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# Mother Marie-Louise-Angélique Clarac and Don Bosco—An Idea Matures

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In the first part of his study on the “Bosco-Gastaldi conflict”,<sup>1</sup> Arthur Lenti drew attention to another figure similarly involved in a painful controversy with the Archbishop of Turin, namely Sr. Marie-Louise-Angélique Clarac, foundress of the Sisters of Charity of St. Mary, also known as the Sisters of Charity of Good Counsel.

Until recently this complex and dynamic woman was little known in Salesian circles and even now few people in the English-speaking world are conversant with the details of her life and work. Yet she is not without significance in the steps leading to the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and it is in this respect that she takes her place in Salesian studies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The Bosco-Gastaldi Conflict (1872–82) Part I”, *Journal of Salesian Studies*, vol. IV, no. 2, Fall 1993, pp. 35–37.

<sup>2</sup> Castano, L., *Santità Salesiana*, SEL, Torino, 1966, p. 40–41.

Stella, P., *Don Bosco Life and Work*, trans. John Drury, Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, New York, 1985, pp. 208–212.

Fiora, L., “Madre Clarac e Don Bosco Collaborazione Pedagogica” in *Maria Luigia Clarac Il Coraggio dell'Amore*, numero unico nel centenario della morte, 1987, supplemento al n.6/1987 de “La Buona Parola” pp. 19–21.

Posada, M. E., “Alle Origini di una Scelta. Don Bosco, Fondatore di un Istituto Religioso Femminile” in Giannatelli R., *Pensiero e Prassi di Don Bosco*, LAS, Roma, 1988, pp.151–169.

Alessi, A., *Una Donna Coraggiosa*, Collana Pionieri 36, LDC, Leumann-Torino. No date.

The story of Sr. Clarac enriches our knowledge of an area of Don Bosco's life which has sometimes been ignored or misrepresented, namely, his rapport with women. He was, in fact, acquainted with many women who assisted him, not only materially by their work at the Oratory<sup>3</sup> but also in the clarification of some of his ideas. They showed him in practice women's possibilities and ability for ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Their presence was an incentive to him to define more clearly the type of apostolic woman he envisaged for the congregation that would complete his foundation.

The present contribution attempts to shed some light on the issue by looking at one of the exceptional figures of apostolic religious women working in Turin, not only at the same time as Don Bosco, but, in a certain sense, in conjunction with him, sharing his concern for the physical, moral and spiritual welfare of "poor and abandoned youth", and specifically of poor and neglected girls and young women. Don Bosco's contacts with her were many and extended over a period of at least twenty-five years, culminating in her enrollment by the saint among the Salesian Cooperators in 1885, on the occasion of the reopening of her chapel in Via S. Pio V, closed for 14 years since the onset of the conflict with the Archbishop of Turin.

Mother Clarac was a woman of spiritual depth<sup>5</sup> and the foundress of a new religious family in the Church in the fruitful vein of St. Vincent de Paul.

Her claim to greater attention in Salesian studies, though, rests on the suggestion that Don Bosco may have wished to make use of her and her works in the founding of his second religious family, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bosco, John, *Memoirs of the Oratory*, (trans. D. Lyons, with notes by E. Ceria, L. Castelveccchi and M. Mendl), Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, New York, 1987, p. 297.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Amadei, A., *Biographical Memoirs*, (English) Vol. X, pp. 261, 263, 265. Quoted henceforth as *EBM*.

<sup>5</sup> Her cause of beatification was introduced at Rome on January 26, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Stella, P, *op. cit.*, pp. 208–212; Lenti, *op. cit.* in the wake of Stella writes, "It is believed that he [Don Bosco] had given some thought to establishing his congregation of women in association with her." (footnote p. 36).

## PART I

## Who Was Mother Marie-Louise-Angélique Clarac?

In the Turin of Don Bosco's time, there were many actively apostolic women. The Marchioness Barolo<sup>7</sup> springs to mind, along with Mother Enrichetta Dominici,<sup>8</sup> Superior of the Sisters of St. Anne of Providence, founded by the same Marchioness, and the recently beatified Sr. Francesca Maria Rubatto;<sup>9</sup> but

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<sup>7</sup> Juliet Viturnia Frances Colbert, marchioness of Barolo (1785-1864), was born at Maulévrier in France. After the death of her mother, she accompanied her father in exile in Holland and Germany during the French Revolution, returning to France at the time of Napoleon I. In 1807 she married the Marquis Carlo Tancredi Falletti di Barolo (1782-1838) and in 1814 moved with him to Turin where she became well known at court as a very cultured and wealthy woman, whose salon was frequented by the leading men of letters and politics of the day.

With the spiritual guidance of Lanteri, Guala and Cafasso, she developed a Christian life that while leading her in the way of devotion and penance also involved her personally in the works of mercy which she and her husband sponsored, seeking to imitate those works of charity they had observed in their journeys through France. She visited the women's prison, nursed the sick, supported numerous schools and other charitable works, founded two congregations of Sisters, and planned to found a congregation of priests under the patronage of Saint Francis de Sales. Her religious and educational ministry in the women's prison induced her to found works to keep girls from getting into trouble and to help young women who wished to reform.

After the death of her husband in 1838, the marchioness continued to found establishments for the benefit of the poor, particularly the female poor, and to concern herself with the congregations she had founded, without, however joining them. She died in 1864 and was buried in the church of St. Julia in Turin which she had had built. Her cause of beatification has been introduced.

(Cf. *Sussidi 2*, Dicastero per la Formazione, SDB, Roma, 1988, pp. 236-239).

<sup>8</sup> Blessed Maria Enrichetta Dominici (Caterina Dominici) (1829-1894) was born in Borgo Salsasio di Carmagnola. In 1850 she entered the institute of the Sisters of St. Anne founded by the Marchioness Barolo. After working at Castelfidardo, she was recalled to Turin to become the novice directress of the congregation. She was subsequently elected Superior General, an office she retained for 32 years. Especially after the death of the foundress, Mother Enrichetta was instrumental in the development of the congregation in Italy and India. In the spirit of the Marchioness, she worked actively in Turin caring for girls in straitened financial circumstances with a preventive intent similar to that of Don Bosco. It was to her that the saint turned on April 24, 1871 for the initial drafting of the first Constitutions of the new order of women he was in the process of founding. She further assisted the nascent congregation by sending, at Don Bosco's request, two of her Sisters, Sr. Francesca Garelli, the secretary general, and Sr. Costanza Gattino, to initiate the fledgling Mornese community into the regular forms of religious life. Mother Enrichetta Dominici was beatified by Paul VI in 1978.

Sr. Clarac stands out in a particular way for the dynamism and tenacity with which she pursued her goal of caring for the poor and abandoned.

“French by birth—Italian at heart” so reads the epitaph on her original tomb in the cemetery of Turin. In fact, Mother Clarac’s life can be divided into two approximately equal parts, the first spent largely in France (1817—1853) and the second mostly in Turin (1853—1887).

### Early Life 1817 - 1841

Marie-Louise-Angélique was born at Auch in Gascony (France) on April 6, 1817, the fourth of the five children of Jean-Gaudefroi Clarac and Ursule Cazes.<sup>10</sup>

Early in her childhood (1820/21) she moved with her family to Paris where her mother’s cousin, Henri Daignan, a member of the King’s personal bodyguard, had Ursule taken into the service of the Duchess de Berry.<sup>11</sup> Thus,

<sup>9</sup> Blessed Francesca Maria Rubatto (Anna Maria Rubatto) (1844-1904) was a native of Carmagnola. As a young woman she moved to Turin in 1863 and became actively involved in the religious and social apostolate of several parishes and institutions of the city, including the “little house of Divine Providence” and Don Bosco’s oratory at Valdocco where she was engaged in assistance and the religious instruction of the oratorians. It is recorded that Don Bosco held her in high esteem for her skill as a catechist, her availability for assistance, and her ability in putting his educational norms into practice. According to Mother Rubatto’s early Sisters, Don Bosco would have foretold that “his Mariettina” would become a religious and a foundress. (Cf. *Il Padre santo*, maggio 1988, Genova, Piazza Cappuccini, pp. 111–115, quoted in Pedrini, A., *Don Bosco e i Fondatori Suoi Contemporanei*, Roma, Opera Salesiana, 1990, p. 94) Competent educator though she was, Anna Maria felt particularly drawn to the care of the sick and in her youth had entertained the thought of entering the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Later, she came under the direction of the Capuchin, Fr. Angelico (Martini) da Sestri, and in 1885 founded the congregation of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters (Capuchin Sisters of Mother Rubatto), for the care of the sick in their homes and the teaching of religion in the festive oratories. Her work soon extended to South America and it was on her last visit to Uruguay in 1904, that she died at Montevideo. Mother Maria Francesca of Jesus was beatified by John Paul II in October 1993.

<sup>10</sup> According to Sr. Clarac’s most recent biographer, Ursule Cazes was probably the natural daughter of a well-known “man-about-town” and a woman surnamed Cazes. Her father had her baptized with the name Josèphe Dartigne but on her marriage in 1810, she assumed her mother’s name Cazes in order to be able to inherit from her. When in 1826 her natural father died, Mme. Clarac was left a rich legacy, part of which was fixed on Marie-Louise-Angélique who would later use it for her works of assistance among the poor of Turin. (Cf. Lorenzo da Fara, *Maria Luigia Clarac*, Torino, Istituto delle Suore di Carità di S. Maria, 1987, p. 49)

<sup>11</sup> Maria Carolina Ferdinanda Luisa de Bourbon-Sicile, duchess de Berry, (1798–1870), was the eldest daughter of Francis I of Naples. In 1816 she married

for the next ten years, the girl's life would gravitate around the Bourbon court of Louis XVIII (1814-1824) and Charles X (1824-1830) where, according to her first biographer, she had regular contacts with the royalty.<sup>12</sup>

The July revolution of 1830 that led to the downfall of Charles X and the subsequent ascent to the throne of Louis Philippe, forced the Claracs to flee from the capital and return to Auch. In later years Mother Clarac would recall her flight from Paris disguised as a country girl with a basket of vegetables over her arm.

Back in Auch, Mme. Clarac enrolled her daughter in the boarding school run by the Ursuline Sisters. The court may have been an education in many ways for Marie-Louise but her schooling had suffered during the years in Paris and she found herself ignominiously relegated to a class lower than that of her peers. However, pride and determination did not allow her to stay there long.

“I was very proud and felt deeply humiliated at having to admit that these children knew more than I did. Self love goaded me to study so hard and doggedly that within a short time I caught up with them and surpassed them, so much so, that before the school year was over, the teacher promoted me to the next class, to our mutual satisfaction.”<sup>13</sup>

While she was attending school, Marie-Louise received the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist for the first time and also that of confirmation, strengthening the basis of her Christian life which was soon to take on more radical dimensions.

The environment of culture and devotion impressed the receptive mind and heart of the young woman whose earlier experiences of the emptiness and

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Charles Ferdinand de Bourbon, Duke de Berry, son of the Count d'Artois, the future Charles X. Four years later her husband was assassinated, leaving her pregnant with his heir, the Count de Chambord (1820-1883). Forced into exile at the downfall of her father-in-law, she later staged an abortive insurrection against Louis Philippe in the interests of her young son. Sent into exile once again, she spent her remaining years in Italy and Austria. Later in life the Count de Chambord came to know of Don Bosco and his works and when critically ill in 1883, he insistently called for the saint to come and bless him in his castle of Frohsdorf. After much cajolery, in July Don Bosco reluctantly undertook the journey. A brief improvement in the Count's condition followed the visit but towards the end of August he died. Cf. Ceria, E., *Memorie Biografiche*, XVI, pp. 330-354.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Vadagnotti, A., *Suor Clarac*, Torino, Istituto delle Suore di Carità di S. Maria, 1953, pp. 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 53, quoting from the *Summarium super dubio*, Rome, 1955, p. 13 #40.

transient nature of external honors and wealth had left their mark upon her.<sup>14</sup> Hence, by the time she was seventeen, Marie-Louise began to become aware of an inner call to dedicate herself to God in religious life. However, when her parents began to suspect what was maturing in the heart of their daughter, they promptly withdrew her from the Ursulines' school, registering her in a public teacher-training institute. At the same time, they arranged a lively round of social activities in the hope of driving the idea of a religious vocation from her mind. Meanwhile Mme. Clarac intensified her own formative efforts, not allowing any failing in her youthful daughter to pass uncorrected. Marie-Louise was to be the impeccably mannered, accomplished, and capable epitome of young middle-class society. It was only later that she would appreciate her mother's severity:

“When, later, I entered the community, I understood what an excellent preparation for religious life this serious training had been. I had been formed to obedience, observance of a rule of life, and taught to live with others. I had also acquired skill in caring for the house, together with all those norms of polite living which are important in relating to others, in gaining their hearts and directing them to God.”<sup>15</sup>

While assenting to her parents immediate plans, the young woman never lost sight of what she increasingly desired. Finally, in 1841, they yielded, allowing her to enter the house in Auch of the Daughters of Charity whom she had come to know and admire through visiting the sick and the elderly in their care and whose life of sacrifice and devotion strongly attracted her.

### 1841–1848: Apostolate in France

On Oct. 18, 1841, Marie-Louise-Angélique entered the “seminary” or novitiate at the motherhouse of Rue du Bac in Paris. At the end of her year of discernment, the judgment expressed by her superiors was generally encouraging:

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<sup>14</sup> Later she would apostrophize her Sisters: “Oh Sisters, everything on the earth is smoke and vanity! Everything passes... Kingdoms fall, every human certainty vanishes like mist before the sun...The judgments of creatures change with every breath of wind...Do not let us lean on any human support, but let us find our strength in God alone who will never fail us for all eternity!” Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 54–55, quoting from the *Summarium*, p. 14, #46.

“Sr. Clarac: small in stature; fairly good at reading, writing, and arithmetic,...lively, even fiery but seems good; she is alert, sensible, capable, intelligent, devout, virtuous. Suitable for kindergarten work.”<sup>16</sup>

At last, on May 12, 1842, she was allowed to vest the habit of the Daughters of Charity with its characteristic head-dress so dear to her and which would later become a point at issue in the controversy with Archbishop Gastaldi.

Her parents, seeing her so happy, <sup>17</sup> came to accept the reality of her vocation and henceforth supported her in all her undertakings for the poor.

A few months in the “house of mercy” at Clermont-Ferrand preceded her first assignment in Toulouse where the young Sister experienced her first crisis of the apostolate. Her educational propensities having been recognized, she was entrusted with a large class of young children. Daily she experienced frustration and sense of failure at being unable to maintain discipline among the unruly little ones. The effort to remain patient each day took its toll and in desperation she wrote to the superiors in Paris requesting to be transferred elsewhere. However, she could not bring herself to mail the letter, fearing her own lack of faith. Then, according to her own testimony, one morning after Communion, she experienced a very deep sense of peace and an understanding of the beauty and value of suffering. She related:

“Desirous as I was of offering something to the Lord that was very costly to me, in exchange for his immense gifts, I grasped in a luminous way the beauty, the precious value of suffering, and how this is the most certain proof of love that a soul can give to Jesus. Responding to a generous urge, I offered myself to Him entirely, protesting that I was ready to remain in that painful task all my life, if that would please Him—in fact, I asked it of Him as a special gift of his love.” <sup>18</sup>

Now at peace with herself, Sr. Clarac’s repugnance gradually disappeared so that she could later write:

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<sup>16</sup> General Archives of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, in Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p 28; Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Summarium*, p. 16, #61, in Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p 60.

<sup>18</sup> *Summarium*, p. 19-20, # 66-67, in Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 33.



“For the five years that I spent in that house, I devoted myself with joy and good results to my little charges who wept at my departure, as though their mother were leaving them.”<sup>19</sup>

This incident has been presented at length for the light it sheds on the future Sr. Clarac. Despite numerous difficulties and very painful, frustrating situations in which she would find herself, she would never withdraw before suffering if the good of the poor and needy was at stake.

### Algeria 1848–1851

Before leaving the community of St. Etienne at Toulouse, Sr. Clarac made her religious vows on November 21, 1846. That same day, as an act of complete detachment, she asked to be sent to the foreign missions.

Her request was accepted and she was assigned to the recently opened mission in the new French colony of Algeria.

While waiting to leave, she worked in a “crèche”, a day center for small babies in Marseilles, extending her experience to an area of apostolate which she would later develop for working mothers in Turin.

Finally, in August 1848, she left with the group destined for Algeria, where since 1842 the Daughters of Charity had been attending to a “house of charity” at Algiers as well as running the hospital and orphanage at Mustafa.

Appointed to the staff of the latter work, Sr. Clarac remained there for three trying years. For her young charges she was an educator and a mother, but she soon became aware of other girls in the town who spent long hours in idleness, exposed to the attentions of generally undisciplined soldiers from the occupying garrison. Her response was typical of her later responses to the needs of girls and young women in Italy. With little encouragement, she set up sewing classes to offer the girls some useful employment, taking upon herself the responsibility of the work.

Lorenzo da Fara notes the emergence at this time of those traits of apostolic style which would characterize her in Turin: “[She had] a sure, enterprising way of acting, [and was] even somewhat authoritarian.”<sup>20</sup>

However, the pressure of work, the tension of misunderstanding and the climate which she had always found pernicious, undermined her health so alarmingly that she was recalled to Paris for treatment and care.

Two years later, the doctors advised the superiors to send the Sister to Piedmont where they considered the climate would aid her complete recovery. So, on May 21, 1853, Sr. Marie-Louise-Angélique Clarac arrived in Turin.

<sup>19</sup> *Summarium*, p. 20, #68, in Lorenzo da Fara, *op.cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

Unbeknown to her, it was to be "the city of her Thabor and her Way of the Cross: the city of her Calvary and the sepulcher of her Resurrection."<sup>21</sup>

### Apostolate in Turin (1853–1887)

The Daughters of Charity had opened their work in Turin more than twenty years before with service in a military hospital. A novitiate had been erected at Rivarolo and on October 15, 1833, the Superior General of the Congregation of the Missions had erected the first province of the Daughters of Charity in Italy, with Fr. Marcantonio Durando, CM,<sup>22</sup> the Vincentian provincial, as its superior. The central house of the province was situated in Turin in the district of San Salvario, not far from Porta Nuova. It was the center for a hospital, a crèche, a kindergarten and a school catering to the first two elementary classes. The Sisters were well accepted throughout the city by the people to whose welfare they dedicated themselves in hospitals, shelters, schools, workrooms, and other forms of social assistance to the poor.

Sr. Clarac spent her first months in the capital of Savoy as an assistant portress in the busy house of San Salvario. After a short time in Chieri, in January 1854, she was nominated "soeur servante", or superior, of the "house of mercy" to be opened in the parish of St. Maximus in Turin. She was thirty-six years old, experienced, energetic and enterprising.

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<sup>21</sup> Mons. A. M. Cimichella. From a homily given at the Résidence Les Cascades, Montreal, June 21, 1986, for the opening of the centenary year of the death of Mother Clarac, in Alessi, A., *Une Femme Courageuse*, Montréal, Les Soeurs de Charité de Sainte-Marie, 1987, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> The servant of God, Marcantonio Durando, CM (1801–1880), was born in Mondovì of a well-off family. He entered the Vincentians in 1818 and was ordained in 1824. Thirteen years later he was appointed the Provincial of Northern Italy and Sardinia, a position he retained until his death, forty-three years later. His spiritual-administrative ability may be gauged from the title sometimes applied to him of "refounder of the congregation" in Piedmont. In fact, not only did he foster the growth of the Vincentians but he also furthered the expansion of the congregation of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul throughout Piedmont and in other parts of Italy. According to the ecclesiastical legislation of the time, the Vincentian Provincial also had jurisdiction over the Daughters of Charity and so Fr. Durando was able to establish numerous "houses of mercy", staffed by the Sisters, which became real centers of assistance to the poor. In 1862 his authority was extended to all the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity throughout the Italian peninsula. In 1865 he founded the congregation of the Daughters of Jesus the Nazarene for the assistance of the sick in their homes and the education of "abandoned youth". He died in Turin in 1880 and his cause of beatification was introduced in 1941. (Cf. *Sussidi* 2, p. 262–263).

## Girls at Risk in Turin

The impact of industry in and around Turin had profoundly affected the structure of society, particularly family life. Girls in poorer families were now expected to contribute to the family budget by the wages they earned in the factories. Often their contact with the new models of society was difficult and even traumatic. Threatened and yet attracted by a life that promised them greater freedom and independence, or at least a means of escaping the misery of the home, the girls were exposed to the risk of moral and emotional compromises.<sup>23</sup>

By 1854 the attention of several Christian philanthropists had been drawn to the plight not only of the "poor and abandoned boys" but also to that of deprived or neglected girls, subjected even more than their brothers to manipulation and exploitation by society. The Marchioness Barolo had already established the "Rifugio" or "Rifugino" where she housed "numerous unfortunate girls who in early adolescence had been contaminated by abominable persons, or corrupted by evil domestic examples."<sup>24</sup> The same lady had funded a "hospital for sick girls"; and the congregation of the Sisters of St. Anne of Providence, which she had founded, attended to the education of about eighty "good girls of modest means."<sup>25</sup> These Sisters were involved in the education of girls in various institutes in Turin, founded by the King or members of the aristocracy. "Today we would define her work as directed to the marginalized at high risk, those who often end up victims of violence and immorality."<sup>26</sup>

There were even some "festive oratories" for girls; one, founded in 1850 by the theologian Saccarelli,<sup>27</sup> was located in via S. Donato, not far from Valdocco. Quoting F. S. Reggio, Bertero notes that Saccarelli's festive oratory and Sunday School opened its doors to some three hundred young girls, who during the week earned their living in factories in the city. On Sundays they "were taught their religion and educated in Christian piety by devout Turinese teachers. At the Oratory they occupied themselves with practice in reading and writing, and so, in the evening, they could happily return home, their purity untarnished."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 82. The author quotes a telling page from A. Mazzoleni, *La famiglia nei rapporti con l'individuo e con la società*, Milan, 1870, p. 200.

<sup>24</sup> Cibrario, L., *Storia di Torino*, vol. 2, (1846) Ristampa anastatica, Bottega d'Erasmus, Torino, 1965, p.100.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>26</sup> Bertero, A., "Don Bosco, le sue suore e l'Oratorio femminile a Torino" in Archivio storico della città: *Torino e don Bosco*, Torino, 1989, p. 278.

<sup>27</sup> Gaspare Saccarelli (1816-1863), chaplain to the court, later founded the Institute of the Holy Family in 1856 also in Via S. Donato.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

Ten years later an oratory more according to the model of Don Bosco's would be opened for "poor and abandoned girls" by the Jesuit, Fr. Sapetti.

### St. Maximus

In the meantime, Sr. Clarac and her community undertook the development and expansion of the school and workroom for poor girls begun by Countess Giuseppina Melina di Capriglio. They extended their assistance to younger needy children, the sick in their homes, and the hungry who arrived at the daily soup kitchen.

After precarious beginnings caused by inadequate premises, the re-located work stabilized and flourished in Casa Azaria in Via Borgonuovo under the capable and tenacious direction of Sr. Clarac. There was no lack of work but her concern was particularly aroused by the plight of many orphaned girls and others left to fend for themselves. "With their Superior at their head, the Sisters penetrated those filthy attics, traversed the streets of the city, touched by the sight of the dirty, ragged children and the misery, idleness and dangers to which so many girls were exposed."<sup>29</sup>

In 1856 a decree issued by the minister of public education required scholastic instruction to be imparted only by suitably qualified and authorized personnel. This posed a new problem for Sr. Clarac as the teachers in her classes were not certified. In a move that is in some ways uncharacteristic of Sr. Marie-Louise, given her openness to the cultural advancement of the poor, and her discernment of the evolving role of the woman in society, she decided to close the regular classes, transforming them into a "women's craft center" divided into sections according to age, so that the girls would be kept from the streets and provided with the means to earn an honest livelihood. Initial difficulties, on the part of the Ladies of Charity regarding the financing of the venture, disappeared. The workrooms prospered, furnishing an incentive for neighboring parishes to establish similar centers.

The increasing numbers of those assisted by the Daughters of Charity in Via Borgonuovo necessitated the lease of extra premises. New works were added to meet the needs of the working poor: a dispensary for the medication of sores and wounds; a kindergarten for three hundred children and a crèche with eighty places, where working mothers could leave their babies, returning periodically during the day to feed them. Naturally all the activity required more Sisters whom the superiors at San Salvatio were not slow in supplying.

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<sup>29</sup> Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 66.

## Sardinia

Sr. Marie-Louise's success made her a natural choice when the superiors were looking for someone to send to Sardinia to instill new life and enthusiasm into the orphanage there. Before handing over the work to the Sisters who accompanied her, she taught them how to obtain discipline among their charges; she set up a sewing room, revived the flagging association of the Ladies of Charity and, from her own pocket, provided the basic equipment needed to give the orphanage some semblance of dignity.

## Viale del Re - Via S. Pio V

On her return to Turin, towards the end of January or early February 1861, she was faced with the demands of the Ladies of Charity to reduce the number of works at Via Borgonuovo since both the finances and the accounting were becoming burdensome. Rather than curtail the activities and harm "her masters, the poor", she took upon herself the task of bookkeeping.

Soon even the extra rented quarters in Via Borgonuovo could no longer accommodate the multiform activities. With the permission and encouragement of her superiors in Paris and the assistance of Fr. Durando, Sr. Clarac proposed moving the works to a more suitable site. She mentioned the matter to Don Bosco who was loath to see such a good work disappear from that area. In fact, he suggested that she establish her works near his own oratory of St. Aloysius on the Viale del Re (Corso Vittorio Emmanuele II). Her work would not only be of a social nature, offering shelter and occupation to the many needy girls who abounded there, but it would take on a missionary dimension, curtailing the influence of the Waldensians which was strong in that part of the city. Her work for girls and Don Bosco's work for boys would be a powerful antidote to the active proselytizing of the protestants.<sup>30</sup>

A property on Viale del Re, with an entrance on Via S. Pio V, became available, and on Sept. 2, 1862, the negotiations for its purchase were satisfactorily concluded.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to other activities, the Waldensians had recently opened a school for girls of well-off families and another for poorer boys and girls. Cf. Lemoine, J. B., *EBM* IV, p. 245.

<sup>31</sup> The deed of purchase stated that the property was held in the name of the Ladies of Charity but Sr. Clarac would be responsible for payment and would be completely in charge of the property and the activities carried out there. Finances for the purchase were provided by Sr. Clarac's friends and relatives in France. In all of this, she acted with the consent of her superiors, including Fr. Durando who was present at most of the meetings of the Ladies of Charity. For details of the transactions cf. Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 80-90; p. 280-287 and Lorenzo da

By October 1865 all the works of Via Borgonuovo had been transferred to Viale del Re 27. These works now consisted of the crèche, a kindergarten for 3–6 year olds, three sections of sewing classes, an orphanage for girls, a dispensary for the poor, and home visits to the sick. To these were added a day school for better-off girls to draw them away from the Waldensian school, a weekly religion course for young ladies, a sewing workroom for young women in which the cream of Turin's society ladies gathered twice a week to make garments for the poor.

Don Bosco had advised Sr. Clarac to open a large festive oratory for girls to counteract the Waldensian influence and propaganda. Within the festive oratory, pride of place was to be given to a large chapel which she had built and dedicated to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.

The house on Viale del Re prospered, thanks also to the enthusiastic support of the new Archbishop of Turin, Mons. Alessandro Riccardi di Netro who was concerned about the Waldensians' activity in the area. Finding in Sr. Clarac's institute and Don Bosco's oratory of St. Aloysius, powerful safeguards for the young, he was unstinting in his support, especially of Sr. Clarac's enterprises which he visited frequently, both formally and informally even at recreation time.<sup>32</sup> He willingly gave his consent to the Salesians officiating in the chapel.<sup>33</sup>

Sr. Clarac's last years attached to the Daughters of Charity at San Salvatio were not easy ones. In 1869, Sr. Teresa Durando died suddenly at the age of thirty-six. Sr. Teresa, the niece of Fr. Marcantonio Durando, had been an excellent liaison between her zealous superior and the community's direct superior in Turin. "She had always remained close to Sr. Clarac as her assistant and advisor and had given the best of herself in her rapport with her superior, treating her with esteem, veneration and affection, offering her advice, anxious to understand but also to counsel when Sr. Clarac's explosive temperament required some reflection."<sup>34</sup> Sr. Teresa had been an element of peace in the community; her death came at a moment when her discretion and prudence would have been an asset to Sr. Marie-Louise.

The following year she was deprived of the support of Archbishop Riccardi di Netro who died on Oct. 16, 1870.

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Fara, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–95. The notary involved was Cav. Giuseppe Turvano, the same who had negotiated the sale of the land for Don Bosco's oratory of St. Aloysius.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Lemoine, J. B., *EBM* IX, pp. 55–56.

<sup>34</sup> Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, pp. 107–108.

### Dispute About Sr. Clarac's Testament

To these personal sorrows was added in 1870 the dispute over her will which finally led to her separation from the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. With the approval of her major superiors, Sr. Clarac had made her will in favor of her works at Viale del Re. When invited by the Visitor for the province to alter the will, leaving her inheritance to the congregation in the name of four specified Sisters, with no condition ensuring the continuity of her specific works in Turin, she demurred. Caught between preoccupation for the works which were clearly serving the poor of Turin and whose worth had been recognized by her superiors in Paris, and compliance with the wishes of the local superiors, she requested further time to deliberate. Unable to communicate with the authorities in Paris, owing to the Franco-Prussian War, she hoped that in the meantime a cessation of the struggle would open the way to discussion with the superiors in France. Such was not to be.<sup>35</sup>

In her dilemma she turned to Don Bosco for advice. "He was a trusted friend and understood better than anyone else, the value of Sr. Clarac's social works."<sup>36</sup> He declined, however, to assume the responsibility of any decision, advising her to turn to Luigi Moreno, bishop of Ivrea.<sup>37</sup>

### Bishop Moreno's Advice

After much prayer, towards the end of April 1871, Sr. Clarac went to consult the bishop. The question of the two wills was not entirely new for Bishop Moreno and his counsel was categoric. He told her to "thank the Missionaries [Congregation of the Missions] and the Daughters of Charity and continue her works, no longer under their dependence but under obedience to the bishop of Ivrea."<sup>38</sup>

She asked if she could keep the Vincentian rule and habit to which Bishop Moreno replied in the affirmative, suggesting only that she introduce

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<sup>35</sup> The debate over the new will was long and complex. Only the barest outlines are given here as a necessary step in the process of Sr. Clarac's separation from the Daughters of Charity. For more details cf. Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 117-121; Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-115.

<sup>36</sup> Lorenzo da Fara., *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>37</sup> The see of Turin was still vacant after the death of Archbishop Riccardi di Netro. Bishop Moreno was the dean of the Piedmontese episcopate and so the most appropriate person to be consulted. It is interesting to note that in his diocese there already existed two women's congregations whose history was connected with the early attempts at establishing the women's branch of the Vincentian charism in Italy, namely the "Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception of Ivrea" at Rivarolo, and the "Daughters of Charity of Montanaro."

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



some modification to the habit that would distinguish it from that of the Daughters of Charity.

### Separation

Having returned to Turin, on May 3 she informed the Visitor of the Daughters of Charity for Turin, Sr. Marie Grand, of her separation from the congregation, together with Sr. Agostina Rota, who would remain faithful to her all her life, and three other sisters who worked with her in Viale del Re. "We preserve our dear vocation, we are always Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, observing the same Rule, doing the same works, and keeping the same habit, with some slight variations."<sup>39</sup>

Months of negotiations followed with the Ladies of Charity regarding the ownership of the property on Viale del Re and Via S. Pio V. Communications passed to and fro between the new Visitor of the Sisters, Sr. Felicity Lequette, at San Salvario and Sr. Clarac in Via S. Pio V. Tension ran high on both sides. The desired reconciliation, which seemed imminent at one moment, failed to materialize. Contributing to the rift was Sr. Clarac's conviction that the community of San Salvario was no longer dedicated solely to the relief of the poor but was turning its attention to the less needy. In this opinion, it seems, she was not alone. However, despite the effective and affective separation from the Congregation of the Daughters of Charity, her commitment to the ideal and the Rule of St. Vincent never wavered. At the end of 1872, on December 6, she wrote to Sr. Lequette:

"Nothing can make me give up my vocation or my habit; the love I have for them surpasses all considerations...we are determined, with the help of God, to continue the good we are doing. He alone knows the spirit that animates us; we seek only His glory and the good of our neighbor. All our confidence is in Him and his holy Mother. Up till now He has not abandoned us and He will continue to bless us in our work which we do for Him."<sup>40</sup>

The next twelve years of suffering, humiliations and recriminations that Sr. Marie-Louise endured have already been mentioned elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> and go beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, that with the demise of Archbishop

<sup>39</sup> The entire letter is found in the *Summarium*, documentary supplement, pp. 531–532, in Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–118; Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 125–126.

<sup>40</sup> *Summarium*, documentary supplement, p. 563, in Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Lenti, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 35–37.



Gastaldi and the advent of Cardinal Alimonda, Sr. Clarac's life and foundation entered a new phase of peaceful development, crowned by her death in Moncalieri on June 21, 1887.

## PART II

### Mother Clarac and Don Bosco

Her activities in the house of Via Borgonuovo and particularly in that of Via S. Pio V, brought Sr. Clarac into frequent contact with Don Bosco and the Salesians. Luigi Fiora, the former postulator of Sr. Clarac's cause of beatification, goes as far as to speak of Bosco and Clarac as "an inseparable spiritual union."<sup>42</sup>

We have already seen her asking the saint's opinion about moving to larger premises before buying the house on Via S. Pio V. His advice led her to establish the girls' oratory there and build the chapel. Once the new house was operational, Don Bosco fulfilled his promise of sending his Salesians to attend to the religious needs of the oratory. In fact, he sent some of his most promising young priests including Fr. John Cagliero, Fr. Paul Albera and Fr. Francis Dalmazzo.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Fiora, L., *op. cit.*, p. 19: "[il] binomio inscindibile: MADRE CLARAC - DON BOSCO."

<sup>43</sup> Sr. Teresa Porta testified, "I was with some of my Sisters at the shrine of Our Lady at Oropa in 1916 when the second successor of St. John Bosco, Rev. Fr. Paul Albera, was there accompanying His Eminence Card. John Cagliero. Both His Eminence and Rev. Fr. Albera told me that as young priests they used to go to our house in Via S. Pio V for the exercise of their ministry and they had known Mother Clarac. They said they had admired her virtue and her zeal, and to us Sisters they left this advice: 'Always preserve the spirit of your Foundress.' However, I wanted to know more and I accompanied Fr. Albera for a good stretch along the avenues near the shrine [...] at the end of our talk, Fr. Albera said that his sister, who was a Daughter of Charity, had told him that her community (that is the Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity) was not pleased that Don Bosco protected Mother Clarac and encouraged her to go on [...]" *Summarium* pp. 189-190 # 640-641, in Rosso, A., "Sr. Teresa Porta la glorificatrice" in *Maria Luigia Clarac il coraggio dell'amore*, Supplemento al N.6/1987 de 'ILa Buona Parola', p. 35.

Sr. Teresa Porta (1880-1971), Daughter of Charity of St. Mary and Superior General 1930-1946. Although she had not known Mother Clarac personally, she had been the private secretary of Mother Odile Serra, Mother Clarac's successor as Superior General of the congregation, and general secretary for four years. For the last twenty-five years of her life she was closely involved in the process of beatification of Mother Clarac, consulting archives and documents, bishops and civil authorities.

Such was the interest and support of the saint for Mother Clarac's work that in a memoir of April 28, 1874, addressed to the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Raffaele Monaco la Valletta, she wrote:

"I have had a large establishment erected but before beginning it I spoke to Don Bosco about it. He advised me to build a big oratory to gather the factory girls on Sundays and feast days, but to do it in such a way that the local people could also benefit from it. He promised, moreover, to send me a priest on Sundays to celebrate Mass and explain the Gospel. He did this before Archbishop Gastaldi's arrival in Turin. Therefore, with good reason, I can call Don Bosco the founder of our oratory."<sup>44</sup>

Mother Clarac also sent the prelate a letter in which she requested him to appoint Don Bosco as the "superior" or chaplain of her establishment because she was convinced that "his piety, charity and prudence would be of great benefit both to the girls and to [the Sisters]."<sup>45</sup>

That she could consider the saint in this light indicates that the contact between the two educators and their institutions had not ceased after Sr. Clarac's separation from the Daughters of Charity. It also points to "the opinion she had formed of Don Bosco in the sphere of ministry to women and girls."<sup>46</sup>

### Style of Education

Angela Bertera suggests a dependence of Sr. Clarac on Don Bosco, not only in the founding of the large oratory at Via S. Pio V but also in the method she adopted in dealing with the girls. "Don Bosco's encouragement [...] transpires from her educational method, from her attitude regarding the girls and from the educational principles she followed. This is so obvious that Luigi Fiora, postulator of the cause of Sr. Clarac's beatification, uses Don Bosco's key words—"reason, religion and kindness"—to illustrate her presence among the girls."<sup>47</sup>

While this may indeed be so, there is no way of verifying it. It might, instead, be more exact to speak of convergence of principles and methods drawn

"She approached her research from a strictly historical-critical standpoint, without yielding to superficial enthusiasm or understandable biases.[...] Sr. Teresa sought the truth and only the truth." Rosso, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>44</sup> *Summarium* p. 585, quoted in Castano, L., *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Summarium*, p. 585, in Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>46</sup> Castano, L., *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>47</sup> Bertera, A., *op. cit.*, p. 280.

from a common Christian educational tradition. Sr. Clarac had eight years' experience as an educator before she arrived in Turin and while not everything had been an unqualified success, the balance was positive. Particularly in Algeria had she demonstrated her sensitivity to the special needs of girls at risk. Lorenzo da Fara noted that the relationship that finally came to exist between the young Sister and her charges in Toulouse "was no longer simply that of a teacher and her pupils, but rather that of a mother with her children."<sup>48</sup>

For both educators the problem of young people at risk was one of extreme urgency. Her response, like that of Don Bosco, transcended the provision of material assistance to offer the young possibilities of self-development and the acquisition of skills which would enable the girls to maintain a certain human dignity through earning "an honest living". Above all, they both sought to bring to the young the love of Christ: "The fields of Valdocco and the suburb of Borgo Nuovo offer the same spectacle of physical and moral squalor and dereliction. There they [Don Bosco and Mother Clarac] settled, seeking to bring to life that charity which frees and saves the young most exposed to degradation."<sup>49</sup>

Vaudagnotti clearly states, "The knowledge that Mother Clarac was a perfect educator was widespread in Turin and even the persons hostile to her recognized it."<sup>50</sup> A past student of Via S. Pio V, Mrs. Augusta Vaira, used to tell her family that "in the education of the young, [Mother Clarac] was excellent, perfect, exquisitely affable and genteel. The powerful attraction of her gaze and her religious dignity inspired love and fear, affection and respect."<sup>51</sup>

She was evidently endowed with natural educational gifts, honed by practice, which while being reminiscent of those of Don Bosco, were not necessarily dependent on him or on his method of education.

Sr. Marie-Louise was firmly rooted in the traditional educational values encouraged by the Church, believing that the principles of education need to be integrated by religious values if one is to arrive at the formation of the whole person. Sr. Teresa Porta testified,

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<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> Fiora, L., *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 235. Writing to the Prefect of the congregation of Bishops and Regulars on June 1, 1874, Archbishop Gastaldi admitted that Sr. Clarac was "richly gifted; of an outstanding activity, she desires to do good. [...] She is at the head of a large female establishment which effectively sets up a barrier against Protestant propaganda." (In Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 182.) Five years later the same Archbishop wrote to Cardinal Ferrieri on February 10, 1879, giving his impression of Sr. Clarac: "...a head as hard as iron and the heart of a volcano, joined to a certain ability in educating girls." (In Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p. 161).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 235.

“In the education of young girls [Sr. Clarac] aimed above all at forming them in virtue, sound piety, work and the fulfillment of duty; she strove to make them understand the importance of their mission in the family, in the church and in society. In a word—she wanted to prepare them for life.”<sup>52</sup>

The girls had to be corrected and, continues Sr. Porta,

“...her great charity was revealed also when she fulfilled her duty of admonishing both Sisters and girls. No harshness, no anger whatsoever, no annoyance or any passion was noticed in her, but only the sincere desire for the good of souls and a motherly understanding of the state of mind of the guilty one. In this way she succeeded in correcting them without humiliating them and without them losing their good name. If the failing had been in private, so was the correction. If, instead, it had been in public; then it had to be corrected in public; but she did it with her characteristic discretion.”<sup>53</sup>

Despite her energetic, even fiery nature, when the personal good of the girls was concerned, Sr. Clarac exhibited what was possibly her outstanding characteristic, namely, motherliness. Anxious about the physical well-being of her charges, “with a vigilant eye she often discovered the causes of their illness before the doctor and would suggest the appropriate remedies.”<sup>54</sup> If for Don Bosco, “education was a matter of the heart”, no less so was it for Mother Clarac. “Understanding as she was, she entered into the needs of the heart, satisfying as far as she could those desires for affection, especially in the orphans who had been deprived of the tenderness of their parents [...] She availed of every occasion, like name days, special anniversaries, to give them some little surprise to make them happy and they were heard to exclaim enthusiastically, ‘How good our little Mother is!’ In this way her holy words of encouragement to virtue, work, sacrifice and suffering penetrated more deeply into their souls, giving rise to the most generous resolutions for good. That was the main purpose of her holy enterprises.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Positio*, p. 127 #421, in Fiora, L., *op. cit.*., p. 20.

<sup>53</sup> *Positio*, p. 127, #427, in Fiora, L., *op. cit.*., p. 21.

Zelinda Signotti, a former pupil of Sr. Clarac, stated “How we loved our Mother! Whenever one of us committed a fault, our good Mother would correct us, even severely if necessary, but then at recreation time, she was the first to come towards us with such a motherly way about her and she would do everything to keep us cheerful.” Quoted by Sr. Porta in *Positio*, p. 129 #434, in Fiora, L., *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>55</sup> *Articoli*, p. 47 #80, in Fiora, L., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Witnesses testify to Sr. Clarac's impartial but personal love for the girls, for her genuine concern for each one: "She took an interest in each and everyone, obtaining the greatest good for their souls and bodies."<sup>56</sup> The same witness continues speaking of Mother Clarac's concern for the lasting good of her pupils, describing a practice fundamental to Don Bosco's own system: "She saw to it by means of her Sisters that [the girls] never lacked supervision, because, she used to say, the devil can avail of just a moment in which they are left unattended to tempt them and to ruin them."<sup>57</sup>

Mother Clarac's work, then, was very close in purpose, style and method to that pursued by Don Bosco. Of the female institutions in Turin, it was possibly the one most germane to his.<sup>58</sup> It would not, therefore, be surprising that her name should be mentioned in relation to the steps he undertook in founding his second religious order.

### Mother Clarac - the Foundation Stone of Don Bosco's New Congregation?

While Sr. Clarac was developing her work in Turin, Don Bosco was well aware of the situation of needy girls. "The saint was too intuitive not to notice that, limited to boys alone, his work would have been defective and inadequate to resolve the social problem which occasioned and almost determined its existence."<sup>59</sup>

Many founders conceived their congregations as two-fold and it is quite probable that the thought of founding a congregation of women "to do for girls what the Salesian were doing for boys" presented itself to Don Bosco during the early years of the Salesian Society. Lemoyne suggests as much in his account of a conversation he held with the saint on the evening of June 24, 1866:

"Tell me, Don Bosco," I asked ... "don't you think something is wanting to complete your work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Won't you do anything for girls? ... Don't you think that a congregation of nuns founded by you and affiliated to our Society would crown your work? ... Could they not do for girls what we are doing for boys?" ...

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<sup>56</sup> Sr. Teresa Porta in Fiora, L., op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Pedrini, A., *Don Bosco e i Fondatori Suoi Contemporanei*, Roma, Opera Salesiana, 1990, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> Castano, L., op. cit., p. 40.

[Don Bosco] remained silent for a few moments and then surprised me by his answer, "Yes, this too will be done! We shall have nuns, but not yet. A little later."<sup>60</sup>

Two years later, in May 1868, the saint confided to Fr. Cagliero his intention "of founding a congregation of women similar to that of the Salesians. They were to ... work for the education of girls of the poorer classes"<sup>61</sup>

John Baptist Francesia recalled a similar incident from 1870:

"It was in the year 1870. About this time Don Bosco felt the urge to provide Christian instruction and education for young girls along the lines of his work for boys, and to gather factory girls together on Sundays for healthy recreation and to teach them the most necessary truths of religion."<sup>62</sup>

When asked by Francesia when he would establish the envisaged congregation, the saint replied, "It will depend on the dispositions of Divine Providence."<sup>63</sup> The reference to "factory girls", while not being necessarily exclusive nor of immediate implementation, suggests an urban context far from the rural environment of Mornese where the congregation was eventually founded. On Sundays Sr. Clarac was gathering in her oratory at Via S. Pio V girls who spent the rest of the week toiling in various factories and establishments of the city. Was Don Bosco thinking of her and her work and awaiting "the dispositions of Divine Providence" in the outcome of the conflict over her will which began in 1870? One can only conjecture.

His intention was approved by Pius IX at an audience on June 23, 1871,<sup>64</sup> but by then practical steps had already been taken to transform the "pious union" of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate into the religious congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Although in the 1860s Don Bosco was in contact with the group of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate engaged, under the guidance of Fr. Dominic

<sup>60</sup> Lemoyne, J. B., *EBM* VIII, p. 187.

<sup>61</sup> Deposition of Bishop Cagliero, January 12, 1908, in FMA General Archives. Cf. Capetti, G., *Onwards in the Course of a Century*, FMA, 1972, (printed in Bombay), p. 18.

<sup>62</sup> Francesia, G. B., *Suor Maria Mazzarello*, 1906, p. 76, quoted in Capetti, G. (ed.) *Cronistoria. Chronicles of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, New York, 1981, Vol. I, p. 228. Quoted henceforth as *Cronistoria*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Amadei, A., *EBM* X, p. 265; *Cronistoria*, I, p. 240.

Pestarino,<sup>65</sup> in an educational apostolate for girls in Mornese,<sup>66</sup> he did not consider them as founding elements for his congregation until the late 1860s or early 70s. In fact, as late as 1867, he was prepared to allow Fr. Pestarino to take up residence in Genoa, depriving the “Daughters” of their main source of formation.<sup>67</sup> Fr. Pestarino was later to play a key role in the founding stage of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, precisely because of his formative role and knowledge of the young women involved. Don Bosco, in fact, left to him the choice of the first Sisters, the presentation of the Rule to the young women, the election of the superior of the group living in community and the transfer of the fledgling Sisters to the “Collegio”. Had the founder already set his sights on the Mornese group it seems unlikely that he would have been willing to allow Fr. Pestarino to leave the village and daily contact with the group.

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<sup>65</sup> Fr. Dominic Pestarino (1817–1874) was born in Mornese. He studied at Acqui and the seminary in Genoa where he was ordained a priest in 1839. After his ordination he remained at the seminary as Prefect of the younger seminarians and deepened his friendship with the Rector of the church of St. Sabina, the Ven. Joseph Frassinetti. Having returned to Mornese in 1847 or 1848, he revitalized the parish through his preaching, catechetical work and encouragement of sacramental life. Following the practice of his mentor, Fr. Frassinetti, he developed a rich associative life in the parish. Of particular note and relevance to the present essay was the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate, from which, with Don Bosco’s intervention, grew the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA). Fr. Pestarino came to know Don Bosco in 1862 and was immediately captivated by his spirit. He became a Salesian but was asked by the founder to remain at Mornese where he was Don Bosco’s closest collaborator in the initial stages of the foundation of the FMA Institute and the first director of the FMA house in the same village. He died at Mornese on May 15, 1874. (Cf. L’Arco, A., *Don Domenico Pestarino - in orbita tra due astri*, Elle Di Ci, Leumann (Torino), 1980; Maccono, F., *L’Apostolo di Mornese*, Sac. Domenico Pestarino, Torino, SEI, 1926.

<sup>66</sup> Prior to the foundation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians on August 5, 1872, Don Bosco had visited Mornese on at least five occasions: October 1864 (*EBM* VII, pp. 449–453); December 1867 (*EBM* VIII, pp. 428–429); April 1869 (*EBM* IX, pp. 285–294); May 1870 (*EBM* X, p. 259, *Cronistoria* I, pp. 223–227); April 1871 (*EBM* X, p. 261, *Cronistoria* I, pp. 232–236).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. L’Arco, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 86–92. Ven. Joseph Frassinetti and Fr. Hyacinth Bianchi had founded an institution for junior seminarians in straitened circumstances in Genoa. Frassinetti wrote to Don Bosco requesting his support and assistance. The saint replied, praising the work, but pleading a lack of personnel to help directly in the enterprise. Fr. Rua suggested, with Don Bosco’s approval, that Fr. Pestarino be invited to assume the direction of the establishment. Frassinetti welcomed the suggestion but negotiations and the settlement of affairs in Mornese, including the matter of the unfinished boarding school, dragged on too long and he finally had to content himself with the deacon Antonio Piccardo who was the prefect in the archdiocesan junior seminary at the time. Fr. Piccardo later became Frassinetti’s successor as superior of the Sons of Mary Immaculate.



In fact, Don Bosco's early contacts with the young women of Mornese were no more significant from his point of view than those of several other priests who visited Mornese and who were more directly involved in the life of the Pious Union. It seems only after the death of his friend and Fr. Pestarino's earlier mentor, Fr. Joseph Frassinetti, in January 1868, that Don Bosco began to take a really active interest in the "Daughters". Even then, one might wonder if it was in view of his proposed congregation or in relation to help that would be required for the boys' boarding school then under construction in Mornese.

In the person of Sr. Clarac Don Bosco had before him the example of an outstanding educator of poor girls, who, during these years, was developing her works in such a way that while remaining legally dependent on her local and general superiors, she was nevertheless in complete charge. She herself also bore the larger financial burden of capital expenditure and day-to-day maintenance and running costs.

Given her growing disaffection from the San Salvario community, did Don Bosco foresee Sr. Clarac's rift with her congregation? Did he hope that Bishop Moreno would redirect her to him, to be placed under his guidance, bringing her works and Sisters with her? Was Don Bosco waiting and hoping for this moment of Sr. Clarac's separation from the Daughters of Charity in order to propose his idea of a religious congregation to her? Was her conviction of the value of the works at Via S. Pio V and the necessity to preserve them in any way influenced by the Salesians?<sup>68</sup> Did he, in fact, ever consider Sr. Marie-Louise in connection with his own plans? Or in conversing with her, had he realized the depth of her attachment to the Vincentian way of life whether she remained in the congregation or not? We have no way of knowing, but a series of tantalizing coincidences fuels the imagination.

#### April 1871

The last week of April 1871 was a decisive week both for Sr. Clarac and for Don Bosco. Lack of accurate documentation<sup>69</sup> makes it impossible to reconstruct the chain of events in chronological sequence, but what details there are point to a concentration of significant happenings in a short space of time.

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. Stella, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>69</sup> For example, research conducted by the Sisters of Charity of St. Mary has been unable to determine the exact date of the meeting between Sr. Clarac and Bishop Moreno. Canon Vaudagnotti seems to have encountered similar problems judging from the letter included in the appendix to his biography of Sr. Clarac, in which Bishop Paolo Rostagno of Ivrea, writing in 1953, lamented: "In the diocesan archives there is very little on Bishop Moreno. In regard to this great bishop there are amazing gaps and silences. For example, we can't even find his body!" (in Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 300).



Sr. Marie-Louise visited Bishop Moreno that week, towards the end of April. It is probable that on her return to Turin she reported the bishop's decision to Don Bosco.

In the meantime, on April 24, Don Bosco had gathered the members of his council and presented his idea of founding a congregation of women, asking them to make this the object of special prayer for enlightenment during the following month.<sup>70</sup>

Presuming on the direction that "enlightenment" would take, the same day, Don Bosco wrote to Mother Enrichetta Dominici, the Superior general of the Sisters of St. Anne (of the Marchioness Barolo), requesting her assistance in drawing up the Constitutions for the new Institute, of which he had already spoken to her.<sup>71</sup>

Then "toward the end of April"<sup>72</sup> or "at the end of April",<sup>73</sup> Don Bosco paid a visit to Mornese, ostensibly to view the progress of the school building and "to take in hand all the necessary adaptation of Carante's house."<sup>74</sup> Having seen the life and spirit of the group of young women living together in the "Casa dell'Immacolata" and the leadership qualities of Mary Mazzarello, "he returned to Turin with a plan in mind concerning the little group of the Daughters that was beginning to take on shape and consistency."<sup>75</sup>

Up to this point Don Bosco had made no move in regard to the proposed foundation which could not have been reversed, abandoned or redirected. Only when the Clarac situation was coming to a head, did he set in motion those actions which would lead to the definitive choice of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate of Mornese as the nucleus of his new congregation.

Very tentatively Pedrini notes: "To a limited degree, Don Bosco had placed his hopes and intentions on [Sr. Clarac] as a reliable person for the

<sup>70</sup> Amadei, A., *EBM X*, p. 261.

<sup>71</sup> "Dear Rev. Mother, I entrust to you the Rule of our congregation, so that you may read it and see if it can be adapted to an institute of religious women, in the sense that I mentioned when I had the honor of speaking with you. You should begin from no. 3: The purpose of this institute of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. Then delete and add as you, in your wisdom, judge best to found an institute whose members will be true religious in the eyes of the Church, but free citizens in the eyes of the State.

"I should be very pleased if any chapters or articles of the Rules of St. Anne could be adapted...."

Original in the General Archives of the Sisters of St. Anne of Providence; quoted in Bosco, G., *Scritti Editi e Inediti, Vol. II: Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice 1872-1885*, testi critici a cura di C. Romero FMA, 1983, p. 35.

<sup>72</sup> Amadei, A., *op. cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>73</sup> Capetti, G., *Cronistoria I*, p. 232.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Cronistoria I*, p. 236.

erection of his future women's institution which he was planning to found. But perhaps the truth of the matter is that Clarac was only the beginning or the providential orientation in the search for the right person who would eventually become the Cofoundress of the work...."<sup>76</sup>

Stella does suggest a connection between Bishop Moreno's decision about Sr. Clarac and Don Bosco's request to Mother Enrichetta Dominici to draft "a constitution for a congregation called the *Daughters of Mary Immaculate*,"<sup>77</sup> inasmuch as the saint may well have foreseen the outcome of the consultation with Bishop Moreno. Regardless of the actual decision, it is quite possible that, after speaking with Sr. Clarac, prior to the visit to Ivrea, he had already come to his own conclusion; namely that the Mornese group of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate would serve his purpose better.

### Why Did Don Bosco Look Elsewhere?

Sr. Marie-Louise-Angélique was well educated, enterprising, experienced and endowed with financial means. With Don Bosco's help she was "completing on the feminine side what he was generating in the world of the boys."<sup>78</sup>

Had Don Bosco been intent on choosing her and no other, would the decision of Bishop Moreno have been sufficient to deter him from his purpose? The Bishop's solution gave immediate relief to a painful situation but it did not necessarily mean that no other future options were available to Sr. Clarac.

In speaking with her before her visit to Bishop Moreno, Don Bosco may have come to realize her identification with the Vincentian Rule and spirit. In her letter of separation she was adamantly clear on that point, "We preserve our dear vocation, we are always Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, observing the same Rule, doing the same works, and keeping the same habit with some slight variations."<sup>79</sup> She would struggle for many years with the archdiocesan curia and the Roman curia over the question of retaining the habit and especially the head-dress, the "cornette", of the Daughters of Charity. Her fidelity to St. Vincent, though, went far beyond externals. For years she had meditated on and made her own his teachings and Rule. She had become Vincentian in mind and heart. She "wished to live and die a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Pedrini, A., *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>77</sup> Stella P., *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>78</sup> Peradotto, F., "La Comunione dei Santi" in *Maria Luigia Clarac. Il Coraggio dell'Amore*, p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. *Summarium*, documentary supplement pp. 531-532 in Lorenzo da Fara, *op. cit.*, p.p. 117-118; Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>80</sup> Vaudagnotti, A., *op. cit.*, p. 197.

While Don Bosco had much in common with St. Vincent, including a spiritual bond with St. Francis de Sales, and a spirituality of action directed to the alleviation of the sufferings of the poor, he also diverged significantly on some issues which would have rendered problematic Sr. Clarac's dependence on him. Both saints believed firmly in serving Christ in the person of the poor, but Don Bosco does not seem to have considered himself a servant of the poor in the same sense that St. Vincent did, to be "commanded" if need be by them.<sup>81</sup>

Sr. Clarac was gifted in the education of girls but she did not wish to restrict her apostolate to the sphere of education. Nursing the sick, distributing food and clothing, running soup kitchens were equally pressing needs which, in the spirit of St. Vincent, she felt called to engage in. Her charism was one of pastoral charity shown through a diversified service to the poor, while Don Bosco's pastoral charity found expression, above all, in the education of the young in need or at risk. It would have been virtually impossible for her to adapt to Don Bosco's position.

Added to this difference of charism, must be the consideration of the personalities of the two protagonists. Sr. Clarac has been described as "firm, decisive, unyielding in her own views";<sup>82</sup> she saw a need and acted. How malleable would she have been under Don Bosco's command? A readiness to have him as the religious director or chaplain of her institute was not to be equated with an equal readiness to submit to him as to her direct superior. And Don Bosco demanded obedience. He recognized and welcomed the talents of his subordinates but above all he required docility to his directives. When Fr. John Cagliero was appointed the Director General of the new Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the founder stated in regard to Mother Mazzarello's government: "This is the only thing she has to do, *conform herself* to the spirit, system and nature of the Oratory, the Constitutions, and the deliberations of the Salesian Society."<sup>83</sup>

As far as is known, Don Bosco did not ask Sr. Clarac to join him in founding his congregation and in the year of her separation from the Daughters of Charity, his choice fell definitively on Mary Domenica Mazzarello and the Mornese group of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. One cannot but wonder what Sr. Marie-Louise-Angélique's response would have been. The foregoing suggests that she too would have realized the impossibility of a deeper collaboration that demanded the renunciation of the Vincentian charism.

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Coste, P., *The Life and Work of St. Vincent de Paul*, (trans. J. Leonard, CM), Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, 1952, Vol. I, p. 355.

<sup>82</sup> Posada, M. E., *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>83</sup> Maccono, F., *Saint Mary Mazzarello*, (trans. Sr. Catherine Hurley FMA), Haledon, New Jersey, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 219.

At thirty-four years of age, intelligent though she was, Mary Mazzarello had received no formal schooling. Her experience of society was limited to that of her village and she had no direct knowledge of the physical, moral and spiritual deprivation of the hordes of girls and young women in the towns and cities. Financially, too, she had nothing to offer. In everything but her spiritual depth and zeal for good, Mary Mazzarello was the opposite of the cultured, experienced Sr. Marie-Louise-Angélique. Don Bosco's choice of her was providential.

Nevertheless, Don Bosco's collaboration with Mother Clarac had not been without fruit. In her he had witnessed the measure of zeal, sacrifice for the young, educative skill and success of which a motivated, apostolic religious woman was capable. The founding of a women's congregation matured during the years of his closest contact with her, a contact which in those years was more frequent and more personal than it was with Mary Mazzarello in the years preceding the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She provided the example of controlled dynamism and energy harnessed in the service of female youth such as he envisaged his own Sisters providing. With his guidance, the uneducated country girl from the hills of Monferrato would become no less an apostle and would in turn form many others to bring "a response of salvation to the profound hopes of girls and young women."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, Rome, 1982, art. 1.