.



March of 1869.<sup>117</sup> Then in 1870 he told the cleric Francesia in a definitive fashion that “We will have the sisters.” But even then, did Don Bosco specifically have in mind to incorporate the Daughters of the Immaculate as it happened later?

Before settling on the Daughters of the Immaculate as the nucleus for the sisters of his Congregation, Don Bosco had also considered Benedetta Savio and Mother Clarac.<sup>118</sup> It is most likely that Don Bosco kept his options open, and decided to set things into motion when he felt that the timing was ripe. In April 1871, Mother Clarac was told by Bishop Moreno that she could keep the Vincentian Rule even though she was separating from dependence upon the Daughters of Charity and going under obedience of the Bishop of Ivrea.<sup>119</sup> It meant that Mother Clarac would remain under the Rule of St. Vincent, as she desired, rather than to have the need to consider going under another Rule. Almost immediately after that, in that same month, Don Bosco discussed his “vast plans” with the Salesian General Council on April 24, 1871,<sup>120</sup> and visited Mornese.

On June 23, 1871 Don Bosco went to Pope Pius IX to seek his approval on the founding of a women’s institute within his congregation, even though by this time, Don Bosco had already set the work in motion at Mornese. Matters began to move very quickly from here on out. He told Fr. Pestarino that the ladies would be called “Daughters of Mary Help of Christians,” and that they will live in Borgoglio. He asked Sr.

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<sup>117</sup> Lenti, Notes (“Key Dates”), 11, and Agasso, *MM*, 75.

<sup>118</sup> Lenti, Notes (“Brief Story”), 16-17, (“Biographical Sketches”), 26-29, and Mary C. Treacy, “Mother Marie-Louise Angélique Clarac and Don Bosco—An Idea Matures,” *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 5:1 (1994) 133-159. Fr. Lenti cites Stella for the reference to Mother Clarac. See Stella, *DB* 208-212.

<sup>119</sup> See Treacy, “Mother Clarac,” *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 5:1. 146-148, 155-159.

<sup>120</sup> *EBM*, X, 261. Desramaut and Posada have doubts about Don Bosco consulting the Council about the women’s Institute on this date. See A. Lenti, Notes (“Brief Story”), 19.

Enrichetta Dominici, the superior general of the Sisters of St. Anne, to review the Constitutions, and then directed Fr. Pestarino to watch the Daughters one by one, with this criteria: “those who are quick to obey even in the little things and accept observations serenely are for us.” In January 1872, while recuperating from pleurisy in Varazze, he told Fr. Pestarino to have the Daughters vote on forming a “directive council.”<sup>121</sup> They quietly did so, and in so doing, the *Cronistoria* states: “The world doesn’t know it, but Don Bosco’s daughters rise today.” On August 5, 1872, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were publicly presented for the first time. In a matter of a year and four months since Don Bosco announced his plans at the Salesian Chapter meeting, the Sisters officially “entered into ordinary, everyday life of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, into the serene and active piety which could now be called Salesian.”<sup>122</sup>

#### IV. Living the Salesian Spirit: Development of the “Spirit of Mornese” in Mother Mazzarello’s Spirituality

Since the “incorporation” of the Daughters of Mornese into the Salesian framework, the evidence of how Mary Mazzarello’s spirit developed into the “Spirit of Mornese”—that is, her personal integration of Don Bosco’s Salesian spirituality—can be distilled from her biography and letters. As seen through her philosophical and life formation, her spiritual growth closely followed Don Bosco’s model even before she had met the Founder, and also before she began to be indirectly influenced by Don Bosco through the mediation of Fr. Pestarino. As she came under the direct auspices of the Salesian Society and struggled through the foundation of the institute, her spirituality took on a stamp that became distinctly Salesian in character, as formulated by Don Bosco.

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<sup>121</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 90.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* 100, quoting the *Cronistoria*.

The “finestrella,” the small attic window at the Valponasca house from which she gazed lovingly at the Lord’s tabernacle in the parish church, has become the symbol of the “Spirit of Mornese”—the loving contemplation of God within the daily activities of life. This reflects what St. Francis de Sales recommended to Philothea, that we should live and work throughout the day with the awareness of God’s presence, just as a child would hold her father’s hand in one hand while picking flowers with the other, occasionally looking up to his face. As a young girl, Mary had apologized to God: “Lord, forgive me, I spent fifteen minutes today without thinking of You,” at a time in her life when she spent most of the day working in the fields. Thus the seeds were already sprouting in her heart, growing and ready to flower. Given her personal history with many parallels to Don Bosco’s own life and outlook, once she came under the roof of the Salesian greenhouse, the “Spirit of Mornese” blossomed in her suffering and labors.

In order to look at the many virtues of Mother Mazzarello, we might rely upon the metaphors in one of Don Bosco’s dreams as a blueprint. In this dream of 1876, Dominic Savio presents a magnificent bouquet of flowers that contain roses, violets, sunflowers, lilies, evergreen and wheat. Don Bosco does not understand, and Dominic explains: “These flowers represent the virtues and qualities which your boys need in order to be able to live for God instead of for themselves. The rose is the symbol of love, the violet of humility, the sunflower of obedience, the gentian of penance and self-discipline, the ears of wheat of frequent Communion, the lily of purity, the sprigs of evergreen of constancy and perseverance.”<sup>123</sup> Here are some of the “little flowers” of Mother Mazzarello’s life:

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<sup>123</sup> J. Bachiarello, SDB, ed., *Forty Dreams of St. John Bosco* (Rockford, Illinois: TAN Books, 1996), 60-69. Bachiarello probably translated directly from the Italian version, citing *EBM*, XII, 586; the wording in Bachiarello is not the same as the English translation in Borgatello; see *EBM*, XII, 438.

**1. “Rose, the symbol of love.”** Love of God and Charity toward others.

Mother Mazzarello once counseled a novice to “always have great cheerfulness which is the sign of a heart that really loves the Lord very much.”<sup>124</sup> The spirit of joy overflowed from her love of God. In turn, love of God expressed itself in love of neighbor, especially toward her sisters.

She wrote to a sister in Uruguay: “[...] although I do not know you personally, I love you very much and pray for you. I hope to meet you one day in Heaven. Oh, what a great celebration we will have then! [...] Although such a great distance separates us from one another, we form one heart to love our beloved Jesus and Mary Most Holy, and we can always meet [there] and pray for one another.”<sup>125</sup> Mother Mazzarello often writes in her letters to sisters whom she has not met personally or are far away, that she meets and loves them in the heart of Jesus.

Agasso relates that, in the depositions of the canonical process a number of testimonies revealed secret episodes of her quiet, almost conspiratorial maternal acts. “They were like the ‘little flowers’ of Mornese, guarded like living relics for years and decades by the recipients of her generosity.” For instance, an elderly nun kept her shoes on even when sleeping, because her feet were so frost-bitten that it pained her to take them off. “Mother, passing through the dormitory before rising time and not seeing the shoes on the floor, understood what had happened. She questioned me, and then with a charity and affection that was truly maternal, she washed my feet with warm water and bandaged them. When she had finished, she brought me to the chapel, set me on a chair near the altar rail and said:

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<sup>124</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #60 to Sr. Rita Barilatti, 206.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #18 to Sr. Laura Rodríguez, 93.

'Sit here and don't even get up for the elevation. Jesus will be just as pleased with you.'<sup>126</sup>

In another example of her loving sacrifice for her sisters, "She would pass the night on a chair so as not to deprive a sister of her bed, or she would be found carrying a bunch of twigs for a fire to warm her travel companions. She would go around the stores, even in Rome, to buy supper for her sisters. Again, still in Rome, they would find her with her aching head wrapped in an ordinary scarf, because she had given her shawl to someone who was colder than herself."<sup>127</sup>

Her charity also involved tactful constructive criticism where it was called for. For instance, Mother Mazzarello would seem to say, "more by gesture than with words, 'Help me to make you better; let's create this masterpiece together.' " A witness at her canonization process testified that: "When she corrected, her aspect was rather strong, but her sweetness immediately appeared, so much so that the sister corrected was consoled." She guided her daughters to examine themselves and resume "their journey with the joy of one who has found the right way."<sup>128</sup>

When she corrected, she did not brood over whether she would be resented for it or not. "Mother's humility lay in never allowing herself and not permitting others to deviate from the general principles of discipline. It lay in being tranquilly firm with regard to whatever happened. She was described as being strong, yet prudent."<sup>129</sup> Fr. Cagliero wrote: "Though she was very loving toward her daughters, when necessary she was firm and resolute in wanting them to correct their faults. She did not avoid correcting them when she saw them unwilling to listen to her exhortations."<sup>130</sup> She advised a community superior: "We

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<sup>126</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 151, quoting Maccano, I, 418.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 170.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

must calmly correct and remedy what we can and leave the rest in the hands of the Lord. [...] Correct, remind always, but in your heart understand and practice charity with everyone. Look, in order for you to succeed, you have to study individual characters and know how to deal with them. You need to inspire confidence.”<sup>131</sup>

She accepted the imperfections of others while helping them to make progress. This loving patience in waiting for positive change also underlies the Salesian method of helping young people mature into responsible adults. For example, she suggested to a superior in dealing with a difficult novice: “It seems to me that if you know how to take her, she will turn out well. So it is with the others; each one has her defects. It is necessary to correct them with charity, but don’t expect them to be without defects nor should you expect that they will correct themselves all at once. Not at all! But with prayer, patience, vigilance and perseverance, little by little they will succeed.”<sup>132</sup> Her charity is thus objective and disinterested; she does not close her eyes to faults, but remains patient and kind, trying to bring everyone, little by little, to a level better than where they had been before.

## 2. “Violet of humility.” Her lowliness.

Genuine charity and acceptance of others must be rooted in self-knowledge and humility. Mother Mazzarello never forgot her peasant origin, just as Don Bosco had mused at a grandiose dinner given in his honor that his hosts were honoring a man who was a “mere peasant.” Less discerning people had scorned her humble origins and ways; for instance, Bishop Scotton told Don Bosco that the sisters were “Too little instructed, ignorant of so many things, they will not succeed. You, dear Don Bosco, should

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<sup>131</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #25 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 113.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #25 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 114.

have no further thought of them.”<sup>133</sup> Don Bosco paid no heed to such advice, since he saw beyond the unassuming exterior.

When the Sisters of St. Anne went to train the Daughters in the earliest days of the foundation, “the little family of Mornese received the Sisters of St. Ann with an authentic joy for learning and with refreshing sincerity in confessing themselves to be inexperienced and clumsy. [...] The little natives of Mornese continued to ask questions; there was a whole lifetime to refine, a great need of rationality in this little spontaneous universe.” But the learning worked two ways; the sisters of St. Ann were impressed by the Daughters, “moved by the joyful humility of all, beginning with Mary Mazzarello, the vicar, the superior, who was the first to say that she was ignorant. There is a Franciscan perfume in making oneself humble with the most beautiful smile, while for many humility means wrapping oneself in misery and being downtrodden. In her there was not the least impediment to making herself small, like the student who receives instruction and later seeks to put it into practice diligently, drawing from it only joy.”<sup>134</sup>

Even in her position of leadership among her daughters, Mother Mazzarello disengaged herself from her own pride and ego. She struggled with Catherine Daghero, who was difficult, resisted the religious life, and yet later became her successor. Mother tried to understand those whom she corrected, and at the same time examined herself: “If you do not see yourself as you would want to be, could it be possible that you are reducing yourself, and others, to your own behavior? We want others to be perfect, but without doing away with our own defects.”<sup>135</sup>

Her humility also reveals itself in a delightful way in her self-deprecating humor. She had a close and trusting friendship with Fr. Cagliero, and she writes jokingly at her own expense:

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<sup>133</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 105.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* 127.



Now listen to what I have to say: save me a place in America, but seriouslyo withered that they certainly wouldn't want to eat me. It is true that we are good for nothing, but with the Lord's help and our own good will, I hope we will manage to do something.<sup>136</sup>

Pray earnestly that I may become worthy by dying to myself and my ! It is true that I am good for nothing but I know how to make polenta and then, I would see to it that not too much soap would be wasted when washing the clothes. If you wish, I will also learn a bit of cooking.<sup>137</sup>

I hardly have any teeth left, but I have two that would frighten you since they are so long. I have lots of grey hair; it is just as well that the bonnet covers it all! To frighten me they also told me that in America there are some people who eat Christians, but I'm not afraid because I am s self-love. I have so much of it that often I trip and fall like a drunkard.<sup>138</sup>

She habitually extols humility in her letters: "Always study how to become humble, humble. Let humility be the virtue you hold dearest."<sup>139</sup> "I recommend purity of intention and humility of heart in all you do. May your humility never be mixed with self-seeking."<sup>140</sup> "You should never be disheartened or discouraged by your defects, have great humility. [...]"<sup>141</sup> She wrote to a missionary:

Make friends with humility and learn her lesson. Never listen to the teacher, pride, who is a great enemy of humility. Never be discouraged when you see yourself full of defects, but turn to Jesus and Mary with confidence and humble yourself without discouragement.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid. Letter #9 to Fr. Cagliero, 70.

<sup>137</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #6 to Fr. Cagliero, 58.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 72-73.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Letter #67 to Sr. Lorenzina Natale, 218.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. Letter #65 to Sr. Ottavia Bussolino, 214.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. Letter #64 to Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, 212.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. Letter #66 to Sr. Ernesta Farina, 216-217.



While exhorting humility, she warns: “always try to ensure that your humility is never tainted by self-seeking.”<sup>143</sup> This reveals her practical understanding that a person could grow proud even of exercising virtues. She thus warns against performing religious acts for others to see, rather than humbling oneself for the love of God.

This humility before God translated into a practical and “earthy mysticism” that kept her feet planted firmly on the ground, and did not allow her to waft into the clouds of oblivion away from the realities of life. As she said, “Woe to you if you become idle dreamers.”<sup>144</sup> She must have “instinctively understood the counsel of the 14th century mystic John Ruysbroeck: ‘Even though you are rapt in ecstasy like St. Paul, if you hear that an invalid needs some warm broth or any other help, I would suggest that you come down for an instant from your ecstasy to heat the broth.’ She heated milk and dry clothing.”<sup>145</sup> In Mother Mazzarello’s own words:

True humility consists not in carrying out the lowest tasks, but rather in fulfilling that which obedience commands, with a heart ready to renounce even these if a new order should come.<sup>146</sup>

**3. “Sunflower of obedience.”** Faithfulness to the Rule and to the superiors.

Humility goes hand in hand with obedience, and Mother Mazzarello told her daughters that they must, without exception, be ready to “do anything which the superior thought best to command,” while carrying out any work, be it intellectual or manual, with all one’s strength.<sup>147</sup> She meant that this obedience

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid. Letter #64 to Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, 212.

<sup>144</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 203.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 176.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

was to be an open trust and frankness with the superiors, rather than a mealy-mouthed, almost grudging, following of orders. For instance, Mother Mazzarello required the sisters to have half an hour of recreation in the mid-morning, not simply because the Rules said so, but because she understood that it served an important function: "During this time we come to know a postulant better than at any other, because it seems that she is not under the vigilance of the assistant, and we must make use of this.[...] Don't trust those who are always around you, hanging on to your apron strings." Don Bosco expressed the same thought, when he was perturbed at the silence of the great number of boys: "You'll never discover their characters this way. A boy who moves, sings, shouts, runs, fights, is an open book, revealing all of himself. In some way, he is confessing himself. There is no other way to distinguish the frank, open person from the hypocrite, the authentic from the false except by allowing them to express themselves."<sup>148</sup>

Just as she asked for openness and honesty from her daughters, she herself took an attitude of trusting submission to her superiors; as she wrote to Fr. Lemoyne: "On my part, I promise with the help of our good Jesus, to do everything possible to assist you and to ease your burden. And you, Rev. Father, do not spare me in anything; use me as you see fit, correct me freely. In short, treat me as a father treats his eldest daughter."<sup>149</sup> This balanced attitude of candidness and obedience was revealed in her acceptance of appointment as vicar of the Institute. She did not want to be the vicar, and kept asking Don Bosco when he was going to send a superior. He only replied, "The Lord will provide," told her not to worry and that in the future "she was not to oppose those events which were already maturing. What was important, he concluded, was that they observe the rules carefully."<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 206.

<sup>149</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #11 to Fr. Lemoyne, 76-77.

<sup>150</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 101.

Mother Mazzarello regarded the “exact observance of the Rules” as a path to save one’s soul, as Don Bosco had conceived. His concept can be better understood in looking at the 1864 dialogue between Don Bosco and Fr. Lemoyne, where he explains the purpose of the Salesian way of life. In the colloquy, Don Bosco interviews young Fr. Lemoyne who expresses the desire to go to Turin with him. Don Bosco asks him why, and Lemoyne replies, “To help you in whatever little way I can.” Then Don Bosco replies, “No, God’s works do not need man’s help. [...] Come only with the intention of doing your own soul some good.”<sup>151</sup> This concept also finds expression in Don Bosco’s statement that he considered himself the most selfish man in the world because he was undertaking all these titanic charitable projects merely to save his own soul. The very first article in the draft of the Daughters’ Constitutions affirms this idea, that:

The purpose of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is to strive toward one’s personal perfection and to cooperate toward the spiritual welfare of one’s neighbor, especially by imparting a moral, religious education to girls of the working class.<sup>152</sup>

Mother Mazzarello embraced this ideal, that through the observance of the Rule and in helping one’s neighbor, one was paving and securing one’s own path to Heaven; as Don Bosco put it, “The purpose of our Society is our own sanctification and the salvation of souls through the works of mercy.”<sup>153</sup> Thus, she constantly exhorted her sisters to “Observe the Holy Rule even in the smallest things. It is the way that leads to Heaven,”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *EBM*, VII, 456.

<sup>152</sup> *EBM*, X, 267.

<sup>153</sup> *EBM*, X, 267-8.

<sup>154</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #23 to the Missionaries of the House of Las Piedras, Uruguay, 109.

“Observe the Holy Rule in every detail and, as far as you can, see to it that the others observe it too.”<sup>155</sup> As she wrote to one of her sisters in America: “[...] the day will soon come when we will meet again in Eternity, if we have observed our Holy rule exactly.”<sup>156</sup>

To a layperson, “Exact observance of the Rules” sounds like a mindless, uncritical following of orders; but when understood in the context of a religious biography, obedience is a knowing and intelligent renunciation of a person’s autonomy, along with poverty and chastity. Mother Mazzarello was not someone who was blindly obedient; there are a number of incidents that show an “independent” streak. In her youth, she was known as “*bula*” (arrogant) because she was very outspoken. When she was 15, she and a group of friends were discussing the fact that some intended to make temporary vows and Fr. Pestarino was encouraging or discouraging individuals on a case-by-case basis. “Mary, who was there in the midst, stood up and said: ‘I don’t understand why we have to ask permission for this for a certain time. I didn’t ask anyone anything and I made it once and for all. I don’t think I did anything wrong.’”<sup>157</sup> She had an aversion to making a general confession, and she tried her best to get around it (she acquiesced only when the priest recommended it for her own spiritual good).<sup>158</sup> When she was asked to help the typhoid victims, she inwardly resisted, “knowing she would catch it;” she nonetheless went to help the patients cheerfully. When Don Bosco gave a draft of the Rules to the Daughters, she frankly objected to the inclusion of “disciplines.” When a difficult request came from a Salesian, she replied: “Now I shall tell you

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter #66 to Sr. Ernesta Farina, 216.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter #22 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 102.

<sup>157</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 36, quoting *Cronistoria*, I, 53.

<sup>158</sup> Class Notes, 34.

the difficulties I have with sending this Sister to Lu. However, if you still want me to send her, then I will send her."<sup>159</sup>

These episodes do not demonstrate a submissive or unthinking nature; she said to her sisters:

“[...] if obedience seems a bit difficult for you, look to Heaven and think of the reward that awaits you there,”<sup>160</sup> which shows that obedience did not come easy for her, either. Mother Mazzarello had a mind of her own, and was not afraid to express her thoughts. Yet she obeyed as an act of sacrifice, imitating Christ who was willing to lay himself down on the cross. She wrote to her sisters in Bordighera: “I told (Jesus) to give you His humility, self-detachment, love of suffering and that prompt, blind, submissive obedience He had to His Eternal Father, to Saint Joseph and to Mary, and which he practiced up to His death on the Cross.”<sup>161</sup>

In that way, Mother Mazzarello’s obedience was not a robotic following of rules and orders, but one that came from a critical understanding of the spirit of the Rules and trust in the judgment of her superiors. As she counseled, “Always be cheerful, have confidence in your superiors, never hide anything from them, always keep your heart open, always obey them in all simplicity and you will never go wrong.”<sup>162</sup>

**4. “Gentian of penance and self-discipline.”** Long-suffering and cheerfulness in face of hunger, adversity and misunderstanding.

In practice, obedience and trust may not be easy for a religious, even when the times are good. Then, the willingness to suffer in times of trouble must be far more difficult. Mother Mazzarello

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<sup>159</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #15 to Fr. Cagliari, 85.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #18 to Sr. Giovanna Borgna, 95.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #33 to Sr. Adele David, 135.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #18 to Sr. Laura Rodriguez, 94.

said of Catherine Daghero that: “[...] virtue does not consist in being good when everything is going according to plan, but especially when we are suffering want or things are not going well; affection toward the superiors is not manifested by words, but in deeds, like those of Sr. Catherine who suffers and prays, suffers and keeps silent, suffers and smiles.”<sup>163</sup>

If obedience came at a price for Mother Mazzarello, the entire beginning of the sister’s community in Mornese looked like a long exercise in long-suffering, humiliation and patience. Agasso notes that Mary Mazzarello is not considered a “penitential” saint, insofar as we do not continually come up against sin, its anguish and its punishment in her writings and discourses. He explains that her words and especially her behavior inspired others to prevent sin: avoid the occasions; act sensibly to get away from the danger; use the arms of prayer, next to which she tenaciously placed that of work.<sup>164</sup> She must have endured such hunger, adversity and misunderstandings in her life that there was no need for her to seek out more exterior penances.

The women must have felt very alone in their initial struggle, as they moved into the *Casa Immacolata* without the understanding or support of their bewildered families and neighbors. They had to put up with the lack of resources, having to humbly go back to their families to ask for food. When they moved into Borgoalto, they had to endure the scorn of the townspeople who believed that these young women had “hijacked” the house which the entire town cooperated to build as a boys’ school. They were not allowed to communicate to the villagers the fact that the Bishop of Acqui had objected to the building of the school, and so they had to take the blame upon themselves, silently bearing all the accusations. They bore hunger and privations, because the villagers refused to support them. When some sisters began to die, one after another, Mother

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<sup>163</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 199, quoting *Cronistoria*, III, 219.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* 192.

Mazzarello must have felt some terrible doubt about their mission. Yet, amidst all these crushing adversities, she cheerfully suffered all things, making her sisters “feel that they were in God’s presence when they washed clothes, split wood or hoed in the vineyards of Borgoalto, just as they were when they adored in chapel, between candles and the perfume of incense.”<sup>165</sup>

Her words of encouragement to her sisters are heroic, considering what weight she must have borne in her own heart: she wrote, “Be brave, Sr. Josephine. The moment will come in which the cross will seem very heavy, but that will be the time to hold it close to your heart and promise fidelity to the good God.”<sup>166</sup> She consoled a young student who was sick, writing: “Have great courage, take care of your health, get well soon, so that you can return to us. There is still one thing that I want to recommend to you and that is to be cheerful. If you are cheerful you will get better sooner, so have courage.”<sup>167</sup> Just as she frequently counsels cheerfulness as a virtue, elsewhere she refers to its opposite state, “sadness” and “melancholy,” as the source of immense harm. She writes to a young sister: “Are you cheerful? No more tears? ‘Oh no, I am cheerful and have a great desire to be holy.’ Very good, try to continue like this; be humble. [...] I want you to be cheerful and have courage.”<sup>168</sup>

Her smile hid her pain, which was sometimes physical: “Frequently she was afflicted with toothaches, earaches, deafness and other ailments, but we never heard a word of complaint from her. We saw her working as quickly as she always did, or going around the house with a serene face and a smiling greeting.”<sup>169</sup> She often had to deal with serious problems that challenged her community, but she did so with a touch of

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 214, quoting *Cronistoria*, III, 361.

<sup>167</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #13 to young Maria Bosco, 81.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. Letter #36 to Sr. Maria Sampietro, 143.

<sup>169</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 151, quoting Maccano, I, 388.



humor; as she wrote to Cagliero of a mentally disturbed young postulant:

We had ecstasies, raptures, revelation of things hidden, real matters of conscience, you know, things that were buried in the deepest recesses of some people's hearts. And all of this through a young woman from Rome whom Don Bosco had sent here to save her from the lion's mouth [...] since we could find no cure, on Don Bosco's orders we sent her to perform a few miracles in Rome. Come back soon and we will tell you all the details of this comedy.<sup>170</sup>

The transfer of the sisters' community from Mornese to Nizza was a particularly trying event in her life, because for the first time she had to separate from the people and the environment which she knew well. Her father died soon after the move, and her resignation and spiritual abandonment must have been a deeply painful process. Her own heartbreak can be sensed in the words she wrote to encourage others: "You must know by now that I am no longer in Mornese, but here in Nizza. We must always make sacrifices while we are on this earth. Let us make them willingly and cheerfully and the Lord will take note of everything and in His own time will give us a beautiful reward."<sup>171</sup>

She strove to unite her suffering with Christ: "With Jesus, burdens become light, fatigue becomes easy, thorns are turned into sweetness. [...] But you must overcome yourselves, if

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<sup>170</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #6 to Fr. Cagliero, 56-57.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #22 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 103. See footnote #4 to this passage: "Mother Mazzarello suffered greatly in the transfer of the Mother House from Mornese to Nizza. It was particularly painful for her because it meant uprooting herself from her native place, leaving persons who were very dear to her and places that had played an unforgettable part in her apostolate. These few sober words show her determination to face the new situation with courage and serene abandonment."

you do not, everything becomes unbearable and malice will keep springing up in our hearts like boils.”<sup>172</sup> It was the kind of suffering that did not turn inward into self-pity, but went out to others:

That humble, patient spirit, full of charity, but of that charity which is proper to Jesus, who never gave up suffering so much for us. [...] Be cheerful, right? [...] and always cheerful. Never become offended, never; on the contrary, as soon as you are aware that someone needs some comfort, extend it quickly and console one another.<sup>173</sup>

##### 5. “Ears of wheat of frequent Communion.” Devotion to Holy Communion.

As mentioned earlier, Mother Mazzarello’s father was one of the first Mornese villagers to start receiving communion frequently as Fr. Pestarino had encouraged, and he probably would have heard the pastor preach as St. Alphonsus wrote: “Holiness does not consist mainly in living in a convent or spending the whole day in church, but in praying, receiving Communion whenever possible, obeying and helping out with the house chores, avoiding worldly amusements, and patiently bearing fatigue and contempt.”<sup>174</sup>

First Communion was a turning point in her life, and every morning she woke up early, walked in the icy cold and waited for the church doors to open for Mass. When she could not go to church, she would gaze toward the votive light where the Blessed Sacrament was placed. Mother Mazzarello’s Christ-centric spirituality took on a visible form in the devotion to Holy Communion, and she exhorts a young student: “Always be good,

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. Letter #22 to Sr. Angela Vallese and the community, 108.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. Letter #22 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 103.

<sup>174</sup> *EBM*, X, 249, quoting *Treasure of Sermon Material (Selva di materie predicabili)* of St. Alphonsus.

Maria[...] Give good example to all who see you and pray from your heart. Do you receive Holy Communion? Receive Jesus with love since He loves you very much."<sup>175</sup> Her love of the Eucharist sustained her in her religious life, as she stated:

We must make our practices of piety with enthusiasm and fervor, especially Holy Communion and try to be exact in the observance of our Holy Rule, by practicing our Holy Vows of poverty, chastity and obedience better. If we do this, Our Lady will be pleased with us.<sup>176</sup>

## 6. Purity of intention and love of work.

Mother Mazzarello often wrote to her sisters to keep their intentions pure: "I recommend purity of intention and humility of heart in all you do,"<sup>177</sup> exhorting them to "[...] begin anew each day to be truly humble, to pray with all your heart and to work with right intention. Speak little, very little to creatures. Instead, speak much with the Lord. He will make you truly wise."<sup>178</sup> She recognized that, since "the Lord sees the heart, it is necessary to practice these virtues more from your heart than with external acts."<sup>179</sup> She explained to a sister:

You tell me that you have a lot to do, and I am happy, because work is the father of virtue. When we work, whims [*grilli*] disappear and we are always cheerful. While I recommend you to work. [...] I also recommend that you all work without ambition and only to please Jesus. I would like you to instill into the hearts

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<sup>175</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #13 to young Maria Bosco, 81.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #16 to the sisters of the House of Borgo San Martino, 88.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #65 to Sr. Ottavia Bussolino, 214.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #22 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 105; this part addressed to Sr. Giuseppina Vergniaud.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* Letter #18 to Sr. Giovanna Borgna, 95.

of all those dear Sisters a love for sacrifice, self-contempt and absolute detachment from their own will.<sup>180</sup>

On one occasion, a woman named Maria Blengini attempted to join the Daughters. She did not last very long, complaining to Don Bosco that “they prayed little because they had too much to do and this was not the way sisters should act. Neither were they religious in their way of speaking, moving or casual acting. It was as though they were in the threshing room, or the vineyard, or the pasture with the sheep.”<sup>181</sup> But Don Bosco must have been delighted to hear this description. He had written to the sisters, “Love work, so that each will be able to say to herself: ‘I support myself by the sweat of my brow.’ Further, ‘Constant work on one’s nature, to form a good, patient, happy character, to make virtue lovable and living together easier.’”<sup>182</sup>

Don Bosco’s spirituality seems to be centered on the idea that every activity can turn into prayer if made with the right intentions, that it was not the nature of the exterior activity, but rather the interior disposition that made the difference. It is a spirituality that can be practiced by anybody, because, in Mother Mazzarello’s words, “God does not take into account if someone did more work than another, but whether all used the talents which He gave them.” Thus, any work done in the right spirit becomes a way to sanctification. As she wrote to a sister who was learning French: “While studying the languages of this world, study also the language of the soul with God. He will teach you the science of becoming holy which is the only true science.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid. Letter #25 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 114.

<sup>181</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 114.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>183</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #22 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 105; this part addressed to Sr. Angela Denegri.

7. “Evergreen of constancy and perseverance.” Her heroic courage.

It is easy enough for a person to make a start at something difficult, but the harder part is to sustain the effort. Mother Mazzarello expressed this practical insight in a letter to a young novice in America, warning her that the road would be long and arid times may lie ahead:

It has only been a few months since you became a novice, so you must still be full of fervour. I recommend that you never allow the fervour that the Lord has enkindled in your heart to die. Remember that only one thing is necessary, to save your soul. For us religious, it is not enough simply to save our own soul. We must become holy and, through our good works, help many other souls who are waiting for our help to become holy, too. Take courage then, after a few days of struggle we will have Heaven forever.<sup>184</sup>

Starting up the community life of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was no easy effort, because she and the first members had to start everything from zero. Don Bosco himself drafted the Daughters’ Constitutions, researching various constitutions of the principal religious orders. “The task was even more difficult because his congregation had to assume external forms which distinguished it from others, stripping it of certain practices and usages which were too ascetical.”<sup>185</sup> Given that “Mary Mazzarello and the others were convinced that Don Bosco wanted them to join an already existing institute [...] They thought they were going to enter a congregation, and were unaware of the fact that they were the congregation,”<sup>186</sup> living out the new Constitutions took all the more effort, raw courage and mental fortitude. Agasso describes their beginnings:

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid. Letter #18 to Sr. Laura Rodríguez, 94.

<sup>185</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 87.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

They had to form themselves more or less on their own. Fr. Pestarino was ready to counsel, and Don Bosco had drawn up the master outline of a rule, but it was difficult for them to give real content to the carrying out of every duty, gesture, obedience. It was not like joining an established order with its history, seasoned members and "preceding experience." Here there was still nothing; it was like a ship guided by sailors (and a captain) who were seeing the ocean for the first time.<sup>187</sup>

"Captain" Mary, however, knew the route even without maps or instruments. She knew that she had to communicate to her companions the greatness of the sense of the moment which they were experiencing. Greatness lay in the adversity to be overcome: that cloudy pessimism and mistrust which seemed to rise from the village toward the new house which was too big, the scarcity of everything. Discomfort stimulated them. Conquering it by work was also a step on the path of perfection. Those who worked well, also prayed well; those who were not afraid of commitment and fatigue were also not afraid of temptations and dangers. And they were never sad.<sup>188</sup>

Her fortitude is reminiscent of St. Teresa of Avila, who also began her Carmelite foundations under the Primitive Rule with no resources but her gumption and trust in God. Thus Mother Mazzarello constantly cheers on her sisters: "Take courage, work willingly for Jesus and be certain that whatever you do and suffer will be repaid in Heaven. Always be cheerful in the Lord."<sup>189</sup>

There must have been discouraging times, especially when all the long-suffering and labors did not seem to measure up to ideals. Still, she encouraged her daughters: "Be cheerful and don't be so afraid of your defects and of not being able to

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #16 to the sisters of the house of Borgo San Martino, 89.

correct them all at once. Little by little, with the good will to fight them, never making peace with them once the Lord makes them known to you, do your part to correct yourself. You will see that sooner or later you will overcome them all. Courage then, have great confidence in God and a good sense of self-contempt and you will see that all will go well.”<sup>190</sup> Further, “Do not get discouraged when you see yourself full of defects, but go to Jesus and Mary confidently and humble yourself without becoming discouraged, then go forward bravely.”<sup>191</sup>

Although Mother did not foresee what the future would hold amidst of the poverty of Mornese, “she prepared herself for a daring future by that precept which she taught and followed: be always in God’s presence, the God who walks with his people and does not allow us to get lost on the long journey.”<sup>192</sup> Even with the rapid expansion of the sisters’ work alongside that of the Salesians, she never remained complacent. She warned: “The houses will multiply—and how! But let us remember that we have made a vow of poverty, that we must all consider ourselves poor and that each of us must go forward in the spirit of poverty if we want to become saints. If there are those who do not want to do so, worse for them and what a disgrace for the whole Congregation.”<sup>193</sup>

Mother Mazzarello’s ultimate goal in her perseverance seems not to have been just the visible expansion of the order, or the number of houses and nuns, but reaching Heaven. At her deathbed, she murmured repeatedly: “Never! I will not give in to discouragement,” and asked her sisters to pray for her, adding “I am afraid I shall give in to discouragement.” But she would quickly rally and voice her trust in God’s help and in Mary’s

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid. Letter #17 to Sr. Angela Vallese, 91.

<sup>191</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 215, quoting *Cronistoria* III, 325.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. 106.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. 210, quoting *Cronistoria* III, 300.



protection.<sup>194</sup> She animated her sisters with the words: “Remember that it is not enough simply to begin, we must continue. We need to keep struggling every day. Our self-love is so subtle that when we think we have already advanced a bit in something, it makes us [bump our] nose on the ground. But, this life is a continual warfare. We must never tire if we want to win Heaven.”<sup>195</sup> Her words evoke St. Paul’s competitive imagery: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

By the time Mother Mazzarello died, within the short span of her years as co-Foundress, she had left 165 sisters, 65 novices and 28 houses: nineteen in Italy, three in France and six in South America. But her most important legacy was “the Spirit of Mornese” that animated the spirit of her daughters. Don Bosco wanted the Daughters to be a “living monument to Mary,” alongside the Basilica which he had built in Our Lady’s honor. “He added that they would be known as Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, because he wanted the new institute to be yet another monument of eternal gratitude for the singular graces obtained from this loving Mother.”<sup>196</sup> The “Spirit of Mornese” was what gave life to that living monument to Mary, Mother Mazzarello’s great gift to the Salesian charism.

Don Bosco had right discernment when he chose the simple, unlettered peasant of Mornese as co-foundress. He spoke of her to Fr. Cagliari: “Mary Mazzarello has special gifts from God. Her limited instruction is abundantly supplemented by her virtue, prudence, spirit of discernment and her gift of governing based on goodness, charity and an unshakable faith in the Lord.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> A. Lenti, Notes, 34, quoting the Testimony of Mother Catherine Daghero in the Ordinary Process.

<sup>195</sup> Posada, *Letters*, Letter #18 to Sr. Giovanna Borgna, 95.

<sup>196</sup> *EBM*, X, 265.

<sup>197</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 115.

## V. Conclusion and Query: Why is Don Bosco “absent” in the life of Mother Mazzarello?

Considering the parallels in their biographies and spirituality, and their collaboration as Founder and Co-Foundress, it is perhaps strange that there was not a closer kinship between the two personalities. It seems that this “distance,” which is very clear from the biographies and from the letters of Mother Mazzarello, had more to do with Don Bosco’s personality and “management style” than with any interpersonal dynamic between the two saints. So I would like to make a digression into reflecting upon the character and the events in the life of the Founder for a moment, to see if some light can be shed on his apparent “lack of presence” in his dealings with the Co-Foundress. I think it will show that Don Bosco exercised a kind of concerned detachment or “holy disinterestedness” that kindled in Mother Mazzarello a zeal “for God and for God’s love for all.”<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Mary Greenan, FMA, “Towards Intimacy: Beyond Power Games and Control Needs; a Salesian Reflection on Collaborative Ministry,” *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 10:2, (Fall 1999), 253 ff.: “Often it is ‘interest’ that damages authentic relationships, creates dependency and therefore ascendancy or dominance. The word interest is used here in terms of having an agenda. Collaborative relationships of the kind we are moving towards requires a kind of ‘holy disinterestedness.’<sup>10</sup> The differences need also to be honored in a disinterested fashion so that the unity implicit in the relationship may emerge.” Footnote 10 states: “Francis de Sales used this term and was misunderstood in the use of it. His understanding was simply that true love, loves and true affection cannot create dependence.” This reflection also finds echo in Don Bosco’s disapproval of the kind of love that is “too attached,” as seen in his letter to the Count and Countess Colle on the death of their son Louis. Don Bosco’s letter to Attorney Colle dated May 22, 1881 states: “The parents’ hearts were too attached to their only son. Too much tenderness and emotion; yet, he remained good always. Had he lived, he may have met great dangers, which he might have been drawn into evil ways after his

Traditionally, this distance has been attributed to Don Bosco's supposed misogyny, that ever since he was a young boy, he did not want to play with girls and that he avoided women's company, that this was because he had no sisters as he grew up. But his biography and letters show that he was neither particularly antagonistic nor awkward with women. He was close to his mother, his landlady Lucy Matta was impressed by his goodness in his school days at Chieri, and he had many friends among laywomen and nuns from various orders who helped in his projects. There are plenty of letters that Don Bosco wrote to benefactresses and women cooperators, asking and thanking them for their help, hospitality, or contributions. His absence from the first Profession of Vows of the Daughters (until the Bishop insisted) is sometimes pointed out as a sign of his misogyny; but this appears to have had more to do with the impasse concerning the citizenry of Mornese and their anger over the Daughters' "take-over" of the school intended for boys. The belief that he was "averse to women" probably came from later moral attitudes expressed in sermons and hagiographies which, though motivated by didactic intent, probably played up certain incidents from Don Bosco's life in order to make the saint into a model for a "puritanical" (and perhaps, even chauvinistic) view of what priestly chastity was supposed to look like.<sup>199</sup>

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parents death." See Joseph Aubry, SDB., ed., *The Spiritual Writings of Saint John Bosco*, trans. Joseph Caselli, SDB. (New Rochelle, New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1984), 247.

<sup>199</sup> Fr. Barberis reports of an "instance of Don Bosco's extreme reserve with women" as follows: "Last night Don Bosco heard confessions as is his custom, and had a late supper. There happens to be visiting the Oratory two ladies, administrators of a hospital in Bologna; they have come to Turin for the feast of Mary Help of Christians. These two saintly women, somewhat advanced in age already, on hearing that Don Bosco was having supper came into the dining room to see him. Don Bosco spoke to them very harshly: 'How dare you come in at this late hour?' he demanded. 'We just wanted to

As a case in point, in the last years of his life, Don Bosco had a wholesome friendship with Mlle. Claire Louvet, whose profound veneration for Don Bosco “she expressed with her heart as well as with her purse.”<sup>200</sup> Aubry comments that “Don

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have a moment with you, and we took the chance,’ they replied. ‘But don’t you know that you are not allowed into a cloister at this late hour?’ Don Bosco insisted. ‘We had no idea,’ answered the one; ‘but if you object to our being here, we will leave.’ But the other added, ‘It was Fr. Rua who invited us in.’ Don Bosco was hardly mollified. ‘I won’t put you out,’ he said, ‘but think of the penalties you may be incurring for violating the cloister?’ The two saintly women, finding themselves reprimanded before an audience of some ten priests, were extremely mortified.” Then Fr. Barberis comments of this episode: “He merely wanted to emphasize the propriety of the situation.” Arthur Lenti, SDB, “Saint with a Human Face—Don Bosco in Fr. Giulio Barberis’ Original Chronicle,” in *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 8:2, (Fall 1997), 184.

As Fr. Barberis commented, Don Bosco’s seemingly harsh action appears not to have been motivated out of dislike for women, but to make a point to his clerics (and to the ladies) that it was not appropriate for them to be in the priests’ dining room at a late hour, and that it might give rise to scandal, however innocent or unintended. As Fr. Barberis commented, “He merely wanted to emphasize the impropriety of the situation.”

Apparently, during his Process, an objection to his sanctity was raised over an incident where a benefactress offered her arm to support the elderly and physically impaired Don Bosco climbing down some stairs. I have not been able to find the citation for this story. But if true, an objection to Don Bosco’s sanctity on such a ground would show that standards of propriety were stricter in Don Bosco’s time, as well as during the years of the Processes. That would explain why Don Bosco took the action reported by Fr. Barberis, and his so-called “reticence with women.” As North Americans living in the 21st century, we need to suspend judgments based on our own social mores in approaching people of a different time, country, culture, and standards of etiquette.

<sup>200</sup> Aubry, *Spiritual Writings*, 258.

Bosco regarded her very highly, as his fifty-seven letters, written between 1882-1887, conclusively prove. She often came to Turin to see Don Bosco. During her last visit on May 24, 1887, when she knew that she would not see him again, she wept. Later Don Bosco wrote to her, 'This hurt very much, but there will be no more partings in Heaven.'<sup>201</sup> Don Bosco wrote to her some six months before he died:

For a few days you have been our guest, and when you left, you looked so sad, as if on the verge of tears. This has caused me pain. Perhaps you did not understand my words when I always assured you that relationships on earth do not last long. In eternity we shall enjoy our days in true happiness forever, and we shall never lack anything that is worthwhile *in perpetuas aeternitates* [...]<sup>202</sup>

Considering this sensitive and kindly letter to the benefactress, it is unlikely that misogyny would have been the reason for his "distance" from Mother Mazzarello. Then what is it? It seems that this was the way he guided his spiritual sons and daughters, so as to avoid any atmosphere of dependency and over-familiarity that can be destructive to a religious community.

Don Bosco's letter to Mlle. Louvet points out a fundamental fact of life which is central to ascetic spirituality that "relationships on earth do not last long." God seems to have been very possessive of Don Bosco, because in his formative years, he lost those who were dearest to him, for example, his father at age 2, his mentor Fr. Calosso at age 15 (1830), and his best friend Luigi Comollo at age 24 (April 1839). As Don Bosco said in his Autobiography:

Fr. Calosso's death was a great loss to me. I wept inconsolably over my dead benefactor. I thought of him in my waking hours and dreamt of him when I was asleep. It affected me so badly that

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Aubry, *Spiritual Writings*, 259.

my mother feared for my health. She sent me for a while to my grandfather in Capriglio. At this time I had another dream. In it I was sorely reproached for having put my hope in men and not in our good heavenly Father.<sup>203</sup>

Moreover, Don Bosco had suffered a physical and nervous breakdown when, after Luigi Comollo died, it is reported that Comollo's spirit returned to the corridor of the seminary with the words, "Bosco, I am saved."<sup>204</sup> This brush with the supernatural, which frightened him so much that he says "All this deeply affected me; I was so scared that I would have preferred to die,"<sup>205</sup> must have had an enduring effect on how he viewed life and human relationships for the remainder of his days.

In the same vein, there is also a feeling that Don Bosco was a rather private, introverted man, contrary to the fun, outgoing and lively public image with which he is usually portrayed. He was not someone who shared his personal feelings with others unless he was trying to achieve an end. One can see this reclusiveness in how he describes the most difficult moments of his life. For instance, when he was threatened with eviction from the field rented for the Oratory, Don Bosco says that he quietly withdrew from the boys and went away alone to cry; as he wrote in his memoir:

With no one to help me, my energy gone, my health undermined, with no idea where I could gather my boys in the future, I was very disturbed. I withdrew to one side, and as I walked alone I began to cry, perhaps for the first time. As I walked I looked up to Heaven and cried out, "My God, why don't you show me

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<sup>203</sup> Bosco, *MO*, 48.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.* 152, and note 3 at 153-154.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.* note 3, quoting the 1884 edition of Bosco's biography of Luigi Comollo at 153-154.

where you want me to gather these children? Oh let me know! Oh show me what I must do!<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid. 255. On this passage, Fr. Lenti points out that “Don Bosco was never really alone. Fr. Borel for one was helping, for he is said to be preaching a sermon to the boys at the time, and the leasing contract was in his name, [...] [and] Don Bosco states that negotiations with Mr. Pinardi for the shed were already in progress at the time of the writing. This not only differs from the dates given in the *Memoirs* by Don Bosco [...] but also contradicts the melodramatic presentation in the *Memoirs* of a Don Bosco waiting for God to manifest his will.” Lenti, “Saint with a Human Face,” in *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 8:2, (Fall 1997), 184. (The article looks beyond the hagiographic and sentimental, to portray a more “photographic” view of Don Bosco through the descriptions of Fr. Barberis, showing a real person, “warts and all,” struggling with the daily issues of life, instead of the sugar-coated legend of children’s books radiating with the aura of the unreal. It helps us in a beautiful way to see that the saintliness of Don Bosco was not of angels or unicorns, but of a human being.)

See also Arthur Lenti, SDB, “Don Bosco’s Love Affair with ‘Poor and Abandoned’ Young People and the Beginnings of the Oratory,” in *Journal of Salesian Studies*, 3:1, (Spring 1992), 35-36, where he writes: “As Bracco points out, from the present letter and from other documents it appears incontestably that Don Bosco was never alone. Frs. Borel and Pacchiotti, [...] and others as well, remained his associates in oratory work. Fr. Borel in particular acted as a partner during the gathering of the oratory, the settling, and for some time thereafter. As a matter of fact, he acted as principal in corresponding with the authorities, as well as in contracts,” citing Giuseppe Bracco, “Don Bosco e le istituzioni,” in *Torino e Don Bosco* I, 123-130.

Perhaps Don Bosco’s recollection does wax melodramatic and, to be fair, does not point out the presence of Don Borel and other collaborators in his *Memoirs*, though he does so in an entry in Barberis’ *Chronicle*. But Don Bosco no doubt did undergo a great deal of stress at these difficult beginnings of the Oratory, enough so that the anxieties and pressures of these times caused his health to breakdown and took him dangerously close to the edge of death. This passage, and the entire *Memoir*, was “his” story, written as a



Moreover, when Mama Margaret died, Don Bosco went away to the Consolata to pour out his sorrows in private, taking only Buzzetti with him.<sup>207</sup> One can see a similar reaction when he was threatened with censure by the Holy Office, when his book on St. Peter barely escaped being put on the Index; he did all he could to clear up the misunderstanding, and by all accounts this was one of the most painful events in his life; but he was reticent about discussing the matter.<sup>208</sup> Surrounded as he was by his clerics, boys and pressing admirers, he did not wear his personal feelings on his sleeves, but focused on the spiritual progress of those who came to him, or were entrusted to him.

A similar pattern can be observed in his work as an educator. It had been said that, in reading the biographical trilogy which Don Bosco wrote of Magone, Besucco and Savio, Don Bosco's "presence" in the lives of these boys could be put on a spectrum, with his being the most present with Michael Magone, who needed the most watching, prodding, and setting boundaries, and the least present in Dominic Savio. He did not cling to his favorite sons, but allowed them independence, sending them off to spread their wings in other realms, e.g., Paul Albera to France, Cagliero to South America, and Savio to Mondonio to die. It was not callousness or apathy. He exercised

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subjective recollection of the elderly Don Bosco looking back on his life, perhaps trying to understand for himself the work of Divine Providence and the meaning in his life. He is writing as a father sharing his personal thoughts with his sons. In that context, I hope that I may be forgiven for reading Don Bosco's words somewhat uncritically here, with the heart rather than the head.

<sup>207</sup> *EBM*, V, 374.

<sup>208</sup> *EBM*, VIII, 335-336. Lemoyne writes that the censure "[...] was a most painful blow to Don Bosco's very sensitive heart. [...] Although habitually appearing tranquil and serene, he must have had his moments of deep discouragement. How many painful thoughts—which he kept to himself—must have come to his mind, fashioning, so to speak, a crown of thorns."

detachment, and gave freedom and space for growth to those who were closest to his aspirations.

Would this not have been true also in Don Bosco's collaboration with Mother Mazzarello? In that light, isn't the absence of Don Bosco in the life of Mother Mazzarello a sign of his complete approval, the greatest compliment that he could pay to her? In any modern business organization, a supervisor is pleased to be able to delegate and entrust the management of the micro-organization to a good subordinate, and allocate his own time and energy to overseeing the bigger movement of his macro-organization. Indeed, he had once remarked to his Salesians, "Do you think that it is easy for me to keep calm when, after entrusting an important or urgent task to someone, I find that task not done or badly botched? Believe me, sometimes my blood boils and I am about to burst."<sup>209</sup> The simple scribbling that Don Bosco wrote for Fr. Bonetti at the top of Mother Mazzarello's letter: "Tell her I am happy with the way things are going,"<sup>210</sup> is like earning an A+ or *plus quam optime* from an extremely difficult task master.

Don Bosco knew from his observations of Mama Margaret (a widowed single mother raising three boys), Marchioness Barolo, his many benefactresses and women cooperators how much women are able to accomplish. In that sense, he was "feminist" enough to be able to see the "feminine" mettle in a humble woman of Mornese, and after having laid the groundwork and setting the parameters, he trusted her enough to put her completely in charge of developing the feminine division of his Salesian family without much interference.

When Mother Mazzarello, dying from pleurisy and battle-worn from all her labors, was in Marseille, Don Bosco arrived for the last farewell. "This was the first time that Mother had ever cried

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<sup>209</sup> Bosco, *MO*, note 3 at 43, quoted by *EBM*, XII, 330.

<sup>210</sup> Posada, *Letters*, footnote #12 at 176.

at the moment of detachment.”<sup>211</sup> Mother would see Don Bosco one last time in Nizza before she died, but to her last breath, she was speaking of “several uncertain vocations, so that after her death (Cagliero) would be in a situation to remove these obstacles.” Perhaps Don Bosco’s gift to Mother Mazzarello was an attitude of respect and complete trust, where, without creating an atmosphere of dependency, in an attitude of “holy disinterestedness,” he placed his confidence in her to allow the “Spirit of Mornese” to grow and take its shape as Mother Mazzarello had envisioned it, lived it, and gave her life to it.

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<sup>211</sup> Agasso, *MM*, 212.