

# DON BOSCO AND MARIA DOMENICA MAZZARELLO: THEIR HISTORICAL AND SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

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## 0. Introduction

There was an extraordinary proliferation of new religious congregations in the 19th century, one of them being the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, founded by Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello.<sup>1</sup>

As we reflect, in the course of this Congress, on the historical figure and on the works of Don Bosco, it seems appropriate to offer this talk as a *tentative effort* to look a little more deeply at a relationship which has been variously interpreted by students of Salesian history.

If we are to understand correctly the type of relationship that grew up between these two saints, it is necessary to clarify certain historical details, to trace the chronology of their contacts, both direct and indirect, and to pick out precisely what it was that caused their relationship to develop. In that way it should be possible to discern the reason for and frequency of the Founder's interventions in the life of Maria Domenica Mazzarello as well as the way she reacted to and assimilated his influence.

Maria Domenica Mazzarello was born at Mornese-Alessandria in 1837 and died at Nizza Monferrato in 1881. Her life was short but rich in an apostolate of charity.<sup>2</sup> She got to know Don Bosco when she was about 27

<sup>1</sup> The Institute was founded at Mornese, in the province of Alessandria and the diocese of Acqui, on 5 August 1872. The founder, Don Bosco, is well known; the co-foundress, Maria Domenica Mazzarello, is little known outside Salesian circles. The sphere of her activities was far more limited than that of the founder; but, though her life was short (1837-1881), her specific mission within the Church was constantly mentioned in the processes for her beatification and canonization.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the main biography: F. MACCONO, *S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello, Confondatrice e prima Superiora Generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, Istituto FMA 1960, vol. 2. A complete bibliography concerning the saint has been edited by A. COSTA, *Rassegna bibliografica su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in: M.E. POSADA (edit.), *Attuale perché vera. Contributi su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, Roma, LAS 1987, pp. 227-262.

and already possessed of a certain spiritual maturity. Don Bosco, who had by then founded the Salesian Congregation and was busy consolidating his work at Valdocco, gradually became aware of her through other people, and then became personally acquainted with this woman upon whom he was to exercise a decisive influence.

### 1. Interpretation of the history of the relationship between Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello within a Salesian perspective

An examination of the many publications relating to these two saints (biographies, studies, sketches, etc.), so diverse in aim, scope, method and use of documentation, reveals at once widely differing ways of presenting and interpreting the relationship between them: at one extreme the Mother (as she was always called) has been seen as totally dependent on Don Bosco, while others have accentuated her prominent and autonomous role as co-foundress.<sup>3</sup>

The early, popular biographies of Don Bosco emphasise his dominance and the corresponding dependency and submission of the young Maria Domenica, «attracted» to his personality, even though there was a «providential» convergence of ideals and of approaches to apostolic and educative work: in the words of Don Amadei: «She kept her gaze fixed on him, as a daughter towards her Father, as a disciple towards her Master, waiting for the merest sign, devoted, faithful».<sup>4</sup>

The tenth volume of the *Memorie Biografiche*, in fact, praises Blessed Maria Mazzarello as «one who had no desire other than to follow in the footsteps traced by the Founder».<sup>5</sup> Amadei gives expression to a conviction that was deeply rooted amongst both the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, and the Salesians, that Mazzarello was to be considered only as a disciple and collaborator of Don Bosco and that she could in no way be regarded as co-foundress. The author's intention is explicitly declared, to demonstrate «the ways of the Lord», namely the dispositions of a Providence which guided his faithful servant, Don Bosco, at every step and used Maria Domenica purely as an instrument to enable the Saint to found his second religious family.

It is interesting to note that the earliest written comments on Maria Mazzarello, by Bonetti in the «Unità Cattolica»<sup>6</sup> and by Lemoyne in the «Bollet-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. P. CAVAGLIA, *Il rapporto stabilitosi tra S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello e S. Giovanni Bosco. Studio critico di alcune interpretazioni*, in: POSADA, *Attuale perché vera* 69-98.

<sup>4</sup> A. AMADEI, *La Serva di Dio Madre Maria Mazzarello*, in BS 47 (1923) 2 and 30.

<sup>5</sup> MB X, p. IV.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G. BONETTI, *La Superiora Generale delle Suore di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in «L'Unità Cattolica» (21 May 1881) n. 120.

tino Salesiano» (1881),<sup>7</sup> present the Mother much more in the role of a Superior who is fully occupied in laying the foundations of the new institute so much so that she amazes Don Bosco, who sets about helping her. In speaking of Mazzarello's mission, these two authors refer to Don Bosco as the founder of the Institute, but without making the first Mother Superior explicitly dependent upon him.

Francesia and Maccono, by emphasising the affinity between the lives and spirituality of the two, seek to prove that Providence prepared a suitable instrument for Don Bosco to realise his enterprises.<sup>8</sup> He found in the docility and attentive solicitude that rendered her so humbly obedient just what he needed for his project; her attitude was that of a faithful disciple.

When the Sacred Congregation of Rites later conferred on Maria Domenica Mazzarello the title of «Co-foundress», these authors tried to represent and interpret the role of the Mother as that of a collaborator, and «auxiliary» of Don Bosco.<sup>9</sup>

Ceria, for his part, has valuable insights into the personal and indispensable contribution made by Maria Mazzarello towards the founding of the Institute, even if she was dependent upon Don Bosco.<sup>10</sup>

Caviglia affirms that Don Bosco, finding in Maria Domenica the essential features of Salesian spirituality, made use of them to create something new and great; there is no longer talk of faithful dependence on Don Bosco but rather of the creation of a new spiritual tradition.<sup>11</sup> Caviglia's interpretation may not be founded on precise reconstruction of the encounters between the two saints, but it has the value of redefining the nature of the relationship, seeing it no longer in terms of static dependence. More recent studies of Maria Mazzarello (Colli, Fiora, Posada, ...) <sup>12</sup> interpret the sources much more accurately, coining the phrases «creative fidelity» or «faithful creativity» to describe the Mother's attitude to Don Bosco.

Interpretations that are more markedly historical and theological in approach (Midali) underline the preminent and autonomous quality of her role

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G.B. LEMOYNE, *Suor Maria Mazzarello*, in BS 5 (1881) 9, 11-13.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G.B. FRANCESIA, *Suor Maria Mazzarello ed i primi due lustri delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Memorie raccolte e pubblicate*, S. Benigno Canavese, Libreria Salesiana 1906; F. MACCONO, *Suor Maria Mazzarello, prima Superiora Generale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice fondate dal Venerabile Don Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, SAID 1913.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the evolution in the biographies written by Maccono, from the first in 1913 to that of 1934.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. E. CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello, Confondatrice dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, SEI 1952.

<sup>11</sup> A. CAVIGLIA, *Santa Maria Mazzarello*, Torino, Istituto FMA 1957.

<sup>12</sup> C. COLLI, *Contributo di Don Bosco e di Madre Mazzarello al carisma di fondazione dell'Istituto delle FMA*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1978; L. FIORA, *Storia del titolo «Confondatrice» conferito dalla Chiesa a S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in: POSADA, *Attuale perché vera* 37-51; M.E. POSADA, *Significato della «validissima cooperatio» di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello alla fondazione dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in: POSADA, *Attuale perché vera* 53-67.

as co-foundress, that is the reciprocity between Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello.<sup>13</sup>

Publications, on the other hand, dealing with Don Bosco do not seem to pose the problem of the relationship between the saints but, by emphasising the parallelism and similarity of their lives, continue to follow the line that Mary Mazzarello was dependent on Don Bosco.

It seems to me that an alternative reading of the sources at our disposal constrains us to adopt a view which neither makes the Mother's role totally secondary nor elevates it to total parity. There is, in fact, a progressive evolution from an initial, reciprocal intuition to a rich and authentic collaboration.

## 2. The historical outline of the relationship

The reconstruction of the history of Don Bosco's contacts with Maria Domenica Mazzarello, based on the data of the most reliable sources, can help us to perceive more clearly the nature of the relationship that grew up between these two saints.

The documents and Salesian historical works consulted have not diminished the difficulty of this task: one has to make a critical evaluation of the sources as, for example, the *Cronistoria. Chronicles of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians* (this is a narrative source that makes a reconstruction of the origins of the Institute based on various documentary materials), and certain recollections and testimonies that are basic, but of late origin.<sup>14</sup>

On the basis of chronology I have divided my account of the research work into two periods, using the foundation of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, as the dividing line (5 August 1872); this

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M. MIDALI, *Madre Mazzarello. Il significato del titolo di Confondatrice*, Roma, LAS 1982.

<sup>14</sup> G. CAPETTI (edit.), *Cronistoria dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1974-1978, vol. 5. This is the edited and completed copy of the chronicle in typescript, compiled by Mother Clelia Genghini between 1922 and 1942. It is a rich historical account; the authoress used an abundance of sound material though she did not always indicate her sources, or conflated them into a synthetic account. The material collected is preserved in the general archives of the DMHC [Abbr. = AGFMA]. It is made up of narrative sources (the testimonies of sisters who lived at Mornese, of lay people and of priests who were from the same place as Maria Mazzarello), of documentary sources, which are preserved with the text (decisions of the Chapter, legal documents, texts of the Constitutions, letters, documents relating to the juridical status of the Institute). In addition to this material, the *Cronistoria* uses the biographies by Maccono and Francesia, the *Memorie Biografiche* and the «Salesian Bulletin». My research has involved comparing unpublished sources with the published text. Whenever they agree, I quote the published version of the *Cronistoria* for ease of consultation.

throws into relief the character and spiritual content of Don Bosco's influence upon the life of Maria Mazzarello before and after the foundation of the Institute.

I do not, however, deal with the problems associated with the choice and foundation of the Institute. This will be dealt with by Sr. Posada in a subsequent paper.

### 2.1. *Before the foundation of the Institute (1862-1872)*

The historical context and ambience in which the two saints first became acquainted was typical of the 19th century in Piedmont and Liguria; the spiritual atmosphere was largely dominated by the figures of Don Bosco, the theologian Frassinetti of Genoa and Don Domenico Pestarino, the priest at Mornese, the village in the Monferrato region where Maria Mazzarello lived and where the Institute would later be founded. Even this region experienced in its own particular way the prevailing climate, the repercussions of the 19th century Restoration and the religious problems connected with it.<sup>15</sup> Don Pestarino played a special part in the movement of spiritual renewal. He was a disciple and friend of the theologian Frassinetti, and promoted a spirituality that was Christocentric, Marian and apostolic.<sup>16</sup>

Although we cannot discover from a careful study of the sources precisely when Don Domenico Pestarino first met Don Bosco (or even when he joined the Salesian congregation), it seems, nevertheless, certain that this priest was responsible for first bringing Maria Mazzarello to the attention of Don Bosco (1862).<sup>17</sup>

Don Bosco sent a number of written and oral messages to the young women, Maria Domenica and Petronilla Mazzarello, who were then mem-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M.E. POSADA, *Giuseppe Frassinetti e Maria D. Mazzarello. Rapporto storico-spirituale*, Roma, LAS 1986, pp. 37-41.

<sup>16</sup> Domenico Pestarino was born at Mornese in 1817 and completed his church studies in the archiepiscopal seminary of Genoa, where he was ordained priest in 1839. Following certain tensions in the ecclesiastical circles of Genoa, he returned to Mornese in 1847. He remained there until his death in 1874, exercising a wide apostolate and very involved in local public life as village councillor and parish bursar. Don Bosco met him in 1862 and he later became a Salesian, though he still remained at Mornese as Director of the infant Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. Cf. F. MACCONO, *L'Apostolo di Mornese, Sac. Domenico Pestarino*, Torino, SEI 1926. Cf. also the relevant file on Don Pestarino in the Central Salesian Archives, ASC 275, 1, 3.

<sup>17</sup> In the *Memoria del Cardinale Giovanni Cagliero*, 15 February 1922, preserved in the AGFMA, it is stated that Don Pestarino had known Don Bosco in Genoa, meeting him in the house of the theologian Frassinetti. There were several meetings between 1860 and 1864. The *Cronistoria* and the biography by Maccono carry, on the other hand, a statement by don Giuseppe Campi, a priest of Mornese, who asserted that the two first met on a train between Acqui and Turin in 1862.

bers of the local association of Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and were engaged in a type of educational apostolate, for which they had received some training. Don Bosco sent the messages without knowing them personally; he was merely expressing a form of benevolent interest according to what Don Pestarino states.<sup>18</sup>

The first recorded encounter took place in October 1864, during one of the characteristic autumn outings for the boys of Valdocco. There was no question of any specific interest in Maria Domenica Mazzarello on the part of Don Bosco; she was merely one of a group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate, who were deliberately introduced to the saint.<sup>19</sup> An unpublished letter of Angela Maccagno to Frassinetti recounts the contents and form of the predominantly exhortatory talk that Don Bosco gave concerning commitment to their «Pious Union».<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the person, words and demeanour of Don Bosco had a profound effect upon the young Maria Domenica and the encounter encouraged in her a more intense concern about the nature of her work as an educator, as she strove to make her presence amongst her young girls even more educative. Testimonies coincide in noting her intuitive perception of Don Bosco's sanctity and the way she openly proclaimed it with unaccustomed boldness.<sup>21</sup>

Salesian history records Don Bosco's continuing interest in the group at Mornese, but not until 1867 do we find a letter of Don Bosco to Don Pestarino that refers explicitly to a projected visit to Mornese.<sup>22</sup> From Don Pestarino's own chronicle we learn that on that occasion Don Bosco again gave a short talk to the Daughters of Mary Immaculate.<sup>23</sup>

In the March of 1869 the saint again visited Mornese and again met the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. The purpose, on that occasion, was more explicit: there are references to some sort of daily programme and a rule for those living in common, but, unfortunately, the manuscript has not been traced.<sup>24</sup> The testimony was provided by Petronilla Mazzarello, who outlined the fundamental features of the Salesian spirituality already practiced by the little group that had Maria Domenica at its head.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Cronistoria* I, pp. 117-118.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 148-150.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the letter of Angela Maccagno (1830-1890), a teacher in Mornese and the foundress of the group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate, written to Prior Giuseppe Frassinetti on 4 December 1864. The autographed manuscript is in the archives of the Postulator General of the Sons of Mary Immaculate in Rome.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Cronistoria* I, p. 150.

<sup>22</sup> A Letter of Don Bosco to Don Pestarino, 3 December 1867, in ASC 131.01.

<sup>23</sup> Recorded in the *Cronistoria* I, p. 204.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222-224.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the testimony of Petronilla Mazzarello in *SACRA CONGREGATIO RITUMUM, Aque. Beatificationis et canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Dominicae Mazzarello, Confundatricis F.B.V.M.A. Transsumptum*, pp. 133-134.

Was Don Bosco's interest already directed towards a Salesian foundation for women? Only in 1871 is there an official declaration of such interest. Don Pestarino continued to care for and form the group and kept in touch with Don Bosco, who followed what was being done with keen and respectful attention; even with a certain degree of expectation.<sup>26</sup>

I shall pass over the succession of events leading to the foundation of the Institute (Don Pestarino's own record of these events is very interesting),<sup>27</sup> the process of drawing up the Rule and the steps taken by Don Bosco. I wish, rather, to draw attention to the work of Don Pestarino as a mediator for Maria Domenica and her companions; it was he who presented Don Bosco's proposal for an Institute, the Rule itself, the kind of work to be done; it was practically through him that the work originated.<sup>28</sup>

Don Bosco, almost of necessity, was present only at the profession of the first eleven Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, on 5 August 1872. Don Pestarino was the busy, energetic go-between. And yet Maria Domenica's strong loyalty to Don Bosco is emphasised in the contemporary testimony of Giuseppe Campi, himself a Salesian, a native of Mornese and a close friend of Don Pestarino: «Even if, to suppose the impossible, Don Pestarino were to leave Don Bosco, I would stay with Don Bosco».<sup>29</sup>

We do not have, therefore, records of any direct, individual meetings between Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello. That does not, however, mean that her contact with Don Bosco was not the determining element in her life. Before they met they had both nourished similar ideals, and when they met they realised the convergence and complementarity of those ideals. Their relationship was based on reciprocal awareness and acceptance. The position of Maria Mazzarello was not one of total, passive dependency: she freely chose to live the kind of life proposed by Don Bosco, with its Salesian emphases, but it was a kind of life that she had begun to practise even before she met him.

In Salesian history of this period, Don Bosco is represented as the founder and Maria Domenica as the instrument for the realisation of a providential plan. It seems to me that, in reality, her free, responsible acceptance of that plan, and her originality in her role as an executive makes this «instrument» a very active one that is endowed with powers of self-determination.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Cronistoria* I, pp. 239, 241, 243, 245.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Memoria di Don Pestarino*, an autographed manuscript in AGFMA.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Cronistoria* I, pp. 250-252.

<sup>29</sup> The testimony of Giuseppe Campi, preserved in the AGFMA.

## 2.2. After the foundation of the Institute (1872-1881)

The years from 1872-1876, the year of the diocesan approval of the Constitutions, were a period of structural and spiritual formation for the Institute, while Don Bosco and Mazzarello worked together for its definitive establishment. Don Bosco's interventions, the role of Mother Mazzarello and the formation of the first sisters are all tightly linked.

Don Bosco's interventions were sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, but his way of dealing with the new Mother General and the first community elicited a warm response from both the Mother and the sisters. At the same time the characteristics of their way of life and of their work helped to determine the nature, frequency and style of the Founder's involvement.

On the 4th and 5th August 1872, Don Bosco again addressed the community, exhorting them to a life of simplicity, poverty and self-denial.<sup>30</sup> There was not, however, as witnesses testified, opportunity for a personal meeting between Don Bosco and the «Vicaria» (such was the Mother's title) even when she was presented to the community in her new role. It seems to me that Don Bosco's main preoccupation was the formation of the community (sending nuns of St. Anne to instruct them, personally accepting new postulants, visiting the Mornese community);<sup>31</sup> at the same time, however, he showed concern for and confidence in Maria Domenica, a peasant girl, yet also a true educator.

In the visits that we have on record (e.g. 1873, 1874, 1875)<sup>32</sup> Don Bosco's activity is directed towards clarifying and consolidating the character of the Institute. Soon after the approval of the Constitutions of the Salesian Society (1874) the Institute of the sisters was incorporated into the «Pious Salesian Society». Don Bosco became the official Superior General of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, but in exercising this authority he showed great trust and respect for Maria Mazzarello, as he became progressively more aware of her sense of responsibility and her growing ability to govern.

Their correspondence demonstrates that the Mother did not have recourse to him over her personal concerns – she was willing to deny herself that<sup>33</sup> – but turned to him rather in her capacity as superior of the community, consulting him about admissions of new members and about the running of the house.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Cronistoria* I, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* II, pp. 24, 28-31, 40. Cf. also *Annali e cronache Istituto Suore di Sant'Anna*, vol. 1, 1873, pp. 103-104, in the archives of the Sisters of Saint Anne of Providence in Rome.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the testimonies recorded in the *Cronistoria* II, pp. 40, 88, 146, 148.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the letter from Mother Mazzarello to Don Bosco on 22 June 1874, published in: M.E. POSADA (edit.), *Lettere di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, Roma, Istituto FMA 21980, p. 51; also the letter of 17 June 1878, *ibid.*, p. 83; the letter of 22 December 1879, *ibid.*, p. 128; and the letter of 30 October 1880, *ibid.*, p. 167.



Her relations with Don Bosco were founded on truth and trust. She was obedient, yes, but also capable of making mature suggestions and appropriate decisions. For his part, Don Bosco showed constant interest but was always discreet in giving guidance (using first Don Pestarino and later Don Cagliero as his deputies), as he established rules and elicited effective and substantial cooperation.

Once the *Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians*, had received diocesan approval (1876), the Institute began to expand, not only in Piedmont but also in Liguria, France and America. For Mother Mazzarello it was a period of intense work, of fresh initiatives, of journeys and much letter-writing.

Her meetings with Don Bosco grew more frequent and more lengthy. She felt the need of recourse to the founder for advice or to report on the progress of the Institute. When new houses were opened, it was she who chose and formed the personnel in a way that showed fine educational sensitivity. She was endowed with the true gift of discernment.<sup>34</sup>

After visiting the houses of the Institute she would call on Don Bosco to report to him how things had gone. There is no documentary record of those reports, but we know that she frequently visited Valdocco.<sup>35</sup>

Don Bosco intervened personally over the transfer of the mother-house to Nizza-Monferrato; but the confidence that he showed towards the Mother during this period became ever more total, as he encouraged her to take more responsibility whilst limiting his own personal involvement, relying more and more on her competence as the real Superior General.<sup>36</sup> Mother Mazzarello, for her part, became more totally identified with and responsible for the Institute whose spirit was that of Don Bosco.

Such limited interventions as Don Bosco now made were aimed at encouraging the spirit of unity within the new religious family.<sup>37</sup>

Their final meetings in 1880 and early in 1881 were at Sampierdarena, at Marseilles and at St. Cyr.<sup>38</sup> The Mother was ill and it was Don Bosco who told her the truth about her condition. She made the offering of her life, and in her last conference to the sisters she spoke of obedience to Don Bosco, who indicated to them the will of God.<sup>39</sup>

Don Bosco was not present at Mother Mazzarello's death-bed. No clear reason for his absence has been recorded, but on 14 May 1881, he was in

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the testimonies in the process of canonization: SACRA CONGREGATIO RITUUM, *Aquen. Beatificationis et canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Dominicae Mazzarello Primae Antistitae Institutii Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis Summarium super dubio*, pp. 408-422.

<sup>35</sup> Recorded in *Cronistoria II*, pp. 182, 202, 269, 323, 341.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 350 and 385.

<sup>37</sup> Recorded *ibid.*, pp. 32, 58, 66, 70, 139, 172, 178, 229, 232.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 340, 343, 346, 354.

<sup>39</sup> Recorded *ibid.*, pp. 367-368.

Florence and, as he wrote to Don Berto, «had very serious business in hand».<sup>40</sup> Don Cagliero took his place.

The last period of Maria Mazzarello's life, therefore, was marked by collaboration with Don Bosco, who gave her his full confidence. When the Saint intervened it was to clarify points, to provide ascetical norms, advice, approval; but all the time he gave full freedom to this simple but exceptional woman, whose true motherhood culminated in the offering of her life for the Institute.

This simple, historical outline, though barely sketched, is based on a careful study of all available documents. By reconstructing events, examining testimonies and correspondence and considering their indirect contacts, it is possible to trace the development of the relationship between these two saints. Their encounters, though neither frequent nor long, bore rich results and it is clear that the influence upon them was reciprocal.

Those encounters are moreover significant because their character helps us to understand a way of dealing with people that was characteristic of Don Bosco. His contacts with people were typically brief and well-judged, always an encouragement to interior growth and expressive of confidence and respect. Such were the contacts of Don Bosco with Maria Mazzarello and with the Institute of the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians.

### 3. Important links

The limits of this paper will permit only a brief reference to some of the people who formed important links between Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello.

Ample reference has been made to the key role played by *Don Domenico Pestarino* (1817-1874), Maria's first precious spiritual guide, in bringing her to Don Bosco's attention and later mediating to her the spirit of the saint. As the first Director of the Institute he did his job with quiet efficiency. Although he frequently referred matters to Don Bosco, he himself possessed a sound doctrinal formation that began in the seminary at Genoa and matured during his busy life as a parish priest.

*Don Giovanni Cagliero* (1838-1926). He became Director General of the new Institute even before the death of Don Pestarino and was a channel through which Don Bosco could express his concern over the nascent congregation. He was a trusted and much loved collaborator of Don Bosco, whose presence in the life of the Institute and whose words to the sisters shared in the authority accorded to Don Bosco himself, whose official mouthpiece he was. Don Bosco frequently relied upon his wisdom and ex-

<sup>40</sup> A letter of Don Bosco to Don Berto, 8 April, 1881, in: E IV, pp. 42-43.

perience in matters connected with the Institute. Maria Domenica established with him a relationship of cordial and filial openness, of unusual trust and warm yet delicate affection. The letters that passed between them bear testimony to this.<sup>41</sup>

*Don Giacomo Costamagna* (1846-1921), the third local Director and famous for his exuberant personality as he tried to train the sisters, was the one who is credited with having implanted in Mornese the traditions and style of life of Valdocco. Despite the ascetical demands that he made upon the sisters, it was the balance of Maria Mazzarello that preserved mutual esteem, charity and a climate of cheerful Salesian serenity.<sup>42</sup>

*Don Giovanni Battista Lemoyne* (1839-1916). His Salesian background was gratifyingly rich. He did not find it easy to settle down in Mornese, but his stay there and, later, at Nizza Monferrato made a particularly precious Salesian contribution to the life of the community, and it was done with discretion and sound judgement. He helped to prepare the sisters for their work in education, and the relations he established with the Mother General were affectionate, simple and homely.<sup>43</sup>

These well known Salesian personalities kept alive the link between Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello, and more research needs to be done on the part they played. Documentation on the years at Mornese is sparse, but the mediating role of these men is such as to merit further study.

#### 4. The spiritual significance of this relationship

Our study of the links between Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello leads finally to a consideration of the spiritual relationship that was established between the saints.

Maria Domenica was particularly receptive and single-minded in her search for truth; she showed a great capacity for assimilating the spiritual direction furnished by Don Bosco, doubtless because there had been elements in her previous formation which were naturally in tune with Salesian spirituality.

The Christocentric, Marian and apostolic spirituality, based on a sound

<sup>41</sup> Cf. the letters of Mother Mazzarello to Don Giovanni Cagliero: 29 December 1875, in: POSADA, *Lettere*, p. 53; 5 April 1876, *ibid.*, p. 58; 8 July 1876, *ibid.*, p. 64; 1876, *ibid.*, p. 68; 27 December 1876, *ibid.*, p. 73; 27 September 1878, *ibid.*, p. 85. For the figure of Cardinal Cagliero cf. G. CASSANO, *Il Cardinale Giovanni Cagliero*, Torino, SEI 1935, vol. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. for example, the letters of Don Costamagna to Mother Mazzarello on 19 February 1877, and on 20 November 1878, in AGFMA.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the letters of Mother Mazzarello to Don Lemoyne: 24 December 1877, in: POSADA, *Lettere*, p. 78; 17 March 1879, *ibid.*, p. 95; 9 April 1879, *ibid.*, p. 97; December 1879, *ibid.*, p. 134.

training in the celibate life which was imparted to the group of Daughters of Mary Immaculate by Don Pestarino and based on the teaching of the theologian Frassinetti, was very much in keeping with Don Bosco's own spirituality.<sup>44</sup> To this there was added Maria's eagerness to learn the spirit of Don Bosco and to practise it in faithful conformity with his wishes and with his own saintly example.

As one studies the unfolding «events» one notes that Maria Domenica's insistent requirement of conformity to Salesian spirituality is prompted not by a need for security or any propping up, but rather by her desire to penetrate the spirit of Don Bosco, in order to translate it fully into the formative female environment of Mornese. Whatever Don Bosco taught, directly or indirectly, was adopted by Mother Mazzarello but, what is far more, it was lived by her in her own personal way, with the combination of austerity and simplicity that characterized her total giving of her self.

If we go back to the varied interpretations of the relationship between these two saints, with which we began this paper, we can certainly conclude that Maria Domenica's role was not one of total dependence and passive imitation. Don Bosco found in her a woman that he could trust and respect, as she freely cooperated with him in the realisation of a considerable project for Christian living and apostolate. Her collaboration was a share in responsibility, achieved through the creative assimilation of Salesian spirituality.

## 5. Concluding comments

The limits of this paper have forced me to touch upon matters very sketchily, but there is considerable scope for further research in this field. Further careful interpretation of the sources is required and my efforts can form only a small part of a much wider survey. More detailed research and examination of the essential nature of the relationship between Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello should prove valuable for both these two religious congregations working in the Church.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. POSADA, *Giuseppe Frassinetti e Maria D. Mazzarello*, pp. 131-132.