

# 1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR

---

Father Egidio VIGANÒ

## THE CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF SAINT MARY DOMENICA MAZZARELLO

**"REDISCOVERING THE SPIRIT OF MORNESE"** - Introduction. - A new gift of the Spirit to the Church: Need for clarifying the distinctive ethos; Preconceived ideas to be rejected. - In recalling the past we plan for the future. - Many persons and events go to make up a unified project: A few of the innumerable facts of history; names and dates worth pondering; Significant coincidences; A wide margin for initiative at Mornese. - The Salesian heritage of our Founder: Valdocco: the burdens of a Founder; Our Founder's uniqueness; Constituents of the Salesian heritage. - The distinctive contribution of Mother Mazzarello: Stars in the firmament of our Salesian origins; The distinctive light of Mother Mazzarello. - The deep significance of her death: Final perfecting touch; Solemn testament; The role of Co-foundress. - The spirit of Mornese: Frame of reference; Salient characteristics of the spirit of Mornese. - Features of the Mornese mystique: The august personage; Visible characteristics; The supporting ascetic and religious framework. - Under the spell of the Salesian identity at Mornese: A long journey; A clear task to be achieved; Conclusion.

*Dear Confreres,*

*The centenary of the death of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello presents us with the opportunity to journey back to our sources and gain a deeper knowledge of our identity and its history. It is also an invitation for us to strengthen the bonds of communion, service and collaboration with the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.*

*On the occasion of this important celebration I have written a spiritual monograph to our Salesian Sisters, and I feel it is a suitable and relevant document to offer to you also as food for reflection.*

*May the perusal of this letter help towards a clearer perception, if need be, of God's infinite goodness and marvellous intervention in the early days of our Salesian origins; may it also increase our knowledge of the grand Salesian principles that*

*have been such an inspiration in the past and are still a vitalising source of fruitful abundance for the common heritage of our Salesian Family.*

## **REDISCOVERING THE SPIRIT OF MORNESE**

**Letter of the Rector Major Father Egidio Viganò  
on the occasion of the centenary of the death of  
Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello**

*To Reverend Mother General, the Superiors  
and all Sisters of the Institute of the Daughters of  
Mary Help of Christians.*

On the occasion of the centenary of the death of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello (14 May 1881), you very kindly invited me, Mother Ersilia, to address the Sisters of your Institute on our common interests and spiritual bond and also to offer a few words of guidance. I accept your invitation with the greatest of pleasure. I feel at home as one of the family, and I share the joy of your festivities as a close spiritual relation. I am truly grateful.

As the successor of Don Bosco I also feel it my pleasant duty on this significant occasion to hearken to the urge of the Holy Spirit and help foster an ever greater understanding and love of our common spiritual heritage of labouring for the salvation of the young.

Mary Mazzarello and the spirit of Mornese are important not only for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians but also for us Salesians and indeed for all members of the Salesian Family, and to understand them better will increase the Salesian spiritual wealth of all.

I have read over again the letters of Mother

Mary that express with such simplicity and directness the essence of her spirituality. I have also meditated on the thoughtful and kindly annual practices or “strennas” suggested by Don Phillip Rinaldi to Mother Luisa Vaschetti from 1928 to 1931. I have endeavoured to recapture the wonderful fatherly spirit and encouragement they contain, for indeed this third successor of Don Bosco was not only a man of profound holiness: he also had a deep understanding of Don Bosco, having lived and matured under his care for many years and absorbed the authentic spirit of the Founder.

I consider your invitation so important that I cannot restrict my words to a mere formal greeting; indeed I have reflected and prayed for some time and have pondered deeply and at length on the values and import of the Salesian origins we share.

I have before me your motto for the centenary celebrations: “Let us rediscover the spirit of Mornese: it must inspire the renewal of our communities”. Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello will help us carry out this project with exceptional competence, for the *spirit of Mornese* is her own special masterpiece.

Mornese, like Valdocco, is holy ground for us, and we feel the longing for this land of our Salesian birth as we ponder its wealth of golden memories. Truly “with humble gratitude we believe” that our common vocation “came into being not only by human agency but by the providence of God”,<sup>1</sup> in other words, “by a gift of the Holy Spirit and through the direct intervention of Mary”.<sup>2</sup>

On the 50th anniversary of the saintly death of the humble Servant of God Mary Mazzarello (the foundation stone of your Institute laid by Don

1. Const. SDB 1.

2. Const. FMA 1.

Bosco himself), Don Rinaldi wrote to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and invited them to "study and perfect themselves in Don Bosco's interior life". He was deeply convinced that "Mary Mazzarello's great forte had been the wonderful acquisition of our Founder's interior life and apostolate, of which she proved a special guardian and a model to be imitated".<sup>3</sup>

3. Don RINALDI: *Strenna per l'anno 1931.*

### A NEW GIFT OF THE SPIRIT TO THE CHURCH

I should like to delve right down to the beginnings with a general observation on the divine intervention in our common vocation.

Vatican II invited us to return to the charismatic dimension of the religious life and establish its spiritual wealth. Institutes did not begin with theories and systems worked out by a thinker: they began with particular events and experiences lived out in docility to the Holy Spirit. Each of the many and varied "experiences of the Holy Spirit" in the Church has its own special function among the People of God; and thus every religious family has a distinctive character and a "particular style of holiness and apostolate"<sup>4</sup> that must be further developed and practised through the centuries according to the genuine spirit of its early days.

4. MR 11.

### Need for clarifying the distinctive ethos

The return to the sources that Vatican II speaks of not only refers back to the Gospel foundations of every religious family, but also to the numerous ways these latter are realised.<sup>5</sup> It follows then that for the further study and practice of its distinctive charisma, a religious family cannot limit itself to

5. v. LG 41-42, PC 1.

the Gospel alone. It is true of course that the Gospel is the common basis for every religious family; but this basis needs to be further clarified, specified and detailed according to the special experience of the Holy Spirit as lived in each particular Institute. The Church has a real concern that this distinctive ethos and mission be preserved<sup>6</sup>, for it is a gift from the Lord. The Gospel is the absolute and supreme rule for all<sup>7</sup>, and for each religious family the proximate and binding pledge is the spiritual and apostolic project of its Founder<sup>8</sup>.

The history of our Salesian birth in the Church is linked to the dawn of a new industrial and technical era. The gift entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit has the beauty and richness of a religious novelty: we are called to be for tomorrow's world the witnesses and bearers of the permanent values of a radical *sequela Christi* in a secularised and pluralistic society. It is urgent that we renew our awareness of such an important mission so as to be equal to the task of dealing with this cultural transition without being tainted by the opinion of those who maintain that the new emerging culture means the end of religious life.

It is unthinkable that the Holy Spirit at Valdocco and Mornese envisaged such a restricted existence — to end at the year 2000! On the contrary, history throughout the centuries makes it clear that great founders have been raised up precisely at the right times for specific problems; their work is future-oriented; in every century they emphasise for us one of the most important consequences of the paschal mystery — that Christ is indeed the true Lord of history.

6. PC 2b.

7. PC 2a.

8. PC 2b.

## **Preconceived ideas to be rejected**

We should reject certain fashionable preconceptions that some pundits of the religious life mouth so facilely.

- One of these theories would have us believe that all religious life should be measured by the yardstick of monasticism. Religious life is shown in its plenitude in the ancient monastic models. Later forms imply willy-nilly some sort of decadence. The challenge of our new era only shows how unstable are the Institutes of the active life and how they have dimmed the clarity of the consecrated life. If they are not to become defunct they must set their sights on a new monasticism.

- The opposing theory maintains that the religious life began as a kind of embryo that was to grow and develop throughout the centuries. The recent accelerated changes speeded up development and full maturity is now achieved in the Secular Institutes. These latter are the final and perfected stage of the religious life. Thus all the various historical forms of religious life are now outmoded: and hence our present-day crisis.

It is immediately obvious that neither of these two theories takes stock of the singular workings of the Holy Spirit in the many charisms of the different Founders.

Our theoreticians would have us believe that there is a one and only basic charism for the consecrated life (either a finished product or a charism in embryo); that the signs of the times require that our two Congregations should change course towards whichever ideal appeals to us: a kind of monasticism or some sort of secular institute.

Our own point of departure, however, is a very different one indeed. We are in all humility absolutely convinced that our evangelical way of life is especially valid for the future for the simple reason that it bears within itself a new kind of gift of the Holy Spirit that gives the religious life a unique adaptability to modern changes. Furthermore it is our experience (borne out also by our many-faceted and flourishing Salesian Family) that there is no opposition between the various Institutes and forms of consecrated life: rather is there a wonderful complementarity and a consoling emulation in the service of Christ. This conclusion is a help to greater fidelity and a spur to deeper understanding and appreciation of the values of our vocation.

It is just as well to be aware of these two outlandish hypotheses. Even if they insinuated themselves into our minds and remained merely at the theoretical level they would play havoc with the important values the centenary is celebrating. These opinions are not just inventions to prove a point: unfortunately their existence is only too real.

### **IN RECALLING THE PAST WE PLAN FOR THE FUTURE**

A hundred years ago the Mornese of 1881 was wrapped in a thick mist for us; we looked at it from afar with sadness; it was a place where we paid our respects at the tombs of the departed. Today the sun has dispersed the mist, the soil is sacred and productive and full of stimulating memories. In its beauty now Mornese reaches out to the future and fills the heart with a nostalgia as for our native land. The life born there over

a hundred years ago has developed and flourishes apace.

Mornese can truly claim that the future has its roots in the past. We recall the past (certainly with a touch of nostalgia, for we are human and have our feelings); but we have no intention of "holing up" in the past: we intend to refuel for the future.

We are recalling a death in 1881: actually we are referring to a birth; the event took place at Nizza: yet we think of Mornese; Mary Domenica's short span of life was a mere fortyfour years and five days: but our thoughts span the centuries. How so?

The reason comes easily to one who believes in a new gift of the Holy Spirit. We see a rich and vital heritage with such tiny beginnings in the Church. The death of Mary Domenica is celebrated, not mourned, because it bespeaks the sum total of all her life in the Spirit.

• *The dawn of 14 May 1881 began Mother Mary's birthday in heaven.* She gave her earthly life as a sacramental donation. To give oneself is the greatest love of all and Mother Mary offered herself as a victim for the future of the Institute. There are some deaths (like Christ's death on the cross) that proclaim the abundance of the heart's virtues: they are not the last drop from the cup of life but the climax of a life rich and fruitful.

• *Nizza Monferrato was the actual place of Mother Mary's death.* It has its own interesting history and its own excellent values. The tiny plant that took root and grew in Mornese was transplanted in Nizza and flourished there — and that is the main reason why Nizza is dear to us. At

Nizza we experience gratitude, admiration and involvement, but we miss the countryside with its bell-towers. Still, from Nizza the campanile of Mornese is visible.

● *Mother Mazzarello died young*, after only eight years and some nine months of profession as a daughter of Mary Help of Christians. Yet her life evinced a *singular experience of the Holy Spirit* that remains vital with the passage of time and across the centuries will always refer back to her. This is how we can claim to be recalling yesterday to plan for tomorrow.

● *An experience of the Holy Spirit*, such as the Salesian heritage of Don Bosco, does not finish developing with the death of the Founder and his main collaborators. Indeed at that moment it is still in its early stages like a healthy bouncing babe to whom the Holy Spirit has given a special character so that it can grow and develop in harmony with the Body of Christ, the Church, which is itself in continual development. The Holy Spirit helps his new gift to develop with the aid of co-workers, disciples and successors, lavishing on them all the means necessary to keep them loyal participants in the original charism.<sup>9</sup>

● *The "Salesian experience" did not happen once and for all* and in a uniform way — neither at Valdocco nor at Mornese; it is no static marble monument: it is something living and inspired by the Holy Spirit; it has an unforeseeable and vital ability for transplantation, adaptation and growth — always faithfully developing the distinctive features of the same well-defined character.

The Council spoke of returning to our sources. It wanted to make sure that the initial charism

evolved in a stable and characteristic way. The original source is our frame of reference to check that the water is clear and pure from the spring and not tainted by a long journey downstream.

● *Pausing to meditate on Mother Mazzarello's death* will give us fresh energy for the future. We return to the past and contemplate the driving afflatus of the Holy Spirit in Mornese a century ago that set in a feminine context the Salesian charism given Don Bosco. We revisit the sources of the Spirit's gift to see to its genuine development and adaptation in other times and climes.

● *Furthermore we are celebrating our communion with the Church triumphant.* SAINT MARY DOMENICA MAZZARELLO LIVES NOW WITH SAINT JOHN BOSCO. In glory they continue to tread the paths of history and are present in both our Congregations and indeed in the whole Salesian Family. In a vital and glorious way they link our origins, our present and our future. They are part of the mysterious communion between the pilgrim Church and the Church triumphant. "We cherish the memory of those in heaven not only because of their good example: we seek rather that by the exercise of fraternal charity the union of the whole Church in the Spirit may be strengthened".<sup>10</sup> So this centenary becomes the extraordinary expression of the wonderful and unfathomable reality that links yesterday's Founder and Co-foundress to their sons and daughters of today and tomorrow; it involves them in the singular and many-faceted experience of the Holy Spirit that flowed from the heart of Don Bosco, and is lived now in glory by Mary Domenica together with Don Bosco — and shared by their sons and daughters as they work with faith

10. LC 50.

and courage journeying through the world and treading the paths of history.

There is no wallowing in nostalgia nor mere regrets. For us the communion of saints means that we go questing with them in the past for motivation and vigour for the future; we seek out from those early days the important principles of the Spirit's special gift and launch this charism into the future with all its overflowing vitality for development.

## **MANY PERSONS AND EVENTS GO TO MAKE UP A UNIFIED PROJECT**

### **A few of the innumerable facts of history Names and dates worth pondering**

Among the memorable names we meet with in our reflections are Mamma Margaret at the Becchi and Papà Giuseppe at Mornese; then there were the poor working families that belonged to a Christian countryside soon to die away; and of course there were Giovannino and Main, who both chose a way of life different from their companions'.

John Bosco became a priest and was called to weave a very special cloth. He had the help and advice of Don Giuseppe Cafasso and Pope Pius IX. Mary Domenica Mazzarello also felt the call to something special and finally became Don Bosco's collaborator. She too was helped and advised — by Don Pestarino first and then by Don Giovanni Cagliero.

1854 saw the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. At Valdocco the Sodality of Mary Immaculate was founded, and at Mor-

nese the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. The chief protagonists were Dominic Savio and Angelina Maccagno.

**1859:** the inauguration of the Society of St Francis de Sales at Turin.

**1860:** Mornese is ravaged by typhoid fever. Mary Domenica feels called to a new way of life.

**1862:** Don Pestarino becomes a Salesian with Don Bosco. From Turin he brings the Founder's first message to Mary Domenica and Petronilla: "Keep up your prayers by all means; but throw yourselves completely into your good works especially for the young".

It was in the sixties that Don Bosco began his campaign of devotion to Mary Help of Christians and built the Valdocco basilica. (Already back in 1843 a chapel dedicated to Mary Help of Christians had been opened on 24 May in the Mazzarelli municipality.)

**1864:** Don Bosco arrives for the first time at Mornese with his boys on one of his famous autumn hikes. Mary Domenica is struck by his sanctity.

**1865:** A start is made on the famous college of Mornese (which had been planned as a Salesian college for boys).

**1866:** Don Bosco makes it known that he is also called to found a Congregation for women.

**1869:** Don Bosco, again at Mornese, leaves four important counsels for the Daughters of Mary Immaculate now living in community in a house built by Don Pestarino: awareness of God's presence; love of work; practice of kindness and joy; zeal for the salvation of souls.

**1871:** Don Bosco, on the advice of Pius IX and with the consent of his young Superior Council, decides on the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It is interesting to note that Don Bosco wished to have the advice of his Council and that he gave them a month to think things over; only after this period of spiritual discernment did he ask their opinion.<sup>11</sup> It was clearly not only a matter of great importance but also a decision that impinged on the life and responsibilities of the Salesian Congregation.

**1872:** Mary Domenica and fourteen other young women consecrate themselves to God: eleven by religious profession and four by receiving the habit. Don Bosco inducts Mary Domenica as their Superior, remarking that the real Mother Rectress was Our Blessed Lady herself.

**1874:** Sudden death of Don Pestarino. In the preface of the first FMA Constitutions Don Bosco was to ask the Sisters to pray for the soul of Rev. Domenico Pestarino, first Director of the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians and instrument of the Lord in the foundation of the Institute.<sup>12</sup> Esteem for Mother Mary grows more and more and the Institute expands in an amazing way, opening up new houses and extending its work abroad to the missions.

**1879:** Transfer to Nizza Monferrato and farewell to Mornese.

**1880:** Mother Mary re-elected as Superior General by unanimous vote.

**1881:** Mother Mary tells one of her young missionaries, "I have offered myself as a victim to the Lord", and Don Bosco confirms her statement,

11. v. MB X 597.

12. Cronistoria dell'Istituto delle FMA III 432: Rome FMA 1977.

saying, "The victim was pleasing to the Lord and accepted by him".

**1881 (14 May):** Mother Mary went to God.

This brief selection of persons and facts makes it obvious that the weaver at the loom was greater than Mother Mary or Don Bosco — in fact no less than the Holy Spirit himself. Don Bosco became the Founder of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians through a design that he had not envisaged and that was manifested to him before any such project had even occurred to him. He committed himself to the work only in docility to the clear signs of God's explicit will; and Mother Mary Domenica Mazzarello became the Co-foundress not through any choice of her own but through a web of providential circumstances that drew her step by step to place her talents in all humility at the service of a project willed by God: she prepared herself for God's work by a number of humble initiatives along the same lines as those at Valdocco.

This brief glance at our origins also makes it clear that the Holy Spirit revealed his designs to Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello through the explicit intervention of Mary. The Holy Spirit made use of persons and events to set in motion his important work.

### **Significant coincidences**

The divine Weaver also included a number of human conditions and situations in the design of his cloth; all went to form the general pattern.

There are surprising similarities to be seen in the early days of Mornese and Valdocco, and they

make it understandable how Mother Mary felt so much in common with Don Bosco.

Both saints belonged to the Piedmontese countryside of simplicity, poverty and hard work. Both in their own ways had robust and practical temperaments; both were active and full of initiative; both influenced and attracted others, had penetrating intuition, reliable balanced judgement and a powerful spiritual drive that found expression in action.

Both John and Mary Domenica had the practical nature of country workers and the mature Christian sagacity that belonged to both field and workshop — a heritage to be preserved and passed on to future ages.

Both experienced a burgeoning love and predilection for young people in need: Don Bosco from his dream at nine years of age, and Mary Domenica at eighteen, when she offered herself to Our Blessed Lady, catechised children and their mothers and became at twentyfive the head of the small group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate working for girls in need.

Our Lady's intervention was clear in each case. The first members of both Congregations of Mary Help of Christians were all trained under the aegis of Mary Immaculate. Don Bosco was the patriarchal Founder of the Salesian charism for the young; yet his founding efforts for the Institute of Mary Help of Christians left plenty of room for the intervention and active participation of Mary Mazzarello and her companions.

## **A wide margin for initiative at Mornese**

Don Bosco knew that the pioneering Daughters of Mary Immaculate, under the guidance of Don Pestarino, had had a solid spiritual formation that had its roots in the widespread influence of his friend the Genoan theologian Don Frassinetti. They were a group of young women who followed Christ in a way that gave Don Bosco confidence that they would fit in well with his own special charismatic project. Mary Mazzarello's first contact with Don Bosco was on 8 October 1864, and she was attracted to the saintly Founder as a compass needle to a magnet.

During those foundation years Don Bosco's visits to Mornese were somewhat sporadic — some fifteen rather short visits in all; but he made the most of them and knew how the young community was progressing. He gave them suitable advice (also on practical matters), received each of the Sisters individually, addressed the novices and the superiors and helped them in their formation. He was unable to remain for long because of his full-time commitment as a Founder preparing the groundwork of a permanent heritage in the Church.

As a matter of fact he had found a practical and efficient way of being always present at Mornese: he personally chose a well-equipped Salesian priest and appointed him his delegate. Don Pestarino was his first proxy; he had been at Mornese from the very beginnings and then returned in 1862 full of the spirit of Don Bosco. After his death Don Giovanni Cagliari was appointed Don Bosco's longstanding lieutenant, with the title of Director General. He had a marked influence on the Sisters, for he was a man of many talents, a powerful

personality and was ever enthusiastic regarding the experience of the Spirit lived at Valdocco.

I would suggest two reasons why Don Bosco never went to stay at Mornese to initiate the formation of the little group of young women as he had so laboriously done with his first disciples at Valdocco. First of all, his charismatic experience was by now matured and authoritatively recognised by the Church and hence was a safe frame of reference for the incipient "feminine spiritual experience" so close to it by "affinity and consanguinity". The second reason was that Don Bosco had providentially found that little group of young women under the leadership of Mary Domenica Mazzarello already established and trained by the Holy Spirit (who had guided and was still guiding all their undertakings); and our Founder was well persuaded that the little community, under the direction of a suitable and holy priest, was well able, in its own unique and feminine way, to imbue its holiness and work for girls with the spirit of Valdocco.

### **THE SALESIAN HERITAGE OF OUR FOUNDER**

To present Mother Mazzarello properly and to understand her secret in building up the spirit of Mornese, it is necessary to refer back to the original experience of the Holy Spirit begun and lived by Don Bosco. No one can understand Mornese without understanding Valdocco; and this is all the more important when we bear in mind why the Spirit of the Lord had Mary Domenica meet Don Bosco: the event was not just an historic moment connected with the origins of the Institute, but a presage of a future project in which history would see both

sons and daughters vocationally united and engaged in the same service to working class youngsters in need of help.

Now I should like to touch on a matter of particular importance to us today. I wish to examine with sincerity and objectivity our mutual communion in the charismatic heritage of our origins; and I am convinced that this will make us more faithful to both Don Bosco and Mother Mary Mazzarello. So I beg you to bear with me, dear Sisters, as I spend some time on the touchstone of our whole spiritual family, namely the *Salesian heritage left by Don Bosco, his experience of the Spirit,*<sup>13</sup> his *charism*.

13. MR 11.

I already had the opportunity of addressing you on this topic on 20 April 1975 during your 16th General Chapter. Here I wish to tackle the subject from another angle: to examine the matter of communion and the elements that make up the spirit of Mornese.

My first remark touches on the original "Salesian experience", the "new gift of the Spirit" at Valdocco. In the past this "experience of the Spirit" was referred to generally as the "spirit of Don Bosco", the "spirit of Valdocco", or the "Salesian spirit". Such expressions used to comprise all the various aspects and different elements of Don Bosco's charismatic experience as a Founder. Today, however, some scholars prefer to distinguish in the sum total of the Founder's experience the "charism" and the "spirit". They see the "charism" as God's initiative in the specific gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the "spirit" as the Founder's human response in heart and mind together with the various ascetic, moral, pedagogical and pastoral aspects with which he expressed this response.

These distinctions are clear enough in theory

and are useful in themselves; but they run the risk of presenting our traditional word "spirit" (that is, the spirit of Don Bosco, the spirit of Valdocco, the spirit of Mornese) in an over-restricted sense, not taking account of all the objective elements found in the "living experience". Hence I prefer to use the broader expression *Salesian heritage of Don Bosco* instead of "charism" or "spirit"; and by that I mean what today is called "the charism of the Founder".<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> In the documents of Vatican II the expression "charism of the Founder" does not appear. Some of its elements are described, but the terminology used is "spirit of the Founder", "original inspiration of the Institute", "spirit and special scope of the Founder", "particular vocation of the Institute", "distinctive character", "original inspiration of the Institute" (v. LG 45, PC 2 20 22, CD 33 35(i) 35(ii), ES 16(ii)). We refer to the Latin text: some of the translations were hurried and inaccurate.)

The first official use in the magisterium documents of the term "charism of the Founder" is found in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* of Pope Paul VI. The document speaks of renewal "according to the charisms of the Founders", that is, putting into practice whatever the conciliar documents say regarding fidelity "to the spirit of the Founders, to their evangelical intentions, to their holy example" (ET 11).

An authoritative clarification of Paul VI's "charism of the Founder" is found in the document *Mutuae Relationes* in which a general description of such a charism is given. This shows that several aspects converge both at the time of founding and in the subsequent genuine living traditions: "The very charism of the Founder appears as an 'experience of the Spirit' transmitted to his disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed by them in harmony with the Body of Christ continually in the process of growth...This *distinctive character* also involves a particular style of sanctification and apostolate which creates its particular tradition, with the result that one can readily perceive its objective elements" (MR 11).

Hence we have avoided terminology that would restrict the meaning of "the charism of Don Bosco" and the "spirit of Mornese".

## Valdocco: the burdens of a Founder

We know that Don Bosco was raised up by God to initiate a special "experience of holiness" and apostolate for the young. He was clearly aware that he was called to be a Founder (and this was exceptional in the history of Founders). His was an undertaking of the most arduous kind. Other Founders of religious institutes were helped by collaborators mature in virtue, knowledge and experience; Don Bosco had to train his helpers from their early years as mere boys. It is true that he had an extraordinary helper in Pope Pius IX, whom he used call "our Co-founder";<sup>15</sup> but Pius IX's help was more in the line of clear and authoritative discernment, choosing the Congregation's particular form of life, big-hearted and courageous planning of a multiple spiritual family, encouragement and resoluteness in the face of all difficulties. But as to the practical problems of forming a pioneering group of faithful disciples to accompany him in his daily vicissitudes, Don Bosco had to go in search of them and educate them over a long period and with infinite patience.

15. MB X 6.

"I need young men willing to help me with the Oratory. Would you be willing to be my helpers?"<sup>16</sup>

16. MB III 548-550.

He undertook this lengthy and fatiguing formation with his usual kindness, and was always sustained by the deep conviction that he was conforming to an explicit divine project. "I hardly know how things came about. But this I do know: God willed everything".<sup>17</sup> "I told the Holy Father all I am telling you now. No one else has ever known about these things. Someone might say, 'These

17. MB XII 78.

things all redound to the glory of Don Bosco!’ Not at all. I shall have to render an exact account of how I have carried out God’s will. I have always gone ahead with this design made known to us by the Lord, and this has been my one and only aim in all I have ever done. For this reason I have never allowed myself to be intimidated by adversities, persecutions, serious problems; and the Lord always stood by me”<sup>18</sup>.

18. MB VI 664.

There was a time when Don Bosco sought to escape from the responsibilities of being a Founder, but he had to change his mind; he then threw his whole heart and soul into the task — but only in obedience to God’s will. We know that he dissuaded a certain Don Allievi from founding a Congregation<sup>19</sup> because he did not see in the circumstances a sufficient and explicit supernatural calling.

19. MB VII 49.

Left to his own inclinations, he would have entered a religious Institute. He did not do so because he saw that God had other designs for him. In his own words, “The Virgin Mary appeared in a vision and pointed out to me the field of my labours. Her plan was well-devised and complete and she could not and would not free me from it. I went to great pains to discover if there were any religious Institutes in which I would be able to carry out my mandate: it was soon plain to me that there were none. So I did not enter any Order or Congregation and remained alone. I found trustworthy companions. As instructed in my dreams I had to go in search of young associates, choose them carefully, instruct and train them”<sup>20</sup>.

20. MB III 247.

It is plain that Don Bosco was a Founder in pure docility to the Holy Spirit, accepting a design made known to him by the Holy Spirit. He was

the bearer of a "new gift" that was to embellish Christ's Church: this was his task in history, and in it lies his grandeur, his transcendence.

### **Our Founder's uniqueness**

Father Ricceri once remarked that "to speak of our unique charism does not mean that we consider Don Bosco a thinking genius who opened up new avenues of thought in the sciences that treat of God and man. What we look for in our father is the uniqueness of the Founder, in other words, his remarkable and fruitful collaboration in developing and spreading the gift of the Holy Spirit throughout the world for the salvation of the young".<sup>21</sup>

21. ASC 272.

The passage of time makes it more and more obvious that we are dealing with a truly remarkable saint. We can now firmly state what in the past we only conjectured, namely, that Don Bosco was responsible for a "great spiritual current" in the Church, and his living traditions and practical concepts have laid the foundations of a genuine and creative new school of holiness and apostolate.

In the history of the Church foundations are many, but genuine "new spiritual currents" or schools of thought that permeate the world with a special Gospel inspiration are indeed rare. In this perspective Don Bosco's importance looms larger and larger, and ever-increasing light is shed on the personalities of the saints formed in his tradition, such as St Mary Domenica Mazzarello, St Dominic Savio, Blessed Michael Rua and others. Similarly he enlightens and guides the whole growing Salesian Family — so that Paul VI was moved to speak of "a Salesian happening" in the Church.

Certain facets of our Founder's dynamic personality were responsible for his unique and striking spiritual current; they emanated from that "first spark", that brilliant intuition, that new concept implanted by the Holy Spirit deep down in his personality. It coloured his whole life and was never to leave him.

Right from the clear indications of his first dream as a nine-year-old, Don Bosco carried within him the overpowering conviction that he was a sign and bearer of Christ's love for the young. This spark of the Holy Spirit, this central trait in his personality, developed in him certain characteristics that showed forth his uniqueness.

- *He had a distinctive afflatus.* Don Bosco saw no other way to fulfil his calling except by being a Founder. He was practically obliged to embark on a brand new kind of sanctification and apostolate, a personal interpretation of the Gospel and the mystery of Christ with a special adaptation to the signs of the times. This originality meant a new "fusion" of the common elements of Christian holiness that was well balanced, congenial and regulated; the virtues and the means to holiness had their own proper place, quantity, symmetry and beauty that were characteristic.

- *He achieved an extraordinary form of holiness.* It is difficult to establish the level of this holiness, but it cannot be identified with the holiness of a saint who was not a Founder (e.g., St Joseph Cafasso). Don Bosco's extraordinary holiness invested him with something of the novelty of a precursor. It drew people to him; it made him a referral point for agreements and differences; it made him a pa-

triarch, a prophet. He was never a recluse, but rather a catalyst; he carried the future in his hands.

● *He worked indefatigably to increase his spiritual family.* If the “experience of the Holy Spirit” is not transmitted, received and then lived, cherished, perfected and developed by the Founder’s direct disciples and their adherents, there is no founding charism. This is of basic importance. Don Bosco possessed his own proper gifts and they remained with him until his death; through a divine disposition they made him a fruitful centre of radiation and attraction, a “giant of the spirit”, as Pius XI called him; and he bequeathed to us a rich and well-defined spiritual heritage.

Thus it is plain that certain qualities are possessed by a Founder that are not possessed by his saintly collaborators (we are not speaking of degrees of perfection in charity); such qualities are: a distinctive afflatus, a sanctity that manifests itself in an extraordinary way, and a remarkable ability to attract followers. These qualities really shone in Don Bosco.

### **Constituents of the Salesian heritage**

The “new gift” and the “design made known by the Lord” to Don Bosco constituted *a spiritual and apostolic experience* lived initially at Valdocco; it grew and acquired further clarity through the years; it flourished in innumerable new places and flowed in the passage of time in an adequately defined and regulated tradition. The Holy See’s document on relations between bishops and religious is very apposite here: it speaks of “an experience of the

Spirit transmitted to disciples to be lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ in constant development".<sup>22</sup> This "Founder's heritage" is manifested in the "special style of sanctification and apostolate" lived according to its "particular tradition" that allows its elements to be adequately visible and objectively distinguished.

What then are the constituents of the special holiness and apostolate of Don Bosco?

Father Ricceri pointed out to us that our Special General Chapter gave a practical reply to this question; along these lines then we set out the main points of the charismatic and spiritual afflatus of Don Bosco<sup>23</sup> as follows.

● *A unique covenant with God* which gives Don Bosco the air of a patriarch of a new spiritual family. It is a case of envisaging the mystery of God as of a Father who has special designs in our regard; we must ponder and listen to him according to this covenant, experience his presence as we follow in Christ's steps, seeing our Saviour from a singular point of view that emphasises his infinite goodness, peace and joy, his untiring concern for our salvation, his deep feeling for his little ones and the poor, and his love of the Father that is inextricably linked with the redemption of mankind.

It is not easy to define the special qualities of this covenant. We have to perceive and describe it according to the practical way Don Bosco lived and witnessed to the *virtues of the covenant*, in other words, his faith, his hope and his charity. The first element in his "experience of the Spirit" is this singular work of God realised in a God-centred interior life constantly animated and sustained by the grace of unity; this welds together into

22. MR 11.

23. v. ASC 272.

a pastoral charity, love of God and love of neighbour that are both characterised by predilection of the young.<sup>24</sup>

● *A second element is God's mandate to participate in a specialised and active way in the mission of the Church, namely, a practical mandate from the Father through Christ and his Spirit.* "The mission can never consist solely in the activity of the exterior life... in fact the Church's mission is by its very nature nothing else than the mission of Christ continued in the history of the world. It consists principally in sharing in the obedience of him who offered himself to the Father for the life of the world".<sup>25</sup>

We know that for Don Bosco Mary is the constant motherly intermediary of this mission, and she directs it preferentially towards the needy youth of the masses. He was chosen to be the friend of the young, their guide, their father, their master. He was assigned a special place in the Church as "missionary of the young", particularly of the poor and needy.

"Mission" is not made up directly of external action or material and human drive, for that is not what a charism is. It is the authoritative mandate that stirs up in the heart, with the help of a God-centred interior life, a special attitude of docility and obedience. Such an attitude constantly illumines and nourishes the awareness of a particular ministerial function in the Church, namely, to be "signs and bearers of the love of God to the young",<sup>26</sup> to "work among youth to help them attain full maturity in Christ".<sup>27</sup>

● *A third element is a distinctive mentality and spiritual life.* This means using our human talents,

24. v. Practice for 1981: Don Bosco's interior life.

25. MR 15.

26. Const. SDB 2.

27. Const. FMA 1.

our temperaments, our hearts, our communion, our special environment and style of life, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and Don Bosco, so that we give an adequate response to our covenant and our mission.

This third element is complex and full of important values; it is difficult to define; it is transmitted in a truly vital way; it implies great kindness, friendliness and understanding (in dealing with the young it is not enough to love them: we must make ourselves loved by them). It implies also that we be contemplatives in action, practising "work and temperance"; keenly ascetical too, since loving-kindness is impossible without a prudent mortification of the senses to guard purity. It implies an optimism inspired by the humanism of St Francis de Sales; courage in matters ecclesial, and in social matters common sense, so that our Catholicity will be active, without human respect, without extremist ideologies; and it also implies an ardent and creative zeal for the salvation of the young in accordance with Don Bosco's "Give me souls; away with all else".

● *Another element is the so-called Preventive System*, our distinctive principles and methods of practising the apostolate among the young. To translate our God-given mission into a relevant and practical apostolate capable of dealing with concrete situations in all cultures, we need a system of pastoral and methodological principles and spiritual attitudes to guide us in practical procedure. Don Bosco, with the help of the Holy Spirit, was at all times a past master of this art, so that this pedagogical and pastoral project must be considered as an integral part of his "experience of the Spirit".

The Preventive System is not just a set of for-

mulas to achieve a proper functioning of a work; nor is it a system of principles for a pedagogical treatise. It is "wisdom in action" and a pastoral know-how in the mind and heart of the educator; it is evangelising by educating and educating by evangelising through reason, religion and loving-kindness.

Rightly did the great Pope Paul VI, alluding to the permanent values of the Preventive System, remark that "the human and Christian principles that formed the basis of Don Bosco's educational wisdom are made up of values that are ageless. But it is difficult to discover the secret, for the roots of his incomparable Christian pedagogical humanism are hidden deep down in the Gospel".<sup>28</sup>

28. Address at PAS  
1966.

• *The last element to consider is our distinctive form of evangelical life.* Don Bosco chose for his Salesians (and what he laid down for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians confirmed it even more clearly) a way of life based on obedience (in view of their special mission) and a family manner of living and working together. We know how much this project cost Don Bosco and how he had patiently worked to ensure it whilst drawing up the Constitutions for Papal approval.

To be a religious Congregation and not a Secular Institute or one of the other possible ecclesial Associations is not a matter of spiritual indifference for the particular interested group — and, in our case, for the whole Salesian Family. On the contrary, it has an integrating and qualifying influence on the "experience of the Holy Spirit" lived und transmitted by the Founder to that particular group. It also affects the Founder's whole spiritual family insofar as the particular group provides for it a compact and powerful centre of identity and vitality.

Don Bosco was inspired by God to prescribe for us a distinctive form of evangelical life, adaptable to the times, actively available for the young; truly religious as well as concerned with social problems;<sup>29</sup> faithfully following Christ and open to the signs of the times; including in its Constitutions certain institutional, structural and juridical elements that can also claim charismatic inspiration. Indeed in the mystery of the Church as a “sacrament of salvation”, the “Body of Christ”, the “Temple of the Spirit”, there is no opposition between “institutional elements” and “charismatic values”; rather is there a vital interchange through which (in our particular “experience of the Holy Spirit”) there are certain institutional aspects that belong definitely to the charism of the Founder.

Hence for both SDBs and FMAs a special part of the heritage bequeathed by Don Bosco is an evangelical community life that is truly distinctive.

It has been advisable to make this preamble so that we can deal more practically and profoundly with what we admire and celebrate as St Mary Domenica Mazzarello’s own special masterpiece, the “spirit of Mornese”.

## **THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF MOTHER MAZZARELLO**

In the first article of your Constitutions we read, “St John Bosco founded our Institute... St Mary Domenica Mazzarello, who shared in a special way and with creative fidelity in the charism of foundation, became the mother and Co-foundress of the Institute”.<sup>30</sup>

Cardinal Cagliero has left us an invaluable testimony that admirably epitomises Don Bosco’s role

29. v. ASC 300: Dream of the ten diamonds.

30. Const. FMA 1.

of Founder of your Institute and Mother Mazzarello's role of collaboration. He writes, "Don Bosco appointed me Director of the new Institute and I used confer with him frequently and seek his sound advice regarding the formation of the Sisters and their religious and moral spirit. In his usual kindly way he would put me at ease, saying, 'You know the spirit of our Oratory, our Preventive System, the secret of gaining the affection, attention and obedience of the boys, loving them all and never hurting their feelings, assisting them day and night with fatherly care, patient charity and unflinching kindness. Well, our good Mother Mazzarello possesses all these qualities, and we can be quite confident that the government of the Institute and the Sisters is in good hands. She has only to align herself, as she does, with the spirit, system and distinctive character of our Oratory and our Salesian Constitutions and deliberations. The Sisters' Congregation is the same as ours. It has the same aim and uses the same means, and with example and word Mother Mazzarello inculcates both in her Sisters. They in their turn imitate their Mother, and rather than superiors, rectresses and mistresses, they are tender mothers among the girls they are educating.'" (*Memoria Storica* of Cardinal Cagliero, written in 1918 and kept in the FMA Generalate; cited by Maccono in *St Mary Domenica Mazzarello, Co-foundress and first Superior General of the FMA*, I 274; Turin-FMA 1960).

This is a fine and telling testimony from Cardinal Cagliero. It makes it eminently clear that Don Bosco was also the Founder of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; that his charismatic experience reached out to the Institute; that Mother Mazzarello was totally en-

lightened by Don Bosco and polarised towards his charism, his Salesian heritage: she lived it and expressed it fruitfully in a feminine way.

Here too we can note another aspect, subtle but most important.

The Institute of Mary Help of Christians was not founded simply and solely to live an independent life, but to be also incorporated into the overall charismatic project of Don Bosco, his spiritual and apostolic family then in existence.

Don Bosco closely linked the Institute with his Congregation; he unified its apostolic drive and missionary plans; he directed its services to assist the Association of the Salesian Co-operators.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The Institute's first Constitutions were significantly entitled *Rule or Constitutions for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians incorporated with the Salesian Society* (Turin 1885; *Cronistoria* III 431 et seq.). In the preface, after a list of intentions, Don Bosco wrote, "Pray also for the Pious Salesian Society with which you are incorporated, and please remember me too, who wish you every blessing" (ibid. 432).

We know how Mother Daghero, Don Rua and all were deeply concerned about the right application of the famous decree *Normae secundum quas* of 1901: all were afraid that the change in the juridical form of incorporation might upset their deep-seated spiritual communion and common Salesian foundation (v. Capetti: *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo* II 202 et seq., Rome FMA 1973). The decree demanded the separation of women's Institutes of simple vows from their respective Congregations of men.

Later another decree of 19 June 1917 appointed the Rector Major of the Salesians pro tem. Delegate Apostolic for the FMA. This re-introduced a certain juridical bond that both safeguarded the autonomy of the Institute and brought back the old spiritual relationship (v. ibid III 115 et seq.). It was the result of representations made by Cardinal Cagliero to Pope Benedict XV, who kindly acceded, established and decreed that the Rector Major should be appointed Delegate Apostolic for five years. The decree was renewed regularly until another decree of 24

(Footnote continued overleaf)

He was inspired by God not only to found the SDB Congregation and the FMA Institute so that each would have its own development and history, but also that they should both be vocationally, spiritually and apostolically related, members of the same Salesian Family, to face the future in solidarity of spirit and mission in the service of the young.

It was his wish that your Institute should find a source of unity, support and animation in the Congregation of Salesians founded by him on the gifts and functions of the priestly ministry.

Far be it from us to suggest the slightest impression of dependence: "Their Congregation is on the same footing as ours", said Don Bosco. What we have in mind is the importance of real communion. "The Institute uses the same means, has the same aim, system and character as our Oratory." In the past our mutual communion was on a specific juridical footing; today the juridical form is different and more in keeping with the social and ecclesial promotion of women. What matters is that the thought of our origins should inspire us with an ever greater family sensitivity.

*(Footnote continued from previous page)*

April 1940 included the faculty for the Rector Major in the list of privileges granted by Pius XII.

Juridical forms can change. What matters is our loyalty to our origins and our practical concern to develop mutual communion of spirit and mission.

When Don Albera became the first Delegate his comment was, "We shall progress together so that our minds and hearts, united to Don Bosco, will strive to attain the end he envisaged for the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians".

Mother Daghero too made known her joy in a circular letter, recalling the history of the Institute and its Marian aspect. She recorded how Don Bosco, at Mary's inspiration, wanted the Institute right from its beginnings to have "the same spirit and mission as the Salesian Society" (ibid. III 119-120).

## Stars in the firmament of our Salesian origins

It is a rewarding experience to study the personality of Mary Mazzarello, not as an isolated individual, but within the framework of Don Bosco's heritage to his Salesians. We should not only look to her virtues and personal merits, but to the founding charism Providence granted her; we must envisage her in relation to the spiritual and apostolic wealth of the whole vast Salesian Family.

As we examine the actual founding of the Salesian Family, it is plain that though Don Bosco was the central and unifying force he was not alone. To better understand and assess Don Bosco and the many-faceted impelling gift given him by the Holy Spirit, we have to refer also to Mamma Margaret, Don Cafasso, Pius IX, Mother Mazzarello, Don Rua, Don Pestarino and others. As a founder Don Bosco moved within a circle of persons imbued with the Holy Spirit and a tissue of providential events that all contributed to setting afoot his great charismatic heritage.

Naturally we realise the central fact that in respect of God's plan for the Saint's founding charism these persons are like satellites around him, accompanying him, counselling him, helping him: but their effect is not essentially a determining one. The author of the charism is the Holy Spirit; it is he who lit the spark in the depths of Don Bosco's heart.

We have to recognise that much thought and research are needed in this matter to arrive at a true understanding of God's design regarding our common vocation. I suggest that the following lines of thought be followed through.

Up to the present the emphasis has been put

by each Congregation on its own Founder or Foundress, viewing the personal goodness and activity of each within the ambit of his or her Religious Institute. But if we look at them in the broad horizon of our common Salesian heritage and the even broader perspective of the Salesian Family, we are rewarded with a clearer and more extensive picture of the historical and founding qualities of each.

Mother Mazzarello shows us how the Salesian charism is just as suitably extended to the feminine world. Her spiritual role was to collaborate in the creation of a feminine Salesianity; thus she became the means used by the Holy Spirit to widen the Salesian charismatic experience for the good of girls.

### **The distinctive light of Mother Mazzarello**

The celebration of this centenary is an excellent occasion to reflect on the important role Mother Mazzarello played as the first typical Salesian woman religious in our Family and the Co-foundress of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Without a doubt the supreme author of our common charism is the Holy Spirit. He is the divine weaver of the Salesian cloth and endowed each collaborator with the qualities necessary to carry out with precision his or her complementary role.

Don Bosco's substantial intervention in the founding of your Institute, far from harming the little seed sown by the Spirit in Mornese through Mary Mazzarello,<sup>32</sup> left more than sufficient space for her creative contribution.

One of the Saint's biographers confirms this affirmation and states that even before meeting Don

32. Colli: **Contributions of DB and MDM to the charismatic founding of the Inst. of DMHC**, Rome FMA 1978, p. 92.

Bosco Mary Domenica "had always felt the divine impulse to show her concern for young girls. As a young woman she had already opened a model workshop for girls in her town and founded a flourishing festive oratory; yet she had no experience of workshops or oratories and probably knew little or nothing about them. In the Maccagno house, together with the good and gentle Petronilla, she already had a charitable institution in embryo; in the House of Mary Immaculate she had taken in three other young girls and some of her companions had joined her as helpers and had elected her their superior. Mother Mazzarello was already at the head of a community when she met Don Bosco. Without her realising it the seed of the educative vocation that God had planted in her heart was already well developed and ready to bear much fruit. Indeed when she came to know Don Bosco and his projects and methods she found that everything corresponded fully with her views. She was immediately deeply convinced that she must help this holy priest in every possible way in his apostolate for good.<sup>33</sup>

All this makes it clear that when the two Sisters of St Anne (sent by Don Bosco to help put the new foundation on its feet) reported that Mary Domenica had a "natural aptitude" for forming the nascent Institute in the spirit of the Founder,<sup>34</sup> they were not dealing with an ingenuous country lass who was merely copying Don Bosco. The same holds too for Cagliari's remark when he spoke of her "pleasing and zealous efforts to imitate Don Bosco in everything".<sup>35</sup> Mary Domenica had made a conscious and free choice to obey the interior call of the Holy Spirit; and it was in Don Bosco and his charism that she saw the full meaning of

33. Maccono: St MDM  
I 239.

34. v. Cronistoria II  
26.

35. *ibid.* II 106.

her choice clearly defined.

Furthermore, Mother Mazzarello, a mature woman, under the wise and exacting guidance of Don Pestarino, threw herself into her vital and creative commitment, and imbued it with her strong, many-faceted personality and powerful initiative.<sup>36</sup> The more one studies the atmosphere and ambience of the various "origins" of Mornese the more outstanding is the obvious influence of Mary Mazzarello.

36. v. Maccono: St MDM  
I 29-30.

The sum total of these elements constitute a well integrated whole and has rightly earned the name of the "spirit of Mornese", her distinctive contribution as Co-foundress.

It should be added that the spirit of Mornese is totally modelled on the living witness of Mother Mazzarello. In her brief life as a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians she was the personification of the spirit of Mornese. At her death she bequeathed it as a complete and fruitful spiritual heritage.

## THE DEEP SIGNIFICANCE OF HER DEATH

On 4 February 1879 Mother Mazzarello left Mornese for good. It was a generous act of detachment. On 23 September of the same year she paid a brief visit there on the occasion of the death of her dearly loved father. A few months later, on 12 April 1880, the historic first house of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Mornese was sold.

From February 1879 to May 1881 (two years and a few months) the history of the Institute has nothing to relate of spiritual novelty at Nizza Monferrato except that the community transplanted from Mornese continued to flourish.

These two years in Mother Mazzarello's life proved that the spirit of Mornese truly survived

its transplant. From the holy death of the humble, creative and mature pioneer Daughter of Mary Help of Christians it received its final perfecting touch and became her solemn testament.

Enlightened by her profound union with God and sustained by the safe and solid forward-looking vision of Don Bosco, Mother Mazzarello had the clearest notions of her important influence as a Foundress on the future of the Institute. Hence she made sure that the experience of those first years and all they symbolised (the spirit of Mornese) became a rich and distinctive heritage that would enlighten and guide the growing Institute as its God-given authoritative model. Some of Mother Mazzarello's statements make it obvious that she was convinced of her "foundation-stone role" in the great future edifice. "If Don Bosco's predictions come true," she would say, "our Congregation will spread to all parts of the world — even as far as South America. But if we wish the same spirit to flourish and continue its good work, then we pioneers of the Congregation must not only be full of virtue: we must be the mirrors in which future members will see the resplendent reflection of the true spirit of the Institute. We must live, work and speak in such a way that they will be constrained to say, 'How fervent were our first Sisters. What observance, what humility, what poverty, what obedience!' Thus they will be able to follow our example and the true spirit of the Institute will continue to flourish in their lives. This is important, because when the Sisters will be great in number it will be hard for them to have the same fervour as we who are so few. As the Sisters multiply and the Congregation grows, perforce the spirit will suffer and zeal and fervour

will gradually diminish. Don Bosco said this was the case in so many Congregations. If we pioneers become lax, if we do not love, if we do not practise humility and poverty, if we do not observe the silence, if we do not live united with the Lord, what can we expect of those who will follow us?"<sup>37</sup>

How simple, holy and expressive are these words. There is a refreshing unaffectedness and humility about them; yet they are alive with the awareness of an historic mission received from God.

37. Maccono: St MDM  
I 399-400.

### **Final perfecting touch**

We have remarked that in the last two years Mother Mazzarello gave the final touch that perfected the spirit of Mornese.

This did not take place at Mornese, but it completed and perfected what Mornese stood for. She made her life totally available for the Kingdom; she was utterly detached even from what was humanly closest to her heart; she was willing to accept the "transplanting": she would go anywhere — Nizza, France, South America, any continent whatsoever. It meant even more: it was a case of self-donation right to the last drop of her blood, right to the final oblation of her very existence, a death that was the expression of her love, and is still seen as a gesture that was to bear much fruit.

The love that prompted her to move from Mornese, to be totally detached, to accept her death so willingly, was Mother Mazzarello's final perfecting touch to the spirit of Mornese. This makes it clear then that the spirit of Mornese not only permeates and matures your Salesian lives but also infuses them with a profound commitment for the Salesian

mission, even to the extent of self-immolation in a paschal offering.

Mother Mazzarello lived her last two years away from Mornese, one might say to perfect its spiritual heritage. She thought of the Institute rather than of herself; she visited their first foundations so recently opened; she accompanied the missionary Sisters to their embarkation ports for South America; she journeyed to France, became ill at St Cyr (where she was visited by Don Bosco three times) and offered herself as a victim to God; she returned to Nizza for the final sacrifice: it was in all a fitting finale to the masterpiece of her whole life, the spirit of Mornese.

### **Solemn testament**

Mother Mary's death at Nizza was her authentic signature to her work as Co-foundress: it was her solemn testament. Only with her death have we gradually come to realise the full extent of her distinctive and determining contribution to the Salesian heritage. By her death too we have at last been able to discover the nature of her historic mission.

Everybody thought it would have been better for the first Superior General of the Institute to have lived longer; but her death made it clear that the Co-foundress of the Institute had admirably fulfilled her specific role.

Some may query why God so shortened the years of Mother Mary Domenica as Superior General and prolonged those of her successor (Mother Caterina Daghero held office for forty-three years). The chief reason comes immediately to mind: Mother Mary's task was to create the spirit of Mornese and

bring it to final maturity; and this task was already completed at the dawn of 14 May 1881.

Thus did Mother Mary Domenica carry out her exacting and distinctive responsibilities as Co-foundress.

### **The role of Co-foundress**

The true role of Co-foundress began when Mary Mazzarello became head of the nascent Institute. It was a kind of investiture that imbued her whole personality; it conferred on her a specific role, greater and more important than that of Superior with which she was always associated.

The unexpected death of Don Pestarino on 15 May 1874, less than two years after his first profession, could be interpreted in a similar way. It was a death that greatly saddened Mary Domenica and her companions because he had played such an important part in their spiritual growth. From a human point of view it seemed sadly premature; but with hindsight and the spirit of faith we see that his death served to throw into relief the role of protagonist for Mother Mazzarello in those early "founding" days.

Paradoxically one could quote here her incredible remark that made such spiritual sense: "Even if by some impossible circumstance Don Pestarino were to leave Don Bosco, I would remain with Don Bosco".<sup>38</sup>

We have already established how conscientiously Mother Mazzarello realised and carried out her great responsibility. Today we admire her in her role of Co-foundress, seeing it as a sublime mission and a glorious duty. She however performed the role

in sincere simplicity; it seemed to her a spontaneous act of docility to the Holy Spirit; she bore the day to day responsibilities unaffectedly and with the deepest humility.

It is curious that for a number of reasons, but particularly because of her natural humility, it was not until the process of her beatification that Mother Mazzarello received the title of Co-foundress. (The remark was even made that she was "too humble" to assume such a role.) It is interesting too that the title of Co-foundress was not a suggestion that came from FMA or SDB Superiors: it was the officials of the Holy See studying her life and work who conferred the title — even if it did not in those days carry the extensive connotation it has now gained through the pronouncements of Vatican II.

Father Ferdinando Maccono, who was vice-postulator of Mother Mazzarello's Cause and had a profound knowledge of her life, was delighted with the statement from Rome, even though it was expressed with low-key caution. It was not till 20 November 1935 (and after considerable discussion) that the definitive approval of Pope Pius XI attributed to the Servant of God the "title of Co-foundress" of the Institute of The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The actual significance of such a title varies according to circumstances. One could instance Benedict and Scholastica, Francis of Assisi and Clare, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Each case must be defined on its own merits in correlation to the respective Founder and according to the historical facts regarding the co-founding partner. In our case we are dealing with an Institute "incorporated" or "affiliated" (Don Bosco used

“incorporato” and “aggregato”) with a spiritual family comprising, in those days, the Salesian Congregation and the Co-operators.<sup>39</sup>

39. Central SDB Archives, Rome.

I do not need to list all the arguments that confirm the validity of the title. Suffice it to quote from an unpublished letter of Father Maccono written at Nizza 22 March 1935 to the then Procurator General Father Tomasetti: “I would like to set forth my own thoughts on the matter”, he writes. “I admit that anyone who reads Mother Mazzarello’s life carefully must realise that Don Bosco is the Founder. But the one who trained the future religious, formed them and taught them to accept and love sacrifice and hunger (and their conditions were poverty-stricken and wretched enough, goodness knows!), the one who sustained them when problems were great and all seemed lost, was Mary Mazzarello. Don Bosco, because of his temperament, and also to forestall gossip and friction with the Turin Curia, etc., was a rare visitor at Mornese (about fifteen visits in all). The burden was borne by Mother Mary.

“One could list Cagliari and Costamagna, but both were after Don Pestarino’s death. Both men were men of quality; but between you and me, their characters were vastly different from those of Mary Mazzarello and Don Pestarino — especially was this the case with Don Costamagna. Indeed it was only because of the virtue and exceptional prudence of Mother Mazzarello that things went ahead so well. She made her observations to them courageously, yet always yielded for prudence’ sake, even when she saw that they were in the wrong. (Both men were upright and humble enough to admit their mistakes.) The governing of the Institute was thus rendered more difficult for Mother Mary.

It would have been far easier for her if she had had only to deal with Don Bosco or Don Pestarino.

“In the *Life of Mother Mazzarello* I have not mentioned these things openly to avoid disturbing people; but I have kept rigidly to the truth, and a discerning reader would understand the great number of difficulties Mother Mazzarello had to overcome with her heroic prudence and self-control, with her ever-present smile and cheerful mien that bespoke her intrepid virtue.

“For these and other reasons, I for one am convinced that Mother Mazzarello merits the title of Co-foundress”.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed the death of the Saint was a final perfecting touch to the spirit of Mornese and all it stands for: it made it “transplantable” anywhere and always. Her death also lifted the veil that had concealed her personal contribution so important and influential in the early days of the founding of the Institute.

The essential of her contribution is the SPIRIT OF MORNESE, and it will always be the life-blood of your flourishing Institute.

## THE SPIRIT OF MORNESE

This is a vital and complex topic and difficult to deal with in a few pages. Its characteristics are numerous; it is not possible to analyse each separately and it is not easy to discern the links that bind them together into an harmonious and dynamic whole.

We have reflected on the overall vision of the Salesian heritage and have arrived at a point where we can now limit ourselves to noting some of the

40. Central Archives  
SDB, Generalate, Rome.

main facets in the spiritual make-up of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians in the Family of Don Bosco. To meditate on these features so clear and thriving in your living traditions seems to me the best way to celebrate the death of Mother Mazzarelo.

I should like to repeat some of the thoughts I put to your Provincials three years ago.<sup>41</sup> Also I would recall Don Bosco's *Dream of the Ten Diamonds*. A few months ago, Reverend Mother, you reminded me that the centenary of this Dream was in September next; and you suggested that I should make a few reflections on it. I did make a study of it (you may read it in our *Acts of the Superior Council*),<sup>42</sup> and I believe it sheds some light too on the thoughts I am offering you now on the spirit of Mornese.

When I began to prepare my talks for your Provincials, the spirit of Mornese presented two great problems for me. Firstly, I thought it portrayed a cultural and religious situation that was now a thing of the past; and secondly, at first glance I could not see any clear and attractive characteristics that pointed up an appealing spiritual personality. It appealed to me rather as a system of ascetic and moral practices that were heroic, yes, but probably discouraging to people of today.

It was only a first impression, however, like a morning mist that clears with the rising of the sun.

It is obvious that with the passage of time, no institution, not even the Church, continues to live according to the cultural manner of its origins; though the early days remain symbolic and their heroicity is forever an entrancing ideal.

The way of life at Mornese also reflected a heroicity born of harsh conditions and a destitution

41. v. E. Viganò: *Non secondo la carne ma secondo lo spirito*; Rome FMA 1978, pp. 101-124.

42. ASC 300.

and mortality not unusual in many other impoverished countries besides Piedmont. To re-establish such conditions today would be against the Gospel. Besides, the asceticism practised at Mornese obeyed local canons of another era now totally out of fashion. Nobody today would demand the same timetable, the same diet, the same formation, etc., of those times. We have to cull from the practice of those days the permanent underlying principles that must be relived and expressed in the light of Vatican II and according to the cultural, religious and ecclesial form of today, taking account of the different situations and cultural variations of the many communities throughout the world; and at the same time being utterly loyal to Christian asceticism and the genuine Salesian tradition.

Dear Superiors, Provincials and Rectresses, if this "re-interpretation" and "re-inculturation" is not followed through there is the very real danger of creating false ideals, conflicts of conscience; and the spirit of Mornese could be presented as an ascetical medieval gargoyle instead of what it really is: an attractive and enthusing ideal that characterises every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

Fortunately, one who lived at Mornese in those days has left us a wonderful description of life there. Mother Sorbone called it "paradise"; she has described a "pentecostal atmosphere"; she cried out with joy, "How wonderful life was!" In the face of such expressions, the cultural differences between past and present simply melt away. I found it easy to distinguish and admire in the spirit of Mornese those wonderful, simple and sturdy values that must flourish in your Institute not only today but always.

When I addressed your Provincials I also en-

deavoured to answer the second problem by treating the main lines of the Mornese tradition under two aspects, the mystical and the ascetical. (The former has reference to enthusiasm for your vocation; the latter to education in fidelity.) I told the Provincials that "I desired to speak first on the mystical aspect because I thought people tended to over-stress the intense asceticism (that made such an impression at first sight). However, it is important to remember that asceticism is a fruitful harvest reaped from a convinced and enthusiastic union with God".<sup>43</sup>

Today, after reflecting on the *Dream of the Ten Diamonds*, I can see that these two aspects have further values to discover, clarify and develop authoritatively and explicitly. And this I shall try to do right now.

43. E. Viganò: Non secondo la carne ma secondo lo Spirito; Rome FMA 1978, p. 113.

### Frame of reference

In the spirit of Mornese there is a central ethos that Mother Mazzarello stressed constantly and that was more or less taken for granted; it constituted the atmosphere and was the regular structure for all the various characteristics; it was the Salesian heritage. Don Bosco was the centre and catalyst for all the elements that made up the spirit of Mornese and gave them character and consistency.

It has been said that Mother Mazzarello and her companions at Mornese were quite able to translate the "new gift" given by the Spirit to Don Bosco into a feminine context. This is true, but the work of Mother Mazzarello and her companions was far more than a mere "translation". Today we speak much of "inculturation", and in certain

situations (such as Africa) the problems that surface are profound and widespread. One could say that Mary Mazzarello's creation of a feminine Salesianity is closer to the complicated travail of an inculturation process than the much more simple process of a "translation".

Indeed at Mornese it was a case of living with the heart and style of a woman the following principles:

- the unique Salesian covenant with God through an interior life of faith, hope and charity energised by predilection for the young;
- the active participation in the mission of the Church with a lively awareness of being sent by God for a specialised apostolate among youth in need;
- the typical, ascetical, mystical and Salesian way of spiritual life created by Don Bosco at Valdocco, with all its various and notable characteristics;
- the Preventive System with its practical wisdom and pastoral principles as a way to achieve the Salesian mission;
- the distinctive form of evangelical life chosen with clarity of vision and practical sense in a Congregation open and adaptable to the times.

These various aspects presented a complex situation; yet the task was achieved despite a vast array of problems. What we call the *spirit of Mornese* was deeply involved in every aspect, and it would be rash to limit it to any scheme drawn up according to preconceived principles.

We have already remarked that the spirit of Mornese was the work of Mother Mazzarello and her companions. *But this spirit referred back in*

*all details to the Salesian heritage of Don Bosco as its guiding light, its source of inspiration its centre of polarisation.*

As in those early days, so also today (and indeed in the future), the spirit of Mornese, to be genuine, must revolve around this central principle: the knowledge, assimilation and practice of Don Bosco's Salesian heritage.

### **Salient characteristics of the spirit of Mornese**

With these principles established, it is possible to define the salient characteristics of the spirit of Mornese. We list the main ones without detailing their make-up.

- First of all, the spirit of faith; fervent, simple and practical piety; constant union with God and devotion to the Eucharist; confidence in the help of Providence; a lively sense of the reward of heaven; a special devotion to our Blessed Lady, St Joseph and the Guardian Angel;

- a lively distaste for worldly values; courageous acceptance of the cross of Christ; mortification and heroic poverty; a shining and delicate purity and unflagging control of the senses and affections; a profound abnegation; an ever-present temperance;

- simplicity of life; common sense and balanced judgement; a spontaneous predilection for humility; ceaseless and joyful work that imparts a Spartan tone to each day; a family spirit that facilitates communion; living a community life in holy joy; instinctive and conscious co-responsibility; profound obedience and sense of duty; admirable exercise of

religious authority with confidence and community participation; a filial respect for Don Bosco and the Superiors;

- an ardent zeal for the salvation of the young according to the Preventive System; a motherly affection that is both tender and firm; an impartial love that can adapt itself to individual weaknesses; missionary availability linked to a generous ecclesial sense; loyalty to the Pope and bishops; generosity in apostolic initiatives with sacrificing acceptance of their cultural requirements;

- sincere attachment to one's personal religious consecration; clear and enthusiastic awareness of the option made by religious profession and a lively sense of belonging to the Institute; desire to know, reverence and practise the Constitutions; constant practical concern for personal formation and for the new vocations that keep coming to the Congregation.

All these things constituted the deep wealth of that first tiny and poor community of young women at Mornese. True, all the Sisters contributed their share to formation development and the common good; but the one who inspired, created, encouraged, guided and gave the example was Mother Mary Domenica. She was both the main fashioner and principal model of the spirit of Mornese. In her were mirrored in a practical and vital way all the salient characteristics noted above.

## **FEATURES OF THE MORNESE MYSTIQUE**

Here I would attempt an interesting experiment: to trace the Salesian characteristics incorporated and embellished in the spirit of Mornese. It was your-

self, Reverend Mother, who gave me the idea; and the *Dream of the Ten Diamonds*, admirably interpreted by Don Philip Rinaldi will help in the experiment.

Our perception of the spirit of Mornese is put into clear focus by Scene I of the Dream. This is important, since the uniqueness and distinctive ethos of a spiritual life is not grasped by a mere list of characteristics (which in the various paths of holiness would be substantially the same). A distinctive idiom is characterised rather by the disposition, symmetry and overall harmony of these features and also their relationships and subtle emphases.

The diamonds of the Dream indicate the main characteristics of the Salesian spiritual life. They are not a mere list of virtues but rather certain attitudes and practical principles that go to make up an actual life-style.

There are five diamonds on the front of the mantle: Faith, Hope, Charity, Work and Temperance; and five on the back: Obedience, Poverty, Reward, Chastity and Fasting. Before explaining the diamonds one by one, Don Rinaldi notes three aspects of the vision: the august personage wearing the mantle; the front view of the august personage with the diamonds on the breast of his mantle; and thirdly the diamonds on the back of the mantle.

For Don Rinaldi the august personage wearing the mantle, and on whom, all the rays of the diamonds converge with dazzling splendour, is Don Bosco himself.

The august personage seen from the front, and the special positioning of the five diamonds on the breast and the shoulders represent the characteristics of the Salesian spiritual life that should be clear and visible to all.

Seen from the back the other diamonds represent the supporting spiritual framework. These virtues are not necessarily immediately visible in the Salesian spiritual life and hence should have a somewhat private character. They infuse harmony and dynamic constancy into the Salesian spiritual life; they hold the secret of Salesian drive.<sup>44</sup>

I feel this threefold aspect of the Dream could open up new avenues in the methodical interpretation of the spirit of Mornese.

### **The august personage**

At the centre, as the august personage, sustaining all, and on whom converge the characteristics outlined above, is *Don Bosco with his wonderful experience in the Spirit*. The brief reference we have made to him above will suffice here and now.

What was the basic concern of Mary Domenica Mazzarello, of her young companions, and also of Don Pestarino? Don Bosco has the answer: to be totally committed to one's project for the reason that it is inspired by God.

To incorporate in the new Institute this experience of the Spirit and endow it with feminine qualities, beauty and attributes required versatile creativity and spiritual motherliness, both imbued with thorough and minute docility and fidelity to the Founder.

### **Visible characteristics**

The positioning of the five diamonds on the front of the mantle help us to delineate the visible

<sup>44</sup>. v. comments in ASC 300.

Salesian characteristics of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

*The diamond over the heart is charity in its twofold aspect: towards the mystery of God and the needs of the young; in other words, union with God with the fervour of a bride; and ardent zeal for the salvation of the young with the delicacy and grace of a mother; the heart of a virgin-spouse filled with a mother's predilection for the young.*

*Then, on the breast, near the heart, were the diamonds of Faith and Hope.* Faith is characterised by constantly seeing God in life and creation and manifests the supernatural atmosphere and profound piety in the spirit of Mornese. Hope indicates an awareness and generosity for apostolic projects, and makes it clear that the spirit of Mornese is based on the sure help of God, especially through the risen Christ and his Mother: Christ present for us in the Eucharist and his loving Mother as the Help of Christians.

These three diamonds show the absolute primacy of certain values in the spirit of Mornese: the vital theological virtues ("the virtues of the covenant") that imbue every attitude in a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians and constitute the active principle that gives personality and verve to her spiritual life.

This year's annual practice or "strenna" is a reminder to us that Mary Mazzarello's grandeur lies in her imitation and development of the distinctive interior life of Don Bosco.

*Finally, on the front of the shoulders are the diamonds of Work and Temperance; they support the mantle of the august personage.* Don Bosco never ceased to insist on these two virtues: they would ensure the flourishing development of our Congregations.

I have already noted two of the significant characteristics woven into the cloth that was to become the spirit of Mornese: the two counsels given by Don Bosco to Mary Domenica and her Daughters of Mary Immaculate — “Keep up your prayers by all means; but throw yourselves completely into your good works”; and the second advice for 1869, “Love work. We live by the sweat of our brows.”

These are indeed characteristic counsels. Unflagging work was assuredly one of the main features of life at Mornese: work was spontaneous and always welcome; it was performed with love and joy, humility and serenity; it was work with a feminine touch and extended to cooking, cleaning, laundering, mending and ironing.

It is interesting to note that when Don Bosco discussed prayer with the Sisters at Mornese, he would mention work almost instinctively. We know well that for him piety expressed itself in unselfish and self-sacrificing work; as he understood it, work was impossible, indeed inconceivable, without an intense and profound piety; and this piety was not to be a mere adjunct to the work: it was to totally impregnate it and make it utterly meaningful.

A word about Temperance, or moderation in all things. It should be reflected in simplicity of life, in good judgement and common sense, in a daily austerity and serenity that eschews all coarseness, and embellishes all with feminine kindness; in self-control and in astute judgement when dealing with others — and a little admixture of feminine shrewdness and intuition.

These visible characteristics in the spirit of Mornese are the qualities of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians that are in the public eye; they express

her social image, that which renders the distinctive ethos of the Salesian vocation of Don Bosco attractive to all people and especially to the young.

### **The supporting ascetic and religious framework**

Finally, on the back of the mantle we have the supporting framework that imparts energy and constancy.

The disposition of the five diamonds on the back of the mantle reveals the ascetic and religious means that add strength and perseverance to the spiritual life of the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

It should be noted immediately that the delicate feminising of Don Bosco's Salesianity must be effected in the extensive area of an ascetic education; and it was here that Mother Mazzarello really shone with her intuition and creativeness. Something of this is adumbrated, perhaps unwittingly, by her biographer when he compares the education received by Don Bosco with that received by Mary Domenica. He writes, "Don Bosco needed not only a father's affection but also a mother's heart for his boys and spiritual sons, and he received his training in virtue from a mother who was holy, wise and virile. Mother Mary, on the other hand, needed to add to her feminine gentleness a manly firmness for the education of her girls and her Sisters, and she had received her training in virtue from her father".<sup>45</sup>

Dear Sisters, it is your task to understand and cherish these many distinctive characteristics of your heritage. They are certainly authoritative after a hundred years of well tested living tradition.

● *Obedience is central.* At the centre of the square of diamonds there is the dazzling diamond

45. Maccono: St MDM  
ASC 300.  
1 6.

of obedience with all the other rays converging on it.

Whenever Don Bosco spoke to the Sisters in those days, cheerful obedience was a recurring theme. To help Don Pestarino discern who were to be the "pillars of the Institute" he gave him this criterion: "Those who are obedient even in the smallest matters".<sup>46</sup> Obedience loomed large in his judgment right to the end. On his deathbed he left this memento for his Sisters: "Obedience. Practise it and see that it is practised".<sup>47</sup> He always gave religious obedience top rating,<sup>48</sup> for (he used say) "if a sack is not sewn up, everything will fall out; and it is the same with a Sister: if her sack of virtues is not well sewn up by obedience, she will lose all the contents and will cease to be a religious".<sup>49</sup> And one should add that cheerful, spontaneous, cordial and filial obedience is possible only when authority is exercised in a truly maternal (not "maternalistic") way.

Religious obedience presupposes a strong and constant sense of belonging to one's Institute. (This was so strong in Mornese that in actually gave birth to your Congregation.) It also presupposes that the Constitutions are known, loved and practised.

• In the spirit of Mornese the *diamond of Poverty* stands for personal decorum, dignity and modesty that reject comfortable and easy living and fashionable affectations. The community attitude to ownership and use regarding the few belongings at Mornese was truly natural, indeed instinctive.

When we consider the apostolic aspect of Mornese we realise that the pupils, as well as the style and means of the little community, reflected the environment of the district: it was not to be an Institute for the well-to-do or the higher echelons

46. MB X 598.

47. MB XVIII 502.

48. Cronistoria II 37.

49. Cronistoria II 339.

of society. In fact Don Bosco sent two Sisters from the Marchioness Barolo Institute and certain lay women to help instil the various social graces necessary for Sisters engaged in educating the young.

This escutcheon of your origins should never be forgotten, just as Jesus never forgot Bethlehem and Nazareth (“What good can come out of Nazareth?”) It must direct your preferential option towards the poor — not motivated by a false class-consciousness, but by the poverty of the Beatitudes as lived with joy by the Virgin Mary.

● *The splendid diamond of Purity.* Don Pestarino referred Mary Domenica to Don Bosco as “a lily of purity”.<sup>50</sup> Hers was not a sombre chastity of complexes and taboos, but serene and unembarrassed. A pupil of those times spoke of chastity as Mother Mazzarello’s “virtue of predilection”. Her demeanour, her dress, her speech bespoke a total modesty. In speaking to the girls of this virtue her words were convincing and sincere, and she impressed her young pupils by her saintly fervour”.<sup>51</sup>

Mother Mazzarello encouraged an unembarrassed, fresh and pleasant comportment; she had no time for mawkishness or simpering.

From the pedagogical point of view her great concern in this matter had in mind the kindness required by the Preventive System. I think that Mother Mazzarello had here a new and important problem to solve.

We know that for Don Bosco “education is a matter of the heart”, and that a charity that translates itself into kindness, pleasantness, friendliness (i.e., “loving-kindness”) is the very hinge of his educational project. We know that in a Salesian house it is not enough that the boys be loved: “they must know they are loved”.<sup>52</sup> All this in a feminine

50. Maccono: St MDM I 206.

51. *ibid.* 121 122.

52. MB XVII 111.

Salesian context presented problems. Would emotionalism and sentimentality prove too strong and compromise chastity or educational activities? — or would the movements of the heart be so suppressed as to cause Don Bosco's educational system to founder?

In Cardinal Cagliero's *Memoria Storica* is found the following passage from an address by Mother Mazzarello to her Sisters: "We have the same mission among the young as Don Bosco has and we must use our hearts as Don Bosco does. But Don Bosco is a saint and we are not yet saints. Hence we must beware of our weakness, for by nature we and the girls have more heart than head; and a woman's heart is emotional, demonstrative and weak".<sup>53</sup>

Cagliero further witnesses. "I remember her last words to me on the eve of her death. After speaking of her own soul she turned to the subject of controlling the inclinations of the heart, the tendency to mawkishness and too-human and over-sensitive affections that had crept into the community".<sup>54</sup>

Mother Mazzarello's own life was a wonderful answer to this problem. Don Pestarino had described her as having "a most sensitive heart"<sup>55</sup> and as having "carried out her office as superior in a truly motherly way; there was no sentimental softness about her: she was, if anything, rather on the firm side, but she had great powers of persuasion".<sup>56</sup>

Speaking of those early years, Enrichetta Sorbone testifies, "Her rule was energetic, resolute but kind. She was direct with us, but she loved us as a true religious mother. There was a kind of sweetness about her that did not force but attract us to do good, to make sacrifices, to draw closer to Jesus. She had an eye for everything and was

53. Maccono: St MDM  
II 135.

54. *Ibid.* 234.  
II 135.

55. *Ibid.* 207.

56. *Ibid.* II 239.

on the watch for what would be good or bad for her daughters. She was ever ready to provide for their physical and moral good to the best of her ability".<sup>57</sup>

57. *ibid.* 240.

I have dwelt somewhat on this aspect since it has a special place in Salesian asceticism, and also because it was one of the more delicate areas of Don Bosco's Salesian heritage feminised by Mother Mazzarello.

In our spirituality this aspect is important because it transcends chastity and seeks out its special splendour: it means more than being chaste: it means being engagingly resplendent in purity.

Nevertheless despite the singular importance of this virtue and Don Bosco's great insistence on it, the diamond is on the back of the mantle and subordinate to obedience. This is indeed something to think about.

● *Below the diamond of Chastity is that of Fasting.* Don Rinaldi tells us that it does not refer only to food and drink but to the *mortification of the senses*, as if to indicate that Salesian kindness needs the splendour of purity but cannot achieve it without an ascetical discipline.

If there is anything clear and practical in the spirit of Mornese and that stands out like a beacon in Mother Mazzarello's biography and the three volumes of the *Cronistoria*, it is daily mortification and abnegation. Life at Mornese meant an emphatic cleavage with worldly tastes and a generous active acceptance of the cross of Christ. It suffices to recall Mother Mazzarello's words to her Sisters towards the end of 1880; they were a kind of testament: "The religious life is of its nature a life of sacrifice, of renunciation, of deprivation; community life and one's duties provide plenty of mor-

tification. But that is by no means sufficient. A good Sister is not satisfied with what circumstances provide: she will find ways and means to forge further ahead in her love for the Lord, for the souls of others and her own poor soul. We must mortify our thoughts, our wills, our hearts, our senses. Then there is obedience and humility that can cost us so much, even though they go unheard and unseen by our neighbour. My dear Sisters and daughters, poverty and mortification, obedience and humility, observance of the Constitutions and chastity are virtues so interwoven as to form one great unity. If we wish to become saints (and who doesn't? Stand up, anyone who doesn't!) we must practise all these virtues. We have given our solemn word before the altar. Our consecration has been written in letters of gold by our guardian angels, to be set before our eyes frequently during life and especially at the hour of our death. Let us be Sisters in real earnest; may the New Year mean for all a new life".<sup>58</sup>

58. Cronistoria III 300-301.

Of a truth, abnegation and mortification were quite at home at Mornese. Don Bosco himself confided to Cagliari "his great surprise" at finding such profound detachment from the world and enthusiasm for the mystery of the cross.<sup>59</sup> In fact it seemed to him somewhat exaggerated; and after a number of deaths among the young members he intervened several times personally to moderate the rigours of the community.<sup>60</sup>

59. v. Maccono: St MDM I 148.

60. v. Cronistoria II 235-236; Maccono: Ibid. II 59-60.

In regard to certain mortifications particularly suitable to feminine psychology, Mother Mazzarello insisted on the following: "Eschew vanity: it is an impediment to everything that is good; be sincere at all costs: the devil is the father of all lies; avoid idleness: it corrodes the soul".<sup>61</sup> She often spoke

61. Cronistoria I 127-128.  
I 421-422.

against vanity and insincerity. Mother Eulalia Bosco wrote that "the faults she most often deplored were vanity, ambition and deceit. She continually encouraged us to look to being beautiful in the eyes of the Lord and to imitate the Virgin Mary".<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere we find written that "at Nizza just as at Mornese, she spoke often against vanity and deceit. Woe to anyone who told an untruth or who made pretence to a non-existent good quality".<sup>63</sup>

62. Maccono: St MDM

63. *ibid.* II 104.

This "ascetical fasting" really got to the heart of feminine psychology.

As a final word about the intense asceticism at Mornese, it seems fitting and meaningful to recall Don Bosco's dream of the chestnuts. It suggested certain criteria for gauging the suitability of candidates for the Institute. It certainly brings to light some of the requirements of the spirit of Mornese.

"Go ahead", said the lady in the dream, "Put the chestnuts in a pot of water: this is the obedience test. Now boil them. If you squeeze the bad ones between your fingers the decayed pulp will ooze out. Throw these away. The empty ones will float to the top. They are the vain ones who will not remain under the surface with the others but want to emerge and be noticed in some way or other. Skim them off and throw them away. Note that the good chestnuts, when cooked, are still not yet ready for eating. The shell must be removed and then the skin. Now you will find them pure white. Even then, look well. Some are double, and you will discover hidden between them another skin — full of bitterness".<sup>64</sup>

64. MB XV 366.

The analogy reveals a whole subtle praxis of discernment and pedagogical asceticism.

● *And now finally the diamond of Reward.* Salesian asceticism is imbued with the confidence that

comes of lifting up our eyes to the sure reward of heaven; and it was the same at Mornese, with the added family touch derived from a feminine delicacy and intuition.

The first thing to remark is a kind of "education for paradise", the effort to be spiritually recollected in times of silence. The significance and value of this is important for us today, immersed as we are in a civilisation of technology and bombarded continually by noise and sensationalism. Again let us listen to Mother Mazzarello: "Why is silence important for a Sister? — so that she can the more easily be united with God and speak to him, let him know her needs, hearken to his voice, his counsels, his teachings. If a Sister does not pray to God and is lost in vain and useless thoughts, with her mind filled with worldly things, and is always wondering what people think of her or how they will treat her; if she is thinking about how certain tasks will succeed, or about conversations heard here and there — I ask you, has such a Sister been observing silence? Far from it. Physically she has been silent, but in mind and heart she has been talking away ceaselessly and has not been united to God at all".<sup>65</sup>

65. Maccono: St MDM  
I 400.

Indeed the practice of silent recollection is to be like a glimpse of paradise during the daily grind of workaday chores.

But then there was a very practical awareness of paradise in the community. Prayer meant real friendships and conversations with people who were very much alive and members of the family; who brought help, joy, encouragement and inspiration, serenity and perseverance. Enrichetta Sorbone put it in a nutshell when she said, "It is paradise here, real paradise".

It was the risen Christ and his Holy Mother who put value and significance into the diamond of Reward; for they proclaimed daily what lay beyond the cross.

In this regard the following episode at Mornese speaks volumes. We are told that one day, among the many happy and serene faces there was the one sad face of a postulant. "Why so serious?" she was asked. "I was unable to go to communion this morning, and today seems an eternity for me. Yesterday Mother Mazzarello did so much to inflame our hearts with the desire for communion. In this house communion is everything in our lives".<sup>66</sup>

66. *Cronistoria* II 363.

Bishop Costamagna put it well when he said that "Jesus was the absolute master in that house". The Sisters lived in his presence and it was to him they turned for happiness and relief from their worries.

Besides Christ there was also Mary who helped whet their appetites for the reward of heaven. She was accepted as the true Superior of the community, vividly present and ever solicitous. Mother Mazzarello always considered herself her vice-rectress, and "every evening placed at the foot of her statue the keys of the house".<sup>67</sup> I would go so far as to say that Mother Mazzarello's whole spirituality had a Marian inspiration. Indeed the ascetical aspects of the spirit of Mornese bore the imprint of Mary: the loving obedience, spontaneous poverty, resplendent purity, prudent mortification, simplicity and humility and motherly self-sacrifice that lovingly referred all things to Jesus. In fact Mary could look at your first community at Mornese as she did at the basilica at Valdocco and say, "This is my house whence my glory will issue forth".

67. *Maccono: St MDM*  
I 310.

## UNDER THE SPELL OF THE SALESIAN IDENTITY AT MORNESE

We set out to search into the motto you proposed for the centenary celebrations: "to rediscover the spirit of Mornese for the renewal of our communities".

I think some light has been shed on the topic; at least for my own part I have had the joy of a deeper appreciation of the spell-binding Salesian identity as lived at Mother Mazzarello's Mornese.

### A long journey

I began a long way back with general principles. It was plain as we continued our reflections that all was based on the very core of *the Salesian identity*; in other words we were dealing with a "new gift" in the Church, a gift that was innovatory and relevant, full of vitality for the future. The return to our origins was a good preparation for the rediscovery of the spirit of Mornese. We have considered many persons and events and have perceived the splendid unity of a project that could not have depended on the gifted talents of Don Bosco nor the sanctity of Mother Mazzarello: this has been a consoling reassurance that we are dealing with something set afoot by God and guided by the motherly solicitude of Mary — a "gift", an "experience of the Holy Spirit", a "charism".

We can truly call the Salesian heritage "the charism of Don Bosco", for he was the first to propose it and put it into practice: he was its "founder".

It was his singular covenant with God, his way of life and apostolate; it flowed from him and became a fruitful part of history, forming a great Family with a common vocation.

We sought out carefully the specific elements of this experience of the Spirit: they were already clear and definite, albeit in embryo, at Valdocco. It was a matter of joy to establish that God's design extended this charism to girls too. We have marvelled at God's wonderful (and humanly inexplicable) interweaving interventions, and Mother Mazzarello's singular and creative participation in revealing the unity and fascination of this divine project. Pius XI had good reason to grace Mother Mazzarello with the title of true Co-foundress of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Her contribution certainly had all the characteristics of a Founder. Within the short span of ten years from her religious profession to her death, she guided, tended and achieved that so-called "translation" of Don Bosco's Salesianity into the world of women: it was her masterpiece and the greatest spiritual heritage she bequeathed — the spirit of Mornese.

We set about pondering the riches of this spirit: not just to sort out its elements (without much detail), but to determine its basic lines, its way of life and action, its special character; what ought to show up most and attract the adherence and enthusiasm of your girls; and what is preferably not so obvious to the public: the supporting spiritual framework, the defence and reservoir of all its energy.

In all this our aim was to rediscover the immediacy of its extraordinary value; to reassess its riches in the one spiritual heritage of Don Bosco; to reawaken the spell of our Salesian identity.

## A clear task to be achieved

Dear Sisters, as you refresh your memories with the recollection of the vital message left you at the death of Mother Mazzarello, you will be ready now to plan and achieve the second part of your proposal: "to renew the Sisters' communities in the spirit of Mornese".

The *Cronistoria* tells us that when Mother Mazzarello was speaking with difficulty to Mother Caterina Daghero, she paused a moment, "became thoughtful and uttered these comforting words, 'What a good father Don Bosco is to us. He means everything to the Institute; I am a nonentity. His work belongs to God and Mary. As Don Cagliero has assured me, the Institute will always have the support of his holiness and his counsel!'

"In the afternoon the Director Don Cagliero returned and Mother Mary conversed with him for some fortyfive minutes about her spiritual welfare and about certain faults that seemed to be growing among some of her daughters; she begged that something be done as soon as possible so as to prevent any harm to the good spirit of the Institute. She concluded with an act of profound gratitude and prayer, 'What a great grace the Lord has given me, to live and die a spouse of Jesus, a daughter of Mary and Don Bosco. May God grant this grace to all my Sisters I have so loved and hope to meet in heaven'.

"When Don Cagliero blessed her in his own name and in the name of Don Bosco, her face lit up and she cried out, 'After God's blessing, this blessing from my dear father is the greatest comfort I can have' ".<sup>68</sup>

This extraordinary attachment Mother Mary had

68. *Cronistoria* III 388-389.

towards Don Bosco, and reiterated at the solemn moment that concluded her earthly labours as Co-foundress, should be continually pondered and turned to account. It is a wide and unexplored area, and Mother Mary surveys its future with the greatest confidence.

In fact the spirit of Valdocco existed before that of Mornese, and the mission of Don Bosco as a Founder was already active while he was living. For Mother Mazzarello the "Salesian heritage" had not yet been "sealed" with the finishing touches by the death of Don Bosco. For her it was normal and fitting to look to Don Bosco as the still living sign of the Holy Spirit and to see for the "primal spark of the Spirit" future possibilities of development and opportunities to adapt itself to the changing times.

It seems to me that in this lies the great message of this centenary: TO REINFORCE THE SALESIAN IDENTITY, SEEING DON BOSCO AS "LIVING" IN A CHURCH THAT IS EVER PROGRESSING TOWARDS THAT FINAL PERFECTION OF ALL IN CHRIST.

## **Conclusion**

Dear Reverend Mother and all Sisters, I recently read some of the profound thinking of a Greek Orthodox theologian on "woman and the salvation of the world". He was speaking on the strong link in salvation-history between the Holy Spirit and woman.

According to a well-known Orthodox conception, in the intimacy of God, the Spirit is the "hypostatic maternity"; he reveals the Son to the Father and the Father to the Son; and in our earthly economy the Spirit descended on Mary to bring to birth for

us the image of the Father. In the Incarnation the Spirit did not intervene through the sublime act of man: he lavished the riches of maternity on Mary in a resplendent virginity. And so when he descended on the Apostles on Pentecost Sunday he brought to birth the Church, the Body of Christ; and when he descends on the bread and wine in the eucharistic celebration he brings to birth the real presence of the flesh and blood of Christ. "According to the prophecy of Joel (quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost), the Spirit works throughout the ages and transforms the body of history into the body of the Kingdom".<sup>69</sup> It is a work of "motherhood".

The operation of the Holy Spirit is a mother's solicitous care. The Church is his temple and is moved by the Spirit to be a mother in time; and the great charisms of the Founders are gifts of the Spirit for this fruitful ecclesial union. Thus it is important that there be a strong feminine presence in a religious family in order to grasp with special acumen and achieve with delicate generosity the values and projects of a particular distinctive vocation in the Church.

When in the early days of the Spirit's inspiration the Lord adds to the work of an "outstanding man"<sup>70</sup> the work of an "outstanding woman", then he infuses into his "experience of the Spirit" a particularly important and promising perspective of mission and growth. He enriches it with a fine sensitivity for the "spiritual"; he attunes it in a special way to the motherhood of the Church and imbues it with a deep loyalty to its ideals; he strengthens it against certain temptations to atheistic materialism that usually show up as "essentially masculine in the deadening of the religious sense of dependence on the Father".<sup>71</sup>

69. Evdokimov: *La donna e la salvezza del mondo*, Milan, Jaca Book, 1980.

70. LG 45; PC 1-2.

71. Evdokimov, *Ibid.* 154 et seq.

If we consider the profound significance in Revelation of the complementarity of man-woman, a spiritual family so composed will seem more perfect. Man and woman in Eden formed the living image of God. Each revealed in complementary form something of God's unfathomable intimacy. In the mystery of the Trinity two Persons were sent for our salvation, the Word and the Spirit. They project the features of their personalities into Christ the Incarnate Word, into Mary and the Church (the temple of the Spirit). Christ and Mary, the new Adam and the new Eve are the first fruits of the Resurrection who proclaim together the clear image of the great Mystery.

In the first of the great spiritual families, St Augustine's (unnamed) sister and her companions were responsible for giving a feminine slant to the Augustinian Rule. Then there were St Benedict and St Scholastica, St Francis and St Clare, and others. Feminine complementarity is a sign of the peculiar plenitude and importance of the charism, of long life and fruitfulness and of abundant contribution to the mission of the Church.

On this assumption it will mean that the feminine contribution of Mary Domenica Mazzarello and her spirit of Mornese to the Salesian charism has only made a beginning in the past: the future must see its real growth. It must not be reduced to a kind of privilege to be pondered on within the Institute: it is a task still to be developed in courageous expansion. Dear Sisters, you are called on to make your spiritual complementarity a fruitful contribution that is vividly real and present. You are called on to spread your feminine Salesianity beyond the confines of your Institute. Do not keep it hidden. Let there be no defenses or complexes; live your special Sale-

sianity with enthusiasm in the conviction of its ecclesial and historical value; spread throughout the world its spiritual attraction. Your testimony will give new life to the entire spiritual heritage of the whole Salesian Family.

With Mother Mazzarello look to Don Bosco. Listen again to those first counsels: "Pray by all means, but throw yourselves heart and soul into your good works, especially for the young". "Increase your sense of the presence of God; love your work; spread your joy and kindness everywhere; with Mary Help of Christians be helpers in the Church for the salvation of all."

May Don Bosco and Mary Mazzarello obtain for your Institute and indeed for all our Salesian Family the grace to perfect ourselves in that Salesian holiness which will make us all "signs and bearers" of God's love to the young.

Please pray daily for the Salesian Family and please include Don Bosco's successor in that Family.  
Affectionately in the Lord,

*Egidio VIGANÒ,*  
*Rector Major.*

*Rome, 24 February 1981*