

## Sister Clotilde Morano and the “Gymnastics Exercises”

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### Introduction

This presentation is a historical framework concerning sr. Clotilde Morano, one of the female protagonists in Salesian history. The writing about her by sr. Grazia Loparco, professor at Auxilium inspired me very much.<sup>1</sup> Today, I will have the opportunity to talk to you about the major work of sr. Clotilde: “Gymnastics Exercises,” published in 1935.

It is a book written by a woman for women in a challenging period for them. The early 1900s is the time when women began to have a more distinct self-awareness. We are familiar with the events of the suffragettes (in today’s contexts the women rights activists) who, starting from the UK, began to fight for the right to exist as politically active figures, that is, voters participating in the political life of their nation. This is to say that in the early 1900s, there was still an initial recognition of equal rights for men and women. It would take a war to reveal it to everyone when women showed they could fully replace men engaged on the front lines. And sr. Clotilde can be considered a female example of creativity applied to the mission, whose DNA is in the charisma of the Salesian mission, as is well known. She is an example of reinterpreting the charisma, not imitation or passive reproduction, as emphasized in the previous lesson, and this tendency is well evident in Morano.

Sr. Clotilde was born and worked during a period of great social and innovative upheavals, expressing herself (in defense of women and their physical exercise, and a spiritual interpretation of both) during the challenging era of fascism. Her interest and the focus of her work are the spiritual and religious aspects of her writings. Sr. Clotilde allows me to connect the history of physical and sports education with that of women and fascism since her book is at the center of a period that profoundly marked Italian history.

### 1 Biographical Notes

Sr. Clotilde Morano was born in 1885 in Buttigliera d’Asti, like her aunt Maddalena, also a Salesian, the “Holy Superior,” a provincial of the Movement proclaimed as Blessed, who would have in some way “protected” and indicated the path for her. The latter is a figure you certainly know, and I would like to briefly recall here.

As sr. Enrica Rosanna, then Dean of the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences “Auxilium,” pointed out in 1995 in the presentation of a book dedicated to sr. Maddalena,<sup>2</sup> she was a “fearless woman and a born teacher, succeeding in embodying the charisma of Christian education according to the Preventive System of St. John Bosco personally known by her.” Prof. Rosanna recalled that Maddalena Morano was truly a “protagonist” with her life as an educator in love with the Divine Master and her tireless activities: animator, novice mistress, provincial, founder of sixteen houses with oratories, catechesis, kindergartens, elementary schools, and workshops for girls of the locality.

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<sup>1</sup> LOPARCO Grazia, *Clotilde Morano e l’apporto all’insegnamento dell’educazione fisica femminile*, in MOTTO Francesco - LOPARCO Grazia (a cura di), *Volte di uno stesso carisma. Salesiani e Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nel XX secolo* = ACSSA, Studi 10, Roma, LAS 2021, 185-208.

<sup>2</sup> MAZZARELLO Maria Luisa (a cura di), *Sulle frontiere dell’educazione. Maddalena Morano in Sicilia (1881-1908)*, LAS, Torino 1995. Cfr. <https://www.salesian.online/archives/4796>

Her personality was imbued “with the intuition and genius that characterized her as a woman, her ability to inculturate herself in Sicilian territory, and her incisive discernment in adapting the pedagogical insights of the Founders to that context.” From this beautiful text, I would also like to quote some words from Piera Cavaglià<sup>3</sup> regarding the historical period in which sr. Maddalena lived, when: “It was urgent to proceed on the frontiers of women’s emancipation, passing through the secure stages of education, solid religious formation, integral education of the person, and their integration into the church and social world.” From these simple references to her aunt’s experiences, we can conclude that Clotilde must have possessed the “genes” that distinguish a teacher and a respectful and aware religious concerned with the wholeness of the person, the necessary recognition of the dignity of women, and at the same time, the importance of intelligent inculturation in the historical period in which she lived. Regarding this last process, if her aunt understood the importance of inculturating and adapting Salesian pedagogy in Sicily at the turn of the two centuries (1881-1908), Clotilde realized that her method would have to “adapt,” fit within the limits of what was possible in the context of the ONB (Opera Nazionale Balilla, 1926), the main organization for youth under fascism, while keeping a firm commitment to the “saturated climate of the Gospel and pedagogical capacity” that Don Bosco had established in Valdocco. Furthermore, in her gymnastics exercise book, both in the first edition and in the post-war second edition, Clotilde is clear that her gymnastics method should take into account the diverse cultures in which the Salesians found themselves working on their missions. In this regard, the references are brief and appear among the tips for indoor gymnastics, with the aim of showing her full attention to the missionary world.

Returning to sr. Clotilde’s biography, orphaned at a very young age, she frequented the house of the Dukes of Genoa, where she was admitted as a skilled embroiderer, a quality that would serve her in developing the laboratory work of the young women at the Patronato in via Giulio in Turin, where she practically lived her entire life. This skill would also be useful for “weaving” the difficult relationships with the politics of the Ventennio. During the war, she had to leave to Mathi Torinese, but then returned to the young women’s Patronato. She wrote numerous educational works, for some of which she had the assistance of a lay collaborator, Luisa Larese Cella, a Salesian cooperater, her secretary from 1936. This was an important help for sr. Clotilde, who never enjoyed good health. Perhaps for this reason, and not only for the need to take full care of her students, she showed interest in the physical education of girls, well aware of its importance for maintaining health, as well as for their psychological and moral maturation. There was also the reason to prepare the teachers of private schools, mainly run by religious, and therefore, she had to follow the dictates of the Gentile reform (1923)<sup>4</sup> and the ONB. It was, therefore, about taking care of the cultural growth of women in a period not particularly favorable to them, while at the same time not deviating from the boundaries imposed by the educational policy of the time. In Sister Clotilde, these boundaries hinted at horizons of modernity and growth. In fact, the fruits of her book have been good and useful for the future, as we will see.

The last element to consider in understanding Morano’s interest in physical education and gymnastics, in addition to the fact that this is an important part of the Salesian charisma, is that she lived in Turin, the birthplace of this discipline. The first Italian gymnastics society is, in fact, the Regia Società Ginnastica Torino, founded in 1844. Edmondo De Amicis himself chose the city of

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<sup>3</sup> CAVAGLIÀ Piera, *Su strade educative nuove*, in *Il Bollettino Salesiano* 118 (1994) 7, 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> The “Riforma Gentile” refers to the education reform introduced in Italy in 1923 under the leadership of Giovanni Gentile, an Italian philosopher and politician. Gentile was a key figure in the Italian Fascist government led by Benito Mussolini. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-riforma-gentile\\_%28Croce-e-Gentile%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-riforma-gentile_%28Croce-e-Gentile%29/) (29/11/2023).

Turin as the setting for his short novel “Love and Gymnastics” (1892), among the first to narrate women’s experiences in the gym in Italy.

We can then say that Morano contributed to completing the vision of female physical education in Italy after the early days in Turin, although in a challenging period, that of fascism.

## **2 The Difficulties of the Time in which She Lived**

There were not few obstacles that Morano had to overcome to bring her pedagogical project, focused primarily on the physical education of women and therefore religious, to fruition in a moment that was not idyllic for the relationship between the State and the Church in Italy. Before delving into this issue, let's examine the state of physical education and sports for women during the Ventennio, and then touch on the "political" difficulties that persisted despite the Concordat of 1929. We will make these two historical references for both completeness and to better illustrate the tenacious and determined character of Sister Morano, who with great intelligence managed to navigate through a genuine tangle of situations.

### *2.1 Physical Education and Women's Sports during the twenty years*

We know that fascism aimed to implement interventions for young people, the new citizens to rejuvenate after years of hardship and poverty due to the immense damages of the Great War. To achieve this, it was necessary to improve living conditions, especially those of the mothers of future citizens, in terms of food, sleep, clothing, etc., to ensure hygiene and health. Physical education played a significant role in this plan. The ONB had among its goals the physical and moral education of the young generations in preparation for building a new Nation where women, too, were expected to be *New Women* – healthy, strong, and courageous. From 1929, the Little and young Italian Girls, already under the jurisdiction of the Fascist Youth Leagues, came under the ONB, the same year in which its president Renato Ricci became Undersecretary of the Ministry of National Education for physical and youth education. This led to the renewal of school programs in this field, through which the regime aimed to promote the eugenic direction of women's physical education and sports, while staying away from competitive or sports-related goals.

For almost all of the 1930s, there was a dual attitude: on the one hand, some saw sports, especially through the pages of “Lo sport fascista,” as a formidable means of growth for women; on the other hand, there were critics of a lifestyle seen as dangerously emancipatory, which was not accepted. In this fluctuating attitude towards the female athlete by the regime, the Catholic Church's stance, with its calls for modesty and decorum for women in every sector, especially in education, inserted itself with considerable strength and following. Sr Morano's gymnastics exercise book thus offers us the opportunity to discuss this.

**We can observe a couple of videos from the historical archive of Luce that date precisely to the period when the book was published, the first being from 1935. The last one from 1941 shows a clear openness to sports, which still does not appear in Morano's 1935 text, reflecting the ONB moment and its guidelines for physical education.**

### *2.2 The Difficult Moment of State-Church Relations*

These were indeed challenging years for Morano, despite the fact that the legend of Don Bosco somehow facilitated her path. Let's take a brief pause to explore this historical moment, which, in a sense, helps us better understand that caring for women and their physicality was by no means a given during this period. Nevertheless, Morano had the full support of the Vatican, with a clear framing of

her work in the field of physical education, albeit within a power struggle between the regime and the Church on educational matters as a whole.

"Gymnastics Exercises" complies with the regulations in schools, and the gymnastic progressions described in it fully adhere to the dictates of the ONB, at that time the only possible guide for physical education in Italian schools. Thus, this text adheres to the programs of this subject in light of the Gentile Reform. However, Morano's intention was to address one of the focal points of Don Bosco's method, which showed attention to the corporeality of young people while respecting the integrity of the person—an element that the Holy Educator wanted to nurture following the principles of their joyful and spontaneous expressiveness. At the same time, the text reveals an awareness of the need to train religious teachers without deviating from the official regulations of the time, and simultaneously to exempt the sisters who taught this subject in private institutions from a training that seemed unsuitable for their status and did not respect the sense of modesty. Morano certainly knew the difficulties her sisters faced in wearing gym attire and practicing exercises in the gym, which were at least unusual for their way of life. At the same time, she realized the increasing forceful imposition of a militaristic physical education, rich in obligations and often ridiculous commands, which had little to do with the loving nature of Don Bosco's method. In this regard, I would like to highlight one of her "balancing acts" that is particularly evident: on one hand, the writing and description of exercises for her students seem strict, almost rigid, while on the other hand, the tones were offset by the grace of choreography, songs predominantly inspired by religion or the patriotism of the First World War, with a continuous reference to a spirituality that transpired in the attention to details and the meticulousness of the work done. The severe tones would soften considerably in the post-war period, especially in the text written for the teachers of the youngest, "Smiles of Spring" (1952), confirming that Morano managed, initially, to adapt, within the limits of possibility, to the "balilla" atmosphere, with a kind of inculturation into the educational methods of the time, only to detach from them as soon as possible.

The ONB had indeed published numerous notebooks on physical education starting from 1929, with numerous reprints, given their widespread use as a guide for physical education teachers in schools. Texts that Morano attributes to the Salesian method, alluding to a true "intellectual theft" by fascism that would have "copied" it in its publications.

The years from 1929 to 1934 were filled with significant Salesian events but also attempts by the regime to identify fascist goals and symbols with religious ones. Pope Pius XI immediately sought to avoid instrumentalization by issuing an encyclical, *Divini illius magistri*, on December 31, 1929, emphasizing that education was also the formation of man "in how he should behave in this earthly life to achieve the sublime end for which he was created," and therefore, the Church had the Magisterium in this field. This was why the Church maintained its own schools and institutions where physical education was also imparted, always agreeing with civil authority when disputes arose. Therefore, the Church considered the state's educational monopoly unjust and illegitimate, within which military physical education was even imposed on young women "against nature," alluding to the fact that at the First National Female Gymnastics Competition organized for Young Italian Girls on May 4-6, 1928, there was shooting competition for girls. The Pope approved the spirit of discipline but not militarism, nor the spirit of violence, which should not be confused with fortitude because athletics (i.e., sports competitions) had historically led to degeneration and decay. In the same encyclical, Pius XI clearly condemned co-education, i.e., mixed courses, especially for physical education. Pius XI wanted to explain the need for Catholics to have their own schools and institutions where young girls could be educated according to Christian principles, following specific moral and religious criteria.

### *2.2.1. The State-Church Conflicts of 1931*

It is in the implementation of this encyclical that Morano's intention to write a text on physical education, or rather "gymnastic exercises," for young women seems to be rooted. The period that concluded when her text was released had touched on the most critical points of the still difficult (despite the Concordat) relationship between the State and the Church. In 1931, a conflict erupted between the ONB and Catholic Action (CA), precisely because of what was seen as an invasion of the educational sector of young people by Catholics. It was then that Pius XI harshly responded to the regime's impositions. If the FASCI, the Federation of Italian Catholic Sports Associations, established in 1906 to coordinate Catholic gymnastic societies, had chosen to dissolve itself in 1927 before feeling compelled, within CA, a Secretariat for physical education had emerged to organize diocesan sports groups operating in the shadow of bell towers, organized in parishes. All of this created an unacceptable situation for the regime, which aimed at total political and social control of the population.

The Church's concerns about the issue of necessarily scanty clothing in the gym and sports fields persisted, but especially about the "dangers" to which women would be exposed in an environment that seemed far from their decorum and their nature, which was more inclined by nature to motherhood and family life.

In 1932, the Fascist Academy of Female Physical Education in Orvieto had meanwhile been established for the training of leaders of regime women's organizations. A school with a three-year residency that would have been difficult for the religious sisters to attend, so, in addition to the summer courses held by the ONB in Rome to complete the ranks of teachers, courses in private institutions with their own teachers, albeit under regime control, began to emerge. This regulatory aspect also showed the difficulties faced by the religious sphere in preparing its own physical education teachers. Another point of contention was that CA had enrolled more women than fascist organizations in its ranks. The clash erupted violently in mid-1931 due to an evident incompatibility between fascist youth organizations and CA, which had also seen the dissolution of "Forza e Grazia," the Catholic part of the female sports movement, a "duplicate" for the regime. For the Church, the most perceived danger was that of promiscuity in the educational field, and on June 29, 1931, Pius XI published the encyclical "Non abbiamo bisogno" (We Do Not Need), written in Italian so that its content would be well understood given the gravity of the moment. In it, the Pope expressed concern about fascism's monopoly on all youth education, denying its exclusive belonging to the State and protesting against the "police" means by which CA associations, including university ones, had been forcibly closed. In particular, the Pope denounced the attack on oratories attended by children and the pious congregations of Mary Help of Christians, which were Christianly involved in "missionary cooperation." However, in September 1931, the CA Statute had to change, and the youth circles completely abandoned offering sports activities to their members.

As seen, Sister Clotilde Morano found herself acting in a period of strong contrasts between the Church and the State, and in a sector, that of physical education, over which the regime claimed exclusive control. Yet, she succeeded in her endeavor with tenacity and a good dose of "balancing" between powers, as well as audacity.

### **3. Gymnastic Exercises (1935)**

The main purpose of this text was to safeguard the dignity of the religious sisters who had to obtain certification for mandatory teaching in physical education schools. In 1934, a diocesan course on physical education for religious sisters was organized in Turin, with 170 participants from 35 different

orders. Perhaps Morano's manual was already prepared at that time, although not published due to the extensive work within the Salesian context for the canonization of Don Bosco.

### 3.1. *Why this title?*

To understand the reason for this title (which speaks of "gymnastics" and not "physical education"), it may be useful to recall that the ONB had among its legally recognized purposes those of "assistance and physical and moral education of youth." In delicate years of growing conflicts, as we have seen, partially resolved between the regime and the Catholic world, Morano may have wanted to avoid using the term "physical education" to avoid encroaching on the ONB's field. Instead, she wanted to respect it and immediately invoked the words of Renato Ricci, president of the ONB, in the opening of her text after the title page. Ricci had thanked her Superior for dedicating two progressions of free body exercises to the music of *Giovinezza* and *Battaglioni Camicie Nere*.

The more severe than playful imprint of gymnastics, as mentioned, is perhaps the only deviation from Don Bosco's method regarding physical exercises. In Don Bosco's method, the exercises were certainly more playful and freer, circus-like and acrobatic rather than gymnastic, as they should have been for Morano, bound by precise regulations and state programs. It is in her adaptation to the militaristic climate without forgetting the Salesian method imbued with affection (especially regarding reminders, always to be done with patience and a natural tone, never pedantic, to encourage the students) that we can recognize her "balancing act" and also inculturation during that period, as mentioned.

### 3.2. *The structure of Morano's text, "orthodox" and Salesian*

Don Bosco is implicit in this text, quite visible after the title page when the fresco by Giovanni Crida dedicated to the *Al Santo giocoliere dei Becchi* is published—a clear memory of the Founder's interest in gymnastic exercises and their playful, creative, and vital aspect, the most useful and interesting for boys. However, Morano chooses for her text an "orthodox" approach compared to ONB regulations but also distinctly Salesian. The book was released in 1935, the same year a competition for teachers was announced in July, and gymnastics was a prominent subject in schools. Hence, the usefulness of this manual was immediately evident. At the same time, it is also apparent that its structure followed the preventive Salesian method, emphasizing how the teacher should put the student in a position to give their best, recognizing their talents and vocation. These elements are evident in Morano's text alongside those dictated by the ONB, with a subtle act of "inculturation" in the climate of those years. This allowed her to be well-received in a historical moment that was certainly not easy, both for educating in private institutions and for publishing. In this regard, it should be noted that the text was published not by the Salesian Publisher but by Paravia, a rare occurrence when others, moreover men of the regime, had failed to do so. The author's intention was to reach a broader audience, and Paravia was the most widely spread publishing house nationally in the sector. Her primary goal must have been to reach her sisters scattered in missions worldwide, as well as the numerous physical education teachers.

### 3.3. *Not Only Gymnastics*

In Morano's approach, there was also a love for the "fine arts" such as music and theater, pantomime, dance, and, in this context, gymnastics was seen as a means to refine and morally educate young girls, as well as for entertainment. Her method was thus based on the gentleness and patience of the teacher: "... the face should reflect the serenity of the heart and spirit" (p. 31). All should be encouraged because all would succeed and contribute their best. Morano's teaching aim was the integral education

of the soul, body, and spirit of the youth entrusted to the Salesians. It was important to educate them not to dissolve the Christian work started within them.

### *3.4. The Method*

I would like to highlight some aspects of this book that, while dealing with gymnastics, an activity usually associated with physicality, nevertheless underscore a continuous inclination of Morano towards the spiritual world. For example, when describing exercises on Bauman's balance beam, Morano provides an original interpretation, emphasizing how these exercises, requiring concentration, induced a spiritual calm in those who performed them. Thus, the spirit, through these exercises, would regain its balance: "... while strengthening the lower limbs, they accustom the gymnast to a certain self-control, attention, and serenity of the spirit" (p. 70). So, when describing exercises with the clubs, with a gymnastic culture that went beyond the more common texts of that time, already open to inclusion, Morano cites Vincenzo Frattini from the Royal Institute of Physical Education in Rome and the Gymnastics Federation. The quote concerns the use of clubs for treating psychic disorders: "... these exercises can contribute to achieving a more harmonious functioning of the nervous centers and can also correct many symptoms or disorders purely of a psychic nature, such as inertia in action, restlessness, excessive sensitivity, etc." (p. 67). In this case as well, the use of gymnastics is evident as a preventive method and as a positive influence on the personal characteristics of the individual.

In this text, it is apparent how Morano, thanks to her personal knowledge in physical education, alongside necessary adherence to national directives, maintained a pronounced spirit of independence in her bibliographic choices. It is not uncommon for her to express this, for example, at the end of the book when, within the last chapter dedicated to "Indoor Gymnastics," quoting respiratory exercises and lamenting the contradictions present in various gymnastic methods of the time, she concludes with some irony: "... we believe that the best way to breathe well, effectively, is to breathe naturally..." (p. 292). In the same chapter, there are also indications of exercises to be done after bathing, especially for those abroad, and in this regard, Ecuador, Brazil, Central America, and India are mentioned—all mission locations for the Salesian sisters.

The methodological imprint derived, for the aforementioned reasons, from the ONB is clear, with the addition of an extra concern when the text addresses the topic of "reprimands." This is expected, given the importance of correction in the Salesian method, along with affection for her students. The method was continuously standardized not to deviate from that imposed by the ONB but at the same time not to forget the more "indulgent" Salesian one. For example, regarding the characteristics of gymnastic commands, these are practically identical to those expressed in the ONB's notebooks but are treated more briefly. To compensate for their severity, the focus is on the characteristics of affection, which were characteristic of the Salesian method: the teacher "... must make the lesson pleasant, make the students desire it, state the exercise clearly, then explain it with attractiveness, making them understand the benefits it brings, the inherent beauty, but this must be done with few words..." (p. 33). Thus, brevity, decisiveness, and "joyful" energy made the command resemble the military tone but with a clear reference to Don Bosco's method. The student became a friend of the teacher, who spoke to her with the language of the heart, played with her when needed, and thereby succeeded in influencing every moment of her education. In the Initial Rules, another sign of the affection indicated by the Salesian method, there are references to the "familiarity" of the environment, the persuasiveness of the words used to explain the exercises, and the serenity "of the heart and spirit" that the teacher would infuse, aware that physical education "refines the girl and educates her morally.

### 3.5. Terminology and Types of Exercises

The terminology used is, in any case, identical to that in the notebooks of the ONB, as it was important to allow teachers to read the manual in light of the official methodology's guidelines. However, it is streamlined in the number of analyzed gymnastic positions and also provides a more discursive description of movements to incorporate all possible indications from the beginning, reserving more space for the description of individual choreographies and progressions—the part eagerly anticipated by the students. They would have to create some of these moments for their lessons, while at the state level, it was exclusively the ONB prescribing exercises and choreographies, with a uniformity that left little room for the individual teacher's creativity.

Descriptions of exercises with small equipment are also very detailed, the only ones allowed for reasons of appropriateness and decency in Morano's manual. Thus, games and sports are missing. The former will be described by her later in texts dedicated to them, namely in 1941 in "Laetitia. Pedagogical and Didactic Gymnastic Norms for Nursery Schools in Relation to the School Charter" and even earlier in 1937 in "Primavera. Musical-Gymnastic Scenes and Progressions for Elementary Schools, Nursery Schools, and Recreationists,"<sup>5</sup> both published by Paravia. Sports, on the other hand, are entirely absent<sup>6</sup> and will be scarcely present even in the post-war edition. Moreover, Don Bosco had never mentioned sports but only games, amusements, and movements with an evident choice of care for the body and spirit of his boys, avoiding any competition executed to achieve personal success, self-assertion, or competition between individuals wanting to surpass each other—all elements far from educational. Care was given to the group of students as a whole, not the pursuit of excellence or, worse, competitiveness. Physical education thus fell into a complex of artistic activities (declamation, music, theater, expressive motor activities) that Morano was well acquainted with. In her manual, she alludes to the stage for the execution of her choreographies, real performances by the gymnasts.

### 3.6. What was Physical Education for Morano?

As reported by Fides<sup>7</sup>, physical education for Morano is an "exercise of balance and harmony," a means of mastering the body and "initiation to a more integral functionality of our entire being in the service of God." This strongly announces how physical education can be a complement to the education of the person in their entirety—body, soul, and spirit. These words are surprising for their modernity. Even today, we talk about holistic systems and methods that involve every aspect of individuals, integrating them into the complexity of society.

Exercises were differentiated by gender. Morano knew that exercises for girls and young women had to be different from those for males because, "The female gymnastics teacher must remember that female physiology is different from male physiology" (p. 31). Her method was, therefore, structured so that girls did not have to engage in exercises on large equipment to avoid tasks beyond their capabilities and situations that could compromise modesty and create discomfort. This was also the traditional stance of the world of female physical education on the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries. Almost as if to continue this path, Morano emphasizes how, with the choice of the most suitable exercises, the teacher could avoid those "that detract from female grace and dignity. Study and

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<sup>5</sup> Both texts were reprinted in the post-war period as "Joy, Harmony, Aesthetics for Nursery Schools" (1953) and "Spring Smiles. Musical-gymnastic-choreographic scenes various progressions" (1952).

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the dichotomy of physical education and sports during fascism, see FABRIZIO, Sport e fascismo cit.; TEJA Angela, Le fascisme entre éducation physique et sport, in KRÜGER - TRANGBAEK, *The History of Physical Education cit. e L'ONB tra educazione fisica e sport*, in Santuccio (a cura di), *le case e il foro cit.*

<sup>7</sup> *La chiusura del Corso di Ef. per sole Religiose*, in *Fides* 8 (1936) 9, 223-228.



experience have taught us how free-body exercises of grace and strength can be combined [...] that can supplement, for the benefit of physical education, large equipment and even the Swedish ladder" (p. 32). This suggests that Morano may have been referring to large equipment when she wrote about exercises unbecoming for women. Nonetheless, the physical development of girls and young women needed to be cared for to maintain health. This aspect will be emphasized even more in the post-war edition when evidently the hardships of war had worsened the health of the population, and women had important tasks to fulfill, such as motherhood, fundamental for the nation's rebirth. Thus, Morano exhibits care and respect for women with recognition of the evident differences that existed (and still exist) between the gymnastic activities of the two genders.

### 3.7. Apparel

Regarding the attire of the students, it is evident from numerous reproduced photos resembling film sequences<sup>8</sup> that the upper part of the outfit was very similar to that of the *Giovani Italiane*, namely a white shirt with a dark tie, while the skirt was longer and pleated. The ballooning shorts, wide and held with an elastic above the knee, worn by the *Piccole Italiane* for gymnastic exercises and giving the impression of wearing a little skirt just below the knee, did not appear. The attire of the ONB was considered in a religious context, modest, and to be avoided.

### 3.8. The Presence of Music

All progressions and choreographies described by Morano have musical accompaniment. This is inspired by themes of patriotism and fascism, as well as Salesian songs. The composers are varied, including foreigners, a sign of her considerable musical culture, as also evident from her indications on the tempo, marked by the metronome.

Morano's use of musical accompaniment, in addition to adapting to the Salesian method, testified to her pronounced aesthetic sense. She sought to teach her sisters to emphasize the spiritual importance of the beauty they should embody in the harmonious execution of exercises. These exercises were chosen and organized based on regime regulations but especially on specific aesthetic principles, which would ensure that the execution was pleasing to both the audience and the instructor. However, Morano never alluded to rhythmic gymnastics, a typically female gymnastic domain. The exercises were marked by tempo rather than rhythm, and, in fact, Sr. Clotilde rejected "fainting" exercises, likely alluding to rhythmic gymnastics. This seems to confirm Morano's firm and determined character, seeing gymnastics primarily as an excellent tool for discipline and personal care.

## 4. Reprinting in the Postwar Period

Morano's text remains the only one for female physical education after those of the famous gymnastics instructors who likely inspired her. Therefore, exclusivity is its most distinctive feature, inserting itself into a field—physical education manuals in general and then specifically for women—that was monotonous at the time. While the ONB notebooks and later those of the GIL existed for teachers, there was no space for anything else, except for the handouts from the Academicians of Rome and the Academists of Orvieto. Especially the female sector was, however, underdeveloped, and one must go back to the texts of Giuseppe Monti, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to find an equal completeness and systematic content.

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<sup>8</sup> See the "Cinematographic progression of the gymnastic composition 'Youth'" in the Appendix (pp.293-306) of *Gymnastic Exercises*. In reality, it is a succession of still images assembled to imitate a progression of film frames, as confirmed by Elena Testa, in charge of the CSC-Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa in Ivrea, whom I consulted on the matter. A likely search for modernity in the homeland of cinema, Turin.

This uniqueness of Morano's text also had the consequence, awaiting new developments, of its reprinting in 1950 (with several reprints, at least two), always by Paravia but with a cover that was halfway different, featuring a tennis player. However, leafing through the reissued text reveals that this image only partially meant the admission of sports, specifically tennis, among the exercises to be practiced. The racket was used as a gymnastic tool, almost like a club, for what was defined as "rhythmic dance" that imparted lightness. Although tennis was considered one of the most elegant and well-known games, it was neither described nor reproduced; there were no exchanges between pairs of players. In the choreography presented at the end of the tennis exercises, young women were supposed to throw not the classic ball but a flower they carried around their waist with the racket (p. 59).

So, still no sports in Morano, even though it had by now gained popularity in Italy for women, officially accepted from the mid-1930s onward, even by the regime. Or perhaps precisely because of this, given the skepticism toward what was considered a fascist legacy. We know, in fact, that the post-World War II period had seen a hesitant return of physical education and then sports at the school level, and beyond, precisely due to their unanimous condemnation as characteristic elements of fascism. The reprint of Morano's book thus once again finds itself in a particular moment, that of the reconstruction of physical and sports education in Italy (Morano herself claims to want to contribute to the moral and civil rebirth of the new generations), and remains throughout the first half of the 1950s the only text of its kind circulating in Italy.

This second edition is updated and expanded, addressing males as well, and is different because all the constraints of the fascist period disappear. At the beginning, Renato Ricci's letter is replaced by one from the Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, dated April 1, 1936, in which Pius XI's benevolence toward Morano's work and courses is communicated, considered "a useful contribution to the solution of the difficult and delicate question of female physical education" and inspired by "wise pedagogical and moral criteria." Although belonging to the previous period, this letter seems to have been included both to maintain a connection with the first edition and for its strong value in the ecclesiastical context, where there was still some skepticism about the involvement of religious sisters in physical education, but not for the Salesians, who would continue to be involved in this area characteristic of their charisma.<sup>9</sup> In the new preface, Don Bosco's method stands out even more, immediately cited. Naturally, the notes to the ONB notebooks disappear, and the material is reorganized more rationally for a smoother reading, without the excess of explanations and the minutiae of descriptions that had weighed down the first edition.

#### *4.1. Uniqueness of the Text*

For years, *Gymnastic Exercises* was the only available manual on the subject, at least until the production of textbooks for the ISEF (Higher Institute of Physical Education) in Rome, after the first half of the 1950s. It seemed to trace a kind of continuity between the essential theoretical structure of the past and the future characterized by new field research. Much importance is given to the description of Physiological Benefits, a novelty compared to the first edition, outlining the purposes of each exercise. "Rhythmic steps" appear (p. 51), with gymnastic movements (while the first edition spoke of "artificial or academic marches," p.74), showing a clear understanding and acceptance of

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<sup>9</sup> The Youth Sports Polytechnics Salesian were established in 1967, recognized by the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) as a sports promotion organization in 1979, and since 2000, they have been registered in the National Registry of Associations for Social Promotion (law of December 7, No. 383, with No. 62).

rhythmic gymnastics, which gained momentum in Italy<sup>10</sup> in the post-war period. The music changes, as do the choirs, excluding fascist and patriotic ones from the Great War, with only the one dedicated to the Unknown Soldier remaining. The clothing is identical, and most of the photos remain the same; Paravia uses the same clichés from the previous edition on several occasions.

A novelty is the introduction of a gymnastic apparatus called "Robur," invented by Morano herself, which evidently could not be publicized earlier when the exclusive guide for physical education and its equipment was that of the ONB, to which nothing could be added. It is possible that Robur aimed to replace large equipment, also discouraged in this edition for reasons of decorum. It was a kind of combination of parallel bars and Swedish ladder for the development of chest, abdominal, and dorsal muscles, with special attention to respiratory gymnastics. The latter was extremely modern and useful for women's physiology (pp. 264-271), who had long been "punished" by the use of corsets, eliminated only with the advent of sports and their more liberating attire. Before the "Gymnastics in the Room," in which there is a new and unexpected citation of Nicola Pende from 1930 regarding the use of exercises and their physiological but also psychological purposes (because they educate the will, feelings, and intellect), there is the novelty, compared to the previous edition but not to the Italian gymnastic tradition, of "Classroom Gymnastics" (p. 257), with the aim of "decongesting the brain" and aiding breathing when alternated with choirs.

In the appendix, there are indications of exercises for males, much in demand at a time when little on this topic had been published but was needed for the immediate reintroduction of physical education in schools since 1946. A final note concerns the list of equipment, from which the heavy Jaeger sticks and the necessary equipment for the tamburello ball disappear, an evident remnant of a past that was intended to be forgotten.

### **5. A Work for Children: "Smiles of Spring"**

*Smiles of Spring* also went through several editions, and thanks to a loan from the Claretian Institute, for which I am very grateful, I managed to consult the 1952 edition, where the reference to the spiritual aspects of gymnastics becomes clearer, without constraints, I would say. This quote seems useful to better understand the spiritual approach that Sister Morano has always given to gymnastics for young people (Few words, pp. 1-2):

"Everyone knows, or thinks they know, what gymnastics is, but some judge it only by its external aspect, that is, as limb exercise; others understand the moral benefits attached to the physical ones, such as the acquisition of reflection, quickness, will training, and the sense of discipline. However, the highly educational aspect, that is, the spiritual side of this subject, still escapes many.

If youth lack spiritual education in any discipline, but especially in gymnastics, it lacks everything. Therefore, gymnastics expressed through patriotic love, religious sentiment, civic virtues, and everything good and beautiful; expressive gymnastics like a hymn or a lyric, gymnastics that truly responds to its intimate and real meaning. Don Bosco understood it this way and wanted to place it first in his preventive method. Let's shape the child healthy, and we will have abundant fruits."

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<sup>10</sup> In 1953, the method of modern gymnastics, at that time called rhythmic gymnastics, was officially included in the Physical Education Programs for female secondary school students. See A. Teja, *Physical Education for Females*, SSS, Rome 1995, p.91.

Many references follow about the value of play for children, while the part dealing with exercises to counteract postural deformities, deviations of the spine that can be treated with gymnastics, is more original. There are numerous references to the psychological aspects of games and exercises for children because they educate attention, courage, and the ability to overcome obstacles. Taking care of strength, it is affirmed, also educates the spirit and morally forms the child. There are many examples, all described with great order and rationality, more numerous than in the more famous text, as if Morano had matured new knowledge in the field of physical education, whose exercises seem almost inseparable from theatrical performance. All exercises are performed with music and become real choreographies. These are prepared with related scenes and with great imagination and affection for the performers. For boys, sports also appear, such as fencing, rowing, track exercises, gymnastics, all mimed and sung, rhythmically rendered with very simple movements suitable for children (as in "The Gymnasts," p. 208), while girls continue to play the role of flower farmers (p. 209), with numerous African, oriental, and Spanish fantasies, with the evident allusion and memory of missions.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, it is evident how Morano's contribution was important for the spread of female physical education in Italy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spanning different historical epochs. The Physical Education Courses of Morano represented an important and significant aspect of the history of this subject in Italy because they were directed towards the religious world, with particular attention to the Salesian one, influencing young people in various latitudes while also addressing numerous sisters from other congregations. An exclusive text on the subject, *Gymnastic Exercises*, received many reviews even during the fascist period.

Morano fully met the needs of the religious world to prepare teachers on the basis of traditional and rational gymnastics derived from liberal and "montiana" principles. However, this tradition, while touching it, should not invade the field marked by youth organizations during fascism and, in the post-war period, should have occupied a temporarily vacant space, waiting for publications related to the new training schools for physical education teachers, i.e., the ISEF.

Morano's work was skillful, at times an "equilibrist" between obligatory positions and creative choices, certainly well-structured and necessarily empathetic with the political life of each historical moment she had to traverse. Her desire to unveil the scientific validity of her manual becomes more evident in the post-war period, remaining relevant for almost all of the 1950s. Only halfway through this decade would research in the sector resume, especially in the field of the technique and systematic nature of physical education, with the publication of new texts differentiated by gender. Therefore, Morano's manual served to keep the Italian tradition alive in the sector on the one hand, and on the other hand, it paved the way for the awareness, from a Catholic perspective, of the need to care for and pay attention to the physical education of women, anticipating the birth, within the female sector of the AC, of FARI (Federation of Italian Recreational Activities), which, with CSI (Italian Sports Center), would have taken care of physical education and female sports in the Catholic context since 1944, where Morano herself collaborated. This is a sign of a progressive vision of the Church that began to realize the importance of women in the reconstruction process of Italy in the second post-war period, thanks to the work done by the Salesians.

*Gymnastic Exercises* demonstrates how Morano was aware of the importance of her method for the physical education of religious sisters, even for the secular world and teaching in public schools. In

its uniqueness,<sup>11</sup> *Gymnastic Exercises* was indeed a compendium of advice and rules reflecting, on the one hand, a necessary pedagogical knowledge for future teachers and, on the other hand, the affirmation of a conscious search for autonomy in female physical education in general, even more invigorated in Republican Italy. Autonomy and freedom seem to be fully realized in the games and scenes for the youngest in *Smiles of Spring* because Sister Clotilde Morano once again showed that she confirmed her expertise, knowing well how important it was to teach movement as early as possible in school and all the benefits that could be derived at a psychological, moral, and spiritual level.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Almost all the physical education texts of that time are directed towards males, with a minimal part reserved for females. They are predominantly written by men, while women have engaged in theoretical discussions of a pedagogical or psychological nature, rarely medical, such as the renowned Maria Montessori.

<sup>12</sup> Mention Eymeux, who must be the Jesuit father Antonino Eymeux, who in 1913 had published a successful book, "Self-Government. The Great Psychological Laws," while in the post-war period, Jean Piaget was emerging, the father of genetic epistemology, who since 1921, at the Rousseau Institute in Geneva, had begun to study the development of mental schemas in school-age children.