

FRAGILITY IN THE LIFE OF MARY MAZZARELLO

by Maria Maul

Introduction

In the altar of the large church to St. Mary Domenica Mazzarello in Mornese-Mazzarelli, a vertebra of her backbone has been inserted as a symbol of her upright personality and her inner strength.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Fr. Alberto Cavaglia, in his celebratory lecture on 14 May 1932, at the end of the Jubilee Year with which the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) celebrated the 50th anniversary of Mary Mazzarello's death, compared her to the "strong and wise women" of the Book of Proverbs (cf. Prov 31).¹

Eliane Anschau Petri FMA, in her 2018 theological hermeneutics of the testimonies in the beatification and canonization

¹ Cf. Alberto Caviglia, *L'eredità spirituale di suor Maria Mazzarello. Commemorazione cinquantenaria*, in Alois Kothgasser – G. Battista Lemoyne – Alberto Caviglia, *Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Profezia di una vita*, Rome, Institut FMA 1996, 115.

processes, entitled *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello* (= The Sanctity of Mary Domenica Mazzarello), confirms that the cardinal virtue of fortitude was a typical characteristic of Mary Mazzarello, already recognized in the Curia of Acqui's apostolic process in 1932.

Particularly evident was the spirit of Christian strength of Mary Domenica Mazzarello. Card. Parocchi, during the homily in Sacred Heart Church in Rome on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Institute, affirmed that Don Bosco and *Mother Mazzarello* have, one could say, exchanged much. Don Bosco as a man could have become holy, it seems, through fortitude, and *Mother Mazzarello*, as a woman, through gentleness; instead, Don Bosco became holy through gentleness and *Mother Mazzarello* through fortitude.²

The inner strength that she was given by God and that matured under the wise pedagogical influence of her father, gradually grew to the extent that she had to cope with the many difficulties she encountered in her short life, caused by all kinds of experiences of fragility.

This article does not offer a scholarly study of this topic, but is limited to a careful reading of the primary sources of the FMA Institute, especially the letters of Mary Mazzarello and the first three volumes of the *Cronistoria*, supplemented by references to some recent studies. The traces of fragility that can be found in them will be exemplified in what follows.³

² Eliane Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Ermeneutica teologica delle testimonianze nei processi di beatificazione e canonizzazione* (= IL PRISMA ed. by Pontifical Faculty of Education Sciences Auxilium, Rome 34), Rome, LAS 2018, 192-193.

³ This presentation was prepared for the *Forum Salesian* in Munich (Germany), August 25-28, 2020, and was delivered in Italian under the title *Fragilità nella vita di Maria Mazzarello* on August 26.

1. Experiences of fragility

1.1. Precarious health

1.1.1. Mary Mazzarello's existential health crisis

For those who think of the fragile situations in Mary Mazzarello's life, the typhoid fever that afflicted her at the age of 23 and gave a decisive turn to her young life, immediately comes to mind. Mary Domenica, in fidelity to the 'exercise of charity' required by the Rule of the Pious Association of the Daughters of the Immaculate, had accepted Fr. Domenico Pestarino's request in 1860 to care for her sick relatives during the epidemic, even though she was convinced that she would catch it. In fact, her premonition came true."The evil struck her in one of its fiercest forms and, even if it spared her life, it forever put an end to the strength that had meant she ranked first among her father's workers."⁴ When the illness took hold of Mary Domenica the roles were reversed. She who was skilled at helping others had to lie in bed and be nursed. It was not easy for her to accept this reversal of the situation because she was a confident person and was used to "always being in control of events"⁵. However, it was precisely the long convalescence that oriented Mary Domenica to dedicate herself to the girls of the village and to recognize, step by step, her "pedagogical vocation"⁶. Thus the house in *via Valgelata*, according to Monica Menegusi FMA and Piera Ruffinatto FMA, became a

'symbolic place' because it was located on a path whose name, by chance, recalled the reality of cold, ice, and death. But [...] beyond the recognizable defeat of the illness and death from which she had miraculously escaped, a new life project is found for Mary. [...] In the Christian view, therefore, the 'crisis' is a 'mystical' place where

⁴ Ana María Fernández, *Le lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Testimoni e mediazione di una missione carismatica* (= ORIZZONTI ed. by Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione "Auxilium" Rome), Rome, LAS 2006, 31.

⁵ Monica Menegusi and Piera Ruffinatto (ed.), *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita. Sussidio progetto Mornese*, Rome, FMA Institute – Formation Sector 2007, 52.

⁶ *Ibid* 55; see also Giselda Capetti (ed.), *Cronistoria. The preparation and the foundation 1828-1872*, vol. 1, Rome, Institute FMA 1974, reprinted 1977, 86-99 (hereafter abbreviated *Cronistoria* = Chronicle).

the heart has the opportunity to purify itself and the gaze of the soul to clarify itself in order to see God with new eyes. [...] The trial thus becomes the ‘place’ of discernment where, in intimate contact with the Cross of Jesus, we learn to choose love even when it brings experiences of suffering.⁷

Mary Domenica recovered to some extent, but she was left with fragile health which apparently deteriorated again twenty years later. At the beginning of February 1881, while accompanying the departing missionaries to Marseilles, she again became very ill. Among other things, she was plagued by severe earache. To Sr. Giuseppina Paccotto she confided the reason for these ailments: “I think I contracted them when, as a youth, I mistakenly got up too early and had to wait outside the church door so as not to wake Fr. Pestarino and the parish priest. Sometimes I was all wet from the rain, other times there was a lot of snow, and the dampness of those days is making itself felt now!”⁸ In fact after the missionaries left, she had to stay in Saint Cyr for several weeks due to pleurisy and a high fever. On her way back to Nizza Monferrato, she met Don Bosco in Nice (France), who announced her imminent death with a symbolic narration.⁹

1.1.2. Dangerous diseases among the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

Many of the first FMA were also plagued by various illnesses. Sr. Teresa Laurantoni, for example, was confined to bed for a long time because of a stroke;¹⁰ Sr. Maria Belletti and novice Sr.

⁷ *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita* 48-49.

⁸ Giselda Capetti (ed.), *Cronistoria. Da Nizza Monferrato nuova espansione con Madre Mazzarello (1879-1881)*, vol. 3, Rome, Institute FMA 1977, 333-334.

⁹ Cf. *ibid* 337-355.

¹⁰ Cf. Giselda Capetti (ed.), *Cronistoria. The Institute in Mornese the first expansion 1872-1879*, vol. 2, Rome, Institute FMA 1976, 166; Maria Esther Posada, Anna Costa, Piera Cavaglià, *Wisdom of life. Letters of Mary Domenica Mazzarello*, revised and expanded new edition, Rome, FMA Institute 2004 (hereafter abbreviated *Letters*), *Letters* 4,5.10 and 5,2.

Domenica Mina contracted tuberculosis,¹¹ Sr. Luigia Giordano typhoid fever;¹² Sr. Ortensia Negrini had to remain immobile for years because of “very severe asthma.”¹³

It is therefore not surprising that Fr. Giacomo Costamagna, immediately after taking over the spiritual direction of the FMA in Mornese, reported at the annual meeting of Salesian directors on 28 January 1876, “Unfortunately, health leaves much to be desired; two of them are at the end of their lives.”¹⁴

The continuous weakness in health of the first FMA represented one of the reasons that led Don Bosco to move the FMA Institute from Mornese to the former Capuchin convent in Nizza Monferrato in 1878. The *Cronistoria* reports, “All the superiors are always concerned about the failing health of many sisters. They attribute the reason for this to the Mornese air which is too thin for those who cannot feed themselves sufficiently and have to work a lot.”¹⁵

Therefore, in their first meeting in August 1878, while they were still in Mornese, the FMA Superiors established the following preventive measure, “Since the preservation of the physical health of the sisters must be one of the most important duties of the Superiors, see to it that there is no permanent draft in the rooms, especially in winter, and with glass windows and padded blankets eliminate a deficiency that could prove fatal for not a few.”¹⁶

Therefore with prudent caution, Don Bosco also had Doctor Silvio Sannazzaro from Nizza Monferrato prepare a statement on the health suitability of the house in view of the relocation of the

¹¹ Cf. *Cronistoria* II 192-193 and *Letters* 6,8.

¹² Cf. *Cronistoria* II 217.

¹³ *Cronistoria* III 168.

¹⁴ *Relazione di don Giacomo Costamagna sulla comunità di Mornese*, document 66, in Piera Cavaglià and Anna Costa (eds.), *Orme di vita, tracce di futuro. Fonti e testimonianze sulla prima comunità delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1870-1881)* (= ORIZZONTI ed. by Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione “Auxilium” di Roma), Rome, LAS 1996, 168 (hereafter abbreviated *Orme di vita* = Traces of Life).

¹⁵ *Cronistoria* II 305-306.

¹⁶ *Relazione della prima adunanza delle Superiore FMA, Mornese, agosto 1878*, document 93, in *Orme di vita* 239.

educational Institute at Mornese, which was to be better expanded in a more suitable place, in order to be able to present it to the Provincial Inspector of Schools together with the request for the opening of an elementary school for girls. The doctor confirmed that the convent of *Madonna delle Grazie* “is very suitable and appropriate for an educational Institute because of the healthy building, built in a healthy and dry area, ventilated on all sides, with rooms, corridors, and wide airy halls.”¹⁷

However, despite the excellent conditions and the vaccinations given everyone towards the end of 1879, some sisters contracted smallpox.¹⁸

1.2. Damaged teenage orphans

It is noteworthy that it was precisely typhoid fever with the subsequent long convalescence that proved providential for Mary Domenica. She had an experience that was called “*inspiration*” in the beatification and canonization processes. Carlotta Pestarino, for example, expressed it this way in her testimony, “She had the inspiration to gather many girls to educate them for the good.”¹⁹ The inspiration to learn to sew and then to gather the girls to teach them to sew and to love the Lord gave rise to a true apostolate among the girls for whom she had a special affection.²⁰

The boarding students admitted to the School at Mornese were mostly from rural areas, from families with sound human and Christian principles. Nevertheless, there was no lack of ‘difficult cases’ for whom application of the preventive system required “an effort of creativity and addition of love.”²¹

The teenage orphans who challenged the first FMA and tested their educational abilities came to Mornese each with her own

¹⁷ *Dichiarazione del dott. Silvio Sannazzaro sulla salubrità della casa*, document 96, in *Orme di vita* 250.

¹⁸ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 126, 141.

¹⁹ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 156.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 285-286.

²¹ *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita* 107.

individual story. Each was marked by the inner suffering they had experienced at a young age.

Mary Domenica knew the art of earning the trust of everyone, especially the more difficult girls. She surrounded them with courtesies and attentions, despite the visible caginess and rebellion that some displayed. She avoided imposing on them or emotionally blackmailing them to effect change in them. Instead, she knew how to wait until the opportune moment came for the young people to make personal decisions in freedom. Significant examples of this accompaniment of hers are represented by three young people: Corinna Arrigotti, Maria Belletti, and Emma Ferrero.²²

Corinna²³ had lost her mother. She was intelligent, very sensitive, but stubborn, resistant and reluctant to pray. Mary Domenica applied the “golden rule of the preventive system” in her relationship with Corinna, connecting

energy with gentleness, kindness with firmness [...]. So she surrounded Corinna with loving attentiveness to ‘win her heart’, and also by means of her gentle and penetrating word. She awaited the opportune moment and then one evening, after the others had gone to bed, she stopped Corinna in order to overcome her last resistances and to approach her heart. She began to talk gently to her about her deceased mother. Mary Domenica had waited for the evening to touch the heart of this half-orphan, who perhaps at that very moment remembered her mama’s kiss, and that very maternal gesture took down the defenses of the youth, who let herself be touched by the thought of the emptiness that had spread through her life.²⁴

Maria Belletti²⁵ was an orphan. If in Corinna’s heart there was a certain sadness due to the loneliness she had experienced without the presence of her mother, the absence of both parents had awakened in Maria the need to indulge in an easy life with pleasures

²² Cf. Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 288-289.

²³ Cf. *Cronistoria* I 260-262, *Cronistoria* II 7-10, 40, 69-72, 78, 87-88.

²⁴ *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita* 108-109.

²⁵ Cf. *Cronistoria* II 129-132, 237-238.

and beautiful clothes. In Mornese, a deep transformation took place in her that opened her to God's call. Mary Domenica had known how to establish a personal relationship with Maria Belletti from the first moment, which led the young person on an authentic path of searching for her vocation.²⁶

Emma Ferrero²⁷ who came from a wealthy family, had lost her mother when she was young. Arriving in Mornese at the age of 18 on the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1877, she resisted the suggestions of the sisters, without any interest in participating in the life of the community. Faced with the desperate situation of this young woman, the whole community tried to approach her with attitudes typical of the preventive system. But

the gentleness, the goodness, the kindness of the educators seemed annoying to Emma [...]. This is a typical reaction in many adolescents who have experienced neglect and trauma. Their longing to be loved turns into rejection of attention, into attitudes of harshness and self-sufficiency. This is a form of defense against personal relationships, a way of avoiding attachments that might hurt or disappoint anew, or simply of taking revenge on adults for the suffering they have endured. Such an attitude, called *reactive transfer*, arises from the neurotic need for affective compensations as a result of the chronic lack of affection in the family, of basic insecurity, low self-esteem. Thus, it can happen that a pupil transfers to the educator her own affective needs, which are reactive to the figure of the parents who, in whatever way, she has lacked. This type of reaction can be characterized by an insatiable hunger for tangible signs of affection, which can be expressed in feelings of rapture, or on the contrary, of hatred. In the face of such behavior, the control of the relationship on the part of the educator must start from the consideration of the fact that those feelings are not 'authentic' and not directed against her person, but are merely reactions to the inner discomfort of the adolescent, a language of the unconscious, expressions of their psychological and emotional 'poverty'.²⁸

²⁶ Cf. *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita* 109-110.

²⁷ Cf. *Cronistoria* II 295-296, 299-300, *Cronistoria* III 128, 156.

²⁸ *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita* 111-112.

Mary Mazzarello, with wise and sensitive pedagogical interventions, helped the educators, especially the assistant Sr. Enrichetta Sorbone, to deal with Emma in a suitable way, so that one day she succeeded in “overcoming the mistrust, the fear, the loneliness and finally let herself be loved.”²⁹

1.3. Mental abnormalities

While the positive development of these three young people proved the effectiveness of Don Bosco’s educational method in the feminine ambience of Mornese, Mary Mazzarello and her fellow sisters also experienced abnormal manifestations that could not be cured with educational interventions. The first community at Mornese was very disturbed, for example, and irritated by the strange behavior, the psychological scurrilities of the young visionary Agostina Simbeni, whom some considered a saint. It was only through the direct intervention of Don Bosco that the sisters finally succeeded in ridding themselves of this postulant, who created a real problem among her fellow candidates.³⁰ Mary Mazzarello, in her letter to Fr. Giovanni Cagliero in early 1876, gave a detailed summary of this pathological case, which manifested itself, among other things in ecstasies, revelations of occult things, and demonic obsessions.³¹ “Come soon and we will tell you all the details of this comedy; for now this is enough.”³²

Sr. Teresa Maritano, on the other hand, apparently did suffer from a mental illness. Gertrud Stickler FMA, in her 1987 paper on “Religious Personality and Discernment of Pathological Experience,” emphasized that “some saints prove to be especially endowed with the gift of discernment, almost of psychological ‘diagnosis’, by pointing out the self-centered and sometimes pathological tendencies of one’s own personality and that of others, which constitute a fundamental obstacle to their religious realization or capacity for love and devotion.”³³ She illustrated this thesis with

²⁹ *Ibid* 113.

³⁰ Cf. *Cronistoria* II 188-205.

³¹ Cf. *Letter* 6,5-7.

³² *Ibid* 6,7.

³³ Gertrud Stickler, *Personalità religiosa e discernimento del vissuto patologico*.

the description of Sr. Teresa's illness that Mary Mazzarello herself addressed to the founder Don Bosco in her letter of October 30, 1880:

As you know well, this poor woman was tormented for a long time by confusion of the mind; now, after a blessing [that she] received from Fr. Cerruti, she tells me that she has really remained calm. But instead since then a physical evil showed itself, an illness that keeps her in bed with a low fever, an ever-burning thirst, sore throat, disturbances in the organic functions etc., etc.

But what is more is that she is always asleep, she has an almost constant numbness and is always almost nonsensical, almost as if she had become feeble-minded. The doctor comes every day, he prescribes something for her, but now that he sees she is always at the same point after about twenty days of treatment, he doesn't know what to say. The physical evil is there, I'm convinced of that, but I'm also afraid that this is a consequence of past moral evils, or a change of those same ailments.³⁴

According to Gertrud Stickler, Maria Mazzarello's capacity for psychological discernment "is all the more surprising because in the common spirituality of the time the psychological and moral-ascetic conception of personality was often confused, to the detriment of the person, and inasmuch as the writer could certainly not have been up to date with the first hypotheses and corresponding studies on the relationships between somatic and psychological disorders that were developing in the medical field precisely at that time."³⁵

Mary Mazzarello personally took care of the sick sister: "... after a few days [in March 1879] Mother takes the road to Biella with Sr. Maritano, who was suffering from melancholy and scruples: perhaps – she thinks – a little trip will do good to the health of the

Sapere «prescientifico» e scientifico a confronto, in Maria Esther Posada (ed.), *Attuale perché vera. Contributi su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello* (= IL PRISMA ed. by Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione «Auxilium» di Roma 6), Rome, LAS 1987, 177.

³⁴ Letter 48,2-3.

³⁵ Stickler, *Personalità religiosa e discernimento del vissuto patologico*, in *Attuale perché vera* 184-185.

dear sister. ... Mother goes to the Sanctuary at Oropa, taking Sr. Maritano with her so that she herself may ask Our Lady to finally cure her of so much unnecessary sadness.”³⁶ The *Cenni biografici of the FMA Institute* report that Sr. Teresa died on 15 January 1884, at the age of 25, at her family home in Cumiana where she had gone in search of a little health.³⁷

1.4. *Inconsistency in relation to vocation*

After the promising beginning of the Institute of the FMA on 5 August 1872, the young community soon experienced the unstable vocations of some sisters who, in fact, did not continue on the path they had chosen. Already at the end of 1875, Mary Mazzarello wrote to Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, “Now comes the sad [news]. A few days after Clothing came the ‘unclothing’. Sr. Angela Bacchialoni was the first. On the 14th of the 12th month she left for Turin with Fr. Rua. On Tuesday, 21st of the month, Sr. Maria Arecco took off the Holy Habit and returned to her own house. Sister Felice is still here but before the year ends she will leave with the sister and then go to the Cottolengo if they will accept her.”³⁸

On 30 March 1876, Sr. Angela Jandet, one of the first eleven FMAs, startled the community by fleeing the house while the sisters were in the chapel.³⁹ She had entered as a teacher at the age of 24 and left even before the dispensation from vows requested of Don Bosco had arrived, after a rather arduous religious life because she could not get used to the ‘rules of the house’.⁴⁰

Despite her sure intuition, Mary Mazzarello was also not sure about Sr. Caterina Lucca, who “had wrung permission from Fr. Cagliero to travel to America with him on 3 February 1881, despite the contrary opinion expressed by Mother.”⁴¹ Therefore, on the day preceding the departure of the missionaries, Mary Mazzarello

³⁶ *Cronistoria* III 24-25.

³⁷ Cf. Stickler, *Personalità religiosa e discernimento del vissuto patologico*, in *Attuale perché vera* 186.

³⁸ *Letter* 4,4 (see also 4,9).

³⁹ Cf. *Letter* 5,3.

⁴⁰ *Cronistoria* II 176.

⁴¹ *Cronistoria* III 320.

reflected for a few hours and “from her words one could see how she was concerned for the soul of a poor person who had strayed from the right path of virtue (Lucca).”⁴² In fact, Sr. Caterina had already left the Institute on 1 June 1881⁴³ – a very painful experience both for Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, the sister in charge of the third group of missionaries who went to Uruguay,⁴⁴ as well as for Mary Mazzarello herself, “Mother returns again and again to the thought,” commented the chronicler, “that if there were or would be scandals, it was all her fault. If she had been more resolute in opposing that departure, or better, if she had spoken more clearly with Don Bosco ..., perhaps then those consequences could have been avoided. Increasingly, she became better aware, as she had said at other times, of the need to place the Congregation in hands more suitable than hers.”⁴⁵

1.5. *Disturbed relations*

1.5.1. With the Daughters of the Immaculate

Mary Domenica also experienced fragile situations at the relational level from the beginning of her intense spiritual path, which became more and more consistent after she joined the group of Daughters of the Immaculate Conception, newly created in 1855.

When Mary Domenica and Petronilla began their activities on behalf of the girls of the village in 1862 and received the first two semi-orphans in 1863, the “first thorns of the apostolic life” were felt by them on the part of some of the older FMI, who considered “the innovations as exaggerations of independent minds.”⁴⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1863, when at the end of the three years of leadership by teacher Angela Maccagno, Maín’s name also came up at the moment of election, “the older ones expressed open

⁴² *Relazione della prima adunanza delle Superiore FMA, Mornese, agosto 1878*, document 122, in *Orme di vita* 329.

⁴³ Cf. *Relazione di don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne sulla malattia e morte di madre Maria D. Mazzarello*, document 122, footnote 6, in *Orme di vita* 329.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 360-361.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibid* 361.

⁴⁶ *Cronistoria* I 135-136.

discontent and almost hostile aversion to the recognition of so much authority for so young a person ...”⁴⁷

The discontent reignited in the spring of 1864 to such an extent that Fr. Pestarino felt compelled to order Main a “painful consequence”, namely to retire to Valponasca for about a month until “it seemed to him that spirits were calmed.”⁴⁸

The disgruntlement came to a head again when, in 1867, at Fr. Pestarino’s invitation, Mary Domenica moved into the house of the Immaculate Conception next to the parish church to live there and form a small community with three companions and three girls under Don Bosco’s guidance.⁴⁹

1.5.2. With the residents of Mornese and Nizza Monferrato

Mary Mazzarello and her sisters had to suffer as well from the temporary offensive reactions of the people of both Mornese and Nizza Monferrato. From 1871 at the latest, a very painful situation developed for Fr. Domenico Pestarino, Mary Domenica, and the first FMAs. Because the diocese of Acqui had vetoed admission of boys and clerics of the village into the school built with the help of the whole population, Don Bosco had destined the new house for the future sisters who would take care of the girls.⁵⁰ The discussions that had arisen after the move of the FMI with Mary Domenica and the girls from the house of the Immaculate Conception to the school during the night of 23-24 May 1872, resulted in a change of attitude of the people of Mornese towards Fr. Pestarino after the foundation of the FMA Institute on 5 August 1872:

“Don Pestarino [...] had to feel the emptiness and loneliness after Don Bosco had left Could they perhaps still think that his compatriots might have false hopes about the fate of the school and a merely provisional stay of the daughters [in it]? The unusual

⁴⁷ *Ibid* 138.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 142-145.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid* 194.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid* 248.

coldness with which they received Don Bosco was already an explicit manifestation of their thoughts. ... The presence of the Bishop at the function placed the sisters under a strong protector against the most audacious who would not have gathered, even if the bishop had returned to Acqui. Nevertheless, there always remained the pain of knowing people were irritated, convinced that they had been deceived, and not being able to tell the truth at any price.”⁵¹

In fact on the part of the townspeople, the “different way of feeling and acting”⁵² increased. Mary Mazzarello and the first sisters suffered with Fr. Pestarino who, according to the *Cronistoria*, experienced open threats and felt that he was considered a traitor.⁵³

The hostile and ambiguous attitude of some inhabitants of Mornese towards Don Bosco and the FMA continued to such an extent “that a certain Mr. Pastore, Municipal Councilor, proposed to the Municipality to remove both the Salesian and the Sister from the public schools, to replace them with secular elements over whom he could more freely exercise his authority.”⁵⁴

The notary Antonio Traverso of Mornese, who was a Municipal Councilor at Gavi, therefore suggested to Don Bosco that he move the FMA house from Mornese to nearby Gavi, where the inhabitants would have gladly welcomed the new educational institute.”He assured him that he knew well the attitude of the people who on the one hand would express regret, but on the other were cold and ungrateful towards the institution founded by Don Bosco.”⁵⁵ Fr. Giacomo Costamagna also supported this proposal and he too presented it to his ‘dear papa’ Don Bosco.⁵⁶

As the *Cronistoria* reports, in this situation Salesian Fr. Francesco Bodrato, native of Mornese, was sent expressly to

⁵¹ *Ibid* 290, 312.

⁵² *Cronistoria* II 9.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid* 9-14.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 209-210.

⁵⁵ *Letter del notaio Antonio Traverso a don Bosco*, document 73, in *Orme di vita* 183.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Lettera di don Giacomo Costamagna a don Bosco*, document 72, in *ebda* 180-181.

Mornese to tell his compatriots clearly that “this step would be the last straw that would make Don Bosco decide to move his work for the girls elsewhere, even if only to Gavi, Serravalle or Novi, which were more important centers than Mornese ...” This would certainly be a disadvantage for the town, which was so incapable of seeing the benefit of having such an educational institute.⁵⁷ The honest advice of Fr. Bodrato seemed to calm the waters in this dispute, “but it is easy to suppose how much it impacted on Mother’s mind.”⁵⁸

The skepticism towards the sisters continued also in Nizza Monferrato. The first reason for this arose already in the spring of 1879 with the admission of the young Jewish woman Annetta Bedarida, who wanted to convert to the Catholic faith. Because of the intransigence of her family, a very difficult period followed.”In the city everyone talks about the sisters, some for them, others against them, more against than for, of course, because of the old habit of attributing the most ignoble deeds to religious.”⁵⁹ According to the testimony of the *Cronistoria*, at the beginning of the presence of the FMA in the *Madonna della Grazia* Institute, some women were even “beneath the windows shouting like furies, ‘Poor young people, what have you come here to die for? Go back home ... Death to the sisters’!”⁶⁰

1.6. *Painful detachments*

While on the one hand Mary Mazzarello experienced fragile relationships with people who were close to her, on the other hand she had to feel all the more the separation from the 26 young sisters who went to the missions in South America – both she and they knew that these were farewells without reunion. The last gestures were therefore touching, as for example on November 14, 1877 in Sampierdarena: “From the bridge, the emotional group waves. Don Bosco turns with a last long look. Mother Mazzarello can hardly hold

⁵⁷ *Cronistoria* II 210.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Cronistoria* III 48-49.

⁶⁰ *Ibid* 52; Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 184-185.

back her tears. Fr. Cagliari wants to say something humorous to raise their spirits, but does not succeed.”⁶¹

At the same time, Mary Mazzarello had to prepare herself for the great detachment from the house belonging to the School in Mornese, which she felt all the more because it held within it the memory of the sisters and young people who were with her at the beginning of the Institute. The notes in the *Cronistoria* clearly allow Mary Mazzarello’s wistful feelings to come through. After having accompanied the beginning of the work in Nizza Monferrato in October/November 1878, on her return to Mornese she wanted the Immaculate Conception novena to be “more solemn than ever: if the first house of the Congregation had to prepare itself to suffer – and who would not feel it [painfully]? – it should at least leave in a harmonious song of love for Mary.”⁶²

After the departure of the second group of missionaries from Genoa on January 2, 1879, “she feels sorrow at seeing the College almost completely depopulated after the work that had cost her innumerable sacrifices. She feels that she must leave the girls, the companions, dear acquaintances, for whom she foresees, with the departure of the sisters, the disappearance of much moral and spiritual help.”⁶³

A month later, on February 4, 1879, Mary Mazzarello personally moved from Mornese to Nizza Monferrato. The *Cronistoria* gives a touching description:

About twenty days earlier, when Don Bosco’s final word on the subject had been communicated, Mother herself had not been able to hold back a few tears from revealing her heartbreak. In Mornese she had learned to love and serve the Lord; the church and the confessional had nourished the incessant work of her spirit; the humble cemetery next to the church held the mortal remains of Fr. Pestarino, Fr. Giuseppe Cagliari, her dear departed sisters, of whom she remembered every gesture and word. In Mornese she had to leave behind three seriously ill sisters, a certain number of ‘little

⁶¹ *Cronistoria* II 290.

⁶² *Ibid* 359-360.

⁶³ *Cronistoria* II 385.

daughters' who were received free of charge, some postulants, lack of funds, and debts to be covered. What suffering!⁶⁴

The chronicler commented on Mary Mazzarello's warm welcome in Nizza Monferrato with terse words: "On her face are the marks of sorrow; but in the flash of her eyes is the smile, and on her lips the ever motherly word."⁶⁵

Mary Mazzarello herself wrote to the sisters in Montevideo on October 20, 1879: "So, my good sisters, if you wish to come to visit me, do not go to Mornese anymore, but here to Nizza [Monferrato]. Poor daughters! We are too far away to do that! It is better that we enter the Heart of Jesus and there we can tell each other everything."⁶⁶

The definitive abandonment of the College in 1880 aggravated her suffering: "The house of Mornese is now completely taken [from us], there is only Fr. Giuseppe there, who sees if it can be sold. Poor house! We cannot think of it without feeling a thorn in our hearts!"⁶⁷

1.7. Frequent deaths

The most painful thorns for her, however, were certainly the losses of many individuals to whom she was warmly attached. In her short earthly existence, Mary Mazzarello experienced the fragility of life through the deaths of at least 35 people dear to her in a span of only seven years. In order to make the emotional burden of this continuous mourning more conscious, the deceased are listed here chronologically up to the death of Mary Mazzarello herself.

On January 29, 1874, the first of the first eleven FMA died, the cook Maria Poggio. Her untimely death began to raise doubts in

⁶⁴ *Cronistoria* III 7.

⁶⁵ *Ibid* 8.

⁶⁶ *Letter* 27,5.

⁶⁷ *Letter* 37,9.

Mary Mazzarello about the deficiency of food, to which Mrs. Blengini had already drawn attention.⁶⁸

Quite suddenly, on May 15, at the age of 57, Fr. Domenico Pestarino, Mary Domenica's cherished spiritual director since childhood, died.⁶⁹

Seven days later, on May 22, the resident pupil Emilia Chiara passed away, and on June 5, Sr. Corinna Arrigotti, the first music teacher. The *Cronistoria* tells in tender detail that Don Bosco himself, together with Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, came for a few days to console his "afflicted daughters"⁷⁰.

On September 4, 27-year-old Fr. Giuseppe Cagliero died. He had succeeded Fr. Pestarino as spiritual director of the FMA.⁷¹ Therefore, the answer that Fr. Giacomo Costamagna gave Don Bosco when the latter asked him to go to Mornese to replace Fr. Giuseppe, is not surprising: "To do what? To die?"⁷² The chronicler added: "Let's hope – they say in Mornese – that he comes to us not to die, but to live."⁷³

When Sr. Rosa Mazzarello died on March 15, 1875, "one wonders again in the house if these deaths are not due to the excessive lack of food."⁷⁴

On February 9, 1876, 'the angel of death' took Sr. Antonia Cassini, a novice who was not yet 17 years old.⁷⁵ Mary Mazzarello expressed her sorrow for the young deceased in her letter to Fr. Giovanni Cagliero on April 5, 1876: "Who would ever have thought it? She seemed a colossus of health [...]. It is really true that death is like a thief and comes when we least expect it! This makes us think seriously."⁷⁶

⁶⁸ Cf. *Cronistoria* II 57.

⁶⁹ Cf. *ibid* 80-86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid* 86-89.

⁷¹ Cf. *database of the Salesian Society, Cagliero Joseph*, ASC B2324501.

⁷² *Cronistoria* II 107.

⁷³ *Ibid* 108.

⁷⁴ *Ibid* II 128.

⁷⁵ Cf. *ibid* 167, *Letters* 4,6.10 and 5,1.

⁷⁶ *Letter* 5,1.

On April 13, Sr. Maria Grosso, the novice mistress, left “the earth for heaven” at the age of 21. Her death had also caused great pain in the village; relatives and friends came from S. Stefano Parodi for her solemn funeral.⁷⁷

On August 16, Sr. Luigia Giordano succumbed to typhoid fever;⁷⁸ on October 4, Sr. Domenica Mina died at the age of 21;⁷⁹ and on November 11, 18-year-old Sr. Maria Belletti.⁸⁰

1877 brought mourning for Sr. Anna Succetti, deceased on March 24.⁸¹ Sr. Paolina Guala passed away on April 9;⁸² and Sr. Caterina Mazzarello died on May 14 in Alassio⁸³.

Therefore, already at their first meeting in August 1878, the FMA Superiors had established precise, detailed norms regarding the intercessions and Masses for the souls of deceased sisters.⁸⁴

At Nizza Monferrato, Mary Mazzarello had to mourn other deceased Sisters: Sr. Lucrezia Becchio, who died on March 11, 1879 in Mornese;⁸⁵ Sr. Maria Gariglio, who passed away on April 1 in La Navarre (France);⁸⁶ 25-year-old Sr. Maria Cappelletti, who gave her life on April 14 at Nizza Monferrato.”It is the first tomb to open in Nizza Monferrato, and people cast glances amid disenchantment and criticism at these weeping sisters behind a humble coffin [...].”⁸⁷

A week later, on April 21, Sr. Margherita Ricci died in Mornese. The chronicler commented: “How much pain and how much concern among the superiors because of such frequent deaths!”⁸⁸ On August 6, Sr. Mary Mazzarello, namesake of Mary

⁷⁷ Cf. *Cronistoria* II 180-182, *Letter* 6,4.

⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid* 217-218.

⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid* 226.

⁸⁰ Cf. *ibid* 237-238, *Letter* 9,9.

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid* 251.

⁸² Cf. *ibid* 252.

⁸³ Cf. *ibid* 256.

⁸⁴ Cf. *Minutes of the first meeting of the FMA Superiors*, *Mornese, August 1878*, document 93, in *Orme di vita* 242.

⁸⁵ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 18-20, *Letters* 22,2 and 23,7.

⁸⁶ Cf. *ibid* 26, *Letters* 21,5; 22,3.18 and 23,7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid* 32, *Letters* 22,3 and 23,7.

⁸⁸ *Cronistoria* III 42; cf. *Letter* 23,7.

Mazzarello and her disciple from childhood, breathed her last in the arms of Sr. Caterina Daghero at the house in Turin.⁸⁹

The news of the life-threatening health condition of her cherished and beloved father pained Mary Mazzarello greatly. On September 23, she was able to assist him as he lay dying in Mornese.⁹⁰

About a month later, on October 28, Sr. Albina Frascarolo exchanged “this earth for heaven,”⁹¹ and three weeks later, on November 19, Sr. Adelaide Carena.⁹²

Less than two months passed before the next death, that of Sr. Agostina Calcagno⁹³ on January 28, 1880, in Mornese: “Mother has known this daughter of hers since she was a little child. She accompanied her in her pure youth; welcomed her among her daughters in her twenties and now she is no more; how she feels it!”⁹⁴

One month later, on March 1, Sr. Emma Ferrero passed away in Nizza Monferrato after a long, painful illness and a life of suffering.⁹⁵ She was followed on April 21 by Sr. Maria Massola,⁹⁶ on May 21 by Sr. Ortensia Negrini,⁹⁷ on August 12 by the novice Sr. Anna Mora, who on the day of her death made her first vows into the hands of Mary Mazzarello.⁹⁸ On August 14, Sr. Emanuella Bonora had also been granted permission to make her first religious profession shortly before her death at home in the family that same

⁸⁹ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 66, *Letter* 25,10.

⁹⁰ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 95, *Letter* 27,12.

⁹¹ *Cronistoria* III 106-107; cf. *Letter* 27,3.

⁹² Cf. *Cronistoria* III 108-109.

⁹³ Cf. *Letter* 27,3.

⁹⁴ *Cronistoria* III 142.

⁹⁵ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 156. On p. 157 the following details can be read: “After all the effort of more than material assistance for several days at Sr. Emma’s side, and in spite of the pain she harbors in her heart, Mother spent the whole night on an armchair, because in the evening she had let Sr. Paolina Orlandi come to her room and spend the night in her bed – she herself was close to her and kept her company – thinking that it would make an impression on the sick sister to stay in the area where Sr. Emma had died shortly before.”

⁹⁶ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 172.

⁹⁷ Cf. *ibid* 181.

⁹⁸ Cf. *ibid* 222, *Letter* 47,4.

month.⁹⁹ Sr. Rosa Gusmaroli died on September 6¹⁰⁰ and Sr. Maria Cagliero, at barely 22 years of age, two days later, on September 8.¹⁰¹

On September 25, the life of 22-year-old Sr. Virginia Magone ended in Montevideo-Villa Colón – she was the first missionary to die in Uruguay. She had so desired a visit by Mary Mazzarello to South America.¹⁰² “Mother was moved by this one more than any other”¹⁰³ and Don Bosco made sure to publicize her edifying life in the *Bollettino Salesiano*.¹⁰⁴ Two weeks later, on October 7, Sr. Angela Allara died at her family home in Tonco,¹⁰⁵ and on November 21 Mary Mazzarello was personally present at the death of 20-year-old Sr. Innocenza Gamba in Chieri.¹⁰⁶ 1880 ended with mourning for Sr. Carmela Arata, who died in Turin on December 10,¹⁰⁷ while 1881 began with the passing of Sr. Luigina Arecco in Nizza Monferrato¹⁰⁸ on January 24, and that of Sr. Caterina Nasi in Turin on March 3.¹⁰⁹

Already at the end of February 1880, in Nizza Monferrato, Fr. Giovanni Cagliero had presented the first descriptions of the lives of the deceased sisters, something Don Bosco wanted because “the memory of the deceased is an eloquent lesson on the way to living and dying well”. “From the example of the deceased we also have new light on the characteristics of exemplary holiness, on the observation of the Constitutions, on the advantage of being prepared for the great call. [...] Whoever comes after us will say: ‘Like them, we too, and if them, why not us?’”¹¹⁰ The editors of Mary Mazzarello’s letters explain in summary the

⁹⁹ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 231.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *Letter* 47,4.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 245, *Letter* 47,4.

¹⁰² Cf. *Cronistoria* III 111, *Letter* 40,5 footnote 4.

¹⁰³ *Cronistoria* II 367, *Cronistoria* III 267-269: Virginia had grown up in the sewing school at Mornese and had taken vows at the age of sixteen. In 1879 she traveled to Uruguay with the second missionary expedition in which the FMA participated.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 277.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. *ibid* 252 and *Letter* 53: Letter from Mary Mazzarello to Fr. John Bonetti, editor of the *Salesian Bulletin*.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 274, *Letter* 51,1 and 55,4.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 281-282, *Letter* 55,4.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 326.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *ibid* 344.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid* 155.

reasons for the numerous deaths among the young FMA, who died at short intervals with an average age of only 25 years.”In the collection of letters we will often notice the recurrent news of the death of young sisters. The harsh air of Mornese, inadequate food, illnesses, the radically adopted self-sacrificial life deprived the Institute prematurely of these religious, but at the same time enriched it with heroic testimonies of virtue, sure guarantee of future apostolic vitality.”¹¹¹

2. From fragility to “religious resilience”

2.1. Devotion to God in one’s own fragilities

2.1.1. Sickness and death

In Mary Mazzarello’s life one can observe the ability to withstand stressful situations and overcome traumatic crises, something that psychology calls resilience. This ability, considered the opposite of vulnerability, can serve personal personality development. The inner resources that lead to psychological resilience can be personal or mediated at the social level.¹¹² In the particularly religious environment of Mornese, Mary Mazzarello was equipped with a firm, deep spirituality that strengthened her resilience. Some examples mark these spiritual attitudes that matured in her precisely in difficult situations.

In her study of Mary Mazzarello’s holiness, Eliane Anschau Petri emphasized that she “lived the painful trial [of typhoid] in faith, in hope, and in love. She participated in the sufferings of Christ on the cross; only He could make her suffering fruitful and give it meaning. According to witnesses, her room became a school of virtue. She was devoted to the will of God; she comforted her relatives; she had a good word for all who came to visit her.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Letter 5, footnote 2.

¹¹² Cf. *Resilienz (Psychologie)*, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resilienz_\(Psychologie\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resilienz_(Psychologie)) (21.08.2020).

¹¹³ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 154-155.

After the ‘crisis’ of typhoid fever in 1860, the more difficult moment of convalescence began for Mary Domenica.¹¹⁴ In the spiritual guide for Mornese, Piera Ruffinatto and Monica Menegusi meditate on this drastic experience of her life:

Physically weakened, she gives the impression of being spiritually debilitated as well, in the sense that ‘what used to be has passed away’. She will not be able to return to work in the fields, she is no longer her father’s right hand, and she must resign herself to being considered weak and fragile. This kind of ‘crisis’ can be more terrible than the illness itself, because it destroys all security and plans. In the face of this situation, however, Mary does not lose heart. She is a true believer, able to look away from herself toward God and His plans. Therefore, when she is able to go to church [again] for the first time, she prays thus: ‘Lord, if in Your goodness You would grant me a few more years of life, let me spend them unnoticed and, except by You, forgotten by all.’ This prayer marks the transition from the life before to the new life. Mary, in fact, no longer cares to be considered the ‘*bula*’ of the village, the first in everything [...] She discovered herself to be a fragile, needy, limited creature. She did not sadly retreat into her own weakness, but took a decisive step. She threw herself into the arms of God, saying to Him, “To You I entrust myself!” [...] The typhoid illness robbed her of her strength. It was the opportunity for her to have a profound inner experience of fragility, physical, psychological, spiritual weakness. It was the moment of uncertainty, of insecurity, of searching for the ultimate meaning of her existence. But it was also the moment of conscious acceptance of her creaturely poverty and reconstruction around ‘something’ new that became the unifying center of her life. The God of the trial had uprooted her from the ‘ground’ of her certainties and her ambitions. He revealed Himself to her as the only ground of life and demanded from her trusting surrender.¹¹⁵

Mary Mazzarello’s health remained precarious, as can be seen in a letter Sr. Elisa Roncallo wrote to her mother in July 1880: “The Mother Superior is better, though she could be in better condition,

¹¹⁴ Cf. *ibid* 155-159.

¹¹⁵ *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita* 54.

but the Lord wants her to be a great saint, so He always makes her suffer something.”¹¹⁶

Mary Mazzarello grew more and more in the certainty and at the same time conscious acceptance of her imminent death, a death Don Bosco himself had predicted for her, as already mentioned, with an unmistakable parable.¹¹⁷ This can be concluded from what she told Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto in January 1881 when she asked her to go to America with the third missionary departure. In order to console Sr. Giuseppina who, because of her affection for Mary Mazzarello, felt the imminent separation from her very strongly, she assured her with courageous serenity, “I want to accompany you as far as America, but I am devoted to the will of God. As I have already told you, I really must go this year, I feel it! The Lord, so good, has seen it worthy to hear my request by accepting me for the greater good of all.”¹¹⁸

Fr. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne’s account of Mary Mazzarello’s illness and death reveals a mature religious woman, not introverted but dedicated to the good of the sisters and young people until her last breath.”We have before us a woman of 44 years, physically worn down by toil and illness, yet with an alert, courageous spirit and joyful hope for the encounter with God beyond death, as well as wisely concerned for the future of her ever-growing and expanding family, which she looks upon with trepidation and trust.”¹¹⁹

The witnesses to her trial also confirmed that “[Mary Domenica’s] last illness had been a constant lesson of humility, piety, patience, and devotion. She was a true school of virtue. Even with so much suffering, she was serene and cheerful.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Elisa Roncallo to her mother, July 1880, in AGFMA 220 08, quoted in *Relazione di don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne sulla malattia e morte di madre Maria D. Mazzarello*, document 122, footnote 8, in *Orme di vita* 329-330.

¹¹⁷ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 354-355.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid* 316-317.

¹¹⁹ *Relazione di don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne sulla malattia e morte di madre Maria D. Mazzarello*, document 122, in *Orme di vita* 328.

¹²⁰ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 181.

2.1.2. Sadness

As a sensitive woman, Mary Mazzarello certainly always felt sadness on a human level for the losses and partings she so often experienced. However, the sources show that she was the first to try to overcome them. This can be seen, for example, in the section of the *Cronistoria* entitled “From Pain to Spiritual Benefit”, which describes Mary Mazzarello’s attitude in the face of grief over her deceased father.”The vivid pain [...] does not prevent her from making herself and those around her smile; faithful to the Crucified and to the sacred wounds of Jesus, as well as to the pains of the Virgin, she often turns to them for consolation, relief, and courage.”¹²¹

Mary Mazzarello felt the final detachment from the College on April 12, 1880 in a particular way.¹²² “She [Mary Mazzarello] herself goes to close the house that is dearer to her than all, and that she wants to preserve at all costs. But ... ‘this is the way Don Bosco wants it and so be it!’ she repeats to herself and to the sisters.”¹²³ Mary Mazzarello personally went to transport Sr. Ortensia Negrini, who had been confined to bed in Mornese for four years, in the carriage to Nizza Monferrato.¹²⁴ Her inner suffering can be well supposed from the heading ‘The Weeping of the Heart’ of the section of the *Cronistoria* that describes the definitive closing of the house at Mornese. Sr. Emilia Mosca expressed Mary Mazzarello’s feelings as well as her own:

For us sisters, it is a great suffering to have to give up this house where the Institute was born, where we spent the first years in the simplicity, love, and passion of spirit of the ancient Anchorites. How many dear and gentle memories we leave there! But God has decreed it so; the sacrifice is already accomplished, and Mornese is already abandoned.¹²⁵

¹²¹ *Cronistoria* III 96.

¹²² Cf. *ibid* 169.

¹²³ *Ibid* 167.

¹²⁴ Cf. *ibid* 168.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*.

Even sadder for Mary Mazzarello than the renunciation of the original house were certainly the losses of her sisters. Commenting on the death of Sr. Angela Allara on 7 October 1880, a few months before Mary Mazzarello herself died, the chronicler notes:

Mother Mazzarello suffers from this: all these young [sisters] who leave just like that when, formed in the Salesian spirit, they are preparing themselves with enthusiasm for a true apostolate ... it makes you think! Is it the privations? Certainly, they are not lacking; but how many more do the sisters impose on themselves, they who are so eager to suffer! And she blames herself, poor *Mother*; while the real reason lies solely in her longing for holiness. [...] It is such an intense spiritual life that the body cannot always endure it.¹²⁶

Describing Mary Mazzarello's meeting with Don Bosco in Turin at the end of November 1880, the author of the *Cronistoria* commented: "In fact, the deaths of her sisters are so far sure proofs of their sanctity; and this is a great consolation, so that even if the tender *Mother* cannot hide her pain at so many losses, neither can she conceal the sweet feeling of already having a beautiful crown of little saints in heaven."¹²⁷

Mary Mazzarello herself tried to cheer up the sisters in Carmen de Patagones in her letter of 20 December 1880: "My dear daughters, look, death comes now and again. Madame Death [comes] to greet us! Let us pray, let us pray, and let us be prepared."¹²⁸

2.1.3. Feeling of her own inadequacy

One form of fragility that she certainly also felt was her self-assessment of not being able to fully meet the competencies required in relation to her leadership role. Already in her first letter to Don

¹²⁶ *Ibid* 252.

¹²⁷ *Cronistoria* III 277.

¹²⁸ *Letter* 55,4.

Bosco, dated 22 June 1874, exactly one week after her official election as Superior General of the FMA Institute, Mary Mazzarello expressed to him her awareness of her own inadequacy. "Since I am not able to tell you all that my soul feels, I will ask with the greatest possible zeal your great protector [patron St. John the Baptist] to remedy my inability by obtaining for you from the Lord all those graces that you most desire. [...] Will you forgive my incapacity, which does not know how to express itself [...]." ¹²⁹

This self-awareness increased in the following years. Towards the end of the summer of 1880, the retreat had to be concluded with new elections of the General Council, since the first six-year term had expired. Mary Mazzarello, anticipating her death the following year, tried to convince the sisters to elect Sr. Caterina Daghero as Superior General for the following reasons: She herself would feel unable to uphold the religious spirit as in the early years. There were more educated, virtuous, and capable sisters than she for the leadership of the Institute and her death would not now permit them to work as much as was necessary to lead the Congregation. ¹³⁰ She saw in all clarity that "the Congregation now needs real superiors." ¹³¹ Nevertheless, on 29 August Mary Mazzarello was unanimously re-elected as Superior General "with the highest jubilation of all present, except herself, who appears rather wistful, yet reverently devoted to the will of God." ¹³²

Her conviction to leave the direction of the Institute grew stronger and stronger shortly after the third missionary departure of sisters to Uruguay and Argentina:

Besides the good sister Pacotto, in her humility and simplicity, she has also told others that she is unable to continue because of her 'ignorance'; that she gladly gives her life for the Institute and for some sisters who are not following the right path. The Superiors

¹²⁹ *Letter* 3,3 and 6.

¹³⁰ Cf. *Cronistoria* III 234.

¹³¹ *Ibid* 235.

¹³² *Ibid* 238-239.

address words of loving encouragement to her, but she remains with her spiritual clairvoyance: not sad, but strong and sure.¹³³

That Mary Mazzarello would have offered her life was confirmed in the apostolic process of Acqui by Sr. Eulalia Bosco and Fr. Giovanni Cagliero. Sr. Eulalia testified that “the Servant of God would have faced serious difficulties of a moral nature. In the Congregation she would have had sisters who did not act according to the spirit of the Institute and Mary Mazzarello, who would have wanted them to change their minds and not to harm the Congregation, would have offered her own life to God for the common good.”¹³⁴ Fr. Cagliero, who assisted Mary Mazzarello on the eve of her death, confirmed that

she gave me information about quite a few abuses which, according to her special insights and her great experience, compromised the religious spirit of the sisters, postulants, novices, and students of the College; and this because of a certain pronounced complacency in some, because of sensitive and too worldly friendships in others, and because of uncertain vocations so that after her death I was able to correct these serious defects and remove these obstacles for the good of the Institute ...¹³⁵

Finally, Mary Mazzarello, devoted to God’s will, was able to leave life in the serene certainty that she expressed on the last day of her life: “What a good father we have in Don Bosco! He is everything for the Institute, I am nothing! His work belongs to God and to Our Lady, and through his virtue and advice [...] the Institute will always have his support.”¹³⁶

¹³³ *Ibid* 361; cf. Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 171-174: The Devotion of Life.

¹³⁴ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 172.

¹³⁵ *Ibid* 173.

¹³⁶ *Cronistoria* III 388.

2.2. Encouraging fellow sisters in their fragilities

Precisely because she herself was the first to draw her inner strength from trust in God, Mary Mazzarello became the strong support of her sisters. Therefore, she never tired of instilling courage in them in the various situations of life, especially in the great challenges they had to face.

To Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto, who had become assistant to the postulants three months before, she wrote in May 1879: “Take courage on my part [...] thankful that I am far away, because if not I would really pull your ears. Don’t you know that melancholy is the cause of many evils?”¹³⁷ In fact, she was convinced: “One more thing I recommend to you. Always be cheerful, never sad, which is the mother of the lukewarm.”¹³⁸

On 9 April 1879, she recommended to Sr. Angela Vallese and to the sisters at the Montevideo-Villa Colón community, “Take courage, my good sisters, Jesus must be your whole strength. With Jesus, burdens become light, fatigue becomes easy, thorns are turned into sweetness.”¹³⁹

Six months later, she encouraged the same sisters with words that show the influence of Teresa of Avila, “The sisters all send you loving greetings and are longing for the time when they will meet you and embrace you in the beauty of Heaven. Courage then, my dearest in Jesus, let us remember that everything passes, so let nothing disturb us, since everything serves to acquire true happiness.”¹⁴⁰

The repeated mention of Paradise, an essential element of the piety of the time, reflects the strong root of their confidence, “Hope of heaven pervades the letters as a testimony to the general awareness that life is a pilgrimage toward its final consummation. It was not only the experience of the untimely death of many sisters that reminded us of this, it was [rather also] a lesson of life and a certainty

¹³⁷ *Letter* 24,2-3; cf. also *Letter* 47,12.

¹³⁸ *Letter* 27,11; cf. also *Letter* 31,1.

¹³⁹ *Letter* 22,21; cf. also *Letter* 37,11 and 64,5.

¹⁴⁰ *Letter* 26,7; cf. also *Letter* 39,2 and 55,1.

of faith that grew as Christian life matured.”¹⁴¹ Those who testified at the Acqui process in 1920 also confirmed that Mary Domenica was “very much in love with Paradise.”¹⁴²

Mary Mazzarello had been accustomed since her youth to the idea that paradise could be acquired through the cross. A few months before her death, Mary Mazzarello, who foresaw that Sr. Caterina Lucca would leave the Congregation, told Sr. Giuseppina Pacotto who was to lead the five missionaries in the third mission to Uruguay in early February 1881:

Take courage, Sr. Giuseppina; the moment will come when the cross will become heavy, very heavy for you. But then will be the time to press it to your heart and pledge fidelity to the good God! [...] Remember that the thorns we suffer for love of God will turn into roses! Always tell everything to Our Lady, sufferings and consolations, and you will find an infinitely more loving mother than the one you are now leaving in Italy!¹⁴³

Mary Mazzarello was able to encourage her sisters in an effective and convincing way because she herself gave them the testimony of her own courage, which, as Eliane Anschau Petri points out, became stronger precisely in sorrowful situations:

[...] it is interesting to underline that the virtue of fortitude characterized Mary Domenica in a profound way. She demonstrated it in the small actions of everyday life, but also in delicate and difficult situations of her life and in the history of the Institute: as shown during the illness of typhoid fever; in the face of physical discomforts such as toothache, earache, and deafness, in the last illness when she was afflicted by pleurisy; when the FMA were ridiculed in the town because of their life choice and in the face of the misunderstandings that arose because of the destiny of the College; in the painful experience of the numerous deaths of sisters

¹⁴¹ Fernández, *The Letters of Mary Domenica Mazzarello*, 283.

¹⁴² Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 180.

¹⁴³ *Cronistoria* III 361.

and girls at a young age, on the occasion of the death of Fr. Pestarino, which had caused great consternation among the FMA; when anticlericalism broke out over Don Bosco's works and the FMA Institute; in the case of Agostina Simbeni in Mornese and of Annetta Bedarida, the young Jewish woman at Nizza Monferrato. Mother Mazzarello, moreover, was never despondent or discouraged, especially not because of the poverty, which in the early days of the Institute can be called extreme, and the contradictions that were not absent. She never lost her calm, nor her serenity. On the contrary, she conveyed her courage to the others. She always endured her illnesses with devotion and fortitude, and in spite of her weak health she did not neglect the duties of her office. In her was observed an ever present 'balanced and constant humor'. She did not go into raptures over prosperous events and did not become depressed at adverse things.¹⁴⁴

2.3. Serenity in fragile situations

Her habitual fortitude of soul supported Mary Mazzarello above all in the difficult situations that made her and her sisters suffer. The *Cronistoria* testifies, for example in September 1877, that some who harbored old resentments against Don Bosco suggested rather pessimistic reflections and considerations regarding the activity of a Salesian and a Sister in the parish at Mornese. "They are so quick to move or die, these priests and these sisters of Don Bosco! ... And the Municipality loses its authority by ceding teaching to them and allowing it to be given in the College!"¹⁴⁵ Mary Mazzarello's response reveals her trusting calm, "Let us keep silent and pray", said Mother to someone who confided these matters to her. "Our Lady and Don Bosco know everything; we trust them and remain in peace."¹⁴⁶

With faith, courage, and generosity she also faced the inner suffering due to the transfer of the Institute from Mornese to Nizza Monferrato and the deep longing that united her to her family:

¹⁴⁴ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 193-194.

¹⁴⁵ *Cronistoria* II 277.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

She seems to once more feel the sufferings of Fr. Pestarino for that dying College, built more with prayers and tears than with stones and bricks. Moreover, always present to her are her dear, elderly parents ... whom she has to leave at the very moment when they need more consolation and help. But ... the Lord had ordained it so, through Don Bosco, and the sacrifice had to be made with merit and cheerfulness of heart. Therefore, Mother smiled at the thought of Nizza and made sure that the few sick or pretty much so people who remained with her in Mornese smiled too.¹⁴⁷

She also assured Sr. Angela Vallese of this in Montevideo-Villa Colón on 9 April 1879, “Already you will know from the sisters that I am no longer in Mornese, but here in Nizza. We must always make sacrifices, as long as we are in this world. We make them gladly and cheerfully. The Lord will note them all down and give us a beautiful prize for them in His time.”¹⁴⁸ The editors of her letters also stated that “Mother Mazzarello suffered greatly from the transfer of the Motherhouse from Mornese to Nizza. The experience was painful above all because it meant for her a total uprooting from her original home. Mother’s sober words reveal her will to face the new situation with courage and serene dedication.”¹⁴⁹

A month later a very difficult situation arose as a result of the aforementioned admission of the young Jewish woman Annetta Bedarida. In this regard, the chronicler emphasized the confidence of Mary Mazzarello and the first sisters in Our Lady’s help, “Never mind; the storm is only a reason to intensify prayer and overcome every fear with songs of confidence in the great Mother of God and the Institute.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid* 385.

¹⁴⁸ *Letter* 22,4.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, footnote 4.

¹⁵⁰ *Cronistoria* III 49.

3. Through fragility to holiness

3.1. *Maturing of virtue through difficulties*

Due to Mary Domenica's interior attitudes, matured in the midst of so many difficulties, it was possible to confirm 'the excellent degree' to which she lived the divine virtues of faith, hope, and love."The rock-solid foundation of her constant optimism and courage even in the face of difficult and problematic situations was her faith in God, who is love."¹⁵¹ "The more numerous the sufferings, difficulties, and uncertainties were, the more hope shone in her."¹⁵² "She embodied in herself the love that becomes mercy; the capacity to take care of the sufferings and weaknesses of others."¹⁵³

Hand in hand with the cardinal virtues, among which, in addition to the strength already mentioned, were Mary Mazzarello's justice, prudence, and moderation. These were revealed when the processes delved into her characteristic virtue, namely, humility, a virtue she lived in 'simplicity of heart'.¹⁵⁴ Deeply humble, she recognized her limitations and thus, not feeling up to the tasks associated with the office of Superior, she wanted to avoid leadership right from the beginning."But this does not make her depressed [...]. With healthy realism she is aware that all the miseries of this world can also be found in her. Entirely devoted to God and His Providence, she entrusts herself to Him so that He can make use of her poverty to carry out His plan of love."¹⁵⁵

Overcoming the fragilities she experienced, Mary Mazzarello managed to mature also in the virtues connected with her educational mission; in a particularly characteristic way, the virtue of joy. In almost all her letters she asked the sisters if they were joyful, not in the form of a purely human cheerfulness, that is, not only as a consequence of a joyful temperament. Following Don Bosco's example, she herself lived and wanted her sisters to have the joy of a poor and free heart immersed in the love of God, which helps to maintain a balanced cheerfulness, and this in turn helps the ability to

¹⁵¹ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 177.

¹⁵² *Ibid* 178.

¹⁵³ *Ibid* 183.

¹⁵⁴ Anselm Grün, *Semplicità del cuore*, in *Lettere*, p. 34-44.

¹⁵⁵ Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 196.

withstand even the fragile situations of life. In fact at the hour of her death, she left the sisters these words that are part of her testament, “Never rejoice too much, never grieve too much whatever may happen to you by way of joyful or sad things, but always rejoice in the Lord.”¹⁵⁶

3.2. Love for Jesus crucified

Mary Mazzarello’s constant joy matured through the painful experiences she had from her youth.”Maria Domenica had a passion for the Cross.”¹⁵⁷ In her life, the Eucharist and the contemplation of the Passion were united in the daily celebration of Mass. In Communion she was able to participate in the mystery of Christ the Savior, in which she was additionally immersed through the constant contemplation of the Passion of the Lord, both in personal meditation and in praying the Stations of the Cross, which helped her to accept the cross in the concreteness of life. The people who lived with her testified that she often meditated on the Passion of Christ and especially cultivated the devotion of the *Via Crucis*. She felt compassion through the sufferings of Jesus and tried to align herself with the suffering Jesus through an ascetic lifestyle. The realization that the Lord revealed His love above all on the cross awakened in her the desire to share His suffering on the cross and to unite herself with Him. She often said that if she met Jesus on the way to Calvary, “she would not let Him carry the cross alone.”¹⁵⁸

The sisters remembered that in her conferences, good nights, and even during her recoveries, she had spoken to them of the Passion of Jesus with the invitation to love Him, lead others to love Him, and suffer everything for love of Him.

Love for Jesus led her to become more and more fully conformed to Him. When she took the cross in her hand, which she had hanging around her neck and pointed her finger at the figure of Jesus, she said, ‘He here, then she turned the cross, and we here.’ In this way

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid* 200.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid* 261.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid* 262.

she made it tangibly clear that it is a matter of living crucified with our Lord. [...] Mary Mazzarello identified herself with Him by imitating His attitude of self-giving, offered herself to God for the salvation of young people.¹⁵⁹

3.3. Experience of the power of God in one's own weakness

“In the lives of the saints,” says Eliane Anschau Petri, “this Christian paradox comes true: in human weakness the power of God is revealed,”¹⁶⁰ precisely in the sense of what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “[...] God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God (1 Cor 1:27-30).”¹⁶¹

Mary Domenica, like all the saints, understood this important dimension of the Christian life, accepting her weaknesses and recognizing in them the power of God's grace that works through weakness.

Weakness or vulnerability can appear in many forms and dimensions. In Mary Domenica's spiritual experience, it manifests itself in her being a woman, even without education; in her physical fragility, especially after contracting typhoid fever; in the poverty of the beginnings of the Institute, in the feeling of inadequacy in relation to her mission as Superior of a religious institute; in the lack of understanding of the villagers, and in the limitations that were connected with her own character and personality.

Some of those who knew Mary Domenica in her role as Superior and had seen the extreme poverty at the beginning in the College at Mornese, could not imagine “that an Institute could move forward in the face of so many signs of fragility and vulnerability: little education, poverty of means and people, hunger, mortality.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid* 380-381.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid* 381.

¹⁶² *Ibid* 381-382.

God reveals His power by means of human weakness. When He encounters the humility of a human person, He can work great things even in limited creatures, characterized by smallness and vulnerability. [...] Mary Domenica was not ashamed to show herself weak and limited, she did not seek to soften her fragility before the Sisters. On the contrary, she gave herself to them precisely by sharing with them her limitations and encouraging the others not to be discouraged in the face of their own, but to put themselves in the attitude of those who want to overcome them [their limitations] with the grace of God and grow on a realistic path of holiness [...] [in order to be able to say with St. Paul, ‘for when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12,10)].¹⁶³

Mary Mazzarello did not avoid or diminish the magnitude of the weaknesses and difficulties. She invited her sisters to adopt effective attitudes in the face of life’s limitations and trials, that is, to honestly acknowledge them, to accept the realities as they were, and “to flourish in limitation, in weaknesses and difficulties” in order to grow spiritually.”The difficulties can thus become opportunities to have a deeper experience of resurrection.”¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

Fr. Ferdinando Maccono, the main biographer of Mary Mazzarello, wrote a work of 400 pages in 1947 which was published in 1958 under the title “The Spirit and Virtues of St. Mary D. Mazzarello”, wrote in his Preface that, according to a member of the Congregation of Rites, Mary Mazzarello’s cause was optimal because her life was exemplary, simple, and therefore imitable. Fr. Maccono himself confirmed this with the feedback of a parish priest who had given the Catholic Action women the biography of Blessed Mary Mazzarello to read.”They read it with pleasure and said, ‘This Blessed lived like us, she worked like us in the house and in the field.

¹⁶³ *Ibid* 382.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid* 382-383.

And we too, if we want, can do as she did, even if we are not called to found a congregation.”¹⁶⁵

In view of our current worldwide situation we can ask ourselves: Can Mary Mazzarello’s example help us in the concrete situations of our lives? Can Mary Domenica be imitated by us today?¹⁶⁶ And if so, in what way?

Certainly, the social and religious climate has changed radically. The exceptionally intense spiritual atmosphere of Mornese is a thing of the past. Certain spiritual attitudes of that time no longer correspond to the values of today. Nevertheless, we too are experiencing that despite constant scientific progress, threats to all humanity remain, making even our everyday, our highly developed life, fragile and vulnerable. This means that even today, in our own lives and in those of young people, we encounter certain fragilities that Mary Mazzarello and the first sisters at Mornese experienced: unpredictable illnesses, delicate relationships, painful family situations, sudden deaths, challenges of the most diverse kind.

For this very reason, despite the changes in spirituality, piety, and asceticism, Mary Mazzarello can still encourage us in the fragile situations of our personal lives and of the present times. She does so with the strength of heart, based on her personal intimacy with Jesus, with which she faced her fragilities. Surely she would say to us today the same thing she wrote to Sr. Virginia Piccono on 24 May 1880, exactly 140 years ago, “Never be discouraged no matter what disturbance you may encounter.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Ferdinando Maccono, *Lo Spirito e le virtù di Santa Maria D. Mazzarello. Confondatrice e Prima Superiora Generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Turin 1958, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Anschau Petri, *La santità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, 390-393.

¹⁶⁷ *Letter* 34,2.

