

***Madre Mazzarello: “a large and generous heart.”
We are challenged by her educative motherhood***

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The secret of Maria Domenica’s life is enclosed in her heart as a “mother.” Mother: a word that evokes gift, generativity, care, attention, dedication, growth, a window wide open to the heart of God the Father and to the sisters and young people who were entrusted to her.

Saint John the Evangelist states that at the wedding at Cana “there was the Mother of Jesus” (Jn 2:1). A solicitous, attentive, active, anticipating, praying, questioning presence... a prophetic presence! And this maternal presence of Mary will be a prophecy to the foot of the Cross: “They stood by the cross of Jesus his mother” (Jn 19:25). In the luminous wake of Mary of Nazareth the source of the generativity of Mother Mazzarello arises: also in Mornese there was the Mother: Mother Mazzarello! Her mission was to generate and educate the first FMA and to create a new way of being a vocational, synodal, missionary community “with” and “for” the young.¹

This reflection intends to deepen the experience of “educational motherhood” of Maria Domenica Mazzarello which for us FMA and Salesian educators, becomes a requirement of our vocation: to be “mothers” / “fathers” in order to generate vocational communities that attract young people to God, to the noble life of the Gospel.

1. Maria Domenica, mother and educator. Why to speak of “educational” motherhood?

1.1. An “educational” motherhood

Reflecting on Mother Mazzarello’s motherhood in an “educational” key is for us FMA a thrust and a charismatic need. The adjective “educational” qualifies her identity as a woman educator and expresses something important. We are referring not to a merely “spiritual” motherhood, but to “educational-spiritual” motherhood. We are talking about a woman who educates in the deepest and most integral sense of the term, bearing in mind the various dimensions of the person: human, affective, intellectual, spiritual, the person in her totality.

Inspired by Mary Domenica we refer to education in its full meaning, that is *educĕre* = “to draw out,” “to bring out what is inside,” what the Creator has already sown in the heart of the human person, created in his image and likeness. It is a question of motherhood that aims at the integral perfection of the person. This term derives from the union of *ĕ-* (“from, out of”) and *dŭcĕre* (“to lead”). According to this meaning, it would mean bringing out the potentialities of the person, helping one to become what one already is.

Education, included in this meaning, is a complex process in which human aspects and divine elements, dynamisms and processes of human maturation not disjoint from the mysterious, but real

¹ *In preparazione al Capitolo generale XXIV, Roma, Istituto FMA 2019, 12.*

action of divine grace, come together. Saint of Mornese, in her simple educational experience, teaches that “grace generates new life, education favours the action of grace in view of reaching full maturity in Christ.”²

1.2 A motherhood generated by the Spirit

Referring to the educational motherhood of Maria Domenica we are talking about motherhood that has deep roots. All this entails, especially for those with an educational vocation, allowing oneself to be constantly regenerated by the Spirit, “being reborn from above” (cf. Jn 3: 7) and living in the dynamism of grace. St. Peter assures us: “You have been regenerated not from a corruptible seed, but an incorruptible one: the living and eternal word of God” (1 Pt 1:23). Maria Domenica allowed herself to be regenerated everyday by the Word of God, through the encounter with Christ in the sacraments, with people and the events of history.

Saint Paul, in his letter to Titus, speaks of “educative grace”³ (Titus 2, 11-12). True motherhood is docile to God's action in one's life and capable of a believing reading of one's own experience. When Mother Mazzarello affirms “the hand of God works in us” (cf L 66.2), she says it as the fruit of a personal experience of one who allowed herself to be enlightened and worked inwardly by “educating grace”. She knows from experience that one must “be reborn in Christ”, let oneself be moulded for life by the creative and purifying hand of God. The advanced fruit of this experience is a unified life that knows how to intuit the action of the Spirit in others, in those whom she must guide and form life. Education, in the deepest sense of the word, is the effect of grace.

Educational motherhood also has the imprint of motherhood generated by the paschal mystery, just as it was for Mary of Nazareth at the foot of the cross. It is at the foot of the cross that Mary's motherhood reaches its apex: the cross is the place of pain and love; the place where her motherhood was definitively “fixed:” she is the Mother!

Mary Domenica lived her spiritual motherhood, in the light of Mary of Nazareth's very motherhood, that is, helping to form in each one the image of Christ (cf. Gal 4:19), imprinted on all from creation. Living her spiritual motherhood in the totality of gift, Mary Domenica gave fullness to her path of holiness: *educational holiness*, the fruit of the educating grace that shaped her and made her, in turn, the mediator of grace to “make Christ grow in the heart of young people” (FMA Constitution, art 7).

Spiritual (mystagogical) motherhood springs from within a dynamic of entrustment: trusting oneself to God and entrusting a mission from God to the person. This movement of entrustment requires, above all from the human person, profound docility to the Spirit. The one who makes us capable of total trust in the Lord with the attitude of the child, who knows well that all difficulties and all problems are at the safe in the “you” of one's mother. We see this dynamic of entrustment exemplified in the life of Maria Domenica. Before entrusting the educational mission “Entrust them to you” (Borgoalto's vision) there was the complete and serene entrustment of Maria Domenica: “I entrust myself to you” (experience of illness and convalescence).

1.3. A Motherhood that knows how to see the action of the Spirit in itself, in people and history

One of the characterizing elements of mystagogy is the ability to “see” the action of the Spirit, first of all in itself, to then be able to perceive and discern this presence in others and history. Maria Domenica had trained in this art from a young age, led by Don Pestarino. She had a docile heart and

² ANGIULI Vito, *Educazione come mistagogia. Un orientamento pedagogico nella prospettiva del Concilio Vaticano II*, Roma, Centro Liturgico Vicenziano 2010, 102.

³ «È apparsa infatti la *grazia* (χάρις = *charis*) di Dio, che porta salvezza a tutti gli uomini, che *insegna* (παιδεύω = *paideuo*) a rinnegare l'empietà e i desideri mondani e a vivere in questo mondo con sobrietà, con giustizia e con pietà, nell'attesa della beata speranza e della manifestazione della gloria del nostro grande Dio e salvatore Gesù Cristo” (*Tito* 2, 11-13) = *grazia educatrice* (χάρις παιδεύουσα = *charis paideuoussa*).

was ready to pay attention to what was going on within her, to work on her character: “Examining herself objectively, loyally as she carried her heart and reason, Maria felt that her nature, called ardent by all, she was about to get zealous.”⁴

For this reason, she “opened the door of her conscience to the confessor double-leafed”, the effective mediation of the interior master, who is the Holy Spirit who worked secretly in her heart and moulded her, day after day, to become a woman with a “great and generous” heart.

Mother Mazzarello expresses awareness of the action of the Holy Spirit and describes it, using the biblical symbolic language of the hand and fingers of God:⁵ “The hand of God works in us” (L 66,2).

Having had the experience of being guided by the Spirit, using her intelligence skills, Maria Domenica too learned to “see” this presence in people's lives. She states Lemoyne: “She was an expert teacher of the Spirit. It was enough for her to see a person a few times, to soon know the good or bad feelings by which she was animated. She seemed to have the gift of discerning spirits.”⁶ This is why Sr. Lina Dalcerra describes her as a soul of the Holy Spirit. “She abandoned herself entirely to the action of the divine Spirit, opening herself to her gifts and letting them work in fullness”.⁷

2. Self-presentation of Mother Mazzarello in her Letters

2.1. The name “mother”

Don Bosco had glimpsed in MM the educative motherhood capable of interpreting Salesian spirituality in a feminine way. On the occasion of the first official election, he had said to the sisters: “I find it good that the superior is called by all of you “mother”.⁸ Mother Mazzarello was already, in the Borgoalto experience, invested with a particular mission: to be “Mother”! “I entrust them to you!” Don Bosco simply confirms this divine investiture. He had no doubts about Maria Domenica so much that he reassured Don Cagliero with these meaningful words:

“You know well the spirit of our oratory, our preventive system and the secret of being loved, listened to and obeyed by young people; loving everyone and mortifying no one, and assisting them day and night with paternal vigilance, patient charity and constant kindness. Well, the good Mother Mazzarello possesses these requisites and therefore we can be confident in the government of the Institute and the government of the sisters. It has nothing else to do and nothing else but to conform to the spirit, system and character proper to our Oratory, to the Salesian Constitutions and deliberations; their Congregation is equal to ours; it has the same end and the same means, which it inculcates with the example and the word to the nuns, who, in turn, following the model of the Mother, rather than superiors, directors and teachers are tender mothers towards their young boarders”.⁹

We are well aware of Maria Domenica's effort in accepting the new mission of “Mother and Superior”. But when she senses that this is God's will, this will that passes through human mediations (the sisters, Don Bosco, etc.), she assumes it in fullness, in the totality of the gift of self to the point of simply signing herself “the Mother” in some letters. An awareness accompanies her: “If I always give a good example to my sisters, things will go well; if I love Jesus with all my heart, I will also

⁴ *Cronistoria* I 39.

⁵ Cf CCC 700.

⁶ KOTHGASSER Alois - LEMOYNE Giovanni Battista - CAVIGLIA Alberto, *Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Profezia di una vita*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1996. 101.

⁷ DALCERRI Lina, *Un'anima di Spirito Santo. S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1980, 154.

⁸ *Cronistoria* II, 97; anche *Cronistoria* II 66.

⁹ CAGLIERO Giovanni, [*Memoria storica su Maria Domenica Mazzarello*] 1918, in AGFMA 020 04-1-01 ms.aut.

know how to make others love him “(L11). It is a question of motherhood that makes a free and self-giving gift and which is based on the personal testimony of life.

The awareness of being a “mother”, gradually assumed, appears clearly in her Letters: in them, she presents herself as a mother, as “she who loves you so much in the Lord” (L 66,6) and is “willing to do everything to your good” (L 52.5), like a mother who “takes care “(L 10.2; 12.3; 19.2), who invites her daughters to have a “great and generous heart”, willing to make any sacrifice for the good of the young women.

Ana Maria Fernandez, in her interesting study on the Letters of Mother Mazzarello, underlines the peculiar motherhood of Mother Mazzarello, who in her “responsibility as a guide and superior of the community does not diminish from familiarity and respect for roles, indeed, accentuates the commitment to strengthen community ties according to a typical spiritual and apostolic physiognomy, fortifies creativity and the freedom of love”.¹⁰ She likes to conclude her letters to FMA by adding the name “mother” or more frequently “the mother” to her signature.

2.2. “A great and generous heart” = missionary heart

The expression “to have a great and generous heart” appears in two letters of Mother Mazzarello (L 27,14; 47,12). The context of these letters is quite significant:

Letter 27 is addressed to sr. Angela Vallese, responsible for the first two houses opened in Uruguay at a short distance from each other as can be deduced from the letter she wrote to Don Bosco from Villa Colon on September 20, 1879.¹¹ For this reason, the letter is addressed to the FMA of the two communities: Villa Colon and Las Piedras. The letter, with a familiar and simple tone, conveys news of the houses of Nizza Monferrato and Mornese and contains some exhortations and orientations to the FMA.

Mother Mazzarello feels the lively responsibility of animating the sisters who have entered a new context and are creatively venturing into the inculturation of the charism in Latin America. We can imagine that the challenges, the problems, the inconveniences were not few for the missionaries. “Go forward with a great and generous heart”: it is a piece of advice as simple as it is profound, which is given to a missionary who certainly at some moment feels the weight and the fatigue of the responsibility of the mission: Sister Angela Vallese. This is what she wrote to Don Bosco: “Oh my good Father, I am like a chick in tow. Imagine that I have two houses to manage, this one in Villa Colon and that of Las Piedras, and I am unable to manage one. I, therefore, ask you to deign to pray a lot for me. I also recommend that you want to send us good and holy sisters, including one to carry my cross”.¹² Here then is that Mother Mazzarello's words sound even more profound: “Angiolina, my dear, there is nothing left for me to tell you that you take courage and do not have such a small heart, but a generous, immense heart and not so many fears” (L 27.14).

Letter 47 is also addressed to the superior of the house of Carmen in Patagones, Sister Angela Vallese and the community. The first four missionary sisters who arrived in Patagonia were Sr. Angela Vallese, Sr. Giovanna Borgna, Sr. Angela Casulo, Sr. Caterina Fina (cf L 37). The sisters taught about thirty girls and some interns and made available themselves for catechesis in the parish. About nine months had passed since the arrival of the missionaries in Patagonia (January 20, 1880) and therefore the news reached the Mother after a long and anxious wait. This was then, the community that had finally realized the dream of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello: the mission in

¹⁰ FERNÁNDEZ Ana Maria, *Le Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Testimoni e mediazione di una missione carismatica*, Roma, LAS 2006, 252.

¹¹ Cf. Cronistoria III 116-117.

¹² Cronistoria III 117.

Patagonia! In this letter, it is interesting to note that the advice to “have an immense and generous heart” is addressed to sr. Caterina Fina, who seems to have to fight against melancholy and in turn on herself. A heart turned in on itself is inevitably sterile and leads to sadness. A “great and generous” heart, on the other hand, speaks of a heart that generates life, joy, fullness, openness to all and all of reality.

Going beyond literal quotations, we can affirm that “having a great and generous heart” is an expression that describes Mother Mazzarello best as a consecrated educator. You can do the exhortation to have a “big and generous heart” because she was the first to be a woman with a heart who possessed these qualities.

The expression “a large and generous heart” speaks of a heart that generates life, wide open to the horizons of God and others. A heart inhabited by God opens positively on reality, all of reality to read the history of salvation in it. It is an invitation to grow in love to the point of expanding the heart to “freely do whatever charity requires” (L 35,3). A big heart capable of glimpsing, dreaming, envisioning, embracing the future.

A “big heart” speaks of a heart without borders, capable of welcoming, embracing and hosting everyone.

A “generous heart” speaks of a nobility of soul that manifests itself in altruism, ready to serve and forgive. A “generous heart” then, is not only ready to give and to share, but it does so with joy, with delicacy, without putting any clauses: a generous heart is generous and that's it! And all this has a liberating and enlightening effect on our own lives because it prepares us for the gift of ourselves and of our things to put the other and the mission entrusted to us in the foreground.

Mother Mazzarello's heart is a heart expanded to universal love. In her, the missionary need of the *da mihi animas* and the *I entrust them to you* burned in her and this pushed her to dream big and to witness Jesus to those who did not yet know him.¹³

3. The traits of MM's educational motherhood

3.1. The priority of the person who is a relationship

At the centre of the educational process is the person who is in relationship and created in the image and likeness of God. The protagonist of one's growth, called to self-appropriate the dynamism of one's own growth and to discover that beyond the person there is also the person committed to being.¹⁴

The person is not inherently bad, but receptive, sensitive, capable of becoming enthusiastic about the good and committing oneself to the good. In her letters, Maria Domenica encourages the girls to keep themselves good (cf L 13,3; 44,6); she sees them as “good beyond belief” (L 4:12), and even in those that seem closed, rebellious, capricious she always sees the possibility of correspondence, improvement, change of life.¹⁵ “Maria Mazzarello, while unmasking the evil without half-term at the

¹³ Cf ANSCHAU PETRI Eliane, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Ermeneutica teologica delle testimonianze nei processi di beatificazione e canonizzazione*, Roma, LAS 2018, 281.

¹⁴ Cf B. LONERGAN, *comprendere ed essere*, Roma, Città Nuova 1993, 237-238.

¹⁵ Cf ANSCHAU PETRI Eliane, *L'accompagnamento della scelta vocazionale nell'epistolario di Santa Maria D. Mazzarello*, in VOJTAS Michal - RUFFINATTO Piera (a cura di), *Giovani e scelte di vita. Prospettive educative. Atti del Congresso Internazionale, Roma 20-23 settembre 2018, Volume 1: Relazioni*, Roma, LAS, 2019, 299-321.

opportune moment, - writes Piera Cavaglià - she sees in the girls the positive resources they bring and never despairs of their possibility of improvement".¹⁶

It is this optimistic vision of the person that leads to a positive view of education seen as an aid offered to girls so that they can live their vocation as Christian women and honest citizens with awareness and dignity. Hence the solicitous, thoughtful, attentive, free love on the part of the educator for each person entrusted to her.

3.2. Educational motherhood that generates and educates to life, in the logic of the mixed-logic itinerary

The formative project of the FMA affirms that "the discreet and wise presence of Maria Domenica guides the sisters and girls on a joyful and demanding journey of holiness. Thus an educational tradition is inaugurated characterized by a mystagogy, that is, initiation into the mystery, expressed in the gestures of motherhood generated by the Spirit."¹⁷ Along the same lines, it is stated in the GEM: "The mysterious voice that resounds to Maria Domenica in the vision of Borgoalto has the strength of a perennial mandate: "I entrust them to you". That inner voice is for Maria Domenica an inspiration that feeds her dream of total dedication to young people, pushing her to take new paths to achieve an educational vocation that quickly involves other young people in the same project".¹⁸

- Guide, respecting the process, the gradualness and the stages of the educational process

The logic of the process is inscribed in human nature. The person does not mature by sudden and evolutionary leaps, but progressively, passing through various stages towards full maturity. This maturation occurs in time and space. Here is the importance of placing the "biographical time" within a "chronological time" conceived as *kairos*, almost a "womb" that allows the gestation of the new creature. Time is not made up only of successive dates but of "personal events" of God and the human person. "The journey of vocational maturity is a pilgrimage towards the maturity of faith, towards the adult state of being a believer, called to decide on one's life in freedom and responsibility according to the mysterious plan of God".¹⁹ In this process Maria Domenica Mazzarello was a wise guide. Fr Lemoyne writes about the gift of discernment of spirits: «[...] And if among her daughters she saw any one having a call to special holiness, she was there with all her heart to guide that difficult path, raising her to a strong spirit, detached from everything and everyone, even from the holiest consolations, and with the help of the Heavenly Spouse made her touch the lofty heights of perfection in a short time. Under the guidance of such an expert teacher of spirit, the new Institute could not fail to flourish [...]".²⁰ Concerning some young people, you can understand that they needed a long time and a lot of patience to set out on a path of true human and Christian maturity. This is the case of Maria Belletti, the orphan girl who arrives at the boarding school at a time when she was certainly not in the best disposition to undertake a formative journey.²¹ However, Mother Mazzarello and her educators chose to bet on the girl with the long-term strategy, starting with "preparing the ground",

¹⁶ CAVAGLIÀ Piera, *un'educatrice al servizio della vita. Linee di uno stile educativo*, in RUFFINATTO Piera - SÉIDE Martha (a cura di), *L'arte di educare nello stile nel sistema preventivo. Approfondimenti e prospettive*, Roma, LAS 2008, 217.

¹⁷ ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Nei solchi dell'Alleanza. Progetto formativo delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Leumann (TO), Elledici 2000, 19. D'ora in poi: PF seguito dal numero della pagina.

¹⁸ ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Perché abbiano vita e vita in abbondanza. Linee orientative della missione educativa delle FMA*, Leumann (TO), Elledici 2005, 30.

¹⁹ PF 86.

²⁰ LEMOYNE Giovanni Battista, *Suor Maria Mazzarello*, in *Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Profezia di una vita*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1996, 101-102.

²¹ L'itinerario spirituale di Corinna Arrigotti è narrato in *Cronistoria* I 260-262; II 7-10; 69-72; 78; 87-88.

up to release the girl to the action of grace. Their persistent work of listening, of loving attention, not only achieved a real change of life but also paved the way for the call of the Lord.

- Guide to the encounter with Christ

Mary Domenica guides the sisters and young women to discover that the meaning and secret of the Christian and religious life is an existence centred on Jesus Christ. Writing to Laura Rodríguez²² as soon as she professes, the Mother, with realism and essentiality, exhorts the young woman to be faithful to her commitments and to concentrate on the fundamental values of the Christian life, above all to “make herself dear to Jesus” (L 43,2). This invitation is a clear appeal to a journey of conformation to Him. In another letter, sent to the community in which Laura was a novice, Mother calls the sisters to faithfully observe the Constitutions, which are enough to make themselves holy and reassure them that “Jesus does not want anything else from us. If it is true that we love him, let us give him this pleasure and make our Heart happy with him who loves us so much” (L 27,9).

The letter to Ottavia Bussolino is a hymn that sings love for Jesus Christ, the centre of one's life: “Never be discouraged by any adversity, take everything from the SS. hands of Jesus, place all your trust in Him and hope for everything from Him. [...] Let Jesus say to you: my daughter, you are dear to me, I am happy with your work. Courage, when you are tired and afflicted go and place your afflictions in the heart of Jesus and there you will find relief and comfort “. Maria Domenica helps the young nun to unite the two commandments, that is, love for the sisters and love for Jesus on a scale of priorities: “Love everyone and all your sisters, love them always in the Lord, but do not share your heart with anyone, let it be whole for Jesus” (L 65,2- 3).

United with love for Jesus is the call to the presence and imitation of Mary. She recommends girls to be devoted to Our Lady, our “good” and “most tender Mother” (L 13,1), to imitate her virtues, especially her humility, purity and withdrawal. If they do so they will be content in life and death (cfr. L 44,3). To the FMA she recommends “instilling in the girls' the devotion to Our Lady” (L 47,10), to have “great confidence with Jesus and Mary” (L 64,1). The reference to confidence, linked to the name of Mary and combined with that of Jesus, allows us to understand how, in the intimate conviction of Mary D., the presence and intervention of the Mother of Jesus cannot be dissociated from that of the Son. The efficacy of entrustment comes from Christ, through the intercession of Mary.

- Guide to confidence, an essential prerequisite for spiritual progress

The Christian life and the response to the call is nothing more than a journey of entrustment to God. But then God uses mediations to reveal himself and reveal his plan of love to the person. It, therefore, becomes important to know how to trust human mediations, the director, the confessor, the spiritual director (cf L 18, 43, 62).

Confidence is, for spiritual masters, the indispensable prerequisite for spiritual progress. Saint Francis de Sales writes in *Philothea*: «Do you want to set out on the path to devotion with confidence?

²² Suor Laura Rodríguez (1858-1924) è la prima vocazione americana, segno tangibile della benedizione di Dio sull'Istituto. Conobbe le FMA tramite suo fratello che frequentava il collegio salesiano di Montevideo-Villa Colón. Laura entrò nell'Istituto il 14 maggio 1878 e fece la prima professione il 24 maggio 1880 (Cf Suor Rodríguez Laura, in *Facciamo memoria. Cenni biografici delle FMA defunte nel 1924*, Scuola Tipografica Privata, Roma 1986, 112-117). Laura ebbe la gioia di ricevere due lettere autografe di madre Mazzarello: la L 18, quando era ancora novizia e la L 43 nella quale la Madre raccomanda alla neo-professa alcuni valori essenziali della vita religiosa. Inoltre, ci sono altre due lettere comunitarie dove la Madre ha un pensiero particolare e personale per Laura (L 22,16; 27,9).

Find some capable man to guide you and accompany you; is the recommendation of recommendations”.²³

The term “confidence”, typically Salesian, “includes esteem, trust, openness and excludes vain and dispersive sentimental complications. It is the “openness of heart” that allows the Director to be able to establish a truly personal relationship”.²⁴ The confidence that Mother Mazzarello instils in young women and nuns is based on a simple trust that pacifies souls, frees them, allows them to see clearly in themselves simply by being able to express what they think. It has the flavour of abandonment to God, of trust in him and others, and reveals a certain inner balance; it is strong confidence that fosters a serious climate saturated with values.

It seems important to me what Mother Mazzarello said one day to Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, assistant to the postulants: «Do not think that those who say so much about themselves (in essence they say nothing about themselves) and even more about others are open! You will find, however, some that say little, but in a little they say everything; on these, we can count much more because they are generally of “good stuff””.²⁵ Having the “good stuff” for Mother Mazzarello corresponds to trusting abandonment in God through trusting openness to human mediations. Especially in the age of youth, in which one is building one's own identity and is in search of one's vocation, it is important to have a reference person to whom to entrust one's life, who helps to shed light on the motivations, to make coherent choices and concrete of life.

The second call is to “never hide anything” and “keep your heart open” (L 18,4). Those who have an open heart to let themselves be accompanied, work inwardly, pull out the weeds of their heart, fight against self-love and disinterest, can progress more rapidly in spiritual life and get to taste it inwardly. Confidence, transparency and openness of heart are necessary attitudes to be aware of the passage of God in one's life.

Combined with the reference to confidence there is another element that transpires less from the letters but is very present in other sources: sincerity with the confessor. To the postulants who parade in silence to see her for the last time she says: “Sincerity, sincerity with everyone you know, especially with the confessor.” Sincerity, sincerity and openness of heart are signs of harmony in being, of a certain human and spiritual maturity. Only in this way can a life of consecration and authentic donation be set up. On the other hand, duplicity and closure of the heart are a barrier to the action of grace and progress in spiritual life.

- Guide to the clarity of motivations: right intention

One of the cornerstones of Salesian accompaniment pedagogy is to guide people to clarity and purification of motivations not in the line of moralism but of encounter: “Do you love the Lord? But really from the heart? Do you work for Him alone?” (L 23,1). The Gospel states: “Where your treasure is, your heart will also be” (Mt 6:21). It may happen that sometimes, or in some moment of life our heart is “outside us” and this makes us understand how important is a guide that guides us to re-enter ourselves to find the centre of life. The right intention is to live in the logic of love received and given, to do everything and only for the love of God and not for human ends. I believe that this is important in the face of the increasingly subtle temptation of self-referentiality, of self-

²³ Francesco di Sales, *Filotea. Introduzione alla vita devota*, a cura di R. Balboni, Paoline, Roma 2006, parte I, capitolo IV, 29.

²⁴ POSADA Maria Esther, *Il carisma della direzione spirituale personale in S. Maria D. Mazzarello*, in COGLIANDRO Mario (a cura di), *La direzione spirituale nella Famiglia Salesiana. Atti della X Settimana di spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana, Roma 23-29 gennaio 1983*, Editrice SDB, Roma 1983, 97.

²⁵ *Cronistoria III* 285.

centeredness, of pride, of individualism that slowly penetrates our hearts and into our communities, if we are not vigilant.

Mother Mazzarello constantly appeals to the basic motivations that lead the sisters and communities to act. Reasons that she summarizes in “acting”, in “working from the heart” with “righteousness” and with “purity of intention”. Love of God and neighbour, prayer, work, authentic virtue must start from the depths of the “heart”,²⁶ not from exteriority and secondary ends.

In the conference to the community on “right intention”, on October 24, 1880, Mother Mazzarello warned the sisters: “We are attentive to what we do and how we do it, and we often ask ourselves for whom we do it”. And after reiterating that God will ask for an account of the talents we have received, she continued: “Let us be careful about our intention in fulfilling our duty: this as Christians and as religious. God sees much deeper than what others see; he sees our thoughts, counts our words, examines our works, and in his infinite holiness he will ask us the most severe account of everything. I recommend, therefore: each one places herself in the presence of God, lives in the presence of God, and does everything and only to do God's will and give it a pleasure”.²⁷ An FMA who has understood this well is Mother Elisa Roncallo. After the finished work she always said: «I am happy because I feel that God is happy!».²⁸ She directed the Sisters: “Let us work well in our groove, because in that the will of God fruitful, flourishes and bears fruit. We work with the right intention and aim at Him alone”.²⁹

The consistency of the formation in the righteousness of intention allows the enhancement of each person with all positive resources and the expansion of the whole being in authentic charity. Then comes true freedom which is never static because it is always an object of conquest, but which allows for a serene and safe movement even among the frailties and inevitable difficulties of every existence.

It is in this sense that we understand one of the deepest and most synthetic formulations, the fruit of intuition and mature experience: “Do freely whatever charity requires” (L 35,3).

- Guide to the formation of a virtuous life in everyday life

The life of faith, for Maria D., is not reduced to a sort of individualistic intimism but is a constant exercise to open up and meet with God, with others and with reality. The daily life is for her the real test of authentic spirituality and one of the fundamental criteria for fruitful vocational discernment. For this reason, Maria D. directs young women to live their daily lives in a committed way by recalling some virtues that qualify and give depth to everyday life: charity, humility, obedience, joy. These virtues or attitudes return frequently in the Saint's correspondence, guide us to a Christian life lived to the full and become criteria for true vocational discernment. To Sister Giuseppina Pacotto, assistant to the postulants, he wrote: “Always recommend [to the postulants] that they think about what they have done or rather have come to religion, tell them not to think only of dressing in a black habit, but they must dress of a habit of all the virtues necessary for a religious who want to call herself the spouse of Jesus. Let them obtain a spirit of mortification, sacrifice, obedience, humility, detachment from everything that is not of God “(L 24,2). In this letter, La Madre recalls the essential elements of the formation of candidates for the Institute, elements which must also serve as criteria for the selection of the assistant.

²⁶ “Bisogna lavorare per Dio solo” (L 19,13), facendo tutto con “purtà di intenzione” e “per piacere a Lui solo” (L 19,8) perché lavorare per Lui solo è l'espressione dell'autentico amore: “Lo amate il Signore? Ma proprio di cuore? Lavorate per Lui solo?” (L 20,1).

²⁷ *Cronistoria* III 259-260.

²⁸ MAINETTI Giuseppina, *Madre Elisa Roncallo. Fra le prime discepole di S. Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, Istituto FMA 1946, 248.

²⁹ *Ivi* 278.

Also characteristic is Maria D.'s call to live the present to the full by committing herself to the exact fulfilment of her duties and the construction of a virtuous life. To a young nun, she advised: "You shouldn't think about the future, now just think about perfecting yourself in your work, in your studies, and then when the time comes to make the sacrifice, rest assured that the Lord will give you the strength necessary to do his will" (L 45,1). The expression "do not think about the future" does not mean inattention to God's plan, but rather concentrating on the essential. I live the present to the full - the only moment that truly belongs to us - in the awareness that the future is in the hands of God. It is an explicit invitation to trusting abandonment in God in the awareness that when moments of fatigue, sacrifice or difficulty arrive, he will give the necessary strength to do his will.

The path of formation to the virtuous life is a path of spiritual combat. Maria D. calls young women, especially those in formation, to the value of mortification, of sacrifice (cf L 67), to combat in the present moment in the certainty of having heaven forever (L 18: 3), not to become "Friend of self-love" (L 67.5). She is not afraid to propose demanding goals, in the awareness that it is in the period of youth that the person is formed with great ideals and a beautiful, joyful, transfigured life.

Charity is the foundation of the whole Christian life. It is also the virtue most recommended by Mother Mazzarello. This becomes almost a refrain that she repeats to her sisters and to the young women who are moving towards religious life: "Always be full of charity with everyone, but especially with your sisters" (L 67,3); "Great charity with all" (cf. L 62; 60,4); "Love all your sisters, always love them in the Lord" (L 65,3). The whole message of Mother Mazzarello is gathered in this orientation: to live industrious and joyful charity. In the wake of Mother's teaching, it is not surprising that a young FMA accompanied by her, Sister Ottavia Bussolino, decided in her heart to make a vow of charity towards her sisters.³⁰

- Guide to holiness

Maria Domenica, as a wise educator, understood that the goal of the spiritual journey is holiness and she did not spare herself in presenting this goal to the sisters and young women. Addressing Laura Rodríguez, the first Latin American FMA, Maria D. reminds her of the need to become a saint: "You, who are the first Daughter of Mary Help of Christians made in America, must make yourselves a great saint so that many American daughters can follow your example" (L 18,2). Since she was the first FMA of the new continent, it was necessary for her to be well-formed in the "spirit of the congregation" and to become a credible witness for many other young people. In her healthy realism, Maria D. continues: "It is not enough for us religious to save our souls, we must make ourselves holy and with our good works holy many other souls who are waiting for us to help them" (L 18: 3).

The commitment to holiness, therefore, translates into continually making oneself available at the service of brothers and sisters, in openness and solidarity with the suffering world. Thus, Maria D. directs young women to move away from an overly intimate and individualistic idea of holiness, making them understand that they are called to walk a path of holiness by collaborating in the holiness of others and living it in a community. Maria Domenica is aware that it is God who sanctifies; but she also recognizes the task reserved for each one on this journey: to let the Spirit of God work, to allow his hand to work in us (cf. L 66,2) and to move forward with a big and generous heart (cf. . L 27.14). Writing to those who had asked her for some advice for a path of committed Christian life, she traces a path of simple and at the same time demanding holiness: humility, obedience, love of sacrifice, mortification, the charity with all, prayer, joy as an expression of love for God, observance

³⁰ Cf *Suor Bussolino Ottavia*, in *Facciamo memoria. Cenni biografici delle FMA defunte nel 1939*, a cura di Michelina Secco, Istituto FMA, Roma 1994, 151-152.

of the Constitutions “sure guide to lead us to paradise” (L 67,6; 60,4). It is a question of a journey of holiness which is a commitment to carry out one's duties well in the simplicity of everyday life.

3.3. Educational motherhood that generates and humanizes communities

- *Values friendship and builds community/communion = family spirit*

Maria Domenica's experience of friendship resulted in an intense experience of motherhood. Living the “spirit of friendship” - both first in the FMI group and later in the experience of the FMA - Maria Domenica collaborated to humanize relationships and the community: in the relationship of friendship, each one feels to mature in their personality, in their freedom of expression and action, and promoting each other in their qualities of initiative and responsibility. The friendship of Maria Domenica with Petronilla Mazzarello is emblematic: a spiritual, fruitful friendship, a true sharing of life and apostolic ideals, so much so that Ferdinando Maccono, referring to their fruitful apostolate among the girls of Mornese, affirms: “Mary without Petronilla we don't know if she could have done what she did.”³¹ It is about a true, transparent friendship, which does not create dependence, but where everyone can be herself.

The experience of “spiritual friendships”, as lived by Maria Domenica and the group of the FMI of Mornese, matured, with the foundation of the Institute of the FMA, in the experience of the “family spirit”, a characteristic of the FMA. We read in the first Constitutions that “for the greater perfection of charity each one will with desire prefer the comforts of her sisters to her own, and on all occasions, they will help and relieve each other with a demonstration of benevolence and holy friendship”.³² It is the example of a friendship that has its roots in God, brings out the depth of the person and is expressed in active and effective charity.

The testimonies of Mother Mazzarello's fraternal charity are abundant and illuminating: “She loved everyone with a great love and for the love of God alone, regardless of whether they deserved it or not; if they corresponded to it or if they showed themselves ungrateful”;³³ “Each of her felt the most loved by her.”³⁴ She made no personal preferences; she loved unconditionally. She had expressions of tenderness and true affection for the sisters, especially for those far away in mission lands: “I assure you that I always keep you present in my heart” (L 37,1); “I will never forget you” (L 65,4). Her maternal goodness sets in motion her industriousness, with the eyes of a woman, which she sees, anticipates, urges and leads to the good: “she had something that drew us to good.”³⁵

From the point of view of the family spirit, Maria Domenica contributed to creating a true community/communion, *schola amoris*, a place of growth and change. «She was endowed with an uncommon criterion; she possessed the gift of motherhood and the gift of government in an admirable way. She was an energetic, resolute, but loving government: she treated us with frankness, yes, but she loved us like a true religious mother; she had something that drew us to good, to duty, to sacrifice, to Jesus, with a certain gentleness, without violence; she saw everything about her, she foresaw the

³¹ MACCONO Ferdinando, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Confondatrice e prima Superiora Generale delle Figlie di Ausiliatrice*, Torino, Istituto FMA 1960, Vol. I, 34.

³² *Costituzioni 1885*, in GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1872-1885)*, a cura di C. Romero, Roma, LAS, 1983, 333.

³³ Testimonianza di Giovanni Cagliero, in *Summarium* 266.

³⁴ Testimonianza di Caterina Daghero, in *Summarium* 251.

³⁵ Testimonianza di Enrichetta Sorbone, in *Summarium* 79.

good and the bad of all her daughters, always ready to provide for both physical and moral, according to her need and possibilities”.³⁶

In dealing with true friendship, Maria Domenica allowed each sister to be herself and express herself in the best way possible, she helped to promote responsibility and to create “an environment of paradise” in the community to the point that one of the first FMA could exclaim: «How beautiful the life was”.³⁷ Her educational perspective made the community a true laboratory of life, “wherein the relationship with others one learns to love God, to love the brothers and sisters with whom one lives”.³⁸

- *Guide to the integration of resources and frailties*

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were people of healthy realism in the confrontation of people. At the centre of everything is the person with his potential and his positive resources, which must be valued and developed. Thus our founders overcome the mentality of the era of the principle of “*agere contra*”, that is, of opposing the taste for the tasks to be performed, to strengthen the sense of self-denial and the detachment of one's will. Don Bosco, on the other hand, had recommended to the first FMA: “I urge you to support as much as possible the feeling of the novices and sisters, as far as mission is concerned. Sometimes it is thought that it is a virtue to deny the will with this or other offices contrary to one's taste, it derives instead damage to the sister and also to the congregation. Rather, it may be your commitment to teaching them to sanctify and spiritualize these dispositions, having God alone in everything”.³⁹ Trying to carry out the “will of God” in one's life must be understood in an evangelical way, that is, in a liberating and reassuring way: it is not a question of destroying our will nor of seeking “our will” at all costs, but of purifying it. So much so that it enables us to feel and act like God. “It pleases God, it pleases me”⁴⁰ was one of the favourite prayers of the first community of Mornese.

Taking care of the person and accompanying them means helping them to find their place in the community, allowing them to fulfil themselves by responsibly assuming their task in life and developing their resources in authentic freedom and in the true love that is given to them. Here discernment and accompaniment meet, that is to help the person understand the underlying reasons for which he does or stops doing a certain thing; why, for whom and with what reasons he puts his gifts to bear fruit in the community. That is, does he do it out of gratuitous love and a sense of belonging or motivated by self-centeredness, excessive protagonism and self-referentiality?

The intuition and experience of Maria Domenica led her to formulate guiding principles for the guiding principles: “You see, one must study the natural ones and know how to take them to succeed well, one must inspire confidence” (L 25,2). Expert in humanity, she teaches to study people to help them flourish in the best possible way and to support her in her fidelity to the Lord in the moment of trial. The witnesses affirm that she “in the office of superior she always behaved with maternal charity; she was cautious; she demanded that each perform their duty, but she had no privations. At the various offices of the Institute she always chose the most suitable ones”.⁴¹ «She seemed - says Sister Enrichetta Sorbone - a real gardener in the government to see which flowers she had to plant

³⁶ Testimonianza di Enrichetta Sorbone, in *Summarium* 79.

³⁷ *Memorie di madre Enrichetta Sorbone*, in DALCERRI Lina, *Madre Enrichetta Sorbone Vicaria generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, L.I.C.E - R. Berruti 1947, 203.

³⁸ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA, *Documento La vita fraterna in comunità*, 2 febbraio 1994, 25.

³⁹ *Cronistoria* II 98.

⁴⁰ MACCONO Ferdinando, *Cenni biografici delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice defunte nel primo decennio dell'Istituto (1872-1882)*, Torino, S.A.I.D. «Buona stampa» 1917, 52.

⁴¹ Testimonianza di Maria Rossi, in *Summarium* 84.

or transplant there. When she saw that a she was not very suitable in one office she would put her in another”.⁴² With prudence, relying on persuasion and love, she knew how to create a community where everyone felt co-responsible for the mission and where each was valued and therefore was happy to be able to collaborate in the educational mission by expressing themselves in their riches.

As she knew how to perceive and value people with her resources, she also knew how to be firm and decisive in helping people to overcome frailties, to correct themselves and to elaborate limits: “You have already told a similar matter several times: it seems to me that time to end it ... but then: take courage in both hands, be attentive, pray better and you will see that you will no longer have the humiliation of falling back so often”. Her expedient that she suggested to the young nun to help her in her self-training path is interesting: “Here, take this hazelnut and keep it in your pocket, to remember to avoid the ugly flaw of always apologizing”.⁴³

Just as she knew how to be tenderly understanding towards any form of weakness or fragility, she was equally maternally strong against the whims of emotion, the complications of sentiment and the sophisms of pride, self-centeredness and we will say today of self-referentiality. Maria Dominica wanted the person to be available to restructure himself, to transform himself internally by working on his own defects. She did not expect perfection, but the sincerity of the person and a determined desire to improve, while taking into account human frailty: “If you are sincere, if you happen to fall into some deficiency, it is always easy to get up and correct yourself”.⁴⁴ The attitude of Mother Mazzarello towards a sister who showed she did not like too much the company of a sister, who was not very nice or sickly, was significant: “Well, well, - said the Mother - for fifteen days you will be with her, and for the office and for recreation. “But she did not leave the young woman alone: ”I will follow you even with my eyes only, to help you win victory.”⁴⁵

These and many other testimonies help us to understand the secret of a wise and prudent, strong and loving accompaniment that has led sisters and young people to a true path of holiness, not denying or hiding fragility but integrating it. The experience of Mother Mazzarello confirms how true Jean Vanier's observation is: “To love others is to recognize their gifts and help them to develop them; it is also accepting their wounds and being patient and compassionate with them. If we see nothing but their gifts and their beauty, we idealize them, we expect too much of them. If we see nothing but their wounds, we do too much for them, or we reject them, and we risk preventing them from growing”.⁴⁶

At the heart of the community that lives communion is mutual trust, which arises from benevolence, from daily forgiveness and from the acceptance of our weaknesses, our poverty and those of others. But this trust does not arise suddenly; it takes time to form a real community. A community in which there is true mutual trust is an incredible and fruitful community.

Mother Mazzarello and the first sisters of Mornese teach us a style and a trait of governance and accompaniment that is based on charity, mutual trust, prudence capable of overcoming obstacles, conquering and encouraging people to welcome and overcome of their own frailties and those of others. It is an authority that does not impose itself with the strength of law, but with the strength of the heart, virtue and witness.

- Guide with the power of persuasion and testimony

⁴² Testimonianza di Enrichetta Sorbone, in *Summarium* 265.

⁴³ *Cronistoria* II 333.

⁴⁴ *Cronistoria* II 250.

⁴⁵ *Cronistoria* III 123.

⁴⁶ VANIER JEAN, *Comunità luogo della festa e del perdono*, Milano, Jaca Book 2018⁸, 64.

Maria Domenica is aware that guiding and accompanying people means being a “witness”, or to use a phrase of her it is necessary to “give a good example”. «Mystagogue is the one who, having experienced God, is able to communicate it to others. More than giving advice and norms of life, one’s support consists in placing others before God who by one’s nature communicates oneself, letting one enter into communion with those who want to have the experience of God and establish the modalities of the meeting”.⁴⁷

It is well known that people, especially young people, listen to witnesses more than professors and teachers. The witness is the surest and most effective way for evangelization and for accompanying the new generations. Maria Domenica is so convinced of this that she writes in her correspondence: «If I always give a good example to my sisters, things will go well; if I love Jesus with all my heart, I will also know how to make others love him “(L 11,2). In a letter sent to superior Angela Vallese, pioneer of the FMA missionaries in America, speaking of effective education with young women, she states: “It is up to us to always make them grow in virtue, first by example, because the things taught with the example they remain more impressed in the heart and do much good and then with words” (L 17,1); “It is up to you to give a good example” (L 35,2). To the sisters of the Montevideo house, he wrote: “I also feel that you have a lot to work with, with so many girls and this makes me really happy, and you try to cultivate them well, first of all with a good example and then with words” (L 56.2).

These recommendations are not derived from formalism, moralism or perfections but, for the formative action to be authoritative and effective, the word must be documented by personal consistency, that is, by the testimony of life. For the incisiveness of Mother Mazzarello's words, we report an entire paragraph of a letter to a superior:

«It is up to you to give a good example, to ensure that the Holy Rule is observed by the daughters, that they love each other and do not enter particular affections because they distance us very much from the Lord and the religious spirit. Make sure there are no jealousies. You must give a good example to all so that no one can say: she loves her more, she talks to her more, pities her more, etc. You speak to all, love them all, also give confidence as much as you can, but always be careful that our heart is not attached to anyone [other] than the Lord. Always advise yourselves with our good Superiors, never give up the good out of human respect, always feel and pity the defects of your sisters, freely do whatever charity requires “(L 35,2-3). The final reminder: “Do with freedom whatever charity requires”, summarizes the Christian message relating to the freedom of the children of God who walk in love.

3.4. Educational motherhood in a “synodal style” for the mission

- Guide in the style of reciprocity and the involvement of all

The educational environment and the style of the community created and animated by Maria Domenica Mazzarello are founded on the collaboration and involvement of all: FMA in their different educational roles, lay educators, community directors, families of the boarders and the same girls. Her way of animating the community has the character of a vigilant and good presence, flexible and attentive to the needs of each one, just like in a family where coexistence is pervaded with sweetness, kindness and joy.

Maria Domenica was aware that education requires a group of interventions, complementarity, reciprocity, collaboration on various fronts. She understood the African proverb: “It takes an entire village to educate a child”.

⁴⁷ ANGIULI, *Educazione come mistagogia*, 109, nota 158.

The service of authority is also carried out from a synodal perspective of co-responsibility. You had already highlighted Don Egidio Viganò: “You have grown from the beginning as a community, and it is nice to see with what style and with what modalities authority was born among you. It can be said that it is blossomed from a fraternal awareness given the need to ensure the life of the community, certainly with the intervention of Don Bosco and the Sacred Hierarchy, but in consonance with the hearts of all, to carry out the function indispensable of authority in a religious institute”.⁴⁸

The sources for studying and deepening the dimension of convergence and collaboration at various levels in the educational mission in Mornese are few and fragmentary, however, they seem sufficient to affirm a synodal community experience. I underline some of them:⁴⁹ the parish environment, the families of the boarders, the FMA in their different roles, the lay teachers, the spiritual director and the boarders themselves.

- *Guide to the gift of self in love*

Donation is a profoundly theological category. God's way of educating is that of giving oneself. Jesus educated and evangelized by giving himself. And, thus, the way of being an educator of the FMA is that of giving oneself which is nothing more than a kenotic experience: lowering oneself to get up again, to express the anticipating love of the Father, up to the last consequences: “He loved them to the end” (Jn 13: 1).

Education is in itself “a privileged way of love.”⁵⁰ Maria Domenica was educated and helped to educate to the gift of self in love, in a kenotic logic. This is reflected above all in the letters written to the missionaries: “Never be discouraged by any adversity, take everything from Jesus' hands, put all your trust in him and hope everything from him” (L 65,1); “When the cross seems heavy to you, take a look at the cross that we hold around our neck and say: Oh, Jesus, you are all my strength and with you the burdens become light, the labours are sweet, the thorns are converted into sweetness. But, my dear, you must overcome yourselves, otherwise, everything becomes heavy, unbearable” (L 64,5).

Some witnesses to the canonization process highlight the continuous and daily giving of motherhood in love: “it was made all to all”,⁵¹ and, “when she had to hear a nun she also sat on the steps of a staircase”.⁵²

The whole life of Maria Domenica was a constant donation, expressed in many gestures of love. When she felt her “hers now” coming of hers, she felt ready for a total and radical gift: the offering of her own life for the good of the FMA Institute. She too sealed her mission with a gift of love, leaving this spiritual message to her daughters as an inheritance: “No one has greater love than this: to give one's life for one's friends” (Jn 15, 13).

- *Guide in the style of the Preventive System*

⁴⁸ VIGANÒ Egidio, *Non secondo la carne ma nello Spirito*, Roma, Istituto FMA1978, 117.

⁴⁹ Cf CAVAGLIÀ Piera, *Un'educatrice al servizio della vita. Linee di uno stile educativo*, in RUFFINATTO Piera – SEIDE Martha (a cura di), *L'arte di educare nello stile del Sistema Preventivo. Approfondimenti e prospettive*, Roma, LAS 2008, 238-246; cf anche ANSCHAU PETRI Eliane, *Lo stile sinodale della prima comunità di Mornese*, in *Sinodalità per la missione. Comunità sinodali # profezia di missionarietà* Notiziario CII (2019) 41, 29-41.

⁵⁰ *Lettera del Sommo Pontefice Giovanni Paolo II al reverendo Egidio Viganò Rettor Maggiore della Società di San Francesco di Sales nel Centenario della morte di san Giovanni Bosco: Iuvenum Patris*, 31 gennaio 1988, in EV XI, 20.

⁵¹ Testimonianza di Giacomo Costamagna, in *Summarium* 67; testimonianza di Enrichetta Sorbone, in *Summarium* 396.

⁵² Testimonianza di Enrichetta Telesio, in *Summarium* 389.

The style of creating a community for the mission was based on the values that characterize the Preventive System: the value of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, of the person who must grow in freedom, joyful and family welcome, attentive listening, trust, closeness, diligent and loving care, friendship, solidarity, gratuitousness, recognition of the other, encouragement, adherence to God's plan, the gift of self in love, joy, etc.

In the way of animating and preparing the teachers, Maria Domenica applied the Preventive System, valuing the gifts of the educators and using freedom in proposing some as a model of Salesian pedagogical attitude. The Chronicle reports: “Sometimes the Mother calls some sisters, especially those who have the greatest difficulty in assuming the cheerful and authoritative kindness which is typical of the Salesian educator, and near the laboratory, she tells them, with a maternal gesture:” Look Richetta ! “[Sister Enrichetta Sorbone]”.⁵³

By implementing the preventive system, Maria Domenica exercised an authentic *auctoritas*, that is, the ability to make person grow. Authority does not express the idea of a directive power, but a true generative force.⁵⁴

3.5. Educational maternity in the animation and governance of the Institute

Maria Domenica presents herself as a woman with a profound art of animating and governing. A synthesis of the art of government of St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello about the development of the Institute is found in the words of Pius XI:

“This small, simple, poor peasant girl, who had only a rudimentary education, soon shows what is called talent, one of the greatest talents: the talent of governance. This is a great thing: and she proves to possess it and possesses it to such an extent that a man like St. John Bosco, so profound connoisseur of men and so intelligent and expert in the government of men and things, immediately perceives that rare and precious talent and he is worth it. Who knows then how many will have said: whatever comes to Don Bosco's mind? But even the choice could not have been better, and that choice was the fruit of the discovery of that talent; and the opportunity and effectiveness of the choice were demonstrated not only by the stable and secure foundation of the new family of Mary Help of Christians but also by the rapid, marvellous enlargement and spread of the flourishing Institute”.⁵⁵

- Guide with love and firmness

For those who animate and govern it is necessary to make love felt, to show that one is at the service of a mission. Don Bosco expresses this conviction well: «It is very important that the superiors love all the sisters without distinction as to their sisters, as daughters of Mary, as spouses of Jesus Christ; but that to a patient and concerned charity they join such firmness of spirit, which in due time, without violence but, but without human respect, prevents abuses and transgressions to the Constitutions ...”⁵⁶ It is a question of a loving, prudent, discreet, firm and decisive charity that draws more for the testimony of life than for the strength of authority. An authority this “that does not abdicate its responsibilities, perhaps for the sake of quiet living or for fear of hurting someone's

⁵³ *Cronistoria* II 209.

⁵⁴ Cf SINODO DEI VESCOVI. XV ASSEMBLEA GENERALE ORDINARIA, *I giovani, la fede e il discernimento vocazionale. Documento finale*, Torino, Elledici 2019, n. 71.

⁵⁵ PIO XI, *Maria Domenica Mazzarello, eroina delle virtù* 481-482.

⁵⁶ GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Atteggiamenti e virtù della Figlia di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, 24 maggio 1886, in ISTITUTO STORICO SALESIANO, *Fonti salesiane. 1. Don Bosco e la sua opera*, a cura di A. Giraud, J. M. Pallezo e F. Motto, Roma, LAS 2014, 842.

susceptibility. He will feel the responsibility not to be a fugitive in situations where clear and sometimes unwelcome decisions need to be made.”⁵⁷

Mother Mazzarello leads by adopting a style of animation and governance in the perspective of a healthy and wise “risk”, of trusting and arousing co-responsibility: trusting the young sisters and entrusting them with the animation of the communities (eg Angela Vallese, Giovanna Borgna, etc.), encouraging the sisters to the mission *ad gentes* (the first missionaries in Latin America were all very young), sometimes asking for great sacrifices such as going as a missionary to Latin America even when some sister had not asked the missionary question (eg. Giuseppina Pacotto); arousing co-responsibility with challenging questions: What would you do in this case? Helping the community to welcome God's plan and the new horizons of fruitfulness even when these seemed incomprehensible like leaving Mornese to go to Nizza Monferrato. Thus exists true authority. *Auctoritas* derives from *augere*, “to make grow”; to give the confidence to make people grow and mature. An authority that becomes a centre of communion without centralizing everything on itself.

Maria Domenica guides and animates the communities through her travels and visits to the communities. It also guides communities in difficulty or going through a moment of crisis with educational motherhood that relies on reason, heart and reasons of faith as in the case of the community of Saint-Cyr-sur-Mer (France)⁵⁸ and the community of Borgo San Martino who struggled to accept the new superior.⁵⁹ Thus she reveals herself as a tender and prudent mother and at the same time firm and decisive in helping her sisters to overcome themselves and their frailties to create not only the community but true communion, in which “Jesus may be happy” among the sisters (cf L 49: 3).

She also reveals herself to be a “true gardener”⁶⁰ - the expression of Enrichetta Sorbone - in discerning the place and the most suitable mission for each person so that they can “flourish”. Putting the person at the centre and seeking his good, Maria Domenica, a free and mature woman, is also capable of dissenting from some of the choices of some authoritative people when she sees that the choices are not appropriate: she does not agree with Don Cagliero di send sr. Teresa Laurantoni as an educator in Lu Monferrato (cf L 15.2-3); disagrees with Fr Cagliero in sending an FMA as a missionary to Latin America.⁶¹ The freedom to disagree does not come from a form of authoritarianism and egocentrism, but the search for the good of the person and the Institute. Seeking the good of the person is not always easy.

- *Guide to assimilation and development of the charism*

The Superior has to be attentive to the assimilation and development of the charism. And for this reason, it is important for a Superior to have a sense of belonging, to love, to know her institution. For Maria Domenica such dynamism, passes through the mediation of the Constitutions. It is no coincidence that Ana Maria Fernandez's study on the Letters of Mother Mazzarello is entitled “The letters of Maria Domenica Mazzarello.⁶² Witnesses and mediations of a charismatic mission”. To this, she lent her collaboration with personal fidelity and with the oral and written magisterium. She is aware that people need time to mature and assimilate the charism and this transpires from the advice

⁵⁷ CONGREGAZIONE PER GLI ISTITUTI DI VITA CONSACRATA E LE SOCIETÀ DI VITA APOSTOLICA, *Il servizio dell'autorità e dell'obbedienza*. Il documento prosegue: «L'amore vero verso la comunità è proprio ciò che rende l'autorità capace di conciliare fermezza e pazienza, ascolto di ognuno e coraggio di prender decisioni, superando la tentazione di essere sorda e muta».

⁵⁸ Cf L 49.

⁵⁹ Cf *Cronistoria* III 271-273.

⁶⁰ Testimonianza di Enrichetta Sorbone, in *Summarium* 265.

⁶¹ Cf ANSCHAU PETRI, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello* 222-223.

⁶² Cf FERNÁNDEZ, *Le Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Testimoni e mediazione di una missione carismatica*, Roma, LAS 2006.

she gives to the director Angela Vallese in comparison with a young FMA: “With Sister Vittoria,⁶³ you need to be patient and that you inspire them little by little. the spirit of our Congregation. She cannot have taken it yet, because it was too short a time in Mornese “(L 25,3). Tickets to departing missionaries are programmatic in their essentiality: “The memory is this: always observe the Holy Rule with accuracy” (L 65,1); “I recommend that you, first of all, observe the holy rule to perfection and as far as it is with you you must have it observed also by the others” (L 66,1); “Often think that our holy Rules are a sure guide to lead us to paradise; therefore you observe them all exactly “(L 67,6). The call to be faithful to the Rule is not formalism - a danger that can be undermined in religious institutes - but to be faithful to a “spirit”, to the charism, to a sure path of holiness.

Maria Domenica, wise superior and educator, knew how to “scan the horizons”, had a “long eye”, listened to the voice of God, and for this, she was able to glimpse what the Institute would be, recalling the sisters of the first community to the testimony of life for future generations:

“If what Don Bosco says is to come true, our Congregation is destined to spread throughout the world; we will also go to America; however, if we want the same spirit to always be preserved in it and always to do great good, it is necessary that we, the first of the Congregation, are not only virtuous, but the mirror in which those who will come afterwards have a see the true spirit of the institute shine forth “. We must live, work, speak in such a way that they can and should say: “What fervour there was among our first sisters! What observance! ... what a spirit of humility and poverty! ... What obedience! ... Thus, following our example, they will be able to continue to make the true spirit of the Institute live among themselves “. Because, you must know that, when the nuns will be many and many, they will hardly be able to have the fervour that we can have now that we are few; as the sisters multiply and the Congregation grows larger, the spirit will inevitably suffer, and the zeal and fervour will gradually diminish “. Thus said Don Bosco that he succeeded in many Congregations. But if we, who are the first, begin to be relaxed, if we do not love, if we do not practice humility and poverty, if we do not observe silence, if we do not live united to the Lord, what will the others do? “. And pointing to the Rule: You see - he continued - in this Rule that Don Bosco gave us, we have a treasure; we are given all the means to become holy, and, if we practice it well, we are sure of going to Heaven”.⁶⁴

4. Mother and educator because she is always a disciple

The true teacher, in a certain sense, is always and in any case a disciple, a person who needs to learn, going and going back to the school of life (= the person who cultivates docibilitas). “If in the everyday and scholastic language being disciples means studying, learning, in the language of the Gospel it means above all following, getting behind, recognizing that one precedes us, that only one will remain the Master forever, that our steps can only be guided by his followers, that the protagonist remains always and in any case Him. May we always remain disciples, even when by grace and not by merit the Lord constitutes us as apostles and sends us to proclaim his Gospel”.⁶⁵

The secret of Maria Domenica lies in the fact that she has always remained a disciple, first of all of the Word of God, of Jesus, of the Church, of Don Bosco the Founder. “We live in the presence of God and Don Bosco”⁶⁶ was her conviction. On being a disciple of Don Bosco, it should be noted that perhaps there has not always been a correct interpretation of this reality, that is, at some point in history, Maria Domenica was seen as a “copy” of Don Bosco, a “disciple who she scrupulously rode

⁶³ Suor Vittoria Cantù aveva infatti bruciato le tappe del cammino formativo. Per il suo ardente desiderio di essere missionaria le fu concesso di fare la vestizione e la professione nello stesso giorno (8 dicembre 1878) per poter partire con il gruppo di FMA che si recavano in Argentina.

⁶⁴ MACCONO, S. *Maria D. Mazzarello I*, 399-400.

⁶⁵ CALDIROLA Davide, *Tempo di partire. Itinerario spirituale col Vangelo di Matteo*, Milano, Ancora 2016, 8.

⁶⁶ MACCONO, S. *Maria D. Mazzarello II* 134.

in her footsteps,”⁶⁷ and this fact prevented her from grasping her originality as a co-founder. Instead, revisiting the sources, we observe that she proves to be an intelligent and creative disciple by bringing her feminine contribution to the Salesian charism. This is what the documents of the Canonization Process highlight that they attribute to it the two substantive nouns: “*adiutrix*” and “*alumna*” of Don Bosco. Maria Esther Posada, in a study on the title of co-founder, states: “Maria Domenica Mazzarello was a “student of Don Bosco” in all that authentic discipleship means as a free and total following, like poverty, as risk and courage, as death and as a victory over death, through a presence and a mission that extend beyond death, in space and time.”⁶⁸

Maria Domenica experiences the attitude of discipleship from a Marian perspective. “The female archetype to which the figure of Mazzarello refers and to which we, Salesian women, are called to refer is Mary Most Holy, Mother and Teacher of Christians, Help of God in the work of universal salvation, Alumna par excellence of Christ and the Church.”⁶⁹

5. An educational-spiritual motherhood that challenges us

Faced with today's educational challenges, Maria Domenica's educational experience challenges us and enlightens us. We urgently need to rediscover the gift of educational motherhood, lived as a pilgrimage in faith and love as was the motherhood of Mary of Nazareth, that is, a motherly presence in every moment of life: in moments of celebration, of joy (Wedding at Cana); in the weekdays and less noticeable to the most tiring and painful moments (as at the foot of the Cross).

- Faced with a world that seems to be “orphaned” by living fathers and mothers, there is the hope of contagious motherhood that brings acceptance, tenderness, understanding and forgiveness, that is, motherhood at the service of others.

- Faced with the fragility, the rupture of relationships and the challenges of functional relationships, we need educational motherhood that helps to rediscover the “grammar” of relationships, putting people at the centre. Accompanying, discerning and integrating the resources and frailties of people and communities become a necessary and urgent task.

- Faced with the challenges of today's educational mission, we need motherhood that awakens in us the educational passion of the *Da mihi animas* and of the *I entrust to you*, that helps us renew apostolic fervour, to rediscover the mysterious action of Risen and of his Spirit in people's lives and in history.

- Faced with the indifference, loneliness and individualism that can threaten our lives and the lives of young people, we need motherhood that knows how to host the other and the mystery of him as a person. Motherhood that knows how to respect, welcome and value difference as wealth by creating unity in diversity.

- Faced with the challenges of dichotomy, of dispersion, of the fragmentation of life, we need motherhood that educates us to put together head, hands and heart, that is, motherhood that helps to integrate, to make a synthesis of life, to make a “reading of the whole “of life and of the history of humanity, to rediscover inner firmness and centrality and solidity in God.

⁶⁷ AUFRAY Augustin, *Sainte Marie-Domenique. Une éducatrice formée par Don Bosco (1837-1881)*, Paris, E. Vitte 1951, 54.

⁶⁸ POSADA Maria Esther, *Maria Mazzarello. Il significato storico-spirituale della sua figura*, in AUBRY J. – COGLIANDRO M. (a cura di), *La donna nel carisma salesiano. 8ª Settimana di Spiritualità della Famiglia Salesiana, Roma 25-31 gennaio 1981*, Leumann (TO), Elle Di Ci 1981, 116.

⁶⁹ *Ivi* 117.

- Faced with the danger of exteriority, we need a motherhood that helps us to re-find the importance of interiority, of a life inhabited and transfigured by God.

- Faced with the challenges of isolation, individualism, egocentrism, we need motherhood that forms and pushes us to cultivate the “mixed” attitude of living together; attention to the other; to open the heart wide to the horizons of God and of others (= to have a large and generous heart).

- In the face of the danger of the idealization of communities and of mission, we need educational motherhood that helps to enhance human resources, to welcome frailties with the Christian realism of faith and the paschal mystery, to the point of assuming the weaknesses, problems and difficulties of others. In a word: to the point of giving ourselves!

- Faced with the drawbacks of looking at life from a purely horizontal perspective, and, sometimes, the danger of spiritual worldliness, we need maternity that helps us “raise” our gaze towards the ultimate realities, that is, look at reality, people and events from the perspective of God and the goal of the Christian life.

- Faced with the fears and the many forms of paralysis that assail so many people today, we need motherhood that helps us to be courageous, to react, to be resilient, that is, motherhood that helps us to remember existentially the words of Jesus: “I will be with you until the end of time”; we still need today to hear the words of Mother Mazzarello: “Jesus must be all our strength”.

- Faced with the danger of uprooting and loss of memory, we need motherhood that always reminds us: “it is the hand of God that I work in you” = *memoria Dei*.

The educational style of Maria Mazzarello encourages and questions us all, consecrated and lay, challenges us to a new relationship with the younger generations in the heart of the contemporary world.

Today young people risk being captured by consumerism, by self-referentiality, by short-term perspectives. Ultimately, however, there is in everyone the need, indeed, the expectation of someone who can revive or strengthen true hope, who recognizes their cry for help. When they meet people / “presences” who know how to bear witness to the beauty of life, then they feel that it is possible to hope for the future. The message is perceived if it is narrated, not only by those who speak of hope but by those who live it.

The example of Maria Domenica Mazzarello continues to shine in its “maternal” simplicity even today: it pushes us to be mothers (and fathers), to generate and re-generate the younger generations. She pushes us to be adults. Adults capable of generating life, faith, relationship with God, with everyone and with creation; generate to love, to a healthy way of living the Christian, family, working experience ... Christians capable of generating acceptance, solidarity, life, love, justice, peace.

Maria Domenica Mazzarello teaches us a style: to be a meaningful and challenging “presence”; learn to become ourselves in the best form, men and women who have the courage and patience to weave authentic and profound interpersonal relationships, who bet their lives in “taking care”, in loving and making themselves loved, making a conscious effort to put the conditions that promote the culture of life and the civilization of peace and love.

The educational passion translated into educational motherhood is the message that we can draw from the life of Maria Domenica. Having a “large and generous heart” is then the logical consequence of consciously living one's mission entrusted to it by God: a “large heart” to welcome and embrace everyone and a “generous heart” in giving oneself to the last consequences. Of this love, Jesus is the model and saints are the best witnesses.