

# MOTHER ERSILIA CRUGNOLA (1892-1973)

## A missionary with a mystical Apostolic heart

*“She lived by loving and giving herself”*



Why remember Mother Ersilia Crugnola on a Salesian Thursday? There are at least two reasons to answer this question.

First, because she was a significant missionary in the history of the Institute, especially in Latin America.

Second, because she had a significant impact on two figures of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians whose canonisation process is underway: on Mother Antoinette Böhm and Mother Rosetta Marchese. She bequeathed the mission of 'making Our Lady work' to the Servant of God Mother Antoinette, and she had an impact on the Eucharistic spirituality of the Servant of God Mother Rosetta Marchese.

### 1. BIOGRAPHICAL ITINERARY

- 2 November 1892: She was born in Comerio (Varese).
- 18th September 1913: at Cesano Maderno (Milan), she began her formative journey to become a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.
- 5 August 1914: she took her religious habit. She lives the novitiate period in Milan (Via Bonvesin de la Riva, 12).
- 5 August 1916: She made her religious profession.
- August 1916: Her first community and field of educational action is the workers' boarding school in Legnano.
- 5 August 1922: she reached the great goal of perpetual vows.
- 1922: she made her missionary application. She was sent to Mexico (she arrived there on 8 November 1922).
- 1924: She was given the task of assisting the postulants and novices.
- 1926: religious persecution breaks out in Mexico. A real exodus to Cuba.
- 1927: She is vicar and sacristan of the community in Camagüey (Cuba).
- 1931: she is appointed director of the Camagüey house and lives this obedience for 6 years.
- 1937: After Camagüey she is transferred as Director to La Habana.
- February 1941: She is appointed Inspector of the houses in Mexico.
- 1947: participates in General Chapter XI, in Italy.
- 1951: her term as Provincial is extended again.
- February 1958: after 18 years of animation and governance of the Mexican province, she is sent as Provincial to Cuba, in the Antilles province.
- 18 January 1959: The Castro regime (Fidel Castro) is established in Cuba. Two years later the religious houses are seized, the works and people severely persecuted. It is a new exodus. The sisters leave, some for Italy, some for the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, Santo Domingo, Haiti.

- 1965: Mother Ersilia Crugnola is once again in the eye of the storm: a new revolution, the fourth, in her life. Santo Domingo is in the grip of terror: the Revolución de Abril.
- 5 August 1966: he celebrates the golden anniversary of his religious profession.
- February 1968: after nine troubled years in the Antillana Province, she is asked to make a final departure: she returns to Mexico, to the rest home in Puebla. She is the director, but in reality she is nurse, sacristan and gardener.
- 1972: during the commemorative celebrations of the centenary of the FMA Institute in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother Ersilia Crugnola hands the cardinal her old booklet of the Constitutions. A gesture full of meaning.
- 7 April 1973: she died in Mexico.

## 2. CONTEXT IN WHICH MOTHER ERSILIA CRUGNOLA LIVED AND WORKED

Mother Ersilia Crugnola arrived in Mexico, when houses were rapidly multiplying on the Latin American continent. In 1922, the houses in Mexico formed the Visitatoria - or Minor Province - Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Sr Octavia Bussolino was the Provincial. It was canonically erected as a Province on 28 January 1931, comprising the houses in Mexico and also three houses in Cuba: Camagüey (foundation 1925), Habana and Nuevitas.

Mother Ersilia Crugnola took on the animation and government of this Province, ten years after its erection, that is, in 1941. In the same year, on 7 March 1941, the Province of St Joseph's Antilles was canonically erected, which included the houses of Cuba, Haiti and Santo Domingo. The Mexican Province, Mater Ecclesiae, Monterrey, was not erected until 1969.

At this time, Latin America was experiencing unsettling socio-political moments.

Mexico, strongly marked by the Catholic tradition due to its close ties with Spanish colonisation, became increasingly anticlerical in the 19th century. In 1926, the tenaciously anti-Catholic President Plutarco Elias Calles (1926-1928) came to power. He tried in every way to eliminate the influence of the Catholic Church, which was strongly rooted in the country. He pursued a precise goal: to remove every Christian principle from the hearts of Mexicans in order to initiate a 'new atheist state'. His programme was to eliminate the schools of the religious and every possibility of worship. The Institute of the FMA then had 12 houses in the Mexican Republic, 178 professed sisters and 12 novices. All found themselves in the whirlwind'.<sup>1</sup> The Mexicans called 1926 the 'Year of Blood and Martyrdom'.

The FMA were driven out and the colleges were seized by the government; in some places the FMA, with the help of trusted laymen, managed to enter the school dressed as laywomen, as teachers (Guadalajara); in others the sisters went to live in small flats where they even suffered hunger and underwent gruelling searches. 'One by one the schools and recreation centres flourishing with young people had to yield to violence, but Providence was watching and had the face of former pupils and students! These wonderful young women carried on, as lay teachers, the work of their educators in numerous colleges from which the sisters had been driven out'.<sup>2</sup> During this sad period, the past pupils were the guardians of the educational charism on Mexican soil.

In 1959, however, it was Cuba that found itself in trouble, with the establishment of the Castro regime (Fidel Castro). The establishment of communism marked the end of the collaboration between the Church and the Castrists. Two years later (1961) the religious houses were seized, the works and people severely persecuted. It was a new exodus for the FMA. The sisters fled, some for Italy, some for the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, Santo Domingo, Haiti.

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<sup>1</sup> BIANCO Mariapia, *Il cammino dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nei solchi della storia (1923-1943)*. Vol. 1, Roma, Istituto FMA 2007, 82.

<sup>2</sup> BIANCO, *Il cammino dell'Istituto*, 85.

In 1965, it was the Dominican Republic that found itself devastated by the Dominican Civil War, also known as the *Revolución de Abril*.

It was in this context that Mother Ersilia Crugnola lived and worked, living and going forward with an unshakeable faith, running away to save vocations, supporting and encouraging the sisters, rebuilding communities, healing and healing the wounds of the sisters.

Even now we can ask ourselves the secret of this missionary-apostolic fruitfulness. She herself reveals it to us: 'In the rush of occupations, the divine light shines before us, the light of the supernatural life; the soul feels that God alone is enough for it, and it feels the need to breathe in an atmosphere saturated with the divine. It then attempts to elevate itself above everything and everyone. Merciful God, despite our miseries, lets us feel and taste his divine essence, and at the same time his cross. This never fails!'.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. HER PERSONALITY

Cardinal Angelo Amato states that saints are true 'benefactors of humanity'.<sup>4</sup> Mother Ersilia, following in the footsteps of the Master, passed through this world benefiting and doing good: dedicating herself above all to the poorest, promoting and accompanying vocations, consoling people, animating and governing Provinces, rebuilding Provincial houses, giving herself 'all to all' with a mother's heart. Wherever she passed she spread charity and radiated joy.<sup>5</sup> To grasp some elements of her personality, let the witnesses who knew her speak:

'We could in fact, without forcing it, frame her in that small condensate of the 'primitive spirit', the 'spirit of Mornese', left to us by Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, a relic of the origins, which gives us the living incarnation of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians in her original freshness. Here it is: 'great obedience, simplicity, exactitude to the Holy Rule, admirable recollection and silence, spirit of prayer and mortification, childlike candour and innocence, fraternal love in dealing and conversing, joy and holy cheerfulness, tireless work under the sweetest looks of God and the Most Holy Mary as if they were visibly present'.<sup>6</sup> This is what Mother Ersilia is all about'.<sup>7</sup>

'She was born to love, to pour the goodness of God-love widely into the hearts of her brothers. And her piety, which reached unexpected peaks not easily reached, shunned all outward things'.<sup>8</sup>

The final touch to her Salesian face is given to us by Father Rafael Sánchez Vargas<sup>9</sup> who, during the not so short period of Mother Ersilia's stay in Mexico, continued the spiritual direction work of Father M. Rafael Mercader:<sup>10</sup>

'In her, a whole complex of human virtues were as if innate: friendship, criterion, good sense, self-denial, tenacious industriousness, gratitude, gentleness, optimism, contagious cheerfulness, immediate creator of a happy family environment.

... Her life was a limitless yes to others, as the most natural thing in the world.

... A great lover of the Blessed Sacrament, she lived the Eucharistic communion 24 hours a day.

Her love for the Blessed Virgin was passionate and she knew how to transfuse it in others. She believed in the miraculous intercession of Mary Help of Christians so that she seemed to prolong in her own, the charismatic and surprising action of our father Don Bosco'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> TERAN María Luz Mier, *Amare è donarsi. Madre Ersilia Crugnola*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1976, 84.

<sup>4</sup> AMATO Angelo, *Santità e teologia. La qualità "teologica" della santità*, Conferenza tenuta alla SIRT il 6 novembre 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Cf DALCERRI Lina, *Una contemplativa nell'azione. Madre Ersilia Crugnola fma*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1981, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Queste sono le parole di Enrichetta Sorbone.

<sup>7</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Testimonianza di madre Antonietta Böhm, riportata in DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Padre Rafael Sánchez Vargas, SDB, direttore spirituale nel periodo in cui madre Ersilia Crugnola era in Messico. Morì a Guadalajara il 18 settembre 1986.

<sup>10</sup> Padre Rafael Maria Mercader, SDB, direttore spirituale di madre Ersilia Crugnola nel periodo in cui lei era a Cuba. Morì a Portorico, il 19 novembre 1982.

<sup>11</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 33-34.

#### 4. AN INTENSE MISSIONARY LIFE

At only 30 years old, in 1922, Sr. Ersilia Crugnola left Italy to begin her missionary life in Latin America. She lived this mission with a completely Salesian heart. 'To be a missionary then, really meant abandoning everything and everyone forever: family, homeland, sisters, and devoting oneself until death, to other countries, other languages, other customs, with no ambition of return'. And she does it by giving herself totally and without reserve.<sup>12</sup> Following in the footsteps of the Master, we can say of her: 'She loved to the end' (cf. Jn 13:1).

##### - Missionary educator according to the Preventive System

One of Mother Ersilia's intimate prayers exudes an apostolic soul: 'The grace I ask of you is to save many souls. Souls! Souls! That is my desire! Everything else is nothing to me'.<sup>13</sup>

Mother Ersilia lived her being a 'missionary', right from the start, *in educational action among the young and especially the poorest*. The starting point of her mission will be with *the 'impossible'*. As soon as she arrived in Mexico, without even knowing yet the Spanish language and the customs of the country, she was entrusted with a group of girls called 'impossible'. In that year (1923), thirty-three girls from an orphanage had been taken in. The little ones presented themselves as suffering, and quite neglected in every sense. Mother Ersilia treated them with kindness and patience. Surely she must have thought of the delivery I entrust them to you and of Don Bosco's dream: how to turn those 'wild beasts' into 'lambs'?<sup>14</sup> The undertaking was not easy and this first 'missionary experience' was an apparent educational failure.

As soon as she arrived in Cuba, in 1926, as an authentic Salesian missionary, 'she threw herself all into a work that had just begun in the ill-famed suburb of St. John of God, a very poor neighbourhood of appalling religious ignorance. Sister Ersilia feels at last, truly missionary. She is not dismayed, nor does she recoil from the ever-new provocative gimmicks of the group of barefoot, unhinged brats entrusted to her. She conquers them with unflagging goodness and patience and opens them up to the knowledge and love of God. She possesses the art of the true catechist. In a short time, 'so Isilia' as her mischievous children call her, becomes everything to them. They would throw themselves into the fire to please her. These are the miracles of the 'Preventive System' of her teacher and father Don Bosco, which she made her own and faithfully put into practice'.<sup>15</sup>

After a few years of her journey as a missionary, she still manifested her desire to the Lord: 'To continually sacrifice myself on the altar of sacrifice for the good of souls, especially the religious souls that the Lord has entrusted to me'.<sup>16</sup>

As a true Salesian missionary, *she was all for the poor*. She cared for the most disadvantaged, the most needy, the poor. They 'were her favourite portion'.<sup>17</sup> In each one she saw the image of Christ and served Him alone, according to her motto: 'Hostia por hostia. Amor por amor. Sacrifice por sacrifice ...'.<sup>18</sup> For them, Mother Ersilia is the 'madrecita buena' who listens to their sorrows and offers them some remedies and Our Lady's blessing. We report some of her testimonies:

'In Puerto Rico, she makes purchases and provisions of all God's goods: she thinks of the needs of the sisters and her poor loved ones! By now she is known even at customs, she can pass without mishap.... and the fee for the excess weight of her luggage on the plane is almost always waived'.<sup>19</sup>

Another testimony: 'There is always something for them [the poor]: stockings for the old lady suffering from rheumatism, a banknote to sneak to poor David, the book that the poor seminarian was missing, the trousseau that a poor nun asked for ... Everyone receives her gifts accompanied by her smile. And

<sup>12</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Cf TERAN, *Amare è donarsi*, 33-34.

<sup>15</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, 80.

<sup>17</sup> TERAN, *Amare è donarsi*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*, 101.

the visit ends as always, when Mother Ersilia takes the statuette of Our Lady out of her pocket and gives them a blessing'.<sup>20</sup>

She used to say: 'Our houses are packed with children and really poor boys. What a blessing!'<sup>21</sup>

- **Spiritual motherhood in the formation of the young people and sisters and in animating and governing the province and communities**

In her second year in Mexico, she was entrusted with the care of postulants and novices. Sr Ersilia proved to be a wise formator. She possesses the qualities that are required in this mission: fervour of piety, love for the Institute, loving kindness in her traits, and knows how to win hearts. This explains her formative effectiveness.

Continuing on her path, Sr Ersilia soon took on *important tasks of animation and governance*, first as Director and then as Inspector in Mexico, Cuba and later in Santo Domingo.

As soon as she arrived in Cuba, she became vicar and sacristan and in 1931 was appointed director of the house in Camagüey. 'The sisters admired her breadth of heart, her readiness of intuition, her maternal understanding, her prudence, her religious exemplarity. It was only the implementation of the programme he had proposed to himself: 'I will use with my dear sisters the most exquisite goodness and kindness that I can. I will pity them in their faults especially if they do not come from the will, and I will endeavour with the grace of the good Lord to do all I can to help them advance every day on the path of perfection. Oh my God, grant that all the souls you have entrusted to me I may lead them to your holy love!'.<sup>22</sup>

She lives her mission as director as service and self-giving. She took care of the sisters' formation and how much she suffered when she saw some sisters living their vocation in a superficial way.<sup>23</sup>

In 1941 she was appointed Inspector of the houses in Mexico. In her mission as Provincial, she became the guardian of the Salesian spirit, a revitaliser of works after the religious persecution. Her spiritual director had this to say: 'With the help of God and Mary Help of Christians she resurrected a dead person: the Mexican province destroyed by the revolution'.<sup>24</sup>

The storm of persecution that had passed over that nation swept everything away. Mother Ersilia did not lose heart. She feels strong in the strength of God: 'The difficulties are many, but Jesus promised me that he will always and everywhere be with me and I see that he is faithful to his promise. I feel his help in an extraordinary way'.<sup>25</sup> This attitude in the face of adversity/difficulties would be called resilience today!

One by one, homes are resurrected and populated with youth; vocations blossom like a rose garden in springtime. Her first concern is to take care of formation for religious life, to put people at the centre. In her lives the same missionary zeal that characterised Mother Mazzarello: 'My greatest torment now is souls: the sanctification of religious souls that the Lord has entrusted to me... But how hard it is to make someone understand that our happiness is placed in 'God alone', and in embracing his cross; how dear

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<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, 80.

<sup>21</sup> GRASSIANO Maria Domenica, *Qualcuno bussa e chiama*, Roma, Tipografia privata FMA 1980, 46.

<sup>22</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Annota nei suoi appunti personali: «Il calice è colmo di amarezza. Com'è penosa l'incomprensione umana! Mi sento sola! Proprio dove dovei trovare appoggio, mi imbatto in un muro di freddezza che mi agghiaccia. Amo queste sofferenze, mi sento lieta nel dolore, ma soffro indicibilmente di fronte alle mancanze che distruggono lo spirito religioso» (DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 26). Tra queste FMA, qualcuna, con il proprio temperamento focoso e incontrollato, le crea situazioni incresciose, con sfoghi intemperanti che la feriscono profondamente: «... dopo il Tabor viene il Calvario: benedetto sia Dio! anche soffrendo si gode molto. La Croce e il Tabernacolo: i due luoghi dove si sta molto bene!... Ciò che mi ha causato molta pena questa settimana fu X con le sue burrasche di sempre, senza motivo. Suor X è "la mia perla più preziosa". Quanto sento di amare questa cara sorella che mi è occasione di tanto bene e di santificazione! L'amo e l'abbraccio spiritualmente come il buon Gesù abbracciò la "Croce" strumento della nostra redenzione e manifestazione del suo amore per noi. Se il buon Dio vuole che continui ad aver questa "croce" sia mille volte benedetto: sono contentissima. La volontà di Dio è il mio Paradiso e la mia felicità. Non desidero altro» (Camagüey, 10 novembre 1934)» (DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 75).

<sup>24</sup> Testimonianza di padre Rafael Maria Mercader, SDB, nella cartella non catalogato in AGFMA.

<sup>25</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 26.

is the price of redemption! However, the good Lord helps me in an extraordinary way, and a little good is done'.<sup>26</sup>

The sisters said of her: 'She made us enjoy that family spirit that first of all rebuilt our hearts, giving all of us serenity and joy, then, in a competition between God's Providence and our commitment, the buildings that the revolution had destroyed were rebuilt and the good - which had never ceased - resumed more luxuriant than before because it had matured in suffering and in charity'.<sup>27</sup>

After the persecution in Mexico, two more storms of persecution awaited him: in Cuba and then in Santo Domingo.

He also had to suffer the effects of World War II, namely the difficult communication and orientation of the Institute's Centre. Such an intense life of work and worries did not disturb her inner peace, nor did it dampen her continuous conversation with God: 'Despite the constant worries and pains proper to my task, my soul, through the goodness and mercy of the Lord, enjoys continuous peace and tranquillity. At certain times, seeing the little boat of my soul sail calmly in the midst of storms, I am amazed. But I certainly owe everything to the divine Pilot who guides it'.<sup>28</sup>

In her mission to give of herself, to animate, to revive the Salesian religious spirit, she also experiences misunderstanding and humiliation even from her sisters. She suffers inwardly when faced with sisters who live the consecrated life superficially and in mediocrity. He writes:

'I have never felt such deep bitterness in my heart as when I note the little generosity and lack of supernatural vigour of some religious souls. I truly suffer; and I suffer all the more for not being able to make them understand that their difficulties, for the most part, depend on not knowing how to give themselves totally to God. We seek ourselves too much and do not live the life of spouses of Jesus crucified to the full, the divine life. I have reached such a point of sorrow that I feel that my soul is in a real agony [...] However, this affliction of mine is tranquil, devoid of impatience; it only kindles in me a great desire to see all religious souls capable of glorying in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I suffer to see them turned only towards self-seeking. But this pain I suffer alone. I try to animate the sisters with goodness, patience and indulgence, otherwise they would be discouraged' (Mexico, Holy Saturday 1942).<sup>29</sup>

'In February 1968, after nine troubled years in the Antillana province, she was asked to make a final departure. To leave the inspectorate and its field of work to enter the path of silence and concealment. She returns to Mexico, to the rest home in Puebla. She is its director, but in reality she is nurse, sacristan and gardener. Every job is hers; every corner of the house the setting for her daily sacrifices. And where she passes, she spreads charity and radiates joy'.<sup>30</sup>

Linked to spiritual motherhood is also the *letter apostolate*, which in some cases became a true spiritual direction. In fact, Mother Ersilia accompanied, advised, consoled through letters.

## 5. MYSTIC MISSIONARY

Mother Ersilia Crugnola had a profound mystical experience. The characteristic notes of her mystical experience are as follows.

- **Mysticism in action: contemplative in action**

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<sup>26</sup> Ivi, 27.

<sup>27</sup> BIANCO, *Il cammino dell'Istituto*, 88.

<sup>28</sup> DALCERRI, *Una contemplativa nell'azione*, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, 31.

Mother Ersilia was described by Sr. Lina Dalcerci, "*a contemplative in action*". Hers was not a mystical life that tore her away from reality, on the contrary, it immersed her more and more in it so much that she affirmed: "If I were asked what I am doing, I could answer: I love!"<sup>31</sup> She lived what spiritual theologians call mysticism centered on action, which consists above all in participation in God's action in the world.<sup>32</sup> José Tolentino Mendonça, taking up the thought of Raimon Panikkar, states that "mysticism is nothing other than 'the integral experience of life', and the mystic is the one who travels on the broadband of reality, involved and attentive to the pain of the world. The hunger and thirst for justice cannot fail to find a place in his heart."<sup>33</sup>

Mother Ersilia Crugnola lived **the mystique of love as an integral experience of life: loving and giving oneself**. She stands before us as a successful model of the ideal of Salesian life as Don Bosco dreamed: "In the FMA, the active life and the contemplative life must go hand in hand, portraying Martha and Mary."<sup>34</sup>

In the midst of a **very active life**, Mother Ersilia **felt immersed in God**, that is, she lived what spiritual theologians call **the ineffability of mystical experience** (something that is felt but cannot be said), mystical **passivity** (it is God himself who is felt and tasted):<sup>35</sup> What will my spiritual life be like? I go on I don't know how; quiet and happy without doing anything in particular for God, or rather, what I do is all his. But it is a completely passive state. The government of the Province and of souls absorbs me a lot so I dedicate little time to my... I go forward only abandoned to the mercy of God (Monterrey, April 1, 1950). I continue quiet and in peace. All the accumulation of things, occupations and worries does not reach, by the grace of God, to disturb the intimate part where 'God alone' dwells!"<sup>36</sup>

Because of her mystical experience and her spiritual readings, especially of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Ersilia suffered the misunderstanding and suspicion of the sisters and one of her spiritual directors. There were those who wondered: "Isn't it a religious mania or worse, a hysterical form? Doubt takes shape and spreads. This is how human myopia goes". For Sister Ersilia it was a painful hour of humiliation and trial. She is subjected to a psychiatric check-up. But the verdict is decisive and clear: everything normal and in perfect balance. Those voices, however, are not silenced, they press for a more authoritative control: that of the Bishop. The humiliation reaches its peak, but Sister Ersilia, at the school of her Master, tastes it in her sacred silence and presents herself to the Prelate. The latter, the great soul of a pastor and a father, questions her, listens to her and is struck by the clarity and simplicity of her soul."<sup>37</sup>

Her journey of love is not simply affective, but effective and very concrete: it impels her to a total gift of herself, moved by the apostolic zeal of *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle* and *A te le confido*, in perfect harmony with the Salesian charism: all for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of the young.

#### - Self-surrender to Love and the vow of abandonment

Mother Ersilia lived the mystical experience in the evangelical logic of **giving herself to God totally and irrevocably**. Spiritual theologians affirm that one of the characteristics of the mystical experience is the **dialectic between freedom and gratuitousness of experience**: this experience is a pure gift of God, but the person is challenged in his freedom, that is, he must be docile to the grace that calls him.<sup>38</sup> An important moment is the program of Mother Ersilia's life expressed on the day of her first profession: "O Jesus, I am religious, I am your spouse, make me faithful to you, make me become a saint!"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> "Apostolic mysticism is less well known, since the 'apostolic' mystics have not elaborated a theology of the interior life" (BERNARD Charles André, *Teologia spirituale*, Milan, San Paolo 1982, 496-497; in a more general way, see also: BERNARD Charles André, *The God of the Mystics*. Vol. 3: *Mysticism and action*, Cinisello Balsamo [MI], San Paolo 2004).

<sup>33</sup> TOLENTINO MENDONÇA José, *The Mysticism of the Instant. Time and promise*, Milan, Vita e pensiero 2015, 39.

<sup>34</sup> BOSCO Giovanni, *FMA Constitutions* (1885), art. XIII.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. GARCIA Jesús Manuel, *Spiritual Theology. Epistemology and Interdisciplinarity*, Rome, LAS 2013, 406-409.

<sup>36</sup> Dalcerci, *A Contemplative in Action*, 100.

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. GARCIA, *Spiritual Theology*, 405-406.

<sup>39</sup> DALCERRI, *A contemplative in action*, 39.

The Holy Spirit immediately sets her on a path of love. As soon as she arrived in Mexico, her offering to "merciful Love" made with little Thérèse interiorized it, personalized it and translated it into a deep and stable attitude of the soul: "O Jesus, my dearly beloved Jesus, **I make a vow**, offering Him through the hands of Mary, to 'keep the disposition' to do all my actions for the 'love of God', always **abandoning myself** to the divine Will which is the supreme expression of love".<sup>40</sup>

This first and **explicit surrender of herself to "merciful Love"** will make her radical in the "Act of Abandonment". She will give her being and her action entirely to God, to the point of desiring to be transformed into a **sacrament of love**, almost **a new Eucharist**, an instrument of the life and mysteries of Jesus.

- **His spiritual director: The Holy Spirit**

His spiritual director, Fr. Rafael Maria Mercader SDB stated: the true "director of his soul, of his life, was the Holy Spirit, the God of true Love. I was nothing but a spectator of what the Lord worked admirably in his soul. ... Through frequent meetings, the Lord made me understand that it was a soul prevented by divine grace in a special way."<sup>41</sup>

The Holy Spirit has made her a masterpiece of grace; But she always felt the need to confront herself about what she was going through and whether her mystical experiences were really on the right path since, as a normal person, she had her doubts. For example, at one point he wonders if what he is experiencing is perhaps a form of quietism.

- **Eucharistic-Trinitarian mysticism: "Jesus established his kingdom in me. He does everything. I go from amazement to amazement, without being able to express anything"**

Mother Ersilia Crugnola arrived at that mystical state that spiritual theologians and spiritual masters call: **mystical passivity and immediate experience**. At this point "mystical experience is not a knowledge deduced from the senses, from the imagination or from the representations of our ideas, but is imprinted directly by God in the substance of the soul that derives from suffering and feeling pleasure in order to have God present: it is God himself who is felt and tasted".<sup>42</sup> The person perceives this experience as an "invasion" directed by God and not in a mediated way.

"Mother Ersilia's life is entirely gathered in the act of the spirit that lives in God. Nor are the things he has to do, nor the tasks he has to perform. Everything in her finds its unity in the mystery of God who possesses her entirely. He lives the life of everyone, the life he must live: his daily life interwoven with relationships, tasks, setbacks, but he lives it in the intimacy of the love that permeates all his actions. This action of his, full of peace and fervour, is nothing but the overflow of inner fullness outwards."

Martha and Mary have now found in her the perfect interpenetration: one is never without the other. But everything sails under the wing of silence in which he loves to hide and guard the "secret of the King":

«... For some time now, I have not wanted to talk to anyone, nor do I feel the need to communicate to anyone what is going on in my soul... It is so profound, it is so lofty that the word does not express it and therefore I prefer to remain silent. They gave me the obedience to write down what happens in my spirit... but I'm not capable... Will it be disobedience? I begin and then I feel incapable and a tremendous repugnance seizes me... I beg the good Lord if He wishes me to carry out this obedience to give me the ability to do so."<sup>43</sup>

She herself felt God's direct intervention in her life and **felt immersed in the Trinitarian mystery**: "I felt like a transformation in the most intimate part of my soul. I felt that little by little the humanity of Jesus diminished and I felt more and more the divinity, the Holy Trinity. It is such a living presence that a spirit of adoration takes hold of me. If I were mindful of my inclination, I would spend the whole day repeating,

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<sup>40</sup> *Ivi*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> DALCERRI, *A contemplative in action*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> GARCIA, *Spiritual Theology*, 406.

<sup>43</sup> DALCERRI, *A contemplative in action*, 124.



"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost." The presence of Jesus arouses a fervor, like fire falling under the senses, but the presence of the divinity, of the Most Holy Trinity, is something very profound, so above any natural experience that it cannot be explained."<sup>44</sup>

She reaches a high level of contemplation to the point that books and vocal prayers no longer seem sufficient, on the contrary they bother her. With a certain perplexity she humbly confessed: "I say few vocal prayers outside those of the Rule: only a few aspirations, because I feel so united to God that I have to make an effort to pray vocally or read some books."<sup>45</sup>

From these testimonies it is understood that Mother Ersilia arrived at what spiritual theology calls the **"passivity of powers"**. She herself wonders about what she is experiencing: "In the midst of so many pains and sometimes doubts of offending God, which is what makes me suffer the most, I feel in the depths of my soul a wonderful peace and tranquility, I dare say happiness... What great contrasts! Maybe it's because before I used to talk to God with continuous expressions of love and desire and now I hardly say anything to him. I stand before Him in a completely passive state, without any effort, and I feel happy. ... Sometimes I doubt that it is a kind of quietism...".<sup>46</sup>

The soul now sees and feels only God present in it, who absorbs it, penetrates it, transfigures it, creating an ever more intense intimacy: "I feel nothing in me... I just feel that I love God, that I love Him very much, and that He loves me much, much more. I don't know anything else. Here I get lost and do nothing else."<sup>47</sup>

Mother Ersilia ardently desired to become a **sacrament of love**: she had the **victim Eucharistic experience**: "Allow me, O my Jesus, to manifest to you another ardent desire of my heart: I want with purity and sacrifice, to become a 'sacrament of love', to make 'a Eucharist' of my heart. You are the Priest of this Consecration, purify me, sacrifice me... Realize all the deaths of myself that are possible for you, to multiply this sacrament of myself as many as there are tabernacles on earth."<sup>48</sup>

Mother Ersilia's mystical experience is not an escape from reality. He had understood that "He alone is enough for me!",<sup>49</sup> living immersed in an intense apostolic activity rich in fruits and good works.

- **Marian mystic: "Our Lady and I understand each other wonderfully"**

Mother Ersilia's spiritual life is at the same time, all of Mary and all of God. He often said with great spontaneity and joy: "Our Lady and I understand each other wonderfully!"<sup>50</sup>

Our Lady is for her the "sweet mother". She lives in the presence of Mary, she allows herself to be modeled on her, she makes the virgin the "form" of her own being and action. In the years of maturity, with the help of Mary and with a statuette of hers, Mother Ersilia performed true miracles: "They [miracles] flourished in her hands as the most ordinary thing, even if they had something miraculous about them. But their reason and justification were in his great faith, in his enlightened trust in Mary."<sup>51</sup>

She herself was aware that her devotion is not a devotion and the "statuette" of Our Lady is not a talisman. The "statuette" is only an instrument: the one who really acts is the Blessed Virgin through the exceptional faith of Mother Ersilia.

The spiritual "fullness" towards which Mother Ersilia was decisively on her way, "finds its ultimate reason in the Holy Spirit and finds no less in Mary that 'powerful help' which is of light and guide to her to achieve full communion with God and the longed-for conformation to Christ".<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, 142-143.

<sup>45</sup> DALCERRI, *A contemplative in action*, 125.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> *Ivi*, 141.

<sup>48</sup> *Ivi*, 42-43.

<sup>49</sup> *Ivi*, 44.

<sup>50</sup> TERAN, *To love is to give oneself*, 18. Words heard and reported by Mother Antonietta Böhm, the Provincial and other Sisters.

<sup>51</sup> DALCERRI, *A contemplative in action*, 110.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, 106.

"Making Our Lady known, talking about her, bringing everyone to Mary was his concern until the end. On his deathbed, after the surgery, he said again: 'As long as I have a thread of life, I will work for Our Lady.'"<sup>53</sup> Before dying, he gave the "statuette" of Mary to Mother Antonietta Böhm with the instruction: "never fail to bless".<sup>54</sup>

## 6. Mother Ersilia Crugnola: a life of relationships and collaboration

The life of Mother Ersilia Crugnola is not an isolated life. She grew up and gave herself within an environment where there was a good evangelical-Salesian air, rich in human relationships. It would be very interesting to deepen his relationship with many other relevant people who have had an influence in his life. We can speak of an environment that formed her: the intense relationship with the sisters (just look at the substantial folder of letters of accompaniment and encouragement to the sisters and the testimonies of them, collected and kept in the AGFMA), with the Salesians (loved by them, especially by the two Salesians who were her spiritual directors: Fr. Rafael Sanchez Vargas and Fr. Rafael Mercader who were able to contemplate the wonders that God worked in her life), with the bishop who held her in high esteem, with the priests, etc.

One fact has not yet been studied: Mother Ersilia Crugnola also accompanied the life of a "seer", a Salesian past pupil and educator in the school of Santa Julia and later in Chipilo (Mexico): Mrs. Luz Rendón, a very special life story of a young woman who saw, spoke and received messages from Our Lady.<sup>55</sup> It seems that both from her and Mother Ersilia Crugnola received the statue of Our Lady Help of Christians.<sup>56</sup> This mission caused Mother Ersilia suffering due to the incomprehension on the part of some sisters and Salesians who were wary of the fact. The clear proof of this can be found in the confidential correspondence (confidential envelope) between Fr. Rafael Sanchez Vargas and Sr. Lina Dalcerrí,<sup>57</sup> contained in a folder in the AGFMA. In one of his letters, the priest, after emphasizing the delicacy and prudence in dealing with this fact and having never spoken to anyone about it, in confidence assures Sr. Lina: "I believe that if you and I try to help each other, we will be able to give the Salesian Family a rich and, in some things, 'unprecedented' contribution of Mary Help of Christians' intervention."<sup>58</sup>

In addition, his missionary experience is intertwined with other interesting figures. In fact, she had a significant influence on Sr. Rina Coffele<sup>59</sup> (to whom she communicated the Eucharistic and Marian grace), on Mother Antonietta Böhm (to whom she entrusted the statuette of Our Lady with the mandate to have it worked) and indirectly on Mother Rosetta Marchese. We can speak of a strand of spirituality – of a **"mystical Eucharistic and Marian grace" transmitted**:<sup>60</sup> from Mother Ersilia Crugnola (Provincial) to Sr. Rina Coffele (who assisted Mother Ersilia Crugnola in her last illness); from Sr. Rina Coffele to Mother Rosetta Marchese (in a personal conversation in 1981); from Mother Rosetta to other nuns especially to her sister Sr. Anna Marchese.

## In conclusion: some topical insights from Mother Ersilia Crugnola's message

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<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, 111.

<sup>54</sup> Teran, *To love is to give oneself*, 135.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. folder of material in the AGFMA (not catalogued).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. folder of correspondence and testimonies on Mother Ersilia Crugnola; cf. also: testimony of Sr. M. Brígida Socorro Martínez Rangel, Uruapan Michoacán, August 15, 2023; testimony of Sor Ma. Carmen Valdez Vera, Morelia Michoacán, July 24, 2023).

<sup>57</sup> Sr. Lina Dalcerrí had already carried out her research on Mother Ersilia Crugnola entitled: *A contemplative in action*. But she does not speak of the relationship of Sister Ersilia Crugnola and the visionary Luz Rondón in this research. Fr. Rafael congratulates the result of the research and writes to her: "I owe you a calm critique." Would the "serene criticism" really have been silent on this fact? (cf. Letter of Fr. Rafael Sanchez Vargas, Guadalajara, 9 December 1983, in AGFMA [folder not catalogued]).

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Fr. Rafael Sanchez Vargas to Sr. Lina Dalcerrí, Guadalajara, December 9, 1983, in AGFMA (folder not catalogued).

<sup>59</sup> Passed away on January 20, 2023. By her wish she is buried in the cemetery of Mornese.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. LÉTHEL François-Marie, *The Permanent Presence of the Body of Jesus in Us After Communion as a True Eucharistic Indwelling, According to the Servant of God Mother Rosetta Marchese*, in *Mysterion* 14(2021/1)63.

"Mother Ersilia Crugnola sang with her life the hymn of charity that constitutes one of the most luminous pages of St. Paul: 'Love covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor 13:7)".<sup>61</sup>

The message that flows from his life is very topical:

1. *A missionary life animated by mystical/contemplative inspiration*: "The Christian of the future will be mystical or he will not be,"<sup>62</sup> Karl Rahner said a few years ago. Pope Francis also recalls that "the Church cannot do without the lung of prayer", but warns against "the temptation of an intimate and individualistic spirituality, which would be difficult to reconcile with the demands of charity, as well as with the logic of the Incarnation" (EG 262). Mother Ersilia Crugnola, a mystical woman, is a current model of missionary life who knew how to combine contemplation and action. We cannot do without, even today, the lung of prayer in order to be authentic missionaries of Christ and to radiate the joy and beauty of the good life of the Gospel, getting our hands dirty in the commitment to a more just, united and fraternal world.
2. *A missionary life animated by the spirituality of the Incarnation*: to become incarnate in the reality where one lives, mingling with the people, feeling the spiritual pleasure of being a people, allowing oneself to be challenged by their joys and hopes, by their sadness and their anguish (cf. GS 1). This is the concrete way in which Mother Ersilia Crugnola lived what Pope Francis calls the "mysticism of drawing near", the "mysticism of encounter" that makes us touch the wounds of people, the suffering flesh of others, seeing in them the face of Jesus: "Love for people is a spiritual force that fosters a full-ness encounter with God to the point that those who do not love their brothers and sisters 'walk in darkness' (1 Jn 2:11), 'he remains in death' (1 Jn 3:14) and 'has not known God' (1 Jn 4:8)" (EG 272).
3. *A missionary life that becomes the inculturation of the Gospel and of the charism*, not through theories and projects elaborated at the table, but through the manifestation of the *sequela Christi* and the inculturation of charismatic values in the culture where one arrives.
4. *A missionary life that is expressed in an intense spiritual motherhood/fatherhood*. Mother Ersilia was affectionately called by everyone the "*madrecita buena*": "She knew – in fact – how to listen without being disturbed, without showing surprise and opposition, so she opened hearts to absolute trust; Everyone found in her an understanding, generous, detached mother, ready only to seek the true good of the person concerned. Equal to herself, without ups and downs, she knew how to love each person to the end with balance and enchanting equanimity."<sup>63</sup> Today's world cries out for the need for motherhood/fatherhood that are expressions of God's motherhood/fatherhood: the ability to welcome without judging; to listen attentively and deeply, to empathize, to understand and compassion, to empower people, to missionary zeal.
5. *The ability to create a network*, collaborative relationships with everyone in view of the educational-missionary mission: missionary synodality.

The Salesian family is enriched by this gift of mystical experience that does not stop at extraordinary facts – even if they exist – but is expressed in a deeper apostolic-missionary ardor that derives from the call of *da mihi animas* and *To you I entrust them*.

*Elisane Anschau Petri*

<sup>61</sup> TERAN, *To love is to give oneself*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> RAHNER Karl, *New Essays*, San Paolo Edizioni, Rome 1968, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Cf Material not catalogued in AGFMA (canonization folder).