

### III. THE INSTITUTE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS

*In the early 1870s, when the Salesian Society was going through a happy time of expansion beyond the borders of Piedmont, thanks also to the many vocations flowing in, Don Bosco, with a group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate at Mornese who were gathered around Mary Domenica Mazzarello (1837-1881), gave life to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In a very short time it was approved by the Diocesan Ordinary and aggregated to the Salesian society, then spread throughout Italy and overseas. We publish here five documents on this women's foundation.*

*First of all the request to the Superior of the Sisters of St Anne, Mother Enrichetta Dominici, on adapting the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales to the new Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (no. 44).*

*Secondly the minutes of the first eleven triennial religious professions and the first five clothing ceremonies (four, according to other copies of the minutes), which in some ways was the founding act for the Institute itself (no. 45). Signed by the diocesan authorities, it lacks Don Bosco's signature (he was at the professions, but not when the minutes of the ceremony were compiled), but he would make two corrections on another copy of the document.*

*Then follows a circular to parish priests in which Don Bosco presents the purpose of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and sends the programme of the school at Mornese (no. 46).*

*The document most important for its consequences is perhaps the petition to the Bishop of Acqui, Bishop Joseph Mary Sciandra, for diocesan approval of the FMA Institute after possible corrections of the Constitutions (no. 47).*

*Then having obtained the decree of approval, and given that the Salesian Sisters had now spread throughout Italy, France and America, Don Bosco send them the printed text of their Constitutions with some particular recommendations of his (no. 48).*

*Perhaps his painful experience in gaining pontifical approval for the Salesian Society and its Constitutions had dissuaded Don Bosco from running the same risk*

for the women's Institute. He simply aggregated it to the Salesians, a rather rare thing, and this did not escape the attention of pontifical authorities in his 1879 Report (see no. 24) and would later be re-examined<sup>25</sup>.

On relationships between Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello and their cooperation in founding the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, see the bibliography in the note<sup>26</sup>. For pedagogical and spiritual aspects go to the second and third parts respectively of this volume.

#### **44. To the Superior of the Sisters of St Anne, Mother Enrichetta Dominici (Blessed)**

Printed Ed. in E(m) III, pp. 325-326.

[Turin], 24 April 1871

Very Reverend Mother<sup>27</sup>,

I am putting the rules<sup>28</sup> of our Congregation in your hands asking you to kindly read them and see how they would suit an institute of religious women in the sense that I was able to personally describe it for you.

<sup>25</sup> In conformity with the constitution *Conditae a Christo* of Leo XIII (1900) and the *Normae* (1901) the Holy See requested juridical separation of the FMA from the Salesians and a review of the Constitutions (1906). The decree of pontifical approval for the Institute is dated September 7, 1911.

<sup>26</sup> María Esther POSADA, *Don Bosco fondatore dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in M. MIDALI (Ed.), *Don Bosco fondatore della Famiglia salesiana...*, pp. 281-303; María Esther POSADA, *L'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice in rapporto a don Bosco*, in Mario MIDALI (Ed.), *Don Bosco nella storia. Atti del I Congresso Internazionale di studi su don Bosco*. Roma, LAS 1990, pp. 217-229; María Esther POSADA, *Significato della "validissima cooperatio" di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello alla fondazione dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in ID. (Ed.), *Attuale perché vera. Contributi su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*. Roma, LAS 1987, pp. 53-68. Many texts are published in Piera CAVAGLIÀ - Anna COSTA (Ed.), *Orme di vita. Tracce di futuro. Fonti e testimonianze sulla prima comunità delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1870-1881)*. Roma, LAS 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Maria Enrichetta (Caterina outside religious life) Dominici (1829-1894). From 1861 she was the superior of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Anne, founded in Turin by Marchioness Giulia e Tancredi Falletti di Barolo. Paul VI beatified her in 1978.

<sup>28</sup> The text of the Salesian Constitutions is at the stage of pontifical approval.

It should begin from No. 3 – *The purpose of this Institution the Daughters of the Immaculate*<sup>29</sup>– to then take away or add as you would judge in your wisdom for founding an institute whose daughters would be true religious before the Church, but before civil society free citizens as well.

For chapters or articles of the Rule of St Anne which could be adapted, I would be very happy if you would do so.

When you think it would be good for us to speak, you can let one of our clerics or workers know who often go there.

I know this is a new bother for you but I believe it will redound to the greater glory of God. If we succeed in winning over some souls you will have played a major part.

May God bless you and all your religious family, and recommending myself and my pupils to the charity of your holy prayers, I profess myself gratefully, to be your most indebted servant,

Fr John Bosco

#### **45. Minutes of the founding of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians**

Printed in Piera CAVAGLIÀ - Anna COSTA (Edd.), *Orme di vita - Tracce di futuro. Fonti e Testimonianze sulla prima comunità delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1870-1881)*.

Roma, LAS 1996, pp. 38-41.

The following document was compiled in the year of the Lord one thousand eight hundred and seventy-two, in the House of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Mornese in the presence of the undersigned and by order of the Very Reverend Bishop Joseph Mary Sciandra.

The Very Reverend Father John Bosco, Founder and Director General of many schools for the Christian and social education of boys, had for a long

<sup>29</sup> Daughters of the Immaculate: the reference is to the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate at Mornese, which most of the first Salesian Sisters belonged to.

time desired to open a house to begin an institute where the same benefits should accrue to young girls, especially those coming from working class families. Finally his wishes were fulfilled. On the fifth day of the current month, in the chapel of this House the following were clothed with the habit of the new congregation. Mary Mazzarello, daughter of Joseph, Petronilla Mazzarello of Joseph, Felicina Mazzarello of Joseph, Joan Ferretino of Joseph, Teresa Pampuro of Lorenzo, Felicina Arecco of John Anthony, Rose Mazzarello of Stephen, Catherine Mazzarello of Joseph, all from Mornese. Angela Jandet of Louis from Turin; Maria Poggio of Gaspari from Acqui; Assunta Gaino of Anthony, from Cartosio; Rose Mazzarello of Joseph from Mornese; Maria Grosso of Francis from St. Stefano Parodi; Corinna Arrigotti of Peter from Tonco; Clara Spagliardi of Lawrence from Mirabello. The first eleven mentioned made their profession, taking vows for three years in the hands of His Excellency the Very Reverend Monsignor Joseph Mary Sciandra, Bishop of the diocese. A short time before he had blessed the religious habits they were then wearing and invested the novices with the medal of Our Lady Help of Christians and the professed with the crucifix.

The ceremony was very touching and through a special grace from God the above-mentioned Don Bosco was present. It was feared that ill health would prevent this. The new religious had the consolation of receiving from him advice on how they should correspond to the grace of vocation in the religious institute they had embraced.

A series of circumstances manifested the special Providence of God for this new institute. The greater number of these young women from Mornese had already received the medal of Mary Immaculate from the hands of Monsignor Modesto Contratto of venerated memory. Monsignor Sciandra, his immediate successor, unaware of this, accepted hospitality in this House for the only reason that the healthy air would help him recover from a serious illness, and completed the good work by presiding himself at the celebration. This should have taken place at the end of the retreat given by Raymond Olivieri, Canon and Archpriest of the Diocese of Acqui and the Very Reverend Prior, Father Mark Mallinari, Rural Vicar of Canelli. This retreat began on the evening of July 31 but, given the much desired presence of Don Bosco who had to leave

the following day for Turin, the ceremony was brought forward to the fifth, a day sacred to Our Lady of the Snow.

The Retreat finished today. The Bishop, who celebrated the community mass and distributed Holy Communion, assisted with all solemnity at the closure. He addressed a few words of encouragement and gave some helpful thoughts as souvenirs to his new Daughters in Jesus Christ and with all his heart he imparted to them his pastoral blessing.

The present document was compiled for the verification of what is stated above. A copy is to be placed in the parish archives in Mornese by order of His Excellency the Bishop and another copy in the Bishop's Curia of Acqui.

† Giuseppe Maria, bishop<sup>30</sup>

Father Domenico Pestarino director of the Institute

Olivieri Raimondo canon archpriest of the cathedral at Acqui

Marco Mallarini prior rural vicar of Canelli

Carlo Valle provost and parish priest of Mornese

Pestarino Father Giuseppe witness

Ferraris Father Tommaso witness

Fr Francesco Berta bishop's secretary

#### **46. Circular to Parish Priests on the School at Mornese**

Printed ed. in E(m) IV, p. 155.

[Turin, end of August 1873]

Very Reverend Father,

I take the liberty of presenting you with the programme of the girl's school set up a year ago in Mornese.

<sup>30</sup> Giuseppe Maria Sciandra (1808-1888), consecrated bishop of Acqui in November 1871, entered the diocese on January 6, 1872.

You will understand that the purpose of this Institute is to raise Christian girls in religion and good behaviour; therefore I am trusting much in your kindness and ask you respectfully to make this programme known and thus find some new students for this house.

Full of trust in your support I offer you my warmest thanks. May the Lord bless you, and I with full respect have the honour of professing myself,

Your most indebted servant,

Fr John Bosco<sup>31</sup>

**47. Petition to the Bishop of Acqui, Bishop Joseph Mary Sciandra, for Diocesan approval of the Institute of Mary Help of Christians**

Printed Ed. in E(m) V, pp. 49-50.

Mornese, 14 January 1876

Your Grace,

Your Lordship would know that an Institute with the title of house or college of Mary Help of Christians in Mornese was begun by the zealous Fr Dominic Pestarino of ever dear memory<sup>32</sup>. Its purpose was to provide Christian education for girls who are not well-off, or who are poor and abandoned, in order to set them on the path to good behaviour, learning and religion under the direction of the Sisters known as the *Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*.

With great kindness Your Lordship deigned to be the protector of the new Institute and on August 5, 1872 was content to read the Rule, adding

<sup>31</sup> Attached to the letter was the programme for the house at Mornese. We should not be surprised that Don Bosco made no reference to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In those early days it was the founder who accepted postulants and established the conditions for admission of the girls to the Institute.

<sup>32</sup> Domenico Pestarino (1817-1874) studied theology in Genoa and was ordained priest in 1839; in 1847 he returned to his place of origin, Mornese, where he carried out a busy apostolate; he became part of the Salesian Society as an 'extern' member.

appropriate observations, presiding at the first clothing ceremony, and the first professions.

Shortly afterwards you enriched the new Institute with various favours and precious privileges, and thanks to you it has become a moral entity before the Church.

These things were like the mustard seed which your Lordship sowed and which grew marvellously. The current number of Sisters is a hundred or more; the Sisters have been entrusted with the public girls' schools in the town; to the Institute's building, a convent school for girls of average circumstances has been added, as you can note from the attached programme.

A second house has already been opened at Borgo San Martino, another at Alassio; the fourth will be opened this year in Lanzo near Turin; many requests are arriving for new houses to be opened in other towns.

But this Institute will certainly lack its true basis until it has sought the ecclesiastical approval that puts religious Institutes on a secure path, one leading to the greater glory of God.

It is to obtain this favour that I respectfully present Your Lordship with the Rules of the Institute of Mary Help of Christians as they have been practised for some years, petitioning you to examine them and indicate any modifications which in your enlightened wisdom you judge necessary, then, if God so inspires you, to give the Institute and its Constitutions diocesan approval. Father James Costamagna director<sup>33</sup>, and all the Sisters join me in asking for this special favour.

This will be one more reason for our indelible gratitude, and we assure you that we will pray in common and privately every day to the merciful God and his august Mother the Virgin Help of Christians, to preserve Your Lordship for many more happy years, and thus you will see the copious results of the

<sup>33</sup> Fr James Costamagna (1846-1921), priest since 1868, spiritual director of the first FMA community in Mornese, left in 1877 as a missionary for Argentina and in 1894 was consecrated titular bishop of Cologne and vicar apostolic of Méndez y Gualaquiza in Ecuador.

work you were pleased to bless, enrich with spiritual graces, and protect, and we could say found and support until now.

With the greatest gratitude I have the honour of professing myself to be  
Your Lordship's most indebted servant

Fr John Bosco  
Fr James Costamagna  
Sister Mary Mazzarello superior

*Decree of diocesan approval for the Constitutions  
of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*

Printed in P. CAVAGLIÀ - A. COSTA (Ed.), in *Orme di vita - Tracce di futuro*. Roma, LAS  
1996, pp. 163-166.

*Josephus Maria Sciandra*  
*Dei et Sanctae Apostolicae Sedis gratia*  
*Episcopus Aquensis et Comes*  
*Sacri Romani Imperii Princeps*

*Miserrimis hisce temporibus, quibus consiliorum evangelicorum professio tam impiis ac innumeris modis praepeditur, ipsaque iuvenum ac puellarum christiana educatio aut prorsus negligitur, aut sceleste corrumpitur, nulla plane res optatior atque iucundior nobis offerri poterat, quam sacra in hac Dioecesi erigenda Domus, quae puellis Deo mancipandis ianuas aperiret cuiusque ope educationi christianae filiarum populi opportune consuleretur.*

*Quapropter vix conscii effecti de proposito ab Adm. Rev.do D. Sacerdote Joanne Bosco Taurinensi piae Societatis Salesianae Superiore, concepto, instituendi nempe in hac Dioecesi, loco Moronisii, Congregationem Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis ad eum finem, ut in ipsam omnes illae puellae convenirent, quae tum propriae spirituali perfectioni vacare, tum proximorum saluti, filias populi praesertim christianae edocendo, promovere intenderent, Nos libenti animo enascentis Instituti Constitutiones, quibus regeretur, ad experimentum probavimus, illudque gratiis et favoribus auximus.*



*Quum vero Institutum huiusmodi Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis iam, Deo favente, sub praedictarum Constitutionum regimine, adeo feliciter creverit, ut centum quinquaginta puellis ditetur, vel eidem adscriptis, vel proxime adscribendis, ac praeterea ipsa Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis Domus gynaeceum agat filiabus populi instituendis, ac in Christi doctrina instituendis, tum ipsae foemineae scholae Pagi Moronisiensis sub filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis disciplina in dies augeantur et floeant; hinc ut novum hoc ac perutile, iudicio quidem Nostro, Institutum, meliori modo promoveatur, eiusdem Constitutiones iampridem datas ac iterum nobis subiectas praesentibus litteris, tamquam ad Dei gloriam et animarum salutem procurandam et adaugendam idoneas, firmiter ac stabilius probamus ac confirmamus, ea innixi potestate, quam vigens dat praxis hoc inducta fine, ut Congregationes ad experimentum aliquod de iis sumendum prius inchoentur, quam Sanctae Sedis absoluto iudicio, ab eaque plenissima potestate cum ipsarum regulis definiantur.*

*Hoc vero dum facimus, potestatem tamen Nobis ac Successoribus Nostris explicite reservatam volumus, variandi nempe, ubi et quoties id expedire videbitur, Constitutiones ipsas, quas in praesens probamus et confirmamus.*

*Jam reliquum est, ut Congregationem Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis, eiusdemque singula membra paternae benevolentiae ac charitati omnium Episcoporum, in quorum Dioecesi vel iam operantur, vel in posterum sunt operaturae, commendemus.*

*Praesens decretum una cum Constitutionibus praelaudatis, ac praesentibus litteris confirmatis, in Curia nostra Episcopali asservabitur.*

*Datum Aquis die 23 januarii 1876*

† Joseph Maria *Ep.us*  
Fr Franciscus Berta *Secr.ius*

*(Translation)*

Joseph Mary Sciandra  
by the Grace of God and of the Holy Apostolic See  
Bishop and Count of Acqui  
Prince of the Holy Roman Empire

In such sad times as the present, in which in various and godless ways the profession of the evangelical counsels is hindered, and even the Christian education of young boys and girls is either completely overlooked or wickedly corrupted, nothing could be more suitable or more pleasing to us than to be offered to erect a holy house in this diocese, that can open its doors to girls who aspire to consecrate themselves to the Lord and for work which can opportunely provide for the Christian education of the girls of the people.

As soon as we became aware of the intentions of the Reverend Father John Bosco of Turin, superior of the Salesian Society, to want to begin the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in this diocese, in the Mornese locality, so that all young girls who aspire to their personal perfection and to promoting their neighbour's salvation especially through the Christian education of the girls of the people, would come to it, we very willingly approved the Constitutions of the new Institute ad *experimentum* and have assisted and promoted its development.

Given that the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians has already happily developed, with the help of God, by following the already-mentioned Constitutions, so much so that it now has 150 who have already joined or who are about to, and given that the House of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians is running a girls' school for the education and catechetical instruction of the girls of the people, and that these classes at Mornese are increasing and flourishing under the guidance of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and since our judgement is that this new and very useful institution may develop still further, we approve and confirm the Constitutions, already earlier given by us and newly presented to us in the present documentation. We do this in a more stable and secure way, since they are suitable for procuring and increasing the glory of God and the salvation of souls. We do this by the power we currently have, so that the Congregation may begin to practise them ad *experimentum*, before the Holy See expresses its judgement and with all its power definitively approves the Rule.

In doing this we wish nevertheless that the power to alter these Constitutions we are now approving and confirming, where and when we believe it to be convenient, be explicitly reserved to us and our successors.

It now only remains for us to recommend the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and its individual members to the fatherly benevolence and charity of all the bishops in whose diocese they are working or will work in the future.

This decree, along with the Constitutions mentioned and confirmed by this document, will be preserved in our Episcopal Curia.

Given in Acqui, January 23, 1876,

† Joseph Mary *bishop*  
Fr Francis Berta *secretary*

#### **48. Letter accompanying the FMA Constitutions**

Printed ed.: *Regole o costituzioni per aggregate alla Società salesiana*. Torino, Tip. e Libreria salesiana 1878, pp. 3-6; also published in P. CAVAGLIÀ - A. COSTA (Edd.), *Orme di vita...*, pp. 262-263.

Turin, Feast of the Immaculate Conception [8 December] 1878

To the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Thanks to the goodness of our Heavenly Father the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians which you are fortunate to belong to, has seen huge development in a short time. In the space of a few years we have been able to open a good number of houses in Piedmont, Liguria, France; even in the distant regions of America.

While the Institute was focused on the Mother House at Mornese, some hand-written copies of the Rule were sufficient for every Sister to get to know it; but now that by Divine Providence houses have multiplied and the Sisters have gone to live in them, these are no longer sufficient.

This is why I judged it to be for the greater glory of God and to the advantage of your souls to have them printed; and now I present them to you.

They already have the approval of a number of bishops<sup>34</sup>, who have found them fully appropriate for sanctifying a Daughter who aspires to be all for Jesus and who at the same time also wants to put her life at the service of her neighbour, especially in the education of poor girls. Furthermore: the Institute was praised and approved by special decree of the bishop of Acqui<sup>35</sup>, in whose diocese it was born in 1872 and still prospers.

Take care then, of the rules which govern it. Read them and meditate on them; but above all never forget that it would be of no value at all even knowing them by memory, if you did not put them into practice.

Therefore let everyone take every care to observe them in detail; the vigilance and zeal of the superior should aim at this, as also the diligence and intelligence of their subjects. By doing this you will discover peace of heart in your Congregation, and you will be on the road to Heaven and become saints.

Meanwhile I gladly take this propitious occasion to recommend that in your prayers you keep in mind the soul of the Very reverend Father Domenico Pestarino, first director of the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, whom the Lord used to put down the foundations of this Institute. For his charity and zeal he truly deserves your warmest gratitude.

Also pray for one another, that the Lord may keep you constant and faithful in your vocation and make you worthy of doing great things for his greater glory.

Pray especially for the Sisters who are already on the way and for those who still will be, to distant parts of the earth to spread the name of Jesus Christ,

<sup>34</sup> That is, the bishops of Casale, Biella, Turin and Bordighera.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. no. 46.

and make him known and loved. Pray above all for the Catholic Church, for its visible head, for the bishops and local pastors; pray also for the Salesian Society to which you are aggregated<sup>36</sup>; and do not forget me who wants every happiness for you.

May the Virgin Help of Christians protect and defend us in life and in death; and by her powerful intercession may she obtain from her divine Son the wonderful grace of finding ourselves one day all together under her mantle in eternal bliss.

Fr John Bosco

<sup>36</sup> This aggregation, taken for granted by Don Bosco, would be questioned by the Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in 1879, when he received the three year Report on the moral and juridical state of the Salesian Society: see pp. 88-89, 98-99.