

THE INSTITUTE OF THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY, HELP OF CHRISTIANS, AND DON BOSCO

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0. Introduction

The theme of this paper is both wide and complex, requiring as it does the identification of the elements of the relationship between the sisters during the period of the Institute's birth and growth and Don Bosco.¹ The view of that relationship which has developed within the Institute during its 116 years of life would call for a more profound study than the one attempted here. It would also require more time and space than is here possible.

My theme and the limits of space have forced me to be selective in my historical approach, limiting enquiry to the Institute's inception and to the first 16 years of its existence. I hope to be able to demonstrate that during those years the relationship that was established with St. John Bosco was one that could serve as a paradigm for the subsequent phases of its history.²

Before proceeding to the real argument of this paper, I think it opportune to make a few preliminary observations on the context of this topic.

1. The historical and ecclesiastical context within which the Institute of

¹ The Institute was founded at Mornese (in the province of Alessandria and the diocese of Acqui). Its co-foundress was St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello (1837-1881). Its purpose was the education of young working-class girls through various works and activities, chief among which were schools, oratories, youth-centres and catechesis. The Institute is of pontifical right (after 7 December, 1911). It at present (1988) numbers 17,167 sisters, organized into 72 provinces and 5 vice-provinces. They have 1495 houses scattered over 72 countries.

² The study examines the period between 1860, the earliest date for which any reliable information is available, and 1876, when the Institute and its constitutions received diocesan approval. Juridically speaking, the process of foundation was completed at that point. The statement that the early relationship between the DMHC and their founder is like a *paradigm* for the history of the Institute, is meant to suggest that at the various stages of its history the relationship acquired a fresh significance, according to the changing context.

the DMHC appeared was, paradoxically, a period of travail and growth, of crisis and religious vitality. Professor Giacomo Martina affirms that the situation in religious institutes in Italy round about 1870 reveals a striking antinomy: persistent crises within the Institutes, coupled with a flowering of new enterprises and new foundations.³

2. The appearance of new religious Institutes forced the development of new juridical procedures which previously had been either non-existent or inadequate and very slow in developing. This was especially true in Italy and particularly where Institutes of women were concerned.⁴ This juridical evolution in turn promoted the expansion of religious congregations for women.⁵

It seems to me that Don Bosco was influenced by this situation in setting about the foundation of a new Institute of sisters. On the one hand he was encouraged by the gradual recognition given to women in the field of education and social activity, while, on the other hand, he was conscious of the procedural requirements in founding any new Institute. In actual fact he was initially somewhat reluctant about founding the Institute and even more reluctant about obtaining the approval of the Holy See once the Institute was founded.⁶

³ Professor Martina writes: «Even a superficial glance at the state of religious congregations in Italy about 1870 reveals a double antinomy, which, at first sight, seems difficult to explain: long before the anti-religious laws the institutes, as a whole, were in a constant state of crisis, yet there was also a flowering of positive initiatives and a rapid, even exuberant expansion»: G. MARTINA, *La situazione degli Istituti religiosi in Italia intorno al 1870*, in: *Chiesa e religiosità in Italia dopo l'Unità (1861-1878)*, III/1, Milano, Vita e Pensiero 1973, p. 194.

⁴ «The constant recourse to Rome of these [female] foundations [...] helped to increase their importance [...] as well as the authority of the Church in the states in which they were located. Certain elements in these congregations were readily agreed to by Rome, while others had to be rethought»: G. ROCCA, *Le nuove fondazioni religiose femminili in Italia dal 1800 al 1860*, in: ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA DEI PROFESSORI DI STORIA DELLA CHIESA, *Problemi di Storia della Chiesa. Dalla Restaurazione all'Unità*. Atti del VI Convegno di aggiornamento (Pescara, 6-10 September, 1982), Napoli, Edizioni Dehoniane 1985, pp. 171-172.

⁵ The situation for women was in a state of evolution: «On the one hand», writes Martina, «women were gradually given greater freedom of activity, especially in care work and elementary education. On the other hand, Church law in the 19th century was evolving and beginning to recognise that female institutes, which had hitherto not been considered officially as "religious", possessed the essential attributes of religious life in its strict sense»: G. MARTINA, *La situazione* 200.

⁶ «A fact in the life of Don Bosco that may appear anomalous is that he never requested, and never decided to request, Rome's approval of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. This is all the more disconcerting when one considers the context, since he was a person whose mentality led him to place great emphasis on the Pope and on the prerogatives that contemporary Catholicism affirmed and exalted [...]. Whilst, on the one hand, he was resisting episcopal pressure in order to safeguard the features that he wanted the Salesian society to have, he was, on the other hand, for an analogous reason and almost at the same time, avoiding any application to Rome concerning the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians» (P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 203 et s.).

3. I should also like to comment on the diversity of the first group of DMHC, compared with the first Salesians. The latter nearly all grew up in the environment of Valdocco; they were boys whom Don Bosco himself had educated.⁷ The first DMHC sisters came from a group that was already in existence, with its own spirituality and organization, namely the Daughters of Mary Immaculate at Mornese.⁸

4. My final preliminary observation relates to the sources. I have to say that, so far, no critical study of them has been produced.⁹ Writings on this subject by Salesians, whilst attempting an accurate account, are more edifying than scientific.¹⁰ Work needs to be done on the original documents, which, though scarce, are extremely important.¹¹ For a correct understanding

⁷ MB IV 429.

⁸ A Pious Union was started in the parish of Mornese about 1851 through the initiative of Angela Maccagno (1832-1891). Don Domenico Pestarino (1817-1874), a priest in Mornese, gave the group every encouragement and was its spiritual guide. The Genoese theologian, Giuseppe Frassinetti (1804-1868), compiled a Rule for them, at the request of Don Pestarino, based on an outline by Angela Maccagno. This pious group called itself the New Ursuline Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and placed itself under the patronage of St. Ursula and St. Angela Merici. Cf. G. FRASSINETTI, *Opere edite ed inedite. Opere Ascetiche*, II, Roma, Postulazione Generale dei Figli di S. Maria Immacolata, 1909, pp. 108 et ss.; M.E. POSADA, *Giuseppe Frassinetti e Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Rapporto storico-spirituale*, Roma, LAS 1986.

⁹ The chapter given up to the DMHC, in Stella's book above quoted, is a stimulating, well documented study, somewhat summary in character, but nevertheless the leading one on the subject. A work of research on the beginnings of the Institute is provided by the critical edition of the primitive Constitutions of the DMHC, edited by Cecilia ROMERO. This is a serious study that makes a valuable, if indirect, investigation of the origins of the text and of its historical context. Cf. G. BOSCO, *Scritti editi ed inediti, II. Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1872-1885)*, a critical edition edited by Sr. Cecilia Romero, DMHC, Roma, LAS 1983. A study on the genesis of the foundation was published by the present writer to mark the centenary of the death of Don Bosco. Cf. M.E. POSADA, *Alle origini di una scelta. Don Bosco, Fondatore di un Istituto religioso femminile*, in: *Pensiero e prassi di Don Bosco*, edited by Roberto Giannatelli, Roma, LAS 1988.

¹⁰ This applies to the MB, as also to the *Cronistoria dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, edited by G. Capetti, Roma, Istituto FMA 1974-1978, vol. 5. Other works that are not critical studies, though fundamental to the history of the Salesian Congregation and of the Institute of the DMHC, are: E. CERIA, *Annali della Società Salesiana*, Torino, SEI 1941-1951, vol. 4; G. CAPETTI, *Il cammino dell'Istituto nel corso di un secolo*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1972-1976, vol. 3. It is upon these sources and studies that the history of the Institute has so far depended.

¹¹ Documents belonging to the «Archivio Generale delle FMA» [AGFMA], Roma, Via dell'Ateneo Salesiano 81 (now in process of reorganization); «Archivio Salesiano Centrale» (ASC), Roma, Via della Pisana 1111, especially concerning the «Fondo Don Bosco», ASC 131-175 (this is also on microfilm). It has to be said that the early *Chronicles* of the Institute are incomplete and rather late in date. The very earliest seems to go back only to 1887. These, with subsequent documents, such as the *Schiarimenti sugli inizi dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, are in the form of summaries. Detailed critical evaluation has, therefore, to be based on rather fragmentary source material. It seems that a process of careful historical reconstruction is necessary at this stage, and for that all the documents, however imperfect, are of considerable importance.

of the history of the DMHC, the following are indispensable: research (already begun), a critical evaluation of the sources and the publication of critical editions of the material that exists.

Having commented in the historical context and on the nature of the sources, I should like to draw attention to the two elements in the relationship under discussion: first, the primitive nucleus of the DMHC, an evolving group that was genuinely modified as a result of Don Bosco's intervention; and then, Don Bosco himself, who was going through a process of research and decision-making regarding the foundation of the Institute: he, too, was caught up in the dynamics of evolution, trying to preserve continuity while, at the same time, breaking free from previous models in a novel form of religious life and work.

I have studied the dynamics of this process attentively and I have been able to single out three stages, of varying duration, which express the changing modality of this ongoing relationship. I shall develop my theme in accordance with these three successive stages:

- 1) the new spiritual orientation within the group of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (1860-1870);
- 2) the truly historic choice, when the Institute was founded (1871-1872);
- 3) the growing sense of belonging that matured within the group as a result of their link with Don Bosco (1872-1876).

1. A new spiritual orientation (1860-1870)

The group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate (DMI) enjoyed a rhythm of intense Christian life: they dedicated themselves to different works in the parish¹² and were given regular spiritual guidance by Don Domenico Pestarino¹³ in a spiritual climate that was greatly influenced by the Genoese theologian Giuseppe Frassinetti.¹⁴ The group first came into contact with Don Bosco through the initiative of Don Pestarino.

¹² The aim of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate was «to ensure the sanctification of its members and to assist in the salvation of others by works of corporal mercy [...] especially by helping poor sick women in the locality»: *Regola della Pia Unione delle Figlie di S. Maria Immacolata* (1885), I, 1; III, 37.

¹³ Don Domenico Pestarino (1817-1874). Born in Mornese, he studied in the seminary at Genoa, then became Prefect of the seminary. He returned to his village in 1847 and worked hard at the spiritual renewal of the parish. He was Maria Domenica Mazzarello's spiritual director for 27 years. After the formation of the group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate he became its spiritual director and, later, the first rector of the community of the DMHC. Documentation relating to Don Pestarino in the ASC is classified under the heading: «Pestarino Don Domenico, sac., founder of the Salesian work at Mornese»: ASC 275 1,3. Cf. also F. MACCONO, *L'Apostolo di Mornese. Sac. Domenico Pestarino*, Torino, SEI 1926.

¹⁴ Don Giuseppe Frassinetti (1804-1868). He was Prior of St. Sabina in Genoa, and a theologian, moralist, writer of ascetical works, pastor and spiritual director. At Don Pesta-

The sources do not agree about the date of this meeting¹⁵ or about where it occurred;¹⁶ accounts do not even agree about the substance of the exchange. All versions do, however, agree about two important elements: Don Pestarino's enthusiasm about the personality and work of Don Bosco,¹⁷ and Don Bosco's interest in the group of DMI that Don Pestarino was directing.¹⁸ The sources do not make clear just how the group became involved with Don Bosco. Some versions present Don Pestarino as «offering» the group to Don Bosco, without asking them first;¹⁹ in other versions, it is Don Bosco himself who, after hearing Don Pestarino speak, «makes the move» because he is interested in the group.²⁰ Some testimonies hint that Don Bo-

rino's request he composed the Rule for the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate and was a spiritual inspiration to the group. Cf. G. FRASSINETTI, *Opere Ascetiche*, with introduction and notes by P. Giordano Renzi FSMI, Roma, Postulazione Generale dei Figli di S. Maria Immacolata 1978, vol. 2; POSADA, *Giuseppe Frassinetti*.

¹⁵ In a Memoir of Cardinal Giovanni Cagliero, deposited in the AGFMA, one reads that «this meeting and subsequent visits took place in 1860, 1861, 1862 and 1864»: *Memoria del Cardinale Giovanni Cagliero, 15 febbraio 1922*, in the AGFMA. The *Cronistoria* of the Institute of the DMHC and the biography of St. Mary Mazzarello by Ferdinand Maccono rely upon the testimony of Don Giuseppe Campi, a priest of Mornese: the encounter is said to have occurred «around 1862»; cf. the *Testimonianza di D. Giuseppe Campi* in AGFMA. Cf. also *Cronistoria* I 111; F. MACCONO, *S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello, Confondatrice e prima Superiora Generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, I, Torino, Istituto FMA 1960, p. 100. The authoress of the *Cronistoria*, M. Clelia Genghini, Secretary General of the Institute of the DMHC, suggests, as a result of her own research, that possible dates for the meeting could be the August, September or October of 1862. Cf. *Cronistoria* I 111-114.

¹⁶ In the Memoir of Cardinal Cagliero (see above) one reads: «I recall that Don Pestarino told me that he had known Don Bosco in Genoa, meeting in the home of Frassinetti, the parish priest of St. Sabina»; Campi affirms that the two met on a train, when Don Bosco and Don Pestarino were travelling from Acqui to Alessandria. This is the version accepted by the *Cronistoria* and by Maccono.

¹⁷ Don Pestarino, «filled with respect for his [Don Bosco] virtues, conceived the desire to come to Turin»: G. CAGLIERO, *Memoria*, in AGFMA.

¹⁸ The *Cronistoria* records not only Don Pestarino's interest in the work of Don Bosco but also Don Bosco's interest in the group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate that was under Don Pestarino's direction. It reconstructs, in a hypothetical, imaginative way, the dialogue between the two priests. In reality only the barest reference to the exchange is extant. Cf. *Cronistoria* I 114-116.

¹⁹ Don Bosco's successor, Don Michele Rua, gave an interesting testimony during the Ordinary Process for Don Bosco's canonization: «[Don Pestarino] with great persistence persuaded Don Bosco to adopt it [the Pious Union] as his own spiritual family. Seeing the good spirit, piety and mutual charity that reigned there, he left Father Pestarino in charge of those women [Daughters of Mary Immaculate and then the DMHC] for as long as the Lord gave him life (1872) [sic]»: M. RUA, *Deposizione*, in: SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIO, *Taurinen. Beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Joannis Bosco Sacerdotis Fundatoris Piae Societatis Salesianae. Positio super Introductione Causae, Summarium super dubio*, p. 323. I shall quote this as *Summ.*

²⁰ This is the thesis most commonly presented in the documents of the Institute. Cf. *Schiarimenti*, ff. 3-4, where prominence is given to Don Pestarino's membership of the Salesians. For me the most interesting document is Don Pestarino's handwritten *Memoir*, where

sco was at first rather worried at the idea of founding a female Institute,²¹ while others point out that this «providential» encounter aroused in Don Bosco the idea of a new foundation.²² It seems to me that in this encounter, which probably occurred in the summer of 1862,²³ Don Bosco found the definitive way towards the realization of a project that had been maturing for a long time.

From that point on it is easier to get a clearer and more reliable picture of the actual events and it is evident that the group, through the mediation of Don Pestarino, became more closely involved with Don Bosco. His influence was manifested in three ways:

a) through his own personality, which aroused admiration, respect and veneration on account of his reputation for holiness;²⁴

b) through his work as an educator, which involved the whole population of Mornese, especially when the Saint first visited the village in 1864:²⁵ the DMI were particularly involved in the preparations for this visit and, later, in the proposal that Don Bosco made to all the villagers, that a college for boys should be started at Mornese; the young women of the group even helped in the construction work for the building;²⁶

he describes Don Bosco's contribution to the idea of a new foundation. The document makes no reference to the first meeting but begins the account from 1871: «In 1871 the reverend priest, Don Bosco, was expounding to Don Domenico Pestarino [...] his desire to do something about the Christian education of poor girls, and he said that Mornese would be the most suitable place [...] since there had already existed for several years the Union of young women under the title of Mary Immaculate and of the New Ursulines, etc...»: D. PESTARINO, *Memoria autografa*, manuscript A in the AGFMA.

²¹ Cf. *Schiarimenti*, ff. 2-6.

²² «[Don Bosco] did not make up his mind until Providence itself clearly opened up the way for him. A pious priest, Don Domenico Pestarino... etc.»: M. RUA, *Deposizione*, in *Summ.* 323.

²³ Cf. E. POSADA, *Alle origini* 162-169.

²⁴ Cf. *Cronistoria* I 148-150. A letter from Don Pestarino to Don Michele Rua seems of interest here. When Don Bosco was ill at Varazze at the end of 1871, the Daughters of Mary Immaculate prayed and even offered their lives in return for the saint's recovery: «Amidst this sadness I had the consolation of hearing one of them say to me that, if I would permit it, she wanted to offer her life to obtain health and life for Don Bosco; this was something that others repeated to me; they are ready to die [...] and will make their offering at holy communion»: D. PESTARINO, *Lettera a Don Michele Rua*, Mornese, 17 December, 1871, original manuscript in ASC 275, 1, 2(2) *Pestarino*.

²⁵ «In the October of this year [1864], the famous and most Rev. Don Bosco of Turin visited Mornese with 60 or more boys, with a musical band, etc... for some time I had, by the grace of God, been in touch with him and we were in agreement over a number of things. I had opened up my own poor soul to him and told him of my projects. After he arrived here and was received as worthily as possible by the local inhabitants, he remained for 4 days, during which there was a beautiful service in church and a sacred concert at Borgalto. I told him of my desire to erect a building in that place...»: *Racconto-Memoria della fabbrica di Borgalto*. A copy, written in some other hand, of an account attributed to Don Pestarino, in the ASC, 409, 1, 5, f. 4.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, ff. 2 et ss; *Cronistoria* I 147-154.

c) through a special project that he gradually unfolded in the course of his visits to Mornese during the next few years,²⁷ and which culminated in a «programme» of spiritual life which Don Bosco proposed to the members of this group about 1869.²⁸

The way that the members of the DMI were effectively, even if indirectly, drawn into the orbit of Don Bosco during these ten years of gradual change and transformation, was a genuinely spiritual process; it was the expression of a common interior disposition which was manifested through the members' admiration for Don Bosco and his work, and through their willingness to be guided by him. For his part, Don Bosco showed interest in the group and, at the same time, as his contacts with its members enabled him to form a better knowledge of their spirituality and apostolic work, he was weighing up possibilities for the future.

2. An historic decision: the «moment» of the foundation (1871-1872)

Historically speaking, the genesis of a religious institute cannot be reduced to the date of its foundation. It is a process of varying duration according to the vicissitudes through which every emergent institute has to pass. 5 August, 1872, is the date that the DMHC celebrate as the date of their foundation, and it is on that day that the first professions are made.

Reliable documents concerning the genesis of the Institute reveal significant changes that took place between 1871 and 1872. We may consider that time as the crowning «moment» of the founding of the Institute. The changes concerned the relationship which had grown up between Don Bosco and the DMI.

A letter in Don Bosco's own hand to Mother Enrichetta Dominici, Mother General of the Sisters of St. Anne of Providence,²⁹ presents us with

²⁷ In 1867 Don Bosco visited Mornese on several occasions (cf. *Cronistoria* I 204-239). Important documents in tracing the relationship Don Bosco - Don Pestarino and Mornese are the handwritten letters of the saint to Don Pestarino: February 1865; [1867]; 4 October 1867; 3 December 1867; 25 December 1867; 8 March [?]; 28 [?] 1868; 23 February 1868; 26 October 1868; 2 May 1870; 10 July 1870, in ASC 13101.

²⁸ The *Cronistoria* speaks of a «daily programme» («Orario-Programma»), of a Rule of life written in Don Bosco's own hand in April, 1869: cf. *Cronistoria* I 222-224. C. ROMERO in her already quoted study of the Constitutions of the DMHC asserts: «Without wishing to enter into the question of the existence and dating of this *Rule*, it seems possible to affirm that we are not dealing here with a text of norms governing the religious life of a community» (C. ROMERO, *Alle origini delle Costituzioni dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti* 32).

²⁹ Mother Enrichetta Dominici (1829-1894). She was born at Borgo Salasio, near Carmagnola (Turin). She entered the Institute founded by the Marchioness of Barolo in Turin, the Sisters of St. Anne of Providence, who were devoted to the education of working-class girls. She was Superior General for 32 years. Don Bosco had reason to trust her spiritual

a decision that Don Bosco had made and with his plan to found a new congregation. He asks Mother Dominici's help in drawing up the first draft of a Rule «in order to found an Institute whose daughters will be true religious in the eyes of the Church and yet, equally, free citizens in the eyes of the State».³⁰ This was a decision that Don Bosco would have revealed to his Superior Council.³¹

The letter provides not only precious insights into the origin of the first rule of life of the DMHC but also an indication of the juridical position of the new Institute. It is also interesting that Don Bosco had recourse to a woman in working out the rough draft of the Rule, and chose the Superior of a religious institute dedicated to the education of working-class girls.

The members of the DMI were also faced with the need to make a choice. Now that they were in close contact with Don Bosco, the group had to make a decision about a new type of life commitment, and whether they wanted to be closely associated with this project of the saintly Turinese priest.³² One section of these New Ursulines DMI openly refused to become «religious», having a clear awareness of the radical change in their way of life that this would mean. Others readily agreed to the changes, seeming to be merely carrying out a choice that they had already pondered interiorly; yet others joined in later, showing that they too had an inkling of the change that was involved.³³

Don Pestarino's handwritten *Memoirs* sums up the first meeting of the members on 29 January, 1872, in order to elect a Superior Council: «... on the beautiful feast of St. Francis de Sales having explained everything that Don Bosco had advised, after the recitation of the *Veni Creator Spiritus* in front of the Crucifix exposed on a table between two lighted candles, he [Don Pestarino] moved on to the voting. There were 27 persons present and the votes received were read out by Don Pestarino and by Angela Mac-

wisdom and administrative ability. Cf. *Vigilia eroica. Pagine autobiografiche di Suor M. Enrichetta Dominici delle Suore di S. Anna della Provvidenza*. Introduction and notes by S.P. Morazzetti, Tivoli 1951. Mother Dominici was beatified in 1978.

³⁰ *Lettera di Don Bosco a Madre Enrichetta Dominici*, Torino, 24 April, 1871. The handwritten original is in «Archivio Generale delle Suore di S. Anna».

³¹ Sources and studies give 24 April, 1871, as the date when Don Bosco committed himself, in the presence of the Superior Council, to the founding of an Institute for women. This is confirmed if one refers to the minutes of the meeting. See P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 188; MB X 594; *Cronistoria* I 241. In the ASC the minutes for that year are missing (cf. ASC 0592) and there is no mention of this in successive minutes or in other sources (cf. Conferenze Generali nella Festa di S. Francesco di Sales, ASC 04, *Cronachette*, Documenti per scrivere la storia di D. Gio. Bosco, compiled by Lemoyne in 45 volumes, ASC 110). A deposition by Don Paolo Albera, at the request of Don Michele Rua, mentions this fact, but places it in 1870 (cf. minutes of the 9 and 23 December, 1907, in ASC 0592 and the *Summ. II, Substantialia Causae*, pp. 68 et ss.).

³² Cf. D. PESTARINO, *Memoria A* in AGFMA.

³³ Cf. *Cronistoria* I 272-274.

cagno, the village schoolmistress, who had hitherto been Superior of those living in their own homes. The result of the scrutiny was 21 votes for Maria Mazzarello of Joseph of Valponasca [...]. The votes for the second Assistant were then cast and Petronilla was elected with 19 votes. These two then withdrew and nominated Felicina (Mazzarello) as Mistress of Novices, Giovanna (Ferrettino) as Economer and the schoolmistress, Maccagno, as Vice-Superior for those in the village [at home]. These appointments were made known and the meeting concluded with the *Laudate Dominum*, and so came to an end».³⁴

The first professions took place seven months later. Those who agreed with Don Bosco's plan were transferred to the College that Don Pestarino had built in a place called Borgoalto, which had originally been designated by Don Bosco as the site for the school for boys of Mornese. It was transformed into the Mother House of the Institute of the DMHC.

The seal of the Church on this historic transformation from a simple «Pious Union» of women into a religious Institute was provided by the bishop of Acqui, Mons. Giuseppe Maria Sciandra, who was present at their religious professions; the seal of Salesian identity was provided by the presence of Don Bosco, who, at the bishop's invitation, addressed the newly professed in virtue of his position as founder.³⁵

As one reads the scanty records of these events, it seems that Don Bosco was not fully aware of the historic nature of what took place on that 5 August. He had not even anticipated being able to be present at the professions,³⁶ it seems almost as if he were obliged to go,³⁷ and he left Mornese immediately afterwards, so that his signature does not even appear on the Minutes of the foundation.³⁸ Nevertheless, his presence there, the bishop's invitation to him to preach to the newly professed and his assumption of responsibility for the Institute in front of the bishop, all announce the nature of the historic relationship that he established with the DMHC in the eyes of the Church and of those who followed after.

What had been a simple, though profound, spiritual involvement with Don Bosco's mission in the Church became the more historic relationship of dependence on their founder, so that a new juridical link was established at the moment when the new «Code of membership» was accepted. This «Code», even in its earliest, imperfect draft, already bore the stamp of Don Bosco's thought and spirituality.³⁹

³⁴ D. PESTARINO, *Memoria A*, in AGFMA.

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

³⁶ Cf. *Cronistoria* I 297.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³⁸ *Verbale relativo alla fondazione dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice eretto in Mornese, Diocesi di Acqui*, Mornese, 8 August, 1872. Authentic copy in the «Archivio della Curia Vescovile di Acqui», Registers, 15, 520-522 [Abbr. ACVA].

³⁹ Cf. ROMERO, *Alle origini*, in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti* 34-49.

3. The growing sense of legal belonging (1872-1876)

Careful observation of the *modus vivendi* of the first DMHC, as presented in their Rule and in the items recorded in their house chronicles, reveals a simple life-style of austere poverty, and yet serene, all based on the life of the first community at Mornese and on the demands of their apostolate amongst girls, especially those who needed educating.

Certain events, however, that followed hard on the heels of the new foundation show that the members became progressively more conscious that they belonged to a juridically constituted Institute, and this, in turn, influenced the relationship that existed between the primitive community and their founder.

In 1874, while Don Pestarino was still alive, Don Bosco took two juridically important steps: he chose a Director General for the Institute⁴⁰ in the person of one of his finest Salesians, Don Giovanni Cagliero,⁴¹ and he appointed a Superior General in the person of Sister Maria Domenica Mazzarello, who up to that point had presided over the community with the title of Vicar (*Vicaria*).⁴²

Don Cagliero's appointment was justified by the fact that Don Bosco could not personally follow the details of the Institute. He also foresaw that it was going to expand.⁴³ The appointment of a Superior General provided a

⁴⁰ Only from Manuscript F (a copy of the primitive Constitutions of the DMHC deposited by Don Bosco in the ACVA, Register 17), which bears the date 1875, does the figure of the Director General of the Institute appear. «The Director General shall be a member of the Superior Council of the Salesian Society. The local Director shall be any person to whom is entrusted the direction of any house of the Institute»: *Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Title 2, 1. In previous manuscripts it said: «The Institute of the sisters or daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, is immediately dependent upon the Superior General of the Society of St. Francis de Sales, who is referred to as Major Superior»: *ibid.*, Title 2, 1 (Manuscripts A - E). Cf. G. BOSCO, *Scritti* 209-252.

⁴¹ Cardinal Giovanni Cagliero (1838-1926). In 1875 he headed the first Salesian missionary expedition to Argentina. In 1884 Leo XIII made him titular bishop of Magida and entrusted to him the Vicariate of Patagonia. In 1904 Pius X entrusted to him the Apostolic Visitation of the dioceses of Tortona, Piacenza, Albenga and Savona, and then sent him as Minister Plenipotentiary and Apostolic Delegate of Central America. He was made a Cardinal by Benedict XV in 1915 and made a member of the Sacred Congregations of Religious, of Propaganda Fide and of Rites. In 1920 he was made bishop of the diocese of Frascati. He died in Rome in 1926. Cf. G. CASSANO, *Il Cardinale Giovanni Cagliero*, Torino, SEI 1935, vol. 2.

⁴² In the first elections to the Superior Council of the Institute on 29 January, 1872, Sister Maria Domenica Mazzarello was elected as Superior by 21 votes out of 27. She «suggested that it seemed good to her to leave the choice of the first superior in the hands of Don Bosco» (cf. D. PESTARINO, *Memoria A*, in AGFMA). When Don Bosco had given his opinion, Mother Mazzarello remained Superior, with the title of «Vicar», until 1874. The first codification of the office of a Mother General appears, in fact, in a manuscript dated between 1874 and 1875 (Manuscript D): cf. G. BOSCO, *Scritti* 85-95.

⁴³ When the Director General of the Institute was appointed, there was only one house in existence, the central or Mother-house in Mornese.

figure that was demanded by Church law. This was a controversial appointment at the time, but the procedures in force required it.⁴⁴

In the March of 1874 Don Bosco had presented to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars a «Summary» of the Pious Salesian Society with a view to the approval of the Constitutions. In this «Summary» he alluded very briefly to the foundation at Mornese.⁴⁵

Without delaying over details concerning the juridical structure of the Institute, Don Bosco aimed at obtaining diocesan approval of its Constitutions, he therefore revised the latter,⁴⁶ with a view to presenting them to the Bishop of Acqui, the same Mons. Sciandra who had presided over the first professions.

The request for approval is a very significant document on account of what it tells us of the beginnings of the Institute, its foundation, its purpose and its development.⁴⁷ The manuscript is signed by Don Bosco, by Don Giacomo Costamagna, who was then Rector of the house at Mornese, and by Sister Maria Mazzarello. It is interesting to note, in the light of that historical step, that beside the signature of Sister Maria Mazzarello Don Bosco had added, in his own hand, the abbreviation, «Sup.» (Superior), which proves that she was, in effect, the Superior of the Institute.⁴⁸

The letters sent to Don Bosco during these years by Sister Maria Domenica Mazzarello demonstrate her personal dependence and that of the Institute on Don Bosco as their Major Superior. She writes: «Allow me, most Rev. Major Superior, to recommend myself to your efficacious prayers, that I may be able to discharge faithfully all the duties imposed upon me by

⁴⁴ Before 1839 the juridical problem of a Mother General was never raised in Italy; but once the question arose various problems appeared. Some were of an ecclesiastical nature, as, for example, the question as to whether this would hamper the authority of the local ordinary. Others were directly related to the condition of women. Serious concerns arise where widespread institutes with a Mother General might depend on «weak women». The moving about necessary for the visits of a Mother General would be contrary to womanliness. C. Rocca quotes a reply of the Consultor of the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, Giusto da Camerino, a Capuchin: «It seems neither prudent nor appropriate that women religious, who ought to be characterised by their retiring behaviour, should be involved in making frequent journeys» (C. ROCCA, *Le nuove* 155).

⁴⁵ «As an appendage to and in dependence on the Salesian Congregation there is the house of Mary, Help of Christians, founded in Mornese, the diocese of Acqui, with the approval of the ecclesiastical authority. Its aim is to do for poor girls what the Salesians are doing for boys. There are already forty religious women taking care of 200 girls»: *Riassunto della Pia Società Salesiana di S. Francesco di Sales nel 1874*, in: CONGREGAZIONE PARTICOLARE DEI VESCOVI E REGOLARI [...], *Torinese, sopra l'approvazione delle Costituzioni della Società Salesiana*, March 1874, in ASC 0231.

⁴⁶ Cf. Manuscripts E and F of the primitive constitutions in: G. BOSCO, *Scritti* 99-123.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Domanda a mons. Giuseppe Maria Sciandra per l'approvazione dell'Istituto e delle Costituzioni delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*. The original manuscript in Mornese file; an authentic copy (Acqui 26 [?] January, 1876), in: *Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, the original manuscript being in ACVA, Registers 17.

⁴⁸ Cf. *loc. cit.*

my office, and that I may correspond with the great graces that the Lord has given me, as well as with your Reverence's own expectations. Have a persuasive word with Mary Most Holy, so that she may help me to practise what I have to teach to others, that they may receive from me the example that my position obliges me to give them».⁴⁹

Having started as a spontaneous but deep spiritual rapport, which was then consolidated by a momentous choice of historic significance, the relationship between the DMHC and St. John Bosco was finally sealed by the sisters' juridical union with the main body of the Salesian family. Such membership implied a particularly close bond with the Founder, who, by requesting official approval for the Institute and its first Constitutions, assumed «in proprio» real paternity of the Institute in the eyes of the Church.

4. Concluding comments

I said at the beginning that the relationship between the first DMHC and Don Bosco was a *paradigm* for the Institute's subsequent history. It seems possible, by way of conclusion, to point out how the spiritual, historical and juridical elements in that relationship interact to produce a cyclic pattern in the unfolding of the history of the Institute. Those elements are particularly noticeable in those phases of the life of the Institute in which it reaches a deeper understanding of the intentions of the Founder.

The moment when the Institute was juridically separated from the Salesian Society by the *Normae secundum quas*, that emanated from the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars in 1901, was a difficult time for the members. The separation was effected when the Constitutions of 1906 came out.⁵⁰ A new understanding of the Institute's relationship to the Founder was demanded and, although it acquired juridical autonomy, the Institute remained spiritually linked to the Salesian Society through the person of the Rector Major *pro-tempore*, and so remained in contact with its spiritual roots.

From 1907 to 1920 the process of beatification and canonization of Don Bosco⁵¹ helped to make it clear to the Church, to the Salesian Society and to

⁴⁹ M.D. MAZZARELLO, *Letter to Don Bosco*, Mornese, 22 June 1874, in: POSADA (edit.), *Lettere di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello, Confondatrice dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1980, pp. 51-52.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Normae secundum quas S. Congr. Episcoporum et Regularium procedere solet in approbandis Novis Institutis Votorum simplicium*, issued by the S.C. of Propaganda Fide, 1901. Cf. also ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Costituzioni delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice fondate da Don Bosco*, Torino, Tipografia Salesiana 1906.

⁵¹ For a study of the processes of beatification and canonization of Don Bosco cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco III*. For further study of the foundation of the Institute of the DMHC as mentioned in the processes, cf. M. MIDALI, *Madre Mazzarello. Il significato del titolo di Confondatrice*, Roma, LAS 1982.

the Institute of DMHC, that Don Bosco was indeed the true father and founder of this Institute for women. Don Pestarino's role in the founding of the DMHC was clarified during the process, and this put an end to any hypothesis according to which Don Bosco was only the Institute's adoptive father.

The force for renewal that began with the Second Vatican Council forced all religious congregations to look both backwards to their origins and forwards in a prophetic vision of their future. This involved the Institute in a cyclic process, as it strove towards a deeper understanding of its original charism. The text of the renewed Constitutions contains the resulting synthesis, based on memory and prophecy.⁵²

The reflection on the history and spirituality of the Institute that was demanded by this renewal revealed more clearly the part played by Saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Although Don Bosco was, quite unequivocally, the founder of the congregation, he was not its sole founder. The essential and efficacious collaboration of Mother Mazzarello led the Church to confer on her the title of Cofoundress, in the strict sense of the word.

My final comment relates to methodology. In view of the continuous, developing cycle of interrelationship between the Institute and its Founders, progressive research upon the original documents is called for, in order to ensure hermeneutical accuracy in the various fields of history, theology, canon-law, pedagogy, sociology and pastoral theology. In my opinion, the Institute is on the threshold of the stage of discovery, may be the most delicate stage, but also the most fruitful one.

Heuristics, exegesis and hermeneutics – these are aspects of that cyclic process which involves us in an endless, and, I dare to say, inexhaustible study of the past in order to ensure true historical progress.

⁵² Cf. ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Costituzioni e Regolamenti*, Roma, Istituto FMA, 1982.