

MISSIONARY SPIRITUALITY LINES IN THE INSTITUTE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

No scientific studies are available on this topic. We have the official texts of the Institute: Constitutions, Regulations, Acts of the Chapters, Circulars of the general Superiors. In all of them it is evident that **the missionary dimension is an essential element of the identity of the Institute** (cf. Art. C 75).

In addition to official sources, we have a rich heritage of experience, stories, testimonies, missionary biographies, letters,¹ diaries, narratives, articles for the Missionary Journals, for the *Newsletter of the Institute* and the *Salesian Bulletin*.

Experience is therefore necessary as a methodological path. This "way", which is of sapiential nature, allows us a knowledge of spirituality not through the speculative mode, but through the concreteness of lived. From it we pick up a style, a way of being and acting, of communicating, of dreaming the mission and of carrying it out.

We can say that the faces of the missionary spirituality of the FMA are as many as there are people who live and embody it, however it is possible to pick out some background lines from the sources.

For this meeting I have, first of all, asked myself about what are the charismatic sources of the missionary spirituality of the Institute, and I wonder if we can say that the spirituality of the FMA is a missionary spirituality? Or is this only of some FMA, that is those who are missionaries ad gentes? What are the bearing dimensions? What is the key to the interpretation of a spirit?

1. The sources of missionary spirituality of the Institute

The missionary spirituality of the FMA Institute has its source in the **Heart of Christ**, the Father's apostle and in the missionary heart of Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello.

Jesus fully incarnates the saving passion of the Father for all his sons and daughters. We see it when he realizes that they are like sheep without a shepherd, they are children to be gathered because scattered, confused, without reference points. They are people to be fed in body and spirit, needing the bread of eternal life, water that dispenses them forever, life in abundance.

The missionary passion of Jesus leads him to grasp the needs of every person, especially the little ones, the poor, the sinners. He lets them feel his love, his compassion and his mercy which, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, transforms and makes new creatures.² To all it announces the joy and transforming power of the Gospel. And on the cross the missionary passion of Jesus is fulfilled in fullness of fecundity. From the paschal mystery, life springs in abundance.

¹ Cf. the already published letters of Mother Angela Vallese, Sister Maria Troncatti, Mother Laura Meozzi. There is also the diary of mother Caterina Daghero in the two years spent in America.

² Cf SALA Rossano, *Apostolic spirituality*, in *Awaited by his love. Pastoral proposal 2024- '25*, Turin, ElleDiCi 2024, 29-33.

Missionary spirituality also finds its model in the **maternal solicitude of Mary**, the first missionary of the Gospel. In haste and with generous solidarity, she leaves from Nazareth to go to serve, to console, to bring Jesus and his joy.

It is a spirituality based on the certainty that Mary is Mother and Helper, and that she accompanies her, still pilgrim, sons and daughters towards their destination. She makes herself a pilgrim of faith and hope, help, presence of trust and missionary impulse, as she did with the Apostles at Pentecost by supporting them as a mother would do for her own children frightened and discouraged.

Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello have made the compassion of Jesus and the maternal tenderness of Mary their own. With the same love, they have responded to the youth poverty of their time without boundaries of culture or territory. They are "missionaries of all the young people", they are not happy if they do not make others happy and if they do not announce Jesus, whatever it takes, expressing so much love until their last breath. The missionary heart of our Founders makes them go out of themselves to the poorest and abandoned youth risking their lives for their salvation.

Now we approach some sources of our Institute that highlights the surprising missionary *impetus of Don Bosco*.

We find a startling promise in the first letter he addressed to Don Cagliero - in the early days of 1876: «Remember that for October we will send thirty FMA with ten Salesians; some even before, if there is an urgency».³

The intention of Don Bosco, 25 days after the arrival of the first missionaries in America, is therefore to continue sending reinforcements, or rather to send more FMA than Salesians and, anyway, to send them together.

Pope Pius XI would have said to Don Filippo Rinaldi: "You cannot have a mission without Sisters, in fact there must be more Sisters than missionaries in the missions..⁴

However, there will be some time before the FMA's long-awaited departure, because the preparations for the house that would have welcome them were not finished. They left in November of 1877 with the third expedition of the Salesians led by Don Giacomo Costamagna to Uruguay.⁵

It should be remembered that the FMA Institute was established during the period in which Don Bosco matured his missionary projects. His first missionary dream concerning Patagonia dates back to 1872.⁶

The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) had ended just two years prior and it was the most auspicious event for the development of Catholic missions in the last decades of the XIX century.

³ Letter of 13 January 1876, in *Epistolary of don Bosco* edited by F. Motto, vol. V, letter 2255,5. Don Cagliero had left for America in November 1875.

⁴ *Don Bosco Missions, anno cento*, Rome, SDB 1975, 14).

⁵ Only with the fourth expedition of the Salesians will the FMA arrive in Buenos Aires (26-1-1879). The reason was that the house for the nuns was not yet ready.

⁶ Cf LEMOYNE Giovanni Battista - AMADEI Angelo, *Biographical Memoirs of San Giovanni Bosco. Vol. X (1871-1874)*, Turin, International Publishing Company 1939, 53-54; 1267-1268.

Bishops from North America, Africa and Asia had taken advantage of the occasion to enlist clergy and nuns for their own dioceses.⁷

Our Institute was therefore born impregnated with missionary spirit, a spirit - as Don Egidio Viganò would say - "*not from the greenhouse, but from the universe*".

Don Bosco, from the early years, saw the FMA Institute open to the ends of the world and he also reaffirmed it by confirming with his own hand the re-election of Mother Mazzarello in 1880 and while noting the report he wrote: «*I pray God that in all infuses the spirit of charity and fervor, so that this our humble Congregation grows in number, it is dilated in other and then other remote countries of the earth*».⁸

Maria D. Mazzarello also vibrated with this spirit, as we can see from her letters and the documentation that we have preserved. The History attests: «*It burns with zeal for the propagation of faith in distant lands, where God is not known and is not loved: He wants his daughters to burn with the same fire and be promptly made capable of working on this work*».⁹

It's interesting to note that, by the wish of Don Bosco, the spiritual exercises of August 1877 were preached both in Mornese and in Turin by Don Giovanni Bonetti and by Mons. Pietro Ceccarelli, parish priest of San Nicolas de los Arroyos, arrived in Italy with Msgr. Aneyros who was a guest in Valdocco.¹⁰

The Institute therefore does not address itself to missions in its reached maturity, almost for an extension of its works - as it has done for other religious Institutes and for the same Salesian Congregation - but we can say that from the beginning it has a specific missionary imprint.

This imprint nourishes the courage, choices, lifestyle, climate of communities and educational works and is concretized, five years after its foundation in 1877, in the departures of young sisters to Uruguay and Argentina.

The purpose of this article is precisely to highlight some traits of the missionary attitude of the FMA.

2. The spirituality of the FMA: a missionary spirituality

Can we say that the spirituality of the FMA is a missionary spirituality?

To answer, we recall the same motto of Don Bosco: *da mihi animas cetera tolle* that he draws from the missionary passion of St. Francis of Sales.

The assumption of this ideal by the Founder, not only in a theoretical but also experiential level, triggers a missionary dynamism in the FMA Institute, which becomes a lifestyle, educational passion, energy of renewal and inculturation in the

⁷ Cf STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 167-170; TRAGELLA G.B., *The foreign missions of Milan on the picture of contemporary events*, Milan 1959, 2 vol.

⁸ *Traces of life* D 118.

⁹ *Cronistoria* II 161.

¹⁰ Cf *ivi* 262-263.

name of the proclamation of the Gospel, source of human fullness for individuals and peoples.

It was a common conviction and rooted in the origins of the Institute that the FMA would be realized as a religious and as a Salesian educator not in a self-referential or intimistic form, but in the donation of itself for the salvation of souls: « *A daughter who enters with the intention of thinking only about her soul is not capable of fulfilling the incumbent duties of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*»¹¹.

This is a recurrent finding in the General Chapters of the Institute, in the conferences and in the formative meetings. In the IX General Chapter, for example, commenting on the *Rules for mission houses* elaborated at that assembly, Don Pietro Ricaldone repeated: « *The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is a missionary Institute and therefore it must have a missionary spirit*».¹²

The model of holiness proposed by Don Bosco to the consecrated people and to God for the salvation of the youth - as is evident from the documented study of Aldo Giraudo - is «a model so radical and austere to leave us astonished: an unbounded obedience, very generous; an essential lifestyle, ascetic, yet joyful; an impressive industriousness in function of the community mission; a charity without limits; a loving and tender relationship, very affectionate, combined with a strictly guarded chastity and defense; a continuous exercise of the presence of God and of the amorous dialogue with Him; an absolute fidelity to the smallest prescriptions of the Rules, especially in practices of piety; a capacity of adaptation to everything up to the extreme sacrifice; an ardent apostolic tension. Don Bosco can't not think of his consecrated if not in the horizon of the absolute primacy of God and in the evangelical perspective of a radical detachment, of a delivery without rethinking in the following of Christ obedient, poor and chaste for the divine service and salvation of souls».¹³

It is clear that this spirituality is proposed to all the FMA, but in a more radical way and it is assumed by those who choose to leave their homeland because they are sent on missions. As Christians and as religious, each one - wherever she is found - feels a living part of a missionary Church and an Institute open to the dimensions of the world. The mission is not identified with an activity that some FMA carry out, but it is the paradigm of educational action of a religious family called to share with young people the joy of meeting Jesus.

The Vicar General, Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, who for many years was also coordinator of missions and missionaries, in a 1928 circular recommended to all FMA to cultivate "universal charity" as a characteristic dimension of the spirituality of the

¹¹ *Report of the first meeting of the Superiors* (Mornese, agosto 1878), in P. CAVAGLIÀ – A. COSTA (a cura di), *Orme di vita, tracce di futuro* 239.

¹² *General Chapter IX. Nizza Monferrato 1928, Exhortations, instructions, answers of Ven. Superior Don Filippo Rinaldi Rector Major of the Salesian Society and Apostolic Delegate for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, Turin, private tip. FMA 1928, 54.

¹³ Aldo GIRAUDO, *Introduction*, in Giovanni BOSCO, *Teachings of spiritual life. An anthology. Introduction and notes by Aldo Giraudo*, Rome, LAS 2013, p. 11.

Institute. It was therefore an undisputed training criterion for young women candidates:

«The Daughter of Mary Help, who feels her mission to help Jesus in the sublime work of human redemption, can no longer live of herself and of her things; but must feel as if under the influence of a perpetual inspiration to be all for the salvation of souls, whatever her particular job in the House is.

Therefore not an occupation, not a suffering, a prayer that does not suggest the dear refrain: "Lord, for you and for the dear souls; for your priests; for your Missionaries; for the holy vocations, for those who suffer in soul and body, who live and die, who know and love you, or do not love you because they do not know you".

*The Novice Teachers see to it that these and other similar thoughts and sentiments of universal charity are instilled in every way; and the number of profess saints, angels of peace in communities and admirable apostles of good everywhere and always will grow».*¹⁴

There is in fact in the FMA, even with different intensities, an educational self-consciousness that evangelizes and is a unifying factor and a driving force of any action that we want to call Salesian. The missionary perspective does not, in itself, involve leaving one's own nation, nor does it depend on the type of work that the FMA carries out, but concerns a fundamental attitude of the heart: the awareness of living for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls in the spirit of the *da mihi animas cetera tolle*. This attitude preserves from the dichotomies between human promotion and evangelization, educational and pastoral activity, action and contemplation and gives unity and fruitfulness to the lifestyle and mission.

It is true, however, that the missionary who leaves her homeland to enter another culture lives more intensely certain dimensions of the spirituality typical of the Institute, accentuates particular nuances required by the situation in which she lives, such as the spirit of sacrifice, detachment from one's own culture and habits, courage and untiring zeal, flexibility to change.

It is interesting to point out, however, that what is recommended to those who go on missions is not different from what is required of every Salesian or FMA. This is attested, from the beginning, by Don Cagliero's proposal to the first General Chapter of the Salesian Congregation in 1877. He wanted an article in the Constitutions on the criteria for selecting personnel to be sent to missions. The proposal was accepted by Don Bosco, although with some modifications. The result was this formulation: *«For the foreign missions, preferably choose the most tried in piety and the strongest in morality»*.¹⁵

¹⁴ Circular No. 120 (24 October 1928).

¹⁵ *Minutes of the I General Chapter*, in ACS 046, pp. 182-183. The text proposed by Don Cagliero was as follows: "For the foreign missions, preferably choose the most experienced and trained in piety and the strongest in morality; never send those rejected from other houses"; cf. Jesús BORREGO, *The first missionary journey in the project of Don Bosco and in the concrete experience of Don Cagliero (1875-1877)*, in Pietro SCOTTI (curated by), *Salesian missions 1875-1975. Studies on the occasion of the Centenary*, Rome, LAS 1977, 75-77. In a circular of Don Bosco from 1875 it was read: "The ones chosen will only be those from whom it can be judged with foundation that such an expedition is to succeed in the benefit of one's own soul, and at the same time return to the greater glory of God" (Circular of Don Bosco, 5 February 1875, in E [m] 408).

Prayer and moral integrity, the basic values of every religious life, were precisely the conditions for effective educational work everywhere, not only in the missions.

Moreover, the missionary dimension of the Institute is also nourished by the awareness of belonging to a religious Family open to the various nations without barriers of language and culture. This awareness gives the FMA experience a broad and universal horizon. The transfer of personnel not only from one Province to another, but from nation to nation facilitates exchange, a sense of belonging, overcoming nationalism. It's easy to be convinced of having a wide responsibility for the overall development of the Institute, its spread in the world, up to the sharing of economic assets, the interest in building a house in Italy with the industries of all the communities of the Institute.¹⁶

At the first conference for novices' maesters, held in Turin in 1925, Fr Filippo Rinaldi, speaking of the missionary opening of the Institute starting from the mutual solidarity between the Provinces, stated: «*Personal giving for the Missions is a means to awaken new vocations. I will bless the Lord on the day I'll know that the exchange of personnel between one Province and another has brought down the barriers of the Alps, the Andes and the Ocean to form the unity of the Institute*».¹⁷

As Joseph Gevaert writes for the Salesian Congregation, it can also be said that the FMA Institute is missionary spirituality: «*We represent a type of Christianity and apostolic work that is very much centered on the proclamation and spread of the Gospel in the world. Our lived spirituality cannot be called salesian, if it is not primarily a missionary spirituality*».¹⁸ From what we have tried to document, we can say that the usual activity of the FMA has a "missionary" character rooted in the charism which has in itself a universal perspective.

3. Dimensions of the missionary spirituality of the FMA

We do not have a systematic reflection on the spiritual physiognomy of the FMA and with the specific perspective of missionary activity. However, on the basis of the documentary and narrative sources available, it is possible to identify common values, shared choices, characteristic elements of an identity qualified as educational-missionary. This in fact is built and elaborated in a fabric of relationships with God, with the recipients of the mission, in the community of belonging and in carrying out a specific task in a particular social context.

It is a spirituality with non-intimistic and self-referential traits, but concrete expression of the title "Daughters of Mary Help", synthesis of a charismatic vision, a project, an inspiration: to be "help" active and solicitous especially of the young people on their journey of human and Christian maturation.¹⁹

¹⁶ It was the case of the construction of the House in Turin "Madre Mazzarello" for the formation of missionaries in 1924 and the house in Rome, "Istituto Gesù Nazareno" in 1926 (cf Circulars of Mother Luisa Vaschetti of 9 January 1926 and 2 February 1927).

¹⁷ *Minutes of the meetings held in the Conference pro Noviziati of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Turin (Borgo S. Paolo) from 1st to 4th June 1925*, Turin, FMA 1925, p. 52.

¹⁸ Joseph GEVAERT, *Operational catechesis in missions*, in AA.VV., *Salesian missionary spirituality II*, Rome, SDB – Department for Missions 1988, 40. v

¹⁹ Cf CAVAGLIÀ Piera – DEL CORE Piera (curated by), *A life project for women's education*, Rome, LAS 1994; G. LOPARCO, *Spiritual features of the FMA in ideal tension*, in ID., *the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians* 220-230.

3.1. *The centrality of Jesus Christ, source of missionary courage*

The secret of the apostolic fruitfulness of the missionaries is that they let themselves be grasped by Jesus, building everything on Him, solid rock, sure source of hope and fertility. The call of the Lord, of which they have no doubt, fills them with energy and gives them courage in trials.

The personal relationship with Jesus is nourished every day by the Eucharist and expressed in charity interwoven with concrete gestures. The Eucharistic life has primacy in their experience of faith. And this is expressed in the daily gift of self sometimes monotonous, often interwoven with sacrifices and labors, perhaps defeats and frustrations, but where missionaries are shaped by the availability, the strength of inner life, the gratuity of love.

The look at the Crucifix gives them life and wings to work: this is the certainty of faith that sustains e.g. Sister Maria Troncatti, and that however does not relieve her from suffering and nostalgia. She writes to her mother from those immense solitudes of the Ecuadorian jungle where she came in 1923: « How much desire to embrace her and say so many things: every time I think of her I weep, feeling her so far away! [...] At the feet of Jesus I comfort myself; a look at my crucifix that I hold hanging on my neck gives me life and wings to work».²⁰

It is love for Jesus that gives strength and courage to the missionaries, making them resourceful and supporting them in their work. It is interesting to note that in general the missionaries willingly walk every day the path of the cross of Jesus (*via crucis*), followed by meditation and the Eucharist. Identified with the passion of Christ, even the limits, fragility and failure acquire a redemptive meaning.

They are women of prayer who believe that God and Mary Help of Christians accompany them and therefore trust in them without doubt. Prayer is their strength, not only that required by the practices of community piety, but that which expresses itself as attention to a Presence, confident "remaining in love". A life always outside of itself impoverishes and dries the soul. A life that knows how to "stay" in the Lord is rich, fruitful and full of joy. Sister Laura Meozzi, pioneer of the mission in Poland, wrote to the young sisters what was the joyous conviction in her: «*Be cheerful! Jesus is always with you, indeed, in you. He follows every movement of yours, every heartbeat that must beat only for Him. Love him with all your heart and soul and you will always be happy everywhere*».²¹

The vital contact with Jesus almost identifies the missionary with the mystery of Salvation of Christ, as it is revealed in a written document by Sister Maria Troncatti: «*With what joy we would like to water these forests with our blood, to make the flowers of Christian truth sprout*».²²

²⁰ Letter to the mother and family of 4 September 1931 from Macas, in CIEZKOWSKA Sylwia (curated by), *Letters of Sister Maria Troncatti FMA Missionary in Ecuador*, Rome, FMA Istitute 2013, 104.

²¹ Letter to Sister Zofia Buczak, Pogrzebień, 21 September 1949, in DALCERRI Lina (curated by), *Listen our daughter. Letters from Mother Laura Meozzi pioneer of the Opera of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Poland*, Rome, FMA Istitute 1984, 258.

²² Writings of the Servant of God Sister Maria Troncatti, in CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM. Mendezén, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Troncatti Sororis Professae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis (1883-1969). Summarium super dubio*, Rome, Tip. Guerra 1997, 527.

Among the missionaries we have significant testimonies of what strength of love they are capable of, thanks to their conforming to Jesus. Faith and love for him does not separate them from the context, but leads them to immerse themselves in reality, to transform it, to recognize the Lord in the face of those who suffer. Hence the fruitfulness of their work. Sister Felicina Marazio's experience (1873-1943) is eloquent. She is a Turin FMA who, when she enters the Institute, is enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Turin. From the moment she postulates, she presents her missionary question: her dream is to go among the lepers. She left in 1913 with Sister Modesta Ravasso for Contratación (Colombia) where 150 daughters of lepers were waiting for her.

A sister writes: *«I saw her several times in that house among the most damaged and repulsive girls; she spent days among them, teaching with ardor the catechism, the work, the theater as if they were healthy educandas»*. From a letter written by this missionary to a sister of Nice we see the unity of vocation that supported the tireless giving of Sister Felicina: *«I am convinced that holiness is not in the lazzaretto more than in the noble college, but it's in the incessant renunciation of ourselves even in the smallest things, in the intimate union, uninterrupted with our beloved Lord. These poor orphans, these unhappy lepers are in the present for me and the Host and the tabernacle, where, more than worshipped, Jesus desires to be served and consoled by me in the most painful affliction...»*.²³ *«For me the visible person of my neighbor is only a veil that hides from me the lovable person of Jesus. I lift that veil by faith and look. Under the lousy rags of misery I see the God of glory; under the wounds of the body, the God of strength and power, and under the robe of sin, the God of purity. And I prostrate with soul at the feet of my sick ones and serve in them the limbs of the adorable body of Jesus»*.²⁴

The conformation to Jesus leads the missionaries to accept the will of God and to live open to his surprises. Many of them repeat an expression dear to the first sisters of Mornese and Nice, as documented in various biographical profiles: "What God wants is never too much", or: "Like Jesus likes me" and they are available to his love, even in the hour of suffering.

3.2. Detachment from self as a path to freedom and joy

The missionary, as a disciple of Jesus, is called to share the Master's destiny to the cross. And this entails detachment, total freedom of heart, poverty, abandonment of the family and renunciation of the dearest affections. Many FMA have promised God to remain in mission lands forever, without ever returning to their homeland. We understand that some have made an explicit vow.

The power of love sustains the missionary and disposes her to accept the cross in its thousand forms: illness, physical pain, fatigue, misunderstandings, loneliness, impossibility of communication, failure, ingratitude.

To bring into focus the spirit with which the missionaries face the hardships of apostolic life, I quote an excerpt from a letter by a missionary in Ecuador, Sister

²³ Michelina SECCO, *Suor Marazio Felicina*, in *Let's do memory. Biographical notes of the FMA who died in 1943*, Rome, FMA Institute 1995, 243-244.

²⁴ *Ivi* 249.

Carolina Mioletti (1884-1972), addressed to the Mother General. She thanks her for sending her a copy of the biography of Sr Maria Troncatti, with whom Sr Carolina shared her missionary labours in Ecuador: *'I read the book with lively interest and I can assure you that the various descriptions of our missionary life in the early days are authentic. I would like you to know, however, that even in the midst of difficulties and sacrifices, none felt the weight of a life of hardship and deprivation; our life as missionaries seemed so concrete to us that everything served as an animation for us to work with enthusiasm and love. [...] We lived singing the joy of sacrifice for God and for souls. The exhausting journeys in the forest, the nights in the serene lying on palm leaves were very frequent, but in our little chapel we felt so happy that the Agimus prayer flowed spontaneously. I am writing these memories to you, because I want you to know, dear Mother, that in privations and sacrifices your daughters always encountered that serene joy that animated us to multiply our energies to console God and the Superiors and to save many, many souls!'*²⁵

The ardent zeal for the salvation of souls gave the missionaries flexibility, agility of spirit, readiness for change and a certain indifference in their choices. For example, Sister Caterina Dabbene, a missionary in Tierra del Fuego, wrote to her FMA niece when informing her of her transfer from the mission where she had worked for so many years: *'All houses are good for making us saints, because it is we who must make ourselves saints, it matters little whether the house is this one or that one'*.²⁶

This was also the attitude of Sister Angela Vallese, pioneer of the missions in Uruguay, who left in February 1877 from Mornese, and who wrote to her parents: *'I am here in America, but with our thoughts we sometimes come to Italy, but we are neither from America nor Italy, our home is everywhere. The Heart of Jesus is always open, it is only up to us to want to enter it, isn't it? So let us be courageous, let us always be humble, obedient and in this way we will always enter that narrow door'*.²⁷

The missionaries may not have known the Letter of Ignatius of Antioch to Diognetus, in which we read: *'Every foreign land is a homeland to them, and every homeland a foreign land'*.²⁸ The Christian, and even more so the missionary, are people with universal perspectives because they are strongly rooted in Christ and in the 'outgoing' Church, according to Pope Francis' vision.

3.3. Evangelisation within an integral educational project

'To make God known and loved' is the priority aim of missionary action. In fidelity to Don Bosco and Mary Domenica Mazzarello the FMA is aware that Christian salvation requires the proclamation of the Gospel and this always has primacy in mission.

²⁵ Letter from Sister Carolina Mioletti to Mother Ersilia Canta, Tupà, 14 April 1972, published by M. Elia FERRANTE, Suor Carolina Mioletti, ispettrice, in VALENTINI Eugenio (ed.), *Profili di missionari Salesiani e Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Roma, LAS 1975, 393.

²⁶ Letter ms to niece Sister Felicita Dabbene from Punta Arenas on 7 February 1926, in AGFMA 26 (1927).

²⁷ VALLESE Angela. *There we will never be separated again. Letters of the first FMA missionary pioneer in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego*. Introduction and notes by PENNA Maria Vanda, Rome, FMA Institute 2014.

²⁸ *Didache. Letters of Ignatius of Antioch. To Diognetus*, Milan, Ed. Paoline 2002, 119.

The purpose of Christian education does not end with instructing, socialising, making one competent in a profession, healing illnesses, but proposes to lead each person to recognise him or herself as a child of God and to live a life worthy of this vocation. Hence the constant commitment of the missionaries to proclaim Jesus, to lead people to Him through His Word, prayer, catechesis, education in sacramental life, and witnessing to Christian values.

In the various and differentiated environments, they try to concretise Don Bosco's *da mihi animas cetera tolle* by inflaming the hearts of young people, children, adults for great ideals: supreme happiness, eternal salvation, holiness as the fullness of human and Christian maturity. Faithful to the 'preventive system', the missionaries try to project the ideal into people's concrete lives to the point of making it their 'dream' and their daily and joyful effort.

Of many missionaries, especially the nurses, we read that they were 'doctors of the body and the spirit'. Their activity, aimed at the 'salvation' of every person, especially the poorest, was aimed at healing the body, but that activity was understood as a way of evangelisation, a transparency of the merciful love of the Father who bends down with tenderness over each of his creatures.

Physical care, the pursuit of everything that benefits the wellbeing of the person, his or her cultural advancement, is not an instrument for evangelisation, but is already evangelisation in itself, and therefore part of the mission of the Church whose priority vocation is to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus to all.

According to Salesian pedagogical realism, evangelisation is concretely implemented within a global project of integral education, that is, in the attention to the local context, to the concrete person, to his or her needs and maturation processes, and the conditions are put in place so that he or she can open up to God and accept the Gospel, respecting the rhythms of growth.

The missionary FMA, with flexibility and pastoral zeal, therefore develops non-uniform itineraries, with wide margins of pluralism because it takes into account the different situations, availability or unavailability to the Christian message of different types of young people, women, families, ethnic groups. It starts from levels that include all forms of human, health, cultural, moral, affective promotion, up to the educational-evangelising purpose of holiness.

Even in multi-religious contexts, the Salesian educational methodology is pervaded with spirituality as it guides one to love life, to promote it everywhere, to welcome it in its mystery, to share it with gratuitous love and solidarity, to work for peace and justice in a continuous dialectic between presence to God and presence in history, evangelising instances and strategies for human promotion.

The sources also show how the competent and creative commitment to do everything possible to promote people and cultures is harmoniously combined, according to evangelical logic, with the certainty that the missionary can do everything in the One who gives her strength. Hers is a project entrusted to her own intelligent and solicitous care, but in which God remains the primary protagonist.

3.4. Dialectic between trust in God and apostolic initiative

The missionary FMA embodies and manifests the difficult balance between total trust in God and in Mary Help of Christians and, at the same time, the apostolic ardour that stimulates her to develop dowries of creativity, boldness and initiative. *'Hands to work and heart to God'* is the motto of many missionaries.

In the religious vocation, as in the Christian life, the two apparently contrasting dimensions are present. Jesus calls those he has chosen and expects a free response from them. The vocation is therefore played out in the interaction between God's gratuitousness and the total freedom of the person whom He has enriched with gifts and talents.

The presence of Mary, as Mother of God and of the Church, is a guarantee of protection, of defence, of security in trials. The awareness of being called and sent by God and of having a Mother who watches over the path of her children is a source of security and trust. At the same time it is a source of creativity and perseverance in missionary commitment.

An attitude of optimism, joy and amazement oozes from almost every letter from the missionaries. Educators, nurses, teachers, catechists contemplate in admiration the extraordinary possibilities for good that God freely gives them as a tangible sign of his presence. When they tell of their activities, the constant reference is to God and Mary Help of Christians who perform wonders through their poor missionary work. 'Let us sow the seed and God will make it bear fruit'; "We are always useless servants" said Sister Tullia De Berardinis (1884-1957) and yet she was very active and creative in the mission.²⁹

The missionary FMA, from those of the first expedition to today, feel that they are sent in the name of the Lord, they are certain of his help, they take on his plan of salvation in the historical context, certain of being at the service of a Father who does not want any of his children to be lost. They also know that they are accompanied and preceded by Mary Help of Christians in the mission places.³⁰ We can say that the missionary experience of the FMA takes place in a constant entrustment to Mary and in the certainty of her continuous maternal protection.

At the same time, the mission is conditioned by the vicissitudes of human freedom, by the more or less enlightened discernment that guides decisions, by the audacity and courage of the initiative. The missionary is aware of being sent by God, but also of having chosen the mission through an explicit request to be sent. Thus, interwoven in her together with trust, is an ardent desire to develop her own talents to the maximum and to give concrete answers to the needs of the context, to the needs of the people.

We can perceive this from a writing by Sister Anna Rodaro (1909-1990), who was a missionary in Brazil for 53 years. Her personality as a consecrated woman and Salesian animator is summed up in the life programme found among her writings: *'Walk in the community on tiptoe, without anyone noticing you. Ask nothing of anyone, but give everything. Adore in everyone a ray of divinity. Believing yourself perfectly useless and, on the other hand, doing everything well. Be silent and smile. Smiling and*

²⁹ A woman of faith and almost daring courage, she was Inspector in India in Madras from 1929 to 1934 and at the same time Visiting Superior of the open houses in Japan, China and Thailand. She was later inspector in England (1934-1940) and in the United States until 1946 (cf. SECCO Michelina, *Sr De Berardinis Tullia*, in *Facciamo memoria. Cenni biografici delle FMA defunti nel 1957*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1999, 125-141.

³⁰ Cf *Chronicle of Carmen de Patagones*, in AGFMA 15 (1880) 1, written by Sister Angela Vallese. She writes: 'God watches over those consecrated to him with a loving eye for the good of souls' (*ivi* 4).

silent. Suffering and praying. Pray and love. Calm and serene, without disturbances, alone with God, to be in the mosaic of human society and the Institute the pebble that God wants and reflects a little of his light.³¹

The awareness of having to collaborate with creativity and courage in God's plan of salvation leads the missionary to mark her days by tireless work. For some it is a physical activity at times exhausting in the large kitchens or laundries at the service of young people, Salesian confreres or internees; among the sick to be cared for and nursed, in the visits to villages reached after hours of walking on foot and on impervious roads. For many it is an educational and pastoral activity to promote the poor, children, women, immigrants, always seeking new ways of formation and evangelisation.

In many contexts, the mission also becomes an arduous and creative search for subsidies, including economic ones, and the ability to arouse the charity and solidarity of benefactors. Some missionaries become poor and even beggars for the poor. They feel their place among the poor. And even as elders they do not know the word 'rest'.

In this perspective, communities are spaces open to the joy of giving, to the audacity of initiatives worked out together, to the far-sighted wisdom of preparing a different future for the new generations, of contributing to the coming of the Kingdom of God in history through the educational mission, a factor in the development of peoples, families and individuals.

3.5. Spiritual and formative involvement of the educating communities

Missionary ardour, as at Valdocco and Mornese, pervades the climate of the educating communities and nourishes not only enthusiasm, but also the commitment and active involvement of all. As noted above, openness to solidarity and evangelisation, being a constitutive dimension of Salesian spirituality, becomes an educational path in that it also involves and awakens apostolic energies in children and young people in a missionary dimension.

Maria Domenica Mazzarello had already been initiated by Fr Pestarino to the missionary spirit as a young girl. She was in fact enrolled in the Pious Work of the Holy Childhood introduced by him in Mornese as early as 1849.³² The apostolic ardour, which she already breathed in the parish, became even more intense after the foundation of the Institute to the extent that it also infected the girls received in the boarding school. After the departure of the first Salesian missionaries for Argentina, writing to Fr Cagliero on 29 December 1875, Sr Maria Mazzarello recommended to him: *'Prepare a large house for us since the educating girls want to become so many missionaries'*.³³ So it was an atmosphere of enthusiasm that infected everyone, as in fact happened at Valdocco and as was also very soon noted in the mission areas.

From the very beginning of the foundation of Candelaria in Tierra del Fuego, as we read in the Chronicle of that community, it was noted that apostolic zeal was also

³¹ Cf. *Autobiographical notes*, in AGFMA 26 (1990).

³² Cf. MACCONO Ferdinando, *Santa Maria D. Mazzarello Confessor and first Superior of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*, Turin, FMA Institute 1960, I, 140. The boys and girls were taught to collect their offerings 'for the redemption and education of infidel children' (ID., *L'apostolo di Mornese. Sac. Domenico Pestarino*, Turin, SEI 1927, 57).

³³ L 4,12.

spreading among the natives: 'Even the Indians of Candelaria began to become apostolic among their friends'.³⁴ On 8 January 1898, Luigia Peña, an indigent 12-year-old girl, died in Punta Arenas. The Chronicle notes: 'She died like a saint [...]. Already agonising, she was distressed by the thought that her mother and brothers were still in the desert without baptism. She made Monsignor Fagnano, who was assisting her, promise that he would look for them, instruct them, baptise them, so that they could be in Paradise with her'.³⁵

The dream of the missionaries is always that those who are evangelised, educated, instructed by them will themselves become evangelisers, educators, teachers, so that they can be factors in the development of their own environment. This is in fact one of the ripest fruits of their apostolic labours.

It should be noted that the FMA Institute extended in later years to all communities and educational works the commitment to missionary cooperation through *the Apostolate of Innocence*.³⁶

The inspiration to involve the children and pupils of the various houses of the Institute in a broad prayer movement to support the work of the missionaries came from Salesian Fr Giovanni Fergnani, a missionary in China. Being in Nizza Monferrato in November 1908 for a missionary animation stop, he launched his proposal to the whole school and received enthusiastic support.³⁷ The initiative, which gradually led to the establishment of a true Missionary Youth Association in the FMA Institute, was encouraged by Bishop Luigi Versiglia and Fr Michael Rua in 1910, and in the Seventh General Chapter of the FMA Institute it was resolved to increase this apostolate in the various communities and educational works by extending its benefit to missionaries and missionaries throughout the world and not only to those in China.³⁸

This prayer movement is rooted in the reality of the communion of saints, whereby we are all one in the Lord Jesus as the Mystical Body of Christ. We are in deep communion in a mysterious but real exchange of spiritual goods that sustains the Church and makes the apostolate effective.³⁹ Mother Luisa Vaschetti wrote in a circular: 'Keeping the missionary idea alive and active in the young girls of our Houses is not only an effective means of formation in the Christian sense and in charity, but it is also a ferment of generous vocations'.⁴⁰

The missionary ardour that radiated among the youth was no less evident among the FMA. How many sisters, although not missionaries, supported the missions not only with prayer, but also with solidarity initiatives, or by offering their suffering, sickness, death to obtain from God the efficacy of the apostolic work of the missionaries and missionaries. Bishop Versiglia was able to note with amazement the

³⁴ *The beginnings of the mission in Candelaria (Tierra del Fuego) 1895-97*, ms notebook, in AGFMA 15 (895) 4, 18.

³⁵ *General Monograph of the Inspectorate of Candelaria and Tierra del Fuego, and of the Mary Help of Christians College in Punta Arenas*, Quaderno ms 4 (50), in AGFMA 15 (888) 4 [s. p.].

³⁶ Cf *L'Apostolato dell'innocenza nei suoi primi venticinque anni di vita tra le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1909-1934)*, Turin, FMA Institute 1934.

³⁷ Cf letter of Fr John Fergnani to the Superior General Mother Caterina Daghero, 16 January 1909, in AGFMA 310/211 (2).

³⁸ Cf *Deliberations of the Seventh General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians [1913]*, Turin, Tip. SAID - Buona Stampa 1914, 40-41.

³⁹ Cf *L'Associazione Gioventù Missionaria (A.G.M.)*, Turin, SEI 1942; *L'A.G.M. nel suo cinquantesimo di vita. Notes on orientation and organisation*, Turin, A.G.M. 1958.

⁴⁰ Circular No. 233 (24th April 1940).

fruitfulness of this offering, when Sister Maria Ferrari died in 1921, offering her life for the mission in China.⁴¹ And like her, many other FMA gave their lives for the missions as an offering pleasing to God for the fruitfulness of the apostolic work of the sisters.

An interesting dimension that testifies to the realism of the Institute's missionary spirituality in the 1920s and 1940s, during the period of rule of Mother Luisa Vaschetti, the Superior General who lived for 20 in Argentina while still a novice, and in the context of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first missionary departure of the Salesians (1925), is the opening of houses for missionary formation. In 1924 the 'Mother Mazzarello' Missionary House was established in Turin, where the missionaries were prepared before leaving for the places of destination. There were specific training courses in spirituality and professional preparation.⁴² Moreover, in those years, similar to what was happening in the Salesian Congregation, the missionary training of the girls themselves was alive, also through the *Missionary Youth Magazine* started in 1923.

The 'pressing and insistent' requests for new missionaries, which came from frontier places, did not only find an immediate response in the sending of reinforcements, when this was possible, but took concrete form in the selection and training of adolescents who had a solid religious vocation, were of good character, intelligent, healthy and resistant to difficulties. These 'little subjects', as Mother Vaschetti affectionately called them in her circulars, were to be chosen and nurtured in each FMA community and then sent to the missionary house 'Mother Caterina Daghero' in Arignano (Turin), and to the International Novitiate in Casanova di Carmagnola (Turin) so that they could then be at the disposal of the General Council for the Institute's needs, especially for the missions.⁴³

Mother Vaschetti wrote motivating the choice: *'If we do not grow seedlings, we will never have tall trees'*.⁴⁴ In fact, both in the house at Arignano and in the novitiate at Casanova, the formation work of the young candidates for the missions was intense and well organised.⁴⁵

The Institute was progressively extending its boundaries, and therefore a qualified staff with a solid spirituality was required. Mother Luisa Vaschetti recalled this in her circulars and indicated the necessary requisites: 'First, among these, the entire immolation of one's own being to God's good pleasure, without calculating the years of service in advance; then good health and a certain kind of education or skill in sewing, weaving, knitting, etc. [...] Therefore, the good Sisters who feel, in prose and not in words, the need to be able to work in the best way possible, should be able to work in the best way possible. [...] Therefore, the good Sisters who hear, in prose and not in poetry, the voice of God calling them to follow the noblest of ideals - the conquest of souls to His Divine Heart - generously make their request: the Angels will countersign it and, whether it is accepted or not, they will always have the merit and the glory.'⁴⁶

⁴¹ Cf Letter of Mgr Luigi Versiglia to Mother Caterina Daghero, the sisters and pupils of the College of Nice of 6 February 1921, in AGFMA 310/212 and cf [SECCO Michelina], *Suor Ferrari Maria*, in ID., *Facciamo memoria. Cenni biografici delle FMA defunti nel 1919*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1984, 38-46.

⁴² Cf *Theme III: How to prepare the greater and better formation of personnel*, in *Annexes to the Minutes of the VIII General Chapter. Year 1922*, datt. in AGFMA 11.8/130 (2). The House for the Formation of Missionaries was to depend on the General Council.

⁴³ Cf. Circular of 24 November 1928; n. 123 (24 November 1929); n. 134 (24 February 1931); n. 137 (24 May 1931); n. 205 (24 July 1937); n. 234 (24 May 1940).

⁴⁴ Circular No. 123 (24 November 1929).

⁴⁵ In 1930 there were 97 novices in the Missionary Novitiate at Casanova!

⁴⁶ Circular of 24th May 1925.

In the Ninth General Chapter of 1928, the subject of the missions was given considerable space and the *Regulations for Mission Houses Abroad* were drafted. In the paragraph entitled: *Missionary Spirit and Formation*, the conditions for an authentic missionary vocation are made explicit, indicating these requirements: firm and fervent piety, spirit of work and sacrifice, marked apostolic zeal, intellectual and professional preparation.⁴⁷

In some General Chapters, a certain concern emerged on the part of the Superiors that the urgent needs of the Provinces could lead to a decrease in missionary vocations. A work of formation of the young candidates was therefore necessary to mature in them the awareness of being in an international Institute and therefore without nationalistic barriers. There was a need to mature in all of them an open and collaborative spirit aimed at the missionary vitality of the Institute. For this it was indispensable to mould the FMA 'in the mould of the Founder who, in the name of Mary' had sent his sons and daughters across the ocean to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, particularly to the young people.⁴⁸

Conclusion

It is clear from the sources that the Institute of the FMA is a missionary Institute and is therefore pervaded by the missionary spirit. It is proper to all the FMA, but in a more radical way it is assumed by those who choose to leave their homeland because they are sent to the mission ad gentes.

As a Christian and as a religious, every FMA - wherever she is - feels herself to be a living part of a Church 'going out in mission' and of an Institute open to the evangelisation of the world.

Hers is a spirituality based on the relationship of friendship with Jesus, on remaining in His Love, grafted into Him like the branches to the vine, on proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel to all peoples. Around this unifying centre converge the various dimensions of the missionary spirituality of the FMA.

The mission is not therefore identified with an activity that some FMA perform, but is the paradigm of the educational action of a religious Family called to share with the young the joy of the encounter with Jesus.

The root of this spirituality is found in the vocational unity of the FMA. This guarantees the indispensable balance between active and contemplative life and the overcoming of dichotomies between education and evangelisation, human promotion and education in the faith.

⁴⁷ Cf *Annex* no. 8, in *Annexes to the Minutes of the Ninth General Chapter. Year 1928*, datt. in AGFMA 11.9/122, pp. 12-19. The Annex refers to Theme III, which is formulated as follows: 'To set out ideas and proposals for the drafting of a regulation which, on the basis of Article II of the Constitutions, would help the development of missionary vocations, be a guide for works to be accepted and carried out in the missions, and determine the norms for the administration, the work of evangelisation, the formation of missionary sisters and their relations with ecclesiastical and Salesian Superiors'.

⁴⁸ Cf *Annexes to the Minutes of the Ninth General Chapter. Year 1928*, datt. in AGFMA 11.9/122, p. 3

The great challenge for the spiritual journey of the FMA is to achieve a balance between the sometimes nagging activity and union with God in work, as Mother Mazzarello reiterated, inviting especially the missionaries to preserve ‘as much as you can the spirit of union with God, be in His presence continuously’.⁴⁹

Interiority, that is, the life of union with God, which has the face of Love, gives depth to action, nourishes joy, strengthens loving-kindness in the community, sustains creativity and courage, and guarantees apostolic effectiveness.

Sister Piera Cavaglià

⁴⁹ María Esther POSADA - Anna COSTA - Piera CAVAGLIÀ (eds.), *La sapienza della vita. Letters of Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, Rome, FMA Institute 2004, Letter 23.1.3. It should be noted that the FMA had opened the house in Las Piedras a few days before (on 13 April 1879) and on 30 April Mother Mazzarello reached them with this letter that remained programmatic. We quote L followed by the number of the letter and the paragraph. Cf also L 66:2.