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The Contribution of Don Bosco  
and of Mother Mazzarello  
to the Charism of the  
Foundation of the F.M.A. Institute

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## FOREWORD

Holiness is the complete fulfilment of the human personality and, as such, is the very hallmark of its own uniqueness.

If this be true, then when two saints have joined forces in a project, the outcome cannot be considered as the work of one only; nor again as the sum-total of both contributors, but rather as a totally new and original creation—one that clearly bears the impress of its co-makers.

This seems to me the inevitable conclusion to which this new booklet leads us, step by step. It is not a preconceived thesis, but the outcome of historical research recently undertaken; which by the sheer weight of its documented evidence draws us stage by stage to the final synthesis.

It has not been an easy task. More so, as it has involved making emerge from the shade those very aspects of M. Mazzarello's personality that she tried so hard to conceal, so that only the figure of Don Bosco would shine. Over the years such an attitude has led to the opinion that Don Bosco was the greater luminary, a sort of "Brother Sun" in a solar system whose satellite "Sister Moon"—in the person of Mother Mazzarello—drew her lesser light from his.

Now the truth has gradually emerged that in reality we are dealing with two great luminaries, each with its own special greatness and brilliance. From their joint contribution, one combining originality and harmony, there has risen in the Church "a Community of Consecrated Apostles, brought about by a gift of the Holy Spirit and through the direct intervention of Mary, Help

of Christians.” (Constitutions F.M.A. 1975, Art. 1).

For this reason, at a given moment in time we have begun to speak of Mother Mazzarello as “a co-foundress”; a title now officially recognized in the Constitutions (Art. cit.); since she has shared both by her fidelity and own enterprise in the foundation’s charism. If the word *fidelity* reaffirms the decisive role played by Don Bosco, the word *enterprise* stresses the important originality of M. Mazzarello’s contribution.

Such a contribution, spelt out in close detail in this present study, was not merely that of a faithful feminine version of Don Bosco’s own work and spirit. Insofar as we can talk of any “version”, by that fact alone we are already dealing with a valid, original contribution; with a “co-foundation”. In fact, as every good translator does a real work of art by reproducing the original masterpiece, while lending it the genius of his own style, so we can say that M. Mazzarello expressed the core of Don Bosco’s thought in her own well-versed dialect, adding her own mature spirituality and apostolic experience.

For M. Mazzarello, it was not simply a question of turning out a carbon-copy for girls, of what Don Bosco had done to benefit the boys. Again, we are not dealing purely with a psychological adaptation to feminine needs. The very fact that this opinion has been held so long, till now in fact, goes to prove Mazzarello’s humility; at the same time it highlights just how hard it is to grasp and make one’s own the mystery behind anyone’s personality.

It would be a mistake in M. Mazzarello’s case to put down to some sort of “passive fidelity and receptivity” on her part, certain signs observed in her life: such as, the tension involved in realizing an ideal; her

scrupulous regard to preserve the original spirit; and her exactness in cherishing and passing on a heritage by becoming its living witness, never once tampering with or dimming the initial light.

But all this is not enough on its own. The author goes far beyond this point with a documentation that, although far from exhaustive, is already totally convincing. More so, since the author uses such caution and almost Socratic moderation in drawing any conclusions of his own.

Don Colli puts forward the claim on solid grounds that, even before her meeting with Don Bosco, there was present in M. Mazzarello an independent vocation parallel to his; that, fitting in with God's providential plan, she had already come to maturity as a chosen instrument; that Don Bosco had neither formed nor, strictly speaking, chosen this instrument, but had met her—under God's guidance—along the way.

We could say that in Mary Mazzarello Don Bosco had had prepared for him by God "a Helpmate like himself", to recall the biblical expression; that God had pre-ordained her for Don Bosco and that with the wisdom of the saints he had "discovered" her, giving her that final formation before seeing her off on her Great Divine Adventure. God's fire, alight within her for so long, was now to fuse with Don Bosco's to make but one flame.

In the context of these facts, it is wonderful to read and reflect on this divinely inspired project. It will serve to confirm, if need be, just how truly the Salesians and the F.M.A. can claim, in all humility and gratitude, that their Families have been raised up "by God's initiative" and "through the direct intervention of Mary".

D. Gino Corallo.



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## THE MEANING OF THE BOOK'S TITLE

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Having been asked for a conference on Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello to deepen our insights into the spirit of the F.M.A. Institute, it seemed to me rather pointless and a trifle academic to present a simple comparison between the holiness of one and the other. By the same token, again, a simple study of the personal relationship between the two founders seemed to fall short of the mark.

We cannot say that Mary Mazzarello was really “the spiritual daughter of Don Bosco” in the same sense that Jane De Chantal can be called “the spiritual daughter” of the Bishop of Geneva. We cannot even call her “a spiritual child” in the same way as we can of the pioneer Salesians who were, without exception, all formed from childhood onwards by Don Bosco personally; and so were able to absorb his spirit to the full. (A rare if not unique happening in Church History, and one which after the initial phase was to be repeated in the F.M.A. Institute.)

In fact, when Don Bosco first met her in Mornese in 1864, Maria Domenica Mazzarello was no longer an adolescent girl, but already a mature woman with a programme of spiritual formation behind her: one wisely mapped out by the hand of Don Pestarino.

This plan of formation was to leave an indelible mark on her own spirituality, and clear traces of it were to flow on into the Institute’s initial charism when the Spirit called her to set up her Foundation.

Not even after the first meeting, nor even after the

Institute had started, can we say that Mary really became “a spiritual daughter” of Don Bosco, in the sense referred to earlier. Insofar as Don Bosco was the founder of the Institute, he intervened more at the institutional level than at the level of spiritual direction properly so called. At most, we can speak of “spiritual direction” in a broad sense; in the strict sense, Don Bosco never wanted to take this task on himself. At the start, he entrusted it to Don Pestarino personally, and after his death he passed it on in turn to other Salesians in whom he had full confidence: Don Joseph and Don John Cagliero (cousins), Don Costamagna, Don Lemoyne, etc . . . Under Don Bosco’s general direction, all these had as much influence as he did in shaping the distinctive features of this emerging Congregation.

If, however, as seems likely, we cannot accept a spiritual dependence of Mary Mazzarello on Don Bosco, neither can we accept that her animating spirit was quite unrelated to his. It was not an altogether different spirit from the one that had inspired Don Bosco to found his Festive Oratory and, later, his Salesian Congregation: two diverse spirits—Oratorian and Congregational—that would later harmonize under grace to form his Institute’s charism.

Besides these two possible ways, Providence was to reveal a third, even more admirable way. That very Spirit which had raised up Don Bosco was now to move Maria Domenica as well, in an equally mysterious way. It was to lead her along a path parallel to his, granting her a spirit similar to his own until the day their paths would come together to undertake a combined mission to save the young.

The young woman who in 1864 had stood fascinated

by Don Bosco's words was not an adolescent carried away by passing enthusiasm, but a spiritually mature woman. In Don Bosco's voice she had detected clear echoes of her own inner voice that had led her in revealing stages, throughout what seemed chance events, to make a start at Mornese on a work "which had the flavour and familiarity of Valdocco's Salesian Spirit". (Castano. L. "Salesian Holiness"—Turin, SEI, 1966, p. 35).

Her unqualified loyalty to Don Bosco, her docility and obedience bear no trace of an automaton, a poor, unlettered country-girl fascinated by the imposing personality of the Saint and Wonderworker; it is a fidelity wide-awake to the plan of God that can only be fulfilled in a single, shared mission to save the young.

It is in this context of "a refined Salesianity" lived out and witnessed to by M. Mazzarello, that we would like to unearth from the initial charism of the Institute just what was her own personal contribution and, again, what was Don Bosco's part.

Given the importance that Vatican II has placed on the initial charism of each Religious Institute, which it sees as the central reference-point of any reform—in fact, as the perpetual reservoir of the Holy Spirit—then no one can fail to see just how vital and urgent (at least, in theory) such a reflection as the present study should be in our times.

## CHARISM OF THE INSTITUTE'S FOUNDATION

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Before going straight into the study of each co-founder's contribution, it seems necessary first to clarify what we mean when we speak of "the foundational charism" of the F.M.A. Institute. As my own terms of reference indicate, it is not my purpose here to give an abstract conference on Charisms in general, or on Charisms of Religious Institutes in particular: topics already well covered elsewhere. I simply want to outline briefly what this concept means when applied to the F.M.A. Institute.

By the foundational charism of the F.M.A. Institute, we mean "the original grace": the experience, the spiritual reality lived out first at Mornese and later at Nizza during M. Mazarello's own lifetime, and taken as a whole. Even from this loose definition on its own, we can understand what a complex reality is involved in the concept; we can appreciate just how many factors—alongside the all important action of grace—have gone to shape such a charism and make it a reality.

Obviously not all these factors have exerted an equal influence on the Institute's foundation; there is a gradation. Yet each of them, in history, has helped fashion the Institute's identity in some special way, or from some unique angle. To draw a profile, it is not only the bold outlines that serve our purpose, but even fine details which at first glance seem unimportant; yet even to alter only a line or two, however faintly, is enough sometimes for the profile to appear no longer true to the original.

By far the most decisive element in defining such a charism is the personality and intention of the Founder, which is enshrined in the Religious-apostolic project that underlies the very base of the Institute.

But, in turn, what is also decisive, though on a smaller scale, are the instruments that served Don Bosco in bringing such a project into being. Among these, the figure of Mary Mazzarello holds undisputed pride of place; she it was whom Don Bosco chose as foundation-stone of the rising Institute. Her work in this regard has been so influential as to merit for her in all justice the title of Co-foundress.

However, we would misunderstand the reality of the situation if we did not recognize also the important influence of those other Sisters, who, with and like M. Mazzarello, have done their bit to create that spirit of Mornese which still remains the fresh, sparkling spring from which all future F.M.A's can and must draw the pure spirit of the Institute.

At Mornese, just as at Don Bosco's Oratory, the Canonization of M. Mazzarello meant not only the official Decree of Holiness for one person, but the canonization of an actual Spirit, of an environment of holiness that Maria Dominica had helped more than anyone to create. But such a holy ambient could not have come about without the supporting influence of all the other Sisters. The very beautiful volumes of the Chronicles, moving in their simplicity, offer ample documentation to support this theory. There the lives, and still more the premature deaths of so many heroines and poor ones among the pioneers, provide testimony to the intense love of God and souls that reigned at Mornese.

Far from diminishing the merits of M. Mazzarello, such evidence puts her in a clear light as the very prime-

mover in fostering such an atmosphere of fervour and heroic holiness.

This analysis, thin as it is, of the elements that went into shaping the charism of the F.M.A. Institute makes us aware of the shortage of material on the topic. I ask your pardon if I confine myself, instead, to considering the major contributions of Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello.

Even if this present section is incomplete, I think it will prove beneficial, although it still needs to be grafted in, at a more leisurely rate, to the more important influences still to be considered.



## **DON BOSCO'S CONTRIBUTION**

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In the presentation of the text of the Constitutions printed in 1878, Don Bosco exhorted the F.M.A. to keep always present in their prayers the soul of Don Pestarino, their "First Director", whom God "had used to lay down the foundations of the Institute".

Despite this statement, stemming from Don Bosco's humility and respect for the former Daughters of Mary Immaculate, I think that no-one today would take from Don Bosco the title of Founder. Indeed, as the Institute did emerge with its clear Religious-apostolic aim, with its special life-style, and with its own education system, it was something — if not contrary to — at least far beyond the horizons first envisaged by either Don Pesterino or Mary Mazzarello.

This fact lends compelling weight to our method of tying the Charism of the Institute to the Founder's original intention. Such an intention, in this light, becomes a vital key to our understanding of those helpers who assisted Don Bosco in getting his project off the ground.

### **1. Don Bosco's motives in founding the F.M.A. Institute**

We can disregard here the motive given by Don Bosco of wanting to found the Institute so that it "would be a living monument" in the church of his gratitude to Mary, Help of Christians (c.f. Chron.

I,306). This is a purely personal motive that tells us absolutely nothing about the intrinsic aim of the work. Instead we would prefer to ask what was the precise reason why Don Bosco did actually decide to found the F.M.A. Institute?

(A decision taken, too, despite his own very strong reluctance to undertake such an apostolate for girls. cf. M.B.X., 594).

We have no clear or more explicit answer anywhere in Don Bosco's life than this one: "To set up a Religious Institute that would take care of young girls, with the same programme that the Salesians have already put into action among boys." (TO DON PESTARINO IN 1862—M.B.X,218); "To do now for girls that little bit of good which we have already—by God's grace— begun to do among boys." (DISCOURSE TO ORATORY-CHAPTER MEMBERS, 24th APRIL, 1871—M.B.X, 594).

From the time of Don Bosco's general statement, spoken in confidence to Don Pestarino, to the explicit concrete proposal that he made to his Council Members to set his project afoot at Mornese, with the nucleus of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate under Don Pestarino's direction, some nine years had elapsed; 1862 to 1871. During these years many other people had shared Don Bosco's secret, at least in part. (IN 1863, A LETTER TO MRS. PROVERA., M.B. VII, 297; IN JUNE, 1866, A CONVERSATION WITH DON LEMOYNE, M.B. VII, 418; IN 1870, A CONVERSATION WITH DON FRANCESIA, CHRON. I, 232-233). However, we cannot detect the slightest trace of a change from Don Bosco's original intention. It remains just as clear and just as precise: to found a Religious Institute of Women that would be not only

a Sister but a Twin-Sister of the Salesian Congregation. The only difference would be the diversity in the field of work (boys-girls) that stemmed from the diversity of roles (men-women) in the Salesian Identity.

It is this same project that Don Bosco presented to Pope Pius IX in private audience in 1871, having first obtained an affirmative vote from his Council (cf. M.B.X, 597). And it is still this very same project that, after a suitable period of reflection, gained the approval requested. "My advice", said Pius IX, "is that they have as their scope the instruction and education of young girls, just as the members of the Society of St. Francis De Sales are already doing on behalf of boys." And he concluded, "As regards dependence, let them depend on you and on your successors to the same extent that the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul depend on the Vincentians ("Lazarists"). Draw up their Constitutions along these lines, and start the experiment." (M.B.X, 599).

Don Bosco took this advice about the relationship that should exist between the two Institutes in a very literal way. Father Peter Stella claims that, apart from what had to do with the government and discipline of the House and Institute (Const. F.M.A 1878, TIT II, Art. 3), "the end-result of such legislation left the Sisters in a condition of almost total dependence on Don Bosco and his representatives." (P. STELLA: DON BOSCO IN THE HISTORY OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT AND PRACTICE, I, 198).

And, in order to keep this bond of dependence, the same Don Bosco who in his time had agitated so vigorously to have his own Salesian Congregation approved by the Holy See, now did precious little or even displayed positive opposition to obtaining such

approbation for the F.M.A. This attitude of Don Bosco's was to cause quite a considerable delay on the part of the Holy See in regularizing such an unusual situation. (cf. STELLA, O.C., 203-207).

It remains for us to ask just why Don Bosco adopted such an attitude. Rejecting as quite unthinkable the suggestion that Don Bosco wanted to keep the Institute in a state of perpetual subservience, Father Stella puts forward the following hypothesis:

“Perhaps he saw in front of him at that time these gentlefolk, so compliant, who made up the F.M.A.; and he was convinced that their very vital work would be blessed provided they were guided and set to work along practical, common-sense lines. He must have seen how urgent it was that the Sisters be not only kept going, but correctly instructed and inspired; all formed by the same Spirit and given experience in educational work that hardly one of them had been prepared for.” (STELLA, O.C. 205).

All these are credible enough theories—all things considered—but they are based solely on the passing historical position in which the Institute found itself at that time. Yet in the overall picture of the ultimate aim mentioned earlier, does such a desire to keep two Institutes tied one to the other (and leaving aside the formal bond of juridical dependence) throw any light at all on their deeper need for a vital, intrinsic connection, in order to bring about the project envisaged by their common Founder? We are speaking, namely, of a single Salesianity which would attune itself differently, but only in response to the different demands of an apostolate for young girls, instead of for young boys.

## **2. Realization of Don Bosco's plan through the formulation of the text of the Constitutions**

I think that we are all convinced of the major importance of a Constitution for determining the identity of a Religious Institute. While leaving the direction of the Institute to his collaborators, on this point over a long period of time, Don Bosco showed how personally concerned he was in drawing up the text.

The beginnings of this work confirm Don Bosco's clear aim spoken of earlier. The very day (24th April, 1871) on which he publicly committed himself to this work in front of his own Salesian Chapter, to ask their advice in founding the F.M.A. Institute, he forwarded to Mother Enrichetta Dominici, the Superior of the Sisters of St. Anne, the text of the Constitutions of the Salesian Congregation (probably still in manuscript form). He did this so that "she could be kind enough to read it and see if it could be adapted to an Institute of Women Religious"; while he in turn was agreeable "to accepting those chapters or articles of the Rule of St. Anne which could be adapted". (UN-EDITED LETTER IN GENERAL ARCHIVES OF ST. ANNE SISTERS).

Even a sketchy outline of the path followed by Don Bosco in reaching the formulation of the text of the Constitutions would be to go beyond the modest boundaries set for this booklet. (We will refer readers to the historical notes on the Constitutions of the F.M.A. by SISTER GISELDA CAPETTI).

We would like to confine ourselves here to a comparative summary of the text of the Constitutions of 1885 (the first redaction during Don Bosco's lifetime)

with the Constitutions of the Sisters of St. Anne, and with the text of the Salesian Congregation approved by the Holy See in 1874. (cf. M.B.X, 956-996). Precisely because it is a summary, we evidently cannot dwell on every detail.

Still, to appreciate Don Bosco's way of thinking, I think it will be sufficient—and probably more useful—to pause at the more significant details, those that open up a way for us to trace those basic tendencies which guided the founder in drawing up the text.

For example, aware as we are that he kept the Sisters of St. Anne text as his working base, it will still be of interest to pick out not only what has been borrowed from such a text, but even more what has been omitted; to see, on the other hand, what has been introduced from the Salesian Congregation text; and what, finally, has been inserted specifically for the F.M.A. alone.

### **In general**

Broadly speaking, we can say that by comparison with the Salesian Congregation text, the F.M.A. constitutions reflect deeper spiritual motives and keep more closely attuned to feminine psychology; while, contrasted with the St. Anne Sisters' Constitutions, what comes through is a tendency to simplify all Religious discipline.

### **In particular — the scope**

Concerning its fundamental aim, we can discern a close parallel with that of the Salesian Congregation.

In both of them, we are dealing in the first analysis with “seeing to one’s own perfection and being of help to save one’s neighbour”, especially young people of the poorer classes. As a logical flow-on, it follows that both Institutes “will, before anything else, set about bettering themselves in Christian Holiness, and then spend their lives in helping their neighbour”. (Const. F.M.A 1885, TIT. I Act I, 3; cf. Salesian Society Const. 1874, Chap. I, Art. 1, 2).

#### External organization of the Institute

While the Sisters of St. Anne depended on each local Bishop (TIT. III), the F.M.A. Institute is under the highest and immediate dependence “of the Rector Major who in each house is represented by the Director” and, for the whole Institute, “by a member of the Salesian Superior Chapter or by another suitable priest with the title of Director General of the Sisters” (TIT. II, Art. I). Their dependence on the local Bishop is limited “to the administration of the Holy Sacraments and to the carrying out of the Liturgy.” (TIT. II, Art.4).

#### Vow of chastity

Here Don Bosco preferred to draw his inspiration in the main from the text of the Sisters of St. Anne (TIT. XIII) which was more closely attuned to feminine sensitivity on this topic.

Yet, besides this, he drew also from the Salesian Constitutions (Chap. V, Art. 1, 6) the heavily underlined theme that “in this Institute the virtue of chastity

must be cultivated to a high degree". (TIT. II, Art. 1); the recommendation is repeated "to flee from idleness" (TIT. III, Art. 3), and in place of the warnings "he who does not have a well-founded hope" etc. and "of the greatest carefulness in dealing with the young who had already been victims of human passions" (Chap. V, and 2, 3), he stressed instead the flight "from any sort of friendship that is not for Jesus Christ's sake" (TIT. III, Art. 3).

For the F.M.A. only he singles out the close relationship that exists between the Vow of Chastity and their Consecration to God in Christ.

"It is for this reason", he reminds them, "that they make the Vow of Chastity, by which they consecrate their very selves to Jesus Christ, pledged to keep themselves, mind and heart, as His own pure and spotless brides." (TIT. III, Art. I).

### Vow of obedience

In the F.M.A. text, Don Bosco condenses a little all the spiritual motives found in the other two texts (Sisters of St. Anne TIT. XIV; Salesian Const. Chap. III).

He does not speak, either, of "blind obedience", as is found in the St. Anne Sisters' Constitutions; although in their guidelines he does want to see "an obedience without delay, without objections, and without any sadness; without judging or criticizing the clear or hidden reasons for the order". (TIT. IV, Art. 2).

We can point to the familiar tone of the parallel article in the Salesian Constitutions, Chap. 4, Art. 5, "Let no one obey while resisting in word, deed, or

heart". The ever-so-slight difference in *tone* help us discern an altogether different psychology.

From the Salesian Constitutions (Chap. 3, Art. 3), he introduces the last article (TIT. IV, Art. 5). "Let no Sister take upon herself as a busybody the presumption of asking for anything or refusing it. On the other hand, if she should realize that something is really harmful or necessary, let her mention it to the Superior, who will, with all promptness, provide what is needed—according to the Spirit of the Institute."

This is a very important article, because it indicates the type of relationship desired; it shows in detail the filial style of obedience and the paternal or maternal use of authority that Don Bosco wanted to see at the very heart of his houses; so that there would be no trace of the old monasticism about them, just a slight trace of a social community, and the all-pervasive Spirit of the Family.

### Vow of poverty

Since the text (like that of the Salesian Congregation) was formulated for an Institute "whose daughters must be true Religious before the Church, while at the same time Free Citizens before the State" (LETTER, OC. TO M. ENRICHETTA), then the accent falls more on "detachment from every earthly good" rather than on mere absence of ownership (TIT. V. Art. I). It is a detachment that is proved by a life of total community, by not keeping anything for one's private use "without the special permission of the Superior" (BID); and by a complete readiness, when need arises, "to suffer heat, cold, thirst, hunger, weariness and contempt, if this be for the greater glory of God and

the salvation of one's soul." (TIT. V, Art. 5).

This article is taken from the Salesian Constitutions, where it is found not in the context of poverty but in the section on admission to the Society (Chap. XI, Art. 10).

At the end of this short chapter on Poverty Don Bosco inserts an article that has a strong Franciscan flavour about it. "To rouse themselves to the observance of voluntary poverty," he advises, "let the Sisters reflect that it is precisely this virtue that makes genuine followers of the Divine Redeemer, who was rich and became poor, and who, in order to leave us a great example, took Poverty as a Bride, being her life-long Companion from birth till death." (TIT. V, Art. 6).

This heritage our founder has bequeathed to his Spiritual Daughters only. In it one can detect, perhaps, far-off echoes of his youthful aspirations; in it we can see, for certain, a reflection of the more-than-Franciscan poverty of his own childhood.

### Structures of the Institute

Apart from the total dependence of the Institute on the Rector Major and on those who represent him at any level (especially in relation to outside matters) the Institute's structure for internal government closely follows that of the Salesian Congregation. But there still remains the task of singling out exceptions that are unique to the F.M.A. Constitutions.

Concerning the criteria for the election of the Superior (a topic not dealt with in the St. Anne or Salesian Constitutions) Don Bosco underlines the point that she should be not only exemplary, prudent and zealous but must be noticeably "gifted with charity"

(TIT. VII, Art. 14). In the following article, a most beautiful one, really, it is again stressed that she must be without the slightest ambition (let alone mania!!) to hold power.

“Though we cannot imagine that a humble F.M.A. could let herself be led by ambition to use deceit and intrigue to obtain promotion, nevertheless to prevent that possibility, we declare that any Sisters who are notoriously ambitious, just as they are unworthy and inept, should be regarded as ineligible.” (TIT. VII, Art. 15). On the strength of these criteria, it is not hard to see Don Bosco’s wish that only those Superiors who reflect the humility, simplicity and motherly goodness of M. Mazzarello herself should be eligible to succeed to the direction of the Institute.

There is still a final detail that lends a touch of feminine psychology to the task entrusted to the Vicar. (A task similar to that of the Catechist General—old regime!—in the Salesian Congregation (cf. Chap. IX, Art. 8): that of admonishing the Superior whenever she fails in her duties. In order that she should not mistake “the fireflies for the lamplight” and not see her duty as a pedlar of gossip, he insists that “she will not give any correction unless the matter is serious, and not before having prayed for God’s light to know if the correction intended is really beneficial; and whether the time, place and manner of giving advice are appropriate.”

On the other hand, to lighten the Vicar’s burden, the article goes on: “From time to time let the Superior herself freely come along to ask whether she has any observations to make, to afford the Vicar the chance of carrying out her kindly service more easily.” (TIT. VI, Art. 6).

## Spirit of the Institute and the essential virtues

We can find a description of the Spirit of the Institute summed up for us in a short article of the chapter dealing with the Novice Mistress. (TIT. IX, Art. 6). Here it declares that the Spirit which the Novice Mistress must try “to instil into and animate the novices with” is a “Spirit of charity and gentleness, a spirit of abnegation and sacrifice.” These phrases, short as they are, still focus on two keypoints: the “charity-gentleness’ complex and the “abnegation-sacrifice” combination. In this way, they portray for us, in a few brush strokes, the authentic spiritual features and identity of the F.M.A.

It is within the ambient of this Spirit, that the Chapter entitled “The Essential Virtues Proposed” should be read (TIT. XIII). This whole brief chapter is an extract from the Constitutions of the St. Anne Sisters.

What is important for us to emphasize in such a context in order to grasp the Founder’s way of thinking is not so much the different order of the virtues listed, but the difference in degree of importance that it proposes, major variations from the original.

For example, first rank is not given to “simplicity and virginal modesty” (Const. St. Anne TIT. VIII) but to “patient and zealous charity not only towards the very young children, but also towards older adolescent girls.” Then expanding the range of such apostolic charity, Don Bosco adds, “Charity towards any other person with the aim of doing greater good for souls”. (TIT. XIII, Art. I).

At the second level are ranked “simplicity and modesty”, from which Don Bosco has erased the

adjective “virginal”, but has added the very Salesian phrase “with holy cheerfulness”, to give a unique tone to the preceding phrase “simplicity and modesty”.

Elsewhere, dealing with the qualities that novices should have, Don Bosco had already pointed out very clearly the apostolic-educative aim of such virtues. “Let the novices”, he enjoins, “be cheerful, sincere and open-hearted” (St. Teresa) because “only those Sisters with such a character can attract young people to piety and religious practice.” (cf. TIT. IX, Art. 5).

Following “simplicity and modesty with holy cheerfulness”, he then comes to, “a spirit of mortification, both interior and exterior.” He concludes this article with the phrase “a rigorous observance of poverty”, taken from the Constitutions of the Sisters of St. Anne.

At the third rank, instead of “the spirit of prayer” Don Bosco puts “obedience of will and judgment”, to which he adds that virtue dear to M. Mazzarello: “humility in receiving any advice or correction, gladly and without any remarks, besides accepting whatever duties are entrusted to her.”

At the fourth and final level comes the spirit of prayer “through which”, Don Bosco adds, “the Sisters will devote themselves with all eagerness to the practices of piety.” Then, again taking his cue from the St. Anne text, he goes on, “Let the Sisters keep themselves in the presence of God and give themselves up completely to His kindly Providence.”

We may possibly be surprised by the fact that Don Bosco puts the Spirit of Prayer in the very last place. But we should not forget in this regard that the Salesian motto—the very badge of identity—is not “work and prayer” (Benedictine) but “work and temperance”. (M.B. XII, 466). What stands out in the Salesian is

not his prayer, but his humble work; generous without fail, dedicated, and with no self-interest. However, we ought not beat around the bush. Work, as Don Bosco intends it, demands an intense spirit of prayer, a deep piety, which is at the one time its secret spring and its ultimate explanation.

That this is Don Bosco's viewpoint is confirmed for us in the last article. It is another precious rule that Don Bosco gives only to his Spiritual Daughters.

Having concluded the outline of essential virtues, Don Bosco sums up: "These virtues ought to be constantly practised and become part of the fibre of every F.M.A., because both the active and contemplative life must grow apace in them; reflecting both Martha and Mary, a life of apostolic zeal and of angelic holiness." (TIT. XIII, Art. 5).

Here we find Don Bosco's secret revealed, the most demanding aspect of the entire Salesian Spirituality—an intense activity that never sinks into activism; a deep spirit of prayer that never wanders off into escapism or singularity, but which is translated without fail into action, namely apostolic work for God and for souls.

#### Distribution of time and practices of piety

Comparing the daily time-table of the F.M.A. with that of the Sisters of St. Anne, we can say that Don Bosco has left a lot more room for work and less for common prayer, to fit in better with the life-style that he wanted to see in his Institute; even if, as is the case, the F.M.A. prayer-time is longer than that allotted to the Salesians.

From the Chronicles it is clear that this brief time

given to prayer proved more of an obstacle to postulants in adapting to the new life of the Institute than even the quite incredible poverty did. The reason is that Women Religious, according to the mentality of that time, were regarded as people dedicated above all to prayer, and not to work.

Invited to reconsider on this point, Don Bosco emphatically repeated his wish that “his daughters should be simple in everything, even in piety, so as not to weary the young girls with devotions better suited to enclosed nuns than to religious in the active life.” (Chron. II, 54).

Keeping to this principle, as he had already done for his Salesians, Don Bosco did not impose any other practices of piety upon the Sisters “besides those in use among devout christians at that time”.

There are still two points, finally, where Don Bosco tends to break away from his contemporaries in the Religious Life: a greater liberty in approaching the Sacraments of confession and communion (TIT. XVII, Art. 4 and TIT. XVII, Art 7).

Religious discipline—  
silence, enclosure, general rules

It is in this section, especially, where we notice that Don Bosco tends not only to modify but to remove any trace of formalism, to simplify Religious Life for women.

For example, it is not said as it is in the St. Anne Constitutions, that during recreation “the Sisters may attend to light manual work or not, depending on the discretion or kindness of the Superior”. (TIT. IX, Art. 3). In its place, instead we find “let them get

on together as good Sisters, encouraging and cheering up one another”; even more, that “sensible and harmless games to brighten up body and soul should not be forbidden”. (TIT. XIV, Art. 4).

Elsewhere we read, “among themselves let the F.M.A. be as happy as real Sisters, laughing and joking, etc., but always in such a way as the very angels do.” (??!!) (TIT. XVIII, Art. 8).

Again differing from the St. Anne Constitutions, Don Bosco wants all his Daughters to take their recreation together, so “they should not absent themselves from recreation without permission”. (TIT. XIV, Art. 4).

The reason behind this sharp, no-nonsense tone of obligation seems pretty obvious to me: for Don Bosco, the recreation and playground were precisely the time and place where the family atmosphere, so essential to his educational system, was to be fostered and spread.

In order to encourage “recollection, piety and union with God” (TIT. XVI, Art. 1), as the Sisters of St. Anne had done (c.f. TIT. XI), the founder divides the day into periods of strict and moderate silence. He simply reduced the first to the “Eucharistic Silence” (from evening prayers till after Mass next morning); and from the second he exempts all recreation times, so that his daughters can unwind and enjoy themselves to the full (cf. TIT. XVI, Art. 3). Besides that, he also makes allowance for a short break during work time (cf. TIT. XVI, Art. 4).

To build up a mood of mutual trust between Superiors and Sisters, Don Bosco then goes out of his way to deprive the Superior of any privileges that could engender coldness in relationships. As for

example “the faculty of suspending Sisters from Holy Communion, for their spiritual benefit”. (cf. St. Anne Const. TIT. IX, Art. 11); or the right of “deciding the appropriate time and place for an outing” (TIT. X, Art. 4); or of designating on whom they had to depend when outside of the Religious House: “on her return let the Sister relate to the Superior everything she has done from the moment she first left the House”, etc. (TIT. X, Art. 2), St Anne Const.

He removes other regulations, also, such as “The Chapter of Faults” (TIT. XV, Art. 28) which, even when they do not lead to legalism, as they normally do, still risk stirring up ill-feeling in the heart of the community.

It is interesting to see how Don Bosco resolves the question of too frequent visits by the Sisters’ parents. He does not “close the door in their face” (St. Anne Const. TIT. XV, Art. 6), but he invites the Sisters themselves to ask their parents not to come habitually more than once a month. (cf. TIT. XVIII, Art. 4).

Again he omits from the F.M.A. Constitutions the detailed regulations about the appearance of their room, their clothing, linen and religious habit. (cf. St. Anne Const. TIT. XV, Art. 11-21).

There is only one point about religious discipline where Don Bosco tends to be rigorous and inflexible; it is that concerning Enclosure (Cloister), especially where it refers to dealing with those of the opposite sex. It was a point on which the good Daughters of the Immaculate at Mornese had already expressed their disagreement, when Don Bosco, through Don Pestarino, had presented them with the first draft of their Constitutions; since they had considered it impracticable for their situation. (cf. M.B.X, 696). Despite this,

Don Bosco would not budge from his stand, and in the draft of the 1885 Constitutions we find the Chapter about Enclosure (cf. III, XV) no less final and no less clear-cut than the corresponding chapter of the St. Anne Sisters' Constitutions. (cf. TIT. X).

I think that this was due to the fear (sometimes it may seem to be a phobia) that Don Bosco had about scandal; a fear that provoked from him a defensive, negative reaction: namely, a set of minute regulations that put not only the young in the moral impossibility of committing sins, but adults as well.

## **Conclusion**

I think that even this sketchy outline of the text of the 1885 Constitutions should be enough to prove Don Bosco's intention in founding the F.M.A. Institute; and to depict the broad features of its spiritual identity: namely, a feminine version of Salesianity.

### **3. Direct intervention of Don Bosco in the foundation of the Institute**

For all their vital importance in the birth of the Institute, the Constitutions could still remain an abstract life-project, impressive but ineffective, if they were not made to come alive in real life. The proof of their value comes only from their power to become part of the life-stream of the Church, whereby they flow with utter fidelity along the way that leads to perfect Charity.

And it is during this delicate stage of passing from the letter to the life-giving Spirit, that splits and devia-

tions can be measured. It is this crucial moment of contact with real life that calls for extra care on the part of the founder, so that the Institute does not deviate from that first impulse he has given it, nor from the direction mapped out for him by God's Spirit.

In such a context, we want to reflect briefly now on how Don Bosco came to intervene directly in the Institute's foundation.

### **Small steps toward the foundation**

The first thing that catches our eye at this stage is how Don Bosco proceeded so cautiously; not only in bringing the Institute into being, but in letting other people know about his project. Don Stella confirms this point: "Don Bosco was slow to reveal his pet-projects and special works while they were still in the pipe-line" (STELLA, O.C. I, 206).

This could be put down simply to innate shrewdness were there not another more convincing explanation in Don Bosco's case.

Speaking about the start of his Salesian Congregation, Don Bosco admitted, "The Virgin Mary had indicated to me in a dream-vision the field in which I had to work. So all along the way I had with me a finished blueprint from which I could not and would not deviate. In one way, I was totally responsible for the success of the project. I saw clearly those lines I had to keep to, and the methods I had to adopt to bring it about. And so I dared not risk letting such a design come to nothing through exposing it to the arbitrary opinion or wishes of other people". (M.B. III, 247).

From many indications, what was true for the

Salesian beginnings is equally true for the F.M.A. (cf. M.B. II, 407; VII, 218). Whether from special divine inspirations or from man-made requests, Don Bosco was personally convinced that here again it was God's will to found such an Institute (M.B.X, 585-599); but he waited for clearer signs of just how, or when, or with whom all these plans had to be fulfilled. (cf. M.B. VIII, 418). In his reticence, he unfolded his project only in stages, according to the emerging signs that he recognized as he went along.

Perhaps we cannot include in this category the first direct intervention of Don Bosco—already spoken of—when he had the initial conversation in the train with Don Pestarino in 1862; (M.B.X, 586) nor again that short note sent via Don Pestarino to Maria Domenica and to Petronilla in that same year (cf. M.B. IX, 618). The work at Mornese, just begun, was hardly sufficient as yet to let Don Bosco see in it the long-awaited sign for the fulfilment of God's plan. Undoubtedly both the train-conversation and the short note were to become providential factors in such a plan. The exact words of the note ["Pray, then, but do all you can for young people; do your utmost to prevent even one venial sin." M.B. X, 586)—an authentic summary of Don Bosco's mission and educational system—were falling on receptive, well prepared ground.

In turn, Don Pestarino's joining the Salesian Congregation, his increasingly detailed reports about the growth of the work, and above all Don Bosco's own personal visit to Mornese in 1864, had all helped the founder become aware that here, right before his eyes, he had found the nucleus of his future Institute.

In letters to priests and in confidential remarks to his assistants, Don Bosco now begins to unveil his

project more clearly; but only in March 1869 does he personally take the decision to begin his work. Letting things mature slowly and moving only when sure of his facts, was a constant norm in all Don Bosco's projects (cf. M.B. II, 39). Just as it was a constant norm that, once he had decided to launch a project, he would do so gradually by tentative experiments, but always heading in the one direction towards his ultimate goal.

The first direct intervention we can consider is the well-known "note-book" delivered to Maria Domenica and to Petronilla: a few short pages "written in Don Bosco's own hand, containing a time-table and a short rule that he thought suitable for them and their girls, in order to make a start on a regular way of life". (M.B. X, 591). The guide-lines of this notebook, now lost, have come down to us from a redrafting by Mother Petronilla:

- “Try to live habitually in the Presence of God.”
- “Make frequent use of ejaculatory prayer.”
- “Go about things in a gentle way, patient and pleasant.”
- “Look after the girls with close attention, keep them always occupied and growing in a life of piety:—simple, pure and straight-forward. (M.B. X, 592).

This is an expansion of the 1862 notes. With a few deft touches of the helm, Don Bosco was steering the little craft of Mornese, without anyone realizing it, towards the shores of Salesian Religious Life.

In a visit to Mornese in May 1870, for the ordination of Don Pestarino's nephew, Don Bosco had a chance to test if the fruit was now ripe. It was then he decided to push ahead.

On January 30th, 1871, most likely, he dropped a first vague hint to Don Pestarino. (M.B. X, 593).

On April 24th, 1871, he commits himself to speak openly for the first time to the Oratory Chapter-members (cf. M.B. X, 594), requesting a month for reflection and prayer.

Having obtained their affirmative vote on May 24th—a significant choice of date!—he writes on that very day to Mother Enrichetta Dominici; Superior of the St. Anne Sisters, so that she can draw up a draft of Constitutions for Religious Women, along the lines of the Salesian Congregation's text. In mid-June he communicates the decision he has taken to Don Pestarino (cf. M.B. X-597), pointing out the basic lines of the future Institute's rules, and authorizing him to choose from among the Daughters of the Immaculate those Sisters whom he thought should be the foundation stones of the work.

It is interesting for us to dwell briefly on the criteria that Don Bosco gave Don Pestarino for discerning those who had a religious vocation. It is the last but the most decisive touch of the helm to reach the shore he was heading for.

### **The initial choice**

In Don Bosco's eyes, those best-fitted to be foundation stones of his projected Institute are "those who are obedient even in trivial matters, who do not take offence at corrections received, and who do reveal a spirit of mortification". (MEMOIRS OF D. PESTARINO, MACCONO, 181 AND NOTE I, 178).

Undoubtedly we are dealing with very radical criteria of selection here, and—from a Salesian view-

point—very down-to-earth ones which leave little room for sentiment or poetry. But for Don Bosco, more pragmatic than any other saint, they are listed as the most solid. They are a good index of love of God, of piety, of the degree of all forms of self-renunciation: of the absence of self-importance, self-love and self-will. Don Bosco will return repeatedly to such themes in later sections, in such a measure that they can be regarded as feature-points of the Institute's identity.

We would like to ask here why Don Bosco, normally so slow in coming to a mature decision, so cautious in bringing his projects into being, demanded such rigorous selection-criteria at the very start of the F.M.A. Institute?

There could be several explanations.

First of all, simply because it was the beginning of the Institute, Don Bosco did not want to take risks in choosing his foundation stones. He wanted to see his work constructed on solid foundations that could sustain the entire edifice yet to be built.

Secondly because, unlike the history of the Salesian Congregation's foundation, Don Bosco was not faced with adolescents who could be formed gradually, but with adult persons who had already acquired a certain formation and who, even more, had to be introduced now to a way of life so unknown as to be never dreamed of.

What Don Bosco demands from the Daughters of the Immaculate is a real "leap in the dark" at his word, seen as the very Word of God; even more than "a leap in the dark", since he foresees the enormous difficulties in the prickly situation at Mornese. Because of this, Don Bosco has need of people who are totally

available, prepared to yield their own viewpoint, their special tastes, the comparative peace of a life that was safe and tranquil, even if not comfortable.

These same preoccupations emerge from short notes, in question-and-answer form, jotted down by Don Pestarino, and to be passed on to the first aspirants in Don Bosco's name.

—“What advice or suggestions has Don Bosco left for us? That we need people who can obey rather than command; that we have plenty who can give orders. People who do not grumble, but show good humour when anyone gives them advice or corrects their defects.”

—“Where does the esteem, the reverence which we must have towards Superiors stem from? That they pander to our whims and let us have our own way? Or rather that they look for our good, the good of our souls, for good order and for the good spirit of Jesus Christ.”

—“What is the most important thing to look out for, and the most important to be on our guard against in this new Institute? To get to know and carry out the Rules, to acquire the spirit of abnegation and mortification; to obey rather than command; to align ourselves with the Superiors who are the very ones that have the welfare and expansion of the Institute most at heart; who have a deep knowledge of their own community and of other Institutes, while the rest of us know little or nothing about such a community.” (M.B. X, 611-612).

The change in life-style that Don Bosco asks from his simple Daughters of the Immaculate is so dramatic that some shortcomings on the part of a few is easy to understand. (e.g. Petronilla cf. Chron. I, 272-273).

Soon, however, such hesitation vanished, thanks to swift decisions and to the persuasive strength of Maria Domenica. Don Pestarino knew that, at the right moment, she would help the other Sisters to understand and accept whatever changes were needed, even if she had grasped their meaning only in principle. (Chron. I, 254).

On the other hand, the solid foundation given them by Don Pestarino was so sturdy that he could assure Don Bosco, "they were ready to obey and to make any sacrifice for the good of souls, their own and others." (Chron. I, 270).

It is beyond dispute that such total availability to God's will, through Don Bosco's hands, of the entire pioneer group (including Don Pestarino), was to be a decisive factor in shaping the early heroic spirit.

But it is a genuine heroism, with no posing or artificiality; so simple and natural that it is unaware of its own existence. We recognize it from Mother Enrichetta Sorbone's following description, "a shining obedience and simplicity, exactness in carrying out the rule; an admirable recollection and silence, a spirit of prayer and mortification, a childlike frankness and innocence; fraternal charity in words and actions, and such a holy-cheerfulness and joy that it made the House almost a Paradise".

Later on we shall see just how influential Maria Domenica's presence and activity were in fostering that pristine Spirit.

Here we would like to stress again that this way of pure faith was the only possible one that could keep the frail little Mornese community together against the violent storms it would soon have to experience: the hostility from their village neighbours; incredible

poverty; upsets caused by unsuitable members Blengini, Bacchialone, the Arecco sisters, Simbeni, etc.): and above all the continual loss of generous souls struck down by death in their prime. Here there was more than enough to discourage anyone who had not yet given herself totally into God's hands. In view of what was to happen later, the words Don Bosco spoke to the Sisters on the first Reception Day (5th August, 1872) have a prophetic ring about them: "Become saints, and in time you will be able to do so much good for so many souls, provided you keep a lowly attitude . . . Take courage and be comforted, since this is the only way you will achieve anything in this new mission of yours." (M.B. X, 617).

### **Development and dangers**

From the occasional reports of his own assistants, and from his own personal visits, Don Bosco was delighted with the progress and fervour. (cf. M.B. X, 628; XI, 26; XII, 65. XIII, 76) (M.B. X, 622; XII, 298).

The spirit of abnegation that he witnessed, and above all the rapid growth of the work in the face of tremendous difficulties, drew from him expressions of genuine wonder. He is on record as admitting that "without doubt, it is not my work but a special intervention of Providence." (TEXT OF CAN. ANFOSSI, M.B. X, 688).

What concerned him more and more, however, was the number of deaths among the very young Sisters. As time went on, he was beset by increasing fears that his simple, docile Daughters had taken too seriously his teaching on total self-denial and sacrifice, thinking

only of heaven and overlooking life here and now. In 1874 in a conference to new Superiors, he had already given a short talk on moderation, requesting them to “comply as far as possible with the inclinations and talents of both novices and Sisters when allotting jobs and duties.” Don Bosco went on, “Some think it is a virtue at times, a sort of rein on self-will, merely to assign some duty that goes against the grain; while instead great harm is being done thereby, both to the Sister in question and to the whole Congregation. It is far better to concentrate on teaching them self-mortification and how to spiritualize and sanctify these natural talents of theirs, by directing them always to God’s glory”. (M.B. X, 637).

Later on Don Bosco spotted a tendency to mortify themselves even beyond the limits already imposed on them by their poverty. Since they worked so hard, they needed to keep up their strength with substantial meals, more so as most of the Sisters were still young. Mazzarello’s kindly solution, to provide special dishes for those who needed them, was not acceptable, as it could have led in time to possible abuses of the common life. (cf. CHRON. I, 252-253).

Don Bosco’s personal request to enlarge their menu was not exactly enthusiastically received by the Sisters—the pioneers especially; despite M. Mazzarello’s avowal of “total availability”! (“If Don Bosco wanted us to, we would be ready to devour a whole chicken each.” M.B. X, 360). When Don Bosco gently tried to overcome their scruples at Borgo San Martino, the Chronicles relate (II, 216); “Mother was promptly informed of it; and while the increased menu was far from her “heroic-mortification” ideal, she replied: “If that’s Don Bosco’s order, Amen! So be it!”

But it must have been an "Amen" that came more from the head than the heart, since Don Bosco had to come back to this very theme, in a more pointed way, at Nizza in August, 1880. (cf. M.B. XIV, 663).

But there was a deeper worry that troubled Don Bosco at this time. The tension apparent in his spiritual daughters, as they attempted to hammer out perfection by sheer will-power that left little room for human nature after the initial enthusiasm, simply increased the risk of not only damaging their health but of dulling their spirit. This would make them less credible witnesses to the joy of the Beatitudes among young people.

This fear came out in the annual meeting of Directors at Alassio on February 8th, 1879. Dealing with the F.M.A.'s progress, it was noted with satisfaction, "their numbers have grown considerably from year to year"; but it was also put on record, with sadness, "too many of them have fallen sick and died." (M.B. XIV, 49).

In the discussion that followed this report, it is interesting to note that Cagliero, the Sisters' Director General who was closer to them than anyone, in attempting to detect the cause and remedies, did not insist so much on their poor diet, etc., but on other reasons. In short, he suggested, "there should be plenty of activity, fresh air, a frequent change of jobs for Sisters employed in the kitchen, a courtyard or garden attached to every house, where without embarrassment from outsiders, the Sisters could play, or shout, run around or unwind to clear their minds from any oppressive problems. In his opinion, many were falling sick simply because of mental anxiety: from scruples, nerves and the like." (M.B. XIV, 50).

Cagliero's theory seems backed up by what the Chronicles remark at the time of the deaths of Sister Belletti (cf. II, 237) and Sister Emma Ferrero (cf. III, 252).

Such concern explains the recommendations that Don Bosco made to the Sisters of Alassio during his visit on January 3rd, 1880 . . . "By all means work, work as much as you can . . . but in such a way that you can keep on working for a long time. Don't shorten your life with privations and over-tiredness, or with melancholy or any other peculiarity that sets you apart from the others." (M.B. XIV, 254).

There were other similar reminders to the superiors at Nizza on August 21st, 1879: "Let the young Sisters have plenty of exercise; see they have such physical activity, which they need, by doing little jobs in the vineyards and gardens. This will do a lot to improve their health." (M.B. XIV, 258).

### **Don Bosco's last words**

I think that such a mode of thought can explain why Don Bosco gradually changed the emphasis of his main ideas when giving conferences to the F.M.A.

At the start of the Institute, the themes on which he concentrates are much the same as "the criteria for choosing candidates" suggested to Don Pestarino: obedience and observance of the rule (cf. M.B. X, 610-612, 622, 647); humility, simplicity, self renunciation, a hidden life (cf. M.B. X, 617, 622, XIV, 257); a spirit of sacrifice, work (cf. M.B. XIV, 257, X, 647). To these are added other qualities of a more incidental kind; mutual love (cf. M.B. X, 622) prayer, the great gift of peace, avoidance of sin (cf. M.B. X, 674).

Don Costamagna seems to synthesize all these themes quite neatly, when relating Don Bosco's ideas after the Decree of Approval of the Constitutions, 1876, he maintains that the Institute will have a great future provided the F.M.A. "remain simple, poor and mortified". (M.B. XI, 366).

Apart from obedience and observance of the Rules which are proper to any Religious Life, it seems that Don Bosco does not have any other ideals in mind for his Spiritual Daughters apart from that of a woman whom he held in such high regard during his life that it amounted almost to a cult—his own mother.

Such an ideal of simplicity, humility, poverty, hard work, and a spirit of sacrifice was not meant to be an end in itself, but to be put entirely at the service of Charity, as in Mama Margaret's case. Here again, we must stress that the pioneer F.M.A's did have such a living ideal right before their eyes in Mary Mazzarello. Such an ideal we find held up to them in a letter sent to the F.M.A. by Don Bosco on May 24th, 1886, on the occasion of the Second General Chapter of the Institute (cf. CAPETTI, PROGRESS OF THE INSTITUTE IN THE COURSE OF A CENTURY, I, 130-135).

In this letter are set out all the virtues that he was gradually inculcating through the text of the Constitutions, through Retreat conferences, and through private conversations: a spirit of mortification and sacrifice; hard work, poverty, humility, obedience and exact observance of the Rule; control of worldly affections, good health, friendliness, and cheerfulness. They all came together here into a single framework, as if we were meant to look at a finished portrait of the spiritual identity of the F.M.A. as seen by Don Bosco.

At a later period, however, for reasons already noted, we see that Don Bosco places less emphasis on these themes of poverty, sacrifice, work and mortification. For his Sisters were already working so hard and placing so much stress on mortification that they could no longer see clearly that "obedience is more pleasing to the Lord than sacrifice" (cf. I. SAM. 15, 22). Already at the start of their Religious Life, he had frankly told his Salesian sons: "It is necessary that everyone of you must be prepared to make heavy sacrifices . . . not of health, not of money, not of harsh external Penances, not of extraordinary fastings, but of your own will." (M.B. VII, 47).

Now keeping to such principles, Don Bosco focuses the attention of his Spiritual Daughters on obedience and the observance of the Rules, which, in his mind, formed an integrated whole to the point where the Superior had to become "almost a Living Rule". (M.B. XII, 81).

We notice that this change of emphasis does not imply that Don Bosco is under-rating the spirit of sacrifice, of mortification and self-denial; as if the conferences of that earlier period had now lost some of their valid worth. It implies only that there was need now "TO INTERIORIZE" such sacrifice.

We know what a central place Don Bosco had given to obedience in the outline of Salesian virtues. (cf. Dream of the Mantle, M.B. XIV, 183-87; STELLA, O.C. II, 526-532). It is not strange that now, as he drew near the end of his life, he wanted to make his Sisters perceive still more clearly just how important obedience really was (cf. Chron. II, 37, 339, 341; M.B. XVII, 217, 626).

Here the criteria for accepting postulants serve as a

key to enlightenment (cf. M.B. XVII, 269); “they are to have good health, and give promise of genuine obedience; if such obedience is not acquired in the novitiate, then it will never be.”

Such reminders are heard from Don Bosco up to his dying breath. One cannot forget that, on his very deathbed, when requested by Don Bonetti for a last memento for the F.M.A., Don Bosco had said, “Obedience. Practise it; get others to practice it.” Admittedly, obedience as Don Bosco intended it is not the obedience of a remote-controlled robot, nor that of a slave or mercenary, but rather the obedience of a son or daughter. In his eyes, obedience is nothing else but the love of God and one’s neighbour in its most exacting form.

#### **4. Indirect intervention of Don Bosco through his collaborators**

At the “Informative Process’ for the Cause of Beatification and Canonization, Cagliero has stated that Don Bosco always regarded the young as his special mission. Therefore he found it hard, Cagliero observed, to devote himself to the confessions and spiritual direction of women. This delicacy he even pushed to extremes by not undertaking the personal direction of the very F.M.A. Institute that he had founded. For that duty he always delegated one of his priests, to look after their spiritual and material direction, with the title of Director General. (M.B. X, 638).

One could, perhaps, disagree with the “delicacy” motive, even if Cagliero comes across as the most credible and best qualified witness to give such testi-

mony. However, the fact is certain that, apart from the redaction of the Constitution which he compiled personally and apart from reserving for himself the top direction of the Institute, Don Bosco did invariably call on other helpers for its immediate direction. Now by the fact that in matters of government, Don Bosco respected to the full “the wisdom and ideas of his subordinates, leaving plenty of breathing-space around each one of them”, as Father Caviglia says so aptly (CAVIGLIA — DON BOSCO — AN HISTORICAL PROFILE, 168-169), it inevitably happened that at the start of the Institute especially, Don Bosco’s “direction” could not help but be influenced by the diverse personalities of those helpers he had chosen to act in his name.

Now we shall pause to consider such an influence, briefly and not at great depth, confining ourselves to the part played by each of Don Bosco’s helpers in giving the initial trust to the Institute.

### **Importance of Don Pestarino**

Speaking of Don Pestarino’s role (1878, Presentation of Constitutions), Don Bosco stated, “The Lord used him to lay down the foundations” of the F.M.A. Institute.

While not taking this to mean that Don Pestarino was actually responsible for its foundation, neither can we underestimate in any way the key-role that he did play. I think this is a point that has to be re-thought and re-evaluated, if we want to discern the spiritual identity given by the Holy Spirit to the emerging Institute.

Precisely because Don Bosco had not formed the

subjects who had come together in this new Institute and had intervened more at the institutional level than at the level of spiritual direction in founding it, we must give time to reflect on the one who had first formed the founding-Sisters, and had later helped them become part of the new project proposed by Don Bosco. Since the F.M.A. pioneers were drawn from the Daughters of the Immaculate, all spiritually prepared by Don Pestarino, it was inevitable that the new plant would have in its make-up, something of the roots from which it sprang.

The events at Mornese were quite different from those at Valdocco, where Don Bosco had been impelled by the Holy Spirit to begin right from scratch, from grass-roots in fact. At Mornese, Salesianity had to be assimilated, both by Don Pestarino on one side and by his spiritual daughters on the other; as a vital part of their life-style, granted, but without erasing their earlier formation.

Rather than abstract reflections, a concrete example will illustrate the point we are trying to make. Such a classic example we have in Mary Mazzarello. We choose her, both because of the major role she played in shaping the Institute's spiritual features and identity, (so major, in fact, that she merits the title of CO-FOUNDRESS), and for the reason that we have ample, documented evidence of Don Pestarino's influence on her spiritual formation.

When Mary first meets Don Bosco, she is anything but a woman at the start of the spiritual life. From a rather reluctant, greedy and vain young lady, Don Pestarino had brought her along in carefully graded stages to the point of real heroism and total commitment. Her obedience in assisting her relatives struck

down by typhoid is striking proof of this.

We know from the records that Mary was not the only fruit—even if the most advanced—of Don Pestarino's spiritual direction. The entire countryside of Mornese had been spiritually transformed by this zealous priest. (M.B. VII, 295).

When Don Bosco opens up a new way for Mary and the other Daughters of the Immaculate, they will enter into it with enthusiasm, but without abandoning any of their former spiritual experience. More so, since the one who directs their first new step is the very same guide—Don Pestarino—who has accompanied them up till now.

Even when this guide is replaced by another, this past spiritual experience will always remain a beacon—especially in Mazzarello's case—a safe reference-point to guide the young Sisters along the way of perfection.

These are simply a few reflection-points, rather than proof of our thesis. But I think they are sufficient to clarify our suggestion of how important Don Pestarino's role was in the Institute's foundation.

### **Role of the Sisters of St. Anne**

The part played by the Sisters of St. Anne is evidently not on a par with that of the Directors whom Don Bosco chose. It is a minor role by far, with only a passing influence limited to the Institute's initial stages and to the specific task asked of them. They had been sent to Mornese by Don Bosco not so much to pass on their spirit but, as Don Pestarino correctly explains, "to teach the locals how to organize Religious Life in a community." (Chron. II, 2).

Don Bosco chose them in preference to others because, first of all, he had already made contact with them from the start of his priestly ministry; and then because they had a similar mission to the one he intended to entrust to his Spiritual Daughters; and, finally, because through their contact with Don Bosco, some of their spirit and disciplinary regulations had filtered through into the F.M.A. Constitutions.

In the final analysis, it was the Sisters of St. Anne who were entrusted with the task of giving a lead to Don Bosco's lowly daughters; so rich in virtue, these F.M.A., but so hopelessly inexperienced in Religious Life and the field of Education. The St. Anne Sisters were meant to advise them on the many practical little points that arose, so that they could be transformed into a Religious Community dedicated to the education of young girls. And it was precisely in this role, we can see, that they went about their business.

The Chronicles tell us, "they showed the Sisters how to answer applications from prospective boarders and postulants; how to set up an orderly laundry and marking-system for the girls; how to settle them down in the dormitory, dining-room and chapel; how to conduct outings; how to deal with the pupils' parents, and how to regulate their correspondence." (Chron II, 21).

At Mornese the Sisters of St. Anne were to deplore "the excessive poverty of life and furnishings, and the absence of habitual external discipline; but they took note also of "the great spirit of fervour" and the "moral leadership" of Mother Mazzarello (cf. CHRON. II, 21-22). Only they wondered, would "the good spirit of these dear Sisters of Don Bosco, so keen to imitate their founder, together with Sister Mary's

aptitude in passing on this spirit to her Young Institute, still be enough to make it succeed. Was it possible that the postulants, especially those from better-off families, could adapt to such rustic simplicity, to so much hard-work and sacrifice?" (CHRON. II, 26).

If their doubts, in the event, were to prove mainly unfounded about the eventual outcome and about the postulants' capacity to adapt—so great was the fervour of the pioneer "MORNESINE", little Mornesians, that they proved themselves capable of weathering every difficulty, they were not so far out in their fears that the Institute could not survive long in that ambient of extreme poverty and harsh mortification.

It was a pity that, although they had decided to mention this point to Don Bosco, in practice they had not said a word to him about it, right up till the end of their assignment (cf. CHRON. II, 47); confining themselves to extolling the capabilities and holiness of M. Mazzarello. Had they mentioned their fears to Don Bosco, perhaps some of the grievous trials at the start of the Institute might have been avoided.

### **Contribution of Don Costamagna and of Don Cagliariero**

Don Pestarino had given a body and soul to the Congregation; in spirit he was totally Salesian. He was ready, then, as he showed during the ups and downs of the Mornese Institute, to sacrifice everything including his good-name for the sake of Don Bosco. His Salesianity, however, had its limitations; unlike the other collaborators who were to succeed him in the Direction of the Institute, he had not grown up with Don Bosco, and so had not been able to absorb the

atmosphere and spirit that Don Bosco knew how to create so well for the young people at the Oratory.

I think that the one who contributed most to filling this gap in the rising Institute was Don Costamagna. He was sent by Don Bosco to Mornese as Director, after the death of Don Joseph Cagliero, who in turn had followed immediately after Don Pestarino.

Young, lively, exuberant, zealous (perhaps a trifle overzealous!) and very attached to Don Bosco, he was to bring "a peaceful revolution" into the tranquil Mornese climate. The Chronicles record, "Above all, the Director knows how to seize every opportunity to purify the spirit, and to endow the College with the likeness of Valdocco. Young, full of life and culture, zealous for holiness and the apostolate, he has an eye for everything: piety, study, work and religious formation." (CHRON. II, 116).

Costamagna, however, did not merely recapture the youthful pulse of the Oratory's working days, but that of festive-days as well: triduums, novenas, feasts, academies, and little stage-productions. (cf. MACCONO. ST. MARY MAZZARELLO, I, 282).

Since Costamagna was most exact in following not only the orders but the slightest wishes of Don Bosco, (IBID. 372), so Mother Mazzarello saw in him Don Bosco himself, just as she had seen him in Don Pestarino and in Don Joseph Cagliero; and so she respected his least wish." (CHRON. II, 116). With such an affinity of soul on both sides, M. Mazzarello's assimilation of the Salesian Spirit could not have been any deeper.

In Don Costamagna's character there was only one drawback that could have had serious consequences, if it had not found a corrective in Mother Mazzarello's

moderation. Young and inexperienced, he thought the only way to holiness was to lead the Sisters through every form of self-denial possible. (cf. MACCONO, O.C. I, 374-376).

Such an approach, besides leading to edgy nerves, ran the risk of introducing at Mornese a climate of tension utterly foreign to Don Bosco's spirit; a spirit that was so human and so understanding of human frailty. M. Mazzarello, who sincerely admired Costamagna's grand qualities of simplicity, goodness and zeal—as well as acting as the Community's lightning-conductor during his stormy moments!—"did not hesitate to let him know", the Chronicles relate, "when she thought his zeal had carried him too far; inspired as she was by the simplicity of the saints and the respect of a humble daughter." (CHRON. II, 116). Humble in turn, "as soon as such faults were pointed out to him, Don Costamagna would change his approach, and ask pardon of everyone, even, if need be, in public." (cf. MACCONO, as above).

In this way through humility, charity and deep mutual esteem, Costamagna and Mazzarello would succeed in clearing the tension, preserving a climate of Salesian joy and serenity so essential to let people grow, freely and spontaneously, in charity.

There was another matter, however, of such a delicate nature that Mother Mazzarello did not dare mention it to the Director, "for it could have seemed too disrespectful and might have led to unhealthy rumours." So she confided, instead, in Monsignor Scotton, but took care to extol the virtues of the Director and the Community rather than her hidden fears." The Chronicle records the fact in this way, "Animated by his usual zeal for the perfection of souls

entrusted to his priestly ministry and by his admirable childlike simplicity, not yet taught by personal experience, Don Costamagna used to treat the Sisters and girls with a fatherly freedom, in view of everyone.” (CHRON. LL, 216).

What concerned Mother Mazzarello was not so much Don Costamagna’s conduct as such, but the risk of his setting a precedent of an over-familiar relationship for future Salesians and the F.M.A.: “I would not want that, through my fault, a principle should be introduced”, M. Mazzarello confessed, “which may seem of no consequence at present, but which in time could become an abuse and a danger.” (CHRON. II, 216).

Even here the delicate reserve of Don Bosco’s spiritual daughter, allied to a broad liberty of spirit, brings to bear a reform perfectly in harmony with the spirit of her father.

### **Don John Cagliero**

Perhaps after Don Bosco and Don Pestarino, the one who was closest of all the other Salesians to the ups and downs of the Institute’s early days was Father John Cagliero, named Director General by Don Bosco even during the lifetime of Don Pestarino. It is not so easy for us today, unfortunately, to pinpoint the exact role that he played in the founding years.

Probably Don Bosco chose him as his deputy for the F.M.A., not only in so far as he was a member of the Superior Chapter, but because he had wider experience of feminine environments. It is interesting to note Maccono’s remark on this point, when narrating the Meeting of the chapter-members for the approval of the F.M.A. Institute. Here is the quote in question:

“When Don Bosco asked Don Cagliero for his opinion, everyone smiled, because all knew how closely tied up he was already with so many Institutes of Women throughout Turin; and how partial and experienced he was towards that particular apostolate. They all smiled, then as if to suggest that Cagliero’s vote could not help but be anything else but affirmative—or affirmative-plus.” (MACCONO. O.C. I, 176).

We find Cagliero always present and deeply involved in the Institute’s moments of joy or sorrow; in difficult situations we find him acting with great tact and authority. The Sisters are always delighted to see him, and his visits are regarded as a blessing that reflects Don Bosco’s fatherly goodness and care for his Spiritual Daughters. We see a reflection of this genuine fraternity and cordial respect between Don Cagliero and the F.M.A. in the letters sent to him by Mazzarello. There emerges from these an altogether different relationship from the one seen in her letters to Don Bosco. Towards Don Bosco, M. Mazzarello felt deep veneration, the same sentiments she had experienced at their first meeting. (“Don Bosco is a saint, and I can feel it.”) It was an interaction that, with the passing of the years and deeper familiarity as they both grew older, came to be blended with a deep spiritual affection.

This is revealed to us by an unusual episode recorded in the Chronicles, when the Mother House had already been transferred to Nizza. There we find that Mother Mazzarello “with the artlessness of a child took Don Bosco’s arm, pressed it affectionately to her heart and said, ‘Father, we’re all so very fond of you!’ Surprised by this gesture of Mazzarello’s, so out of character, Don Bosco gazed at her with such fatherly pleasure, that we

could all see there a meeting of saintly souls”.

This incident was remarked on by the Sisters, and later one of them, with the typical frankness that M. Mazzarello encouraged, remarked: “Mother, what have you done?” as if to say, “what boldness you’ve shown!” And Mother, all goodness and simplicity replied, “Why? Have I done something wrong?” (CHRON. III, 72).

On the other hand, from the correspondence we catch her different attitude towards Cagliero: a cordial, childlike openness, complete confidence, and deep, sensitive affection. Even on her deathbed she will pray to the Lord for Don Cagliero’s arrival, and wait for it as a special grace.

In a discussion among the members of the Superior Chapter, it was remarked, “What links the F.M.A. to the Salesian Congregation is not the Rules but affection. Don Chicco, Don Cagliero and Mother Mazzarello herself, before dying, had insisted on making the relationship with the Salesian Directors closer all the time.” (M.B. XVIII, 288).

I think Don Cagliero’s unique role was that of being a living-bond-of-communion. It was through him that Don Bosco’s thoughts, wishes, and fatherly concern for the F.M.A. became an on-the-spot reality; and it was through him, likewise, that the needs and demands of his spiritual daughters reached Don Bosco’s heart.

It is very much to Cagliero’s credit that the Institute became part of the family of the Salesian Congregation, at one in charity, even during Don Bosco’s own lifetime.

## MOTHER MAZZARELLO'S CONTRIBUTION

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We have spoken of the many collaborators whom Don Bosco leaned on to make his apostolic project become a reality: this reality was a Religious Institute that would be the feminine version of the Salesian Congregation.

We have deliberately kept till this late stage, considering her importance, any detailed discussion about the one who, more than anyone, worked side by side with Don Bosco to make his project come alive; namely, Maria Domenica Mazzarello.

Mazzarello's help came more from a providential encounter with Don Bosco, than from a calculated choice. It is difficult to know if Don Bosco spotted Mazzarello's gifts of grace and nature right from the start, or if he had spontaneously discerned that this lowly Mornese farm-girl would be the underpinnings of the work intended to become "a living monument of his gratitude to Mary, Help of Christians." Don Bosco's reply to Monsignor Scotton's negative comments about M. Mazzarello gives us a hint that he had some intuition about her: "We shall see what the Madonna will make of this Mazzarello." (CHRON. II, 216). But it could be, again, that he was simply letting himself be guided by circumstances in "going ahead as the Lord inspired him, and as circumstances demanded." (M.B. XI, 87).

The convincing testimony of Don Pestarino, the esteem shown by the Sisters in electing her as leader, and the admiration of the St. Anne Sisters must have

made Don Bosco increasingly aware of the rare gifts of nature and grace that she possessed.

A witty remark of Don Bosco's to Cagliero, who was concerned about the accommodation-lack in their new house, with a large inflow of retreatants expected, shows us that he appreciated her sterling worth. "Don't worry", joked Don Bosco, "you'll see that Mother knows how to manage. She is a "MAZZARELLO", so she has at her disposal not only the "MEZZI" but the "MEZZARELLI" as well." (A play on words to highlight her skill with "little details" as well as with "MAJOR ORGANIZATION". TR.) (CHRON. III, 69).

Certainly she was a chosen soul whom the Lord had prepared in every detail and had brought, at the ripe moment, to meet Don Bosco to help him carry out the project assigned by God.

### **Fidelity of Mazzarello to the Holy Spirit and to Don Bosco**

An assessment of Mother Mazzarello in Don Pestarino's Memoirs, published in the Salesian Bulletin after his death, portrays her above all as the woman of unqualified obedience, "The Faithful Woman." "She proved herself always ready", he testified, "to accept any advice from her superiors and promptly gave proof of her respect, humility and submission. So close was she to her superiors in will, judgement and Spirit that she admitted she was willing to sacrifice everything, her life included, to follow them and to do good for souls." (M.B. X, 618).

While Don Pestarino's testimony refers only to the very early period on one hand, when M. Mazzarello had

not yet realized the extent of her responsibilities flowing on from leadership of the Institute, on the other we have to counter-balance it with the weight of Don Lemoyne's evidence: "She was frank and sincere in expressing her own opinions, and she knew how to stand up for them; but then later she would bow to the decisions of Don Pestarino." (M.B. 644).

For all her lack of culture, Mazzarello is too rich a personality, too complex, to imagine her as being without a mind or will of her own; simply a docile pawn of authority, dominated by the ideas and commands of other people. Even in her undeniable docility we can spot signs of spiritual freedom, of a willing inner co-operation with the breath of God's Spirit, which was at work both in her and in Don Bosco to give shape to God's saving plan.

In Mazzarello's eyes such "faithfulness" meant that "fidelity to Don Bosco *first*, was in fact "fidelity to the Holy Spirit". (And first, here, signified not only in order of time, but in the scale of values.)

### **Fidelity to the Spirit**

We shall leave till later a brief outline of the spiritual journey travelled by M. Mazzarello under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and Don Pestarino's guidance. Here we simply want to highlight the fact that Mazzarello's "Salesianity" already existed prior to her first meeting with Don Bosco; that is, as we have stated in the introductory section, that the very same Spirit that raised up Don Bosco had also inspired Mother Mazzarello. In a mysterious way it had led her along a path identical to his, endowing her with such a

similar spirit that they could unite in one single mission to save the young.

For all its importance in Mazzarello's life, her meeting with Don Bosco did not mean a really radical change of direction; it simply meant a more clear-cut, precise awareness of both her road and her destination, towards which God was already leading her.

As a very young girl she had been moved by the Spirit to consecrate herself, freely and forever, to the Lord as a virgin. (cf. MACCONO, O.C. I, 411); even though she had been dissuaded by Don Pestarino from entering Religious Life. (cf. CHRON. I, 63). But in the Daughters of the Immaculate, she had found a way of satisfying the deep inclinations of her spirit (at least in part); and thereby became a household word for her apostolic zeal among the young girls and their mothers. (cf. CHRON. I, 76-77).

On this point, I wonder could we make a faint comparison between Mazzarello and Don Bosco? In young John's case, we must concede that it is his apostolic zeal among his own age group that appears first, and his desire to consecrate himself totally to God comes later (cf. MEMOIRS OF ORATORY, CHAP. I, 6-8; M.B. I, 863). In Mazzarello's case, it is her total life-long-consecration to God that comes first, and it is along this road to the Lord that she develops her zeal to help the young.

It was her typhoid-illness, a result of her heroic obedience to Don Pestarino, that gave a different, unexpected turning to Mazzarello's life. Her apostolate among young girls, which till that time had been marginal to her spiritual life, now became its central motive:—the very *raison d'être* of this new vigour that flowed again to strengthen her body, weakened by

sickness. (cf. CHRON I, 95-96). A mysterious vision confirmed her in this resolve. (cf. CHRON. I, 96-97).

Among the many little crosses and upsets that seemed like a re-screening of the Oratory's early days, there gradually emerged a project that was a fac-simile—within the narrow confines of the Mornese village—of all that Don Bosco had built up at Valdocco. There was a workroom for girls, a small-scale orphanage, and a little festive oratory. M. Mazzarello and her companions still belonged to the Daughters of the Immaculate, but the very demands of their newly chosen apostolate gradually led them to adopt a different life-style; one that would separate them more and more from the others (cf. CHRON. I, 138-139, 142-145)).

In the light of the work-to-come, it is interesting to see what sort of spirit prevailed at Mornese before Don Bosco. We have read, “Mary was keen to bring young girls to God, and yet she did not bore them with devotions, recommendations and prohibitions.” (CHRON. 7, 103); taken with other remarks, this clearly indicates the end-aim (SALVATION OF YOUTH) and the method (LOVING-KINDNESS) of Don Bosco's work.

Salesian through and through, with its own special tone adapted to feminine psychology, these seem to be the hinges on which Mazzarello's educational activity revolves: “Keep well away from vanity which spoils every good work; be sincere at any cost, because lying is the devil's daughter! don't remain idle, since idleness is rust upon your soul”. (CHRON. I, 127).

Mazzarello's special love for the most neglected girls, for those in trouble, for those who came from families of doubtful morality, or for those who had

lost their mother, already reveals how thoroughly Salesian she was. "For such girls", the records tell, "she worked non-stop, keeping an eye on them even in the workroom. She prepared them for the Sacraments, and for a better life ahead. Not that she burdened them with many instructions, preferring to win them over with loving-kindness: but when she did ask something of them, she expected it to be done." (CHRON. 7, 128).

We know what violence Don Bosco had to use to overcome his own temperament, so quickly prone to anger (cf. HIS DREAM AT AGE OF NINE—M.B. I, 407) (SEE ALSO IN G. COMELLI'S EVIDENCE). We know, also, how he became, in time, a living-sign of God's prevenient-love among his boys, all patience and gentleness.

Mary is likewise described as "having perfect self-control; she put up with any kind of annoyance or upset; she endured and tolerated anything, so long as the girls did not commit sin. But if a correction was needed, she did not hesitate to give it. If a "rotten pear" was discovered, and if she could find no way to improve such a girl, she would send her away before she could corrupt the others, but in such a tactful way that she remained her friend, and helped her in later years." (CHRON. I, 134).

We know what powers of insight Don Bosco had into the souls of the young (cf. MEMOIRS OF ORATORY, CHAP. I, 9-11). We hear such testimony about Mazzarello as well: "When we found ourselves in any doubt of conscience or in trouble, it seemed she could read our thoughts, and there was no need for a single word!" (CHRON. I, 137).

We know what powers of love Don Bosco's heart

had, and how resourceful he was in finding ways to win over the hearts of his boys to lead them to Salvation. In the same way we learn that Mazzarello grew close to her young girls, so that she could sow a word of advice in their hearts. "If she did not win them over the first time, instead of giving up she would follow them up with loving-kindness that spilt over into thoughtful little favours or holy pictures for them. Practical by nature, and so recollected and observant as to miss nothing, she was liberal enough to expect no better response than each girl was capable of giving." (CHRON. I, 185).

There still remains a final point that can be regarded as the negative side of Salesian-Basics, whose positive side is zeal to save the young; namely, spending oneself to the last to prevent any offence against God. Here we are told, "Whenever Mazzarello had to deal with a serious offence, she sent for the mother of the girl concerned, since she would never remain silent when evil was discovered. She would not rest and would move heaven and earth, gently but firmly, until the evil had been got rid of."

From this brief comparison there emerges a striking parallelism. The humble farm girl from Mornese, without a trace of culture, and unfamiliar with educational methods, had—even before her meeting with Don Bosco—been led by the Holy Spirit's special light along the very same path as his—a path heading unerringly towards the same final goal.

### **Fidelity to Don Bosco**

I think that in the light of all that we have said, we are in a better position now to assess the signifi-

cance of the 1864 meeting, Mazzarello's first with Don Bosco.

If we have no record of the impression that Mazzarello made on Don Bosco, we do have clear testimony of Mazzarello's opinion of him, put on record. To those who were surprised that she had sat herself ahead of the youngsters in the very front row to listen spellbound to Don Bosco, she answered, "But Don Bosco is a saint, and I can feel it", (CHRON. I, 150).

Such an expression, beautiful as it is, still remains ambiguous unless it is followed up by something more detailed. What in fact, lies behind her words? Was it simply that she was more carried away with enthusiasm than the others for this apostle of youth, already renowned as a saint and wonder worker? Or was it that she had intuitively discerned in his humble bearing, simple words, and affable goodness, especially, a genuine Man of God? A confidential memoir that Mary left with Petronilla clears up the mystery for us: "It seemed to her", writes Petronilla, "that Don Bosco's words echoed a language that she had heard in her own heart, but had not known how to express; in such words she had now found the translation of her very own sentiments; as an answer long-awaited, and now finally arrived." (CHRON. I, 149).

Better than any long discourse, this account helps us understand the deep significance that such a meeting had for Mazzarello; it was not a turning-point in her life, as such, but a clarification, a transition from the implicit to the explicit, from the confused and nebulous to the clearly defined. If I may make a comparison, it is like the pleasure of meeting up with someone who is making the same journey, heading in the same direction as ourselves, but much more experienced

than ourselves in knowledge of both road and destination.

This, I think, explains the absolute docility of Mazzarello to Don Bosco, even before there was any prospect of the Institute being founded. The Chronicles record that in a second visit to Mornese in 1867, Don Bosco did in fact speak especially to the Daughters of the Immaculate. We read there that this time Mary “did not say a word about the joy in her heart; but it could easily be seen by just looking at her, and from her keenness to put Don Bosco’s words into practice, or to have others do so. (CHRON. I, 205).

This explains, too, why Maria Domenica had pledged her support to Don Bosco, so promptly and enthusiastically, when he gave them (through Don Pestarino’s meditation) a preview of his great project. It explains how she got the other Sisters, through her strong personality and powers of persuasion, to give their support.

As Don Bosco came to reveal his plan in stages, Mazzarello realized with growing pleasure that their points of identity and near-identity were drawing them day by day towards perfect spiritual harmony: “These tiny unexpected resonances of the spirit between father and daughter gave Mazzarello great pleasure as she commenced her journey along this new path”, the Chronicles relate. (CHRON. I, 258). The joy of such a discovery, plus the power of the life-project that was opening up before her, were so great that she was able to overcome—and help others overcome—the many problems that arose at the start.

“She did not balk at obstacles of any size”, the Chronicles note, “or she found a way of getting round them as soon as she came to them”. So sure was she

of “the co-operation of her Sisters and boarders, and so exemplary herself in every situation, that very soon she gave the whole house that order and serenity which mark out the Religious Life. (CHRON. I, 258).

Don Bosco had not yet revealed his plan in full; the moment of decision was still to come, yet at Mornese some of the secrets behind the Institute’s origins were already being displayed. Mary’s own docility to God’s plan, as it unfolded before her through Don Bosco, became the centre-point for the docility of the other Sisters to actual grace, as well as their centre of gravity under any pressure. When the moment of decision comes, Mazzarello is all for Don Bosco: Here and now, and for all time. (CHRON. I, 272).

From her lips, we hear a decisive act of faith at this period, “Even if Don Pestarino were to leave Don Bosco (if that were possible!), I would still stay with Don Bosco”. (CHRON. II, 106). We all know the close spiritual bonds that tied Don Pestarino to Mazzarello; from the very grief she showed at his death, we can gauge the deep gratitude she cherished towards the one she regarded as her Spiritual Father. And yet none of these personal considerations would have been influential enough to make her turn her back on the way that Don Bosco had indicated.

All that was left to her of life would now be nothing else but the logical, inevitable consequence of this decision taken slowly within the depths of her soul. For this reason, the will of the father will become her will, and she also wants it to become the will of the Sisters.” (CHRON. II, 101).

And this went beyond Don Bosco’s expressed will. Cagliero observes, “to both her natural gifts of piety and educative insights, Mazzarello combined a blessed

talent for imitating Don Bosco in everything". (CHRON. II, 106).

Don Bosco could not have dreamed of a more suitable instrument for making his project become a reality: an instrument that he had neither chosen nor prepared, but one whom Providence had let him encounter at the ripe moment, and whom the Holy Spirit had made use of to raise up in the Church an Institute that mirrored the Salesian Congregation's identity and mission, but along feminine lines.

Don Bosco's intervention in no way interfered with the tiny seedling the Spirit had germinated at Mornese through Mazzarello's labours. It had simply given it a clearer end-aim, method and spirit; it had opened up for it a world-wide vision, and finally it had lent it support for its formation and organization (in terms of direction, help and experience), so that it could grow, develop and expand all over the earth.

It was with such humble sentiments in mind that Mazzarello once poured out her heart: "Dear Don Bosco! Dear Salesians! They regard us as part of the family. None of our works has any vitality or future without Don Bosco and his sons. Woe, woe to us if pride sneaks up to put it into our heads that we can achieve something without them! Then we shall be like a vine-runner, cut off from the vine-stem, and good for nothing." (CHRON. II, 342).

She repeated this elsewhere: "Never forget to thank the Madonna for making us her daughters; She has entrusted us to a saint, such as Don Bosco is." (CHRON. II, 344).

Perhaps we should ask if there were more lasting bonds, apart from this gratitude to the Salesians for their contribution to the Institute's beginnings, that

tied the F.M.A. Institute to the Salesian Congregation (and leaving aside any juridical connection).

The problem is too vast to warrant a separate consideration here. But may we be permitted to conclude this section on Mazzarello's fidelity to Don Bosco by formulating an opinion, or better, an hypothesis? I think that the spiritual affinity between Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello plus the identity of a single mission and educational method, hinging on the priestly ministry, already constitute grounds for an intimate, permanent solidarity between the two Institutes.

## **Creative fidelity**

### **Introduction**

The text of the Constitutions claims "Mother Mazzarello has shared in a unique way and with creative fidelity to the charism of the Foundation."

Such claim, quite justified in itself, could lend itself to erroneous interpretations.

Before a reflection on this topic, then, I think it is essential to specify what we mean by "creative fidelity". In practice, we could interpret this "creativity" in such a way as to compromise Mazzarello's "fidelity". Such an assumption is unthinkable in Mazzarello's case, for her creativity, according to Don Pestarino, was "always conformed in will and judgement to that of her superiors."

On the other hand, we must not interpret such "conformity" as "conformism", which is usually the sign of a weak personality; in no way is this true of

Mazzarello whom Don Lemoyne describes as “frank and outspoken in her opinions” and “capable of standing up for them”, even if she does bow, later, “to the decisions of Don Pestarino”.

From earlier remarks about Mazzarello’s determination to follow Don Bosco’s footsteps, not only carrying out his wishes but copying his very way of acting, I think that we should try to track down this “creativity” of hers; noting not how she “differs” from Don Bosco (a thing quite alien to her mentality and contrary to her expressed wish) but how she remained her own normal self. This method fits in perfectly with Don Bosco’s own thinking, that of founding an Institute where Salesianity would be transposed to a feminine key.

The more we study the spirit of Mornese the more we see it bears the impress of Mazzarello’s rich and very original personality: her way of understanding and exercising authority; her way of making the F.M.A. ideal come alive; its climate and spirit that only she knew how to create. It seems to us, in the final analysis, that this is her true “creativity”. It is a “faithful creativity” since it is perfectly in line with the intentions of Don Bosco, who at first wanted his Directors to confine themselves to spiritual direction, leaving the rest for the Sisters themselves to look after (cf. M.B. X, 618).

In the later stages of development Don Bosco wanted—or better encouraged—Mother Mazzarello to take on ever-widening responsibilities in the running of the Institute. (cf. M.B. XIII, 204).

It is exactly during this task of identifying the traces that Mazzarello has left of her own personality in the pioneer Institute—traces of her own character

or methods—that we wish to keep systematically and almost exclusively to the historical Chronicles. In fact, if Biographies have the advantage of highlighting the human figure better, they do so at times at the expense of the historical context, and of the environment in which she lived; while, instead, it is only in the gradual evolution of the work that we can better appreciate the key-role that she played in bringing such a work to completion.

### **Her personality**

Given the major importance we have attributed to Mother Mazzarello's personality in shaping the Spirit of the Institute, this section for all its brevity is of capital importance. It is certainly not our intention here to write anything like a biography, or even a mini-biography of Mazzarello. Starting from the Chronicles, we simply want to highlight some traits of her personality that can be regarded as basic and characteristic, both in her early formative years and during the later maturer years under Don Pestarino's spiritual direction.

It is really no more than a sketch, the indispensable minimum, so that later on we can appreciate the value and significance of her life's work.

### **Her character**

The family environment where Maria Domenica was born and grew up was a peaceful one, well-balanced and normal. One could say a lot more peaceful and normal than young Don Bosco's early home, and this despite the presence of such an incomparable educator as Mamma Margaret was.

Orphaned at a tender age by his father's death, young John Bosco had received an education that was exclusively maternal. He lived in a family environment where the only female presence was that of his mother and grandmother. An intelligent little fellow keen on studying, he saw his way blocked by his stepbrother, Anthony. For young John this family dissension must have been a traumatic experience which, at a certain moment, reached such an explosive-point that Mamma Margaret was compelled to send away for two years this little son of hers who had been the centre of so much conflict. (cf. MEMOIRS OF THE ORATORY, 1st DECADE. CH. 3, 40-41). (SEE ALSO DON CERIA'S FOOTNOTE).

Even when the storm had passed, in order to fulfil his dream John had to leave home for a second time. As a penniless student, he had to turn his hand to any kind of work so as not to be a burden on the family. All these are factors that could not help but influence young John's extremely sensitive heart. And so he was said to have "an easily inflammable temper, being rather pig-headed and stubborn; he was somewhat serious in character, slow to speak" (M.B. I, 94) and even "more cautious in forming friendships" (ORATORY, MEMOIRS, 1st D. CH. 6, 4-11); not very open with strangers, and extremely reserved and shy when women were present. (cf. M.B. I, 199; X, 594).

Without doubt Maria Domenica's childhood was a much happier one. She was the first of a clan of seven brothers and sisters, all of whom were to grow up within the warmth of the domestic hearth in a serene, deeply Christian atmosphere; nourished especially by the faith and deep wisdom of Papa Giuseppe, an honest, hardworking man. The family was not well

off; they lived a subsistence existence from their own farm, but as a rule (apart from the burglary at their Valponasco household, on one occasion, when their hard-earned savings disappeared) they were never below the breadline.

To help her mother, Mary soon had to look after her younger brothers and sisters. It was here in this job that she revealed rare talents as an educator. She knew how to keep the youngsters happy and well-behaved with pleasant stories; and how to get them to obey her, not as her mother did, "who with too much talking got hardly anything from them", but as her father "who said little, but said it in a firm and effective way". (CHRON. I, 42).

Being the eldest daughter, she tried as early as possible to make herself useful to the family by working on the farm. On this point, the Chronicles observe, "through her strong physique and character she was able to work as hard as any man" (IBID). In fact, she was second to none here. (cf. MACCONO, O.C. I, 37).

It seemed characteristic of Mary that she wanted to surpass the boys not only in catechism (cf. CHRON. I, 34).

Later as Sister Superior, she will come out with a memorable quote: "Although we are women, we should let no-one treat us as slaves; fair is fair." (MACCONO I, 194).

It is not a case here of making her out to be a dyed-in-wool feminist ahead of her time; we merely want to stress that Mary never showed a trace of an inferiority complex when opposed to anyone whom Don Bosco would describe as "persons of the opposite sex". This puts her humble, docile obedience in a different light.

As an adolescent who bravely faced up to life and was keen to get to know people, she found in her own father an expert guide who took her with him to markets and fairs, where she could satisfy her healthy curiosity with no danger to her charming innocence. (cf. CHRON. I. 43).

Her cheerful temperament was the result of this peaceful educational environment. Don Pestarino says of her: "By nature she was sincere and ardent, with a very sensitive heart". (M.B. X, 618). Here we have an etching of Mazzarello but not a complete one; for side by side with this sensitivity of heart went a strong, self-willed temperament; with her sincerity and frankness we must bracket her docility; to her ardent spirit and resolute will was joined a witty, engaging manner.

All these elements weighed heavily in shaping Mazzarello's personality, and she could not help but leave traces of all such features on the identity of the Institute she founded.

### **Her spiritual journey**

Having underlined the positive aspects of Mazzarello's temperament, we would betray the historical truth if we did not place equal stress on her negative qualities.

For example, we cannot say of Mazzarello (as we could of Dominic Savio) that from the start she took delight in going to church. On the contrary, feast days for Mary became an absolute torture. Now if her distaste for the over-piety of her cousins, the Bodrato family (where she stayed for some months) can be excused in full: "I wanted to be good" she

would say, "but without all those long hours in church, and without putting on a show for everyone", (CHRON. I, 31); if her marked aversion for sermons can find a plausible excuse in the fact that they were not adapted to her age-group (in practice, she showed intense interest in Catechism); at least her deep repugnance for confession does not seem excusable on any grounds. This repugnance for confession was to stay with her for a long time, well after she had progressed along the spiritual way under Don Pestarino's guidance.

We find in the Chronicles that going to confession "cost her dearly, due to the natural aversion she had to laying bare her conscience". (CHRON. I, 31). But far from being a valid explanation of her problem, this remark simply deepens the mystery; it seems logical to ask a second time just what lay behind her reluctance to confess?

It is not my purpose to pinpoint such a reason; such a task seems not only difficult but impossible, due to lack of historical data on the subject. The best we can do with what we have is to formulate an hypothesis, that will have some basis in and resemblance to the facts. Perhaps we have a key to unlock the mystery in the charming confidential memoirs that Mary gave to Petronilla about her childish escapades. (cf. CHRON. I, 39-40).

These reveal an unknown side to her character. To satisfy her greediness and to avoid any punishment (another of her negative qualities) Mary resorted to stratagems that took away her sincerity and simplicity, as she admitted later. By comparison, it is interesting to recall how young John Bosco defended any pride in his blossoming personality by resorting to stubborn-

ness and lack of submission. It was only after his First Communion that he showed some improvement here. (ORATORY MEMOIRS, 1st D. CH. 2, 42-46). Young Mary, for all her docility, defended her pride in a more typically feminine way: by insincerity. It was an insincerity that found an obstacle in confession, where it was not possible for her to tell lies. This childish tendency to maintain in others a beautiful image of herself (her defects notwithstanding) runs into conflict, in confession, with her innate delicacy of conscience.

This, it seems, is what gave rise to her reluctance and repugnance to this Sacrament, which we spoke of earlier.

Perhaps some credence is given to this hypothesis by the insistence with which Mazzarello right up to her dying day, (CHRON. III. 378) recommended her Sisters and Postulants to be sincere and open without fail, in Confession.

Well-founded or not, this hypothesis brings to centre-stage Maria Domenica's really major obstacle to perfection, namely, self-love and pride. This can be seen from the insistence with which she harps on this point; and from the constant references to it in her letters. For her, self-love is "the ugly enemy that makes us lose all the fruit of our good works" (letters 32-4); it is "the enemy who has to be ground into the dust" (letters 29, 2; 24, 9); "trampled underfoot", "burnt to cinders" (letter 20, I). It is an enemy so shrewd that, when it seems we are really making progress at last, it comes to make us fall flat on our face", (letter 16, I).

Getting on in years and in virtue, she admits in a letter to Cagliero that "she had so much self-love that

she stumbled every moment and fell to the ground like a drunkard.” (letter 7, 9).

We have seen how she became aware of all this, and admitted it, as her personality matured and came to its peak. Held in considerable esteem, both inside and outside her home, and very much aware of her own self-worth, we have seen her growing tendency to surpass other people; to be always top-dog, dux of the class. Added to this was the typically feminine vanity of wanting to be praised and admired by everyone around her (CHRON. I, 46).

This negative picture that we have just drawn after the positive one, far from diminishing the greatness of Mother Mazzarello, helps us understand how that deep humility and great simplicity that everyone admired in her were not natural gifts, but effects of actual Grace, with which Mazzarello had to cooperate day in, day out. They came about only when she had purified and simplified her spirit, inch by inch, in God’s pure light.

The first sign of Mary’s response to this grace in action can be discerned in the sheer delight and enthusiasm she experienced in absorbing the Catechism. God’s word seeped deep into her soul, gave it light, and gradually transformed it. A sure sign of such a transformation in action, a vital oasis for her spiritual journey is her first meeting with Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

Being so shy about revealing her inner life, she spoke of it to no one; but the improvement noted in her conduct—she went to church more willingly, was more attentive at sermons, did not need prodding to go to confession, was not so restless and distracted at prayers—helps us see that Mary had become aware of

the Centre towards whom her entire existence had to gravitate—Jesus Himself.

Lucky for her that she found a true, reliable guide in Don Pestarino to direct her steps for the first time to the Eucharistic Lord, a blessing denied young John Bosco, and a deprivation regretted in his Memoirs (OR. MEM. 1st D. CH. 2 132-34).

So intense was Mary's collaboration with grace that the Chronicles record it: "Don Pestarino now let her approach the Eucharist with exceptional frequency after her Confirmation Day. (cf. CHRON. I, 38).

This favour becomes even more significant when we recall that Don Pestarino, besides being a wise director, expert in affairs of the Spirit, was also very firm and exacting. Under him, Mary soon learned to rid herself of any "baggage that could slow her down on this Spiritual Journey: to mortify herself in food, taking nothing outside of meal-times; to overcome laziness, getting up before sunrise to prepare for her daily Eucharistic meeting (cf. CHRON. I, 47), to shake off her feminine vanity, dressing neatly and in updated fashion, but now more simply. (cf. CHRON. I, 46).

She learnt especially to master her fiery temperament, so vivacious and outspoken; and to mix in a little drop of sweetness. (cf. CHRON. I, 49); and, above all, to break that pride of hers which risked undermining the whole foundation. Such pride could have changed her from zealous to fanatical, from serious to lofty and overbearing, from frank and open-hearted to petulant and independent. (cf. CHRON. I, 39).

There still remained one obstacle to overcome on the road to perfection: namely, her aversion for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Every eight days she went there on time, but it cost her a great deal. To

make a general confession, then, to reveal the most intimate recesses of her heart to the Director, was just too much, an insurmountable hurdle—in her eyes—to purification.

Aware that prolonging the day would get her nowhere, Don Pestarino had her make it there and then, taking no objections. (CHRON. I, 50).

From that very day, her repugnance was overcome; but even while retreating, pride was to leave a wound that smarted and was slow to heal.

The Chronicles tell of her new affliction. They speak of her “delicacy of conscience” at this time (I, 81), but the episodes they relate reveal instead not so much “a delicate conscience” but an “anxious” one, still afraid to stand in God’s presence as a sinner, not yet totally surrendered to His fatherly goodness and loving-kindness. How she overcame this anxiety is revealed to us, indirectly, in a letter to Sister Giovanna Borgna. At first she encourages her to overcome self-love, but then adds in a motherly tone: “I suggest you should not be discouraged, to find yourself weighed down by faults; simply increase your goodwill, make it genuine and resolute, and Jesus will do the rest. If we admit our defects with goodwill they will become the very means to help us make progress, provided we stay humble”. (letters, 25, 5).

As she made progress day by day, Mary’s step became lighter. She grew more receptive to the breath of the Spirit, and the divine attraction grew apace. There were such moments of fervour, even at Valponasca; a more intense union with God, even during work on the farm, a life centred on the Eucharistic Jesus, and under the motherly gaze of Mary most holy. From her early years, Mazzarello had cherished a

vibrant devotion to the Madonna under the title of Our Lady of Sorrows (cf. CHRON. I, 80-81). It was at this time also that her decision to consecrate herself to the Lord forever by virginity came to maturity. Her entering the Daughters of the Immaculate congregation, besides benefitting her through community life and shared ideals, stirred a fresh apostolic longing in Mazzarello. The full life she now experienced had to be shared, in her eyes, with other people. We see it from the Chronicles, "So reserved before, Mary now freely approached this or that child to help her improve in conduct, to draw her closer to the Lord"; and—a point to be noted—"she no longer went to look for the better-behaved ones, as she had earlier, but preferred, so it seemed, the more mischievous types. These same little troublemakers soon grew very fond of her, and went out of their way to imitate her goodness." (CHRON. I, 71).

At this point in her life, however, something happened that can be counted as a real watershed on her spiritual journey: the close of one era and the opening of another. This was her illness, painful and providential at the one time. We shall not merely record the episode, but try to unearth its significance in Maria Domenica's spiritual life. Her illness was no chance-happening. When Don Pestarino suggested she should nurse her relatives stricken with typhoid, Mary, usually so generous and obedient, for once hesitated. She was not just vaguely aware of the real possibility of contracting a disease that could cut down her life at its prime, but boldly faced up to this likelihood, despite her instinctive fear, and heroically accepted it. "If you want me to, I will go, although I am certain I shall contract typhoid." (CHRON. I, 87).

This "fiat" of the lowly Mornese farm-girl made her scale the summit of freely-willed sacrifice, the total gift of herself for God and for others. It was a mystical sharing of Jesus' own "fiat" in his agony at Gethsemani. The quiet peace and inner joy that she experienced when her predictions about typhoid did come true, clearly show us how wide-awake her offering was. Made at her spiritual peak, her offering was accepted by the Lord, but He did not want the victim. In the designs of Providence, this grain of wheat crushed by suffering had to stay in the ground to bear fruit. More than anything, Mary's recovery was a slow resurrection from the dead.

Mazzarello felt that the new life, which slowly flowed back into her limbs, no longer belonged to her. The prayer that rose from the depths of her spirit, totally purified by this painful experience, was a marvellous hymn of humility: "Oh, Lord, if You still give me a little life, grant that I may be entirely forgotten by all. I am content to be remembered only by You." (PETRONILLA'S TESTIMONY, CHRON. I, 93).

Now that she was utterly forgetful of herself, totally in God's hands, He would ask her to realize His project: to make of her the foundation stone of a family of souls consecrated to His service. She was, at last, meant to be the "BULA" (PIEDMONTESE), that is, the very first one; not in a pre-eminence of pride, but in humility, abnegation, total self-sacrifice—the humble servant of everyone.

It was at this time, also, a time of pure docility to the Spirit, that Mary's plan of detachment came to maturity: to create a new spiritual family—detached from her former family—who would dedicate their lives to the spiritual renewal of village youth.

The meeting with Don Bosco was to be no more than the Providential dawning that the road covered by her till that time had been God's road; that she could now pin-point her direction and final destination, to fulfil God's plans. Before this meeting, she had already reached spiritual maturity. Not that from this moment, she no longer grew in holiness: the growing awareness of her call to be a Spiritual Mother to the Sisters actually sharpened her innate gifts of management and deepened her spiritual qualities with a renewed purpose, fresh ideals and new tones.

Granted all this, her spiritual features at that time—at least in their basic lines—were already clearly discernible.

To wind up Mazzarello's spiritual journey, I think it is time to unveil—almost as a synthesis—her spiritual portrait as given us by Don Lemoyne. We prefer it to Don Pestarino's portrait (cf. M.B. X, 618), because while the latter regards Mazzarello from the viewpoint of a father whose children, even when fully grown, still seem tiny in his eyes, Don Lemoyne instead describes her in full maturity. In this final synthesis, we find gathered into one frame all her gifts of nature and grace that have nicely blended over the years, to give her personality a distinctive spiritual identity.

This is how Don Lemoyne portrays her personality for us: "She was of an ardent character, but mortified by gentleness and charity. She had acquired a great self-control, and had learnt at long last how to live continually in God's presence, being very alert not to make a single slip in her words or actions. Great common sense, made holy by a supernatural love for souls, shone out of her. She could not abide even the slightest singularity in devotion or prayer.

She had wisdom, long-matured, with a clear-cut view of things; a promptness in decision, and an energetic will. She was frank and openhearted in stating her opinion, and she knew how to stand up for it, but she still bowed to the decisions of Don Pestarino. Highly sensitive in her feelings, she could always remain impartial to all. She had a witty and lively manner, but was always composed; in her bearing, she was her natural self, normal yet dignified.” (M.B. X, 644).

From this striking word-picture that Lemoyne gives us, we could make a mental-note on the countless points of resemblance to Don Bosco’s own spiritual portrait.

### **Mazzarello’s life in action**

Treating of the way that Mazzarello has gone about shaping the Institute’s spirit, we wanted to give precedence to the section on her personality; precisely because we find her spirit perfectly mirrored in her character.

If this is true, broadly speaking, of every individual, it is doubly true in a unique way of Mazzarello, who was simple in the extreme. Mazzarello is a saint who, by working in closest harmony with the Holy Spirit, had refined and simplified herself to the point where had attained her real identity; had found her own splendid selfhood, her unique way of being, thinking and working.

In her we can discover no complex, no complications.. In reading her letters, one has the impression of tracing the very movement of the Spirit, in the

same way that one can discern the smallest stones in a limpid river-bed, insofar as her thoughts flow uninterruptedly and spontaneously; rather like her spoken-word, so lively and fresh that she was incapable of holding back the first spill-of-words. (cf. CHRON. II, 364).

She just could not be untrue to her own nature. She always remained her normal self, either as the humble "MAIN" (Piedmontese version of her Christian name) of Mornese, or later as "MOTHER" to the little group of Sisters; whether she was asking advice of one of her little daughters, or whether she was standing in the presence of Bishop or Pope. There was nothing unrefined or the slightest bit undignified about her, but no trace either of affectation or of anything else that did not stem straight from the heart.

The actions of such a personality just had to be a mirror-image of what was in her heart. Her ideas on authority in a Religious Community, or of carrying it out, her relationship with her own Sisters, her special way of directing them along the way of perfection—all bear the unmistakable impress of her own personality and life-style.

An authority that is imposed from below

Evidently we have no intention here of opening up a discussion on the nature and origin of the authority at the heart of Religious Life. Apart from anything else, this would be utterly foreign to Mazzarello's whole mentality and outlook. Here we want to stick to one factor that carried great weight, in our opinion, in creating the climate of the pioneer years: a factor partly independent of Mazzarello, and partly brought about by

her own personality, by the way she went about things.

Slightly paraphrasing the Gospel in an off-the-cuff discussion with his confreres, Don Bosco could repeat Jesus' words, "You did not choose me, but I have chosen you." This could not be said of Mazzarello, who did not choose her companions, nor was she imposed on them from above; but they themselves had chosen her as guide. In fact, we could say they had compelled her, despite her shyness and reluctance, to be their Superior.

Looking more deeply into this may help us grasp the secret, I believe, why Mazzarello succeeded so well in her work, and left such a lasting impress of herself in the Institute.

From the Chronicles, it appears that even before she was officially designated as the-one-in-charge, Mazzarello had already carried out in practice, much against her will, the role of guide, animator and consoler; she it was who had been the bond of union between the Sisters, a function really proper to the one who would have to assume full authority to serve.

M. Mazzarello's was "an authority of fact", even before "an authority of office" ("before" indicates a priority here, not only in time, but in order of values). It was an authority that was not imposed from above by command, but which imposed itself from below through living example: by humble service, by strength of soul; by wisdom, friendliness and dedication.

It was said, "inside the house of the Immaculate Sisters everyone was obedient beginning with M. Mazzarello; who more than anyone put herself at the service of all, never looking for any other eminence except that of being first in hard-work and self-giving." (CHRON. I, 238).

In a feminine environment, so easily prone to emotionalism and depression, it was "always Mary who tackling everything in a simple, moderate way, kept the Sisters calm and cheerful." (CHRON. I, 248). There was a saying, "She did not want to see any frowning foreheads, that she had the gift of making the sun shine on cloudy days, and of sweetening not only unpleasant words and boring work, but even the most back-breaking occupations."

Again it is Mazzarello who, by her marvellous courage and strength of soul, helped her Sisters overcome with ease the incredible problems of the pioneer days: the sarcasm and hostility of all the villagers (cf. CHRON. II, 10); and a material poverty that bordered on misery. She it was "who surpassed everyone in piety and active-work"; with her lively, friendly character, full of wit, she kept her companions cheerful even when, exhausted after working all day, they had nothing more appetizing than a small bowl of polenta. She again was their leader in practising every virtue with enthusiasm so that, inspired by her lead, the Sisters would gladly undertake even the most exacting duties and privations." (CHRON. I, 291).

She was certainly not one of those who impose unbearable burdens on others' shoulders but do not lift one finger to help them (cf. MATT. 23: 4) nor was she one of those perfectionists who, from their lofty perch, can no longer have compassion for the frailty and weakness of others.

After a really tiring day of washing clothes at the Roverno Brook, we read of her, "as if she were not just as weary as the others, she saw to it that each Sister should be looked after as she had need; she

was here, there and everywhere, seasoning each little favour with so much goodness and lightheartedness as to make even newcomers and grumblers wish that laundry-day would come round more often.” (CHRON. I, 292).

Perhaps now we can begin to understand why the first Daughters of the Immaculate, these chosen foundation-stones, came to elect her unanimously as the one responsible for the Community. (CHRON. I, 274).

Even her genuine reluctance to accept the office of Superior, while underlining her humility and lack of ambition, besides confirming their own sound choice, visibly increased the esteem and confidence they had felt for her all along. Such trust and esteem continued to grow until they had the satisfaction of seeing her officially confirmed as Superior; and the joy of calling her by the sweet name of “Mother”.

Hers was a “motherhood” that did not stem from official Church Legislation, but from her close collaboration with the vital-action of God’s Spirit; from the spiritual insight of the whole community of Sisters, who felt by experience they were really her own spiritual daughters.

Even on that occasion Maria Domenica was in no way untrue to her natural self: all their esteem and affection did not succeed in making her the least bit uppish. The Chronicles relate, “all gave thanks to the Lord for this blessing; only the newly elected Superior had an air of resignation. She looked at Don Bosco, as if to ask for pity, then looked at the Sisters and said with a voice emptied of emotion, “Well, if they want it . . . they know how little I’m worth”. (CHRON. II, 96).

She will carry out this office till the day when she thinks she can no longer be of service to the Institute. When the work reaches a highly developed stage, she will feel it in her bones that she can no longer face up to her obligations (cf. CHRON. III, 236-361); and she will ask repeatedly to be relieved of her responsibilities. When she is not listened to, she will turn to Him who she knows will always grant her requests. (cf. CHRON. III, 374).

This is also in keeping with the notion that she had of herself as a superior: service, distilled to its purest form.

An authority that remains deeply fraternal

Led now by Providence and the will of the Sisters to take on the role of Superior, and to live out the part of their Mother, Mazzarello still remained true to self. Her official position and function in no way affected her true personality. She remained the Vicar of this Community of Sisters, whose "true Superior is the Madonna". (MACCONO, O.C. I, 287).

This protege of Don Bosco, to facilitate her new official duties, simply corresponded in every detail to his way of doing things (CHRON. III, 25), and he it was who mapped out a programme of life for her: She is to remain a Sister like all the others, but the one who has the duty of being their Vicar or, better still, of becoming (by her kindly concern) the gentle, living presence of their one real Mother, Mary Immaculate; whose Daughters they glory in calling themselves.

As such, she refused anything that would set her apart from the others. The only privilege she asked for herself was that there be set aside for her the very

last place, the most menial job, and the most taxing privations.

Neither did the office of Superior give her any sign of an "Exemplary-Model" complex. Not only is there a notable absence of any effort to appear anything else but what she is, but one can detect just the opposite. The higher the office assigned her, or the more praise from all sides, so the more readily she lets everyone know her limitations, and tells them of her own defects.

Keeping to this very same spirit where the good of the Institute was concerned, she encouraged everyone to play a part. And so she would ask advice of everyone, convinced as she was "that not only herself, as a weak Vicar, had to run the House according to the Rules and wishes of Don Bosco, but that each Sister could and should be of help and counsel; and accordingly each had to make known her own views and opinions, so that everything could run smoothly in every department." (CHRON. III, 11).

It is true that these testimonies do refer to the pioneer days of the work, when she was still not fully aware of the area of her responsibilities in running the Institute. But it is no less true that the underlying core truth behind such testimonies remained a constant of Mazzarello's spirit; right till the end she had no fear of belittling her authority by asking advice, in all simplicity and artlessness, even from the girls. (cf. CHRON. III, 371).

If hers was an authority, as we have argued, that seeped from below it was also one that remained faithful. If we were not afraid of being misunderstood (today the term has become too ambiguous), we would call hers "a democratic authority". Not in the sense that Mazzarello went in search of popularity

or of a popular consensus from some majority; not in the sense, either, that she was afraid to assume a Superior's responsibility, putting aside the dictates of conscience if some correction were needed. In such an approach she would not have been true to herself, something quite alien to her simple integrity. She was democratic in the sense that she never sat tall on the Sedia or Throne, but kept faithful to her Sisters, to the very least among them; to those engaged in the most menial and unrewarding work; to those most crushed by their own defects. It was with such as these that Mazzarello felt closest in solidarity.

Elected Superior, then, she still did not give herself superior airs; keeping to her practice of sitting on a workroom bench or on the steps of the staircase. She continued to be a good listener, to uplift everyone, spurring on to greater zeal not only the generous ones but the weak or mixed-up souls." (CHRON. II, 333). She kept for herself the smallest and poorest room, and "so as not to grant herself the privilege of sleeping in a single room and thus provoke criticism, she picked out as a room-mate one of the more rough-and-ready Sisters, a simple soul, promising her that she would soon get a change." (CHRON. III, 79). Like the other Sisters, she took part in all their games at Recreation, and "sometimes pretended to fall onto the ground to have the chance of kissing the feet of her Sisters (CHRON. II, 220), especially the simpler ones who were engaged in the more menial jobs. She had such solidarity with these Sisters, even with their weaknesses, that she tried to act as a buffer during the periodic outbursts of Don Costamagna." (cf. IBID). On her visits to the Houses, there was nothing bureaucratic or formal about her. Her main concern was

not to be a trouble to anyone, but to be of help to all. In all simplicity she easily slipped into the work-day rhythm in each House, as we see her do in one of her visits to the Sisters at Lanzo. The Chronicles are clear: "As in all houses of this kind, so at Lanzo the Superior and her few Sisters are busy from morn till night; Mother helps in every way she can; in the kitchen in the morning, then she goes to the workroom to mend the Sisters' clothes. And how she enjoys her sewing, as she thinks she can give a break to her overworked Sisters!" (CHRON. III, 37).

As each Sister was freed from her duties, Mother would welcome her for a talk; just as she talked to them in a group, whenever it became possible to get the entire community together.

She continued to act in this manner till the end of her life. At Nizza, Mother surpassed everyone on the weekly laundry day, washing more than the rest, even when the bitterly cold water chilled one's hands; and when time for breakfast came she would pick up her bowl like any other Sister and line up for her ration of boiled chestnuts. She ate her portion standing, keeping an eye out to see if the youngest and the more robust had enough bread, and if the more sickly ones needed to go to the refectory to get something more easy to digest." (CHRON. III, 142).

When she was sick, they had to restrain her in case she should tire herself out unnecessarily. (cf. CHRON. III, 362-363); and when she could no longer stand on her feet, so as not to be a nuisance to the Sisters, she would go to the Community infirmary. Only a strict order "given by him who could give it" could persuade her to retire with resignation to her room." (cf. CHRON. III, 373).

That such a way of interpreting the Superior's role in the F.M.A. Institute not only flowed from her temperament, but fitted in with her expressed wish is shown to us on her deathbed. It is the first of three recommendations that Mazzarello left as a final testament to her spiritual daughters. Even on its own, such testimony should help us realize how important this approach was for the future of the Institute:

“I fear that when I am gone, jealousies will spring up among you . . . little rivalries . . . complaints and grumblings as to who should be Superior; about a younger Sister given the position of authority . . . Oh, I know all that . . .! And so there will enter into the house a little coldness to chill the spirit of charity and holy union.

So long as this “poor old rag” was with you, this danger was not present; but now it could happen. I know that our Congregation belongs to the Madonna, and that the Madonna will always help you; but you must do your part; cheerfully obey anyone the Superiors may send you; and good riddance to that mania to be in charge!” (CHRON. III, 377).

There is more than enough here to give serious thought to all, and to cherish a tradition that has not only lost nothing with the years, but has taken on a new value and urgency.

More attention to persons than to things

In her mode of directing, we find Mother Mazzarello putting herself totally at the service of her Sisters; not only as a group but with each individual. This spirit she was to maintain, even

when the work was expanding with a new house opening, one after the other. In this, she possibly surpassed Don Bosco even. The reasons for such a difference in their respective approaches are many; but here we can list a few of them:

—First of all, due to the vastness of the work he had turned his hand to, and because of the duties entrusted to him for the good of the Church, Don Bosco was less able as time went on to keep track of each confrere personally. He had to rely on his trusted deputies, etc. to make personal contacts, and to see to the everyday running of things.

Mazzarello, instead, still living in the pioneer atmosphere when the Institute was not much more than one large family (first at Mornese and later at Nizza), could still stay close to her Sisters; even with those overseas, by a vital personal rapport, as is clearly evident from her letters.

—In the second place, taking into account “the condition of almost total dependence of the F.M.A. Institute on the Salesian Congregation (STELLA. OC. I, 198). it naturally followed that Mazzarello’s main sphere of responsibility—if not the only one—was boiled down to that of authority and discipline within the House. Freed, then, from other occupations, she could give herself with undivided attention to her Sisters.

—Finally, there is a third motive that seems to me less flimsy than the two mentioned. If it is true that in the family atmosphere created by Don Bosco in the heart of his House there should be no room for purely formal, official relationship, then this should be doubly true for the F.M.A. Houses, given the entirely feminine nature of such an environment.

And it was precisely such a spirit that Mother Mazzarello knew how to create at Mornese and later at Nizza; and that has filtered through into every community that has hived off in all directions from Mornese and Nizza. This comes out very clearly from the Chronicles.

Even when the numbers did increase, it did not appear that Mazzarello's concern for each one of the daughters God had sent her had diminished in any way. Serene and reassuring with her girls (cf. CHRON. III, 371) kind and understanding with her postulants who had just left their own families and were now confronted for the first time with a life-style so different from their former one and from their vocational-dreams, and perhaps felt a trifle disillusioned—Mazzarello became all things to all people. (cf. CHRON. II, 119-120).

Totally forgetful of herself and her own little crosses, we see that she is all eyes to search out their needs, to guess what they want and to anticipate their wishes. "Her eyes wandered from this one to that", the Chronicles record; "she enquired about all their little ills, whether they found the food tasty enough at table; she studied in depth the character of each young woman the Lord had confided to her; in this way she could reach into their hidden sufferings, or merely into their needs and passing problems." (CHRON. II, 361).

And then she would intervene in a motherly way. To one she brought a piece of bread; another, she would tell to take extra milk; this one would be permitted to carry on a short, low-key conversation in the work-room; that one to take her turn working in the vineyard. The nervous types would be encouraged,

and the depressed ones cheered up no end. What a wonderful collection of anecdotes poured from their lips when they came together for their annual Retreat at the Motherhouse that had seen the birth of their own Religious Life; (cf. CHRON. III, 226-233); or that gushed out pell-mell, as they chattered like sparrows in the courtyard, or at the Feast of Gratitude celebration! (cf, CHRON. III, 61 63, 187-189).

With the professed Sisters, M. Mazzarello was said to be "a little serious". (CHRON. III, 371). We shall see later what significance should be given to such an expression. The little episodes that have come down to us, however—so many and so varied—help us appreciate how close she was to each Sister, in her unique, motherly way. Concerned for their physical well-being, their spiritual problems, their ideals and aspirations; she still found time to concern herself with their beloved families, delicate topic as it was!

Even the stern words we occasionally hear from her were really expressions of her motherly concern, of her close attention for each one of them. She would step in to help one get over a problem, to prevent another from becoming closed in on herself, or to encourage a third one to make a new start. But as soon as she realized she had stirred some resentment or had grieved someone without meaning to, we see her immediately humbling herself to beg pardon and to display clear signs of the esteem and affection she cherished for each one without exception. (cf. CHRON. II, 364). And she knew how to do this with such grace and heart, as to bring back tranquillity on the spot.

A note in the Chronicles confirms this: "Anyone who left Mornese for the first time felt deeply this

separation from their Mother.” (CHRON. II, 269). We can consider as further concrete evidence the letters that reached the Mother from her daughters scattered throughout the world, besides those she sent to them.

The open-heartedness, the lively style and simplicity that run through them, their refrain of trust and loving-kindness stand as proof of the depth and intensity of the closeness that bound the Mother to each one of her spiritual daughters.

### Bond of communion

From all that we have said so far, we have seen Mazzarello's personality and influence slowly spreading, as time went on, throughout her Institute.

It may seem paradoxical. This very same woman who had asked the Lord after her serious illness “to be forgotten completely by all” (CHRON. I. 191) is now gradually drawn, against her will, into the limelight; to pour out her own spirit into the minds and hearts of those living so close to her.

She comes to the fore through her zealous, energetic character—so honest and strong-willed; through her goodness—so sensitive in her feelings, through her splendid sense of balance—brave, sturdy and cheerful; above all, she comes to the fore through her deep humility and simplicity, through her abnegation and devotedness in spending herself totally in the service of everyone.

Her abhorrence for any pretence; her resolve never to run after honours and to put herself in the very last place—all this allied to her sincerity and to those

inimitable little sayings of hers, won for Mazzarello everyone's heart, mind and soul.

It is evident from the Chronicles that even during her lifetime Mazzarello had become something of a legend in her own circle. We can see this in the anecdotes about her, carefully treasured and handed down by the Sisters, the Novices and even by the girl-students. (cf. CHRON. II, 220: III, 185-191). We can see it in her sayings which also came to be treasured, even those slightly cutting ones that, at a distance in time, were seen to be charged with wise foresight and motherly goodness.

We see it again in the repute that had preceded her to Nizza: a repute attested to by the keenness to get to know her, "about whom the Sisters have spoken of in such glowing terms that it has set her apart." It is thanks to this repute that we find recorded in the Chronicle: "The young people at Nizza were conquered by her simplicity, and even by her very austerity." (CHRON. II, 351). We can ascertain it again, best of all in fact, by the void left behind at the moment of her death. It was then that each could measure just how much this humble soul, without wanting to, had indelibly influenced each one of them by the charm of her simple goodness; how much she had been part of their very lives. (cf. CHRON. III, 395-402).

God had made use of this lowly instrument, so responsive to His touch, to accomplish the marvels of His love, and to impress it on the Institute. From earlier remarks and eye-witness accounts, I think it is beyond doubt that the heroism of the pioneering-period bears the identical stamp of Mazzarello's own heroism. We still have to deal with this likeness

when we come to speak in a later section, of her Spiritual Direction.

For the moment it is imperative to stress that such an impress has been left more by M. Mazzarello's own personality than by her teaching. It is the charm which emanates from her simple goodness, so genuine, and from her unstinted self-giving that impressed her Sisters, even those a lot better educated than Mazzarello was. All were caught up by her very enthusiasm, found comfort in her courage and faith, and were drawn along by her magnetic example.

With a guide to lead them with such a measured tread, and so unerringly, to their final destination, there was nothing else to do but follow in her footsteps—unless one wanted to be left behind and separated. Only this can explain the rapid increase in the number and standard of vocations at the beginning, when confronted with mountainous difficulties.

If she was the Sisters' living bond of cohesion with God, then M. Mazzarello was no less a bond of communion among themselves. The deep Family Spirit created at the start was due, above all, to her by the way she interpreted the role of a Superior.

We can put it down to her simplicity, sincerity, littleness, spontaneity and cheerfulness; to her unique kindness that could make the sun shine on even the darkest day. (cf. CHRON. II, 118, 362-364).

Mazzarello's "family" was like that of Don Bosco's, with no watertight compartments: "My little daughters", as Mazzarello used to call them, "can all be postulants, so long as they live our family-life; taking part in every activity". (CHRON. II, 125).

A weighty testimony to this pioneer Family Spirit is that of Don Pestarino. In a report made to Don

Bosco (1874) on the conduct of the Institute, he singled this out especially: "What mainly pleases the observer is the genuine spiritual union, the charity, the cheerful harmony and holy joy among them all at recreation, where they unwind as a closely-knit family. They all take delight in staying together for their games and relaxation." (CHRON. II, 59). When the Sisters spread their wings far and wide, it is still Mazzarello who takes pains to keep her Sisters as one family.

This she does primarily by her visits to the Houses. As we have noticed, such visits are in no way official, formal ones; something totally alien to her way of thinking. She visits them to see if all her Sisters are keeping well, to stay with them for a while, to lend them a hand, to hear their news, and to pass on to them news of other Sisters. She comes to encourage them, to give them inspiration, and, if she finds them confronted with a problem, to help them reach a solution. (cf. CHRON. II, 302-303, 309).

There was also that precious moment each year when they could reinforce the family-ties at the time of the Spiritual Retreat, when the Sisters from houses far away met together as one. Mother Mazzarello took advantage of Retreat recreation times not only to be right among them, but to foster the swapping of news from one house to another. In practice, we find that Mother "made an effort to ask about news from each house when all were present, so that everyone could be up-to-date with Family affairs; and so that each could learn from the other new ways of becoming holy and doing good to souls." (CHRON. III, 213).

Finally, there were the Sisters who were too far away to be reached personally, or to attend the Retreat.

These also Mazzarello tried to keep in touch with, at least by letter. At that time, fortunately, there was no such thing as duplicators. But even if there had been, I don't think Mazzarello would have given up sending her personal letters, full of sunshine, in her crystal-clear, limpid style that radiated benevolence and holiness.

To the Sisters at Villa Colon and at Las Piedras she admits that she feels something she cannot explain for her daughters so far away. "Time and distance, it seems, instead of lessening have increased my old fondness for each one of you." (letters 40, 1).

And such letters were to become a pure draught of Mornesian air that refreshed these Sisters overseas and drew them closer into a Family Community.

Just how successful Mazzarello had been in her efforts to keep the Sisters together can be seen after her death, when they were described as "having but a single heart and soul". The Chronicles states, "Nearly all of them have grown up together, one could say. They still know each other really well, and not just by name. Since they love each other as Sisters so the joys and pains of one become the joys and pains of all. Even though they no longer live under the same roof, they still maintain their old friendships. Every scrap of news about an absent Sister draws everyone closer into the domestic circle that Don Bosco has left us as a distinctive mark of his children, that Family Spirit." (CHRON. III, 415).

Direction marked by a strong motherly spirit

We have just finished reflecting on the role that Mazzarello took on as Superior; we now want to

make a brief outline-sketch of the key principles that she followed in her Direction of the Institute.

We will start with the spiritual criteria by which she used to "distinguish wheat from chaff". Despite her lack of education, from her own experience on the Spiritual Journey and from her long study to eradicate pride from the core of her soul, she had acquired a great skill in reading the feminine soul. In fact, she is even sharper than Don Bosco himself in this field, as was proved in the case of Blengini, of Bacchialone, and of the Sister who left for Argentina despite Mazzarello's negative report to Don Bosco. (CHRON. III, 361).

Just what criteria she herself relied on, we can learn indirectly from the counsels she gave to her Superiors and to those involved in formation-work with postulants and novices. In full accord with Don Bosco's own, her criteria were inspired by a deep sense of moderation, realism and practicability.

Writing to Sister Angela Vallese, she says "Be convinced that there will always be defects; there is a need to correct and improve all that you can, but do it with calm, leaving the rest in God's hands. There is no need to make a big thing out of trifles; sometimes in our efforts to keep track of the really tiny faults, we let the major ones slip under our guard." After adding that she has no intention of advising anyone not to worry a scrap about small defects, she concludes, "Give corrections without fail, but have a compassionate heart and practise charity towards everyone. It is essential that you carefully study each one's natural qualities, and know how to lead them to the heights. There is a need to inspire confidence". (letters 22, 2).

It will help, I think, if we know just what principles Mazzarello considered important, and which ones she took little account of.

Writing to Sister Josephine Pacotto, she sends her these recommendations for postulants. "Tell them not to think only of dressing themselves in a black habit, but more of essentials: wearing a habit made from all those virtues needed for a Religious; namely, acquiring a spirit of mortification, sacrifice, obedience, lowliness; and of detachment from all that is not God." (letters 21, 2).

Generally speaking, Mazzarello did not have too much time for sudden bursts of enthusiasm; she preferred solid virtue. This can be seen from the Conferences she gave to the Sisters, all eager to leave for the Missions after reading of the success of the F.M.A missionary work in South America: "We don't save souls only by words and momentum, but with mortification, self-denial and solid virtue." She goes on incisively, "Get a lenten-discipline started on your self-love and all the defects of your own little world: those glaring defects most opposed to your duty of giving good example." (CHRON. III, 148).

Just as she was wary of short-lived enthusiasm, so even more she warns about inconsistent fervour.

We see this clearly in the case of Augustina Simbeni; and in the case of another Sister who claimed she had visions, Mazzarello is convinced, "true visions are only for humble souls". (CHRON. III, 385), and that vain-glory can sneak into the ambient of piety. She warns her Sisters to resist such a tendency. "Have piety, by all means, but resist the temptation to put your devotions on parade." (MACCONO, O.C. I, 425).

She puts no faith in a buzz of tittle-tattle, as she reminded Sister Pacotto. "Don't regard as "open" those who talk a lot about themselves (in reality they say sweet-all), and talk even more about other Sisters! On the other hand, you will find those who speak very little but say a lot in a few words. These are the ones you can count on most, for usually there's good stuff in them." (CHRON. III, 285).

She was afraid of shallow characters, "Be careful", she advises Sister Pacotto, "of the inquisitive ones, of the conceited and ambitious types. For these are the faults into which our daughters fall more easily, and they bring real division into the community." (CHRON. III, 250).

Finally, she had little faith in those "always tied to someone's apron-string." (CHRON. III, 250). In a Goodnight, she insists, "Do not trust the simpering types who show their affection by flattery, compliments and carrying tales. You won't find such types among those devoted to their duty; normally such tale-bearers are the most self-centered and least sincere, since they are only looking for their own good or for the good-will of others, especially of superiors, just to get their own way from them." And she ends up, "Do you know those who love you best of all? Those who are most docile, most obedient, and most observant of the holy rule." (CHRON. III, 364).

Apart from the intuition and insight, so typically feminine, we can note "the solid virtues", which she demands from those who are called, are substantially the very ones that Don Bosco insists on:—mortification, self-denial, humility, sincerity, obedience, observance of the rule, and hard work—even if, as we

shall see later, Mazarello puts her accent on different key-points.

Where Mazzarello differs remarkably from Don Bosco is the manner in which she tries to direct her Sisters to practise such virtues.

We find Don Bosco very wary of meeting people head-on; he is afraid that their pride or touchiness could lead to their withdrawing into themselves. When he is asked for a favour, he is scared to say no, preferring to give a refusal through a deputy (cf. M.B. VI, 305). When he wants to make someone submit, or to put them back on the right track, he never takes the direct path of bluntness from the outset, but prefers to scout around the problem by first winning over their heart. Above all, when he is confronted by "hostile, stubborn, depressed or fickle people" and realizes that "pleas about good-order or charity or duty don't get him far", then we are told, "with superb skill and with no trace of flattery or deceit, he would gang-up with their self-esteem. In this way he was able to pull a few strings to the point where he would get them to agree with what he had in mind. A word of praise here, a good report he had heard there; a pat on the back, a shared secret to show his trust and respect; and most of the time he got around every obstacle and antipathy. By such methods, he succeeded in getting what he wanted from both Salesians and outsiders." (M.B. I, 431; cf. also M.B. II, 218; VI, 55-56).

On the contrary we see that with her Sisters, above all, Mazzarello was not the least bit afraid of meeting people head-on, or of provoking quick reactions. To a Sister who sang magnificently, she said with the whole community present, "Who do you think you

are? If the rest of us had had a chance to learn music as you did, we would sing as well as you, and perhaps play a lot better.” (CHRON. III, 148).

Another Sister, an expert in embroidery, was packed off to the workroom to patch old clothes for a fortnight. To a third who showed antipathy towards a Sister, she gave the obedience of staying for a fortnight with the more sickly Sisters and those not to her liking. She made those who liked to cut a good figure wear a patched old habit. For small breaches of discipline, following Don Costamagna’s custom, she made the culprit kiss the ground. (CHRON. II, 145-154). In short, to use her own words, she had no fear of “grinding the Sisters’ pride into the dust”, or of “burning it to a cinder”.

When pride took the path of insincerity or deceit then Mazzarello showed absolutely no mercy; “Full of kindness and compassion to those who admitted their faults, in order to improve or humble themselves, she could not abide the underhand tricks of any self-love which shifted the blame onto innocent shoulders.” In such cases, her voice became sharpened and commanding, “Let them correct this fault, or else realize they are out of place in the Lord’s House; let them follow some other vocation.” (CHRON. III, 149).

As soon as she saw that a Sister was truly sorrowful and humble enough to do better, Mazzarello, was not afraid to be humble with her. “This fault which causes you so much bother and regret, you know, is one that makes me sweat, too.” (CHRON. II, 333); or she did not hesitate to go out of her way with extra kindness when a Sister just could not shake off a deepseated resentment. (CHRON. II, 364).

On this last point Don Bosco was more cautious.

Though very slow to indulge in strong corrections, or to take negative decisions, once he was compelled to do so there was no turning back; even if he did leave the door open for pardon. His biographer tells us, "He showed equal determination both in demanding obedience to his orders, and in punishing those who remained obstinate in defying him." (M.B. VI, 307).

This difference in their two approaches can be put down to many factors. Primarily, it depended on their respective temperaments. Don Bosco was said to be cautious and guarded; while Mazzarello with her open, lively, character "did not succeed in mastering the first natural impulses." (CHRON. II, 364). We can say, also, that it depended on each one's past experience and early formation. From Don Pestarino Mazzarello had received a tough formation, certainly in no way indulgent to her natural weaknesses.

Finally (and this is only a hypothesis, yet to be proved), their diverse styles could have come from the male or female context where each founder was obliged to work. If we can say of Don Bosco that he had "a strong fatherly heart and at the same time a heart that felt all the tenderness of a mother." (PIUS XI, M.B. XIX, 234); we must also admit that Mazzarello, while being tender-hearted as a Mother, was not soft-hearted. Her love for the Sisters was a strong love. They, in turn, were asked to pray that the Lord would give them "not a tender love, but a strong love". (CHRON. II, 334).

Basic tendencies of her spiritual direction

We have no intention of compiling a summary, let alone an exhaustive treatise, on Mazzarello's spirituality.

So short is our allotted space here, that it would be both impossible and impracticable. What we want to stress are not those aspects common to every spiritual teaching stemming from the Gospel; nor those that show a close affinity with Don Bosco's; but those that are, in a special way, characteristic of Mazzarello.

The reader may grasp Maria Domenica's spiritual-principles for her F.M.A. from remarks of her own postulants. "Our Mother, they say, insists on no other virtues except those that are really her own." (CHRON. II, 223). Such virtues are then listed: "humility, mortification, and the spirit of sacrifice".

Disregarding the possible incompleteness of such a list, it seems to me that such guess-work about Mazzarello is on sound lines. All our conversations let others see, more or less, what we are; but in Mazzarello's case so close was the identity between her personality, ideas, and actions that she could not help but reflect her true self for the world to see, and in a unique way.

This is confirmed by the recurring emphasis on the same themes in her Conferences and correspondence. In this perspective, we can look at a mosaic of virtues that reflect her main tendencies as a spiritual director. The order chosen is not meant to suggest a priority of values or importance; but simply to give some sort of logical order, just as they occur in Mazzarello's train of thought.

Mortification—a spirit of sacrifice,  
poverty and work

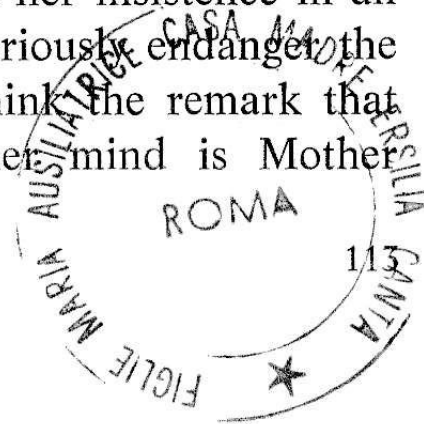
In the short-list of virtues demanded by Mazzarello, which the postulant had identified as uniquely her

own, we have seen two or three virtues grouped under the heading of Mortification.

For M. Mazzarello this meant a close share in the sufferings of Jesus Crucified, and of the Virgin of Sorrows to whom Mazzarello had remained devoted since childhood. This core of virtues, listed under Mortification, instinctively calls to mind the financial problems at the foundation, and the heroic life-style the pioneer "Mornesini", little Mornesians, had to lead; it was a "compulsory virtue", virtue of necessity. It was this, but a lot more. Such pioneer heroism, as said already, cannot be explained by mere adaptation to the inevitable, but by a deliberate choice of life these Mornesians had made—with Mazzarello in the forefront—under Don Pestarino's firm guidance.

Another concrete proof is the episode where, after appeals from Blengini, from the St. Anne Sisters, and from Don Bosco himself, for an improvement in the menu, the pioneer Sisters had let Don Bosco know their mind, through Don Pestarino's mediation: "Could he wait just a little longer to see if their health improved first?" (M.B. X, 629).

M. Mazzarello goes ahead, unperturbed in her "limitless mortification". (CHRON. II, 52) and the other Sisters, though no longer obliged to, "mortified themselves to an equally high degree". (CHRON. II, 120). When death began to stalk so many young victims, an agonizing conflict arose in Mazzarello's conscience. On one side, she was fully convinced that mortification was essential, and extraordinary mortification at that; on the other, she feared that her insistence in an already harmful situation could seriously endanger the health of her young Sisters. I think the remark that best captures the dilemma in her mind is Mother



Richetta's quote . . . "Don Bosco wants us to be mortified, but not to suffer". (CHRON. II, 61). When Don Bosco directly intervened to solve the problem at Borgo San Martino (whether milk-coffee or desserts should be added), Mazzarello bowed in submission (cf. CHRON. II, 236); but at the same time she feared that, by weakening on this point, the Spirit of the Institute would evaporate. (cf. CHRON. II, 129; 249-250). To her own Sisters she kept repeating, "At our death, we will be only as contented as we have been mortified." (CHRON. II, 259). And this irritating sting would not go away with time; it smarted again one famous sleepless night, followed by a memorable Conference. Memorable, because it projects into the future of the Institute.

"Up till now, we have been poor, and so often we have had to experience the effects of poverty, when even bread was scarce. Yet, despite all this, we have never been reluctant to work, carrying out with great zeal any job entrusted to us. But now our work is expanding, taking on wider dimensions all the time. All this will gradually bring about major changes in the life-style of the F.M.A. I will no longer be with you then, but you will live to see luxuries being introduced, a little at a time, until you have everything that a well-to-do family has."

At this juncture, Mazzarello's voice took on a grieved tone: "For heaven's sake! God does not want that, because of this, we should lose our good Spirit, the spirit of Don Bosco, the spirit of Our Saviour. For heaven's sake! even in the midst of greater comfort, continue to love poverty, really and in practice; that poverty whose great Master was Our Divine Redeemer, and whose spirit stands out so well

in our good father, Don Bosco.” CHRON III, 265-266).

The deep wound (almost an incision, you could say!) stings so much that she feels in duty bound to come back to this same theme in her end-of-the-year Conference (1880). (cf. CHRON. III, 298-301). Again, one of the very motives why she feels she can no longer be Superior—and perhaps one that induced her to offer her life to the Lord—would be that of “finding herself powerless to maintain the Religious Spirit in full flower as it had been in the first years”. (CHRON. III, 234).

Humility—(self-renunciation, sincerity, simplicity, observance of the rules, obedience)

Mazzarello’s concept of the Religious Life is a very austere one. In her eyes “Religious Life by its very nature is a life of sacrifice, renunciation and privation”. (CHRON. III, 300); and first and foremost is a share in the Cross of Christ: a life diametrically opposed to worldly values (SEE ABOVE). For this reason she consistently asked her Sisters not to imitate the world in their religious life:

“Let worldly people laugh now; it will be but for a short time. Weep for them. For us, happiness must consist of constant suffering and renunciation for the love of God.” (CHRON. III, 298-299).

Through force of circumstances, it came about in practice that external austerity faded as time went on, even though she hoped that no one would “be afraid of voluntary mortification”. (CHRON. III, 300).

So now Mazzarello came to focus her daughters’ eyes on Interior Mortification. At an end-of-the-year

Conference, she poses the question: "Is it enough to regard Community Life and daily duty as sufficient mortification in itself? No! No! A good Sister will not be content merely with what circumstances bring, but will go out of her way to find extra mortification for the love of God, for souls, and for her own poor soul. There is always the mortification of one's judgement, will, heart and senses; there is humble obedience which can demand a great deal from us, even if human ears or eyes take no notice." (CHRON. III, 300).

Since there were no ill-effects on health as a result of interior mortification, it seemed to Mazzarello that one could not sin by excess here. In this field, we see that Mazzarello's concern centred on self-love and pride. Apparently she insisted less than Don Bosco on obedience, which she regarded mainly as observance of the Rule. Again here, we could indicate how Don Bosco prefers to combat pride indirectly, concentrating on its evil effects, namely disobedience and inobservance of the Rule. Mazzarello, instead, prefers to charge head on at the cause.

Speaking of Mazzarello's powers of discernment, we have seen how expert she was at uncovering self-love under its various guises: under the mask of openness, of attachment to Superiors, and finally, under the cloak of piety, fervour and holiness. We have seen how expert and vigorous she was in combating the mania for power, recognition and esteem; in eliminating resentment provoked by envy and rivalries; and, above all, in annihilating insincerity.

This all-out war against self-love, and this striving for deep humility and simple sincerity are dominant themes, also, in her letters. It is along these compass-

points that the spiritual bearings, given by Mazzarello to her daughters, mirror to a large extent the same Spiritual Journey previously travelled by her to reach her authentic self-identity.

Then she can put herself, as she is, in all lowliness and simplicity at the service of everyone: for God and for her Sisters.

### Charity—chastity

When pride is destroyed, the heart becomes simple, that is free from anything that can make it close in on itself, causing it to become sour, dried-up, or hardened in its outlook towards one's brothers and sisters. And when the heart is free, then genuine love spontaneously expands it in true liberation.

So M. Mazzarello is convinced that "when the heart discovers true charity in the House between the Superior and Sisters, it does not look elsewhere; but if such charity is absent, the heart will gallop off like a wild horse". (CHRON. III, 216).

It is precisely because of this close interdependence that Mazzarello makes Charity another of her dominant themes for conferences and letters. She wants to see her Sisters "love one another in the Lord" (letters 19, 20); "to live in love, one with the other" (letters 20, 2); "to love one another as good Sisters do" (letters 22, 7); and "to console and help one another in turn", (letter 23, 3). She wants them "to offend no one", but rather "to excuse one another's faults". (letter 23, 5). She wants to see "no jealousies or particular friendship among them". (letter 35, 2).

This "flight from particular friendship" is possibly

the only point on which Mazzarello insists very much as regards chastity (CHRON. III, 163, 216).

I think that an extract from a letter of Mazzarello's to the Sisters at Carmen di Patagones serves as an apt summary of her thought on this theme of fraternal charity. "My ever-beloved daughters, I recommend that you love and deal with each other in all charity. Have compassion for each other's faults; correct any defects, but do so with unfailing charity and gentleness". (letter 37, 3).

Here we have a miniature portrait of Mazzarello's own features; humility, simplicity and frankness . . . above all, an unending Charity!

#### Cheerfulness—courage

Made pure and simple from its share in Christ's sufferings, when the heart expands in love, it cannot help but reveal itself in joyfulness; or, better still, cannot help but burst out into Salesian cheerfulness to be the motif running through her spiritual message, left to her Sisters. Anyone reading her letters, will be surprised at this recurring theme of holy joy.

One of Mazzarello's strong points and the fruit of her own happy temperament, is without doubt her unfailing cheerfulness, her optimism, her constant ability to see things under a good light; and so to face up to the heaviest sacrifice with a sportive sense of challenge. It is equally true, however, that she would not have been able to get through the many great trials that she did,—above all, that generous illness which cut down her physical energy—if her soul had not learnt, by self-renunciation, to anchor itself only in God.

This is the special kind of “cheerfulness” of which she speaks to her Sisters: “We want a cheerfulness that is the sign of a heart deeply in love with God; that is the result of humility and total trust in Him; that is the outward expression of charity and family union; and that is the overflow of a soul that prays”.

With such cheerfulness we can ally courage, since the first is just not possible without the second. A timid soul, full of fear and closed in on itself alone, is not capable of facing up to the hard realities of life with any optimism or tranquillity. And so it is equally incapable of being cheerful. This is another pet-theme to which Mazzarello will return in her letters.

Again here, we are not dealing with her purely natural qualities: her resolution and energy, and her strong-will. The very basic bed-rock foundation of Mazzarello’s courage, paradoxically, is her humility. In the measure in which she puts no trust in her own strength, so she can abandon herself totally to God, the centre of her confidence, serenity and courage—real and unshakeable. Closely linked with her “cheerful courage” was her hope of sharing God’s love for ever in the kingdom.

## Piety

We have tried to bring our readers along one step at a time, following the Socratic method announced at the start; keeping till last that theme which underlies not only Mazzarello’s spiritual edifice, but every christian life as well.

We are speaking here of Mazzarello’s piety, and of the kind of piety she fostered in her Sisters. We shall

keep strictly to those features of piety that were uniquely hers.

Even as a little girl, as we have seen, Mazzarello tended towards a piety made up not of lengthy devotional-practices and external forms, but of real-life itself. (CHRON. I, 31). Later, the spiritual formation she received, her own experiences, and her meeting with Don Bosco merely deepened and gave fresh purpose to such a tendency. She warned her daughters, "Don't stop to envy those who stay back in Church, sighing deeply and shedding tears before the Lord; and who still have not learnt to make a little sacrifice, or adapt themselves to some menial job. Do you know whom you ought to envy, instead? Those other Sisters, who with genuine humility can adapt to anything and are content to be as "The brooms of the household". (CHRON. II, 223).

She wants to see piety as the very nourishment of life, and so become part and parcel of daily life. Here, again, she is in perfect accord with Don Bosco. She does not want this deep, abiding union-with-God to become an alibi to escape from hard reality; but to be translated immediately into work, humble, self-sacrificing service for God *in* one's neighbour.

Accordingly, she does not want to see piety used as a pretext not to reform one's life, or to quote her own words, "not to use Holy Communion as a cloak for one's serious defects". (CHRON. III, 83).

For Mazzarello, then, the best proof of a serious, bona-fide piety is the earnestness with which each one makes progress on the road to conversion.

At the centre of this piety, obviously, we find God; not a far-off God, but Emmanuel, God-with-us and so close to us. Mazzarello's piety-centre, then, is Jesus,

especially the Eucharistic Jesus. Her place of rendezvous for all those who love her, near and far, is the very Heart of Jesus, full of loving-kindness.

If we want to make a comparison with Don Bosco, we would have to say that of the two pillars of Salesian devotion—Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Most Holy—Don Bosco's accent falls more on Mary than on the Eucharist. Or, better, his adoration of mind and will is all directed to the Eucharistic Jesus, but his heart seems to drift more instinctively towards the Madonna, whom he feels as closer. The very evidence from Don Bosco's letters, where he speaks of his encounters with God, conjures up the idea of the all-powerful Maker of the world, the Almighty Father and the All-providing, merciful God, rather than that of Emmanuel, of God-with-us.

M. Mazzarello's concept of God, on the other hand, is miles apart. The very persistence with which such titles as "Jesus", "Jesus crucified", "Jesus, our bridegroom", "The Heart of Jesus", etc., keep recurring in her letters (by comparison with the number of times the title "Mary Most Holy" appears) helps us understand the intensity of her close relationship with Jesus.

Despite this, we grasp from her letters that she was not thinking so much of "a tender love" but "a strong love", sustained by the cross, and by lowly service and pure faith. In all simplicity she confides to Sister Pacotto: "You say that you see me praying with fervour. But I must tell you in all truth that I never feel the slightest taste for prayer". (CHRON. II, 301).



## CONCLUSION

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The area explored is too vast, and the documents consulted too few to be able to reach a conclusion that will stand up convincingly. For the most part, we have dealt with ideas that need deepening, or with theories that had to be proved. At best, we hoped that this brief outline, researched from the material available, could provide a quick round-trip of new territory that promises to be really interesting.

For all its haste, however, from this exploratory birdseye-view, some conclusions do stand out, it seems to us, that are permanent features; feature-points that could serve as land-marks for future researchers.

(1) The first is the clear intention of the Founder, Don Bosco, (expressly stated in his own words in the reduction of the text of the Constitutions; in his own direct interventions, or through his collaborators) of making the F.M.A. Institute the feminine version of the Salesian Congregation.

(2) The second is that, in bringing his project into being, Don Bosco made use of Mazzarello as his main instrument; a unique instrument that Don Bosco did not form nor choose (strictly speaking), but whom he met, providentially, along the way.

(3) The third is that, raised up and prepared by the Spirit to make Don Bosco's project a reality, while keeping faithful to Don Bosco and to her own true self-identity, Mazzarello has given the impress of her own personality to this budding Institute.

For a convincing climax, one would need to re-read the description of "The Spirit of Mornese", written

by Mother Eurichetta Sorbone; and then to hold it up against our own Spiritual portrait of M. Mazzarello, to discover just how much that Spirit is indebted to her personality.

For this very reason, I think Mother Mazzarello is justly to be called "THE CO-FOUNDRESS".

