

Giuseppina
Mainetti
FMA

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**Mother
Caterina Daghero:**

Woman of Wisdom and Vision

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First Successor of St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello

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Translated by the
FMA English Translation Group (ETG)
from the original

***Madre Caterina Daghero: Prima Successora della Beata
Maria Mazzarello nel governo generale dell'Istituto Figlie di
Maria Ausiliatrice***

by Giuseppina Mainetti FMA

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Reverend Sr. Giuseppina Mainetti,

Only today did I finish reading your manuscript.

Here in brief, is my poor reflection. The life of Mother Caterina Daghero that you have written is destined to do great good. This will certainly be the most desired reward for your work, which was far from easy.

I bless you, your work and your zealous aspirations.

In J. C.
Fr. Pietro Ricaldone SDB
Rector Major

Contents

Preface	11
Introduction to the English Language Edition	12
Chapter I A Sign and Guarantee of the Future	
At Home in Cumiana	15
Her Loving Parents	17
Death of Her Mother	18
Model Student	19
Eucharistic Piety	21
New ‘Mother’	22
Love for Our Lady	23
Life as a Catechist	25
Call to Religious Life	26
Leaving Home	28
Chapter II From Extreme Doubt to Wholehearted Acceptance	
Is this Religious Life?	31
All These Things will Disappear	33
Come and Take Me Home in Three Months	34
Peace at Last	36
Religious Profession	37
Good-bye Mornese!	39
Don Bosco’s Advice	42
Chapter III Practical Accompaniment	
Joyful Work and Apostolate	45
Animator and Vicar	45
Charming Episodes	46
First to Wear the New FMA Habit	48

Paternal Vigilance	49
Ready for Any Type of Work	50
Perpetual Profession	51
From Mornese to Turin as Animator	54
Chapter IV Baptism of Fire	
Painful Event	57
At the School of Don Bosco	58
Good-bye Turin	59
First FMA Foundation in France	61
Back to Nizza Monferrato	62
Mission at St. Cyr	63
Cold Welcome and a Friendly Response	64
Unexpected Gift	66
This, too, is God's Gift	68
To Remember is to Relive	69
Threatening Times	71
Faithful Entrustment	72
Shivers in the Parlour	75
Will She Ever Come Back?	78
Chapter V In the Footsteps of Maria Domenica	
Back to the Beloved Nest	81
First General Chapter	81
Precious Relic of Mornese	83
Gracious Separation	84
Death of Mother Mazzarello	86
Students Present at the Election	87
<i>Amaretti and Confetti</i>	89

First of Forty-Three Years	90
Dream of the Chestnuts	92
Chestnut Festival	94
Chapter VI Fidelity to the Church and to Don Bosco	
Gift of Leadership	99
A Lasting Memento from Maria Domenica	100
Bravo, those valiant ones	102
Mother Mazzarello's Only Visit to Rome	104
Don Bosco's Legacy	105
City of Emperors and Popes	108
Two Beloved Names	110
Price of Fidelity	113
Delightful Surprise	119
Twelve Years of Waiting	120
Crowning Moment	122
Four Popes and Fourteen Audiences	123
Chapter VII From Nizza to the World	
Companions on the Journey	125
A Jewel of a Mother	127
Work and Prayer	128
First Apostolic Visits	129
Early Circular Letters	131
Loving Care for the Sick and Elderly	135
Loyalty to Don Bosco and His Successors	137
With a Salesian Heart	138
Death of Don Bosco	139
Travels Abroad	143

On Board the <i>Perseus</i>	146
Apostle Among the Emigrants	147
Tragic Event	149
Difficulties and Consolations	150
Arrival at Dawson Island	152
Onward to Matto Grosso	153
In the Midst of the Bororos	154
Hands to Work and Heart to God	155
Letter to Fr. Rua from Ouro Preto	159
All for Others, Nothing for Self	161
An Original Initiative for Young Women	162
Return to Europe	164
Jubilees and Anniversaries	165
Visit to the French Province	165
Advance of World War I	167
Sow Good Seeds	169
Chapter VIII The Seed Flourishes and Grows	
Expansion Continues	173
We Must Go There!	175
Some Wise Teachings	176
Requests for New Foundations	177
Festive Oratory	179
Importance of Catechism	182
To Instruct in Order to Educate	184
Teacher Training Institutes	186
Workers' Hostel	190

A Heartening Account	193
Dealing with Crises	195
Assistance to Refugees	199
Outbreak of World War I	200
Nizza, a Military Hospital	202
Anniversaries	204
Painful Farewells	205
Ursuline Sisters of Acqui	208
Chapter IX In the Eyes of Her Contemporaries	
Mother Caterina is No Less Holy	211
Have Courage and Encourage Everyone	213
Fr. Paolo Albera Praise	216
Marvellous Equilibrium	219
Unaware of Her Own Merit	221
From Generation to Generation	222
Celebrating Salesian Events	224
May the Holy Will of God be Done	226
Wise Guidance	228
Grateful Heart	229
It is All the Same to Me	232
Piety: as Simple as it was Deep	234
Do Like All the Others	236
Love for the Missions	238
Celebrating the Missionary Dream	239
I Carry You All in My Heart	241
Authority that Made Itself Loved	243

Always Practical	244
I have Learned to Understand	246
<i>Casa Madre: House of Memories</i>	248
Timely Advice	251
Caring for the Sick	252
Postulants and Novices	254
Pupils and Past Pupils	256
Intuitive Understanding of Hearts	257
Chapter X Into the Sunset	
Prayer, Gratitude, Joy	259
FMA Association of the Past Pupils	259
Golden Jubilee of the Institute	261
VIII General Chapter	264
Revised FMA Constitutions	266
Intense Work but Declining Strength	267
Grave Concerns	269
Joy and Courage through Pain and Suffering	272
Last Days	275
Salesian Family Mourns, Yet an Angel Rises	277
ADDENDA	
A Courageous Formator in Changing Times: Mother Caterina Daghero (1856 – 1924)	281
Educational Power of the Family	281
Beauty and Joy of Faith	283
Solidarity as an Attitude for Life	286
Conclusion	290

Preface

In writing these biographical memoirs of Mother Caterina Daghero, Superior General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, I drew from authentic documents preserved in the General Archives of the Institute, and from oral testimonies of Sisters who, from the earliest years of the Institute, personally knew our late lamented Mother. I followed a rigorous historical criterion. However, I did not intend to write a complete life. Forty-three years as mother general represents a long period in the history of the Institute, the development of its works and its expansion, all of which would require a more vast and detailed historical study. In these pages, Mother Caterina Daghero is remembered above all for her virtues of mind and heart, and especially in the total dedication of herself to the fulfilment of the will of our founder and teacher, whose desire was completely intent on the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Not only the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, but also our friends in the great Salesian Family, and everyone will benefit from reading about this Mother, who was a faithful disciple of St. John Bosco and of Blessed Maria Mazzarello.

Giuseppina Mainetti FMA

1940

Introduction to the English Language Edition

The English language translation group (ETG) is an international group of FMA representing various parts of the English-speaking world. Mother Antonia Colombo, then Mother General of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and the general council, commissioned the group in 1998.

The principal aim of this group is to translate from Italian into English significant primary and secondary source material relevant to the history and spirituality of the FMA.

The ETG was re-established during the XXII General Chapter, 2008, in the presence of Mother Yvonne Reungoat, current Mother General of the Institute, Mother Antonia Colombo, Mother General *emeritus*, and some members of the general council, together with the provincials of the English-speaking provinces.

The ETG is indebted to the work of the late Sr. Giuseppina Mainetti who published the book, *Madre Caterina Daghero: Prima Successora della Beata Maria Mazzarello nel governo generale dell'Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice* in 1940. This translation has been prepared with a view to making the life of this great FMA, who led the Institute for forty-three years, available to a wider English-speaking audience and particularly to those in initial formation. Given the fact that the text was written nearly 80 years ago, the translators, with due permission, have updated some terminology and expanded on certain historical references.

A special word of thanks goes to Sr. Piera Cavaglià, Secretary General of the Institute, for her constant encouragement, assistance, and guidance and for her kind permission to include an extract from her article, *Una formatrice coraggiosa in un tempo di svolte: Madre Caterina Daghero (1856 – 1924)* [A Courageous Formator in Changing Times: Mother Caterina Daghero (1856-1924)]. The group also thanks the FMA province of Chennai for their generosity in liaising with Chummy Printers, Vellore, and the FMA Institute.

Style and Mechanics of the English Translation

Throughout the text the ETG has tried to utilise words and terms that are acceptable wherever English is spoken. The group sought agreement on usage and chose that which was most understandable, if not always the most acceptable for a given country or region.

UK English spelling is used throughout the text. The USA date sequence is used, that is, month / day / year. An exception to this rule has been made for the footnotes, where the European system has been used to avoid confusion. Footnotes containing bibliographical references have not been translated, while explanatory notes instead have been translated.

In lists, a comma has been inserted before the word *and*, as is the custom in USA English. In keeping with modern usage, capital letters have been reduced to a minimum. Where necessary, and possible, the group chose to break long sentences into shorter ones. When the same word is used to signify different groups of people, lower and upper case are used to make the distinction. This occurs most frequently with the use of the word, sister. When this word is capitalised it refers to a woman religious, otherwise it refers to family members. In this particular text, the capitalised forms of Mother and Daughter are also used to refer to women religious. The term *Don* in Italian is a title applied to priests. The translators have used *Don* for Don Bosco, as he is universally known, and have translated it as Father when naming all other priests. Throughout the text, as far as possible, proper names of people and places are left in their original language.

Inclusive language and terminology that respect the dignity of all peoples have been used where possible. Terms such as superior, souls, have been replaced by words that are more commonly accepted today (e.g. general councillors, community animator, people). At times, however, in order to respect the thought of the author some quotes using such terminology have not been changed. Lengthy quotes have been indented and personal correspondence italicised.

The FMA English-language Translation Group:

Sr. Isabel Geraghty (GBR)

Sr. Edna MacDonald (SPR)

Sr. Máire O'Byrne (IRL)

Sr. Louise Passero (SEC)

Sr. Alphonsa Maria Yettukuri (INM)

Chapter I

A Sign and Guarantee of the Future

At Home in Cumiana

Caterina Lucia Daghero, whose noble life will be recounted in these pages, was born amid the rocky, but fertile, terrain of Cumiana. It is irrigated by the rivers Chisole and Rumiano that make the pastures verdant and water the rosy apples on the trees, the tall sturdy walnut trees, and the dense chestnut groves. She inherited the leadership of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello who was co-founder and first superior general chosen by the Founder, St. John Bosco, and formed by him in spirit, ideas, and action. Caterina was the heir to saints.

She was born on May 7, 1856, the third child of Giacomo and Luisa Issoglio and on the following day, the feast of the apparition of the Archangel Michael, baptismal water was poured on her forehead, making her an heir to heaven. She was named Caterina Lucia. From Caterina of Siena and Lucia of Siracusa she would receive the flame of charity, and from the warrior archangel, zeal for the battle against evil.

She had scarcely given her first cry, when the church sang in praise of that day, “Bless the Lord all you his angels who are powerful and strong, and observe his commands, obeying the call of his word”.¹ That inspiring liturgical chant appears now almost as a sign and guarantee of the future.

Her home was a little rustic dwelling isolated on a hill, with dense thickets of surrounding trees, gently sloping meadows, and above the roof, nothing but the sky. It seemed to be a little

¹ Ps. 103:20.

lost, and looking at it now, uninhabited and without any signs of life, it could be said that it is shrouded in oblivion.

However, it is well remembered. To it fond thoughts and memories return, searching for the echo of a dear voice in those poor little rooms. Almost by the fervent enchantment of imagination, a beloved figure is created, that of little Caterina, and of the young Caterina Daghero. In those rooms, in that verdant solitude that would seem to have been created more for meditation than for work, she lived from the time of her birth until she was eighteen. That is, until she responded to the urgent, yet gentle, call of her vocation.

A small room with a little altar can be found there; it is still hers. She made it herself and as an orphan, with her beloved little brother, she prayed there, sang sacred hymns and even wept.

Now deserted and silent, that little isolated house once resounded with cheerful voices and songs, the songs of strong working people that were a means of relaxation and a source of spiritual refreshment for rural families after a day's hard work.

The surrounding woods and fields welcomed and spread them, and with them the name of Don Bosco, the holy priest from Turin, since they were hymns to Don Bosco's Madonna.

Even in later years, Mother Caterina recalled this fact to her dear nieces, "My mother and father sang them and taught them to us, so much so, that when I went to Mornese to become a Sister, I already knew them".²

Popular and inspiring religious music so dear to Don Bosco and his young people had, perhaps, some small influence on that great vocation which cannot be adequately described in these few pages.

Certainly, the environment in which she grew up was healthy, and the first impressions, the first lessons she received were all marked by that Christian strength and doctrine from

² Testimony of the Daghero sisters.

which upright people emerge who do not know ‘if’ or ‘but’ when it comes to observing the divine commandments and the precepts of the Church; people who, precisely because of this rectitude in ideas and feelings, possess a correct sense of the value of life.

Her Loving Parents

Being learned in literature and the sciences is, at times, of little importance. Country people, whether artisans or especially farmers, are accustomed to living in the presence of natural grandeur. Even without being aware of it, they imbibe all that breath of serenity, order, and beauty with which God infuses creation. Tempered by this, they can become more receptive to welcoming and following the Word of God. Such were Caterina’s parents.

Her father, who cultivated his land, as wise as he was honest in the management of his fields and orchards, was that type of good parishioner who loved his home, his land, his church. Her mother, with her beautifully simple countrywoman’s faith, practised the queen of virtues of which the apostle spoke in the strongest words and which responded directly to the teaching of the Divine Master. Luigia Daghero was a woman of charity.

Everyone in the area, which even today is commonly known as, *dei Daghè*, knew her well, and the women especially turned to her with their worries as a sincere, confident, and helpful friend.

Caterina’s nieces heard from their father and their beloved aunt what their grandmother had done. Episodes of goodness and generous dedication passed into family tradition. Conversations repeated from one generation to the next were a gentle and profound memory that could not be erased.

- Luigia, could you lend me?...help me?
- ‘Right away! Come, take it’ was our grandmother’s prompt reply.

- Luigia, you know what it's like to go to the parish on a Sunday with these children...
- I'll see to it. Go to the sung Mass in the parish, and evening prayer. Be at peace. I will go to the first Mass, and I will say evening prayer here and look after your children with my own.

The good woman had the little ones of the district, some still in cradles, brought to that solitary house on the hill and took care of them there. She had them play and sing. The farmyard resounded with innocent voices, and with prayer, the Hail Marys of the Rosary. Then there was the snack that they had brought to eat, to which Luigia added her own apples, walnuts, figs, or cherries according to the season. When the mothers returned to collect their little ones, these almost did not want to be separated from the good mamma Luigia.

Death of Her Mother

Luigia was still young when she died,³ and Caterina was only twelve years old. However, in those twelve years she had already learned from her mother the love, strength, and duty of the Christian apostolate.

She also learned a filial devotion full of abandonment to Our Lady. In her early years, she used to call her the *Madonnina*; near the end, when her life turned toward the last rays of the sunset, she still gave this name to the beautiful image of the Virgin that is venerated in the little chapel situated halfway up the slope of the hill where the solitary little house is found.⁴

As an orphan Caterina cried over her misfortune and remained at home with her younger brother who was nine years old. The eldest had become a soldier and the second had died while still a child.

She was alone in taking on the role of mother, alone she consoled her father who was too weary from working the land to

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

be a serene comfort alongside his little daughter, alone she looked after the house when her father had to go far away, and this happened often, alone she wept and remembered.

She recalled those times to her little nieces, and they were also related by their father who felt both tenderness and admiration toward his sister. He recounted:

We were young, she was about twelve or thirteen, I was about eight or nine. In the evening seated by the fire, we spoke about our mother. Caterina would cry and I would cry too. But then she would become strong and would say to me, 'Come on Giovanni, let's be brave and abandon ourselves to the arms of the *Madonnina*, she is our mother now'. She would begin the Rosary before the little altar, and then had me sing praises to Mary. We sang together. I had a beautiful voice and she, too, could sing in tune. When our father returned he found us serene and happy.⁵

These are the words that the author heard from Caterina's nieces, who in turn had heard them from their father, Giovanni.

Pain, therefore, matured the spirit of this young girl, rather than weakening it, and re-enforced that energy and strength of which she would have to give proof so many times in her future life, and in that great mission to which she was destined by God.

It strengthened her faith, gave her the joy of a reassuring piety, and at the same time opened her vision to the more serious and realistic aspects of life: duty and sacrifice.

Model Student

Like her other companions in the area, Caterina went to school. She went there during the winter months until Easter. The first and second classes were held in the local school, the third in the village school. She had to descend by poor, difficult paths, especially when the snow covered hedges and ditches; but

⁵ Ibid.

memories relate that little Caterina never missed school. She was the most diligent at lessons and the most attentive. She said little, but her large, bright eyes said much, they spoke of intelligence and goodness.

She appeared timid, but courageous at the same time; timid because she was rarely the first to ask questions, to be seen or heard, and if asked a question she replied a little hesitantly. She was courageous because when the time came she showed that she did not fear obstacles, hard work, or conflicts.

A report written at that time is very expressive. It was from Carolina Quassolo who had known and remembered her well. She wrote:

In school, her voice was never heard at the wrong time. She was always silent and attentive. When she left she followed the line out in a quiet, calm way until we dispersed, but the moment she was free she was seen slipping away quickly, ready to run through the doorway of a shop, and then on to another to carry out the errands entrusted to her either by her family or some neighbour who could not come to the village. Then she would take the uphill path in order to reach home in time. At two o'clock in the afternoon she would descend once more, a little tired with red cheeks because of the hurried journey, but ready, exemplary, and studious.⁶

Perhaps even more expressive, and more moving is that which can be read in another report revealing the delicate characteristics of this gentle person, and at the same time the generous strength of a first sacrifice. Another former companion writes:

We attended the first three elementary classes together. I remember that towards the end of the third year she had to leave school because of her family situation. Sorrowful but resigned,

⁶ Testimony of Carolina Quassolo, FMA General Archives.

she made the sacrifice, and with great gratitude, she sent thanks to the teacher for what she had done for her. As soon as she received the message, the teacher, moved by the sensitive action, (a rare occurrence, if truth be told) suspended the lesson in order to praise the little Daghero girl who was so promising.⁷

Eucharistic Piety

A story told about her when she was a young girl provides another characteristic, the most beautiful and the strongest. She was described as being very pious. When she was twelve or thirteen, she already had a Eucharistic spirit. She desired to receive communion every morning, but during the good weather it could only be once a week since she was occupied with farm work on other days. Therefore, she satisfied her great love for Jesus during the whole winter! In order to go down to the parish church that was quite far from her house, she faced cold, discomfort, and the heavy snow that spread far and wide and covered roads and paths. Little did this girl think or know that long before they met on her spiritual journey, she was imitating and following in the footsteps of Maria Domenica Mazzarello, who was destined to be her Mother and teacher!⁸ It was like this until she was eighteen.

There are many testimonies concerning this vibrant piety in her life as a girl and as a young woman. One has been chosen which, in its brevity, appears more intense and more eloquent than many detailed pages. A companion from that time writes:

In summer, Mass was at 4am, in winter at 6am. Caterina had a good half hour journey to make. I remember that in order to get me out of bed, my poor father would say, ‘Hurry up, the Daghero girl [*Nin dei Daghè*] is already in the church.’ One morning, coming out of the parish church, the good Caterina approached me and, in tears, told me, ‘I can no longer come to

⁷ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁸ F. Maccono, *Vita della Beata Maria Mazzarello*.

Mass during the week, because I have to look after my little brother’.

New ‘Mother’

Her father remarried when Caterina was fourteen years old.⁹ Thus, a new stage of life began for her.

What was her stepmother like? How was her relationship with her stepdaughter? Angela Ruffinatto was a good housewife, kind to the children for whom she had become mother, but she was not their mother, and Caterina felt it.

She had a different character, different views, and different habits with regard to piety. Luigia Daghero had been lively as well as reflective, a friend and almost a sister to the other women in the village. She loved being with them and seeing her little daughter enjoying, like her, the company of her peers. She loved to pray and sing with others in their rustic gatherings. She was expansive in friendship, diffusive in her piety, and an apostle of her faith.

Angela was also a woman of faith, good-hearted, pious, but with a solitary piety that she was reluctant to share with others. She did not like outsiders in her house or farmyard. During her free time Luigia used to help, not only her family, but others in generous self-giving charity. Angela, instead, spent her time alone reading the lives of saints or reciting psalms or prayers.¹⁰

Caterina watched her perhaps also admired her but she could not imitate her. Her mother had given different attitudes to her spirit, other tastes, that of a delightful and equally strong spirituality that is effusive and self-giving, like a clear wave that reflects the sky, does not stop or stagnate, but runs swiftly to irrigate, to give life to flowers on the margins, to drive and increase other life-giving waves.

Caterina always kept alive the memory of her mother who had died, and she suffered. However, she was always amenable

⁹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and affectionate to her stepmother. She understood her closed, but kind heart and adapted to her point of view, giving up some encounters with her lively companions. She was a most gentle sister to her new little brother, whom one less generous than she might have regarded as a little intruder, and accepted becoming his godmother.

So it was in that small house, where death had come twice, to carry away first a little flower just in bud, and later the flowering and vigorous shrub, peace was not disturbed, and life continued in work and virtue. Giacomo Daghero saw how Caterina respected and loved the woman he had married to provide a vigilant guardian for his children. He saw his Caterina lovingly and quickly forgetting herself to give him serenity, by helping his new spouse and tenderly caring for her brothers. He saw her blossoming like a beautiful flower among the thorns, which however, were hidden, well hidden, by the flower itself.

There were also the smiles and joys that Caterina drew from her faith, her spirituality, from her devotion to Our Lady, or that which came from her own character that was reflective, certainly, but was at the same time witty and fun loving.

Love for Our Lady

As much as her stepmother preferred to keep her at home, in May she allowed her to go down to Our Lady's chapel every day to pray the rosary and to sing Marian hymns. Caterina happily gathered not only the young women of her own place, but also those of the surrounding area, and so all together in a beautiful choir they descended to the chapel which they decorated with flowers, and there kept the lovely month of Mary. She took her brother Giovanni with her, and because he had a beautiful expressive voice she told him to reinforce the choir of fresh silvery voices. Many times he was reluctant, somewhat intimidated by that group of girls older than he who was still a

young adolescent. However, his sister gently, but with authority, ordered him, “Sing, Giovanni!”

Later on in life Giovanni would recall for his sons and daughters those far off May evenings and each time he passed the Marian chapel he would say:

Your aunt would bring me here. She made me sing, and if I did not obey her, he would add smilingly, ‘She would give me a clip on the ear, but it did not hurt’. Here I witnessed her being very devout and at the same time very happy.¹¹

It was the holy joy of a young, pure spirit. The fact about the clip on the ear, which, however, did not hurt, would lead one to consider that the young girl who was reflective and at the same time good-humoured, capable of renunciation and humility, also had a quick, authoritarian temperament, an ability to command which was not sufficiently controlled or channelled. However, in the future, softened and guided by charity and experience it would become an admirable strength in directing people in God’s ways.

During a visit to Our Lady’s chapel with Caterina’s nieces the author prayed before the picture representing the Holy Virgin in an attitude of singular grace, piety, and love. She seemed to be suspended in mid-air, turned a little to the side and in the act of descending from on high. Her pure face, almost in profile, inclined towards the earth far below; her clasped hands expressed compassion, love, and prayer.

We reflected admiringly, then the older of the Daghero sisters broke the silence:

You know, when we would leave the boarding school for the holidays, my aunt would say, ‘Please remember not to displease Our Lady and to pay attention to her. Look at how she teaches

¹¹ Testimony of the Daghero sisters.

you purity and humility. Don't become haughty!¹² Be humble, very humble.

The gentle contemplation of this painting of the Virgin, had inspired profound thoughts in Caterina who had so loved her and imitated her greatest virtues: purity and humility; she had been Mary's apostle for many years among young people and among those that God had called to be Sisters on the path of a religious vocation.

From Our Lady's chapel, we went to visit the beautiful large parish church in Cumiana. There too, are memories linked to the religious piety of the young Caterina. There is the altar of Our Lady of Consolation which the nieces said was particularly cherished by her, and above all, there is the little chapel of the Children of Mary where she often went to the group's meetings, and where she received the blue ribbon and blessed medal.

Life as a Catechist

There is a clear, precise report, as unassuming as the one who wrote it, concerning her devout behaviour during the religious functions and her work as a catechist. It states:

She went to the sung Mass after having already attended that of the morning where she had received Holy Communion. She wore a chestnut brown woollen garment, a black apron and a veil that was also black and fastened on her head with a ribbon as was the custom of the Children of Mary in that region.

She always sat in the bench behind the Sisters¹³ and seemed to want to be a Sister too. She was very devout. After the sung Mass, instead of returning to her own house, she would come home with me and eat whatever she had brought with her. She did this so that she could be ready for the catechism hour and for vespers.

¹² The phrase used, *non alzate la cresta*, comes from the Pietmontese dialect.

¹³ The Sisters of the Institute of St. Joseph Cottolengo.

She taught catechism, and I remember that we who were very lively would escape from our classes to go to hers, because she had a nice way about her. She would tell us with a smile, ‘Be quiet, be good if you want to please Our Lady’, and we were good. When I entered as a religious, and she was already the superior general, sometimes she would smilingly say to me, ‘Do you remember when you used to come to catechism? Ah, you were really lively!’ For my part I remembered that I said at that time, ‘I want to go with the Daghero girl for catechism’.¹⁴

This simple, brief account outlines the figure of the young Caterina who was already moving toward that future of goodness, dedication and apostolate according to the spirit of Maria Domenica Mazzarello who put into practice the teaching given by the Virgin to, “...the little shepherd of the Becchi, ‘...not with blows but with kindness’”¹⁵.

She was, therefore, a little apostle of catechism ‘with kindness’, and she was the same when she was cheerfully conversing with her beloved companions. Caterina had a witty spirit, and she preserved it as a religious, and among the cares of leadership as mother general. It was a delight to hear some of her responses and certain quips full of innocent wit and spirit.

The years passed. At twelve she had lost her mother, at fourteen she welcomed a stepmother, at eighteen, ...at eighteen she felt the irrevocable call of God.

Call to Religious Life

The sublime call, the mysterious, ‘if you want’, which stirs the most intimate part of a person when it comes from Jesus Christ, was heard repeatedly from deep within during her early years, that is, after her First Communion. She shared this with her cousin, Rosa Daghero, who had preceded her in entering religious

¹⁴ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹⁵ Cf. “Il primo sogno di S. Giovanni Bosco”, in G. B. Lemoyne, *Vita del Ven. Don G. Bosco*, S.E.I. Torino.

life. However, she had never paused to meditate on this mysterious intimate voice, on that mysterious invitation. Why? Perhaps because she was still very young, and therefore did not really understand it or how to respond. Perhaps she also felt that in the family she was of considerable help to her stepmother, an affectionate support for her father and especially for her younger brother Giovanni.

But when her cousin Rosa, whose brother was a Salesian priest, decided to go to Mornese and join the newly formed Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, preferring it to the Cottolengo Sisters who were well known in the area, the young Caterina stopped to listen and even to debate with that powerful intimate call of God.

Her older brother had married nearby and did not need her. Giovanni, her favourite brother, was by now a strong adolescent of fifteen years who could help their father with his work. Her stepmother did not oppose her choice even though she received much support from the wisdom and kindness of this dear stepdaughter in her task as wife and mother. The youngest was three years old, and was the only one occupying all of his mother's time.

Rosa wrote repeatedly to Caterina from Mornese encouraging her to follow her example. She described the house, and how they lived, the enthusiasm in prayer and work, the goodness of Mother Maria Mazzarello, and the protection of the Founder, Don Bosco.

But Caterina hesitated. To leave her little house, her dear family, her daily routine, and go to Mornese! Mornese seemed to be at the end of the earth. And truly there were differences of land, people, dialect, and customs. Cumiana is near Turin, Mornese is between Piedmont and Liguria. It is neither one nor the other. Therefore, the journey from Cumiana to Mornese was not easy. On reaching Ovada it was necessary to continue the journey on

some kind of wagon or cart.¹⁶ Instead, Cumiana, being only few kilometres from Turin, the Royal Capital of Savoy, was influenced by it. A number of illustrious personages had been born there. Who knows? The young woman may have heard them praised in her little school, and perhaps she might even have seen some of those who were her contemporaries.¹⁷

Mornese was a silent, forgotten village, lost among the hills far from the city. No one had heard of it until the ‘priest of the young’, Don Bosco, had gone there with his little rascals, and then, no one knew how, he had founded an Institute of Sisters. But those Sisters were still few and almost unknown.

Caterina still hesitated. More than anything, however, it was a question of affection, because she loved her family with great tenderness. “Whoever loves father and mother more than me, is not worthy of me.”¹⁸ The powerful words of Our Lord won over the heart of the young girl, who no longer hesitated but decided.

Leaving Home

On August 16, 1874 Caterina left her solitary little house on the hill, she left the Marian chapel. She detached herself from the altar in the beautiful parish church. She went to the cemetery where her unforgettable mother was buried. There Caterina prayed for a final time, asking her blessing that she would have the strength for the sacrifice. She said goodbye to her father, brothers, stepmother, and other family members, as well as her dear friends and took the road that the Lord was showing her. She took it amid a veil of tears, while smiling at the pain she carried in her heart.

The wheat harvest had been gathered in the fields, the vines displayed their bunches of grapes among the large, dewy, leaves. The September fruit peeked out from among the vigorous

¹⁶ G. Mainetti, *Un'educatrice nella luce di S. Giovanni Bosco*.

¹⁷ Cf. History of Cumiana.

¹⁸ Mat.10:37.

branches. How many workers had laboured and would still do so to obtain all those riches of the earth that are gifts of God!

There were, however, other fields, other vineyards, to which the Divine Master was referring when he said, “The harvest is great but the labourers are few”¹⁹. This young woman was going to increase the ranks of the mystical labourers in the Lord’s vineyard.

In Mornese, Sr. Rosa Daghero, along with the other Sisters and postulants, was waiting for her. More than anyone else she was joyfully welcomed by the first Mother and Co-founder of the Institute, Maria Domenica Mazzarello.

¹⁹ Mat. 9:38.

Chapter II

From Extreme Doubt to Wholehearted Acceptance

Is this Religious Life?

The young postulant from Cumiana immediately felt lost in that small world. The fact that her cousin was already a fervent Sister in that house was of no help. Neither was she helped by being surrounded by others of her own age who were very happy to have entered the white building in the green countryside. It had a lovely little chapel that invited recollection and prayer. That was of no help either. In fact, that very chapel was a cause of discouragement. Why? It held too great an attraction for her.

Caterina immediately felt, or believed that she felt, an invincible aversion towards that intensively active life lived by the postulants and Sisters. They did not spend many hours in the chapel, but much time working.²⁰

Was this religious life? She had imagined it to be completely dedicated to piety, prayer, meditation, union with God.

She did not know, nor could she have yet understood the programme of holiness of Mother Maria Domenica, who had welcomed her, and who had summed up this programme in a single powerful phrase, “Every stitch an act of love of God”²¹. She did not yet know what work done under the gaze of God and all for and with Jesus meant. She still had to understand work sanctified by the offering of all one’s powers of mind and heart, which is a perfect fulfilment of the words of the psalmist, “I consecrate my work to the king”²², a work that also became a prayer of intercession, reparation, and apostolate.

²⁰ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

²¹ Cf. F. Maccono. Op.cit.

²² Ps. 45:1.

There was more. Her heart still bled because of the detachment from her loved ones, especially from her father and her younger brother Giovanni. She would never have imagined that she would have suffered so much in being far from them.

A sense of rebellion grew in her heart, and could only be calmed by the firm resolution: she would return home. She would write to her father to come and take her home. Her trunk was still in the little room next to the entrance where she had intentionally left it. The others paid no attention to it. When she passed the entrance, she glanced at it as if there were a kind of understanding with it that she would soon take it and leave. This consoled her.

The memoirs state, “She did not speak. She smiled when questioned, obeyed, and worked, but she longed for home”.²³ Her cousin, Sr. Rosa, wrote of her:

Every day, at recreation time, I went to look for her. She always told me that it seemed better for her to return to her family. She wanted to write asking her father to come and take her home. She suffered too much in being away from them. I would say to her, ‘Caterina, you know it is the devil tempting you’!²⁴

What beautiful simplicity and at the same time the wisdom of a heart that loves the Lord.

Meanwhile, the weeks were passing. This intimate drama of the young postulant that God was calling to an exceptional destiny is recorded not only in the written memoirs preserved in the general archives. It is also known from family tradition, because having become like a mother and guide to many young women on the same journey, she recalled and told of her spiritual struggle, to encourage, urge them on and save them.

In later years, Mother Petronilla Mazzarello, who directed the postulants and novices, would tell the young women who were doubtful or fearful of taking the first steps, “Our Mother General, Caterina Daghero, thought and felt like that. She too had encountered this painful trial, therefore, take courage!” Sirach

²³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

²⁴ Ibid.

admonishes, “My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing”.²⁵

All These Things will Disappear

It was an intimate drama that ended in the light of God. It came to a happy conclusion as a result of the energetic, almost prophetic words of Mother Maria Mazzarello who had accepted the young postulant with such celebration and who had, perhaps foreseen that with her, a new gift from the Lord had entered Mornese, a light to guide the new born Institute into the future.

In his biography of Maria Domenica, Maccono does not pass over this incident in silence. Rather he uses it to demonstrate the profound intuition Maria possessed; an intuition that cannot be explained without a supernatural light. He wrote:

The temptation, rather than disappearing, became ever stronger. There were certain poorly defined apprehensions that tormented her heart and soul. [...] She would have liked to return to her family but feared going against God’s will. She was constantly struggling and suffering, often with tears in her eyes. Some believed that it would, perhaps, be better to let her return to her family, but Mother, through her gift of clear discernment, said to her, ‘No, you must stay here. The more you suffer now, the more content you will be later on and the more good you will do. Once you receive the habit as a novice all these things will disappear’.

The eve of the clothing ceremony [entrance into the novitiate] arrived and the young woman was still in anguish, unable to understand what God’s will really was. Even the Sister in charge of the postulants²⁶ was uncertain whether or not she should be admitted to the novitiate, but Mother, when asked by the local rector what she thought about the matter, responded without hesitation, ‘I have said it already many times, the will of God is that this young woman should stay here, and enter the novitiate, because she is called to do great good for souls’.

²⁵ Sir. 2:1.

²⁶ Mother Petronilla Mazzarello.

Therefore, the rector told the young woman to prepare. She obeyed and received the religious habit. The following night, all her fears and worries, her spiritual anguish, all disappeared and peace returned to that heart purified by so much inner suffering. In the years that followed, Sr. Caterina Daghero was never again troubled by doubt about her vocation. Maria Domenica had predicted this.²⁷

All of this comes from the first biographer of Maria Mazzarello. Does it not remind one of a very striking page from *The Story of a Soul*, in which the little but great saint, St. Thérèse of Lisieux writes recalling the fiercest temptation of her whole life. Here are her words and they have value as the words of a saint:

My vocation seemed to be like a dream to me, an illusion. The devil, it was really he who was tempting me, inspired in me the certainty that Carmel was not in the least suited to me and that by continuing in a vocation to which I was not called, I was only deceiving the superiors. The darkness became so dense that I only understood one thing: since I did not have a religious vocation, I had to return to the world. How can I describe my anguish?²⁸

However, for the gentle saint of Lisieux, too, the word of a Mother, enlightened by God, obedience and humility together with trustful abandonment, scattered the deep shadows forever and brought the light, and what light! After that fierce tempest she wrote, “I found myself immersed in an ocean of peace, that peace which surpasses every other sense”.²⁹

Come and Take Me Home in Three Months

The above episode has been quoted from Maccono. It was recorded in the memoirs preserved in the general archives of the Institute and then summarised by him. However, it would be interesting to transcribe, in these pages, the actual conversations

²⁷ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

²⁸ Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, Chapter VIII.

²⁹ Ibid.

between the young postulant Caterina and the saintly co-founder. They are brief, but incisive, and left a deep impression. They are conversations written in the Mornese chronicles and traditions of the Institute. This is because they give, one could say, the flavour and colour of the times. They describe the Franciscan or rather Salesian simplicity with which they dealt with problems, even the most important ones, which are recorded in the history of the Institute and from which it draws life even today. For example, the following is an exact quote:

One day Mother Mazzarello said to the postulant Caterina Daghero:

- So you don't want to become a religious?

- I do, but not here, Mother.

- Instead, I tell you that the Lord wants you here, and if you leave, you will have to give an account of it at God's tribunal.³⁰

These are strong words that might disturb or even upset a person. However, they were said by a saint, who was enlightened by the wisdom of God and led Caterina to reflect and pray. On another occasion she said:

- Caterina, don't you want to write home?

- Oh, how I want to write! My cousin who is a Sister knows it.

- Sit down there and write that you are well and happy.

- Oh, no! That is a lie!

- What kind of a lie? Are you not happy to do God's will? Therefore, write as I tell you and you will be happy.

Caterina did write, but said, 'In fifteen days come to collect me'. The saint read it, smiled and had her correct it to, 'in three months'.³¹

The three months passed. On December 8, 1874 Caterina was clothed in the habit of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and immediately after this act, God also granted her that

³⁰ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

³¹ Ibid.

peace, which the saint of Lisieux said, "...surpasses every other sense". And so began her life as a religious, a very long life.

On that memorable day, she took as her own motto the words spoken by Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, who had come for the ceremony in the name of the founder. He gave the new novices a programme for religious life to be lived day by day. It was all contained in three short but very meaningful words, which were worth a whole treatise on ascetical life: act, suffer, be silent.³²

Peace at Last

The memoirs from that time attest to how the novice, Sr. Caterina entered immediately into full Salesian activity, manual work as well as studying to prepare herself to qualify as an elementary teacher. All this activity was enriched by the most refined and serious piety.

She was always serene, always alert in her goodness and charity towards others, ready especially to console those who found that life of extreme poverty and much work difficult. She comforted those who had not yet received the light to understand the correction of their defects as a grace, and who could not take a reproof with a smile, unable to recognise it as a more fruitful and reliable treasure than praise.

To another novice, Enrichetta Sorbone, who would later become vicar general of the Institute, Caterina made a statement that revealed the depth of her spirit, and remains as an example and admonition for the FMA of all times, in all the events of their life as religious and educators. In a friendly chat with Sr. Caterina, Sr. Enrichetta said, "I really like being with the boarders, teaching them how to work, getting them to play and helping them to be good". With a smile Sr. Caterina agreed, and then added with great feeling, "I really love to console, to console".³³

It seemed as if from that time on, she went in search of people to whom she could repeat the words of consolation that the Lord speaks to those who want to follow and imitate him. "Listen

³² Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

³³ FMA General Archives.

my child to my words, the sweetest of words that surpass all the knowledge of the philosophers and wise people of this world.”³⁴ So states the *Imitation of Christ* and Sr. Caterina, who kept her heart open to the consoling words of God, and received, from them, the joy of consolation and the light of wisdom. She felt moved to share them with others who, like her, were taking their first steps in a life of religious perfection.

She would communicate them throughout the many years of work, sacrifice and leadership that God had in store for her.

Religious Profession

She completed one year of novitiate and then received the grace of religious profession. Sr. Caterina had prepared for this under the guidance, more of example than of words, which she received from the saintly Mother and co-founder, who was the ever faithful and intelligent interpreter of the spirit of the holy founder. “Let us live in the presence of God and of Don Bosco”,³⁵ she would tell the Sisters. They were so convinced and committed that for them, the founder was always present, even if he was far away in Turin, or further afield. With Maria Domenica, he became the topic of spiritual conversations to help them to be more fervent in their desire for sacrifice, charity, and the apostolate for which they had come together in the white house on the hill in the green countryside of Mornese.

Sr. Caterina spoke little, but thought much. She would always keep that characteristic, born of a balanced intelligence and of humility: few words, much thought, and virtue in practice. Thus, she was prepared to make her triennial vows as a religious, and she had the grace of making them in the hands of the founder. He was assisted by Fr. Giovanni Cagliari, the General Director of the Institute and Fr. Giacomo Costamagna, local Rector. Later, both were destined to be among the first and most illustrious missionaries of the Salesian Society, the former becoming a cardinal and the latter a bishop. Both would write pages in praise

³⁴ *Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chapter III, 1.

³⁵ F. Maccono, Op. cit.

of those early times of the Institute and of the co-founder and the first Sisters and they are held in high esteem in the history of that time of great blessings.

Thirteen other novices were professed with Sr. Caterina, and on the same day, the saintly co-founder also pronounced her vows for life.³⁶

Among the other twelve who pronounced their vows for life was Sr. Emilia Mosca who, before entering religious life was Countess of San Martino. She was highly gifted in mind and heart and became Maria Mazzarello's first secretary. She was later elected general assistant for studies and for twenty years after the death of the co-founder, she was Mother Caterina's most valued helper in the field of education and in the formation of the religious as teachers.³⁷

The holy founder, after having accepted the postulants into the novitiate and received the religious vows of each of the Sisters, spoke from the altar in his usual simple, fatherly style. He spoke of the great gift of peace and taught these good religious a way to enjoy it in their heart and in the community. He inculcated a confidence that was filial and at the same time maternal. It was a reciprocal confidence in mutual charity. In the memoirs one reads:

The good Father said, '...not to allow things to accumulate,' but on each occasion to speak of any difficulty that arises in fulfilling our duties, in work or in mutual relationships, to ask for the necessary advice, to give this or that admonition. This applies to relationships between subjects and superiors as well as to the Sisters among themselves.³⁸

Whoever wrote these words used a very simple, perhaps a rather colloquial style. But what did it matter, it captures the thought. They contain a complete practical programme for religious life in common, without which there can be no peace. This is especially true of Salesian life that seeks to reflect the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ G. Mainetti, Op.cit.

³⁸ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

charity and peace of a large family that is as affectionate as it is hard-working.

The co-founder sought to have the same spirit of agreement in both sentiments and ideas. It would be enough to read what is written about her life to be convinced of this. After Maria Mazzarello, Sr. Caterina, as Mother General, always had the same goal. She wanted to see the Sisters open and trusting in their relationships and she practised this in a maternal way. She had certainly listened to the words of the saint and treasured them in her memory and in her heart.

Good-bye Mornese!

Religious Profession, which had brought her an intimate spiritual joy, also brought an increase of grace and the strength to follow directly on the path the Lord had indicated to her. Sr. Caterina could be seen among the first in work, serene in the giving of herself for the good of others. She was particularly sincere in her availability, which saw her ever ready to leave manual work for study, study for the kitchen, the kitchen to assist the students, without a word or a gesture that might betray her personal attraction or repugnance. This is what was said by those who were professed with her in Mornese, not least among them Sr. Enrichetta, her friend and companion. Seven months passed, from August 28, 1875 to March 18, 1876, but it was enough to confirm that the newly professed Sister was mature enough to begin life outside the happy house of Mornese, and to use her talent in a broader field for the apostolate for which St. John Bosco had founded the FMA Institute. That 'broader field' was the house in Turin. Maccono and later Ceria³⁹ in their biographies of Maria Mazzarello, speak of that foundation taking place a month after the one on the Plains of Vallecrosia, and indicate its importance, since there the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would carry out their apostolate under the guidance of the founder.

³⁹ F. Maccono, Op.cit.; E. Ceria, *La Beata Maria Mazzarello*, S.E.I. Torino.

It was a house that Don Bosco had long wanted to purchase in order to put an end to the morally unacceptable activities that took place there. His desire was to use this property as a foundation where the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians could work for girls of the area.⁴⁰

Maria Mazzarello had rejoiced in the invitation of the saintly founder to send the Sisters to Turin and had immediately chosen the members of the community. Two of them, the animator and the vicar, Sr. Elisa Roncallo and Sr. Caterina Daghero, were destined to play an important role in the history of the Institute.⁴¹

Maria Domenica did not personally accompany them to Turin, but followed them with her thoughts and prayers, after having comforted them with her own joy, her maternal recommendations and advice. She often repeated, “You are fortunate to be so close to Don Bosco! Remember what he says to you, so that we can imitate it.”⁴² Sr. Elisa and Sr. Caterina did not allow this recommendation to fall on deaf ears, as the lives of both would clearly demonstrate.

It was good fortune their co-founder had said, “...to be so close to the founder,” to be able to learn directly from him, the power of charity that attracts and wins people over in order to lead them to God. She could have added that they were also very fortunate to have as their spiritual director, “the second Don Bosco”, the one who complimented him, Fr. Michele Rua.

Sr. Elisa had her heart set on imitating the Sacred Heart of Jesus and having others imitate Him, so much so that she merited the title of Apostle of the Sacred Heart, both within the Institute and beyond. She recalled the period when she was animator of the community in Turin, as the time when she received from God the choicest graces of her whole religious life. It is true that she had suffered much there, but she had also learned a lot from Don Bosco and Fr Rua, two incomparable teachers of the spiritual life,

⁴⁰ E. Ceria, *Op.cit.*

⁴¹ Mother Elisa Roncallo, who died in the house of Nizza Monferrato, Asti, on April 19, 1919, is considered to be a saint by many.

⁴² Cf. F. Maccono, *Op.cit.*

who helped them to see that external apostolic activity can only be efficacious if it is done wholeheartedly for God and others. They were masters of Salesian life, which consists of sanctified work, constantly offered with every heartbeat, and bears fruit for one's own eternal salvation and that of others. Sr. Caterina was an attentive pupil at the school of these two teachers. She never let any word or example of theirs be lost, not even the smallest detail, things that could seem insignificant, but were not, that came, moment by moment, directly or indirectly from that marvellous school. Even during the last years of her very busy life she would speak of how she still maintained the lively memories of those times.

When Sr. Elisa and Sr. Caterina arrived in Turin on March 29, 1876, with three other Sisters who were to help in the new work, they went immediately to Valdocco, to greet their founder and Father. Their hearts were beating with happiness at being close to Don Bosco. However, they also felt the sadness of leaving Mother Mazzarello and the Sisters they had known and loved, and the house of Mornese where they had fought against and overcome the first painful struggles and then joyfully accepted the first detachments. Yet, they were still so young! Both just twenty-two! The memoirs state:

At the station to meet them were Adele David⁴³ and Fr. Rua's mother. They immediately accompanied them to Valdocco, where Don Bosco, Fr. Rua, some ladies, and the Countess Callori of Casale were waiting for them. In the office of the prefect they were served dinner in the presence of Don Bosco, and it was the Countess who served them. Don Bosco encouraged them. He assured them that they would have both physical work and work for souls, and that the Salesians would help them. Then, since their house did not yet have the comfort of a kitchen, a coadjutor brother would bring them dinner during those first days. For any need whatever they should turn to Fr. Rua, whom they already knew, and who would be their

⁴³ She later became a very virtuous Daughter of Mary Help of Christians.

rector. In the afternoon the Countess Callori accompanied them to their house.⁴⁴

Encouraged in such a fatherly manner by the founder, Sr. Elisa and her vicar Sr. Caterina, with the other three Sisters, gave themselves energetically to the work of their apostolate. Their first thought was to open an oratory. The golden statue of the Madonna shone from the dome of the basilica. Her gaze must not only have rested on the great Oratory opened many years ago by Don Bosco, and still ringing with the shouts and games of his dear boys, but also on the smaller one that was just beginning, which would gather girls, as Don Bosco had foreseen in his prophetic dream. From both would spread the love of Mary, to the right, the large house of the SDB, and on the left, the little house of the FMA. However, with the passing of the years, it would also become large and beautiful.

Therefore, the oratory was their first thought. But how could they gather the girls? Where could they go to look for them? How should they make themselves known, and invite them? Turin was not the little village of Mornese!

Don Bosco's Advice

Don Bosco had told them, "You will have work for souls," and his school of Salesian apostolate, which is essentially missionary even when it takes place in the cities with the most refined culture, art and education, began in the simplest and most ordinary way.

Another quote from the biographical memoirs recalls a dialogue with Don Bosco that was reported by Sr. Elisa and Sr. Caterina:

The superior asked with filial simplicity, 'What must we do, Don Bosco, to have a numerous and flourishing oratory? How can we attract the girls?'

The holy founder smiled and taught them, 'Take these little pictures and medals of the Madonna and go for a walk through

⁴⁴ FMA General Archives.

the surrounding streets. Give a medal and a picture to all the girls whom you meet and ask their name, if they have a mother, father, brothers and sisters, if they go to school, and where. Tell them to greet their mother for you and invite them to come and visit you. Tell them you will let them play and will have a little gift for them. Ask them to bring along their sisters and friends. Tell them that on Sunday, after the games, when they, too, feel the need for a bit of quiet, you will bring them to the church for catechism and Benediction. You will see how many will come! Then you will say that if some want to come to school, you will be ready to teach them *gratis*'.⁴⁵

It was a charming lesson that came from a man of God. They are the words of a saint, who spoke to kings and princes and prelates, who was listened to with veneration by the Pope! To the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, he taught what he had done at the beginning of his life as, “a seeker of souls”, and was still doing: humility, simplicity, loving kindness, patience, cheerfulness of manner and words, charity that does not wait but runs to help and to save.

The oratory was soon flourishing, as was the free school, with Sr. Caterina as teacher.

⁴⁵ G. Lemoyne, *Memorie Biografiche e Vita del Ven. G. Bosco* S.E. I., Torino.

Chapter III

Practical Accompaniment

Joyful Work and Apostolate

The house chronicle of Turin records:

Oratory, Sunday and daily catechism for young adults and those children who needed to be prepared for Confession and Holy Communion, free schools, evening classes, sewing classes both free and fee-based, house of study for Sisters. Sr. Caterina began teaching, guided by Cherubina Sala, sister of Fr. Antonio Sala, Bursar General of the Salesians, and by the Salesian Professor, Fr. Celestino Durando.¹

This entry has a tone of rejoicing in the work and in the apostolate. The wealth of works that developed in such a short time seem prodigious, and it would appear as if Sr. Caterina summed them up in her person. She manifested humility in everything that she did and in how she presented herself.

Animator and Vicar

Since Sr. Caterina did not yet have her teaching diploma, she found herself in the situation of having to teach under the guidance of a qualified teacher. She also had to study which was difficult because she had little time. In addition to studying, working, and teaching, she also had the task of being vicar of the community. This required a vigilant spirit, continual self-control, patience, and at the same time, an uncommon capacity for action, and above all, the composure and serenity, which must be the outstanding virtue of one who is called to direct and educate.

¹ House chronicle of the community in Turin, FMA General Archives.

This is not to say that Sr. Caterina did everything. The community animator, Sr. Elisa, was the type of person who was capable of being like a sister as well as a leader. She was very tender-hearted and strong, possessing an uncommon intelligence, and had a delicacy in manner and speech, and a piety that informed her whole life. She had an ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus that gave her, "...an extraordinary influence over souls". Sr. Elisa was such and Sr. Caterina loved her like a sister and an animator, and was most obedient to her. She was ever ready to implement her ideas, to foresee her desires and always humble to receive orders and, sometimes, even corrections.

Laughing gracefully with her, she tells of those times lived in Turin before they found themselves at the head of the Institute, of their mutual relationships between the leader and the members of the community.

"Do you remember, Mother, that story of the umbrella?" asked Mother Elisa of Mother Caterina, who had become mother general.

"Yes, I remember, but don't think about it anymore now, Mother Elisa! Rather, you should still have remorse about when you came to disturb me and Sr. Laurentoni who were hiding from you to prepare surprises for your name day."

These were the affectionate words alluding to episodes that can be found in the chronicles of the house of Turin at that time. Reading them today, one is moved in thinking about both of them, so humble and great, virtuous and exemplary in the practice of religious virtues, and in their fidelity to their vows. They observed them scrupulously, yet with largeness of mind and heart, simple as children in dealing with obedience to the Constitutions and to the person who was the guide of their souls in the way of religious, Salesian perfection.

Charming Episodes

The following are episodes that Mother Caterina wrote about Mother Elisa after her death.

Wanting to give a gift to our superior for her name day, we were all caught up in thinking about what to choose and how many meetings we had before deciding! We had managed to scrape together two and a half *lire*, (an enormous sum for that time). However, in doubt whether we were permitted to save it and use it as we thought best, we consulted Fr. Rua, who was our director. He answered simply, 'You know well if the vow of poverty allows you to have monetary savings.' So it was that in the evening before going to rest, (Teresa Laurentoni and I shared a room). I threw the little purse to her and she tossed it back to me. As luck would have it, it ended up under a bed and remained there throughout the whole night, freeing us from the remorse of having money with us! In the morning, we hastened to make the great purchase of a length of fabric and a bit of linen for a pair of slippers and a watchcase. Then came the difficulty. How many innocent subterfuges were needed, how many escapades to work in secret! The superior enjoyed catching us, discovering us here or there, so much so that I thought to myself, I will never be a superior, but if I were to become one, I would leave them alone in this type of activity, to do what they wanted. Poor Sisters!²

It was a delightful episode in its simplicity, as was the telling of it, and that helps to imagine a little community of very young religious, very new, very fervent, and who loved their animator, who was like a mother to them (oh, how young she also was), an innocent astuteness on both sides led to a pleasant intrigue that would be crowned by a little, heartfelt celebration.

In it Sr. Caterina manifested her characteristics: great delicacy of conscience, humility, and kindness, kindness, kindness.

As mother general, how many celebrations of gratitude and honour she would receive from the Sisters. The writer knew from personal experience how faithful she was to her decision. Even during her last years, when she was so ill and weighed down by work and preoccupations, participating in and being the recipient of these celebrations was a struggle and suffering for her.

² Mother Caterina Daghero, personal memoirs, FMA General Archives.

She would be among the Sisters with a maternal smile, and she let them do it, let them do it.

What about the episode of the umbrella to which Mother Elisa referred, showing an almost subtle remorse? It is of interest because it adds to the knowledge of two animators who were taking their first steps in religious life, with a mutual confidence that never changed, never diminished, even when they found themselves in very different roles of authority and responsibility.

It was raining heavily, and Sr. Elisa, the animator, needed her vicar, Sr. Caterina, to go out for an urgent errand. But her umbrella was missing, or at least could not be found at that moment and Sr. Caterina was uncertain. Go out? In the rain?

Since it was urgent, the animator asked Sr. Caterina to do what she herself would have done, go without an umbrella, and she obeyed serenely.

In this episode, one can see that which as mother general she would tell the Sisters, following the formation she had received from Maria Mazzarello. Obedience is the measure of holiness.³ In this she would always be the first.

First to Wear the New FMA Habit

Another episode from those happy times can be found in Sr. Caterina's memoirs and in the oral tradition of the Institute. It is important and regards the religious habit which would constitute the uniform of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It was black in colour, signifying austerity and death to all that was not for heaven, and white to indicate the purity with which the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians must clothe themselves in their very active apostolic life. This was not intended to separate them from the world, but rather it allowed them to be present in it, just as the dove released from the ark threw itself into the mud left by the flood, but did not mar the candour of its silvery feathers.

“The superior (Sr. Elisa Roncallo), in agreement with the person in charge intervened in order to obtain the modification of the habit adopted by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Mornese.”⁴

³ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

⁴ House chronicle of the community in Turin, FMA General Archives.

Maria Mazzarello had assigned to her this delicate task as reported in the above memoirs, "Bettina (as she sometimes familiarly called her), see if you can make a habit that has a touch of white and a suitable veil for us".

In his first biography of Maria Mazzarello, Maccono described this fact which is important in the history of the Institute.

Sr. Elisa prepared the new habit, and sent a sample to Mother Mazzarello, then once again resorted to her dear, obedient vicar. It was necessary to go to the Oratory, across the courtyards to model the new outfit for Don Bosco and, in short, to see whether he approved.

Sr. Caterina blushed but did not hesitate. She was the first to put on the new habit and present herself to the saint who, seeing her before him, smiled in a fatherly way and approved of it.⁵

Yes, this episode has its value in the history of the Institute, but also in the life of Sr. Caterina, in particular, because it revealed a remarkable similarity of facts. The co-founder put on the first religious habit at Mornese⁶ and Sr. Caterina, who was to succeed her in the leadership of the Institute and mirror her virtues, was the first to put on the new religious habit in Turin. The habit worn by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians today, may be different, but is still a sign of purity and strength.

Paternal Vigilance

Among other events of those early days, the house chronicle of Turin narrates the visits of Mother Mazzarello that caused the Sisters to rejoice, and gave the animator and the vicar wings that were ever ready to fly. Religious celebrations and new apostolic works were gradually increasing, especially under the continual fatherly supervision of Don Bosco, particularly through Fr. Rua. He was forming the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians giving directives in cases which presented themselves and were sometimes difficult to overcome, resolve, and lead to a good result. These directives were also passed on to others, as a spiritual treasure for the future. Sr. Elisa entered evermore deeply

⁵ F. Maccono, *Op. cit.*, part I, Chapter XX, p. 163 [Italian edition], and testimonies, FMA General Archives.

⁶ F. Maccono, *Op.cit.*

into the spirit of great charity and wisdom of the holy founder. It seemed as though Sr. Caterina studied especially his serenity, and gentle yet tenacious strength in leadership.

Certainly, she learned much from him and always testified to this and once, with a smile of ineffable complacency and admirable simplicity said, “It was Don Bosco himself who chose me to be superior [general]”. The holy founder, therefore, was preparing the chosen one whom God had called to assume the place of Maria Mazzarello when she would have gone to her reward.

There was nothing extraordinary about Sr. Caterina. If one were to ask, “What is Sr. Caterina like?” They would probably hear the reply, “She is like all the others, she acts like everyone else”. They also said this about Mother Mazzarello. She was like everyone else, and she was, says her first biographer. It was the most beautiful eulogy. Humility invested all her works so they became extraordinary in the ordinary.

Sr. Caterina imitated Mother Mazzarello. She did not know, and certainly had no thought of where her beloved humility, which she sought and desired, would lead her. The book of Sirach says, “The wisdom of the humble lifts their heads high and seats them among the great”⁷.

Ready for Any Type of Work

One day when she was mother general she was asked what she did when she was in Turin as vicar of Sr. Elisa. With her usual bright, witty smile answered, “I was the *turabuco*”, literally, a “cork”, figuratively one who fits in anywhere, doing a bit of everything. She replied, “I was a *turabuco*”,⁸ and I filled in the gaps wherever I could”. What she meant to say was that where help was needed, she was there, when someone was missing from a task, she took their place, where there was a greater need, she filled in, and, in this case, when sacrifice was called for, she was ready to respond.

On August 30, 1877, at Cuneo, she attained the qualification for elementary school teaching. The year before in

⁷ Sir. 11:1.

⁸ A typical Piedmontese term.

Turin, the community animator Sr. Elisa had also received this qualification.

The following is a personal memory from that time and it again illustrates the dominant note of her spirit, ideas, and life, "...nothing for myself, everything for others".

Sr. Caterina wrote, "Almost immediately we had a visit from the school supervisor who was accompanied by Fr. Durando, school supervisor for the SDB. I remained tongue-tied, but Fr. Durando helped me to make a good impression".⁹

This was a humble confession on her part, humble and yet at the same time cheerful. It could be said that she was amused when remembering that now distant past, "I remained tongue-tied and could not say a word".

With the passing of years, the Lord would give her the gift of influencing people with the efficacy of her words as he had done for Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. Words that sometimes wounded, but only to heal, that brought consolation and restored peace. They always spurred one on along the path of holiness, which at times were marked by crosses, but were always bedewed by grace for those who invoke and entrust themselves to God.

Perpetual Profession

In October of the same year, Sr. Caterina was called back to Mornese. The memoirs simply state, "In October she returned to Mornese because a teacher was needed for the students".

She remained there at least until December 8, the day on which she pronounced her religious vows in perpetuity, in the little chapel where she had made her religious promises as a novice and the vows of her first profession. The feast of the Immaculate was characteristic of the two great families of the SDB and FMA. It recalled the humble beginnings, and the equally wonderful worldwide expansion of the work initiated and accomplished by their holy founder. Every year it constituted almost a

⁹ Mother Caterina Daghero, FMA General Archives.

commemoration of the work itself, to the glory of the Virgin who was its heavenly inspiration and patroness.

Later, as mother general, each year Sr. Caterina remembered that happy day in the Catholic Church, as the most intimate date in the history of her life.

The Rule did not yet have formal approval by any ecclesiastical authority, and it did not establish that the professed Sisters should pronounce the vows for a given time, or bind themselves to the Lord in perpetuity. In those early days of the Institute, the Founder, Don Bosco, was responsible for every decision.¹⁰

The memoirs give an interesting detail that at first glance is surprising because it seems inappropriate, even discordant with the mystical event of a perpetual religious profession. However, in truth, it gives one a taste of the spirit of simplicity, fervour, and faith, which then informed the whole life of those first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the Salesian Spirit that knew nothing of what was then called, the aristocracy of piety.¹¹ From the memoirs:

On the morning of December 8, 1878, while the community was gathered in the chapel for the new professions, Sr. Caterina was not present because she was preparing the refectory for the celebration, Mother Mazzarello went to call her, 'Hurry, Sr. Caterina! Take off that white apron, and come in to the chapel to make your perpetual vows'. Don Bosco had telegraphed Fr. Lemoyne¹² to act in his name. Sr. Caterina, with only the preparation of obedience, followed Mother and went to make her perpetual vows.¹³

A more valid and secure preparation would have been good, but one may also think, without fear, that Sr. Caterina had prepared for the great event day by day, with the refined, constant

¹⁰ E. Ceria, Op.cit.

¹¹ A. Caviglia, *S. G. Bosco*, Profilo.

¹² One of the first and most illustrious SDB general councillors and historian of the Salesian Society.

¹³ Memoirs, FMA General Archives. This was how things were done in the very early days of the Congregation, but later, first profession and the renewal of profession were always preceded by an eight day spiritual retreat.

practice of religious virtue. If Mother Mazzarello, with so much joyful confidence, suddenly called her from the refectory where she was intent on material work, at least apparently so, and led her to the chapel for the great act of perpetual offering to the Lord, it meant that she knew well the virtue of Sr. Caterina.

It may be added that not only did Sr. Caterina possess such virtue and inner strength that she could so easily and tranquilly pass from a material task to a spiritual one, this was true of all those early FMA, whose preparation was continual in the diligent observance of the Constitutions, in humility, mortification, in the love of God, in the serene acceptance, and an even heroic seeking of all that was contrary to nature and favoured by grace.

Among such Sisters were Sr. Maddalena Martini, Sr. Virginia Magone, Sr. Emma Ferrero, Sr. Assunta Gaino, Sr. Adele Arecco and many others. It is enough to read the brief biographies of the Sisters in the first decade of the Institute to clearly understand how life in Mornese marked the golden age of the Congregation.¹⁴ An authoritative testimony affirms:

The life that was being led, was one of prayer, work, sacrifice, mortification, perfect observance of the Holy Rule, and a desire to be ever better; we all wanted to become saints. Everything was pervaded by a holy joy, living and working for the love of God, emulating the example of Mother Mazzarello who was the first in everything.¹⁵

Sr. Caterina stood out in this radiant group because, in the designs of God, she was like a light placed on a lampstand. However, she did not eclipse the memory and the light of the others who were no less radiant with spiritual beauty, even though, because of the divine plan, they remained in the shadows.

¹⁴ G. Costamagna, Salesiano, *Conferenza alle Suore Missionarie in America*. He was the spiritual director of the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Mornese, and in his conferences recalled with religious and nostalgic sentiments that golden age of the Congregation.

¹⁵ F. Maccono, Op.cit. From the chronicle written by Mother Emilia Mosca.

From Mornese to Turin as Animator

On December 8, 1878, Sr. Caterina was, therefore, a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians forever. She returned from Mornese to Turin in 1879 for the new year no longer as vicar, but as community animator.

Sr. Elisa had been called to Mornese by Mother Maria Mazzarello. She sadly left the field where she had worked for approximately two years in the shadow of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. She had received much enlightenment from Don Bosco and Fr. Michele Rua in how to be a wise guide for others. This helped to form her for a long future of love, service, and sacrifice that was extraordinary throughout her lifetime. She suffered, and so did the Sisters. In the house chronicle of August and September of the community in Turin one can read:

To the comfort of the Sisters, the beloved mother superior was not lacking in the gift of self in order to allow all to be content in God. In view of the change of the superior of this house, she sought through her conferences and Good Nights to prepare the souls [the Sisters] for the religious acceptance of any change of house, animator, or the task entrusted to her. [...]

Toward the end of the month (September) our dearest superior Sr. Elisa Roncallo, before going definitively to Nizza Monferrato¹⁶ where she had been destined by obedience, returned to visit the community of Turin and invoke a particular blessing from Mary Help of Christians on the new mission that had been entrusted to her.¹⁷

¹⁶ On February 4, 1879, the generalate had been transferred from Mornese to Nizza Monferrato which, from that time on, was known as the motherhouse [*casa madre*] a title which has remained in tradition, even though, in 1929 the generalate was transferred from Nizza to Turin and to Rome in 1969 (see F.Maccono and E. Ceria, Op.cit.).

¹⁷ Chronicle of the community of Turin, FMA General Archives.

Sr. Elisa had established the Association of the Daughters of the Sacred Heart in the oratory, “and she had written a little regulation for it that Fr. Rua and Don Bosco had later revised and approved. Thus, she had placed an almost divine seal on the two years of her office of a hard-working superior under the paternal gaze of the holy founder¹⁸”.

Sr. Caterina took on the new role of animation in October 1879, thus taking the first steps on that rapid journey that would lead her to assume the important task of mother general at the age of only twenty-five.

The religious community of Turin had grown in number from the five Sisters with which it had begun in March 1876 and now numbered twenty-nine, one of whom was a novice. The amount of work had also increased. The first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were called to Turin by Don Bosco. He had guided them and entrusted them to Fr. Michele Rua, his faithful imitator and interpreter. There, the Sisters had matured in virtue and leadership through their apostolate.

¹⁸ Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

Chapter IV

Baptism of Fire

As community animator, Sr. Caterina continued the work of Sr. Elisa. The Sisters, pupils, oratorians, co-workers and benefactors of the FMA apostolate hardly realised the change that had occurred, and while preserving the wonderful memories and impressions of their first animator, became admirers and affectionately devoted to the new leader.

The chronicle states, “Our Mother came with Sr. Enrichetta Sorbone. She was pleased to see a large number of girls in the oratory, catechism, and the liturgical celebrations”.

The work, therefore, continued serenely and intensely under the direction of Sr. Caterina, who, besides directing the others in the assistance, teaching, and apostolate, continued to teach and assist whenever she could find a free moment from her main occupation as animator.

Painful Event

The chronicle of that year, 1879, marks a painful event that was widely reported in the biography of Maria Mazzarello written by Maccono. It concerned the young Jewish girl, Anna Bedarida of Nizza Monferrato, who had been attracted by the charm and goodness of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and particularly by the charity of Maria Mazzarello. She wanted to convert to Catholicism and had applied for protection and instruction to prepare for this. From Nizza Monferrato, the motherhouse, she went to Turin, where a greater part of the tragedy staged by her relatives took place which resulted in her not converting to Catholicism.¹

Sr. Caterina, with her great heart, piety, zeal for the Glory of God and the salvation of people and in her position as animator,

¹ Cf. F. Maccono, Op.cit. and E. Ceria, Op.cit.

surely could not remain indifferent to this fact. However, there is no documentary evidence directly relating her to this event.

At the School of Don Bosco

The good spirit of harmony, piety, Salesian religious observance that reigned among the Sisters was evident. The chronicle states, "We are all of one mind, our hearts are on fire with holy love."

The continuous assistance and teachings of the holy founder are extensively documented:

- We participated in the first conference, which our good Father, Don Bosco, gave to the Salesian Co-operators where he rejoiced in their generous cooperation with the works for the well-being of young girls. He urged them to continue in the good they had undertaken, assuring them of the blessings of Mary Help of Christians.
- At the conclusion of the retreat our Father, Don Bosco, received the holy vows and gave recommendations in which he exhorted us to a life of prayer, humility, hidden life and sacrifice for God alone.
- In keeping with the most fervent exhortation of our Father Don Bosco, we celebrate the feast day of the Pope with special prayers, invoking upon him the most abundant blessings of Heaven!²

Don Bosco was always a teacher who used short, telegraphic, but expressive phrases! The chronicles also speak of the correspondence and the tender religious affection toward the holy founder:

We cannot help but follow with our thoughts the happy event which today is occupying the whole of the Salesian Oratory for boys. Two hundred French pilgrims have come to Turin to visit our Father Don Bosco and to prostrate themselves at the feet of the Help of Christians.

² Chronicle of the house in Turin, FMA General Archives.

And they also speak of a great joy:

Our Sisters have returned from Nizza Monferrato more fervent than ever with a holy fire! They have received the printed copy of the Holy Rule which they consider to be the most precious treasure!³

The chronicle of 1879 concludes with a joyous expression of thanksgiving to God who, "...has blessed us so much", and a prayer that, "...he may forgive us for our lack of correspondence to his grace".

Sr. Caterina, while speaking of her time in Turin, said, "I stayed there a year and a half as vicar, and a year and a half as superior".

Three years, therefore, the first of her youthful time of religious life in the shadow of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians; three years at the direct school of the saintly founder and Fr. Rua. As always, she spoke little and listened much, reflected much, and always learned with a resolve to progress in the understanding of that Salesian Spirit which contains in itself the Christian ideals of the apostolate, saving one's self by saving others.

Good-bye Turin

One day, the founder communicated the news to her. Mother Maria Mazzarello was calling her back to Nizza Monferrato, and then from there she would be sent as the animator to St. Cyr. It was March of the year 1880.

To France?! Everything seemed to crumble around her, who by now was well oriented to that dear world of young people and her work, but she did not open her mouth to express her deep feelings. She herself attested to this simply and humbly many years later, remembering the day and the hour.

She said nothing to the Sisters, not even to her Vicar, Sr. Pierina Marasso, nor to Sr. Teresa Laurentoni who had been her faithful companion in work and virtue, right from her arrival in Turin. She remained silent with that prudence which she already

³ Nizza Monferrato. The Constitutions were printed for the first time in 1878.

possessed from her earliest years and which would be one of the most characteristic gifts of her life as the mother general. Prudence should be the primary quality of the one called to the important and delicate task of leadership.

Sr. Caterina speaks of how she procured a French grammar book, and an Italian-French dictionary. In order to study this language she tried to steal some precious moments from her work as animator.

She remained silent. However, others knew it. Outside the community a rumour spread that Sr. Caterina also would leave like the unforgettable Sr. Elisa. One of the Sisters not ready to part with her, and who lacked prudence, thought of sending influential women as intermediaries to Don Bosco, in other words, some sort of dignitaries who could obtain a change of decision. Here is an interesting detail recorded in the memoirs:

A woman who was a benefactor went to the extent of saying, 'Don Bosco if money could make Sr. Caterina remain here I am ready to...'. Don Bosco responded, 'Right now I don't have a penny, but, for the moment I do not have another Sister who knows a little French and who could take the place of Sr. Caterina Daghero. But I assure you that she will not stay in France for long'.⁴

The Sisters tried to exert gentle pressure on the heart of Maria Domenica so that she would not send her so far away, would not take away their dear animator. However, like the founder, she understood, empathised, smiled, but did not change her mind. A Sister said:

Mother listened to me lovingly, encouraged me, and acknowledged that I did have a reason to suffer at the loss of such a good superior, but I should console myself because later on, I would have her back, not as superior, but... I do not remember the exact expression, but she made me understand that God had destined her for much greater things.⁵

⁴ Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

⁵ Sr. Teresa Laurentoni.

An affectionate letter written by Sr. Caterina from Turin dated May 22, 1880, to the mother of Sr. Elisa, has been preserved. It reveals her heart, pain, and generous adherence to the will of God. She comforts Elisa's mother who is always preoccupied and anxious about her daughter and assured her that she was happy and things were going very well, and promised that while in Nizza she would bring all her messages to Elisa. "*Have no fear regarding me, dearest mammetta! I have little hope of being able to see you again on earth but I hope to see you again in paradise.*" She spoke to her about her great pain and at the same time her acceptance. The following extract reveals this:

*We are all doing well, but we are suffering because of the painful separation. Then, I lack the courage to look at or speak with my dearest Sisters for long, thinking that I have to leave them and perhaps I will never see them again! But the Lord wants it thus, and thus let it be... For his sake, I am ready for any sacrifice. Oh, how sweet it is to always do the will of my Jesus.*⁶

First FMA Foundation in France

The house of St. Cyr was one of the first SDB foundations in France, and the motive that led Don Bosco to open it is described clearly in the history of the Salesian foundations⁷. The motive was suggested and accompanied by Divine Providence.

In a mysterious dream the Holy Virgin appeared as usual and with her a multitude of young people. She called the attention of Don Bosco to a solitary house surrounded by fertile land that could be entrusted to the hard-working hands of good labourers. It could offer hospitality to many orphans.

At about the same time as the dream, an opportunity presented itself to the saint. He was offered an orphanage, with land that could produce a harvest for the maintenance of the abandoned poor, and he was invited to take possession of it and direct it. That house, that land was St. Cyr. The saint of the young accepted it, sent his Salesians there, and then asked Mother

⁶ Letter from Sr. Caterina to Mrs. Roncallo, FMA General Archives.

⁷ G. B. Lemoyne, *Memorie biografiche di S. G. Bosco.*

Mazzarello to send also the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Among these, it was necessary to select an animator who had the gifts of mind and heart to be able to tackle difficulties that would not be easy to overcome. Maria Mazzarello and Don Bosco chose Sr. Caterina as the most suitable person for the task at hand. Therefore, Sr. Caterina left Turin.

Back to Nizza Monferrato

She was smiling, but there were tears in her eyes. That obedience really demanded a great sacrifice from her. In those early days of the Institute, for those first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to go far from Mornese, Nizza Monferrato, Turin, was almost like going to the end of the earth. Now she was being sent to France. When would she return? She said goodbye to her father, brothers, and stepmother, thinking that perhaps she would not see them again, or who knows when, while Cumiana was so close to Turin!

On the part of the pupils and oratorians, there were tears and protests. When Sr. Caterina left the house, they accompanied her in large numbers, trying to stop her from leaving. One of them threw herself on the ground saying, “If the superior wants to leave, let her step over me”. However, Fr. Cagliari who was present became serious and managed to calm them and clear the way through that lively and emotional crowd.⁸

Sr. Caterina returned to the motherhouse at Nizza Monferrato where Mother Mazzarello was waiting:

- Are you here Sr. Caterina?
- Yes, Mother. Don Bosco sent me.
- To do what?
A smile lit up Maria Domenica’s face.
- To go to St. Cyr.
- Oh! Well, for the time being, try to do some work here. There is much to do in the house. Later we will speak about it.

Some days passed!

⁸ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

- Are you still here Sr. Caterina?
Mother asked her with a smile.
- Yes, Mother, I am waiting for your orders.
- Well, prepare yourself, therefore, to go to France. You will first go to Alassio. They will come to the station to meet you and from there you will proceed to St. Cyr with another Sister.

It was a Franciscan, or rather Salesian simplicity of authority and obedience.

Later, as mother general, Sr. Caterina recounted the adventure of that journey, her arrival and stay at Alassio. She experienced difficulty in getting her two companions, Sr. Alessandrina Hugues and Sr. Enrichetta Telesio, who were of the Alassio community, relieved of their responsibilities in order to go to that new, unknown mission that was awaiting them at St. Cyr.⁹

In the Salesian house of Alassio, the Sisters were in charge of the kitchen and laundry of the Salesians and their pupils. There were not enough Sisters to manage so much work. That is why it was difficult to allow the Sisters to leave even though Mother Mazzarello had already designated them as Sr. Caterina's companions.

Why did she not tell Sr. Caterina of this before she left? Maybe she wanted to test the blind obedience of the generous Sister, or she wanted the consent of the Salesian rector of the house for the choice of the two Sisters.

Mission at St. Cyr

Her arrival at the dilapidated house of St. Cyr, the welcome she received, and her early stay among the Franciscan Tertiaries who had long been in charge of the institute and the poor orphans housed there, is a unique story.

⁹ Sr. Caterina travelled alone as far as Alassio, because Sr. Sampietro, the Sister who was to accompany her to St. Cyr, was ill. She was replaced temporarily by Sr. Enrichetta Telesio. FMA General Archives.

On April 4, 1880, Sr. Caterina took up the direction of the orphanage, while the founder and director of the work¹⁰ and the members of the Franciscan Third Order were still in the house. She soon began to demonstrate that tact in leadership that places charity and prudence as the basis to overcome obstacles and win over the heart of others.

It was a difficult and very delicate undertaking. Above all, there was a declared conflict on the grounds of nationality. Why should the 'French' be subject to the 'Italians'? No.

Cold Welcome and a Friendly Response

Then there was also the leader of the Tertiaries, Sr. Marie Claire Agnely, who for thirty-four years had acted as director and mother of those poor orphans. She was fifty-eight years old and had sacrificed herself day after day in that work of charity! Why should she have to submit to a foreign Sister who was only twenty-three years of age?

Some of the Tertiaries took sides and looked upon the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and their new animator with some disdain. In the beginning, even the orphans manifested hostility. They had been told that under these foreigners they would not be treated well, indeed worse, they would be made to obey by beatings. Therefore, the poor little children looked at them with frightened eyes and, when possible, tried to avoid them.

But the Sisters of Mother Mazzarello and the Salesians of Don Bosco did not go to France to stay in the house that had already deteriorated over the years, in the middle of that fertile but inadequately cultivated land, just for material gain or profit. The Sisters had gone with the same yearning in their heart as Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello. They were seeking young people to whom they could dedicate their whole lives, for whose material and moral good and for whose salvation they would sacrifice themselves!

Sr. Caterina reciprocated the hard, suspicious looks with a gaze of gentle kindness and those stinging remarks with words

¹⁰ Fr. Jacques Vincent.

founded on humility and love that touched their hearts. Thus, much sooner than she and her Sisters would have thought, every barrier fell and hands were extended in mutual peace. Some Tertiaries, having formed a good impression of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, withdrew from the work. Others, first and foremost, the saintly leader, Sr. Marie Claire, asked and obtained the longed-for grace of becoming a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. Much has been written about this virtuous leader of the Franciscan Tertiaries of St. Cyr in the biographical notes of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who died during the second decade of the Institute¹¹. Her extraordinary humility, her charity, her patience in the excruciating pain of her last illness as well as her gentle submission to the new animator, Sr. Caterina, and admiration for her virtues, are also highlighted. There was a contest between that elderly religious and the very young worker in the vineyard of the Lord, a competition in religious respect and kindness. The memoirs record:

Whenever dear Sr. Marie Claire left the house of St. Cyr accompanied by the new superior, many women approached her, happy to see her again and have a word with her and, as usual, would give her their offerings. She would immediately introduce the new superior, praising her, attributing to her all the good that was being accomplished in the house. She would add that she herself was no more than a poor Sister. The expression on her face and the tone of her voice revealed her sincerity and it was moving and edifying.¹²

Sr. Caterina reciprocated with equal humility and affectionate deference and wanted to make sure that the Sisters did not overlook the seniority in age, religious virtue, and the sacrifices of the most humble and generous Sr. Marie Claire. Even then, wisdom and kindness directed her work.

¹¹ *Cenni biografici delle Suore defunte nel 2° decennio dell'Istituto (1883-1893)*, S. E. I. Torino.

¹² *Ibid.*

There are additional detailed memories regarding the time she spent in St. Cyr. They refer, above all, to her formation in patience, dependence, humility, and prudence during the brief period when she was in leadership, far from Mother Maria Mazzarello, Don Bosco, and her homeland. Above all, she knew how to hide her intense sorrow at the separation and discomfort.

There was extreme poverty in the house and they actually had to depend on their own work and Divine Providence for everything. The orphans were like featherless little birds in the nest waiting for their parents to bring them food. It was necessary to seek, not with quick, agile wings in the blue skies like birds, but rather on the ground along rough roads, since the path of those who beg for alms is always rough.

Before the arrival of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, to maintain their orphans, Sr. Marie Claire, was accustomed to begging, which could be humiliating but equally sublime when inspired by charity. In those early days Sr. Caterina saw that there was little that could be changed. It was necessary to do like Don Bosco, the Founder, to seek and to ask for bread.

Unexpected Gift

In Turin, when they heard about this poverty, a Sister appealed to the bursar of the Salesian Oratory at Valdocco to ask for help. The bursar at first was evasive saying that he did not have the authority to do so, but then, at the pitiful insistence of the Sister, he was moved and talked to Don Bosco. He received this answer:

My son, between the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians nothing is as yet divided. What is ours is theirs, what is theirs is ours. Yes, yes, put into a trunk whatever you can find that might be useful for those poor Sisters. Do so freely and send it.

Sr. Caterina was informed about it. She rejoiced and communicated the good news to the Sisters, especially the ever ready paternal goodness of Don Bosco.

However, the well prepared and fully packed trunk never reached the house of St. Cyr, but because of a mistaken address it arrived at the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato. Also here there was great poverty, and Mother Mazzarello rejoiced over this sudden, unexpected gift of God and immediately used it. When Sr. Caterina learned what had happened, she smiled and said just one, brief, but meaningful word, "Patience!"

One day, she accepted advice to go together with Sr. Alexandrina Hugues to knock at the door of a woman in the nearby city¹³ to ask for alms to meet the payment of an urgent debt. This woman was said to be a benefactor.

Sr. Caterina trembled, she had never been rich, she was simply a country girl but she had never begged. She thought of the holy founder, of the love which often demands sacrifice and self-denial and so she attempted and hoped.

But she, one day would have to teach others, many others, that true charity cannot be exercised without trials, humility, and love, without forgetting oneself, received an abusive refusal, harder to endure than a physical blow.

The woman, perhaps caught at a bad moment, looked at her with contempt and lashed out at her with bitter words, "You do not have a few cents to write a letter to me and yet you have enough money to make this journey? Take a good look at the door of this house! Look well so that you will never again return".

Sr. Caterina did not speak. Only her eyes turned to the woman with an expression of humility and forgiveness, and with the Sister she left that house. Oh, how often the doors of the rich are hard to open! "The harsh, illustrious doors", says the poet.

But Sr. Caterina did not think that way. Frustrated in her confidence that they might move the woman's heart with the eloquence of the spoken word rather than with her writing, they now had to think about the return journey but had no more money to pay for the trip. She searched until late afternoon, when a woman, a Salesian benefactor met her, and recognising them as the Sisters of Don Bosco, treated them maternally and helped them

¹³ Toulon, France.

with a shiny coin of a hundred francs! The Virgin Help of Christians with her heavenly hand healed the raw wound.

They returned home fasting, but happy. The humiliation suffered and the generous offering in return had given to their hearts a bright ray of love and joy in the service of God.

Sr. Caterina having become mother general would not be surprised at certain feelings of repugnance or reluctance, to request a contribution for the Institute from good people as well as the not so good. She realised that it was not easy because the impression of that day had left a salutary mark on her and had given her a quick but overwhelmingly, profound experience.

This, too, is God's Gift

She would encourage the Sisters to turn their gaze to Don Bosco, who, until his death, in order to provide food and Christian formation for thousands and thousands of orphans, walked the paths of a humility that begs, charity that gives of itself, sacrifice that has only one recompense, but what a recompense, heaven!

Therefore, the hardship felt was quite substantial. Sr. Caterina realised this from the first time she entered those walls blessed by charity. She wanted to endure these hardships serenely, smiling and joking, and she encouraged the Sisters to do likewise. At times, she would leave the house, go to the orchard or the fields and would comfort herself saying, "This is God's gift!" and would hasten to gather the good fruit, to prepare a dish to bring to their poor meal.

Later on, as a result of hard work this land would be cultivated and provide abundantly for the poor, and that house now so deserted and almost abandoned, would become one of the most flourishing orphanages of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.¹⁴ Sr. Caterina might have thought this way, but she had to water the earth with tears so that it might bear fruit.

She suffered in those financial straits, not for herself, but for the beloved orphans, for the Tertiaries, for the Sisters who had

¹⁴ At the time of writing this biography the orphanage of St. Cyr accommodated more than 100 orphans.

come with her, for the founder of the work who, now old, tired, and ill was still residing in the house and needed care and comfort. Sr. Marie Claire helped her in this by her goodness and her ever alert activities, but it was not enough.

It was necessary to put things in order, clean, restore and give a healthy and pleasant aspect to those old rooms. One of the Sisters said that from the first day Sr. Caterina had begun to do this work with all the strength of her robust and thriving youthfulness. On the one hand, she liked this work because it almost gave her the illusion of doing the kind of work she had always done as a young girl in Cumiana. On the other hand, it caused some pain in her heart, because she naturally compared her work in St. Cyr among the orphans with her dear apostolate among the lively children of Turin, who were now so far away.

To Remember is to Relive

These memories threatened to overshadow that inner peace which she had acquired through such generous obedience and sacrifice.

However, she smiled and remained silent. A Sister who was with her at St. Cyr attests that not a lament or regret escaped her. Only once did she inadvertently reveal her intimate feelings. The Sister reported it with much simplicity and was moved every time she narrated it, though it was a distant memory. She recounted:

Fr. Cagliari, who had been present at the departure of Mother Caterina Daghero from the house of Turin, and had seen the demonstrations of affection and the pain of separation from the dear girls of Turin, perhaps for fear that she would become proud and over-confident, and to test her humility, wrote a note in which he said, 'Do not think that your departure has brought harm to the Sisters and girls, no, no! Rather, everything is going better than when you were here, although it seemed that at your departure things would not have gone well without you. Courage, therefore, and think that God does not need us in his work'!

Oh, yes, Sr. Caterina knew this, "However," the Sister continued, "while in her goodness she read the letter from Fr. Cagliariro to me, her eyes were clouded with tears". She remembered her dear, lively children, the Sisters left behind in that house, the Basilica, Don Bosco, everything! It was a world of goodness, work, apostolate full of energy and hope and she felt more deeply than ever the loneliness of that life which she now faced. To remember is to relive.

She did not waste time thinking about the past. It could weaken her resolution for perfect obedience and steal valuable time, which she should spend not for herself but for others, for charity. Yet, the same Sister remembered that after having read that note with tear-filled eyes, she went back to work washing the dishes, cleaning the floor all with a smile.¹⁵

Every morning she went with the orphans to collect almonds in the vast countryside surrounding the house armed with a long pole. She would shake the tall, leafy branches, and the good fruit would fall to the ground. The orphans would gather them joyfully and put them into sacks which were then sold. They would return home at about ten or eleven, the children cheerful, she very tired and with her neck aching so much that she could barely turn. She had stood there for hours with her head back to search among the highest branches with the pole looking for the right point to strike. At the same time she found comfort in raising her mind and heart to the Lord.

The only income to meet the many expenses came from the fruit which though abundant was not enough. Sr. Caterina thought of raising silkworms, but even that was not enough; their poverty continued. Their daily food was only a little soup seasoned with oil, a dish of potatoes and a piece of bread. Sometimes, when the baker was late in bringing the bread and it was already time for dinner, she had to go to the neighbours to borrow it. In such cases, Sr. Caterina could not hide her pain. Her facial expression then was more eloquent than the words she held back so as not to show how much she was suffering.

¹⁵ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

Sisters who later joined this community and found improvements, learned from the first Sisters about this painful life of poverty and generosity, and they, in turn, passed on the memories to later generations. As mother general, Sr. Caterina spoke of it with serene complacency every time she went on a visit to St. Cyr and recalled its historic beginnings very similar to those of Mornese. She was silent, however, regarding all that would highlight her virtue. "She was always the same, serene, cheerful, with no regrets for the past, no acts of impatience for the present, and no fear for the future." These words are taken from the chronicle of St. Cyr.

Through constant practice Sr. Caterina lived the spirit of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello and succeeded in making her own the Salesian virtues. She lived the love of young people and for this love, a life of faith and trust in Divine Providence, without 'ifs' or 'buts', a life of simplicity and strength even to the point of heroism.

Threatening Times

There was certainly reason to worry and fear for the future. On March 29 of that year, the French government had issued two decrees, one that affected the Jesuit Order in particular, and, the other, all religious congregations. It wanted to prevent the young people of France from being taught and educated by religious.

The whole story of this persecution, which broke out in the year 1880, is extensively described by Fr. Ceria in the *Biographical Memoirs of Blessed John Bosco*. It is dominated by a light that dispels even the darkest shadows. It was a divine gift that enabled him to be an instrument for the triumph of good and the glory of God.

The Salesians residing in the houses of France were studying how to deal with the difficult situation. They sent urgent letters to Don Bosco, and he counselled, taught and without neglecting human intervention as a means of averting the danger, the gravity of which he was well aware, always showed himself to be secure and unperturbed. He wrote:

*Everything passes; each day has its share of good and evil. Let us pray more and more so that God will avert the hurricane that now threatens the barque of Peter. Do not fear, you will have trouble, annoyance, disturbance, but THEY WILL NOT EXPEL YOU.*¹⁶

He exhorted everyone to trust in the protection of the Blessed Virgin. His confidence surprised all. They saw him always calm, master of himself, trusting in the divine assistance promised to him ever since he was a child. This security came from his admirable faith in Divine Providence, in the protection of Mary Help of Christians, and in an enlightening dream.

The hurricane was averted. The Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians remained peacefully in their houses of France to continue their task of salvation. Give me souls; take away the rest!

Yes, Don Bosco was rescued by Mary, the one of whom it is written, "...formidable as an army in battle array".

In that dream Our Lady looked beautiful in majesty and glory. Her immense blue mantle spread itself high over the Salesian houses of France so as to accommodate them all, and she gazed at them with a smile. All around there was a roar of fearful stormy winds, thunder, hail, lightning. In that frightening upheaval there appeared horrid forms of monsters. Since the Salesian houses were gathered under the protective mantle, the fiery darts aimed at them were in vain. They shattered against that mantle and Mary Help of Christians, in a sea of light, her face radiant with a heavenly smile, repeated several times the very comforting words, *Ego diligentes me diligo* [I love those who love me].¹⁷

Faithful Entrustment

Later on, the holy founder recounted this dream to his Salesians who questioned him about his words, "...they will not

¹⁶ E. Ceria, *Memorie biografiche del Beato Giovanni Bosco*. Vol. XV. S. E. I. Torino.

¹⁷ Ibid.

expel you”, and other things he had said, amazed at the confidence which he demonstrated in those difficult times when everything seemed lost. And Sr. Caterina? It is recorded by a Sister of the St. Cyr community:

She had no fear for the future, even though that was the time in which many Religious were being expelled from France and the Salesians were also threatened. She was always calm, while keeping secular clothes ready in case we had to lay aside our religious habit and receive some unwelcome visitors. [...] She did not alarm us, but rather urged us to trust in God and to pray. Once I remember seeing her a little sad. It was May 24, the feast of Mary Help of Christians. She called me and said, ‘Come with me. Let us go to the meadow. I need a moment of peace. Today is the feast of Mary Help of Christians, let us stay close to her in thought. Let us go to Turin, where our Heavenly Mother is so greatly honoured. She also sees us who are here far away, who would like to celebrate her, but we have nothing. Our hearts feel the need to love her and make her loved. But we are here as in a desert. Our only comfort is prayer’.

But the cloud of sadness passed and returning to our little community, she began to sing the praises of Our Lady with her beautiful voice, and thus the day ended in holy joy.¹⁸

There is a charming simplicity in these lines written by a Sister, who was more than eighty years old. More than sixty years had passed since that day, and the ‘cloud of sadness’ as she graciously termed the deep nostalgic feeling of Sr. Caterina, was still etched in her memory. She pictured a generous person who did not regret leaving family, homeland, and comfort. Sr. Caterina did not fear the threat of trials, trusted in Divine help, and suffered only from not being able to worthily honour Our Lady, and regretted not being able to enjoy the sweetness of seeing her celebrated in her great Basilica in Turin. Perhaps, she even missed the May 24 celebrations of her childhood.

Possibly, this memory of this ‘cloud of sadness’ has survived in history because it reveals the tender yet strong heart of

¹⁸ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

Sr. Caterina. She showed her strength by quickly letting go of this nostalgic feeling. “With her beautiful voice she began to sing the praises of Our Lady, and thus she ends the day with holy joy.”

Sr. Caterina’s complete confidence in the divine assistance, her calm in troubled times of religious persecution, recall the words of Don Bosco, “Everything passes: each day has its share of good and its share of bad, let us pray very much to God”. It was written of him in those sad days, “His most striking characteristic, which impresses everyone who approaches him, is a calmness that never fails and which demonstrates his self-control”.¹⁹

She had been at his school and that of his great first disciple, Mother Mazzeo. As mother general in 1903, Sr. Caterina would have seen the FMA in France threatened again as had happened when she was in St. Cyr. Having become expert also in this test, she was able to understand, sympathise, encourage. She would once again demonstrate her wisdom and kind heart. Not a moment’s hesitation, not an ‘if’ or a ‘but’; no doubt as to whether to stay or leave. No, confident of the help of Divine Providence and the protection of Mary Help of Christians, she would share her strength, the humility of her heart, and her fervent faith with the discouraged Sisters who wrote to her. She would call some of them to Nizza to strengthen them and send them back stronger and more serene. To all she will say, “It’s not the habit that makes the religious, but rather the exercise of virtue and exact observance. Seek to do God's holy will always and in everything”.²⁰

What words of consolation she addressed to the dubious and the discouraged who in the thick of that hurricane were afraid of the loss of their vocation, the danger that they would have to return to the world!

In Italy, as mother general, Sr. Caterina lived through the full force of Freemasonry, when it invaded every field. The

¹⁹ E. Ceria, Op.cit.

²⁰ “Notes biographiques de notre très regrettée Mère General, Soeur Catherine Daghero. - Chacune des Soeurs de l'Inspection S. Coeur”, FMA General Archives.

government was at the mercy of the sect and promulgated laws aimed, overtly or subtly, to crush religious congregations and prevent their work, especially those involved in teaching and the education of young people. They created scandals and spread slander in order to suppress them. Day after day and in every event she demonstrated the gifts of her spirit so filled with the qualities of faith and charity, armed with spiritual strength, and tested in the fight against evil pitfalls. After the example of the saintly founder and of his first successor, Fr. Rua, who were her teachers, although suffering, she would remain wonderfully serene, and repeat with her characteristic smile, “The Madonna covers us with her mantle. Let us not be afraid, only let us be good and pray”.

Shivers in the Parlour

However, all of this was in the far distant future. It would be better to return to Sr. Caterina, animator of the house of St. Cyr, and her on-going formation.

The Salesian Rector, Fr. Ghivarello, was advised to guide her in her leadership role:

She is very young, and is at the initial stages of her religious life and role of responsibility. It is necessary, therefore, to watch over, correct, and remind her; do not allow any defect in her to pass, even in what seems small and insignificant. On the other hand, she is humble and docile and receives corrections, suggestions, and advice well.

These things had been told to Fr. Ghivarello more or less in the same words by the Director General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, the Salesian provincial of the houses of France, Fr. Francesco Cerruti.

The memoirs record that the rector, who was by nature one who would not let anything go unnoticed and would not stop even at the most minute detail, responded perfectly to the instructions received.

The records are full of precious details and anecdotes on this subject, and Mother Caterina repeatedly confirmed them with her reminiscences, laughing at herself, at what she called her ‘shivers’

of that time. She kept to herself only the secret victories over her ego, her self-love, over her sensitivity and her heart.

One day, for example, she had pinned her veil back so as to move more freely while cleaning and tidying, since she was the first also to take the broom in hand. Who knows where he was when he noticed her? Perhaps passing in front of the house, the rector saw her and immediately disapproved of it quietly. He called her to the parlour and began:

- Do you think, Sr. Caterina, it is appropriate for a Sister, even more so for a superior, to camouflage herself in this way?
- It's true, thank you, Father rector.

Another day, she had pinned up the hem of her skirt over her petticoat, to be able to move quickly. This time, too, she was seen by the rector who called her to the parlour and repeated to her:

- But it is not becoming, I'm surprised.
- It is true, Father Rector. I will not do it again. Thank you!

Walking along with a Sister where some labourers were working on repairing a water pipe, she did not stop, but only turned to look at that work, which of course, was of interest to her because it was a repair to the house. However, from afar the rector had noticed it and severely judged that fleeting glance of hers. He called her to the parlour and said:

- Does this curiosity look like religious mortification, Sr. Caterina?
- Thank you, Father Rector! Yes! It is true, I was not mortified.

On another occasion along with a Sister, to shorten her journey she jumped over a small ditch on the road. She did not think that she would be seen by anyone and she was so young and lively! After all, she had not yet reached twenty-four years of age! But the rector saw her from afar, and called her to the parlour,

"Sr. Caterina, is your behaviour that of a Sister, and a superior?"
The answer was always the same, "Thank you, Father Rector!"

Yet again, at another time, with her harmonious voice she sang the praises of Our Lady. The Sisters and the orphans listened, and then followed her in a sweet chorus. Alas, their voices reached the ears of the men who were working a short distance from the house. This delighted and moved them so much that they stopped to listen. The Rector saw it, disapproved, and forbade Sr. Caterina even the simple joy of singing to the Blessed Virgin in the short break at 10am allowed by the Constitutions of the time.

It was always like this. Absolutely nothing passed without being observed, analysed, and corrected. And the corrections were neither short nor sweet.

A Sister of the time wrote the following, confirmed by others who heard it from Sr. Caterina herself:

Fr. Ghivarello felt duty bound to treat our Mother like this, and we suffered. However, she seemed serene, and said, 'When the rector calls me to the parlour, I immediately make a thorough examination of conscience and always conclude, of course, I must have done something wrong'.

She received several letters from Turin written by Sisters, benefactors, oratorians, and pupils. However, the rector said to her, "Do not answer them, mortify yourself. Save time and money". "Yes, thank you, Father Rector." Her heart suffered, but her spirit was strengthened to face greater difficulties.

At an early age she had been already called to carry out roles of responsibility and authority. She possessed valuable resources that needed to be channelled towards what is essential.

The youthful age is beautiful with its daring, enthusiasm, and confidence but it falters when humility is lacking. There would not seem to be a better way to define the lifestyle and the struggle to which this young woman was called at an exceptionally early age to become sufficiently prepared for her arduous task of leading others.

Young people tend to be courageous, full of life and energy, naturally self-reliant, all of which can be good. To them

everything can seem easy, even the pain they have not experienced, the struggles they have not yet faced, the privations they have not yet endured. They can be astonished at the failures caused by human frailty that does not spare even the most experienced. Such presumption may result in not recognising one's own limitations, leading to mistakes that are difficult to remedy and which cause one to suffer, and even more so, to make others suffer.

Will She Ever Come Back?

One needs to be prepared, but how? By giving the person a little experience before entrusting her with a role of responsibility or authority, as well as accompanying her with the experience one has gained over the years.

How is this accomplished? With humility! "It is good for me that I was humbled."²¹ Humiliations lead to humility, "but wisdom is with the humble".²²

Don Bosco quickly threw his young people into the fray. He assigned to them difficult tasks and leadership roles. He counted on the strength of their youth, it is true, but above all on that obedience and self-forgetfulness toward which he had trained them from childhood.

Before becoming founder of a marvellous congregation in the Church and leading innumerable people to God, he had to travel along the way of humiliations and trials from his earliest years. It was the same for Mother Mazzarello.

Therefore, Sr. Caterina was also led along the paths of humility. It had to be done quickly. In the designs of God, the statue needed to be well chiselled before being placed on a pedestal. Over the years, by means of events and sufferings, God would form in her a reflection of himself. She corresponded constantly allowing God's grace to emerge.

Meanwhile, weeks and months had passed. August gilded the vineyards, woods, and lawns surrounding the house of St. Cyr.

²¹ Ps. 119:71.

²² Prov. 11:2.

The sun was shining radiantly on the sea that rippled in the distance below the house from which one could enjoy the incomparable beauty. Sr. Caterina received the order to leave for the motherhouse in Nizza Monferrato, where the annual spiritual retreat was held.

The Tertiaries and the orphans who during those few but intense months had become so very affectionate, and the two Sisters who had come with her were afraid of not seeing her return.

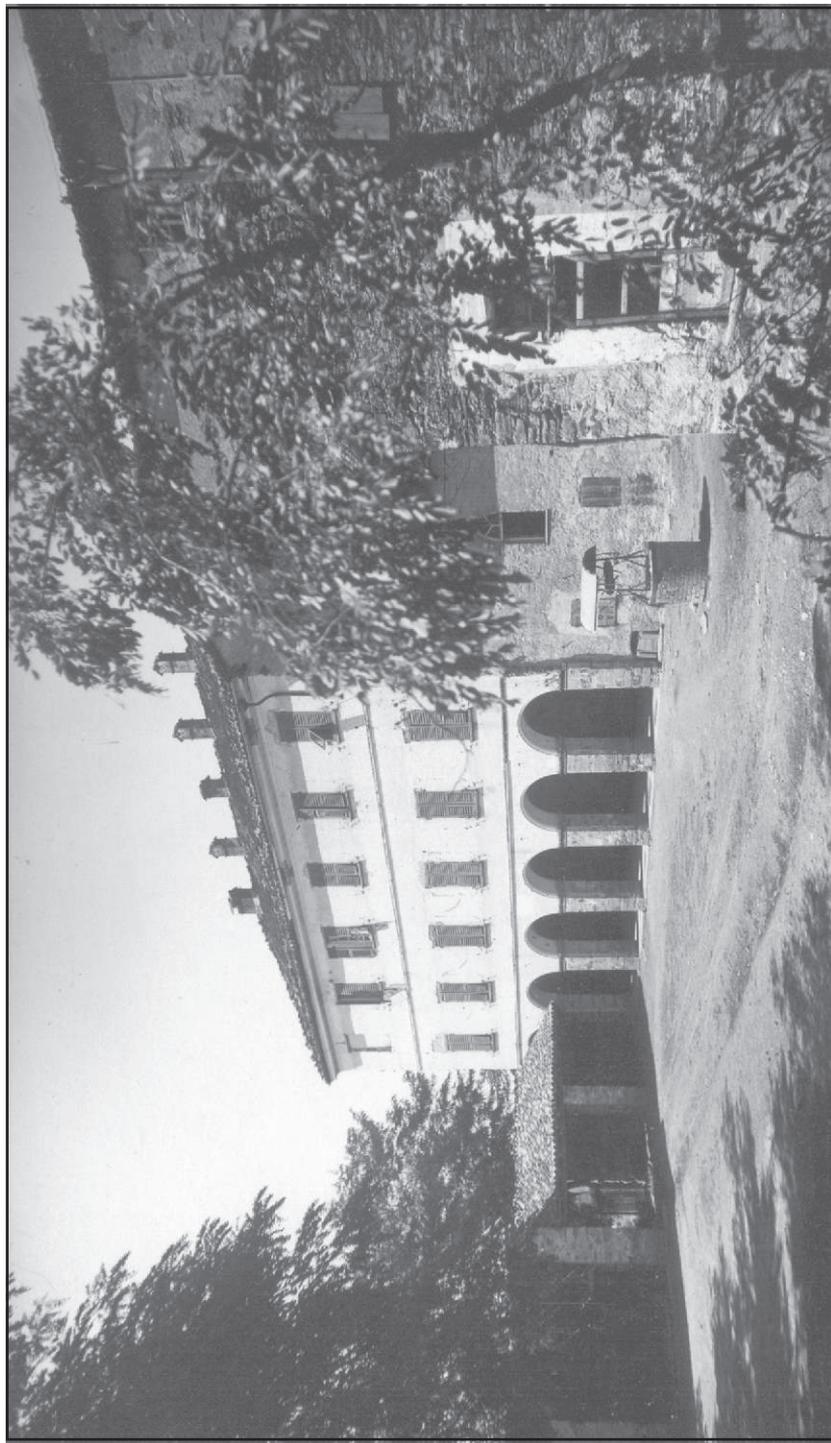
Would she ever come back? She did not think of a change of house or of work. She just wanted to obey always, therefore, she did so serenely.



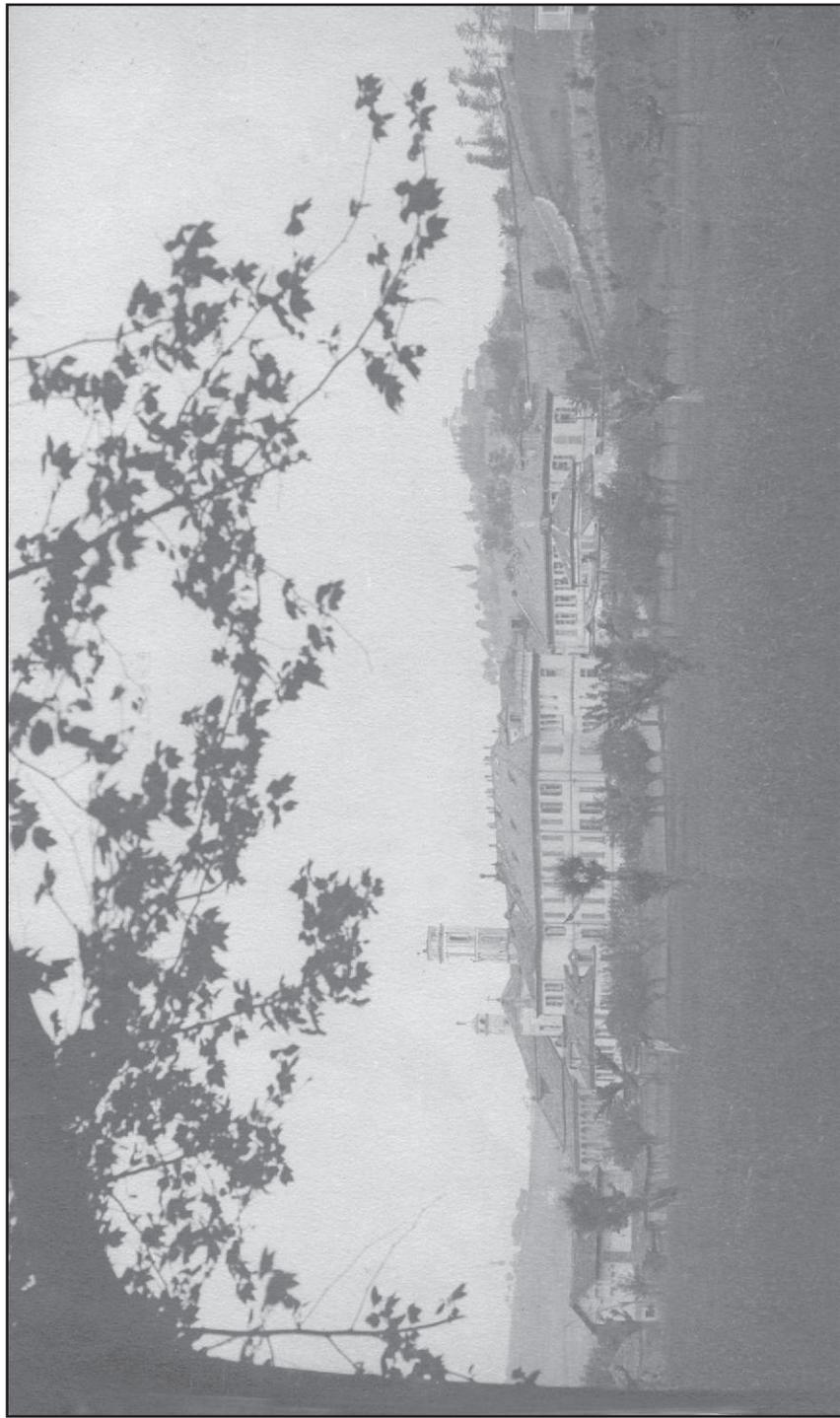
The house where she was born in Cumiana



The chapel of the Madonna near her home



The house of Mornese



Nizza, early 1900s



The motherhouse at Nizza Monferrato



The old section of the motherhouse at Nizza Monferrato (the former Capuchin Convent)



Shrine of Mary Help of Christians of the motherhouse at Nizza Monferrato as it was at the time of Mother Caterina



The Chapel of the Sacred Heart for the oratorians at the motherhouse

Chapter V

In the Footsteps of Maria Domenica

Back to the Beloved Nest

As soon as Sr. Caterina arrived in the motherhouse at Nizza Monferrato she met Mother Mazzarello. She welcomed that Sister with celebration, almost as she had received the timid, young girl as a postulant at Mornese. She looked into her eyes and saw them smiling at her return to the beloved nest. She enquired about the house of St. Cyr, the Sisters, the Tertiaries, the orphans, and said a few meaningful words. She said them with that smile which she used when asking the Sisters for cheerful obedience in the face of difficult detachments.

Did Sr. Caterina understand that she would not be returning to St. Cyr after the spiritual retreat? Had mother general already determined a change of house and work for her?

Not even in her imagination did she question the future. She simply smiled and prepared herself to accept the will of God expressed through the person in authority. She was far from the idea that one day, with a new title and a new task of greater responsibility, she would revisit that house where she had a brief but intense practical training in leadership, self-forgetfulness and prudence.

First General Chapter

The chronicle of the motherhouse of August, 1880 marked the date for the annual spiritual retreat attended by the Sisters and particularly by Maria Mazzarello. In spirit they felt the joy of the sacrifice that God grants to persons consecrated to him. They felt reaffirmed and strengthened in their heroic will to strive for holiness. "Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be

ashamed.” “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good”.¹ Thus sings the psalmist. The same hymn of joyful strength arose from the hearts of those first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians,

This retreat prepared them for an event of which they were well aware, that is, the First General Chapter and the election of the general council. They were also unknowingly preparing for the departure to heaven of the one who had brought them together, guarded, loved, and formed them for a life of joyful dedication to God and others, the death of their co-founder and Mother. Had they been aware of it, they would have suffered intensely. The following is faithfully reported by the first biographer of Mother Mazzarello:

After the spiritual retreat, the superiors of the general council and the superiors of the individual houses gathered in the chapel for the election of the superior general and the major superiors. Presiding over the meeting, on behalf of Don Bosco was Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, Director General, assisted by the Director of the house, Fr. Giovanni Lemoyne. After having recited the prayers and carried out the usual formalities, the major superiors as well as the local superiors, cast their vote by secret ballot, and proceeded to unanimously elect Mother Maria Mazzarello as Superior General.

Also elected were: Sr. Caterina Daghero, Vicar, Sr. Giovanna Ferrettino, Bursar, Sr. Emilia Mosca, First Assistant, and Sr. Enrichetta Sorbone, Second Assistant.

Don Bosco was immediately informed and asked to approve the election. He gave his approval in writing on September 1:

I confirm the election of the mother superior and of the Sisters who make up the superior chapter of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. I pray to God that he may infuse in all the spirit of charity and fervour, so that this humble Congregation will grow in number, and spread more and more to

¹ Ps. 34:5,8.

remote countries. May the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians save themselves by gaining many souls for God. May they one day, along with the souls saved by them, find themselves all together in the kingdom of heaven to praise and bless God forever.²

Sr. Caterina was, therefore, elected as the vicar general of the Institute and placed at the side of Co-founder, Mother Mazzarello.

Precious Relic of Mornese

Up to that day the vicar had been Sr. Petronilla Mazzarello, not a relative, but a dear friend, indeed a soul-sister of Maria Mazzarello since the early years, her generous and faithful collaborator from the beginnings of the oratory and sewing classes at Mornese. She had been the first to understand the fervent apostolic heart of Maria Mazzarello, and to embrace her ideals, sacrifices, and sufferings. The history written by Maccono places the figure of Mother Petronilla Mazzarello in her modest and pure light. Many Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who knew her in later years, recalled her with tenderness and admiration. No one more than she, or even like her, mirrored the simplicity, self-sacrifice, love for young people, or as she expressed it, "...love for the girls" for whom everything, everything, must be given, so that they do not commit sin.

A more complete account of the life of Mother Petronilla Mazzarello, who was rightly called, "the precious relic of Mornese", can be found in *Petronilla Mazzarello: Faithful Friend of Main*. At eighty-six years of age she went to her reward after having said more than once, with charming simplicity, "Mother Mazzarello would not be happy that people speak so much about her. Oh, if only she had known, if only [...] Mother Mazzarello wanted to live a hidden life!" This dear friend of Maria Domenica did not think that with such words she was giving the most eloquent eulogy for her companion.

² The minutes of the election found in the FMA General Archives.

It must be recognised how great a sacrifice it was for Mother Mazzarello to no longer have Mother Petronilla by her side as vicar. Her strong, tender heart suffered because she felt that something was changing around her, had to change. She loved and admired the virtuous Sr. Caterina, and had long accompanied her with a discerning eye. However, she could not help feeling the difference in age, experience, spirit, and above all, how could she suddenly end the reassuring feeling of being accompanied and supported by her friend, Petronilla, who had always shared everything in life with her, without feeling it deeply?

Some of the expressions spoken by Mother Mazzarello, understood by only a few, reveal her generous sacrifice. It was generous because she wanted it and offered it to God for the good of the new-born congregation. Maccono wrote that in her deep humility, she repeated, "It is necessary that I leave, that another Sister should become superior general so that the Institute may be well governed. I'm too ignorant". Ah! She was not ignorant!

Gracious Separation

It was necessary therefore that even the humble collaborator of the early days should step back to prepare another to govern the Institute. Even in this generous sacrifice Maria Domenica was consistent with her programme of holiness, one that she had decisively traced out for herself and for her friend many years earlier, while still in the family. When proposing to open a small sewing school for the girls of the village, she had said to Petronilla, "From this moment on let us put the intention that each stitch will be an act of love of God".³ It is a holiness that includes everything in love, begins with love, and ends in love.

Mother Mazzarello welcomed the new young vicar as a gift from God and a grace for the Institute.

The former vicar, Petronilla, was no less generous than was her friend. The memoirs show that she was the first to joyfully greet the newly-elected with the title of vicar. To the Sisters who turned to her for this or that permission, or advice, she would say,

³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

"Go to Sr. Caterina, she is the vicar now." This was said with such a joyful and affectionate expression that it was clear that she felt no sorrow or regret.

The situation in which Sr. Caterina found herself in her new important task was delicate. It could have been thorny if Mother Mazzarello and her faithful companion had not been truly people of God. They were superior to all those petty, but tenacious passions, of pride that obscures the intelligence, hides the reality and could hinder the designs of Divine Providence. Mother Mazzarello had more than once presented her resignation as superior general demonstrating her deep and serene humility. Since she had been re-elected against her wishes with a new young vicar at her side, she understood that this was the one chosen to fulfil, in the near future, the important role that she had to accept once again in obedience. She rejoiced with her dear friend, Petronilla, and went to the extent of telling her, "Let us thank the Lord that they still keep us in the congregation, ignorant as we are!" Ah, she was not ignorant! She had the wisdom of the saints!

This was the most eloquent and effective lesson that Sr. Caterina could have received at the beginning of her religious life. How did she conduct herself during her term as vicar general? Those who knew her said she tried to remain hidden and unassuming. She did not abuse the high authority conferred on her. She did not place herself at the side of mother general as her *alter ego*. It has been said that humility is truth, perhaps, it could also be defined as clarity, insight, a right sense of proportion, and discretion. Sr. Caterina seemed to possess these qualities, because she continued as mother general, in that programme of simple, humble, serene life.

She, too, had the title of Mother, Mother Vicar.

Sr. Caterina of Mornese, of Turin, of St. Cyr, now would become Mother Caterina, a direct assistant of the co-founder. In the eyes of the Sisters she was not seen as being any more than an elder sister, always ready to help, to comfort, and to be one with them.

Among the new general councillors Mother Emilia Mosca, Secretary of the chapter and of Mother Mazzarello, stood out

because of her intelligence, learning, and virtue. Mother Caterina was especially respectful and affectionate toward her, because she had prepared her to obtain the diploma of elementary teacher. From her, though she did not yet know it, she would be the recipient of many years of generous and valid, though hidden, help. With the other councillors, she was a sisterly, intelligent, and serene collaborator.

The chronicle of 1880 of the motherhouse concluded by naming new houses founded in Piedmont, Venice, and Sicily, and the invitation from Argentina to open free schools for poor children, a festive oratory, and a residential school at Rio de la Plata just a short distance from Buenos Aires.

Mother Mazzarello rejoiced in the rapid development of the Institute, and her young vicar seconded the movements of her apostolic heart and consoled the Sisters who were called to make the painful detachment from the beloved motherhouse.

The chronicle of 1881 began with a note of joyful sacrifice, the departure of the new missionaries on January 18 for the foundation of the house at Rio della Plata. They went to Turin accompanied by Mother Mazzarello for the touching farewell function in the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. They would embark at Marseilles on February 6, and receive the blessing of the holy founder, and the embrace of Mother Mazzarello with her last words, “Don Bosco obtains all his requests from the Madonna. He accompanies you with his prayers; and is with you in spirit and with his paternal affection. Courage! Go and be sure that you will have a happy journey”.⁴

It was really the final goodbye, the last greeting, the last encouragement. She would never again see her beloved, generous Sisters.

Death of Mother Mazzarello

The house chronicle continued noting the anxiety of the Sisters of the motherhouse because of the long illness of Mother Mazzarello at St. Cyr, where Don Bosco had wanted her to go for

⁴ F. Maccono, *Op.cit.*

treatment since she was already ill when she accompanied the missionaries to Marseilles. It recorded the joy of a letter of March 25, which announced her recovery and return. It also noted the great celebration of March 28, when, at last, she returned to the house that would witness her death. It was the beloved house to which she wanted to return in order to die among her dear Daughters of Nizza Monferrato.⁵

But the Sisters did not know this, they only rejoiced and blessed the Lord because she had come back to be among them. On the morning of the 30th, in the festively adorned church, a solemn Mass of thanksgiving was celebrated. During the afternoon the auditorium echoed with music, songs, and festive recitations. Mother Mazzarello listened intently and was moved. Sitting by her side was the Vicar, Mother Caterina Daghero.

Then the chronicle marked the grave and tragic event of the death of Mother Maria Domenica Mazzarello on May 14, 1881.

Students Present at the Election

Mother Caterina, by virtue of her role as vicar, was called to act in her place until the election of the new mother general could be carried out.

She did not lose heart in that great suffering that struck the new Institute. She was a tender and watchful Sister, ready to console, comfort, encourage. She kept alive in her heart and in the hearts of all the final request, “Love one another, love one another”!

The letter written by the director general in the name of the holy founder was communicated to all near and far. It documents the goodness, support, and help of the saint toward the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It was the first letter which Don Bosco had Fr. Cagliero write in his name to the one who was to continue and develop the work entrusted by him to the first Mother and co-founder.

⁵ Ibid.

Reverend Sister [Caterina] and Daughters in Jesus Christ,

The most reverend Don Bosco, our and your dearest superior and father, takes an active part in your rightful suffering at the painful loss of your very reverend mother superior.

He recommends to God the beautiful soul of the deceased, and at the same time does not forget her orphaned Daughters.

He wants you all to be resigned to the holy will of God, and exhorts you to be united in the beautiful bond of charity together with the perfect observance of the Holy Rule of your Institute. Under the present circumstances it is not possible to follow what is prescribed in Art. 4 of your Constitutions regarding the election of the mother general. Therefore, it has been postponed until next August, on the occasion of the holy spiritual retreat.

He urges you all to trust in Divine Providence and in the maternal protection of Mary Help of Christians; and desires that every day in all the houses of the Institute, you recite an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory be to the Holy Spirit, so that he may grant you a Mother like the previous one and guide you all to heaven!

Recommend me to God in your fervent prayers. I am in J. C.

*Your Director and Father,
Fr. Giovanni Cagliero⁶*

The election was scheduled for August 12.

The general councillors and all the animators of the houses of Italy and France convened for the general chapter. Don Bosco presided over it in his capacity as the rector major, assisted by Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, Director General, and Fr. Giovanni Lemoyne, Local Rector. Twenty-one FMA voted. A singular event took place, which was unique to the history of the Institute. Like other events of those early days, it demonstrated the spirit of simplicity and familiarity that reigned, the oneness of sentiments,

⁶ Reported in E. Ceria, Op.cit.

ideas, and spiritual interests that allowed the boarders also to take part as spectators.

After the solemn invocation to the Holy Spirit and the words of Don Bosco, with trepidation in their hearts they cast their secret vote. The scrutineers were Sr. Adele David, animator of the house of Vallecrosia, and Sr. Rosalia Pestarino⁷ animator of the house of Chieri.

Sr. Caterina was elected. The rule required the candidate to be thirty-five years of age, but she was only twenty-five! The founder, however, granted the dispensation. A provincial who was then a student wrote:

When, after the voting was over, Don Bosco proclaimed her as the superior general, she covered her face with her hands and bowed her head as if in a simple and solemn act of faith, humility, and obedience. Those attitudes, that action, greatly edified me. I always remembered and I still remember it today as if it happened yesterday.⁸

From that moment on, Sr. Caterina really started to climb her Calvary because the general leadership of an institute does not exclude but rather presupposes, offers, and implies suffering for those who govern.

Amaretti and Confetti

Records state, "During the preparations for the elections, Mother Caterina was speaking to Don Bosco. He said to her:

- 'I've already prepared a beautiful box of *amaretti* [bitter confectionary] for the poor soul who will have to succeed Mother Mazzarello, because..., poor woman'!

And Mother Caterina, with a smile, instinctively reiterated the words of Don Bosco murmuring:

- 'Poor unfortunate creature'!⁹

⁷ Niece of Fr. Domenico Pestarino, (Cf. F. Maccono).

⁸ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁹ FMA General Archives.

At that moment Don Bosco, who knew the way things were from long experience, was speaking to the one whom he believed to be destined by God for that great and heavy task. With humour and gentleness, he wanted to impress on her that such a high and important task did not exclude, but rather carried with it as a consequence suffering and self-giving.

He was not satisfied with saying the words; he also wrote them down. He had two boxes given to the general councillors, one with *amaretti* and the other with *confetti* [sugared almonds], along with a note, witty in style but serious in meaning. They were to give the note and the boxes to the new superior general after her election. This note is recorded by Fr. Ceria and is quoted here because it also reveals the spirit of Don Bosco:

To the future Mother General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

Reverend Mother Superior General,

Here are some confetti to be distributed to your Daughters. Keep for yourself the sweetness to be practised always and with everyone, but always be ready to receive the amaretti, or rather the bitterness when it pleases God to send it to you.

God bless you and give you the courage to sanctify yourself and the community that is entrusted to you.

Pray for me who am in Jesus Christ, your most humble servant,

*Fr. Giovanni Bosco
Nizza Monferrato,*

August 12, 1881

First of Forty-Three Years

After the election, the two boxes and the note were quickly delivered to the newly-elected Mother Caterina who, profoundly moved, smiled, and understood.

It is worth reporting another extract from the memoirs because it recounts significant details of that event that marked the beginning of a new and long period in the history of the Institute of

the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the forty-three years of Mother Caterina's leadership.

These details, which were faithfully collected and handed down with great simplicity give an admirable picture of her tenderness, strength, and teaching:

When the meeting was over, the Sisters went into the courtyard and gathered around Don Bosco. Nearby was also Countess Gatti.¹⁰ The saint said, 'How many you are already! The house is big, but will be even bigger. Take heart! You have lost a humble Mother, but you already have another very humble one. You had a saint and now you already have another who will be no less holy. Where is your superior? Go and look for her and ask her to join us.'¹¹

They searched for her and found her huddled in the attic in tears.

That evening in the school hall they celebrated the election of the mother general and the presence of Don Bosco. The good father wanted Mother Caterina to take her place between him and Countess Gatti. At the end of the celebration he said, 'I see that there are two trays, one of *amaretti* and other of *confetti* (the *amaretti* were as tiny as beans). Good, distribute them Mother Caterina, first a spoonful of *amaretti* for each Sister, then another of *confetti*'.

When the distribution was over, Don Bosco turned to Mother Caterina and said, 'You should always do this. To each and all a few *amaretti* which are good for soul and body, and then a few *confetti*. Keep those for the end'.¹²

It was a memorable lesson given with that good-natured, jovial tone, which the holy educator used to clothe his wisdom! Mother Caterina never seemed to have forgotten it, because she tried to put it into practice throughout her life.

The celebration of that August 12, 1881 was the first in that room since the feast of March 30 that celebrated the return and the

¹⁰ Benefactor of the Salesian Society.

¹¹ E. Ceria, *Vita di S. G. Bosco*.

¹² Ibid.

hoped for healing of Mother Mazzarello! Certainly, in the hearts of those Sisters it must have revived those sentiments, memories, and tears. Three months earlier on May 14 the great mourning for her death had taken place. Today, August 12, there was a great celebration for the one who was succeeding her and beginning a new page for herself and for them. But faith points to heaven and experience educates for life. Divine Providence alternated the events, joys, and sorrows with an eternal plan of wisdom, mercy, and salvation.

The presence and the words of Don Bosco and the knowledge that Mother Mazzarello had set her gaze, trust, and confidence on Mother Caterina Daghero, greatly contributed to the serenity and strength of the newly elected, and gave a gentle confidence to the Sisters who now had to look to her as their spiritual Mother.

Dream of the Chestnuts

During that same year, Don Bosco had a dream about the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He narrated it to Fr. Giovanni Lemoyne, then spiritual director in the house of Nizza Monferrato and Fr. Lemoyne, in turn, told it to Mother Caterina so that she could use it as a norm for the study and discernment of religious vocations, whether they were called or not.

In the dream Don Bosco found himself in a dense chestnut grove. How many fine, big chestnuts were scattered here and there on the ground! Had the wind scattered them? Or had a hand already shaken them off the branches? He was absorbed in gathering them when a woman who was also involved in that pleasant work of picking the chestnuts appeared. A short dialogue between him and the woman followed:

- What right do you have to come and gather chestnuts on my land?
- What do you mean? Don't I have this right?
- I believe I am the owner!
- Well, I am also collecting the chestnuts for you.

The woman spoke in such a resolute voice that Don Bosco thought it best not to continue to protest and the work proceeded diligently in silence. Soon both of them had filled their baskets.

The voice of the stranger confidently posed another question, “Do you know what these chestnuts symbolise”?

The conversation was interrupted and drowned out by a sudden uproar of voices. It sounded like a rough crowd of shouting drunkards. It was truly a malicious crowd advancing toward the chestnut grove and all of them viciously trampling underfoot the fine chestnuts that remained on the grass.

Don Bosco was awakened by the uproar. He soon dozed off again and the dream continued.

He seemed to be sitting on a grassy bank when he saw the woman again. In the distance there were the echoes of the wild shouts of the men of the first dream.

Don Bosco still saw the chestnuts, they looked good and certainly, they would be delicious, but instead, they were riddled with little holes where voracious worms had nestled. “What are we to do with these chestnuts?”

“You must throw them away”, the woman replied, “Lest they spoil the good ones”. Then she left aside the figurative, symbolic language and spoke plainly.

She explained, “It is necessary to send away the young women who are not suitable, who do not have the spirit of the Institute because the worm of pride or some other vice is consuming them. Send them away especially if they are postulants”. Don Bosco listened and was still looking at her. The woman spoke again:

- Do you think that some of those who look so good on the outside might not be bad on the inside?
- But how am I to discover them?
- Yes, it is difficult. There are those who know how to pretend, pretend, pretend...
- And, how then can I find them out?
- There is a sure means. Put them to the test of the observance of the Rule and religious obedience.

Don Bosco woke up. But on the following nights the dream returned, and the teachings of the woman became ever clearer and more incisive. She said:

Look, if you press the spoiled ones with your fingers, they will spurt out the bad disposition they have inside. Throw them away! The empty ones will rise to the surface: they are the vain people, they cannot stay at the bottom with the others. They want to somehow rise to the surface. Scoop them up with the skimmer, and throw them away! Even the good ones are difficult to prepare properly. Boil them, remove the husk, and then peel them. They will appear white, but you'll see that some are double, open them, and in the middle you will find another skin. The bitterness is there.¹³

The dream received a wide-ranging and accurate commentary from the faithful collector and narrator of the dreams of Don Bosco¹⁴ and has been handed down to later generations of Sisters as a tradition not to be lost. Mother Caterina personally gave great importance to its lessons for herself and others. Sometimes she used to say with a sigh, "Ah, the dream of the chestnuts"!

The Sisters would say jokingly, "Mother, you certainly know how to study them, boil them well, throw away the skin, and uncover the bitterness"!

She would smile and with some of those direct and incisive sayings of hers, made them understand that, yes, she knew them well and knew how to choose.

Chestnut Festival

Every year on the evening of November 25, feast of St. Catherine of Alexandria, the Sisters of the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato would celebrate what they called the *Little Feast of St. Catherine*. That was the name they gave to the happy,

¹³ Reported in E. Ceria, *Memorie*, Op.cit.

¹⁴ Fr. G. B. Lemoyne sdb.

intimate family celebration with their beloved Mother Caterina in which they could share all the most beautiful expressions of filial affection. The Sisters and animators of the other houses and other provinces would celebrate the grand feast, what might be called Mother Caterina's official feast, that of St. Catherine of Siena, celebrated on April 30. November 25, instead, was only for the Sisters of that beloved house. They called it the chestnut festival because Mother Caterina would distribute the chestnuts of the new season, and also eat some with them and taste the new wine. It was really a family, country-like, Salesian celebration. On that occasion, they would remember the mysterious dream of Don Bosco. Mother Caterina, after listening with maternal complacency to their greetings and cheerful songs, would draw from it messages of fervour, exhortation, and encouragement.

Among the memoirs that speak of the little feast of St. Catherine, there is a poem, *The Dream of Chestnuts*, composed and read by a Sister on that memorable evening of November 25, 1911. It is presented at the end of this chapter because it also documents the cherished tradition and at the same time the tender filial affection of the Sisters for Mother Caterina.

The house chronicle of the day recalls, "This evening is the traditional little feast of the chestnuts, during which our Mother gave us the consolation of spending a very pleasant hour with us".¹⁵

From August 1881, Mother Caterina spent many delightful hours with the Sisters in response to the inclination of her heart: to console, to console, to console and in fidelity to the programme that she had drawn up from the very beginning of her religious life: act, suffer, be silent.

It has already been stated but it bears repeating that from August 12, 1881, she had begun her ascent of Calvary composed of activities, silence and sacrifice.

¹⁵ Chronicle of the motherhouse at Nizza, FMA General Archives.

THE DREAM OF THE CHESTNUTS

Don Bosco had a dream: he saw the chestnuts
Fragrant, ripe and much sought after
He gathered them, examined them and through
the countryside
Went wandering pensively!

Such ripe, lovely, tasty chestnuts,
Fruit of the earth and gift from the Lord
So good, so beautiful...but by an evil power
Some of them were rotten within!

But how! They seem so lovely and delicious!
What a sad deception! Evil lurks everywhere,
The prudent mistrusts appearances
And terms it a deceptive beauty!

He saw! In his dream, Don Bosco saw!
He threw the rotten fruit to the ground,
Then, in a mysterious flight, he rose
To profound thought!

He looked into the future!
And gave to his children a supreme teaching
He inspired a salutary fear
And a holy desire in their hearts!

Mother, you understand!
Don Bosco's dream is always in your heart,
(oh, what a great heart you have!)
You are anxious about us, Mother!
And the Lord hears your prayer!

We shall not be like that rotten fruit
Which our Father saw and rejected with disdain
Today we pledge to you dear Mother
Oh, yes, a pledge of eternal faith!

While the beautiful, ripe chestnuts
Are cooked in the steam and the new wine rises up
We promise you dear Mother, that
Our destiny is to follow you forever!

The Lord has marked a holy destiny!
To follow you in humility,
In the love of God, in obedience
In pain as much as in joy!

The hour of anguish will come, perhaps
To test the strong, the humble and the faithful.
Mother, we look up to you, we look to the heavens,
With you! We will be there with you!

And you will not feel the weight of the cross.
Gently we'll lighten it with mighty love
Which inspires our hearts, and with the most
beautiful flowers
We'll weave a garland for you!

And thinking again of Don Bosco's dream
You will smile, no longer with trepidation!
Because by now your maternal hope
Will have been fulfilled!

O, Mother! We are so happy to tell you
Between the chestnuts and the bright red wine
We will raise a toast of promise
With a jubilant cry that rises to heaven!

Even for those Sisters who are far away
For those immensely loved Daughters,
Oh, yes, even for those* who though not here
Remain in your heart and in ours!

Sr. Giuseppina Mainetti FMA

* The Sisters of the other houses and provinces and especially the missionaries.

Chapter VI

Fidelity to the Church and to Don Bosco

Gift of Leadership

At twenty-five years of age a religious needs to be spared any surprises, safe under the benign wings of a sure director, of an authority who indicates the way, and supports her against obstacles. It is an age in which the mind and heart of a woman needs balance to direct herself, and even more so if she is called to direct others.

It is true that Mother Caterina was very young, but in Sacred Scripture it is said of the chosen young person, “I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it to observe your righteous ordinances.”¹

In *The Story of a Soul* one reads the humble, true confession of the young saint:

Don't you think it imprudent, dear Mother, to tell me that the master will one day enlighten my soul giving it the experience of years. I would simply say, ‘The Mighty one has done great things for me’² and the greatest is to show me my nothingness and my helplessness for any good.³

It would seem that Mother Caterina possessed this faith and these feelings since she had the confirmation of her election from Don Bosco and his encouragement to accept it in the name of God.

The *Cronistoria* of the Institute records these brief but decisive words, “The Sisters had long recognised Sr. Caterina

¹ Ps. 119, 100,105-106.

² Lk. 1:49.

³ Thérèse of Lisieux. Op.cit.

Daghero's humility, prudence, charity, and the exact observance of the Holy Rule".

With these qualities and gifts, Mother Caterina began her great leadership of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; a role which she held for forty-three consecutive years.

One is amazed and almost dismayed. What other mother general remained as leader for such a long time from her first election to death? This was carried out in an atmosphere of extraordinary serenity even in the midst of storms, and in activity that was also extraordinary among many difficult events, and within a turbulent, treacherous and threatening time in history that increased her problems from within and from outside.

Mother Caterina had to continue and develop the work that Mother Maria Mazzarello had begun under the direction of St. John Bosco, the saintly founder, following the path to which she had been led by the wonderful design of Divine Providence.

Despite her youth she was called to lead the new Institute which was limited to twenty-eight houses with about two hundred members between professed Sisters and novices, but was already prepared to spread around the world, full of energy, hope, and bravery. The motto *da mihi animas coetera tolle* was the driving force.

Don Bosco had predicted a great future for the first humble Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and as Mother Mazzarello lay dying she shared words of consolation and encouragement to her dear vicar whom she could foresee as the one who would succeed her in the animation and leadership of the Institute.

A Lasting Memento from Maria Domenica

Fr. Ferdinando Maccono wrote of that solemn moment, the last spiritual communication between two people, Mother Mazzarello and Mother Caterina. It was a brief moment that had the transparency and the moving charm of truth.

Mother Daghero wept and asked:

- Mother, don't you think of us? Doesn't it matter to you that you are leaving us?

- I don't think of anything except preparing myself for eternity and presenting myself before the Lord.
- And don't you have anything to say to me?
- I tell you to have courage, and from heaven I will pray for you that you remain always cheerful.
Again the vicar wept.
- Do not cry; I am old, and I am good for nothing now, I am dying but I will go to heaven and will pray for you and will help you from there.⁴

The promise of Mother Mazzarello remained indelible in the heart and mind of Mother Caterina. The word courage surely resonated in her particularly when the weight of leadership made itself felt.

Above all, she imitated her in that profound humility which gave her an understanding of her own weakness and at the same time of her own strength, according to the saying of St. Paul, "Whenever I am weak then I am strong; so I will boast all the more gladly of weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me".⁵ She always imitated her in total, constant and courageous fidelity to the founder's teachings, directives, and spirit.

It could be said that Mother Mazzarello saw in Don Bosco the visible personification of God's will. This can equally be said of Mother Caterina who, with profound conviction and heartfelt gratitude, repeated to the Sisters, "We are nothing without Don Bosco. We owe everything to Don Bosco and the Salesians. Our Lady will help us as long as we do what Don Bosco taught us".

Mother Caterina never deviated from the opinions and directives of Don Bosco and his successors and she absolutely wanted all the Sisters to faithfully imitate her in this.

It is in this fidelity that one must search for the secret of that influence she manifested in her dealings with people, events, and difficulties from which she emerged ever more Salesian in

⁴ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

⁵ 2 Cor. 12:9-10.

mind, heart and will. It made her secure and confident in the way traced out by the founder of the two great religious families created by him in the heart of the Church for the fulfilment of the same wonderful design of Divine Providence.

It is the same tree with but one trunk from which the branches draw their life. One vigorous branch of this tree is entitled, Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and detached from that tree it would die. This was a fundamental conviction of Mother Caterina.

Bravo, those valiant ones

In the year of her election as mother general, she had the consolation of going to Rome to pay her respects to the Holy Father. This event is recorded in the *Cronistoria* of the Institute and in the writings of Cassano entitled, *Cardinal Cagliero*. There is a lovely account given by a Sister, one who went to Rome with Mother Caterina. It is delightful because it speaks of extreme poverty and candid simplicity, almost an engaging search that leads to a happy ending.

The Sisters asked, “Mother, are you going to Rome to see the Holy Father and St. Peter’s Basilica”? This was because on October 16, 1881, approximately 20,000 Italian pilgrims would visit the tomb of St. Peter in Rome and would afterward be received by His Holiness, Leo XIII.

Mother smiled and it was clear that she would be happy to go. “Go, Mother”, the Sisters insisted. She turned to one of them, “Sr. Carolina, we are poor, very poor. To go to Rome is not like going up to the vineyard”.

It was enough to glance out of the windows to see the vineyard. It would take but a few minutes to reach.

“Oh, Mother”, and Mother, with a mixture of humility and wit, explained, “We do not have your aunt’s purse. If she goes, fine, we all go”.

“Mother, first you have to go to Lu (hometown of the Sister) and my aunt and uncle will be happy to give you the money.”

In fact, Mother Caterina with the First Assistant, Mother Emilia Mosca, went to Lu Monferrato to visit the Sisters. The Sister recounted that her aunt and uncle felt honoured to give the money for Mother, Mother Emilia and herself.⁶

On October 16 Mother Caterina and the Sisters, accompanied by Fr. Giovanni Cagliero who had returned from Patagonia, entered the marvellous Basilica. On the 17th, this small group of pilgrims was received by the Holy Father in the Vatican Palace. Fr. Giovanni Cagliero recorded the following:

As I headed the group of Salesians from Turin, Rome, Magliano, Lucca and Randazzo, a person close to the Holy Father exclaimed, ‘Don Bosco! The Salesians’! Since he knew me, Cardinal Billio called aloud, ‘Fr. Cagliero’.

Others said, ‘Also the Sisters of Our Lady Help of Christians’. But I was already at the feet of His Holiness, who paused, revealing his fatherly affection by paternally saying, ‘Tell me, how is Don Bosco in Turin? Ah, he is always going here and there! He has houses everywhere. He has Sons in all of Italy, in France, in America and even in Patagonia and will Don Bosco go to Patagonia? I am very happy. Much good is being done, much’!

I was very confused and I don’t know what I replied. While in this state a monsignor pointed to me and said, ‘Here is a veteran of Patagonia’. ‘Only from the borders’, I corrected him. The turn of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians came. Monsignor Schiapparelli exclaimed, ‘The Sisters of Don Bosco’! The Pope said, ‘Good, good, how many houses do you already have’? This time I had to have courage and say something as the superior knelt at his feet. It was the first time that she had knelt before

⁶ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

this amiable and impressive person and therefore, the good religious, moved to tears, could not speak. On hearing that the Sisters were already in Uruguay, Argentina and Patagonia, the Pope exclaimed, 'Bravo, those valiant ones, are even in Patagonia. May God bless everyone. May God bless your superior and all your houses'. It was impossible to express the profound effect that the words of the benevolent authority of the Vicar of Jesus Christ produced in us. We left the audience an hour after midday with our hearts full of tender, deep and unforgettable emotions.⁷

Fr. Cagliero's account is recorded here in detail because this episode is most significant in the life of Mother Caterina and in the history of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

First of all, at the beginning of her leadership, Mother Caterina received the blessing of the Vicar of Jesus Christ and the highest praise, "Bravo, those valiant ones". This must have aroused in her the great desire to work and offer herself for the salvation of others, that is, to spread the mission throughout the world. Secondly, in that moment the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would have felt, in the words of the Holy Father, the guarantee of their union and spiritual identity in the aspirations, risk-taking, sacrifices, even martyrdom for the worldwide mission for which Don Bosco had established them.

Recalling the indescribable emotion of that day, Mother Caterina humbly said, "Oh, if Fr. Cagliero had not been there! I felt very small, like nothing! Leaving the audience I was so moved that I no longer saw anything else".

Mother Mazzarello's Only Visit to Rome

This episode of Mother Caterina's first encounter with the Holy Father mirrors that found in the life of Mother Mazzarello.

⁷ D. G. Cassano, *Il Cardinale Cagliero*, Vol. I. Torino, S. E. I.

It was the first and only time that the co-founder, accompanied by Fr. Cagliero representing Don Bosco, had the joy of kneeling at the feet of the Pope. Recollected, yet with profound elation she listened to his noble words and uttered an exclamation of devotedness, faith, and filial love, a cry that still remains in the history of her life as a favoured Daughter of the Church, “O Lord, console your admirable Vicar”! Even though very timid and humble she could not remain silent. Her love was stronger than her joy and even greater than her profound reverence. It was the love of the saints toward the Vicar of Christ, the visible Christ at the heart of the Church.

When she returned to Mornese she was radiant and recalled the joy of that audience. She described the presence of the Pope, and encouraged the Sisters to pray for him and offer sacrifices to God for his intentions.

Maria Mazzarello shared the same fundamental orientation to holiness with Don Bosco, devotion to the Holy Father.

Mother Caterina also possessed this. The cry of the co-founder was her cry, her daily prayer of every hour, of every suffering. Each suffering was a way to obtain the triumph of Jesus Christ among the people and in the world; to support the Church of Christ and to console the Pope.

Don Bosco’s Legacy

When Don Bosco was dying, he reaffirmed the idea, attitude, and strength that had directed and sustained his whole very busy life. He left the Salesians a memento that sounded like a command, “Wherever they live and are to be found, the Salesians are for the defence of the Pope, Fr. Cagliero, tell this to the Holy Father”.⁸

⁸ E. Ceria, Op.cit.

Standing at the foot of the bed, Fr. Cagliero promised he would in the name of all. “Be at peace, yes, dear Don Bosco, I will give your message to the Holy Father.”

Like Mother Mazzarello, Mother Caterina needed and wanted to move within the orbit chosen by the founder and in that orbit a great light shone, love for the Holy Father.

She was not St. Catherine of Siena, whose name she bore. She lived in a different century, and had a different lifestyle and personality. Yet, in the light of faith, of homage to the Vicar of Christ and constant awareness of working in the Church, she showed the ardour of her holy patron. Better still, she showed this was also that of Don Bosco.

It is sufficient to read the circular letters she sent to all the houses of the Institute. It is enough to capture the oral and written testimonies of many Daughters of Mary Help of Christians on this topic. When she spoke, even if briefly, of her visits to the Holy Father, it was enough to recall his gaze and tone of voice.

In the minutes of the VII General Chapter, 1913, a delicate and important question was addressed to the participants, “According to the spirit of the founder, how can love, homage and obedience to the Pope be promoted and maintained among the Sisters and pupils”?

In one circular letter a fervent invitation was extended to provincials on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Pope Pius X. Mother Caterina wrote:

The Congregation needs to prepare an extensive and extraordinary apostolate of prayer and sacrifices for the protection of the Holy Father and to obtain offerings for his golden jubilee.

I earnestly urge you to encourage the superiors, Sisters, and students of the houses dependent on you to take part with the great enthusiasm felt by every faithful Christian, in this very appealing, heartfelt, and dutiful manifestation.

This is for the Supreme Pontiff, and we know how our venerated father, Don Bosco distinguished himself and rejoiced at every opportunity to give homage to the Pope to whom he declared himself to be a submissive, obedient subject.

We, his Daughters, should not be found lacking in affection and veneration towards the Supreme Head of the Church, as Don Bosco taught us. We do not have the means, but our hearts are not lacking and if on the priestly jubilee of the august Pontiff we cannot humbly present him with great sums of money, he will not be less pleased with the homage of our good will, efforts, the union of our prayers, and our small sacrifices.⁹

When obstacles were encountered, she joyfully and energetically encouraged, “Sisters, let us always go forward in the name of the Lord and his Vicar and let us pray for him”!¹⁰

The Pope's blessing for her and the Institute reanimated and filled all with joy. Her circular letter of October 1912 was full of elation that she wanted to pass on to the Sisters. She wrote:

- As the new scholastic year is about to begin, I believe that the blessing of the Holy Father, Pius X, with whom I had a private audience on the 7th of this month, will be of great comfort and encouragement to you.
- I cannot tell you of the great, delightful and holy satisfaction that I experienced at that time! His Holiness welcomed me so paternally that it seemed to revive in me those happy times in which I heard the words of our venerable Father and Founder, Don Bosco!
- Pius X said with great satisfaction, ‘I know that the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians work very much for the Christian education of youth and for the missions. Tell them to maintain the spirit of the founder and they will do much good. I bless you, the Sisters, the students and their families, the benefactors, and whoever, in whatever way, assists in your works’.

⁹ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- I ask that you pass on these consoling words and the blessing of the Vicar of Jesus Christ to your students, oratorians, past pupils, and benefactors that they may be an encouragement and spur us all on to accomplish our duties better and to become holy.¹¹

City of Emperors and Popes

The chronicle of the provincial house of Rome records the visits of Mother Caterina to the city of Emperors and Popes and the Papal audiences, and also interesting episodes. For example:

Today, Mother Caterina, along with seven Sisters, attended the solemn consecration of Monsignor Lasagna. During the day she was able to recite the rosary led by His Holiness.

The Holy Father is pleased to hear the news of the journey of our mother general to America and blessed her so that she can happily bear all the travelling and do much good there.

Mother Caterina had the consolation of meeting the Holy Father walking in the gardens. He listened with pleasure to the news of her trip to America and sent heartfelt blessing to the whole Congregation.¹²

Other pages of that brief but well documented chronicle could be cited, which also illustrate the ardent love of Mother Caterina for the Vicar of Christ. For example:

- Mother Caterina is received in audience by the Supreme Pontiff. She went to extend her dutiful homage and that of the Congregation to the Supreme Pontiff, Pius X.
- The revered Mother with the provincial and the novice formator are received by His Eminence Cardinal Rampolla, Cardinal Protector of our Congregation. She presented to the renowned cardinal the homage of the whole Institute after which they went together to Cardinal Respighi.¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Chronicle of the houses of Rome, FMA General Archives.

¹³ Ibid.

The faithful chronicle continued to record visits and audiences up to 1922, after which, only two years remained of Mother Caterina's life.

It is primarily in her circular letters that one can get to know her spirit as a Salesian and a daughter of the Church.

She had undertaken the rather heavy burden of visiting the houses of Sicily, Sardegna, and Rome. She returned for her feast day and was warmly welcomed by the Sisters at the motherhouse and received letters and gifts from the Sisters living far away.

How could she express her gratitude? The most beautiful exchange, the most refreshing comfort she would be able to give to the Sisters would be to communicate the great joy of having seen the Holy Father and having received his blessing, encouragement, and appreciation for everyone.

It is an affectionate and joyful letter. After mentioning the treasured gifts she had received, the result of much loving and creative activity on the part of the Sisters, she continued:

I thank you for everything from the bottom of my heart. [...] To support and sustain you in your good resolutions, I bring you the blessing of the Holy Father, Pius X with whom I had the good fortune of a private audience on April 21. He welcomed me with the greatest kindness and inquired about the houses of the Institute and expressed his pleasure on hearing of the good being done for poor youth. He gave me his apostolic blessing which he extended to the whole Institute, naming superiors, students, oratorians, past pupils, our dear co-operators and benefactors, imploring upon all the treasures of divine grace.

Courage, then dear Sisters, always go ahead without hesitation in the struggle to do good, to save souls with God's blessing and that of his Vicar on earth. Confide in the powerful help of she who is our Mother and Patron.¹⁴

¹⁴ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

In a circular letter where she gave news of another audience, she insistently repeated that the Holy Father was pleased with the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She wrote:

He inquired about the good that is being done in our houses in Europe and the missions and encouraged us to continue with increasing zeal in favour of young people.

He added with paternal satisfaction, ‘I have already had the pleasure of meeting several of your Sisters and it pleases me that they all ask for a blessing for their mother general. This shows that they love you. Continue’.¹⁵

In her emphasis on the minute detail of the Holy Father’s comment regarding the filial sentiments she inspires, Mother Caterina reveals her maternal satisfaction in knowing she is loved. It seems that she wanted to say it to the joy of all. “The Pope knows that you love me.” She exhorted all to correspond:

...to the immense goodness of the Supreme Pontiff. We need to pray for the intentions of His Holiness and console him by faithfully following the way that our venerable founder and father, Don Bosco, has marked out for us.¹⁶

Two Beloved Names

Two beloved names always occurred together in her thoughts: Don Bosco and the Pope!

She was happy when the Pope recognised what she desired and promoted with all her heart for herself and every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, that is, the humble but faithful and constant imitation of the characteristic virtues of the founder, charity, zeal, and untiring activity in apostolic works.

The year 1916 was a tumultuous one of war that left her anxious about many of the Sisters living far away who were

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

exposed to grave dangers. In one of her circular letters she comforted herself and the Sisters remembering the goodness of the Holy Father who had welcomed her in a private audience. She wrote:

His Holiness is greatly consoled at the report given to him of what, with the help of God is being accomplished in Italy and elsewhere, especially in these difficult times, and he encouraged us to continue to do what the present moment inspires and needs.

She shared:

I assisted twice at the Mass celebrated by the Holy Father and received Holy Communion from his hands. As I left the Pauline Chapel I could once again kneel at the feet of the Pontiff who was crossing the Vatican apartments to visit the exhibition of the works of the Catholic Women's League in favour of the missions.

She was filled with joy and said:

The Holy Father took this occasion to speak of the great good accomplished by our venerable founder for the benefit of the missions. He also recognised in our humble Institute Don Bosco's characteristic activity. He added that, in a special way, it is up to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to obtain some miracles through the intercession of the venerable Don Bosco to hasten the cause of his beatification.¹⁷ The Holy Father gave us a rosary as a memento.

She was happy and gently insisted:

Such gestures of particular kindness on the part of the Supreme Pontiff serve to make us even more worthy of the venerable Don Bosco, more devoted to the Vicar of Jesus Christ and more

¹⁷ Folder of circular letters and Testimony, FMA General Archives.

fervent in prayer for the triumph of the Church that is still the sole anchor of salvation and divine peace in the world.¹⁸

Mother Caterina helped the Sisters to feel that obedience to and love of God, the practice of Christian and religious virtue and loving respect for the directives left by Don Bosco should become tangible through love for the Church and the Pope.

She prayed and had others pray for him. In the circular letter of June 4, 1915 she wrote, “Let us spend the month of the Sacred Heart with the utmost fervour offering our practices of piety according to the intentions of His Holiness, Benedict XV”.¹⁹

Since the Pontiff established that the whole Catholic Church was to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of St. Joseph as patron of the universal Church, she quickly communicated this news in a circular letter and shared it in conferences to the Sisters:

While all wait for the local ordinaries, each in his own diocese, to establish those practices judged to be opportune, let each of us initiate in herself and in those entrusted to us, devotion to this noble patron of the Church, pondering how, during these present difficult times of misfortune, this 50th anniversary is so providential.²⁰

The tragic World War I had just started and there were already a number of victims. Mother Caterina asked for prayers but also for action, like that wanted by the founder and father and also by the Pope. She wanted to uphold the thinking and sentiments of the Pope or better still, to obey him asking for the seal of his approval. She reported the following memorable exhortation:

- The Holy Father, insists on recommending prayer for the critical needs of humanity, but also proposes action and in that action, he

¹⁸ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

indicates his preference for the religious education of youth on which he sets his hopes for society to come to its senses.²¹

- With renewed devotion and filial affection let us be in accord with the desires of the Supreme Pontiff and let us dedicate ourselves with greater zeal to the truly Christian formation of youth. Don Bosco states that, ‘Without having to go in search of them, they come to us through Divine Providence. We do not have to do anything else than duly instruct them, and prepare them for life teaching them the way to reach the gate of salvation’. Thus, the voice of the Pope recalls that of Don Bosco who, leaving us the motto: prayer and work, has put us under the banner on which the celebrated reigning Pontiff today writes: Prayer and work.²²

Don Bosco and the Pope: two names that Mother Caterina could never separate, one name recalled the other. The more she felt herself Salesian, the more she felt herself Daughter of the Church, and the more filial affection for the Pope came alive in her and in the Sisters.

For Don Bosco every desire of the Holy Father was law. The same was true of Mother Caterina. She exhorted:

We would not be Salesian if we did not love the Pope, if we did not seek what he teaches, wants and desires, if we did not receive all that he says with love. No, we Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would not have the spirit of our venerable founder and father.²³

Price of Fidelity

Her words always bore the seal of action. A painful moment came when the fidelity and obedience to the Pope demanded a great sacrifice from the Congregation that she

²¹ Cf. Discourse of Pope Benedict XV to the representatives of the *Partito Popolare*, March 3, 1919.

²² Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

²³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

directed. This suffering was even greater for her as a mother general who was most faithful to the founder. It was especially during this period then that she showed herself to be a Daughter of the Church, ever faithful to the Pope, and a Salesian of Don Bosco, and humbly bowed her head in full accord with him, prayed, and hoped.

In 1901 the Holy See decreed that the female branches of spiritual families founded within the same charism should be juridically separated from the male branch. This posed a dilemma for Mother Caterina. How could the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians obey this decree without betraying the spirit of Don Bosco who had founded them as an integral part of the Salesian Society?

This event that engaged her and the Institute was profoundly and intensely felt. It is recorded in the work of Fr. Angelo Amadei, *Il servo di Dio Don Michele Rua*.²⁴

In the following pages it will be briefly presented to highlight the character of Mother Caterina in her attachment to the founder and in her obedience to the Vicar of Christ.

In this incident Mother Caterina is seen side by side with Blessed Fr. Michele Rua, he the first successor of the founder and she, the first successor of the saintly co-founder, Mother Maria Mazzarello, in the same aura of light. In one and the other there was the same resolute love for the founder and father and at the same time the utmost obedience to the Vicar of Christ.

Both knew and practised the teachings of the founder, a life dominated by love, obedience, defence of, and suffering with and for the Pope.

In 1887, in a commemorative publication in honour of the priestly jubilee of Leo XIII, Don Bosco had written:

I intend that the pupils of the humble Congregation of St. Francis de Sales promptly, respectfully, and with simplicity of mind and

²⁴ S. E. I., Torino.

heart, accept the decisions of the Pope not only in matters of dogma and discipline, but even in what can be disputed, they will follow his judgement. The Pope deserves all reverence.

It was an expressed request that Fr. Rua and Mother Caterina safeguarded and practised as a precious heritage.

On June 18, 1901, the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars promulgated the decree, *Normae secundum quas*, to be followed for the approval of new religious institutes with simple vows. The Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was among these. It was necessary, therefore, to comply with what had been established.

Founded by Don Bosco on the advice of the Holy Father, Pius IX, this Institute had been established in 1872, with the same dependence upon the Salesian Society that the Institute of the Daughters of Charity had on the religious of St. Vincent de Paul.

With the ample authority given to him by Pius IX and verbally renewed by Leo XIII, Don Bosco was the direct major superior of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. At his death, his successor, Fr. Michele Rua continued in the same role according to his spirit and intention.

The two Congregations, the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, proceeded accordingly, one was incorporated into the other, recognising and living the same apostolic life in the heart of the Church, in the name and according to the norms left by their common founder.

But if the *Normae*, published in 1901, were totally applied to the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians it would break the link that bound them together. It would withdraw the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from the government of the Salesians.

This was a tremendous blow to the heart of Mother Caterina. She did not neglect any means that might make it possible for them to remain dependent on Don Bosco's successor. This lengthy process took years, but it was accomplished with a

spirit that was ever willing to recognise, in the words of the Pope, the word of God. The general archives of the Institute preserve the documents that refer to this most difficult and painful time. They testify, as has been noted above, to her great fidelity to Don Bosco and to the Pope.

In a letter of Mother Caterina to Fr. Giovanni Marengo, then Procurator General of the Salesians in Rome and previously Director General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, she wrote:

*Would there ever be the danger that it could happen, that the support which the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians have from the Salesians could, I don't say fail, but even weaken? How could we sustain our works for the salvation of youth without the support of those who know us intensely? [...] The Salesians alone, who come from the same founder Don Bosco of venerated memory, were established with the same spirit and purpose, and have grown strong from within, who are teachers for us in our struggles, can, according to us, sustain us with divine grace in a life that is so full of difficulties.*²⁵

In another letter:

*I admire the abandonment to God that the Salesian superiors show by leaving all in the hands of Divine Providence regarding the Rule or Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, but I cannot rest if I do not do everything possible for our Congregation.*²⁶

To Fr. Rua she sent expressions of heartfelt gratitude, trust and pleading:

Where will we go, if we are divided from you? Separated from you we are like vines whose support has been removed, we would crawl on the ground and die miserably. Furthermore, if by the grace of God we can call ourselves Daughters of Mary Help

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

*of Christians it is because from the beginning it was understood that we would safely continue under the banner of Mary since we were guided by Don Bosco and his legitimate successors, and now we cannot comprehend otherwise. It seems we are betraying ourselves.*²⁷

She humbly spoke to the Holy Father, expressing her sincere gratitude to the successor of Don Bosco:

Bless our 230 houses, our educational institutions, schools, orphanages, the missions in the Holy Land, in Africa, America, among the natives of Patagonia, and among the lepers of Colombia. Bless, the Reverend Fr. Michele Rua, our superior, who as a true successor of Don Bosco, continues to extend his paternal solicitude to us.

She implored him with this ardent prayer:

Do not deprive us of our superior and Father. [...] Without him our Institute would no longer be that founded by Don Bosco and for us, the one we have embraced. Without him our superiors feel their strength failing them under the weight of authority. All the Sisters think that the fragile little boat in which they have embarked with great faith, will be deprived of his helmsmanship and of his sturdy arm that holds the rudder, and therefore would miserably crash into the rocks frequently found on our path or be overwhelmed by violent storms. [...]

This is what has caused the anxiety that all of us experience as soon as we came to hear that our Constitutions should be amended in relation to withdrawing from the authority of the superior.²⁸

This was the spirit of Mother Caterina and of those to whom she had transmitted it, that is, an indomitable love for the father and founder, a tenacious will to follow his successors in

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

order not to drift away from him but to keep intact the spiritual heritage.

But the official commission that was in charge of examining the issue gave a unanimous vote that the Constitutions were to conform to the general norms without exception, therefore, there was to be no dependence on the Salesian Society.

The minutes of September 9, 1907, of the VI General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians record:

The meeting was presided by the Very Reverend Superior General, Mother Caterina Daghero, who expresses her gratitude to the Lord for having gathered us together. However, she cannot conceal her sorrow in seeing us gathered for the first time without the presence of a representative of the founder and, at the same time, she exhorted us to respectfully accept the word of the Holy Father which is the word of God.²⁹

It was attested to in the documents conserved in the general archives that Mother Caterina sobbed, revealing her true sorrow at the announcement of the possible separation of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from dependence on the successors of Don Bosco. She then composed herself and assisted others in doing so because the word of the Pope was the word of God. However, she continued to pray, hope, and work.

She faithfully continued to lead along the way traced out by the founder; to follow the examples and practise the norms left by him and kept alive by his successors. In general conferences and individual conversations, in circular letters and private correspondence she continued to recommend to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians respect and love for the Salesian traditions and directives, to keep alive in thought and action the Salesian maxim, work and prayer, and the Salesian motto, *Da mihi animas coetera tolle*.

²⁹ Minutes of the VI General Chapter, FMA General Archives.

At the same time, she continued to be an obedient Daughter of the Church. She desired to see every religious, civic or family celebration, every new decision or directive in relation to apostolic works, every important act in the Institute sealed by the blessing of the Holy Father. She took every occasion to reaffirm her inalterable loyalty to the Chair of Peter, a loyalty that was inculcated by Don Bosco to his children and left to them as a testimony.

Delightful Surprise

Mother Caterina received clear proof of the particular, paternal goodness of the Holy Father, which he demonstrated when she went to Rome to pay her respects of filial obedience to him for herself and all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and to give him an account of the spiritual, moral, and material state of the Institute. He also transmitted his eminent words of approval and satisfaction through the distinguished cardinal protector and other notable prelates of the Church.³⁰

The goodness and generosity of the Holy Father were also manifested in other delicate acts and gifts. The hall that accommodated young women in a technical programme in the house entitled, Holy Family, on Appia Nuova Street, Rome, was built by his financial contribution and was festively inaugurated under the title of Pius X.

A letter written by the provincial of Rome gave Mother Caterina the news of a very special, delightful surprise given by the Holy Father to her and all the young women, students of the teacher training school, and staff gathered in the provincial house of Marghera Street for a seminar in religion. She wrote:

The Holy Father knew that a course in religion is held in this house for young women students of the teacher training school

³⁰ Correspondence with the Holy See, Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, FMA General Archives.

and the university, as well as for teachers. He wanted to give encouragement and impetus to this work so dear to his heart. How did he do it? By sending no less than the *Befana* [a good witch who brings gifts to children on January 6], and what a *Befana*!

Monsignor Bressan came, sent by the Holy Father, to bring a beautiful watch in an elegant case bearing the pontifical coat of arms. It was to be raffled among the young women that were attending the course. An artistic medal was given to each, representing St. Peter and the Holy Father.

One can only imagine the amazement of all at such a welcome surprise. The medals were distributed and the raffle was held for the magnificent watch. It was won by a student teacher of the third year.

This morning, in the name of everyone, the young woman wrote to the Holy Father thanking him and we will make sure that we spread this news in all the bulletins. What do you think of such a remarkable and cherished event?³¹

Twelve Years of Waiting

The years passed as Mother Caterina continued to pray, wait and hope for a solution regarding the issue of the juridical separation between the two Congregations. Her prayers were finally answered. While the separation remained in areas such as leadership and finance, the Holy Father appointed the rector major of the Salesians as his representative for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Thus after twelve years of waiting, from 1907 to 1919, she was finally reassured by the Vicar of Jesus Christ. The spiritual guidance of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would once again be entrusted to the successors of Don

³¹ Letters, FMA General Archives.

Bosco. This had been the strength, the dominant and sustaining idea of her leadership. It was an assurance and comfort for every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, in the long term, for those who would succeed Mother Caterina as she had succeeded Mother Mazzarello.

The letter of January 24, 1919 sent out by the vicar general in her name, brought, “...very consoling news”:

She had an ardent desire to humbly present not only the sentiments of profound veneration and filial devotion of the whole Institute toward the sacred person of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, but also to express her fervent gratitude for having given us a superior and Father in the venerated rector major of the Salesians to protect the spirit of the venerable founder.

During the audience that was kindly granted to her on the 14th of this month from His Holiness Benedict XV, she had all the time she needed to fulfil this dutiful act of gratitude.

Paternally pleased, the Holy Father asked if she was content to have received such a gift. When she stated that the whole Institute expressed its gratitude in prayer asking God to bless his Vicar for having granted such a grace, he exclaimed, ‘I should say so because among the spiritual children of the same Father, you have the same spirit and the same direction in doing good, it could not be otherwise’.

The circular letter continued in a moving exaltation, giving thanks to God and to the Pope.

In November of 1922 Mother Caterina returned to Rome and on December 9 was received in a private audience by His Holiness, Pius XI.

It was the year of the 50th anniversary of the Institute and she had called for great festivities to celebrate it in all the houses of the Institute. She recalled to the minds of all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians those happy epic times of Mornese, the humble, obscure beginnings of the Institute, the first Mother who

in the hands of the venerable founder was like pure wax that received the imprint, all the features he wanted to give her. Mother Mazzarello had received this imprint.

There were great celebrations, especially in Nizza Monferrato, where Mother Caterina resided and where a numerous crowd of Sisters had gathered, already hoping to celebrate her 50th anniversary of religious profession.³²

Crowning Moment

The private audience granted her by Pope Pius XI was a crowning moment of great joy and indelible memories.

In the circular letter of December 24, she recalled the distinguished words of the Holy Father for the encouragement of all:

He was pleased with our celebrations. I shared about the new missionary communities opened this year, and of the hundred Sisters who, with resoluteness and generosity, abandoned everything to go to help their Sisters overseas to begin or to continue the salvific work with young people most in need of Christian formation. The Holy Father exclaimed, 'Bravo! We send a special blessing to these generous Sisters that the Lord may protect them and with his help they may do much good'.³³

Mother Caterina, who was extremely obedient to the commands and desires of the Holy Father, had sacrificed personnel in Europe to provide for the further development of the distant missions, so dear to the Holy Father. He was known as, the Pope of the Missions, as well as the Pope of Don Bosco, and the extraordinary title, the Pope of Reconciliation.

Did Mother Caterina have a presentment that this could be her last encounter? She continued:

³² This would have taken place in 1925.

³³ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

These moments were precious and reflected my desire to profit from them for the whole Institute. I gave a detailed report regarding the houses, works, and religious discipline, etc. I was always listened to and even questioned with the interest of a father. Kneeling at his feet I ended by saying, ‘Holy Father, bless me, and with me my council, the good provincials, the superiors, all the Sisters, so that they may persevere with the good will in which they have been reinvigorated by the celebrations of the 50th anniversary [of the founding of the Institute]’.³⁴

This circular letter, of which only brief passages have been quoted, is longer and more affectionate than most.

Four Popes and Fourteen Audiences

For the last time in that December 1922, Mother Caterina saw the palace of the Vicar of the King of Kings; that royal palace which for the first time she had seen long ago at the age of twenty-five, when she had ascended and descended the marble staircase trembling with emotion and joy. Now she saw for the last time the Chair, the only one in the world that could not collapse. She saw the venerable white-robed personage whose name changed but who was always the same, always Peter to whom during the long years of her leadership as mother general she had confided her burdens and sufferings with all her heart, many of which she could only share with the Vicar of Christ.

Mother Caterina had known four Popes: Leo XIII, Pius X, Benedict XV and Pius XI. During fourteen audiences she had brought before them her humility, obedience, and love as a Daughter of the Church, and a Salesian Sister of Don Bosco.

In the 6th reading of the breviary for the feast of Don Bosco it states:

³⁴ Ibid.

[Don Bosco] especially recommended three duties of piety to his sons: as often as possible receive the sacred Eucharistic species, venerate Mary Help of Christians with great affection, and pay filial homage to the Pope.

Three devotions. Mother Caterina never forgot this paternal testament.

Chapter VII

From Nizza to the World

Companions on the Journey

At the side of the young Mother General, Mother Caterina Daghero, were two outstanding women: Mother Emilia Mosca and Mother Elisa Roncallo.

Mother Emilia had a keen intelligence, was well educated, and had a great heart. Mother Elisa also possessed a profound intelligence and was very tender-hearted, with an almost priestly piety that came from the uncommon gifts of her spirit and a devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus composed of charity and sacrifice.

Those who knew these first general councillors of the early days of the Institute, have a positive, pleasant memory of them. As luminous examples, they left an inheritance for those who came and who will come after them in the future.

Because of their special aptitudes, Mother Emilia and Mother Elisa were intelligent and practical collaborators in her work of the general leadership of the Institute.

They saw in Mother Caterina the continuation of the great and much loved authority of their first Mother. In her leadership they saw an expression of the will of the founder and the designs of God. They vied with one another to give her honour and show affection, while she was edified and corresponded by entrusting to them the most delicate assignments, taking them as companions on her travels.

They worked well together. Their virtues complemented each other as did their characters, which though different from each other created a harmony of aspirations, intentions, and works, all directed to the glory of God, and to the full and faithful execution of the great idea of Don Bosco. Mother Caterina possessed a sense of judgment, tranquillity of character and sentiment, sure common sense, a will that was decisive and acted on what she had

understood and discerned, without unnecessary hesitation or sudden changes. Mother Emilia possessed a keen intelligence, vast learning, and a courageous and persevering will. In Mother Elisa, her intelligence was accompanied by an ardour of charity that knew no limits or obstacles to sacrifices except to embrace them with joy. The Apostle says, "Charity urges us, and it covers everything". This was the principle that informed her in her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

God had placed Mother Emilia at the side of Mother Caterina to be an instrument in her hand to affirm and develop in the newly-founded Institute the idea of the founder, "Go to meet the young people with the ardour of charity and with the attractiveness of an integral education; instruct so as to educate", to lead young hearts to God. The school is not merely for instruction but must be a school for life, a life that does not end with that on earth, but is to be prolonged beyond the here and now, for eternity. Hers was, therefore, a task of Salesian and intellectual formation.

He had also placed at her side Mother Elisa, so that she could be a valid help in the development of the first fundamental work of the great Salesian Family, the festive oratory, and everything that was involved in relating to the people directed especially toward those who were most in need of assistance, compassion, and charity.

Throughout the long years of her leadership, other general councillors would be at her side especially in times of difficulties. Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, Vicar General, was the faithful friend, the spokesperson for Mother Caterina, and she consoled her in the grave difficulties of responsibility. Later, there was Mother Marina Coppa, who succeeded Mother Emilia in the field of studies, and Mother Luisa Vaschetti, who had been a valiant missionary for twenty years. She was Mother Caterina's intelligent and active secretary and succeeded her in the leadership of the Institute.

With her was another precious Councillor, Mother Eulalia Bosco, great niece of the saintly founder.

However, as has been seen, from the beginning of her time of leadership, Mother Caterina had two exceptional councillors in the persons of the first 'mother assistants'. She was able to count on their admirable strength with that special tact that she had

learned from the founder. She received counsel from them, and at the same time she inspired and encouraged them and was their wise mentor.

On her deathbed, Mother Mazzarello had told her, "Sr. Caterina, make good use of Sr. Elisa; you will have a precious help in her".¹ She had long since shown Mother Emilia to be eloquently esteemed and loved. She had formed her, made her, her private secretary, and kept her close until the very end of her life.²

A Jewel of a Mother

Leafing through the many writings of Mother Elisa that remain from these times, the following are some phrases that she wrote to her mother. In these letters there appear religious sentiments of a cordial relationship between Elisa and Caterina which was born in Mornese, strengthened in Turin, and remained unchanged by the new event of an election that placed Mother Caterina in a position of the highest authority. Rather, it made her more steadfast and affectionate.

These phrases from her letters reveal the very humble and gentle spirit that Mother Elisa nourished toward the mother general who was as young as herself, but whom she considered to be her 'mother'. They also highlighted, though indirectly, the gentle solicitude of Mother Caterina and the delicate authority she had assumed with regard to this Sister, who had once been her animator and later became her councillor. Mother Elisa wrote to her mother:

The Lord has given us such a good Mother...I cannot tell you the good she has done for me, I can only say for your comfort, that she has shown me great solicitude so that I do not become ill. She never thinks of herself. [...] She is a jewel of a Mother, a creature whom I do not know how to define, except to say that I find in her a person according to the heart of God. She is so young to be burdened with such great responsibility. But the Lord uses humble and great souls to do good. Dear Mama, I would throw myself into a fire to make her happy. Dearest

¹ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

² G. Mainetti, Op.cit.

*Mama, ask Jesus to help her, to sustain her, to make her feel that the cross she bears may be less heavy. [...] Ask Him that He may conserve this dear Mother who does so much good for souls, to make her Daughters happy by her charity, her sense of sacrifice, her example [...] and grant us the grace to imitate her.*³

Many of Mother Elisa's other writings could be cited here. She was held in high regard and many hope to see her one day crowned with the radiant light of holiness.⁴

Mother Emilia also left written testimonies about her. True, they were in another style, another attitude of thought and heart, but were no less clear and precious.

In addition to the copious correspondence from which the figure of Mother Caterina almost always emerges in a pure light, there is the *Cronistoria* of the Institute which Mother Emilia wrote from the time of the origins from 1872 to 1900, the year in which she died.⁵

After the death of Mother Mazzarello, it describes the first twenty years of the long government of Mother Caterina, 1881-1900. Mother Elisa and Mother Emilia saw new foundations, visits to Italy and abroad, notable events, conflicts, and serious difficulties. These two decades were like a fruitful, rich, virgin land in which the works flourished and shed light on and put into practice the ideas Don Bosco had for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It was twenty years in which the remarkable, prodigious activity of Mother Caterina was clearly visible.

Work and Prayer

Don Bosco had said: "When a Salesian dies while working for souls, then you will be able to say that our Pious Society has

³ Mother Elisa Roncallo, Letters, 1881-1882.

⁴ Mother Elisa Roncallo died in the concept of sanctity.

⁵ G. Mainetti, Op.cit.

reported a great triumph and copious blessings from heaven will descend on it”.⁶

The *Da Mihi Animas, Coetera Tolle*, his motto, was a complete programme of work for God’s Kingdom, carried out in daily life through the challenges and victories achieved by means of continual work inspired, guided, supported, and sanctified by faith. All was a sacrifice; all was part of life. So it was with his successors.

Mother Caterina understood this perfectly. Even before Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, the third successor of Don Bosco, composed the brief prayer which the Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians repeat each day, “So that we may always love work as you did, St. John Bosco pray for us”,⁷ Mother Caterina Daghero practised it in her activity. She taught the Sisters that work was the safest weapon for salvation, and for this reason, it was like a prayer.

In her first circular letter she explained that for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, prayer, “...must have only one aim, as if it emerged from one heart: the glory of God and the salvation of souls”.⁸

First Apostolic Visits

Elected mother general at twenty-five years of age, she began to act in that capacity immediately. A vast, unconfined field appeared before her, and with the daring of unpretentious people who see and evaluate everything in the light of faith, she did all with love establishing a series of foundations and undertaking journeys throughout the world. It is no exaggeration to say that during the forty-three years of her leadership she led the Institute to

⁶ G. B. Lemoyne, *Memorie biografiche del Ven. Don Giovanni Bosco*. S. E. I. Torino.

⁷ He composed it with other invocations on June 2, 1929 in St. Peter’s, Rome at the very moment when the banner was unveiled and the image of Don Bosco appeared as *Blessed* in the Glory of Bernini.

⁸ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

a remarkable growth, to secure spiritual and social achievements. The *Cronistoria* of the year 1882 states:

Mother general began to visit the houses in February. The first to be visited were those of France. Everywhere Mother was received with affectionate signs of sincere devotion. Her visit brought much good both to the Sisters individually and to the communities. With these visits she could get a clear idea of the conditions of the Institute, the needs of each Sister and those of the houses.”⁹

After that first journey, others followed almost without interruption. There were brief return visits to the motherhouse, which were a joy for the Sisters living there. Every year Mother Caterina, accompanied by a member of the general council, went to meet the Sisters who lived far away, to listen to and encourage them, and repeat to them the motto of the founder and Father, “...all for the salvation of souls”!

She told her councillors, “It is necessary to go to see those poor Daughters who work and perhaps suffer, and are in so much need of a good word. We must see with our own eyes and touch with our own hands”.

From 1882 to 1923, which was the last year of her very busy life because she died in February of 1924, she undertook more than four hundred journeys throughout Italy, France, Belgium, England, Spain, Palestine, Africa, and South America.

She seemed to be tireless. She looked serene and cheerful with her large penetrating eyes, and her cheerful smile that encouraged the Sisters and dispelled shadows and uncertainties. They uplifted people. She spoke words of consolation and was an example of strength. She had expressed this desire to her vicar one day when they were both young Sisters, “I want to console, to console”. Now she could do so because of the role of authority with which she had been entrusted.

⁹ Chronicle of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (from 1872-1900), Emilia Mosca.

In her perfect adherence to the spirit of the founder, the fear that some might abandon it, gave her the extraordinary energy to arouse and strengthen in the Sisters the will to work and to sacrifice themselves for the fulfilment of their Salesian religious vocation.

Early Circular Letters

Her early circular letters were written in an informal style. They echo the exhortations that she made verbally on every occasion, the expression of her inner resolution that she also desired for the Sisters. She wrote:

- Let us make every effort so that our Congregation may grow daily in the spirit of abnegation and sacrifice, in zeal for the glory of God and in commitment to the salvation of our neighbour.
- By practising what the Holy Rule prescribes for us, and keeping ourselves united to God by prayer and by working for his greater glory, we will become holy.
- This is just what our founder and Father, Don Bosco formally assured us.¹⁰

She was always vigilant. Nothing escaped her either regarding the exterior or even the interior life of the Sisters, in any situation in which they found themselves due to their ministry, in health or illness. She was aware of whether the house and work prospered, or had difficulties of an internal or even external order, that caused spiritual impoverishment, or impeded the implementation of what she wanted to be alive, fresh, genuine: the spirit of the founder, the observance of the Rule, the salvation of young people, the religious social works for which the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had been founded.

This is confirmed by the chronicles of the houses she visited and the reports of these visits written by the community animators and Sisters. These reports of the conferences given to the communities and even the private conversations with individual Sisters help to understand and admire her. Those brief, but vivid reports give a clear picture of Mother Caterina. She was a

¹⁰ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

person of contemplation who habitually had her eyes fixed on God and easily raised her heart to intimate union with Him. At the same time she was animated by an extraordinary activity that never distanced itself from reality, but rather embraced it, studied it with an expert eye and a firm will to draw all into the orbit of faith for the glory of God, the salvation of young people, and for the regeneration of society.

Like Don Bosco, as his disciple, Mother Caterina never withdrew her gaze from heaven, while remaining with her feet firmly on the ground.

She did not think of holiness for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in any other way than one based on:

...a spirit of faith, the observance of the Constitutions, sanctified work with the intention of giving glory to God in order to save souls. For all of this, it was necessary to imitate the virtues of the founder, to follow the norms, the teaching and the examples that he had left. I ask the Lord for nothing more than that you pray for the spirit of our Father Don Bosco, [...] that you will then have a spirit of humility, patience, sacrifice, and hard work. Don Bosco was always ready for any sacrifice for the good of souls.¹¹

Like the founder, she had a clear concept of what God wanted from her and the Institute she governed.

Don Bosco had a precise idea of his historic mission: to serve poor children, to gather those who were lost for their well-being on earth and in heaven. In one of her first circulars, Mother Caterina wrote:

My Sisters, the main purpose of our Congregation, is to sanctify ourselves and to work incessantly for the well-being of our neighbour, especially for that of poor young people. To save souls! Oh, what a great mission the Lord has entrusted to us!¹²

Yes, to work incessantly, but with an upright intention: God and others. To a Sister who asked her for a word of advice, a

¹¹Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹² Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

remembrance, Mother Caterina answered simply, “Meditate often on the parable of the sterile fig tree.”¹³ What an incisive response! To another:

We always need to be aware of time. If there is not a consciousness of time in the community, there could be much negligence. Time, for us, is the present moment and that of our future. Let us remain in the presence of God, and we will be sure of not wasting time.¹⁴

Her visits to the different houses had no other purpose than this: to keep alive in the Sisters the awareness of their responsibility as Salesian religious, of the obligation assumed in their Salesian vocation, to help them to sanctify their intensely active life, never tiring, but rather loving it always with renewed fervour, keeping their gaze fixed on God, Don Bosco, and the Church.

When she discovered, if not an actual relaxation of this, the beginnings of tepidity in someone, a transgression of the Constitutions, a temptation to forget Salesian traditions, and especially a touch of independence, she did not hesitate to correct it with strong words, she who had come to console, to console. These words, then, left a deep, positive mark on the heart, however, because except for very rare exceptions, the early fervour was regenerated. How moving to hear her say:

When I see a need, I feel it my strict duty to correct it, for I would not want a Sister to have to say at the point of death, ‘If Mother general or my superiors had corrected me when they saw me make a mistake, I would have acquired greater virtue and now I would have gained for myself a greater degree of happiness in heaven’.

This is why, therefore, I correct the Sisters, but when the Sister to whom I am speaking immediately recognises her fault, and the reasonableness of my observations, I remain disarmed, and I find myself lacking the courage to continue, or to complete my

¹³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹⁴ Ibid.

thought, so much so, that on some occasions, do not marvel at this, I would almost prefer that she either keep quiet about it or at least attempt to justify herself, and thus I could complete my correction and not remain disarmed.¹⁵

One can also see here her uprightness and at the same time, her heart. A Sister wrote, “After many years Mother Caterina’s words still ring in my ear, ‘If I knew that a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians would not be saved, my heart could never be at peace’”.¹⁶ Another Sister wrote:

I had the impression that our Mother always sought not to attract attention to herself. But when it was a question of consoling and healing a wounded heart, then she no longer stayed in the background, nor did she draw back but set to heal with all zeal and love.¹⁷

The following is a very moving testimony to her maternal tenderness:

How much she helped us in our intimate struggles, in the sufferings found in religious life! We rejoiced, not only when we could hear her words but also when she accompanied us with her letters, and she encouraged and prayed for and with us. In one of our private conversations, I confided a great inner suffering to her. She listened to me with such tenderness that I felt that I was not alone in my struggle. Truthfully, upon hearing what I had to say, she told me, “Go ahead, my Daughter! You will no longer be alone; I will be with you in thought and especially in prayer’.

Three years later I was with her again. This time I did not confide my suffering to her, but rather the consolations that I enjoyed in working with the young people, the satisfying results of the task that she had entrusted to me. She rejoiced with me like a mother, and with me, she blessed the Lord and then said, “Do you still have those sufferings you

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

were enduring three years ago?’ ‘Oh, no, I responded, thanks to your prayers, Mother, and your advice’¹⁸.

She had not forgotten!

Loving Care for the Sick and Elderly

She cared greatly for the Sisters who were ill or physically weak. Upon her arrival to visit a house, if there were any sick Sisters her first visit was to them. It was the same when she left the house. She recommended to the animators that they be vigilant and maternal. This is what she told them:

They are our Sisters in the Congregation, and what would we not do for a sister in our family? Then, too, the Institute needs Sisters who work much for the good of souls, and for this reason, it sends us vocations. Let us take care of their health.¹⁹

A Sister wrote:

Mother became aware that I was not well. She questioned me, wanting to know the cause of my illness. Before leaving she gave instructions to my superior to have my health taken care of so I could recover. Her goodness gave me courage and much comfort.²⁰

Mother Caterina was very affectionate and kind toward the elderly Sisters and wanted those who were younger to be respectful and attentive to their needs. “They have worked so much! I know all about it”, she would say while looking at them with a kindly expression, “and you young people have much to learn from them.”²¹

Many other instances attest to the heart of Mother Caterina for the Sisters who had worked in ministries that

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

demanded the generous sacrifice of their health, and, at times, even their lives.

She wanted cheerfulness and tried to spread it during her visitations. She would say, “Don Bosco was devoted to it, therefore let us serve the Lord in joy”. At table, especially on the day chosen to celebrate her visit, she was amiable and witty and took the opportunity to give charming and efficacious lessons. For example, she said the following:

The time at table after the prescribed silence, must be one of cordial relaxation. You must regard this table almost like the sacred table, abstaining from any conversation that is contrary to charity. At times, it happens that we wait for this moment to speak of something unpleasant that took place in school, in the oratory or even among ourselves. No, no! This is not good and does not please the Lord. Avoid making this time that we spend together with the superior uncomfortable. The time you spend together should help to renew your strength for a new task. It should also be time to reinforce the spirit, to help your heart to rejoice because sisterly union is so comforting and is proper to religious communities. Be cheerful, be cheerful.²²

This simplicity of words was an expression of charity and wisdom. Mother Caterina was extremely prudent, and she knew she was, and wanted to be so. In a definition that is uniquely hers she said, “Don Bosco’s spirit was one of prudence and action”.²³

She possessed a crystal clear, transparent simplicity in mind and heart. However, she also possessed a prudence that knew how to use silence and made use of measures that were not a pretence nor untrue, nor did they lack charity. Rather, they were different forms of charity, intimate efforts to find the way to people’s hearts, and the most direct and safest paths to do good.

²² Ibid.

²³ Good Nights, FMA General Archives.

Loyalty to Don Bosco and His Successors

She always recalled the founder to the minds and hearts of the Sisters, and had strong persuasive expressions when inculcating in them respect for all the Salesians. It would not be an exaggeration to say that her visitations to the houses had this intention, because she understood that the branch which is detached from its native vine would become diseased and die. With Mother Mazzarello she insisted that they should, “live in the presence of God and Don Bosco”. She said with emotion:

- What would we poor Sisters do without the Salesians? Nothing! Oh, if only you knew how much they do for us! How much help they give to everyone, and especially in the missions! Be good, very good to them! Help them willingly, even at the cost of sacrifice and Our Lady will bless you!²⁴
- In a Good Night our good Mother spoke to us of the reverend Salesians for whom she had a great veneration. ‘My dear Daughters we should kiss the ground where the Salesians walk. What would we do without them? If we can do anything it is thanks to them.’²⁵
- I want you all to show gratitude toward the Salesians. It is due to them that we were born and grew, and they always support us with advice and work, be it spiritual or material. After God, it is to them that we owe all the good that we have done in the world. Let us foresee their desires by doing for them all that is possible in exchange for the great good that we receive from them.²⁶

“Our dear departed Mother Mazzarello esteemed the Salesian Congregation very much. She wanted the Sisters to feel deep gratitude and respect for the Salesian of Don Bosco.”²⁷ She was the first to give a continual example. Another written testimony states:

²⁴ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

I remember her great obedience to the rector major. Once in 1889 we intentionally made her miss the train to keep her with us another day. I never saw her so sad. The delay caused by us kept her from following perfectly the itinerary drawn up for her by the rector major.²⁸

In this context, the sentiment of respect did not become less in her after the ‘separation’, if it can be called that, of the two great families of Don Bosco”.²⁹ In fact, it could be said that it became more profound. She constantly reminded the Sisters to keep it alive in their hearts and manifest it in their ministries.

Mother Caterina urged them to remember the founder, “When you enter your classroom, imagine that you are taking the place of Don Bosco who never intended to rest on this earth, but only in paradise”.³⁰

She told the Sisters, “We are fortunate to have the Salesians to guide and direct us in our studies and schools according to the spirit of Don Bosco.”³¹ Another testified:

When we made the retreat Mother exhorted us, ‘Let us thank the Lord that the Salesian superiors send us priests to preach our spiritual retreat. They have our Rule and the Spirit of Don Bosco’. Then she added with an expression that was all her own, ‘When I have to go to Confession, I would prefer the least, if we can say the least, of the Salesians to any other secular priest, no matter how gifted’. Mother certainly did not mean to lack respect for the other priests, no one was more respectful, but she wanted to make us feel that it was a grace for us to be directed by the Salesians of Don Bosco.³²

With a Salesian Heart

To those Sisters whose ministry was in the kitchen and laundry in Salesian houses, like Marthas serving Jesus in the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Cf. Chapter VI.

³⁰ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

³¹ Conferences.

³² Testimony, FMA General Archives.

person of his priests and young people, she would warmly insist, “Always try to please the Salesians with charity, patience, and prudence. We will never succeed in reciprocating that which the Salesians do for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians”.³³ The above shows how important this concern was for her, as a truly Salesian mother general.

Much space has been given to recording these reports because it would seem that the greatest splendour in the life of Mother Caterina lay precisely in remaining close to Don Bosco and his followers, like the fragile vine clinging to the elm that supports it.

Her visits to the houses were too short for the animators and the Sisters who would have liked to have her remain with them always. However, while planning to remain for a set period of time, she never left a house before listening to all, Sisters and animators. “Did you tell me everything? Do you still have something that disturbs you”? “I will not leave until you are all satisfied.”³⁴ She would smilingly reassure those who doubted, if they could share all their sufferings and joys with her.³⁵ A Sister wrote:

At the time of her departure, she seemed to be very moved. I approached Mother to ask her for a further word, but she said to me, ‘I am too moved, and at this moment I could not tell you anything’.³⁶

Yet she was a woman of fortitude! Her journeys abroad would be enough to prove this. How much discomfort and inconvenience and even pain she endured.

Death of Don Bosco

She was returning from a second journey to the houses in Spain and was in Marseille where she had gone to begin her visits

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

to the houses of France when a telegram reached her. It announced the death of Don Bosco on January 31, 1888.

This was a tremendous blow! True, when she had left he was ill, but she had the hope of seeing him again on her return. She had undertaken that long journey entrusted to her by him and blessed by him. She was to bring to the Sisters the consoling blessing of the founder, and she was almost at the vigil of seeing him again! Instead, she would never be able to speak with him as she had in the past, confiding the results of her journeys, the difficulties, the needs of the houses and works, and also telling him of the consolation she experienced in seeing the spirit of the founder and the example of their first mother general always alive in the heart and apostolate of those Sisters who were so far away.

It was indeed a tremendous blow! It seemed to her that all around her was crumbling. She did not waste time, but left immediately for Turin. The chronicle of the motherhouse for February 2, 1888, states:

Mother vicar wrote that our dearest mother general left Marseille alone and inconsolable and arrived in Turin. She wept and wanted to see the venerated remains of our saintly founder and Father, from whom she had received so much. Then, she stopped crying. She only invoked him and prayed to him.³⁷

Mother Caterina also found herself in spiritual contact with Mother Maria Mazzarello, who had similarly suffered deeply at the death of Fr. Domenico Pestarino who had guided her to God from her first tender years, and then guided her to Don Bosco. Of her too, the biographer says, it seemed that at that painful moment everything was lost. However, she soon rose heroically, thinking that Don Bosco would support her and all the Sisters.³⁸

Mother Caterina had lost Don Bosco! But she also revived at the thought that he was living a more perfect life, and would always be even more powerfully a Father, support, and guide of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. He still lived on in his followers, first among them was Fr. Michele Rua.

³⁷ Chronicle of the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato, FMA General Archives.

Mother vicar immediately left for Turin.

³⁸ F. Maccono, *Op.cit.*

In one of her circular letters of that year, she consoled and exhorted the Sisters. Her words expressed the profound suffering that had afflicted her, but at the same time, the firm hope that from that very suffering, generous resolutions would blossom in the hearts of the Sisters.

She also rejoiced, “The Lord in his infinite mercy continues to bless our humble Institute by sending us many vocations, increasing the number of our houses, and giving us a means of broadening the field of our work for his glory and the salvation of souls”.

She spoke of the death of Don Bosco, the most revered person, a death that, she said, “has immersed all in deep pain, and she recalled the most precious memories he had left them”. Other thoughts are the following:

- Having had the good fortune to be able to visit him during his illness, and asking him for a special blessing for all, he, with his usual goodness, raised his hand and said, ‘I bless all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; I bless the superior general and all her Sisters; let them work to save many souls’.
- Another day, in the presence of Rev. Fr. Rua and Monsignor Cagliero, he added, ‘For the Sisters: obedience, practise it and see to it that it is practised’. Finally, he requested that Reverend Fr. Bonetti, who is in charge of our general direction, should make known this sentiment of his, ‘If the Sisters observe the Constitutions given to them, their eternal salvation is assured’. My good and beloved Sisters, let us impress well in our minds and stamp in our hearts these three reminders and preserve them as the precious inheritance from our good Father.³⁹
- Let us often remember what was said after his death, ‘... the holiness of the Father and founder can be discerned from that of the children’. The more exact we are in the observance of the Constitutions, the holier we will become, and the stronger will be our attachment to the Church, and to the Holy Father. Let us imitate Don Bosco!⁴⁰

³⁹ Folder of circular letters and lists of the houses and Sisters, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁰ Reports and circulars, FMA General Archives.

There is a letter from her to Don Bosco's successor, Fr. Michele Rua; a precious document for interpreting the heart of Mother Caterina toward Don Bosco, toward Fr. Rua, and all those who made their own the great spiritual patrimony of Don Bosco.

The letter was written on her return from Turin after those days of painful emotion.

Rev. Superior and Father,

Thank God, I have arrived happily at home, and although I had a few days to come to see you personally, I feel it my duty to direct these few lines to you. You will rightly say, my dear Father, that I could have freely spoken my thoughts to you in person but what do you expect? I felt too weak, I was afraid of betraying myself and by doing so my tears might cause new and more raw pain in your heart that is already so acutely wounded. Therefore, forgive me, my good Father and superior, and, though late, please accept my sincere condolences, and those of the whole Congregation.

I will not dwell on this subject, reverend Father, because my heart could not bear it. I only pray that you may find consolation in thinking that from heaven Don Bosco will protect you in a very special way and obtain for you from our heavenly Mother Mary Help of Christians that you may see the two Congregations that he has entrusted to your care always prosper.

Besides, I assure you, O good Father, that even in the midst of such pain, I am consoled. Yes, having your reverence as superior is for me, for the chapter and for each Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, such a strong consolation, that it cannot be expressed in words.

For this great favour that God has given us, we will thank him throughout our whole lives, and to make us less unworthy, we will seek to correspond to our holy vocation with the greatest fidelity.

Dear Rev. Father, I know the burden of responsibility for our Institute will cost you many sacrifices and will bring you many

thoughts and concerns, but we will pray much to Jesus that in this also he may adequately compensate you.

For my part, I promise to do my best to make the burden of directing us lighter, by always inculcating in all the good superiors and Sisters prompt obedience, unlimited confidence, holy, reverent and filial affection toward your Reverence who from this time on, after God, is our Father, guide, support, in short, everything!

With this letter, dear Father, I place myself along with our poor, entire, dear Congregation in your hands. I rejoice in your election; I offer our filial obedience and service, and I beg you to also consider us as your Daughters.

I ask you to bless our good intentions. Bless the professed Sisters, novices and postulants, and especially the least among them, the poor writer who, with the deepest veneration and, for all, kisses your sacred hand, feeling honoured to be able to call herself,

*Your most obedient Daughter
Sr. Caterina Daghero*

Nizza Monferrato, February 9, 1888⁴¹

Travels Abroad

Mother Caterina's journeys extended to France, Belgium, England, Spain, the Holy Land, Tunisia, Algeria, and South America.

It is impressive to read the statistics of her travels during that long period from 1881 to 1923.

She was indefatigable in her travels, and always with set goals. Every stage was marked by moving episodes of charity and a generous detachment from anything that did not enter into her program: God and others.

In February of 1895, she went to Palestine, where houses had been opened in Jerusalem, and Beitgemal in Bethlehem. She stayed there until early May, "carrying out devout pilgrimages,

⁴¹ Letters, FMA General Archives.

comforting and encouraging her dear Daughters", as can be seen from the memoirs of those days and the accounts written by the Sisters. They report the following:

Our Mother was so good that in order to give the possibility of enjoying her presence as we all desired, she had the vegetables to be cleaned brought to the place of recreation, and thus, together with us, she joined in the task in all simplicity, and spoke with us, made us smile and cheered us up.⁴²

A Sister wrote:

Our superior, Mother Annetta, wanted to accept a young woman named Caterina. Mother Caterina said emphatically, 'No, do not accept her, she would not succeed just as the Caterina, whom you already have, did not do so. She will make you suffer as this one has, and nothing more'.

Indeed, Mother's words were fulfilled. The postulant Caterina clearly demonstrated that she was not made for the Institute, and left. How could Mother have known so well the inclination and the will of that postulant?⁴³

The return from the Holy Land to Italy was recalled in a letter written by Mother Caterina from Alexandria, Egypt, to the Sister in charge of the pre-province who had accompanied her to Haifa. It was very beautiful and filled with tenderness and simplicity as shown by the following excerpt:

Let us hope that the rest of the journey will be better, but may the will of God be always done.

What is certain is that neither the distance nor the suffering can take away my thoughts from my beloved Sisters who remain in Palestine, their good heart, their great will, the many manifestations of their sincere affection, the many kindnesses, and the attention shown to me in my unforgettable stay among them.

⁴²Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁴³Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

*Yes, I remember everything! I will keep it in my mind and heart. I am often among you in thought, and when I look at those around me it seems that I am dreaming when I think I might not see you anymore! That's how things are in this world! Let us see to it that through our efforts, sacrifices, and the observance of our Holy Rule, we may earn a beautiful place in Paradise. Then there will no longer be any separation, but only union and eternal rejoicing.*⁴⁴

Mother Caterina never returned to the Holy Land, but she sent one or another of her councillors to whom she entrusted her vigilant thought and heart. However, she followed the works that she had founded and strove intensely to extend the Institute's apostolate in Egypt and Syria.

Six months after her return from Palestine, she undertook a tiring journey to South America, departing on November 1, 1895, and returning on September 1, 1897. Only two years, too few, too short a time to visit the many houses of the missionary Sisters. Those were years of intense fatigue but filled with love that left unforgettable memories. From her long journey she gained an ever clearer vision of what the founder had desired, and an experience of the struggles and challenges that the apostolate of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians required for its perfect fulfilment in the world.

There remain three large notebooks of memoirs written by the secretary, Sr. Felicina Fauda, who accompanied her. They formed a detailed diary of that first journey of a mother general to South America. Mother Mazzarello had dreamed of undertaking this journey herself in her ardent desire for sacrifice and to comfort her first generous missionary Sisters. Mother Caterina fulfilled Mother Mazzarello's desire.

In the diary it is written, "Mother Caterina doubted that she would ever return, and this caused her great anguish".⁴⁵ She truly was detaching herself from many beloved places and people. It is true that the missionaries who were awaiting her, were very dear to her, as were those who were accompanying her. But God allowed

⁴⁴ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁵ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

her much anguish of heart. Perhaps it was so that she might better understand and sympathise with the sacrifice of those whom she was going to comfort, and of the many others whom she would see leaving for the missions during her long years in leadership.

On the eve of her departure, concealing her inner anxiety and smiling to encourage the Sisters whom she was leaving in that beloved house, she wanted to offer each one, in particular, her maternal words of affection, admonition, and farewell.

All the Sisters were gathered in the large courtyard and she waited for them at a little distance. At a sign, a Sister who was deeply moved approached her. Mother Caterina whispered a word in her ear and the Sister then kissed the hand that was offered almost as a blessing, and moved away in tears, leaving a place for another. So it continued until she reached the last person.

On Board the *Perseus*

Mother Caterina sailed from Genoa on November 10 aboard the *Perseus*. Some SDB missionaries were also travelling on the same ship. Among them were Monsignor Fagnano and Monsignor Costamagna: the first was returning to his dear mission in *Tierra del Fuego*, the other was going to Quito where he hoped to be able to extend his apostolic activity as a missionary Salesian bishop.

The diary of that first day, rather, of those first hours of travel, noted: "We were at table, as close as in a family, but I saw in our Mother, despite her usual serenity, a certain anguish, and concern".⁴⁶

The five hundred and thirty-eight pages that follow note completely the opposite. "Mother is always serene, encouraging, bringing cheer, and all delicate care and attention for her dear Sisters and Salesians."⁴⁷

Sea, sea, sea, and nothing else. She thought of the dear ones left behind, but above all of those she was about to meet again in the name and will of God.

She was serene, apparently tranquil, even though suffering when the rolling of the *Perseus* caused her vertigo, and when the waves beat its mighty sides almost as though to crush them. Up

⁴⁶ Diary, *Journey of Mother C. Daghero in America*, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

and down, up and down, it seemed as though it would plunge into the abyss and then it rose on the mountainous waves. The secretary wrote:

When the sea calmed down Mother Caterina said, ‘Our life hangs by a thread, and this thread is in the hands of God. Why then should we be afraid?’ Then, with enchanting simplicity, she explained, ‘Since I was used to living on land, I thought with apprehension of the sea journey, instead I feel completely tranquil. Moreover, if I knew that my death would be more profitable to the Congregation than my life, I would even be happy to die at sea’.⁴⁸

When there were blue skies and a sparkling sea, she still had the same thought. Sr. Felicina wrote:

The sky is beautiful and the sea is perfectly calm, but let us not forget that we are suspended over the depths by a very thin thread. However, let us have courage! This extremely thin thread is in God’s hands.⁴⁹

Since they were speaking of sacrifices and suffering, she ardently affirmed that, “The greatest sacrifice for a religious would be that of not having anything to suffer and to offer to the Lord”.⁵⁰

At another time she said, “You have to accept the good and the contrary winds, everything as the Lord wills. Religious perfection lies in abandonment to his divine will.”⁵¹ She could draw topics for spiritual reflection from everything.

Apostle Among the Emigrants

On board the *Perseus*, she gave the Sisters a practical example of exercising the apostolate. In the third class there were 1,200 poor Italian emigrants. Mother Caterina was deeply moved by their plight. Poor people! They were looking for work and bread, and perhaps they had the foolish hope of finding treasure: gold, gold! But in their frantic search, they ran the risk of losing

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the only real treasure in the world: the beautiful, simple faith learned in their little villages, which they had practised until that day.

The secretary wrote, “These and other similar thoughts occupied the mind and heart of Mother Caterina”.

She was moved and went down to the third class quarters to distribute medals, and little gifts for the children, and to speak words of comfort, faith, and Christian hope.

Aboard the *Perseus*, she came into contact for the first time with the most unfortunate classes of her compatriots, unfortunate because they were forced to seek under foreign skies nourishment to sustain their lives and those of their families and to accept the traditions, customs, laws of foreigners, and frequently, even their corruption.

There burned in her heart an ever-greater and livelier patriotic charity and during her time of leadership it urged her to support the works for Italians abroad, and especially beyond the ocean in distant lands. It meant being Italian in the full sense of the word. It meant being Christian and Italian according to the spirit of the Founder, Don Bosco. On her trip to South America, she encouraged the Sisters to sacrifice themselves for the good of all, especially those people who were so much in need of moral and material comfort.

It is true that among the immigrants there were those who became extraordinarily wealthy. But wealth of itself does not remove from, nor impede moral misery, rather it could favour it. Becoming wealthy from work and good fortune it is necessary to be open to a charity that reignites and revives faith when the flame flickers or has already been extinguished.

The Salesians had preceded the Sisters and had also taught them in this great work. They had left Valdocco in 1875 with the intention of reinforcing and preserving in the Italian immigrants, who were already many in Argentina, the sentiments of their religion and homeland, and with the prospect of preparing themselves for the passage to the vast Patagonian pampas where they would devote themselves to the evangelisation of the indigenous tribes, who had shown themselves to be strong and indomitable. These were the tribes of the Onas, Alcaluffi, Tehuelcane and Yaagan.

From the flourishing, luxurious cities, therefore, they went to the frozen forests of Patagonia, from the magnificent skyscrapers to poor huts. Mother Caterina went to them all with the same Salesian and maternal heart.

Tragic Event

They landed on November 19. At the beginning of the journey did Mother Caterina have a premonition of the painful bereavement that awaited her? Did that shadow of anguish the secretary had seen on her forehead, conceal an obscure presentment? Sr. Felicina gave a detailed report:

The Salesian rectors of the houses of Montevideo and Villa Colon came by an express ferry and without having the courage to speak of the very grave misfortune that had occurred, persuaded her to disembark for more than a few hours. She had intended to go to Buenos Aires on that same day and to return to Montevideo another time, but they persuaded her to remain for at least a few days because the Sisters needed her presence and comfort.

She agreed without asking the reason, but it was soon made clear to her. The provincial and all the superiors of the Argentine province were waiting on land and then she heard of the grave misfortune. A few days before, while she was at sea and thinking of them, Monsignor Lasagna, Salesian missionary bishop, and his secretary along with other SDB and four Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had been victims in a train crash at Juiz de Fora. They were on their way to Cachoeira do Campo at Ouro Preto and to Ponte Nova for the opening of an agricultural school and two boarding schools for girls.⁵²

They were, therefore, victims of obedience and charity for the apostolate. So it was that Mother Caterina, having just reached the threshold of the new world, received the cruel greeting of sorrow. Her secretary wrote: "It was a torment!"

Perhaps never before, as in this painful circumstance, had Mother Caterina revealed her tender heart and at the same time her

⁵² P. Albera, *Vita di Monsignor Lasagna*.

fortitude. She cried but consoled others and was able to inspire in them the courage to look with resignation at the present very sad moment, and also to the future in which one could foresee other dangers and further violence. In fact, it seemed clear to everyone that the railway crash of Juiz de Fora was a hate crime against the heroic apostolate of Monsignor Luigi Lasagna, the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.⁵³

On November 25, she left again for Buenos Aires, and began the exhausting journey of visiting all the houses and provinces founded in South America since 1877 under the leadership of Mother Mazzarello, and then under her own until that 1895.

In a first period she visited Argentina, Patagonia, Uruguay, and Brazil, in a second period, Tierra del Fuego, Chile, and Peru. She crossed the Strait of Magellan often and stopped at Dawson Island to get to know all the heroism of her dear missionaries.

Difficulties and Consolations

She faced discomfort, exhaustion, and danger. "Mother was always on the road", wrote her secretary. "She had a fever but did not stop. Once, she was engulfed by a tremendous wave and was knocked down on the deck. She travelled for days and days without a break, and she slept in a tent, camping out in the open."

She travelled on fragile vessels, the secretary actually wrote, "little boats", and more than once was in danger of drowning. She suffered hunger, cold, and exhaustion, but she always smiled, encouraged, comforted, and revived hearts. She brought joy also to the generous Salesian missionaries because she passed on to them the thoughts and affection of the Rector Major, Fr. Rua, and of all the general councillors. She brought to them a breath of Valdocco and its Basilica.

As children are wont to do with their own mother, they confide their sufferings, difficulties and needs to her so that upon her return to Italy she would be able to speak of them with the much loved rector major, because she had seen with her own eyes and touched with her own hands all that the fulfilment of their

⁵³ Cf. Op.cit.

apostolate required of them. And she listened to them. There was in her appearance and her words, both gentleness and strength. Those private conversations with the Salesians of Don Bosco bring to mind the great Teresa of Avila, who had the heart of a founder, reformer, and Mother.

Fr. Rua had entrusted her with taking an interest in the Salesians, and she humbly carried out the mandate. Her faithful secretary wrote enthusiastically:

It seemed that all hearts are reborn to new life and all celebrated her visit, not only her Daughters but also the Salesians, the bishops, prelates and civil and political authorities, even presidents of republics came to bring her reverential, cordial greetings. But Mother persevered in her humility, prudence, and that full abandonment to God, that was so characteristic of her, and was her strength and life.⁵⁴

This could be seen as a brief summary which defined that two-year journey that revived the Salesian Spirit in the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It strengthened the bonds of all the houses and provinces so far from the centre of the Institute, the place of FMA formation of valiant missionaries for the entire world and for all time.

It would be worth mentioning the solicitous, vigilant, and truly paternal goodness of the Salesian missionary bishops: Giovanni Cagliero, Giacomo Costamagna, Giuseppe Fagnano and of all the Salesians toward Mother Caterina. The diary refers to the generous cooperation for the success of that journey. How often they helped to remove serious obstacles and to escape grave dangers. They had a very high, most affectionate esteem for Mother Caterina. This is shown in the pages of the diary, their conferences, and their writings to her, the Sisters, and other Salesian authorities.

So it was that, in her fatigue, in her continuous pilgrimage from house to house, to the distant and difficult missions among the indigenous peoples, she also had the great consolation of

⁵⁴Diary, *Journey of Mother C. Daghero in America*, FMA General Archives.

feeling the protection of Don Bosco through the generous help of the Salesians.

The diary reports many interesting and moving scenes. Those, for example, that have as their background an island lost in the sea, Dawson Island, or the frozen forests of Tierra del Fuego. In these scenes the typical figures of natives wrapped in *guanaco* hides move out of their huts, or from the houses built by Monsignor Fagnano when they began to accept religion. They went to meet the ‘white Mother’ who had come to visit them and bring them who knows how many beautiful presents!

In the history of the Salesian mission of Tierra del Fuego Monsignor Fagnano stands next to Bishop Cagliero in the aura of the glory of the apostolate. Mother Caterina, at that moment, stands with them.

Arrival at Dawson Island

In Tierra del Fuego, the living conditions of the indigenous people were poorer than those of Dawson Island, where Monsignor Fagnano had succeeded in building almost a little city. The extreme poverty did not prevent Mother Caterina from entering their huts, gathering them around her, smiling through veiled tears, and looking at her dear missionaries who lived happily among those people.

What about Dawson Island? The diary recalls the cries of jubilation on the part of the Sisters, the Salesians and the indigenous people, when they saw her landing. Then she visited their little houses, sitting at table with those, “dear, invited guests” who were, “lacking experience of certain more basic rules of etiquette, the failure of which was not really the best tonic to favour a good appetite...on the contrary!”⁵⁵ Mother Caterina understood and smiled, and she showed them great kindness.

Later there was the distribution of medals and clothing for the children and the mothers, but especially the great joy in seeing those dear people approach the altar to receive the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist, to hear their voices singing the hymns to the Madonna, Don Bosco’s Madonna.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Intense conversations took place between Mother Caterina and the little children, conversations that cannot be reported, however, since they were composed more of gestures than of words, and then they could be all summed up in a jubilant cry of, “Kind-hearted Mother”!⁵⁶

Onward to Matto Grosso

Deeply moved, the secretary recorded the most painful yet glorious scene of Mother Caterina’s journey, as Mother to the heroic missionaries. She wrote, “No longer among the frozen forests of Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, but under the scorching rays of the sun darting through the forests of Matto Grosso, Brazil”.

It would take nine days of exhausting travel before arriving in the depths of the forest.

“Fifty leagues [about 150 miles or 250 km] on horseback, Mother!” they warned her. “Yes”, she responded because she wanted to go to see the Sisters, the first missionaries among the Bororos. “Mother, perhaps it would be better to make the journey on a portable chair carried on the shoulders of the native tribesmen. Twenty days journey, Mother!” “Yes”, she responded, “as long as I get there, poor Sisters!” “No, it is better to make use of a *chatta* [a river boat]...perhaps we could get one, but we would need money”. And the money was found. The president of the republic obtained the necessary sum from the government as a sign of recognition of the merit of her work as mother general.

Nine days and nights of travel under the scorching sun during the day and the copious dew at night and mosquitoes, mosquitoes, mosquitoes! The leader of the pre-province who accompanied her, scourged by the bites of these insects, fainted. Mother Caterina, however, bore with the discomfort.

Food? Only hard, dry bread. Rest? In a hammock strung between two tree trunks, under the immense silent sky, under the vigilant paternal eye of God.

They prayed, and this was the sweetest comfort. They sang the praises of Don Bosco's Madonna, and they worked. They mended the stockings of the missionaries who walked great

⁵⁶ Ibid.

distances to look for the poor Bororos who had not yet shown up at the missions.

In the Midst of the Bororos

When they arrived at the Teresa Cristina colony, the mission station of the Bororos, there was a great celebration! The Sisters, children, and adults went to meet her shouting with joy. Even the indigenous men and boys, guided by the missionaries, ran to the river and proudly showed her their bows and arrows.

They triumphantly accompanied her to the little church, which resembled a large hut, and there, prayers and songs were offered. Then Mother Caterina could finally take some rest and have something to eat. She was offered a rare, exquisite gift, that is, two loaves of white bread that the captain of the *chatta* gave as one would give a rarity. The missionaries among the Bororos never saw bread, only with great difficulty could they obtain flour for the hosts to be consecrated! When night fell they could finally rest, but what kind of rest?

The next day there were the visits to the poor huts and the distribution of medals, glass trinkets, and clothing. The Bororos gathered happily around Mother Caterina, who smiled and cried. It was a new experience for her who was usually so serene and strong! She looked at those dear missionaries who were lacking everything and yet were so happy.

She told them, “If you want, we can take you back with us. We can have others ready to come in your place so you can rest a little. In this way more Sisters can share in this life”. “No, no, Mother! Leave us here! We are happy!”

Mother Caterina wept now with consolation and admiration for these heroic Sisters. Sr. Felicina alludes to other, less dramatic but equally interesting scenes. For example, “Mother writes, writes, writes. She stays up late at night to respond to far away Sisters and superiors. She has a little suitcase full of letters!” Therefore, she was surrounded by silence and solitude, but how many voices spoke to her, and how much work of mind and heart she had! Further on it is recorded:

Mother was really besieged by the Sisters, but she never showed herself to be tired. On the contrary, she was happy to listen to

them. She also received benefactors and important personages. She was queen of the celebration that they held in her honour, but received them all with joyful humility, saying as she usually did, 'These were not for her, but for Our Lady, and for Don Bosco to whom all honour must be directed'.⁵⁷

Hands to Work and Heart to God

Still quoting from the diary, it can be added that even during her two year journey in South America Mother Caterina continued her work as mother general in Europe, keeping in touch with the SDB and FMA general councillors and Sisters of all the houses of the Institute, while establishing new foundations of which three were in South America.

Mother Caterina defines this prodigious and truly Salesian activity that she wanted for herself and the Sisters, with a powerful and expressive phrase that summed it up, "Hands to work and heart to God"!⁵⁸

The secretary was speaking the truth, "...a little suitcase full of letters" to be answered. A large collection of Mother Caterina's letters could be made, referring only to those written during the two years in South America. The following is chosen from among the many, because it seems worth reporting in full. It reveals her patience, self-sacrifice clothed in gentleness, delicacy, wit, and her maternal tenderness. She wrote from Cuyabá on May 8, 1897:

Your letter and those of the Sisters expressing your kind wishes for the feast of St. Catherine, reached me here in Matto Grosso. I can't tell you how much I appreciated them, especially when I think of the dear Sisters who wrote and sent them.

Oh, you have to experience it to know what you feel on the arrival of a letter from a person who is so dear to you! If only you could see how pleased these poor Sisters are! It seems like a dream to them to have me here. They never thought that I would have come here. Certainly, the voyage was long, twenty-five days, five by sea and twenty on the rivers of Panama, Paraguay, and Cuyabá.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

This was definitely not a pleasure trip. However, we have arrived, and by the grace of God with less hardship than had been indicated to us. The heat is intense and if it has not melted our bones that is a sign that they are very hard! Here we don't wash our face only once a day, but far more frequently also during the night. Steam baths without cost at your pleasure!

On Sunday, I will leave for Teresa Cristina colony, to visit those poor Sisters, and I will not be returning for a month. This journey will be delightful! For all that time we will not have the comfort of a Holy Mass, nor even Holy Communion and the Sundays will be like all the others! On the journey, we will see only water, many crocodiles, and dense forests.

The Lord, who accompanied us here, will continue to accompany us in view of the prayers that so many good souls offer for us, including you all, my dear ones, as the writings from each Sister confirm. I deeply regret that I cannot thank them individually, but being about to depart, I have many things to do.

These Sisters who are so good, know me, they know what I would do to please them, to show them my pleasure, therefore I hope that this time they will be satisfied with a heartfelt thank you. I will answer those who have written to me in person if the Lord will grant me life. Greet everyone for me, including the students.

Give my congratulations to dear Sr. Paolina for the good disposition she manifests. May she always confide in Our Lady, and may it also be so for her sister, Sr. Giuseppina. Please give my greetings to the parish priest.

On June 14 I hope it will be possible to leave this land to go to Buenos Aires from where we will leave for Europe as soon as possible and will arrive in Genoa.

Oh, how much I want to see you all again, however, even if all goes well I will not arrive before the end of July or early August, as I have already written! I fear that the letters I wrote to you and to the other Sisters with so much love, as well as some of those you have written, have been lost.

May our most Holy Virgin and Mother, whose month we are celebrating, bless us all, keep us under the protection of her mantle, and help us to be worthy of divine favour. Pray for me.

*In the Lord, your most affectionate,
Mother Caterina Daghero⁵⁹*

In another letter she wrote:

I only have a few minutes free. However, I want to send a heartfelt greeting to you and to the postulants as I do every day when I ask my good Angel to let you hear within you what I want to tell you. Oh yes, not a day passes, not even a single hour, that I am not with you in your midst! I see you now at recreation, the sewing room, classroom, dining room, church or engaged in various tasks of the house, everywhere. I also hear your warm recommendations, and the prayers you offer for this poor writer.

She then asked about one or another of the Sisters with maternal interest, and she closes with expressions that must surely have given much encouragement to the one to whom the letter was addressed:

To you, then, I send all that one may wish for a person who is holy and deeply loved. Every day I ask the Lord to bless you, enlighten you, to allow you to enjoy that sweetness that he wants to bestow on the souls he has chosen. Thus comforted, may you have no other desire than to sacrifice yourself for the good of souls, to lead them to His Divine Heart. I ask that you continue the charity of your prayer and those of others.⁶⁰

In another letter, she wrote:

I will only write a few words to you because we are finally leaving for Chubut, if nothing prevents us. We will again pass through the Pampas, I will once again see the Sisters in Patagonia and then on to the Chubut mission. All that is left for

⁵⁹ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

*us then will be Matto Grosso if we can reach it. I thanked the Lord for the good news from your houses and from you in particular, as well as about the large number of boarders and day students attending the school. Yes, you will have much work, but you will be very consoled by the good you will be able to do. There is a great need for someone to seriously occupy themselves with so many young souls who are neglected and exposed to many dangers. It is not necessary to cross many oceans to reach America. You have America there with you.*⁶¹

She goes on to encourage her to take an interest in a poor young girl who had not persevered in her religious vocation. She wrote, “Poor, misguided lamb, she allowed herself to be attracted by vanity, by the desire to make a name for herself in the world”. She was, in fact, a talented musician. “*May Our Lady save her!*” wrote the good Mother, and she concluded:

*Even in this new world one can find strange ideas. More and more one feels the need to ask the Lord for perseverance. We are in the month of St. Joseph, let us pray to him to obtain for us a happy death because we have lived a good life, and the grace to remove from our houses all that is not pleasing to the hearts of Jesus and Mary. Pray to them also for me, because I have the same, if not greater, needs.*⁶²

In another letter she wrote:

Also and especially to you, I want to write a few lines before embarking on a journey to the colony. You know by now how I arrived from Patagonia and I stopped at Almagro for only one night. There I was given a mountain of letters, among which was your welcome letter. The news of the common will and shared commitment to put into practice my poor advice was certainly comforting. I was sorry to hear that your health is still weak. It is true that you are earning great merit for paradise. However, I recommend that you take care, and do for yourself what you would do for your Sisters, and I will regard it as done for me.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Who knows when these lines will reach you! Mail leaves here only twice a month! I am going to the colony and I will leave these letters in the house so they will mail them. Rest assured, however, that you will be preceded, accompanied, and followed always by my poor prayers.

I, too, have a great desire to see you again. What consolations will you give me then? That of finding you all united in one heart, in the exact observance of the smallest points of the Holy Rule, cheerful, and in as much as it depends on you, in good health. May Our Lady bless you all and be a tender Mother in life and in death, and may she prepare a most beautiful place for you in Paradise close to her and to Don Bosco.

Letter to Fr. Rua from Ouro Preto

The following is a letter to the Rector Major, Fr. Michele Rua, written from Ouro Preto on October 30, 1896, that is worth reporting in full.

Very Reverend and beloved Father,

I cannot tell you my consolation when I received your letter of August 18 at Ouro Preto. Thank you, my most venerable and beloved Father!

Thank you for such thoughtfulness. I do not expect a response to all my letters, much less during certain times. I know how much effort this writing takes, and therefore I appreciate it even more and I feel very grateful.

*I thank you for what you wrote to His Excellency, Monsignor Cagliero regarding the change I had proposed for the new superior for the houses of the province. The letter which was delayed only arrived last week. Since, as I wrote to you, there was an urgent need to organise and establish the houses of the province, so as to see them started before I left, and seeing that Sister *** who is already known and wanted, could do well, we made the decision, persuaded that we would have your paternal approval.*

I have not had any special news about the retreats nor of what was decided in Nizza. I am satisfied, however, and I thanked the

Lord for the news that you gave me, i.e. the increase in the number of new houses.

Unfortunately, I have reason to believe that having distanced myself from the Centre I removed an impediment to much good. May this be a motive for greater blessings for our dear Congregation and nothing more on my part because I am not worthy of celestial favours.

If the director general⁶³ writes to me, as you told me in your last letter, I would be happy to implement his orders. Otherwise, I will have to adhere to those of monsignor, as he had the vicar general, Sr. Enrichetta write to me. In this case, our return to Italy will not be too soon. He thinks that I should attend the retreats in Uruguay and Argentina that will take place in January or February, while before and after I will go to visit the two missions of Chubut and Matto Grosso. The latter will require at least three months. These things have not yet been decided, both because the season of the year is not favourable and because I am not sure of being able to find the means to go. These will be the most difficult visits. As for my return to Montevideo and Buenos Aires, that is still to be decided. We will not be able to leave Brazil before the middle of October because of the immense distances involved.

As you can see, I am mailing this letter from Ponte Nova after having visited the hospital at Ouro Preto, the two houses that were to be opened when the terrible disaster [the train crash] took place.

The inhabitants of these cities are Catholic in every sense of the word, beginning from the highest authorities to the last poor person.

Bishop Cagliero received a cordial welcome and manifestations never before seen in all of America and so it was also with us Sisters. The president was the first to come to visit him, not allowing him to go first to pay his respects.

The hospital of Ouro Preto has about a hundred patients with external wards, schools, sewing classes, festive oratory, that have begun to produce results even though it has been opened

⁶³ Fr. Giovanni Marengo who later became bishop in Massa and Carrara.

for barely two months. The authorities are all committed to finding a suitable site, to later give it to the Institute, in order to open a boarding school.

This school has been in existence for only five months and already has more than 70 resident students. There is so much esteem and enthusiasm for the Congregation that I fear that the Sisters may not be able to maintain it! I hope in the Lord and in your valid help, Very reverend father. There is much work, and especially in Brazil, scant personnel. They have great hopes for assistance, especially from Italy, as do the Salesians.

There are not that many vocations here. The situation is very complex and very delicate, so we cannot count on much. They are, in general, docile and good. With the increase in the number of boarders in the various schools, we can hope for a greater number of vocations, and therefore, more help.

To arrive here one must pass the place of the disaster, where we stopped to visit the tombs of the dear departed held by all to be saints, so great is the veneration for them. How many feelings, how many impressions one experiences at that sight!

I conclude, good Father, asking for your blessing on her who is happy to be able to call herself,

*Your humble daughter,
Sr. Caterina Daghero⁶⁴*

In this letter, as in many others, Mother Caterina showed that she lived in the light of obedience, of gentle submission to the rector major and the one who represented him. It was an aura of simple, amiable humility, of self-forgetfulness, which, at the same time, reveals her strength of character.

All for Others, Nothing for Self

She was always the same. Others were everything; she was nothing, if not an obstacle to good. Mother Caterina had this concept of herself, and in her letter to the one who was her guide and Father, she candidly reveals it.

⁶⁴ Letters, FMA General Archives.

In a circular letter to all the Sisters of the old and new continents written from Villa Colon, there is another expression of her gratitude and gentle humility.

In the year that is about to conclude, I see continual proof of the prayers that you offer for me. Yes, my dear Sisters, it is to divine goodness, to the blessing of the [SDB] superiors, but also to your prayers, I owe the paternal assistance with which God has deigned to protect and comfort me in the long, perilous journeys on the vast South American continent.

I also know that many of you imposed not light sacrifices for this end, committing yourselves in a special way to the practice of perfection and the exact fulfilment of your duties. Oh, think of how grateful I am for your charity, which is so worthy of the holy predilection that always and everywhere must keep us united in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

She rejoiced in the good that the Congregation was doing and exhorted all to work constantly and show themselves true Daughters of Don Bosco, true Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She continued:

The Lord, always admirable in the designs of his Divine Providence, is pleased to use our humble work for the good of girls. There are many houses that have been opened both in Europe and in America, there are very large number of requests for new foundations. Oh, how great is our need to be attached to the observance of the Holy Rule, to live in its spirit in order to correspond to the divine plans to show that everywhere and in all things we are true daughters of Don Bosco, true Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.⁶⁵

An Original Initiative for Young Women

On June 22, 1897, she was in Buenos Aires for the last time. From there, on the 28th, she would leave for Montevideo, the

⁶⁵ Circular letter written from Villa Colon, Dec 31, 1897, FMA General Archives.

last stop before returning from South America. She had yet another great consolation as the diary recorded:

During her penultimate visit in this beloved house, our mother had expressed the wish to the superior of the pre-province that they should form a group of girls to be educated particularly to the duties of family life, of a good working family. They were to choose the poorest, and those of good will. They were to consider them to be the dearest to the heart of God and Don Bosco and help them to grow to be wise, hardworking, pious, so as to help them to earn their daily bread honestly and to provide for their own family. They also had to be the most beloved of all. They would be like the artisans of Don Bosco.

Our Mother's desire was fully implemented. When she returned, the group had been formed, and how joyful they were! It was a group of about fifty girls, who had a modest, but attractive uniform. The members of the group divided their time between prayer, school, handiwork, laundry, cooking, and sewing.⁶⁶

They wanted to present themselves in a genial representation, showing that they were already little, proficient homemakers, happily recalling the familiar tradition of the young artisans of Don Bosco.

Mother Caterina brought the work accomplished in those two years of travel in South America to a good conclusion. In establishing this apostolate she once again gave a characteristic imprint of the Institute, the genuine imprint of the founder.

The pre-province leader, Mother Luisa Vaschetti, who had responded perfectly to her wish, was worthy of her.

June 28, 1897 was the date of her final departure. The diary continued:

The Sisters, boarders, the Don Bosco artisans, the more than 400 day students, all this dear world of souls once again crowd around Mother Caterina. Then Monsignor Cagliero raised his

⁶⁶ Diary, FMA General Archives.

voice and instructed, 'All kneel! Mother Caterina will bless you', and he in her name, blessed them'.⁶⁷

This incident seems significant because it shows the high regard in which Mother Caterina was held by the first Salesian cardinal. It was also very moving.

Meanwhile, he wrote to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who were eagerly awaiting the return of their beloved Mother:

Mother is returning to Europe! The Sisters in America are returning her to you after having experienced her thoughts, affections, maternal councils for almost two years. She is departing, but leaves to the Brazilian, Uruguayan, Argentinean, Chilean, and Peruvian Sisters indelible memories, wholesome examples, and unforgettable affection.

She is leaving, and with her go the hearts of thousands of Sisters and boarders, as well as, day pupils from Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, and Matto Grosso both those evangelised and those yet to be evangelised. They all follow her, love her and remember her with cherished and sincere affection.⁶⁸

Return to Europe

Mother Caterina departed from Buenos Aires bound for Montevideo. On July 2, 1897, she set sail from Montevideo for her definitive return to her dear land of Italy. On July 25, she was in Turin before the image of Mary Help of Christians in the beautiful Basilica, and visited Fr. Rua in his poor little room.

On August 1, she left Turin for Nizza Monferrato, that large and beloved house, where everyone was waiting for the celebration! There were not only the Sisters of that community but many others from the various houses and provinces. There was a great joy that had its most beautiful manifestation in the church that had been festively adorned in thanksgiving for that longed-for return. There followed the entertainment in the hall, where she sat

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Letters, FMA General Archives.

like a queen among the Sisters and students, and where she also received the greetings of the SDB and civil authorities who had arrived for the celebration.

That gala celebration of hearts left an unforgettable memory. Copies of the songs in her honour are conserved in the archives of the *Schola Cantorum* of the motherhouse, including a beautiful one with lyrics by Fr. Lemoyne set to music by Br. Giuseppe Dogliani's music. Both men are well-remembered in the history of the Salesian Society for their piety and their artistic gifts.

Jubilees and Anniversaries

In 1897, the *Cronistoria* recorded the occurrence of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Institute. The Rector Major, Fr. Michele Rua announced that it would begin on August 5, the anniversary of the first religious profession in Mornese. His Holiness Pope Leo XIII, with his apostolic blessing, granted a plenary indulgence to be gained on the day that the anniversary was celebrated and permission was given to use the proper of the Mass for the feast of Mary Help of Christians.

Mother Caterina was glad to spread the good news. Together with an invitation to the celebration she communicated the following important news to the past pupils. "For the occasion a permanent committee of past pupils will be formed, with the aim of creating ever-stronger ties that will bind you to the Institute."⁶⁹

She established the Association of the Past Pupils of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, with its own regulations, similar to that of the Salesian Past Pupils Association.

A very brief summary has already been given of her long journey in South America. It would be good to recall her other travels abroad as mentioned in the chronicles of the various houses and provinces, and in the writings of the Sisters.

Visits to the French Province

As mother general, she made thirty visits to the French province, not only in times of peace but also in times of war. All

⁶⁹ Circular Letter, December, 1898, FMA General Archives.

this is recorded in a handwritten volume that attests to her great goodness during those visits to the Sisters.

Mother Caterina loved all the Sisters, but she seemed to have a predilection for the French and those living in France. One should not be surprised or jealous. The reason was clear. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the French houses had to suffer what the Italians did not. In addition to the distance from the Centre, they could not wear the religious habit. They faced greater difficulties in their religious apostolate and even more hidden and dangerous threats to their vocation.

Mother Caterina understood perfectly, and with her habitual simplicity and, at the same time, profound understanding of people and events, she kept a spiritual balance even there where discord could have developed with the danger of doing harm to both the spirit and the works of the Institute. The following is a charming incident reported by a French Sister:

I was at the motherhouse and it was a grace and happiness for me to spend a few days there, close to our Mother, and to warm myself at the holy fire that burned in her heart. One day, at recreation, she, with her charming grace, was distributing sweets to those who crowded around her, accompanied by a few words that made them radiant with joy. When my turn came, she said to me with a smile, 'To this Frenchwoman, I give my heart. The sweet had the form of a heart'. I was moved to tears.⁷⁰

Another Sister wrote:

In the foyer outside Mother's room several Sisters were waiting to speak with her. She came to the door, and pausing in the doorway said, 'Let the French Sister come first. Poor daughters! They are far away, and seldom have the joy of seeing their superiors'. She had such a motherly smile, that the other Sisters seemed to be happy to let me pass first!⁷¹

⁷⁰ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Advance of World War I

In 1914, the beginning of World War I, despite the difficulties she foresaw at the borders, she decided to visit the dear French Sisters. When she found herself among them after serious hardships and dangers she said with a smile, “To come and see what was going on and how you were in France, I willingly placed myself at the risk of going to prison”.⁷² She showed all the suffering of her heart for their difficult situation. To a Sister who worked in the garden, she suggested with profound emotion, “When you go to the garden or fields, take your rosary and recite some Hail Marys so that Our Lady will help all”.⁷³

She gave the example of intense prayer. Here are some further remembrances from the French Sisters. “It was Holy Thursday and Mother Caterina stayed in the chapel on her knees for two hours, without moving, though her health at that time was no longer good.”

Mother Caterina suffered anguished trepidation during that trying period. The news coming from France and Belgium was such that it would not let her rest at night. “I cannot sleep, thinking of those poor daughters. I know of institutions not respected, and I, in the evening, feel my heart tremble with fear for them! Oh, Mary Help of Christians save them! Ask me any sacrifice, even my life.”⁷⁴

When the enemy was almost at the gates of Paris, and the Sisters of the French houses were able to come to Italy to take refuge in the motherhouse, she welcomed them with tears in her eyes. For as long as they remained she lavished caring affection on them. When the danger ceased, and she allowed them to leave, she gathered them to repeat what they already knew, but it was good and even moving to hear it in her own words, “If ever you find yourself in a situation or with a task that would be of danger to your vocation, let the superiors know. Be ready to die rather than to lose your vocation”!⁷⁵

To obtain this strength of perseverance in the way of religious perfection, she suggested to the dear French Sisters very

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

simple yet practical ways. She did so with that cheerfulness and, at times, with her characteristic humour, even though she was so reflective.

It was easy for them, for example, to allow themselves to be tempted by vanity upon having to resume the way of dressing which they had renounced at their profession and committed themselves to the spirit of detachment. It could also happen that a Sister could be given something that did not suit her, did not fit her personality, or the social condition to which she had belonged before entering religious life. This might cause conflict, perhaps even a slight sense of rebellion.

Mother Caterina intervened readily, clearly, and maternally to prevent and console. She told a Sister:

If you should be given a dress or a hat that you do not like or that does not seem to suit you, or is out of fashion, hide the feeling of displeasure. Don't mention it, but accept it gladly, and wear it still more cheerfully, thinking that Jesus wants this mortification from you.⁷⁶

The Sister who gave this report, said that the words of the dear Mother comforted and cheered her up, with the sacred joy that came from self-denial and humility.

In the following words, Mother Caterina offers firm but gentle advice:

Remember that even though you change your style of dress, you are always religious. Often repeat this to one another in meetings with your Sisters. Sanctify your daily activity by renewing your intention to work with love for God alone. In your conversations, there should never be anything that is not in keeping with your religious life, and that does not keep us united to the Lord. In everyone and everything, let there be a spirit of humility and obedience.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Sow Good Seeds

The French manuscript recalls other precious memories of Mother Caterina during World War I. They help to provide a more complete picture in which she insists above all on the aspect, "...to console, console, console":

I am certain that my daughters in France had to suffer, and suffer much. I wanted to go to share their pain, to console them. Once having seen them, I would even have gone to prison, and I would have gone with joy!⁷⁸

This precious remark seemed worth emphasising even at the cost of repetition.

Mother Caterina went to Belgium and England, and reports and letters have survived that refer to those short but intense visits.

She kept in mind the mysterious dream of the young Domenico Savio that was told in the life of St. John Bosco. It was a dream that bright light would banish the shadows from the great, rich land of England, a light that would dispel the shadow of error. Mother Caterina wanted the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to take part, alongside the Salesians, in spreading the light of truth and salvation. The houses of England, like those of France and Belgium, were the subjects of her most vigilant care.

She also visited Algeria and Tunisia. At the beginning serious difficulties hindered the apostolate of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, but she energetically opposed every obstacle and taught others to overcome them.

The memoirs record one of her memorable sayings that the Sisters treasured in their heart as a safe and comforting sign. "Sow good seeds! Sow many in these African lands! Others after you will reap abundant harvest."⁷⁹

A Sister wrote, "We were very poor and our dear mother edified us by her example and with her words. She comforted us and taught us with her wise counsels. She was really like a mother to her Daughters".⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

That is the way she was always and everywhere. That is what her tireless travels from country to country, from house to house, throughout Italy, Europe and abroad, were all about: teaching to sow good seed from which works of salvation would sprout.

By the time she prepared for her journey, not around the world but for heaven, Mother Caterina had known through direct, personal experience, the situation of almost all the provinces and houses of the Institute, even of the smallest and least known. She left flourishing Salesian life in 184 houses in thirty provinces.

In the year before she died, she envisaged the idea of a new, long, journey. Would it be she or one of her general councillors who would make it?

A Sister who for years had cared for her tenderly and knew well her now worn-out health said, "Mother, do you want to die? You cannot go on a journey with your poor health!"

Mother Caterina replied with a glance and a tone of voice that the Sister could never forget, "I would be very fortunate to be able to die for the Congregation"⁸¹ Ever living charity and Salesian activity.

HYMN SUNG IN HONOUR OF MOTHER CATERINA
DAGHERO DURING THE CELEBRATION OF HER RETURN
TO THE MOTHERHOUSE ON AUGUST 10, 1897

Words by Fr. G. B. Lemoyne Music by Br. G. Dogliani

Beyond the Atlantic Sea,
On the Pampas, above the Andes,
There, along the singing rivers,
In the marshes of the land,
Among endless forests,
With the shadowy veil of the rays of the day,
You proceed, intrepid Mother,
Your step does not falter.

⁸¹ Ibid.

In the roar of the storm,
Or on earth that burned like lava,
Or under the starless night,
Now through snow-capped mountains,
You do not give up! Your ardent heart,
Gives the strength of immense love
To your yearning for souls dear to your Lord.

Dear encounters among the tents
Of the wilds of Patagonia,
And in the *toldos* that you saw as splendid,
And the joy of the colonies
Where you have Daughters, who are rejoicing
In towns and cities;
Where your virgins
Exult in the love of the good God.

And you are seated in their midst,
In the jubilation of flowers and songs,
You see the noble work
That fills the heaven with saints;
You hear the voices renew
Their faith in Jesus
And you see fulfilled the faith of Don Bosco
The hope that he gave us.

And then, pure and fervent
With the wings of love
Did not the ardour of our love
Reach your heart?
Ah, sometimes, in the twilight
When thoughts were sad
Your heart and gaze
Turned to your favourite home!

Here the most fervent prayers
Hasten that happy time
In which you, Mother, smiling
Would return among us.
For you we begged a cloud-free sky
And invoked quiet seas,
And for your ship a strong, fast wind,
Until the shores of your homeland appear.

Finally, you are here!
The house vests itself with joy.
All is in glad celebration.
Loosen the cords of the harp
With notes of joy.
Rare flowers adorn the surrounding walls
With the perfume of virtue,
The tabernacle shines with gold.
To give thanks to Jesus.

Be seated, O gentle Mother and rejoice
In the midst of your Daughters,
Among the choirs of hearts.
At seeing your dear, gentle face
All our pain and suffering flee,
Our lips murmur the affection
That shimmers in our eyes!

For you, O Mother, an immense hymn
Resounds to the heavens.

Chapter VIII

The Seed Flourishes and Grows

Expansion Continues

Mother Caterina gave a magnificent example of living charity and Salesian activity.

When Mother Mazzarello died she left twenty-eight promising houses. A great deal of work was accomplished during the nine years of her wise leadership. She had sown the first seeds in fertile soil. They would flourish under the leadership of Mother Caterina.

Maria Mazzarello had welcomed and kept in her heart the prophetic words of the saintly founder, and had repeated them to the Sisters, “There will come a time when we will have houses and works in all parts of the world”. Mother Caterina gave an energetic impetus to those first twenty-eight houses and their number grew. She expanded the field that Mother Mazzarello had first cultivated, until it extended to the Far East.

With extraordinary energy of thought and action, she established and encouraged the development of all the apostolates that responded to the intention and spirit of the founder, and constituted the full, perfect character of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. She never stopped or allowed provincials, community animators or Sisters to do so.

Like Don Bosco, she was accustomed to repeating, “The devil never rests. Work, work to snatch souls from him. We must never rest; we must fight him with every means possible”.¹

¹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

There were works of instruction and education, of moral safeguarding, of human advancement, charitable works in all the varied forms that places and times allowed or required.

No hostile struggles, factions, or groups seeking to dominate, or even the storms of war were able to diminish her passion to face challenges. In fact, they heightened it and made it more alive and ready.

Yet, to look at her, she seemed so quiet, placid, and measured in her words and decisions, so poised, that one might think she was routinely trying to buy time. In reality, however, when she delayed in making a decision, it was then that Mother Caterina worked even more intensely.

She never engaged in impulsive acts, or followed short-term bursts of enthusiasm, but rather acts of will, calm thoughts, and decisions that left no doubt or uncertainty, that led to a safe and perfect conclusion.

The powerful workings of her mind and heart were clearly demonstrated in her letters to the provincials and community animators. It was shown above all in those written to her councillors when they were far from the motherhouse because she had sent them to visit the provinces, to initiate new foundations, to study places with their possibilities and difficulties and ways to resolve them.

They showed her insightfulness, her clarity of vision and foresight. Her tenacity of will in pursuing any good was directed toward people and demonstrated again and always her perfect submission and abandonment to the divine will.

For our part, we must do everything possible for this foundation since, it would seem that the Lord really wants it. But, if after having done everything possible, it does not succeed, well, we

will be equally happy. We will have a sign that this is not what God wants from us.²

Such thoughts, such serene, yet tenacious words are found repeatedly in her letters to the provincials and animators of the Institute.

She wanted the expansion. She said, “Wherever our work is not yet present, we must go there. We must bring Don Bosco’s spirit and his Madonna with us”.³

We Must Go There!

If it happened that, at the same time requests were made to open houses in places where the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were already present, or others where they were not, she would choose those most in need.

She was not concerned with material interests, with greater ease of foundation; if in that country or city they might face major difficulties in life or perhaps in the apostolate, it did not matter, if the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were not there yet. She would state decisively, “We must go there”.⁴

Difficulties at the beginning of a work? Poverty? What were these, if not distinct indicators that the work would prosper in the future. Had not the Founder, Don Bosco, done this, had he not given a very clear example?

“Do not be dismayed by the initial difficulties that you will undoubtedly encounter when opening new houses.” This was her admonition, and she gave it in a voice and with a smile that took away the pain and fear from the Sisters.

“Is the house uncomfortable? Do you have a scant income?” She questioned maternally and with a touch of humour, “But more than often in our houses the money has to be measured in order to reach the end of the year without debts!” She consoled

² Letters, FMA General Archives.

³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁴ Ibid.

and encouraged with the promise of a divine reward. “There is an abundant reward in the good that can be done and in the consolations that God gives to souls who know how to face pains and sacrifices for his glory and to do good. Courage, and be cheerful, cheerful!”⁵

She recalled that when Don Bosco visited his houses, especially at the beginning, and found the furnishing scarce and insufficient, and an income that meant the purse strings had to be held tightly, he would exclaim with fatherly satisfaction, “This is a true Salesian house”!

Don Bosco was wont to say, “The good of souls is not accomplished without sacrifices and without cheerfulness” and Mother Caterina agreed with him.⁶

Some Wise Teachings

Good can also be surrounded by dangers. While Mother Caterina sent the Sisters out into the field of a rich and beautiful harvest, she could not always protect them from the hidden dangers that lay in wait. Therefore, she anticipated, “Always do good, but do not endanger your souls by becoming too involved in your work”.⁷

Mother Caterina was aware that some community animators were still young and inexperienced, while others, though older and more experienced, faced certain challenges because of their ministry or role of leadership. She cautioned them all, “Always ask advice in cases of doubt. Don’t do too much on your own. Your role has its risks. Always be alert”.⁸

These words expressed both a certain anxiety and at the same time, firm authority.

⁵ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁶ G.B. Lemoyne, Op.cit.

⁷ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁸ Ibid.

Yes, one must work much and sacrifice oneself for young people, but this apostolic work should not endanger or be to the detriment of virtue or one's own salvation.

An activity not guided by prudence and not sustained by a sound spirituality, can easily lead to regrettable consequences. How much harm and sometimes even scandal, have taken place where there had been so much work and hope, where treasures of grace and salvation were so promising!

“Always carry out the practices of piety well; be as observant as you can be!”⁹ She often repeated this fervent exhortation, and it can also be found in many of her writings.

Mother Caterina showed great confidence in and gave appropriate freedom of action to all the Sisters, especially those who were entrusted with assignments of leadership, or other roles of responsibility. At the same time, however, she made her presence felt even to those furthest away and required directly from them in word and deed, expressions of their trust and obedience.

This was the secret of the authority that she maintained in the Institute, despite the constant expansion.

She succeeded in maintaining unity at all levels of the Institute. The Sisters felt that she was always present to them, to accompany and praise, but also to moderate excesses and even to disapprove when necessary.

Requests for New Foundations

The requests to open houses in the Institute, and for new works came continually, and Mother Caterina answered the provincials, “Do it, do it”. However, along with her councillors she examined the proposal, looked for the personnel to send, and gave a confident answer and encouragement. Sometimes the response was a decisive “no”, but always after having thought and prayed much, and having asked for prayers.

⁹ Ibid.

The vicar general said, “Mother thinks of the Sisters, the houses, the mission day and night. Everything weighs on that poor mind, on that poor heart”.¹⁰

Sometimes a foundation or a work was hindered by influential people. Even though, more and often than not, it was the civil or ecclesiastical authorities who wanted it. Then Mother Caterina would look to Don Bosco, to the story of his life of hard work and struggles, and like him, smiled and waited. She said, “We want what is best, we want souls”.¹¹

In the council meetings, she presented the situation and asked for the councillors’ thoughts on the matter at hand. She listened and remained silent. But her expressive eyes spoke, and the councillors understood well that Mother wanted to study further, to reflect on what was to be done. She would conclude by saying, “Perhaps we have not prayed enough. We will have enlightenment the next time,” and she smiled. “We will meet again. We will see”.¹²

It sometimes happened that the councillors, dismayed by the difficulties, would display great uncertainty, indeed opposition, and say, “Mother, can’t we give a negative response? Let this thing go at this time? Then, too, Mother, there is a lack of personnel”! She looked at them with that profound gaze and replied, “It seems to me that the Lord wants this from us”. Instead, at other times she would say, “Yes, it would be better to lay this thought aside”.¹³ The councillors smiled, “Ah, so enlightenment has come, Mother”!

Yes, she had obtained it with confident prayer. Her discerning and reflective mind was strengthened, and her will was decisive. She also sought advice from the Salesians. In a spirit of obedience and respect Mother Caterina accepted their word as

¹⁰ Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, conference to the Sisters of the motherhouse, Nizza Monferrato.

¹¹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹² Testimony, Mother Eulalia Bosco.

¹³ Ibid.

though it were from Don Bosco. Their word dispelled every doubt and uncertainty.

There were many requests for houses and works but a shortage of personnel, even though every year many young women applied to the Institute, eager to become Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. In more than one of her circular letters she mentions her fervent desire for many, good vocations, “So that the Institute might grow, so that good could be done according to the spirit and the will of the holy founder and the desire of the Pope”.¹⁴

Festive Oratory

Among all the ministries she wanted to see the festive oratory flourish. It was the first, the fundamental, the favourite of the founder. There should be no house without this ministry. Schools, boarding schools, kindergartens, hostels, yes, all good, but the festive oratory, the festive oratory before all else!

Mother Caterina feared that the multiplicity of works that by now were being asked of the enthusiastic Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, might lead them to neglect the beautiful, joyful, beneficial work of the festive oratory. It was the most suited to ordinary people, the most popular and, one could almost say, the most salvific.

It must be remembered that while formal education focuses on the mind, the festive oratory touches the heart. Instruction enters the mind, it gives wings to the flight towards truth, and therefore, toward good. However, it does not go directly to the heart. In order to find a way to enkindle in the hearts of young people that flame of love for God and for all the virtues that lead to God, the teacher needs to make an effort. She must be a teacher, one who has been converted, so that from the splendour of truth that she presents, the young person may be able to draw the warmth of charity, almost without being aware of it.

¹⁴ Circular letter, FMA General Archives.

However, a good word whispered between one game and another goes directly to the heart. An admonition given almost in a jovial way, between one throw of the ball and a point won or lost, is accepted and heard. Celebrations, plays, little gifts, religious functions with their incense, candles, flowers, and the sound of young voices in the oratory chapel, fascinate young people.

In the festive oratory the Daughter of Mary Help of Christians truly and fully puts her vocation into effect. In order to do this, she certainly needs a Salesian, spiritual and religious formation, as well as zeal and common sense.

Mother Caterina wanted this work to be spoken about especially in the novitiates and that the young professed Sisters should be trained for it from the start. From the window of her room in the motherhouse, while remaining at her desk, she paused now and then to look out at the courtyard crowded with oratorians on Sunday. Perhaps she was thinking of the beloved oratory in Turin that she had left to move to St. Cyr? Or perhaps she was thinking of all the festive oratories of the FMA in every part of the world. Or was she thinking of the hundreds and thousands of young people saved by this work that was so cherished by the founder, so precious in the eyes of God?

When she was visiting the houses, knowing that it would give her great pleasure, the community animators would quickly present the young oratory group to her, and the more numerous that merry crowd was, the more her eyes shone. She was generous and distributed medals or holy pictures according to the occasion, and said a few words that the young people listened to with gentle reverence, almost with devotion. "How good Mother is! She is a saint!" Youthful enthusiasm had proclaimed her as such.

She took a particular interest in those most in need, who she said, should be preferred. She advised:

Love all your oratorians equally, but if you have to love one more than the rest, choose the poorest, the most imperfect, those most in need and, the most unattractive, if there are any.¹⁵

It was a suggestion inspired by charity and the experience of the human heart. Mother Caterina knew that a girl, an adolescent, because of the appeal of her age or particular gifts of nature, could pose a dangerous attraction, a subtle seduction. With a precocious malice of which she was not fully aware, she could at times, ensnare one who approached her only with the purest intention of doing her good.

An attraction develops, still innocent, but it is necessary to halt it. It is precisely then that one must turn to those whom she does not find attractive. “Choose the poorest, those most in need, the most imperfect.”¹⁶ “Mother, that is a bit difficult”, one Sister jokingly said to her. She replied seriously, “Look at the souls, not the faces of your girls.” Another said, “Some are so rough, so disrespectful that you would say they were from the *Generala*”.¹⁷ She replied, “Think of Don Bosco, then they will be more precious to you than the others”.¹⁸

Heartfelt references to the festive oratory are frequently found in her letters, conferences, and Good Nights:

- I am pleased with the news that you give me about the house and the Sisters, but I am sorry about the oratory. I urge you with all my heart, take care of it. Do everything possible so that there might be many, happy oratorians. You know that the festive oratory is our first work we must take care of, it is the work wanted by Don Bosco.¹⁹

¹⁵ Conferences and Good Nights, FMA General Archives.

¹⁶ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹⁷ A reformatory for juveniles. Cf. *Vita di San G. Bosco*.

¹⁸ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

- Countless poor young girls who are exposed to many dangers because of their circumstances are saved at the oratory, and through them, much good is done for families, and good religious vocations can be discovered and nurtured.²⁰
- Pay no attention to hard work or sacrifices for the good of the oratorians.²¹
- Open, open wide the oratory doors.²²

Importance of Catechism

Along with the festive oratory, catechism lessons, both in the houses and the parishes, flourished.

Mother Caterina recalled that the founder's great work had begun and developed from a catechism lesson given to a poor boy. Likewise, she remembered the words, the exhortation, or rather the command, of Mother Mazzarello on her deathbed, "Catechism must be catechism! Study and teach the catechism".²³

Mother Caterina believed that religious formation comes from the study of the catechism. She said, "You will form yourselves while studying and teaching catechism".

To how many country and city parishes did she send the Sisters to teach catechism! Sometimes a negative response was given to a request for other works, but never to one for parish catechetics. There was no point in objecting that personnel was scarce, that they would have to give up another good work or that the Sisters were already burdened by too much work. No. She considered it as taking first place along with the festive oratory which facilitated and shaped the work of teaching catechism, a task that could be called divine.

In a letter to a community animator who had many commitments and many difficulties, Mother Caterina gave advice and encouragement, but above all, a recommendation:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

*I recommend that the Sisters help you to work always with the greatest zeal in the teaching of catechism. Work for the good of the young souls that Divine Providence sends you, remembering that no one else can use such charity toward them, and therefore take advantage of every opportunity, every occasion to achieve our purpose which is to teach them the eternal truths.*²⁴

While this book was being written, the *Strenna* for the year 1940 was promulgated. Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, the fourth successor to Don Bosco, sent it to the Salesians, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and to all the past pupils. In a few lines, it expressed a fundamental programme for Salesian education: “St. John Bosco invites us to always hold the teaching of catechism and Christian formation in the highest regard in our houses and particularly in the festive oratory”.²⁵

Mother Luisa Vaschetti, successor of Mother Caterina, immediately sent copies to all the houses in the Institute with words of heartfelt gratitude and admiration. She warmly recommended that this great fatherly invitation be put into practice.

Mother Caterina would have welcomed this *Strenna* with sincere gratitude and joy. From heaven, where it is firmly hoped she is, she will see the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians all over the world, the older ones of her time and newer ones, promptly and happily putting it into practice in hundreds and hundreds of houses: festive oratories, kindergartens, elementary and middle schools, day professional schools and evening classes, high schools of all types, boarding schools, orphanages, charitable institutions, workshops, hostels, foster homes, holiday camps in the mountains or by the sea, homes for abandoned young people, houses for youth protection, hospitals and nursing homes for elderly people, yes, also for the elderly poor who were, perhaps, forgetful or even unaware of the eternal truths; leper colonies,

²⁴ Letters, FMA General Archives.

²⁵ *Strenna*, 1940.

missions among those yet to be evangelised and also in missions among people who, though evangelised needed new evangelisation.

To Instruct in Order to Educate

Mother Caterina wanted to give to the Institute, and therefore to society, teachers, educators who understood and followed the educational method of Don Bosco, a method that was fundamentally appealing and therefore effective. For this reason she was untiring in her support for the foundation of what were known as *scuole normali* in Italy, which today are known as teacher training institutes.

She knew well that the work of gaining access to young people could be achieved more easily and more securely by way of instruction and through the prestige of education.

The Sister who unites the awareness and discipline of her religious duties with the intellectual and moral power of a sound education, attracts young people who are interested in higher studies. She can more easily influence their minds. She helps them experience her loving authority, so that they willingly accept her, listen to her advice, admire her teaching and follow her in the way of study with docility. She, in turn, ensures that this way leads not only to enquiring truth, but above all to the conscious practice of virtue. She leads them to God.

This was what Don Bosco was taught by the mysterious, resplendent personage, through a dialogue composed of brief but incisive remarks.

His first dream traced out his mission, “Not with blows, but with gentleness and love [...] with obedience and knowledge”.²⁶

The Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, therefore, should follow the great lesson given to Don Bosco by the Divine Master, that is, to approach children through religious obedience, educate

²⁶ G. B. Lemoyne, *Memorie biografiche del Ven. D. Bosco*, vol. 1.

them with gentleness and love, with knowledge acquired from genuine sources, directed and enlivened by purity and love.

For the FMA education should be a means of growth and development that helps them to better carry out the apostolate desired and inspired by Don Bosco in the heart of society.

Don Bosco prepared his followers for the challenge. He had some of them trained as skilled tradespersons who were able to teach the young the dignity of work, train them to earn their bread by their own efforts, and to love it with a great spirit of faith. He formed others as teachers, professors, and writers who could form the intellect of the young person to the love of truth and beauty and, at the same time, lead them to appreciate what is good. Mother Caterina had also understood this aspect of the founder's ideas.

Times were difficult. Anticlerical groups attacked especially religious institutes dedicated to the instruction and education of young people. They said that to go to 'the nuns school' was to go to a school that did not instruct, that did not prepare people for life, and, above all, did not prepare them to the support of the homeland.

Mother Caterina discredited this offensive lie as Don Bosco had done before her.

She worked intensely to promote instruction in the Institute, and to form the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians as teachers who were capable of holding their own in comparison with lay teachers both in education and teaching skills. She worked hard to open day and boarding schools for student teachers, entrusting their direction and the teaching to the Sisters with diplomas and degrees. Mother Emilia Mosca was an effective support in this delicate and difficult work, and she merits a perennial and grateful remembrance in the history of the Institute.²⁷

²⁷ Mother Emilia died on October 2, 1900, four months after having the joy of presenting to Mother Caterina the long desired decree of government

Fr. Francesco Cerruti, the Salesian Director General of Studies, who was one of the first and most illustrious Salesians of Don Bosco, must not be forgotten.²⁸ Mother Caterina and Mother Emilia had received instruction, directives, and encouragement from him. Mother Caterina humbly said, “Without Fr. Cerutti, we, with all our good will, would have been able to do nothing”.²⁹

Teacher Training Institutes

The first teacher training institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was opened in the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato and was granted government recognition on June 7, 1900.

The legal practices to obtain this privilege, a very rare occurrence at that time for a school administered by religious women, had taken a long time and required years of patience, courage, struggle, and prayer. The acts relating to the decree of recognition are preserved in the archives in the administrative offices of the teacher training institute, Our Lady of Graces in Nizza Monferrato. There is also a notebook of memories, a private chronicle which gives full details of what happened, of the obstacles overcome, and the pitfalls avoided. It also contains a document that is most precious because it bears the signature of Don Bosco. This document goes back to September 28, 1878, the year in which the FMA transferred from Mornese to Nizza Monferrato in accordance with the founder’s wishes.

In November 1878, Don Bosco had requested the director of education of the province of Alessandria to allow the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to open a school for girls with an adjoining boarding school in the city of Nizza Monferrato.

recognition for the teacher training institute at Nizza Monferrato. It is said that she had offered her life to God in order to obtain this recognition. Cf. G. Mainetti, *Una educatrice nella luce di S. Giovanni Bosco, Suor Emilia Mosca di San Martino*. L. I. C. E.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Letters, FMA General Archives.

Initially, it was only to be an elementary school, but soon a school offering further studies was added, and then after the promulgation of the law of July 12, 1896, it was established as a primary and secondary school, and a teacher training institute, always with the intention of obtaining government recognition from the ministry.³⁰

Thus, the first teacher training institute administered by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians had its far-off origins in that primary school desired and requested by Don Bosco. Its history began with the great and blessed name of the founder. With the passing of years others in Italy and abroad have drawn inspiration and standards from this foundation.

The Froebel Course that was incorporated into the teacher training institute also received recognition of equality with the government-run Froebel Courses in a decree from the ministry on June 30, 1906.

Mother Caterina rejoiced. She saw that it would now be easier to prepare teachers for the Institute and for society. The Sisters would go to every nation to instruct and educate young people, to save them! Truly Christian teachers would go to every country, having been instructed and educated by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Also in imitation of Don Bosco, she boldly sent young Sisters immediately to attend the royal training institutes and universities so that they could obtain the necessary diplomas and degrees in order to maintain the rights and the prestige of the Salesian school before the law, the families and society.

Encouragement and fatherly congratulations came from the Rector Major, Fr. Michele Rua. Fr. Giovanni Cagliero also wrote from the Andes:

³⁰ The archives of the *Istituto Magistrale N. S. delle Grazie*, Nizza Monferrato.

*May God bless this programme of instruction and education so that it succeeds for his greater glory and for the spiritual benefit of the students. [...] Mary Help of Christians is granting them an extraordinary grace. May they take advantage of it forming their hearts in devotion, adorning themselves with beautiful virtues, especially purity and humility.*³¹

Mother Caterina repeated the words of the great Salesian missionary to the teachers and the pupils and commented on them with her own, which were no less efficacious and welcome.

After the granting of government recognition to the teacher training institute in Nizza Monferrato, there followed that of the schools in Alì Marina, Sicily and Bordighera, Imperia. Then with the reforms introduced by Giovanni Gentile and government authorisation, came the recognition of many other elementary schools, high schools, technical colleges, commercial and professional schools. The way had opened, there was nothing else to do but follow it in the name of God and Don Bosco.

Smiling, Mother Caterina said to the teachers in Nizza, “You are our general staff.”

- Mother, what does that mean?
- The important officers are called ‘the general staff’.
- Are we officers, Mother?
And everyone laughed.
- Yes. The general staff is everything to the army; they command and train the soldiers.
- What about us?
- I mean that you form your pupils, and not only the boarders and day pupils, but also the Sisters.
- How can that be, Mother?
- Your example, sacrifices, and obedience, your hidden work carried out in silence and only for the love of God and the Institute, help to prepare teachers like those wanted by Don

³¹ Letters, FMA General Archives.

Bosco and Mary Help of Christians. You see, your Sisters, leaving the school and the motherhouse, take with them that which they have seen, experienced, and learned from you. When they are far away, also teaching, or directing, they will certainly say, ‘This was the way things were done at the motherhouse. Our teachers did it like this and therefore we must do the same’. It is necessary that they can say, ‘They were good, obedient, diligent in their work, without pretensions; they were humble and happy. They were perfect’!

- Oh, Mother!

Then her expression became rather serious, and she fixed her attentive gaze on the faces of the dear teachers of that first great school that had been established by means of many struggles, and said:

- Oh, if you could only understand how much good will come to the whole Institute from you, from this school. But one needs to have humility, humility! Obedience, piety and humility. To forget one’s own self.³²

Humility was her great virtue, which led her not to seek her own glory even in the midst of the many honours that came with her high office, and she wanted the teachers to be the same.

The ‘general staff’ listened to her with reverence. Even with their degrees and teaching diplomas they welcomed and treasured Mother Caterina’s little gifts of a holy picture, or a motherly counsel written by her with the simplicity of a child.

Mother Caterina’s words were fulfilled. From that first teacher training institute came hundreds of young teachers who brought the treasure drawn from the spirit of the great educator into families, the countryside, and the city. Likewise, there came community animators, provincials, and mother generals, whose faces lit up again with a grateful smile when recalling the studies undertaken at that school. They radiated, spread, and maintained in the Institute, the treasure acquired under the gaze of Mother Caterina Daghero.

³² Testimony of the teachers of the *Istituto Magistrale*, Nizza Monferrato.

During their years of study in that first school, many missionary Daughters of Mary Help of Christians were prepared for their difficult apostolate. From there, many left to go to help Italian emigrants, to open Italian schools, boarding schools, and orphanages, to keep alive in their hearts the love, nobility, and religion of their homeland.

Workers' Hostel

A ministry no less dear to Mother Caterina was that of the workers' hostel where the Sisters safeguarded from harm hundreds of girls and young women. Many of them had come from the countryside and were inexperienced and unschooled.

Think of the factories in which men, women, and young girls who were still almost children, worked at the same time and the same place with the continual fatigue and preoccupation of earning a living. Physical forces were worn out, and also any moral sense was weakened. The purity of thought and sentiments slowly darkened and were lost. The work day in such an environment, under such conditions, presented a tremendous temptation to young people who wanted to claim their right to freedom and enjoyment. But how and where?

Mother Caterina knew. When in 1897 she was asked to send some Sisters to administer the hostel for female workers in Cannero, she did not hesitate. She said to the Sisters, who were going to the new work that this was new in structure but not in substance. On the contrary, it was an old work, she explained with a smile, because it addressed that section of people that Don Bosco most wanted to save. He had gathered poor young boys of humble origin and had made them honest workers, and good Christians. They should do the same for these dear young girls who were in such need of religious instruction, maternal vigilance and affection. She sent there as community animator, Sr. Clelia Guglielminotti, who came from a family of industrialists. She was intelligent, had

a great heart and had experience in the field in which she was going to work.³³

What kind of reception did the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians receive from the young factory workers in the hostel? From the chronicle:

At first, as we had already expected, there was almost a rebellion among the workers at the factory who did not want to hear anything about having to depend on religious. However, after a month spirits calmed down, the air cleared, and by the end of the year the goats were transformed into gentle lambs by the hands of those who led them maternally to the healthy pastures of work made holy by purity of life and Christian piety. The Family Spirit and religion had redeemed many young workers from that unbridled freedom, pitfalls, and the enticement of pleasures that threatened to carry them away to the abyss.³⁴

After the establishment of the workers' hostel in Cannero many others followed in different regions of Italy. The vigilance of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for the young workers was also a splendid application of Don Bosco's educational method, and the young boarders experienced its effectiveness. In the chronicle notes:

By now the institute can count five thousand factory workers who, while earning a living, experience the saving and transforming power of religion. At the same time, they were given a safe, healthy place to stay, with wholesome food, balanced occupations suitably interspersed by times of rest and fun, education corresponding to their circumstances, principles of domestic education and home management, and fundamental guidelines of family and social virtues. They are formed in that practical living of religion that eased their labours, prepared

³³ Sr. Clelia Guglielminotti later became provincial.

³⁴ *Chronicle of the Apostolic Works*, FMA General Archives.

them for life, and guaranteed the morals of future Christian spouses and mothers.³⁵

Mother Caterina also wanted the Sisters to go into the factory during working hours in order to watch over and comfort by their presence the girls and young women working there.

Silence, certainly, in the midst of the deafening roar of the wondrous and dangerous machines, silence among the screech of the belts and the rumble of the whirling wheels, but an unspoken meeting of looks and smiles between the industrious young workers and the vigilant Sisters. They were like the presence of visible angels protecting them.

Mother Caterina loved this work that did so much good. For her, teachers and workers were like the artisans and students were for Don Bosco. They were two young, strong forces for the Christian formation of families and society.

She encouraged the community animators and the Sisters assigned to the workers' hostels just as she encouraged and protected the teachers in day and boarding schools, because both, in different ways but with the same goal, had in hand, she said, "A treasure, a flower that would bear fruit: Christian women, Christian mothers, Christian families".

Instil in them devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary Help of Christians. Make sure they love frequenting the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Love them! Make yourselves loved and never feared!³⁶

Beautiful accounts can be read in the chronicles of the workers' hostels, episodes that Mother Caterina recounted with maternal satisfaction. She wanted them to be written as a reminder for future generations of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Memoirs, FMA General Archives.



One of the earlier photographs of Mother Caterina



Mother Caterina with her Vicar General, Sr. Enrichetta Sorbone



Her first councillors:

Standing L-R: Mother Emilia Mosca and Mother Elisa Roncallo

Seated L-R: Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, Mother Caterina Daghero, Mother Angiolina Buzzetti



The General Council of 1922:

**Standing L-R: Mother Clelia Genghini, Mother Marina Coppa,
Mother Eulalia Bosco, Mother Caterina Arrighi**

**Seated L-R: Mother Enrichetta Sorbone, Mother Caterina Daghero,
Mother Luisa Vaschetti**



Last photograph of Mother Caterina



Mother Caterina after her death



The mortuary chapel of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the cemetery at Nizza Monferrato where Mother Caterina is buried



The former generalate of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in Turin

A Heartening Account

The following account has been taken from the pages that date from the troubled times of the great workers' strike:

On September 14, 1906, a general strike broke out at Intra. In addition to 9,000 workers from various factories in the region, skilled workers who belonged to the Union of Manufacturers also took part. Our residents did not comply with the strikers' invitation. They wanted to continue their duty serenely. Such behaviour annoyed the strikers, so much so, that there were hostile demonstrations, with threats and actions culminating in stone throwing.

Our residents would not be intimidated. They worked and prayed.

The military authorities intervened for the necessary protection of the hostel, the young women, and the Sisters.

But the leaders of the strike did not give up the battle or the threats. They insinuated that the Sisters had imposed forced imprisonment on the residents in the hostel, thus thwarting their personal freedom. It was necessary to release them from the Sisters' control!

All of this was repeated in daily rallies cursing the 'jailors'. What did these do? They tried to lift the spirits of the dear young women with a bit of fun, some cheerful snack times, some pleasant theatre presentations, and joyful singing.

On September 25, a delegate from the socialist party arrived at the hostel in order to speak directly to the residents, and to carry out an investigation. They were all gathered in the theatre, without, of course, the Sisters.

The most amusing moment of the incident was when the delegate, wishing to make one more attempt, told them to have no fear in joining the common cause of the strikers; no harm would come to them. He added, 'Anyone who wishes to leave the hostel, can declare it openly by standing up'.

And our dear young women made their declaration clear by remaining seated, and those who had been standing, due to a lack of chairs, immediately sat down on the floor!

The delegate smiled. He did not continue the interrogation, and before leaving the room he praised the young women for their spontaneous action and for the frankness with which they sustained their own ideas.³⁷

When Mother Caterina heard about this incident, she was moved and exclaimed, “May Our Lady help and bless our dear workers, as she blessed Don Bosco’s artisans”.³⁸

Her visits to the workers’ hostels were not rare nor were her stays with them brief. She stayed there showing that she was happy to be among the workers. There was so much simplicity, friendliness, and a great deal of gratitude among those dear young women. They were truly Salesian!

Sometimes, good vocations were found there, but she wanted to test them. She wanted it to be clear that the young worker candidate who asked to enter religion among the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians should do so with right intention and a firm resolution to work. It would be a different kind of work from that experienced as a factory employee, but no less incessant, only made more spiritual. She said, “They must have a spiritual aim, and not believe they are entering the Congregation to rest”.³⁹ Good vocations flourished because the community animators and the Sisters, trained by her, knew how to form, to help, and also how to select.

As has been noted, Mother Caterina insisted on repeating, “There is a great need for Christian women, Christian mothers, Christian families”!⁴⁰ Unfortunately, strikes provided frequent

³⁷ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Testimony, private conversation.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

practical lessons of the very damaging experiences for the workers' families and all the working class, by women who were not educated as Christians.

Dealing with Crises

Don Bosco was at the vanguard of progress⁴¹ because he, in truth, sought the highest level of Christian social compassion, and Mother Caterina was also at the vanguard of charity.

Her circular letters directed at encouraging the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, not only to deepen their own formation, but also to make them aware of painful and difficult social conditions around them. This became particularly important when extraordinary events disturbed the normal rhythm of life, and required a greater contribution of compassionate forces to reconstruct it.

Some examples would be the earthquake in Messina in 1908 and that in Gioia dei Marsi in 1915, the expulsion of the Italians from the Ottoman Empire in 1912 and the horrendous 1914-1918 World War.

The *Cronistoria* of the Institute records the memories that show the person of Mother Caterina in an admirable light of strength and charity.

As Don Bosco stood by fearlessly reaching out to help, console, and save during the most calamitous times for the church and the country, so did Mother Caterina.

Her heart was pierced both as a leader and as a mother. The tremendous earthquake had caused ruin to the houses in Sicily, especially in those of Ali Marina, Catania, and Messina. At Gioia dei Marsi three Sisters were killed, buried under the rubble of their house. They had barely returned home after receiving Holy Communion during the parish Mass. When Mother Caterina came

⁴¹ Discourse of His Holiness, Pius XI.

to know this detail, even in the midst of great sadness, with a ray of consolation she exclaimed, “They had Jesus in their hearts”!⁴²

The author of these pages saw Mother Caterina on both occasions when she received the news about the disaster that took place in Sicily and that of Gioia dei Marsi. She witnessed her profound pain each time, but as always, she remained tranquil. She spoke words that came from her heart, “The Lord has chosen to test us. Let us pray for our poor Sisters who have suffered and are still suffering. Let us pray for the countless number of persons affected by the terrible disaster”. Her tone of voice and her eyes expressed much more than her words.

She did not limit herself to prayer and expressions of sympathy. She encouraged work and self-denial. It was necessary to respond to sacrifice with sacrifice. Everyone was asked to cooperate practically in helping so many unfortunate people, that is, the whole FMA world: provincials, community animators, Sisters, and everyone guided by or known to them: pupils, past-pupils, co-operators, collaborators, even the smallest flowers of the Institute, the children in the kindergarten. It was all an expression of charity and of saving lives.

First of all, she recalled to the motherhouse those Daughters of Mary Help of Christians who had directly experienced the painful effects of the terrible disaster in order to rebuild their strength. Then, in agreement with the local authorities and some benefactors, she arranged that the Sisters could restart their good works as soon as possible for the people in the affected cities. Not only this, but with warm words of authority, she invited provincials, community leaders and Sisters to welcome and freely assist the innumerable refugees: the children in the houses of the Institute, the men and women in the places provided for that purpose by the local authorities. Among the memories of the time is the following:

⁴² Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

Material and moral assistance given day and night; care for many sick refugees; the preparation and distribution of food all involve expense, hard work and sacrifice of personnel from several houses, but our venerated mother general is generous, and has sent the superiors to visit and console the Sisters and refugees in her name.

The important work being carried out is producing real, spiritual results: Baptisms and Confirmations conferred on refugees; First Communion even for adults.⁴³

For the most delicate and difficult journeys and tasks during that painful event, Mother Caterina chose from among her general councillors the one who would succeed her, Mother Luisa Vaschetti.

Before closing these brief accounts of the practical charity of Mother Caterina during the disaster of the Sicilian-Calabrian earthquake, it is worth transcribing at least part of one of her circular letters, since it reflects her spirit and her words exactly.

V. G. M. G.!

Nizza Monferrato, June 1, 1909.

My dear Sisters,

The terrible disaster that has just taken place in Italy has certainly struck your hearts too, and with me you have worried and cried for the many fellow citizens, and especially for the Salesians and pupils of the Institute in Messina, who remained victims of the horrendous catastrophe.

But charity must be active. Therefore, while I urge you to pray for forbearance and strength for the survivors, I desire that you all commit yourselves effectively to help those poor unfortunates who are suffering misery and hunger.

⁴³ Ibid.

Let's get to work, my dear Sisters! Encourage collections in your festive oratories, schools, and boarding schools; do all that you can in every way to collect as much money, household goods, and clothing as you can to send to those who are destitute and lack everything.

On my part, I arranged to accept into our houses the greatest possible number of orphans, certain that Divine Providence will not fail to help us. May this outpouring of charity also be an expression of thanksgiving to our heavenly Mother and Protector, who in the midst of a general catastrophe wished to miraculously save the lives of her Daughters. The collapsed houses, now heaps of ruins, witness to this grace.

May the Lord keep us in his holy grace and grant us a year full of good works!

*Your affectionate Sister,
Sr. Caterina Daghero.⁴⁴*

Three Sisters perished in Gioia dei Marsi in 1915, and therefore Mother Caterina thought and said that the apostolate for the salvation of people and the glory of God also, and often, involves the sacrifice of one's life. The memoirs record:

Our beloved mother general invited us to offer suffrages for the dear victims, and at the same time arranged that the poor children affected by the earthquake, whether they are orphans or not, should be welcomed into the houses of the Institute. In her kindness Queen Margherita of Savoy wanted to see and console them. In the midst of such painful trials our mother showed that even when misfortune affected the Institute, she found the strength and the means to aid and comfort others in their suffering, especially the children and poor, abandoned youth.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁵ Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

Mother Caterina treasured the inheritance received from Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello: children and poor, abandoned youth.

Assistance to Refugees

At the beginning of the Balkan War in October 1912, the Italians living in areas ruled by the Ottoman Empire had to return to their homeland. They were poor families, poor people who had worked, and tried to bring honour to the Italian name with their honesty, intelligence, and work. They lost all, because everything had to be left there, where they had made their homes and their peace.

Since 1907, despite hardship and deprivation the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, had generously maintained two houses in Scutari, an orphanage and a hospital. Now they had to leave. Mother Caterina not only welcomed the Sisters, she thought of the orphans and also of the Italian families who were being repatriated. She thought of the little refugees who came with or without parents. Once again, like Don Bosco, she opened her arms in an outpouring of charity.

She sent a circular letter to all the Italian provincials, asking them to let her know how many places were available in their provinces to accept the little refugees from the Ottoman Empire, and at the same time she placed all the houses of the Institute in Italy at the disposal of the government, offering 200 temporary places of free hospitality.

Not only that, but she arranged for Sisters to go to the places where there was the greatest concentration of refugees: Brindisi, Naples, Palermo, and Genoa. Through an agreement with the respective action committees, they would be ready to receive and welcome the children, and surround them with care and motherly help and then accompany them to the various houses of hospitality. Even more, there was the most delicate attention and one could say, breath of charity, because they arranged that in the

houses there would be a festive welcome prepared, an abundant provision of food, clothing, and medicine, of everything that might be needed for the dear children.

The houses in Rome, Catania, Naples, Civitavecchia, Lugo di Romagna, Turin, Chieri, and Intra were the new family homes for the poor children, who found there, refreshment and smiles, new hope and the joy of Divine Providence.⁴⁶

Mother Caterina opened her heart in a loving and generous outpouring of Salesian charity, always with the founder in mind whom she must, she wanted to imitate perfectly, always with heaven in view.

However, the world also took notice of her. Newspapers commended her work. They drew attention to the Institute led by her, and praised it: *La Stampa*, *L'Italia Reale*, *Il Momento*, *Il Corriere d'Italia*, *Il Cittadino*, *Il Caffaro*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Perseveranza*, *La Sera*. Newspapers and magazines of every political persuasion, named the mother general of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians with reverent admiration.

Mother Caterina's response was, "It is not us! It is Mary Help of Christians, it is Don Bosco! Not to us, Lord, not to us: but to your name give the glory".⁴⁷

Outbreak of World War I

World War I started on July 28, 1914, and on May 24, 1915, Italy entered the dreadful conflict.

Mother Caterina felt the cross weighing heavily on her shoulders, and she felt it even more in her heart. The Institute had houses and Sisters in almost all the European countries and in some countries outside of Europe.

Some of her letters to the Sisters in America remain, and they speak of her fear and anxiety. She wrote, "*War, war everywhere. Let us pray to the Lord for the return of peace; that he*

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Psalm 114.

*may enlighten and guide us; let us offer him our sacrifices and let us pray for everyone”.*⁴⁸

She could not sleep at night; the spectre of war and its dreadful consequences were always before her; she often asked herself, “What will our Sisters in France, Belgium and the other countries that are in danger, do? And what of those in Veneto, situated at the border almost in the line of battle”?

After some days of terror, the Sisters and novices had to escape from the house in Conegliano Veneto and arrived unexpectedly in the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato, that big, beloved welcoming home. She blessed Our Lady who had rescued them from horrendous dangers. But the others? She knew certainly that some in other countries had been forced to leave their homes and were interned in enemy territory. News arrived in Italy that made her shudder. She trembled and suffered.

However, personal worries did not distract her from concentrating on the task of the Institute, her task and that of every Daughter of Mary Help of Christians was to help and save. She encouraged the Sisters near and far to make sacrifices.

Renounce everything, much loved occupations, study, works that were done only for God’s glory and the salvation of souls; accepting joyfully deprivations, struggles, inconveniences, illnesses. Let everything become an offering of petition and reconciliation.⁴⁹

Then she began energetically to direct, one would say, a mobilisation of peaceful but heroic forces involving work and sacrifice.

From 1914 until 1919 every work in the Institute was absorbed or modified by the necessities of war. All energies converged in the single aim of alleviating pain, of stemming the

⁴⁸ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁹ Folder of circular letters, FMA General Archives.

disastrous consequences of the terrible war that had been unleashed on the world.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians immediately offered to work as assistants and nurses in thirty-two hospitals. Three Sisters died and others became ill due to infection, but they did not leave their field as long as their work was needed. Several houses had to be transformed into hospitals; twenty-six places were given freely, many at a minimal price; fourteen orphanages were opened for war orphans, fifteen hostels for young factory girls, ninety-five kindergartens and nurseries, seventy-five youth centres, schools and after-school activities, twenty sewing classes, eighteen centres for the distribution of work, twenty-two centres for food distribution with 5,706 meals daily, twenty-eight houses for refugees, ten houses for refugee children with 1,028 refugees helped. Work, in order to earn a living, was given to 2,827 families and to eleven communes.

Many subsidies in money and medicines were distributed. Offerings were sent to the Red Cross; numerous visits were made to the sick at home, 5,800 girls were helped. To all of this can be added twenty-eight Baptisms, 432 Confirmations, and 253 Marriages that were legitimised.⁵⁰

At the head of the list of reported statistics, the name of Mother Caterina Daghero can be found.

The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians took inspiration, encouragement and comfort from her. They were more than ever intent on living the founder's motto: *Da mihi animas coetera tolle*.

Nizza, a Military Hospital

A large part of the motherhouse at Nizza Monferrato was also adapted as a military hospital.

When Mother Caterina heard the first rumours that hinted at this, and understanding the need to comply, her heart missed a beat. Why?

⁵⁰ Memoirs, FMA General Archives.

She thought of the dear sick Sisters in the infirmary, that little section of rooms situated beside the main church and overlooking the green expanse of the large orchard. Among them was Sr. Vittorina Heptia, the angelic Belgian Sister who had been immobilised for almost twenty years because of advanced arthritis in all her limbs. Where could she be transferred if the house had to be completely surrendered because of strict necessity? Those rooms seemed suitable to be adapted as officers' quarters.

Mother Caterina considered Sr. Vittorina Heptia to be a saint. Many Sisters went to receive her wise words that consoled and admonished. Her memoirs state:

During the time of war our venerated Mother had a particular thought for the fate that could affect the poor patients in the infirmary. Almost the whole house had become a military hospital, and she feared that she would have to surrender our rooms too. She came one day to visit us as she always did. It was clear that she felt a sorrow that she could not hide. One of us asked her with filial confidence, 'Mother you are worried! You are very pensive! What is it, Mother'?

And Mother replied, 'Did you know that, perhaps, we will also have to give your little section to the soldiers? For me, if I had to go down there into the barn,' and she pointed to the rustic building at the bottom of the orchard, 'I wouldn't give it a thought... but where will we put you poor sick Sisters? Then she pointed to me. 'Where, especially can we put this poor Daughter who cannot even move?'

Then with a motherly smile and with fervour added, 'Well, if we are really good, if we pray to Our Lady with confidence, she will think of it and help us!'

Our Lady really did help us, because those of us who were sick were able to remain in our rooms.⁵¹

This episode has been recorded because it, too, reveals Mother Caterina's heart.

⁵¹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

With regard to FMA houses in other countries, Mother Caterina arranged that, according to the conditions, possibilities, places, and works whatever was done in Italy would be done there too. Thus, Salesian charity knew no barriers.

The post-war period did not bring any respite in Mother Caterina's activity, but rather an increase. It was necessary to re-assemble, rebuild, and renew throughout Europe.

Anniversaries

The Salesian activity of Mother Caterina was exceptional throughout a journey of forty-three years of leadership as mother general, a journey that was marked by two magnificent stages, or better still, two milestones, the twenty-fifth and the fiftieth anniversaries of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians; and also, the twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversaries of her entrance into the novitiate.⁵²

Many memories from those jubilee years are recorded in the *Cronistoria* of the Institute, in both her circular and private letters, and in many other writings by Sisters. During those festive anniversaries, Mother Caterina could take in with her profound reflective gaze the long road she had travelled, one marked by crosses but also adorned with roses.

She could measure the great work accomplished outside of the Institute by means of an inspiring apostolate of salvation and social renewal according to the spirit and the wishes of the founder; and the great work carried out within the Institute to consolidate and organise the structure, to foster vocations and form the future generations of FMA. This required a comprehensive plan of action so that the charism might never fail.

This process is well documented in the general archives. In it written testimonials are stored regarding, first, the formation of the provinces in the Institute and then of their reorganisation, the

⁵² The year of her death, 1924, marked the beginning of the fiftieth year since her entry into the novitiate.

foundation of a novitiate in each province, the relationship with the Holy See, with the bishops of many dioceses, with civil and political authorities of various countries where the Institute was present. They confirm that Mother Caterina functioned almost as a founder, rather than a mother general.

A study of her simple and down-to-earth circular letters alone would provide a comprehensive history of her great work. Among other things the reader would find a step by step description of her journey, stopping at times to listen to her report on a papal audience, a new foundation or new works, the construction needed to enlarge houses, churches or novitiates. They also give the joyful announcement that the Diocesan Curia of Acqui had begun the Cause for the Beatification of the unforgettable Mother and co-founder and therefore it was necessary to double the work and prayer.

Painful Farewells

In her long life as a religious and as mother general of the Institute, Mother Caterina shared in both the joys of seeing it grow and expand and the sufferings it experienced from persecution, earthquakes, war and other painful events. On a personal level she also faced the death of many who were not only significant in the FMA story, but were her mentors, close co-workers, and in many instances very dear to her.

She suffered at the death of Mother Mazzarello who had welcomed her into the joy of the humble house of Mornese, had consoled, reassured, enlightened, and then urged her on her great journey.

The death of the venerated and dear founder has been noted elsewhere. She suffered at the death of Fr. Rua, who was also Father and teacher, and with whom she had shared worries and sufferings in serious moments in the Institute. The wounds he suffered were also suffered by her. During the long process of the

juridical separation of the two great religious families, she had suffered and feared with him; with him she had obeyed and glorified the Lord.

In her letter to an animator written from Turin where she had gone to visit Fr. Rua who was gravely ill and was dying, one can read words that could be said were bathed in tears.

It is 7.30, and I have been brought news from the Oratory that the dear patient was able to rest, therefore, he appears better. Last evening, however, one of the doctors repeated in my presence and that of the Rev. Fr. Rinaldi that there is no hope for a cure. He may last for a few days, or even a week; but unless there is a miracle he will not recover. The other doctors agree with this. One might say that the Lord is keeping him in this condition to prepare our hearts for the sacrifice.

Last evening, I had the comfort of seeing him again. He was very happy. I asked for a special blessing for the whole community, while I held your name and that of your dear ones in my heart. He said, 'I willingly give it'. And he did, followed by many affectionate, fatherly words that would draw tears. I am leaving for Nizza, where need awaits me, but my heart certainly remains here, where, unfortunately, I will soon have to return to shed tears, unless the Lord wishes to perform that miracle for which so many are praying.⁵³

The death of Fr. Paolo Albera, successor to Fr. Rua, had also caused her great suffering. Her personal correspondence and circular letters affirm this.

Among other significant losses were the death of Monsignor Giacomo Costamagna, that of Monsignor Giovanni Marengo, and of other distinguished Salesians who had been spiritual benefactors to her and the Sisters. She also felt the loss of Mother Emilia Mosca, the death of Mother Elisa Roncallo, who was very dear to her, and of Mother Angiolina Buzzetti, the Bursar

⁵³ Letters, FMA General Archives.

General who had been at her side for many years. Then there was the death of Mother Petronilla Mazzarello, faithful friend of Mother Mazzarello, for many years a living relic of the epic and beautiful time in Mornese.

She suffered greatly as a result of the mysterious train crash in Juiz de Fora that had claimed four generous missionaries as victims!⁵⁴

She endured great pain on seeing many flourishing houses of the Institute struck by disasters, devastated by earthquakes, and Sisters perishing there as victims. She experienced the anguish that World War I caused her heart as mother general, the religious political struggles in France, in 1903 and 1906, and in Spain in 1913, which put houses, works and Sisters in danger. In the village of Lomellina, the community animator, Sisters, and oratorians were returning happily from a religious procession, and were brutally assaulted, maltreated, and beaten by the “reds”. She suffered when news arrived from the missions far away of aggression on the part of the poor indigenous people who were not converted to Christianity, and still resisted the charity of the missionaries.⁵⁵

Another cause of pain was created by the infamous slander against the Salesians and FMA who both had flourishing works in Varazze. In July 1907, the Salesians at Varazze, Liguria, were falsely accused of celebrating ‘black masses’, which, it was claimed, included all kinds of sexual and political wickedness. Two Salesians were arrested and their schools closed. The anti-clerical press launched sweeping attacks against them. The FMA were among those accused of attending the ‘black masses’, and their schools too were closed. The attacks were finally traced back to an evil press campaign orchestrated by an extreme Freemason journalist, Ettore Ferrari, and public opinion once again began to support the Salesians. However, it was mid-September before the two SDB were released, and November before the

⁵⁴ P. Albera, Op.cit.

⁵⁵ Testimony and Letters, FMA General Archives.

schools were allowed to reopen. In, *The Life of the Servant of God Fr. Michele Rua*, the able biographer recounted the whole painful event in pages entitled, *The Facts about Varazze*.⁵⁶ Mother Caterina, like Fr. Rua suffered it all.

But there are sorrows that do not appear externally, that are hidden, rather they must be hidden from the eyes of most people. Sometimes they are revealed by a fleeting shadow on the face or a short but very expressive phrase.

Some Sisters, though few, abandoned FMA life and returned to where they thought life would be easier. They were unresponsive to her maternal recall.⁵⁷

Mother Caterina suffered bitterly, just as Mother Mazzarello had suffered in similar cases⁵⁸, as the holy founder had suffered.⁵⁹ Also, like them, she remained steadfast, upholding the spirit that she had inherited from them.

Ursuline Sisters of Acqui

God seemed to reward her by attracting other religious institutes to the FMA orbit, for example, the union of the Ursuline Sisters of Acqui to the Institute. This amalgamation was warmly requested by their founder and was approved by a decree from the Holy See on November 5, 1912.⁶⁰ Perhaps Don Bosco had foreseen this union some time ago?

Their Founder, Mother Caterina dei Conti Tizoni and her Vicar, Mother Giuseppina Bruno, recounted that when they were still young, they went to the FMA motherhouse in Nizza Monferrato for a retreat. Above all, they wanted to see Don Bosco, speak to him about their vocation, and ask to enter the Institute that he had recently founded.

⁵⁶ A. Amadei, *Vita del Servo di Dio Don M. Rua*. S. E. I. Torino.

⁵⁷ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁵⁸ F. Maccono, Op. cit.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Vita di San G. Bosco*, Op.cit.

⁶⁰ FMA General Archives.

The saint had listened to them paternally and after some thought had given them an answer, “Not at the moment. Return to Acqui and remain there. Do as Canon Olivieri says, and later...later, not at the moment”.

These words remained indelibly fixed in the spirit of the two pious women, and even when, directed by Canon Olivieri, they saw their institute flourishing, their thoughts turned to that, “later...later...”. However, they were far from giving that word the meaning it would assume at a later date.⁶¹

Providence arranged that the previous desire of the two friends would be satisfied after long years of waiting.

There is another wonderful detail. Their spiritual director, Monsignor Raimondo Olivieri was a close friend of Don Bosco. Not only that, but Don Bosco invited him to preach the first retreat in Mornese. It was the retreat that preceded the clothing and religious profession of the first fifteen FMA on August 5, 1872, among whom was Mother Maria Mazzarello.

In the document relating to the foundation of the Institute of the FMA, immediately after the signatures of the bishop of Acqui, and Fr. Domenico Pestarino, was that of Canon Raimondo Olivieri.⁶² The two Institutes were destined to meet and unite.

Mother Caterina felt and proved herself immediately to be like a mother to those new Sisters whose arrival was unexpected. She admired their virtue, especially that of their most humble founder, who, in turn, always showed respect and filial reverence toward her new mother general.

The house chronicle of Acqui has delightful pages that describe the celebration of the clothing and religious profession of the new FMA. In those pages the figure of Mother Caterina Daghero again emerges. Among others things it was written:

⁶¹ F. Maccono, Op.cit. and chronicle of the house of Acqui.

⁶² Ibid.

She has won the hearts of all these new Daughters; They are all appreciative of, edified and reassured by her delicate charity, and because of this, her first farewell, since she is returning to the motherhouse in Nizza Monferrato today, was emotional and solemn.

She said, “In the future in this house and in those that depend on it, much good will be done for the glory of God, Mary Help of Christians, and Don Bosco of whom we are all happy Daughters!”

Under the leadership of Mother Caterina, Salesian life continued to expand. Salesian activity, which cannot be without suffering, also produced roses for the glory of God.

Chapter IX

In the Eyes of Her Contemporaries

Mother Caterina is No Less Holy

Up until this point, the personality of Mother Caterina has been described only very briefly. What follows is an attempt to create a clearer picture of her as she was remembered by those who knew her in life and who, having lived at her side, were able to grasp all the beauty of her spirit.

Day by day and hour by hour Mother Caterina showed her true self in the strength of her thought and the kindness of her heart. She was more gentle than might at first have appeared.

One thing that was admirable in her was the coherence of her thought, teaching, and example. She never betrayed this throughout her whole life, even in the midst of complex situations, events, and the responsibilities that naturally resulted from her important task. This meant that she had to relate, not only with the beloved world of her religious family, but was in contact with all kinds of persons from outside it and who were even at times antagonistic towards that world so dear to her, composed of the Sisters and their ministries.

Don Bosco, had confirmed her election to succeed a saint¹ and had said of her to the Sisters, “You had a saintly Mother, and you already have another who will be no less so”.² Was it a wish? An encouragement for one who was newly-elected? Was it not rather something that he, who frequently looked into the future, already foresaw? After all, God often gave him a glimpse of things

¹ It would seem that Don Bosco had suggested calling Mother Caterina Daghero from St. Cyr to work alongside Maria Domenica Mazzarello as vicar general, thus preparing her as a likely candidate for election as mother general after the saint's death.

² E. Ceria, Op.cit.

to come. Besides, he would follow and watch over her until his death, directly in person and indirectly through his followers, especially Fr. Michele Rua and Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, his first successor and the first SDB cardinal respectively.

He had watched and loved as a father watches and loves, with paternal concern even for her health.

Some memories of Mother Caterina have survived, which describe the fatherly tenderness of the saint. They may be few, since she tended rather to hide anything that would draw attention to herself. However, a short and very simple document that she dictated remains and is worth reporting here. Seen in a superficial and secular way, it might even appear childish, but not to the thoughtful reader. Everything that refers to Don Bosco, even the smallest action, the simplest word, had value. It lifts a veil and reveals the face of the saint, who appears even more amiable the more merciful he shows himself, the more he cares even about things that are not usually considered part of the traditional idea that many have of holiness. In him one sees the human in the divine, like a brother and father in the saint. Mother Caterina recounted:

One day I went to Turin to speak with Don Bosco, but he was already in Valsalice.³ I went there and by the time I finished telling him what I had gone for, it was midday.

Don Bosco, with a fatherly heart, said:

- It is midday, won't you stay here for dinner?
- Thank you Father, but I can easily go home.
- But you will arrive late and everything will be cold!
- No, Father, they are expecting me and they will keep everything hot.
- Are you sure?
- Very sure.
- But remember to eat slowly and tell the Sisters this, too. You are all still young and you will not notice it, but later your stomach will suffer and you will find it hard to digest, and

³ A Salesian house that was well known because Don Bosco was originally buried there, as was Blessed Michele Rua later.

your health will suffer. Greet the Sisters for me and tell them that Don Bosco blesses them all and to become ever better.⁴

Two figures stand out in these brief exchanges: that of the elderly founder, who is experiencing in his poor body the diminishing of his strength as a consequence of a life of fatigue and forgetfulness of self. He does not regret it, but shows concern for the health of young people wanting them to remain strong so as to face the fatigue and battle for what is good. Then there is the person of the young mother general, who always bows to the will of the founder and Father, goes to him for advice, seeks him as a daughter. She already competed with him in self-forgetfulness.

Have Courage and Encourage Everyone

Fr. Rua, too, always gave clear proof of great confidence in Mother Caterina's gifts of mind, heart, and leadership. He directed her step by step, for about thirty years, knew the crosses that came with her role of responsibility, the heroic deeds that were hidden from others, but not from him who could discover them and even compare them with his own experience. He found harmony in thought, sentiment, and action, in an obedience that left no room for 'if', 'we'll see', or 'perhaps', but unflinchingly ended in, "Whatever you want, decide, think, Father". She obeyed him because in doing so she obeyed Don Bosco who lived on in his successors. She sustained the Institute by sustaining the spirit of the founder.

Fr. Rua was well aware that this obedience was not passive or submissive. It was not the obedience of a one evading responsibility, or of a timid, faint-hearted person. Rather, it was that of an active, generous spirit, who in obeying the one who represented Don Bosco and continued his work, discovered the living source of strength and security.

Many letters from Fr. Rua remain. They were written to her on various occasions and for different reasons. While all reveal the wisdom, piety, and delicacy of this Father, they also reveal, as

⁴ Mother Caterina Daghero, personal memoirs, FMA General Archives.

through a luminous veil, the virtue of this disciple. While she was visiting the houses in South America, he wrote in a fatherly tone:

How many journeys, how many hardships, how many celebrations! I have received news of your visits from various parts, together with expressions of gratitude for having sent you. And I thank God for the good health he gives you, for the difficulties he helps you to overcome, for the beautiful and fervent words he inspires you to speak in order to encourage in your Daughters zeal in working for souls and the commitment to become holy. Meanwhile I pray that he may continue to protect you and I also implore our Heavenly Mother to keep you always under the shelter of her mantle.⁵

On another occasion he wrote:

When you wrote to me from the Tropic of Cancer, giving me good news of your journey, you certainly did not expect such sad news when you set foot on dry land.⁶

May the will of God be done! Perhaps Divine Providence arranged your journey so that, through your presence and your holy words, you might be able to offer comfort to those good Sisters, deciding who was needed to replace those called by God to eternity. Have courage then, and encourage everyone, animating them to lift up their hearts with the truths of our holy religion and with confidence in God. God will be able to draw great good from this disaster.⁷

Like the saintly founder before him, he paternally worried about her health. The travel, the difficulties of the long journey shook even her still young and strong physique. Fr. Rua wrote to her:

The news that I receive from the Sisters is generally good. The worst news I am getting is about Mother General, who, I was

⁵ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁶ The disaster at Juiz de Fora, Cf. Chapter VII.

⁷ Letters, FMA General Archives.

*told some time ago, is suffering quite a bit. I hope that you are better now, and on my part, I will pray to St. Joseph (it was the month dedicated to this saint) to obtain a long and prosperous life for you, in order to work for the glory of his foster son, Jesus. And when the time comes, may he bring you his loving assistance on your deathbed in order to take you straight to heaven.*⁸

Impressed and grateful, Mother Caterina smiled as she read these fatherly words and, as described in the diary of her journey in South America, she continued to work tirelessly, feeling the fatigue but hiding it. Others wrote to Fr. Rua about it and he, with fatherly care, advised her to care for herself. He wrote:

*I thank you for all the beautiful news you sent me. I only regret the news I am getting from other sources that you are beginning to tire and some evenings you run a temperature. Take care of your health and don't tire yourself beyond your strength. When you are tired rest for a bit longer in some of the more comfortable houses. In this way you will be able to continue your journey with less risk of your health suffering. Then, if you see that the journey to Matto Grosso could be harmful for you, you can leave it out.*⁹

Mother Caterina did not leave it out. Strengthened by the blessing of the representative of Don Bosco, she bore the fatigue and enjoyed the inexpressible spiritual consolation it brought.

Since August 5, 1897, marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the profession of the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians made in the hands of Don Bosco, he wrote to her, “A solemn jubilee celebration is being planned. You should certainly be in Nizza. It would be a very poor celebration if Mother was not there”.¹⁰

There are also many letters in which Fr. Rua deals with such matters as foundations, difficulties in the works, the choice

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

and formation of personnel for the houses in Europe and in the South American missions. His words, advice, and approval, always reveal sentiments of great confidence in the virtue of Mother Caterina.

Some holy pictures that he sent on the occasion of her name day, St. Catherine of Siena, also remain. Oh, how simple and poor they are! Poor pictures, but how precious because of what was written on them! One reads:

‘Evviva St. Catherine! Long live the mother superior! May the Lord grant her his choicest blessings, especially the consolation of seeing her Daughters grow in number and holiness, so that they can be spread throughout the whole world to snatch souls from evil to give them to their heavenly Spouse, Jesus.’ The priest, Michele Rua, in writing this prayer, sends the image of that Virgin who awaits her Daughters to work for the salvation of souls in the missions most in need, such as the people of Africa, and this without delay.¹¹

The words written on another holy picture are gentle and aflame with charity:

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, support the heart of your handmaid, Sr. Caterina Daghero in the accomplishment of the holy tasks that in your goodness you have deigned to entrust to her.¹²

Other such images bearing the wishes of Fr. Rua to Mother Caterina have also been preserved. They are heirlooms for the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and indeed for the whole Salesian Family.

Fr. Paolo Albera’s Praise

Letters also remain from Fr. Paolo Albera, second successor of Don Bosco, demonstrating the high esteem he had for this revered Mother. One, in particular, has been chosen because it reveals the sentiments of her heart, and allows the reader to grasp

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

an intimate spiritual drama that shines a vivid light on her humility and generosity. It goes back to September 4, 1913, a historic date for the Institute, because it marked the VII General Chapter, and therefore the sixth election of Mother Caterina Daghero as Superior General.

Fr. Albera's letter was written almost on the vigil of that election, and is the response to a question, a request for clarification, for light, which Mother Caterina had addressed to him, "What is the will of God? If re-elected, should I accept or renounce"?

Her heart had certainly looked at this important issue, which in substance was not new to her because from her youth she was in the habit of searching, and of wanting to follow the will of God. Maria Domenica Mazzarello had said to her, "You must remain here, because this is the will of the Lord". She who, at first, was hesitant and reluctant to remain in Mornese, immediately decided and found peace.¹³ Thus in other difficult moments, one could say at every moment of her life, those closest to her heard her ask herself and others, "Is this the will of God? Let us pray". Fr. Albera's reply was brief but clear:

V. G. M. G.!
Turin, September 4, 1913

My good Mother General,

*After having thought and especially prayed much, I have decided to reply to you that if the Lord wants you to be elected again as superior, you should embrace the cross with generosity and prepare to carry it with merit for yourself, and with the greatest profit possible for your Sisters.
May the will of God be done in all things!*

Yours affectionately in Jesus and Mary
*Paolo Albera, priest*¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Chapter II.

¹⁴ Letters, FMA General Archives.

On September 16, the election took place, “...with unanimous joy”, according to the chronicle of the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato and Mother Caterina, once again, accepted in peace and, one might add, with love.

On the occasion of the feast of St. Catherine, Fr. Albera wrote:

May the Lord hear me and grant that each one of your good Daughters may be a Simon of Cyrene who helps you carry the cross of your role, and this by prayer and conduct worthy of a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians. May Don Bosco, our venerated Father and founder, looking down from heaven on his Daughters already scattered throughout the world, occupied in the most varied works, recognise them as true spouses of Jesus, tireless imitators of his zeal and of his spirit.

*With this beautiful hope, I shout with all your Daughters, Evviva mother general!*¹⁵

On September 8, 1922, Mother Caterina accepted this role of responsibility for the last time,¹⁶ It was almost an immediate foretaste of the eternal reward her divine Spouse had prepared to recompense that great cross that weighed on her shoulders for forty-three years, causing both sufferings and consolations to blossom in her heart.

While referring to that last election, less than two years before her death, it is worth quoting a detail passed on in the memoirs:

At sunset on that day, September 16, 1922, we saw a white dove appear on the roof of the hall where the members of the general chapter had met that morning, and where the election of Mother had taken place. It went to the little tower on which there is the statue of Mary Help of Christians, and landed at the feet of the statue. It then continued its flight and stopped, or so it appeared

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ FMA VIII General Chapter, FMA General Archives.

to us, on the roof above the superiors' rooms, and right on that of mother general.

It flew around a number of times and then returned to where it had first appeared. After a few minutes it flew away and disappeared.

We were rather impressed and commented, 'Where had that white dove come from, out of its nest so late? Why had it flown to the feet of the statue of Mary Help of Christians and then landed on the roof above mother general's room? What could it mean?' Perhaps the Lord was pleased with the election and wanted to give us a tangible sign.¹⁷

This story reminds one of the beautiful, ardent verse of the Song of Solomon: "Arise, my love, [my dove] my fair one, and come away".¹⁸

Just a year and five months after that memorable day, the voice of the Beloved would resound in the ear of the Spouse, and she would follow him in that last supreme flight.¹⁹

Marvellous Equilibrium

Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, third successor of Don Bosco, already Prefect General at the time of Fr. Michele Rua and Fr. Paolo Albera, always showed toward Mother Caterina an esteem that could not have been greater. From 1901, that is, when Fr. Rua recalled him from Spain to Italy to entrust the task of prefect general to him, Fr. Rinaldi understood and admired Mother Caterina. Twenty-three years of understanding and direction followed.

During the events that involved the two great Salesian families and the Holy See,²⁰ he, perhaps more than anyone else, with the exception of Fr. Rua, understood how this indomitable woman suffered in that painful situation. He became her adviser and support. He was able to measure the strength of silence,

¹⁷ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

¹⁸ Song of Solomon 2:10.

¹⁹ February 26, 1924.

²⁰ A. Amadei, Op.cit.

prudence, constancy, humility, and faith that made of Mother Caterina, a most obedient daughter of the Church, one who had an unlimited devotion to the Pope, who was deeply attached to her founder and Father, most faithful to his spirit and completely obedient to his successors.

Many writings of Fr. Rinaldi have also remained: letters to her, conferences, Goodnights to the Sisters in which the name, mind, heart and Salesian virtue of Mother Caterina clearly stand out. He testifies that she was, “Balanced in her judgements, work, and way of thinking. She was always humble, and had an inner humility” that did not consist of gestures, or false reluctance, but of convictions, feelings, and deeds:

She possessed that marvellous equilibrium, strength, firmness and clarity that never deviated, and made her capable of dominating her passions. Passions disturb, indeed they take away balance, and uprightness. She never allowed herself to be disturbed or conquered by passions.²¹

The following is a selection from the wealth of testimonies left by Fr. Rinaldi:

- She thought of her duty, and that was all.
- A woman of prudence, a prudence that always shone brightly but especially during times of great difficulty.²²
- She did not allow herself to be allured by a false freedom of action. She would say, ‘The Institute was born with Don Bosco and in Don Bosco. It is necessary to remain with Don Bosco.’ With an act of heroic prudence, humility, and submission she waited for the proper moment, and obtained the desired result.²³
- Speaking to me privately, with admirable simplicity, she revealed her conviction that she did not know how to act or to speak, she needed everyone to help her to continue, she was inept in role of responsibility. However, a moment later, in

²¹ Conference, FMA General Archives.

²² Cf. A. Amadei, Op.cit.

²³ Conference, FMA General Archives.

exercising the authority that had been given to her by the Lord, she could, all at once, be seen with the reins of government in hand, sure, calm, serene, as one who knew that God was at her side, without becoming disturbed or moved if she saw some discontented people around her. She was always fixed on her goal: the glory of God, the good of the Institute, the sanctification of her Daughters in the spirit of Don Bosco, the ‘good of souls’.²⁴

- She possessed a simple spirit, a complex of virtues that were not very obvious but of immense value.
- She was constantly consumed by good works.
- An example of activity, suffering, union with God.²⁵

Fr. Filippo Rinaldi wrote frequently in praise of Mother Caterina.²⁶

Unaware of Her Own Merit

Fr. Pietro Ricaldone, who had been at Fr. Rinaldi’s side for thirty years as his close, great collaborator, and later the fourth successor of Don Bosco, was no less eloquent in his words describing her venerable person. In his concise style, he summed up her life, her determination, and her greatness of heart and mind:

- The heart of a woman and the strength of a man.
- A great woman and a holy religious; a strong-willed woman.
- Her truly extraordinary gifts of leadership: wisdom, prudence, fortitude, caution.
- She was forthright in following her path.
- Her glory was her attachment and fidelity to Don Bosco, her Salesian judgment.
- The development of the Institute under her leadership was extraordinary.
- A magnificent example.

²⁴ *Salesian Bulletin*, April 11, 1924 [Italian edition].

²⁵ Conference, FMA General Archives.

²⁶ Conferences and Discourses, FMA General Archives.

The author had the honour and joy of hearing these phrases spoken by the fourth successor of Don Bosco, and taking note of them when she heard them. One could almost say that they were expressions of the intense conviction and the lively memory that dictated them.

It could be said that the words of Don Bosco's successors echoed his own words and those of all the SDB who knew Mother Caterina directly or indirectly. This is confirmed by abundant oral and written documentation. One could name many of the most illustrious and best known members of the Salesian Society, the general directors of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, from Fr. Giovanni Cagliero, the later Cardinal, to Fr. Giovanni Bonetti, Monsignor Giovanni Marengo, and Fr. Clemente Bretto.

They knew her more closely and, like the successive rector majors of her time, they left memories of Mother Caterina that show their great esteem and confidence in her.

Mother Caterina was unaware of her own merit. The only thing she showed that she knew and wanted to make known was her deference toward them and her joyful, spontaneous fidelity and obedience.

From Generation to Generation

One day Fr. Rinaldi wrote to her, "Everything fades, but if you cultivate the true spirit of Don Bosco, and pass it on from generation to generation ...". These words were an inspiration as well as an exhortation. Mother Caterina was aware of this and practised it from moment to moment, by her example and with her words, which were insistent and revealed a certain trepidation, a fear, almost an anxiety regarding this responsibility: to pass on the Spirit of Don Bosco to others! Some day she would be gone, and the closer that day came the more she wanted to imprint on the Institute for the future, that indelible Salesian identity. She was not afraid to act energetically when necessary.

Don Bosco's directives, Don Bosco's works, Don Bosco's spirit, "never move away from them". Let the house be closed in

which it was not possible to implement this. Absolutely no change, no modification! The memoirs record:

In the village, they had such esteem and confidence in us that they called on us to assist the sick in their homes. When Mother heard about it, she absolutely forbade it. 'It is not the work of our Institute', she told us. 'Don Bosco did not found us for this.' The parish priest and the people did not want to hear of this. They asked repeatedly, but Mother said, 'It would be preferable to close the house'.²⁷

In order to safeguard the Salesian Spirit intact in the Institute, she was careful that Sisters were not entrusted with roles of leadership or other positions of responsibility if they had not given proof of true Salesian judgement and had not received a sound Salesian formation. She would say:

Other institutes may do better than we do. All charisms that praise the Lord are good, but we belong to Don Bosco. We must think, act, pray, and live as he taught us. Nothing should be new or different in our works, in our practices of piety, in our way of educating, even if it seems to us more beautiful and more comfortable.²⁸

Mother Emilia Mosca, her great collaborator in the area of studies, education, and the formation of the Sisters, said the same, as did Fr. Francesco Cerruti, General Director of Salesian studies.

Until the end, she adhered perfectly to what the saintly founder had taught and what his successors were teaching.

The following testimony comes from a member of the VIII General Chapter of 1922, who later carried out significant roles in the Institute. She wrote:

I was in a position to admire the great prudence and humility of our venerated Mother Daghero, especially in the 1922 General

²⁷ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

²⁸ Ibid.

Chapter. It was the first in which I participated and the last in which our venerated Mother, of happy memory, took part. Therefore, the impression made on me was deeper and more unforgettable. Rev. Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, of happy memory, also attended. The chapter members took part in animated and heated discussions on important topics. Mother Daghero listened calmly, followed everything intelligently, and with that profound understanding of the topics which came from her long experience of leadership.

She could have given her opinion, but she always remained silent, allowing Rev. Fr. Filippo Rinaldi to guide the discussions toward a resolution, wanting to see what the venerated superior thought about the controversial issues, and showing herself immediately ready to fully accept and adhere to his decision.²⁹

What a magnificent example she gave to those who were of her time and those who would follow, from generation to generation. She wanted and was happy that the Sisters should have filial confidence in the Salesians and welcome their advice and help for their peace of mind and sanctification. A provincial wrote:

When, due to the new dispositions, we no longer had the assistance and help of the Salesian director general, Mother said to me, ‘Going to the houses, tell the Sisters that if they need or want to write to any of the superiors of the Salesian chapter, they may do so in full freedom, handing in such letters sealed and receiving the response in the same way. Say this, not only to each Sister in private, but to all the Sisters gathered for a conference, in the presence of the superior.’³⁰

Celebrating Salesian Events

Once again, she demonstrated her respect, veneration, and ardent love for everything that bore the name of Don Bosco, that is, everything Salesian. To fully understand this, it would be necessary to cite her circular letters, especially those that give the joyful news of the declaration of Venerability of Don Bosco, the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Golden Jubilee of priesthood of Fr. Rua, Fr. Albera and Fr. Rinaldi, the consecration of Salesian bishops, of Cardinal Cagliero, the inauguration of the Museum of Devotion to Mary Help of Christians, and the centenary of Don Bosco' birth.

She wanted prayers and spiritual and material activities involving all the Sisters and those with whom they worked, so that these Salesian celebrations might be splendid and glorious. This theme resounded like a joyful refrain in her circulars.

Mother Caterina received messages from civil and political authorities, outstanding prelates, cardinals and pontiffs that must have given her great satisfaction. She rejoiced in them for the Institute, not for herself. Without saying anything, with a cheerful nod, a smile, an eloquent glance, or a humorous phrase, she showed that she did not consider herself as being important. Her conviction could not be doubted. Those gestures were all too clearly marked by sincerity.

There is a passage in the gentle but profound *Story of a Soul* that reminds one of the characteristics of Mother Caterina. This is not intended as a comparison between St. Thérèse of Lisieux and Mother Caterina, two very different persons. However, amidst the almost infinite variety of the elect, common traits are love of God, forgetfulness of self, and that simplicity which is humility and the foundation of holiness. The Little Flower compared herself to a drinking bowl, which is not placed on the table, but on the ground, so there is little danger of it falling any lower. However, continuing the comparison she explains that:

For a prioress it is very different, because being placed high up on the table, one runs much greater risks. Honour is always dangerous. How much toxic praise is daily offered up to those who occupy the first places. What harmful incense and how necessary it is that a soul be detached from self, so as not to be damaged by it.³¹

³¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, Op.cit.

With what ingenuity and courageous openness, the saint of Lisieux spoke the truth!

May the Holy Will of God be Done

Mother Caterina did not write the above, but she lived it, and like the Little Flower, she showed that she understood it, always kept it present in her heart, made it her strength and safeguard. She avoided honours, and wherever it was not absolutely necessary, or a strict duty, she sought to pass unobserved, and not to take the first place. In various places, the memoirs recount:

- Mother did not want it known that she was the Superior General.
- On the occasion of her re-election, moved by humility, Mother said to us who surrounded her to celebrate, ‘May the Holy Will of God be done! In the Congregation, there are certainly people who are much more capable than I. You did not pray enough about this’.
- When we performed musical and literary entertainments in her honour, she would say, ‘This is not for me, but for Don Bosco and for the Madonna. You honour them in me since I represent them, even though I do not deserve it’.³²

The following are a few examples taken from the memoirs. They are not only words, but deeds and episodes that are very meaningful:

- On the occasion of the crowning of the image of Mary Help of Christians, the venerated Fr. Rua was accompanying Her Royal Imperial Highness Letizia Bonaparte towards the exit from the courtyard when, by chance, they met Mother Caterina. Fr. Rua immediately said, ‘Your Highness, here is the superior general of our Sisters.’ There was a large crowd around and Mother pushed forward Sr. Sofia Cairo, who was beside her, and quickly moved back. The princess complemented Sr. Sofia and she, in the

³² Testimony, FMA General Archives.

confusion of the moment, responded with a deep bow! The kind and intelligent Fr. Rua just smiled.³³

- In Rome, she wanted to go to visit the Marchese Giustiniani, whom she had not yet met. Perhaps she wanted to give her news of her relative, Sr. Chiarina Giustiniani, however, she wanted to do so as a simple Sister. At the door of the palace, she said to Mother Maddalena Morano³⁴ who was accompanying her, ‘I ask you not to present me as mother general’.

‘Oh, Mother’, she replied in surprise but did not add either yes or no. Mother Caterina Daghero understood her silence as consent. However, when the Marchese appeared in the reception room, Mother Maddalena Morano immediately made it her duty to present the Mother General of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, and therefore, also of the very dear Sr. Chiarina Giustiniani.

Mother Morano recounted how, ‘Mother Caterina Daghero turned scarlet and gave her a look that said, you played a nice trick on me! It was also a tacit reproof’.³⁵

The more light there was around her, the more she chose to remain hidden and in the shadows. From this profound sentiment of humility came her sense of reserve, even though she was so strong, firm, and clear in her action. It was a mistrust that led her to always have recourse to prayer, to ask others and seek advice. She did not only ask it of the SDB superiors, and her councillors. At times, when there was no risk of imprudence, and it was not a serious matter, she would ask the opinion and advice of any Sister whom she encountered. It was just like Don Bosco, who sometimes even turned to his boys.

This was a sign of intelligence, wisdom, and true humility. According to Sacred Scripture, “Keep sound wisdom and prudence, and they will be life for your soul”.³⁶

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sr. Maddalena Morano is now declared Blessed.

³⁵ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

³⁶ Proverbs 3:21-22.

Wise Guidance

Mother Caterina used to say:

- A Sister or a superior who is too sure of herself, who does not feel the need for advice and help from others, who thinks she knows how to do everything well by herself shows that self-love is still very strong in her, even though she does not recognise it. With self-love there is pride and inexperience.³⁷
- Let us not fear humiliations, let us not be afraid of corrections. Rather, if we want to learn humility we must love humiliations; we must receive them well, thank the Lord for them.³⁸

She confirmed her words by example. It is certain that, even in the midst of the honours that came with her role as leader, Mother Caterina, knew the healthy, bitter taste of humiliation. Suffice it to say that, as leader, she had the ultimate responsibility for everything that happened in the Institute.

What a heavy burden the responsibility of leadership must be! The Institute embraced hundreds and hundreds of varied houses scattered throughout the world. They often included delicate religious and social works, and thousands of religious.

When the call of leadership was entrusted to her, the strength of her spirit shone forth in a humility that won the admiration of those who had asked it of her.³⁹

Don Bosco had given an heroic example⁴⁰ and she did not forget. Her whole person seemed to be invested with humility, and this increased rather than diminish the fascination of the dignity and ascendancy that emanated from her.

A Sister in leadership in the Institute, recalling past times, when she was a resident student, wrote:

When I was a resident student, Mother suggested an invocation to me. She recommended that I repeat it frequently, 'Oh, Mary,

³⁷ Conference, FMA General Archives.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁰ E. Ceria, *Vita di S. G. Bosco* (private circulation).

my Mother, help me to belong totally to Jesus and to you by means of great humility'.⁴¹

It was a beautiful, ardent invocation and Mother Caterina probably repeated it often herself, since it was in great humility that she sought her sanctification.

Grateful Heart

The virtue of humility also gave birth to that very delicate sentiment, gratitude. The Sister quoted above also wrote, "When I was leaving to visit the houses of the province, Mother recommended that I should not forget to visit and thank the authorities and benefactors".⁴²

Like Don Bosco, in whom the sentiment of gratitude was outstanding, Mother Caterina used to say:

Our Father and founder was most grateful to those who helped his works. We must be the same. We must be, and show ourselves to be grateful. This, too, is a way of doing good to souls and to the Institute.

She took every opportunity to return the favours done to the Institute. She always prayed and on the occasion of dates dear to the families of benefactors, or on important religious feasts, she graciously indicated and chose the gifts she thought would be most useful or welcome to them.

There was a room in the motherhouse of Nizza Monferrato where the beautiful and at times precious objects that were given to Mother Caterina were placed. When the opportunity occurred they would find their way somewhere else, as an expression of her gratitude.

She wanted people to be educated to gratitude. Both resident and day students were to learn this gentle and consoling virtue from their teachers and assistants. Fr. Francesco Cerruti said:

⁴¹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁴² Ibid.

The gratitude of those we help is a consolation and encouragement to us. We must not, however, depend on it to do good, or expect it. When we receive indifference, or worse, ingratitude, let us say, 'Everything that I have done is gold for heaven'. However, this does not mean that we should not enjoy expressions of gratitude. Rather, we should cultivate this sentiment. It is either a mistake or a sign of a lack of sensitivity and delicacy of soul to refuse or despise manifestations of gratitude on the part of young people. Though thoughtless and lacking in reflection, they are open to the sentiment of gratitude and enjoy showing it, if we only cultivate it. The Lord loves a cheerful giver, and loves the grateful soul. He praised the leper who was the only one of ten who returned to thank him.⁴³

Mother Caterina had similar thoughts. She did not want the students to give gifts to their teachers. Nor did she want the teachers to expect or desire them. What she wanted was to see gratitude and affection in the students for their teachers. She was happy that they should show it with letters, compositions or especially with spiritual offerings of prayer and promises to become better people.

It was beautiful to see her congratulate young people, allowing them to understand that what they did for the Sisters was as if it were done for her.

She was most delicate in showing gratitude to those dear Sisters who helped her to carry the heavy burdens of the Institute not just spiritually but also materially.

The following extracts from her letters clearly demonstrate her gratitude:

- *Your kindness, which is so heartfelt and full of benevolence towards your superiors and Sisters will certainly be repaid in*

⁴³ Conference to teachers.

*that abundant measure with which the Lord repays those who help without any human aim, looking to him alone.*⁴⁴

- *I received your registered letter for the feast of St. Catherine with the two cheques enclosed. I was really moved.*⁴⁵
- *Your generous offering, sent to me on the occasion of St. Catherine arrived and has been cashed. I thank you very, very much, especially in these times of so many needs it was providential and doubly welcome. I pray the Lord to reward you with many graces and blessings.*⁴⁶
- *I received the gifts that all those centres of our past pupils wanted to offer to our devastated houses in Veneto, on the occasion of your name-day.*⁴⁷
- *I cannot tell you how surprised and moved my spirit was by this act that was so generous in itself and so devoted and filial in how it was done. Oh, how much good our brave and active past pupils can do in works of charity, but especially for souls, guiding many inexperienced young people and supporting them on the path of honour and duty.*
- *With regard to the offerings in favour of our houses that were damaged, how can I ever sufficiently thank the women and girls, co-operators and past pupils, who, one could say, have made our cause their own?*⁴⁸

Similar expressions can be found in many letters to Sisters who lived far away and personal conversations with those who lived close by:

- *Mother always thanked, always! With a smile, an eloquent look, that went to the heart.*⁴⁹
- *Mother would say thank you even for something insignificant, and how she said it! She did so wholeheartedly.*⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

It is All the Same to Me

The Sister who generally accompanied her and provided the various services that were indispensable for her work and health, said, “Mother always demonstrated a trusting gratitude”. When asked what she meant by ‘trusting’, she replied:

Because she said thank you and at the same time showed that she had confidence in what was done for her and in the one who did it. No matter what she was given, she was content. In this way, I always felt encouraged to do things for her and for others.⁵¹

What this Sister said helps to understand Mother Caterina’s delicacy of heart as well as her habitual spirit of self-denial, which always accompanied her humility. The same Sister also attests:

In all those years I could never guess Mother’s tastes. I would ask her, ‘Mother, would you prefer this or that?’ ‘Whatever you want. It is all the same to me’, she would respond.⁵²

Mother Marina Coppa stated more than once, “There was no danger of Mother showing that she preferred one thing to another. Everything was fine for her, everything was too good for her”. Mother Enrichetta Sorbone recounted:

Mother was most frugal. Not only that, but she always looked for what seemed less good, less beautiful. For example, when a bowl of fruit was brought to table, and she needed fruit because of her health, gently and very naturally she would select the least attractive apple or peach, the one that was already overripe, and with equal naturalness she refused the one we offered her.

There is an incident recorded in the memoirs, that is reminiscent of St Francis de Sales serenely eating the rotten egg and of St Margaret Mary Alacoque eating cheese in obedience, despite her natural repugnance.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Mother was visiting a house. One day they brought to table a plate of eels. These dear Sisters did not know the repugnance, the almost disgust she felt for that fish.

“It’s tasty, Mother, it is a very fine fish and is good for you.” She smiled, said nothing and ate it. But she had to leave the dining room immediately. Her stomach, which was not as heroic as her spirit, refused the food being forced on it. “Oh Mother, why did you not tell us?” “Because I wanted to try again, and besides, you were eating it, so...”.

Mother Caterina wanted to keep the spirit of self-denial alive in a practical way. As the following incidents show:

- We had gone with Mother for a walk in the countryside. After walking for quite a long time, we stopped, tired and hot. We were thirsty, but where could we find water? We found a lovely fresh spring. Naturally, everyone took advantage of it. Mother, too, approached and took some water in her hands. She bowed her head and put her lips to it but did not drink, although she repeated the action a few times.

Without being noticed, I observed and was filled with admiration. At that moment Mother gave me a very eloquent example of mortification and at the same time of delicacy. If she had not made others believe she had taken a drink, some Sisters would have suffered, and those who still had to drink or had already drunk would have felt embarrassed. Oh, how many secrets of holiness and charity Mother had locked into her great heart!⁵³

- On one occasion a Sister felt remorse for what she considered to be a failing in self-denial. She shared her concern with Mother Caterina who advised her to, ‘Pay attention, because if we are careless in little things, it can lead to greater failures’!⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

She was the first not to give in, as the following shows:

- She had arrived from a journey and it could be seen that she was tired and suffering. However, she refused to take even a short rest and immediately began the work that was close to her heart, listening to and consoling us.⁵⁵
- It seemed as if Mother never tired.⁵⁶

These things might seem insignificant, but such acts of self-denial were repeated throughout her life. The frequent repetition of such acts leads one to the conclusion that Mother Caterina possessed a habitual spirit of self-denial that was neither easy nor commonplace. She would say:

- Personal sacrifices, suffered in the intimacy of your soul are of value in saving others.⁵⁷
- One does not go to heaven without mortification, faith, prayer, and work.⁵⁸

These were the characteristic virtues of Mother Caterina. They appeared almost like a natural reflection of her spirit and her character, a free gift from God. So well did she manage to conceal the intimate effort it took to practise them that they seemed to have become second nature in her.

Piety: as Simple as it was Deep

One who knew the secrets of her heart and was with her when she died said that, Mother Caterina, “possessed a practical spirit of prayer”.⁵⁹

Her piety translated immediately into work. She did not speak much about her spiritual life. She did not compose beautiful words of sublime teaching about it. Rather, she lived it, moment by moment, and showed this in the way she referred everything to

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Giovanni Zolin, Commemorative conference.

God and took all as coming from him: joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures. She would say:

The Madonna does everything. By night she fixes all the mistakes we make during the day. Therefore, let us go forward, entrusting ourselves completely to her love for us. Let us remain always united under her mantle.⁶⁰

She did not want anything else, no special practices of piety that were not in the spirit of the Constitutions and in the prayer book of the FMA. She neither sought nor wanted others to look for special books of asceticism. Piety meant thinking, speaking of God, and working for him. For the FMA, piety, which must be her first virtue and the source of all others, consists in doing all for the glory of God, sacrificing everything, every personal good, for the salvation of others. One thinks and speaks of God by working for him.

Like Don Bosco, she inculcated those devotions that were the foundation and at the same time the summit of all piety: devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, to Mary Help of Christians, and frequent Confession and Holy Communion. She insisted on:

Well-made, sincere Confession, daily examination of conscience especially at night. A fervent Act of Contrition before closing one's eyes in sleep. Flight from sin. Being vigilant that sin does not enter our houses. Keeping oneself in God's grace! The four Last Things.

She wanted this teaching, completely based on faith, love and experience, to be given to everyone, day and boarding students, and oratorians alike.

Like Don Bosco she had only one fear, almost a terror, sin! She had only one desire, the grace of God in every person, especially in those entrusted to her and to the Sisters.

⁶⁰ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

In her conferences and private conversations these same ideas, sentiments, and lively faith, always dominated. She used to say:

- I like beautiful expressions, but I much prefer the practice.⁶¹
- Not words but deeds, work much in union with God.⁶²

The asceticism of Mother Caterina was very simple, yet profound and sure. It was a Salesian asceticism, like that of Don Bosco.

Do Like All the Others

A Sister wrote:

I decided to make my meditation on my knees, so as not to allow myself to fall asleep. Mother noticed it and approached me, saying:

- What are you doing? Why are you on your knees?
- Not to fall asleep. And besides, I am making a novena.
- No, no novena. Do like all the others.⁶³

‘Like all the others’, the kind of piety that Mother Caterina wanted was as simple as it was deep, one without ostentation.

To those Sisters who were inclined to stay peacefully in chapel outside of the prescribed times, at the risk of neglecting apostolic works or other duties, perhaps the less apparent ones, like household chores or other things that might escape one who was superficial, she would say, “This is not Salesian”, and would reprove them.

- Mother, and when there is nothing else to be done?
- Nothing else? There is nothing else to do for those who don’t want to work. But those who want work will always find it. If you have finished your own work, look around and help others with theirs.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Such expressions were spoken seriously and were not lost. However, this hard-working piety neither prevented nor was it opposed to time spent in prayer before the altar. On the contrary, she suggested and encouraged short personal visits to the Blessed Sacrament during recreation, when the Sisters could take some time for themselves, or during the brief interval between breakfast, after morning Mass and the sound of the bell that called all to their day's work.

She rejoiced at seeing them gather around the altar, or make a short, but ardent, Way of the Cross. She set the example.

She took the greatest care with regard to the chapel and religious celebrations. No expense was to be spared for what was needed in the chapel. She wanted the novenas of the Immaculate, Christmas, Mary Help of Christians, and the principal liturgical solemnities to be celebrated, not only with the greatest fervour of the heart, but, as far as possible, with the greatest splendour of the rites.

The sacristan and the Sister responsible for sacred music knew how much Mother Caterina encouraged them and how she enjoyed seeing them animated in this beautiful and holy work and how maternal she was in her praise when the singing, music, vestments, lights added splendour to the beauty of the service. In the memoirs it states:

- When Mother Caterina came to Genazzano, she immensely enjoyed being able to kneel before the image of Our Lady of Good Counsel. She would say, 'Let me go to church to enjoy the beautiful services that take place there, and if you want to do something that pleases me, put me close to the statue of Mary'.
- At Cinzano she did not have many visits to make to authorities and benefactors. Therefore, she could allow herself the concession of spending more time with the Sisters and the pupils to relax spiritually before the altar.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Hers was a serene and confident piety. The Sisters working in a SDB house experienced a beautiful example of this. She wanted to offer them a break from the heavy work that they did every day, so they went for an outing to the seaside. A Sister wrote:

It became a bit late for the work we still had to do. ‘Mother, a Sister said to her, we have made our spiritual reading, but what about the visit to the Blessed Sacrament? As soon as we get home we will have to serve a snack to the boys, and then get the supper ready, and then ... Mother said to the Sister, ‘Poor Sisters! We are in the presence of God everywhere; so even here at the seaside we can make our visit. You say the prayers of the visit, and in this way we will do what our Holy Rule asks for today’. Therefore, walking slowly and in a recollected manner we made our visit to the satisfaction of everyone.

Mother Caterina lived in the presence of God, with a spirit of true, deep piety.⁶⁶ But, to the very end, hers was a concept of piety based on work and sacrifice.

Love for the Missions

It is moving to read what a Sister wrote:

Having told her of some suffering I had regarding my future, Mother said to me, ‘Be ready to die working, that’s how Don Bosco wanted it. In your sacrifices and sufferings think of the hardships faced by the missionaries’. How much good that suggestion did for me!

On that occasion, Mother said good-bye to me with tears in her eyes. I could read in her glance a real goodbye and I was fearful. That is exactly what happened. It was the last time I saw her!⁶⁷

The work of the missions, the thought of all the work that the missionary Sisters were doing, was always on her mind.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Thinking of the weariness, sacrifices, and dangers that made up their lives was for her a source both of pain and of consolation. How often she saw these generous FMA leaving for the missions, how many memories they have of her generous heart in those moments of farewell. It was like a great manuscript that told the story of her life.

From August of 1881 to December of 1923, missionary expeditions followed one another without interruption, and there was more than one each year. In 1922, the golden jubilee of the Institute, she rejoiced in knowing that there were no further obstacles to begin the FMA presence in the Far East. The personnel was ready and the far-off dream that Don Bosco had for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was about to be fulfilled. In that same year the first FMA entered southern India.

In 1923, the last full year of work for her, she had the great joy of finally seeing one of her prayers granted. Her Sisters arrived in China on January 17, and on December 15, in northeast India.

Celebrating the Missionary Dream

On April 30, 1922, the feast of St. Catherine of Siena was celebrated at the motherhouse. This was to precede the more solemn celebration that would take place on August 5 of that same year on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Institute. On the stage of the little theatre a very attractive drama, *The Surprise of the Fairy*, was performed. Called by the touch of a magic wand and brought by little genies who served the magic fairy, children representing every part of the world came bringing festal greetings and promises of devotion, fidelity, and love to Mother Caterina.

She looked, listened, smiled, and wept with emotion. In the final scene, little Chinese children who also had been brought by magic, came asking Mother Caterina to send them her Sisters with their black habits and white guimpes, with their shining crucifixes around their necks, that they might teach them to know the virgin Mother of God. From her armchair, and with a radiant smile, Mother Caterina nodded her assent to the little actors who represented the Chinese children.

The following year, when Mother Marina Coppa referred to her forthcoming feast day, she said, “This year I would like a missionary drama to be presented”.

She wanted to impress on the minds of her Sisters, and especially on the novices and the boarders, the idea and desire for a missionary apostolate. She wanted to draw attention to its necessity and glory, to keep alive the memory of those Sisters who were already sacrificing themselves often heroically, and to encourage missionary vocations! Like Don Bosco, Mother Caterina also wanted the theatre used as a school, a source of inspiration, of uplifting spirits, a virtue, in this case, missionary virtue.

The missionary Sisters had left a few months earlier for the Far East. Among them was a young Sister from the school of Nizza who had greatly desired this grace. Mother Caterina kept these Sisters very much alive in her heart.

Mother Marina Coppa communicated her desire to the Sister who was preparing the celebration and this Sister prepared a missionary drama called, *Lily Flower: Daughter of the Rajah*.

The drama presented scenes from the East with its splendour and its shadows, with its thirst for beauty and greatness. Lily Flower personified this. She was the East turning to God the way, the truth, and the life. The missionary work of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians was also seen in the drama. In it, an FMA missionary, in her white habit, appeared on the scene and at the conclusion was crowned with humility and martyrdom.

It was the last time she would celebrate her name day, an artistic affirmation of the missionary work of Mother Caterina.

The house dedicated to Maria Mazzarello in Turin, Borgo S. Paolo, welcomed young Sisters who had just left the novitiate and who aspired to be missionaries. Here under intelligent and expert guidance, they were preparing and training for the work and all the forms of missionary apostolate. They studied the languages, customs, and cultures of the different countries to which they were destined. This house had been desired by Mother Caterina and was constructed during the last two years of her life. She had wanted a large house to be built to which all the houses of the Institute

would contribute. It was for the good, the merit, and the glory of all!

In this way all the Sisters with their pupils, co-operators, and supporters, as well as their families had become builders of the missionary apostolate.

I Carry You All in My Heart

The general archives contain an abundant documentation in which one can discover the maternal heart of Mother Caterina for all her missionaries. But again, which testimonies should be chosen?

The missionaries recall the final tender farewell of Mother Caterina, and the last words whispered with a smile that gave encouragement and comfort. She promised her maternal help, made suggestions for their new life, for the long sea journey, for all kinds of difficulties they might encounter.

They remember her penetrating glance that looked at their faces for the last time trying to understand their feelings and console their heroic suffering in those last moments before their departure.

- What is wrong? You look very sad. Are you suffering? Aren't you pleased to be going?
- It's nothing, Mother.
- Yet you are not content, have you some deep suffering?
- Nothing Mother, I am happy to go!

Mother Caterina had a deep understanding of the pain that each of those dear Sisters must have been suffering, the pain of saying goodbye. But in the young Sister who replied, "It's nothing Mother", she intuitively guessed that there was a more deeply felt suffering and she understood. "Mother, you know, it's my mama, I feel ...". At that moment Mother Caterina was her mother, and had words of great comfort, almost of prophecy, "Go happily, go! The Lord will console your mother. Go! You will do much good and then you will see".

That young missionary, Sr. Luisa Vaschetti, remained in the missions for twenty-five years. Then she came back and, as has been previously stated, became mother general. She told the story as if it had happened yesterday. She remembered that farewell, that suffering, that comfort.

Mother Caterina accompanied them in thought and prayer, “I always carry you all in my heart”, she would say.

They wrote, opening their hearts to her, sometimes telling of sufferings, memories, regrets, knowing that there is no victory without a struggle, no great idea without suffering. She replied encouraging, consoling, and even joking a little:

Don't let it one day be said of you that you were a paper soldier⁶⁸, that you went to war and hearing the enemy, you turned your back. Instead of fighting you ran away. You need, at least for a while, to distance yourself from every thought of Italy, and all its inhabitants. Set your heart at peace and put it into what you have to do there. My hope is that the greater your sacrifice, your sufferings in the detachment, was and still is, the happier you will be, the greater the joy you will experience. Then you will have the consolation of doing good for many souls! Absolutely everyone, as you can imagine, is thinking of you.⁶⁹

The Sister overcame her difficulties, remained and became a valiant missionary and a community animator. The same could be said of many others.

She not only wrote to them, but with maternal care she also recommended them to the community animators and provincials. She wrote:

They have had to support and overcome who knows how many inner struggles. It is necessary to be generous with them and to be especially loving toward them.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ The phrase used in the Piedmontese dialect is, *suldà 'd papé*, paper soldier, that is, someone who is worthless, with no strength to resist.

⁶⁹ Letters, FMA General Archives.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

The words of Mother Caterina were listened to and followed.

Authority that Made Itself Loved

The Sisters who worked in the garden, who carried out tasks outside the house, the cook, the teacher, all, whatever their role, whether in leadership or not, felt that they could not withdraw from the authority of Mother Caterina's word. It was an authority that did not impose itself by the strength of its rights, but by the strength of the heart, of virtue, of example.

Hers was an authority that made itself loved. She understood the secret of the true religious leader who felt the responsibility of her authority before God who had bestowed it upon her, and before those she was called to lead, the secret of the saints. This secret explains the genuinely filial relationship, the union among all the houses, provinces and the Centre which, over the many years, did not experience the slightest weakening. It explains the intensity of work done by all under the guidance of one person, one rule, one inspiration, that which came from her mind and heart.

The provincials of distant provinces who were called to act with greater autonomy, still maintained a humble, and filial obedience to her, like that which would be expected of a young novice toward her formator. The letters and memoirs offer clear and moving proof of this and they remain a very authoritative documentation of the kindness and wisdom of Mother Caterina's leadership. In that love there was an element of fear, or rather respect. The Sisters tangibly expressed this through phrases such as:

- Mother would be displeased.
- We don't want to displease Mother.
- Mother wants us to observe silence well at the prescribed times.
- ...that we should pray well in church.
- ...that we should be attentive when assisting.
- Mother desires that we should treat the pupils, the oratorians, everyone well, very well.

- She wants us to be charitable with one another.
- If we should act differently we would give her much displeasure.
- We would displease the Madonna whom she represents.
- Let us make the Madonna happy!

Far and near, the Sisters often listened to and repeated such cautionary phrases that were reminders inspired by filial love and by respect and the spirit of faith in her authority, which came from God.

The following striking phrase was spoken by Mother Luisa. It illustrates this great filial love, “To have a smile and a word from Mother I would willingly and joyfully have undertaken the journey from America to Italy”.

Mother Caterina knew about this love and filial respect and in a maternal way was pleased with it. To use her words, she wanted nothing more from the Sisters than:

Docility and abandonment in obedience, that docility which comes from faith in God, entrusts everything to him, praying that he may do whatever he sees fit according to his divine will.⁷¹

Always Practical

With her inner gaze fixed on love, mercy, and God’s will, she encouraged the Sisters to follow the way of religious virtue. However, she was always practical, and did not neglect anything. Everything had value, even what might pass unobserved, because she considered everything in the light of faith and with that charity that comes from it. And everything was for the good of others and of the Institute. A Sister wrote:

I was responsible for carrying out tasks outside the house, and our beloved Mother often said to me, ‘Purify your intentions frequently. Before leaving the house think of the distance so as not to increase your fatigue by unnecessary journeys. When the journeys are long don’t hesitate to take a tram. If you don’t do this, you will wear yourself out before your time and you will

⁷¹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

soon be unable to work and give the Institute all the help that it expects from you'.⁷²

The following are a few testimonies that give a more complete picture of her efforts to form each Sister as a Salesian religious:

- Let us love zeal for the glory of God and willingly accept anything he sends us, even suffering. Live in his presence but without effort, gently, thinking that he sees you. Be humble. Much knowledge is not necessary. Don't get upset about your lack of ability, God wants abandonment and docility. Let us pray that he may act in us. As long as you feel remorse for little failures, for example, having forgotten a prayer prescribed by the Rule, be at peace. But if one day you notice that you no longer feel such remorse, wake up, be vigilant regarding your soul.
- When a child comes to you, think: here is a soul that Jesus is entrusting to me. I accept any pain, and sacrifice in order to make her a good and perfect Christian. Everything fades away in this world. Always have courage. Religious life is one of sacrifice, but also a life of joy for those who are generous.
- Let us hold fast to obedience. Sometimes being so busy with tasks that are not required, we leave aside those that are. Order is needed even in doing good. In the first place your own soul, then the Sisters, then the resident students, then the day students. Did we not commit ourselves to seek perfection? Have not the superiors entrusted the Sisters to us to form them in virtue and to help them to become saints? Do not the families trust us more than themselves to educate their children? Do not the students come to us to be well-instructed in good? Therefore, let us not waste time in visits etc., the parlour is not our goal. To do good in the oratory it is necessary to have a strong will, as well as a clear awareness of your own weakness, always accompanied by great confidence in God.
- Sincerity, sincerity, simplicity!
- Trying to practise charity and union with God in a hidden way means being a true daughter of Mother Mazzarello. You tell me

⁷² Ibid.

that you are doing things because you are obliged to? All right, now you do them because you're obliged to, later you will do them for love. Have courage!

- You must remain in the last place without making demands, working with purity of intention. There is a great reward in practising holy obedience, and the peace that enters the obedient soul surpasses every other satisfaction. The spider works to weave its web so as to better hide and does not realise that when the web is complete it is then more visible. Perhaps sometimes one may weave a thick web of excuses and deceit to hide her weakness from the superiors. But God is never deceived.
- Live by faith, obedience, and charity. Put all your goodwill at the service of the Lord in order to do good as Don Bosco taught us.⁷³

I have Learned to Understand

Some Sisters wrote:

- Having neglected one of my duties, I presented myself to her to admit my failing. I was a bit anxious, and I told her so. She looked at me with an expression of kindness and understanding, and I said, 'Do you still love me, Mother, as you did before?' She replied, "Do you doubt it? I am well aware of the weakness of the poor human heart, and I have learned to understand it".⁷⁴
- Mother never left us with painful impression. She herself came to look for us or sent for us in order to say, 'Now be at peace, we will not think any more about it. Make a fresh start'.⁷⁵
- Mother had given me a correction, and I had suffered. Later she came to tell me, 'You know, I now understand that it was not all it seemed to be, and I had not taken that into account when I scolded you. Be cheerful'!⁷⁶

The same humility and charity can be found in the life of Mother Mazzarello. Her biographer writes, "Every time she realised that she had been too strict either in correcting or in commanding she acknowledged her mistake and asked pardon".

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

He reports the testimony of one Sister among others, who had received a maternal, but not serious correction, which the saint considered inopportune. She writes, “Two days later Mother called me when I was no longer thinking about it, and hadn’t even suffered, and she said to me, ‘I ask your forgiveness because I should not have said such a thing to you’”.⁷⁷

Mother Caterina also expressed herself rather strongly in a way that could have upset people if her great heart and her uprightness, as well as her sincere desire for what was best, were not so well known. However, the forceful expressions she used at certain moments were more than compensated for by her habitual kindness, patience, and charity.

She was also jovial and humorous. After having given advice and even maternal corrections with great seriousness, in a way that made people reflect deeply, she added some cheerful expression, often in dialect, “...and now *brichet a la prœuva*”!⁷⁸ The Sister would cheer up, smile and reply, “Yes, Mother, you will see”!

It is charming to hear what a Sister who was rather too quick and sharp in her responses had to say. Mother Caterina said to her, “When you feel like giving a sharp response turn your tongue around in your mouth seven times. You’ll see that it will pass”! However, she also suggested that she make a short visit to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.⁷⁹

This, too, reminds one of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. One of her novices had the weakness of crying at everything that went against her, even insignificant things:

She had an idea, and taking a small seashell from her art table said to her, ‘From now on I allow you to cry whenever you want. However, you must only cry into this seashell’. The novice obeyed, and corrected herself. She said: ‘The attention I had to pay to move the shell from one eye to the other distracted me totally from my affliction, thus my tears ceased’.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

⁷⁸ *Put the match to the test*, Piedmontese dialect.

⁷⁹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁸⁰ Thérèse of Lisieux, Op.cit.

Mother Caterina acted with simplicity and cheerfulness, and at the same time with firmness. The Sisters state, “No one was more cheerful than Mother”. Perhaps they could have put it better by saying, “No one was more in control of herself than Mother”, because, even when there were more serious thoughts and worries than usual, and even sufferings filled her spirit, she imitated Don Bosco and Maria Mazzarello by always having a serene face and knowing how to smile and jest.

Casa Madre: House of Memories

A Sister wrote:

One day I went into Mother’s office. She was leafing through the many letters she had on her desk. She raised her eyes and they were filled with tears. She smiled at me and had me sit down. With great calmness, serenity, and motherliness she listened, consoled, and advised me.⁸¹

The Sisters of the motherhouse experienced this for many years. They could follow, almost live Mother Caterina’s day in that house that was so dear to her and where she wanted to die! It was there that she had been elected mother general for the first time and then repeatedly until the end of her life. There she had experienced the spiritual joy of the visits of Don Bosco and of the venerated early Salesians, who were great spiritual benefactors to her and to the Institute. It was the house where Mother Mazzarello had died and where her room was still preserved. That great house, which has never ceased to be called the motherhouse, *Casa Madre*, has now become the *House of Memories*. She knew it, breathed its life, and at the same time inspired that life. From her room, she flew in thought and prayer, and with her pen, to every part of the world where the Sisters were working. However, she especially loved being there, where she felt truly at home.

The Sisters of the motherhouse remember everything about her day. From dawn when the windows of her room were lit up

⁸¹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

before any of the others, until, after the evening prayers when it was the last window to remain illuminated. A clear light burned behind the curtains that allowed the shadow to be seen by those who observed it. It was the shadow of Mother Caterina still bent over her desk where hundreds of letters awaited her reply.

When the Sisters who lived in that house spoke of her they drew a perfect picture of every aspect of her personality, her attitude of prayer, work, vigilance, and celebration. They saw her in the chapel at her kneeler, completely recollected and yet always vigilant, and they saw her passing along the corridors or going up the stairs leading to the Mothers' corridor. She replied kindly to their greetings with a smile and often with a brief phrase like, "Be cheerful.", "Are you good"?, "Keep going forward", "Have courage!" When she received someone in her room, or during the month of May on the little terrace garlanded with wisteria, her eyes penetrated even before her words, and she sometimes guessed their inner struggles. She went among them during midday or evening recreation.

They remember her on the feast days St. Catherine of Alexandria, November 21, and St. Catherine of Siena, April 30. The former was a very intimate feast, reserved just for the Sisters of the motherhouse. The second could be called her official feast, in which the provincials and animators from distant provinces and communities also took part, happy to see her again and to be strengthened by her words. The past pupils, co-operators, and other people connected to the Institute participated, along with the local authorities. On such occasions it could be said of her that she remained unassuming in the midst of such glory. They remember her returning after the long absences due to her visits to other houses. What great celebrations there were! The bells rang out festively, and everyone, including the resident students, ran to the entrance to greet her. As she arrived smiling, there was a joyful shout of, *Viva La Madre!* Everyone crowded around her trying to kiss her hand or at least catch her attention.

She went to the chapel for a brief visit and then returned, smiling and greeting everyone.

They remember her accompanied by the general councillors who formed, as it were, a noble crown of faithful love around her.

As the Sisters would later recount, her councillors were all senior to her in age. There are many interesting particulars recorded with regard to the relationship between Mother Caterina and her council. Some events were seen by all, while others were remembered only by the councillors and shared to honour her.

A word or a glance, from Mother Caterina was law for them, a very acceptable law. Mother Eulalia Bosco recalled, “Mother did not need to say much to us; it was enough for her to look at us”.

The general councillors showed a simplicity and candour that was almost childlike in their obedience and respect for her, “Immediately, Mother”, “Say it, Mother”, “Whatever you want, Mother”. These were their usual words. They were words of sincere, filial, and loving respect. The Sisters took note, admired them, and tried to imitate their example.

The following is a brief episode from a Sister who, for many years, worked alongside Mother Caterina:

One day, I don't know for what reason, I was in Mother's office. Mother assistant⁸² came in and said something to her. I think it had to do with the school. But Mother did not approve, then mother assistant said something like, ‘But what will I do, then, Mother?’. The tone of her voice was impatient. Then she went out. That same day I had occasion to go back into Mother's office, and mother assistant came in at the same time. She knelt at Mother's feet and said. ‘Oh Mother, excuse me if I opposed you’. Mother raised her to her feet immediately saying, ‘But what are you doing, what are you saying, Mother Emilia?’. She, too, was moved and I also was edified.⁸³

⁸² Mother Emilia Mosca, the first general director of the schools of the Salesian Sisters. Cf. G. Mainetti, *Un'Educatrice nella luce di S. Giovanni Bosco*. L. I. C. E., Torino.

⁸³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

Timely Advice

Sisters who carried out various tasks remember her practical advice:

- When Mother came to the garden and saw me gathering vegetables she would teach me saying, ‘Look, Sr. Giuseppina, if you gather them like this it will be quicker. It would be good if you threw less away, because in this way you learn to observe holy poverty’. When she saw hoes, rakes, chairs, glass out of place, she would say to me, I recommend that you take care of everything, otherwise you might find yourself in Purgatory’. The way she said, ‘you know’ is something I have never forgotten and will never forget. Sometimes she would say to me, ‘Sr. Giuseppina, may I take this or that’? I would answer, ‘But you are mother general! You are in charge of everything’! If it happened that I was not there and Mother took something, as soon as she met me she would say from her heart, ‘Sr. Giuseppina did you notice that I came to the garden’? ‘No Mother’. And she would say, ‘Well I took such and such a thing’.⁸⁴
- Sometimes it happened that Mother made a mistake with regard to the mail and I would point it out to her. She would thank me, while the expression in her eyes was one of contentment and gratitude that I cannot describe. She would say to me, ‘Always tell me when I make a mistake’!⁸⁵
- I was very young and suffered from sleepiness during meditation. I confided in Mother and she said to me, ‘Come and sit beside me, and perhaps that would help you to overcome yourself’, and smiling she added, ‘thinking that you are beside mother general’. But then she recommended that after the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, we cooks should go to rest for a while.⁸⁶
- I had to prepare several trunks for the missionary Sisters in America. I had a fever and felt that I could hardly stand. What was I to do? I went to Mother and explained my suffering to her and I added, ‘Mother give me the obedience of going to work’. She placed her hand on my head and said, ‘In obedience, go and

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

do all you have to do'. At that instant, all my pains disappeared and I was able to work for the rest of the day.⁸⁷

- When she came to the midday recreation, and there were peas, beans or corn to be shelled and cleaned, she would cheerfully sit among us and join in the work. She listened to everyone, laughed with us, and spoke to this or that person one of those phrases that said so much. She was the quickest and the most cheerful in this humble household chore.⁸⁸

They remember the evening recreations and her Good Nights. After supper, if the weather was good they went outdoors, under the windows of the Mothers' dining room and cheerfully the chorus began to murmur, 'Come with us Mother'! The door would open and she would appear smiling. In winter, too, the happy chant would begin, or if not, an ambassador would be sent to the Mothers' dining room. She went faithfully and quickly, and never in vain. We had a brief joyful recreation and then the Good Night which, like those of Don Bosco to his Salesians, offered thoughts and sentiments that prepared all for a peaceful night and a day that would be busier and better. Mother Caterina was like a real Mother to her family, and she wanted every house to mirror the motherhouse. She also wanted every community animator and every provincial to be like mothers. She would say, "Life in the family is the kind of life that Don Bosco wanted, Salesian life."

Caring for the Sick

She did not want any partiality and advised:

If we want to be sure that we are not being partial with either the Sisters or the girls let us ask some of the more prudent Sisters of the house, 'Do I show partiality towards anyone'? Let us profit from the words which sometimes shake us, but are the truth.⁸⁹

The Sisters of the motherhouse also remember her visiting the sick frequently, going from room to room, or in the garden. She spent time with them, consoled them, and cheered them up. "Rest,

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

take care of yourself, nourish yourself, and work.” Work? Yes, and she taught them, “Make *cordoncino* [type of cord made from wool] or go into the garden and remove the withered or extra shoots”.

She had the most maternal, consoling words for those who were bedridden. She recommended to the nurses, “One can recognise the spirit of a house from the way the sick are treated. Do not spare any expense in caring for the sick”.

When the Spanish flu was raging, each day, and more than once a day, she went from bed to bed without any regard for herself. She had no fear of contagion, while at the same time forbidding her councillors, except her secretary Mother Luisa, to make such visits for fear that they should catch the terrible illness.

Through her faith and charity, she even obtained extraordinary graces and one could almost say she saved a life. A Sister narrates:

I was close to death. I could no longer open my eyes. My whole soul was centred on one thought: eternity. My limbs already felt the chill of death. Even today I remember, I relive it all as in a dream, how I felt that I was more there than here. But I felt Mother’s presence; I felt her close to me, I understood that she was speaking about me. She had a *biretta* [a three-cornered hat worn by priests] in her hand and put it on my head. I understood that she wanted to save me and it pained me not to be able to open my mouth, not even to be able to make a gesture to thank her. A short time later, the priest came and gave me Extreme Unction, assisted by Rev. Mother Luisa. That same day I felt freed from my illness. I had the sensation that something heavy had fallen from me and freed my body. The *biretta* was one of those worn by Don Bosco, and it was Mother who had brought it to me!

A few months later, Mother Marina Coppa, coming among us teachers, and speaking of the Spanish flu, referred to me saying, ‘When I expressed my pain to Mother about you I said, ‘What will we do for a history teacher’? She responded confidently, ‘Be at peace, she will not die, she will get better and will teach for who knows how long’.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Ibid.

This account has been reported in full because it gives us a picture of Mother Caterina's faith, and glorifies the saintly Founder, Don Bosco.

Postulants and Novices

With the postulants she was like a true mother and she wanted the Sister responsible for them to be the same, no weakness but gentle firmness. She wanted her to study their characters, their moral and intellectual gifts, their aptitudes. In short, she wanted a wise discernment. The Institute does not need money, she would say, because Providence is never lacking. What it needs are Sisters with a genuine Salesian vocation.

A Sister remembers how, almost jokingly, when they were speaking of the poverty of the house, someone said, "Mother, if only some wealthy postulants might come". She replied with great energy, "Don't pay any attention to money. Take care instead that they are good vocations"!

Mother Caterina wanted the postulants to be hard-working and cheerful, of good character with a strong, but flexible will:

... submission in the practice of obedience as Don Bosco would have wanted; a heart formed to piety, filled with the desire to love the Lord, great sincerity, and good health because Salesian life is an active life.

A Sister recalled:

Returning in spirit to the beginnings of my religious life I love to remember the good night that Mother gave to us one beautiful summer evening. We postulants were in the playground of the day pupils when Mother appeared. Our formator had stolen her for a few moments from the professed Sisters. She responded to our noisy, 'Viva Gesù, Mother'! with 'Viva Maria!' She looked around the large group, almost as if to read the heart of each one.

Then in a motherly tone, she said, 'Listen postulants, sometimes it happens that as I go around the house, in the distance I see a postulant with her head down, her eyes swollen with tears and her face sad. Suddenly the poor young woman notices that Mother is at the end of the corridor. She becomes confused and

would like to turn back so as not to be seen. She looks around for a door to disappear through so as not to cut a bad figure. Poor thing! If I could I would really like to follow her and say, ‘Come here, don’t you know that I too cried a lot when I was a postulant? I really wanted to leave, to go home to my own place. This is nothing new to me. Yet, I cannot come to look for you as I feel I should’.

Right, let us do this, dear postulants. When certain dark thoughts come to you and you really feel the need to come to me, write your name on a slip of paper and put it in the mailbox at my door. As soon as I am free, I will call you. It might be the next day, but if I can it will be the same day, and look, if you are sincere, we will settle everything, and your worries will disappear. Are you happy with that? Now good night! Don’t build castles in the air!’ And with a smile she left us. That smile and that gaze remained impressed in my soul. Timid by nature, in those few moments that Mother spent with us, I was recollected enjoying her smile and her face that radiated such goodness and motherly kindness.⁹¹

There are also accounts of Good Nights given to the novices. They recall Mother Caterina’s kindness and vigilance, her encouragement, reminders, and almost always her greeting and invitation to:

- ...be cheerful. Study the spirit of Don Bosco. I am happy to see you always cheerful, because a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians must always be so. You must learn to form yourselves as good religious according to the spirit of Don Bosco, as true Salesian Sisters. I know that you are reading the life of Don Bosco. Do you like it? You do, right? Be attentive to the reading and try to draw much good from it. The true source of our spirit is there. You will see that when you reach the end of the book you will have a strong desire to start all over again!
- Novices, love the Lord, imitate the love of St. Mary Magdalene who knew so well how to console the heart of Jesus. Love him with the love that makes great saints.

⁹¹ Ibid.

- Novices, accept corrections respectfully without giving excuses. Wounded pride is a serious illness. Work, and pay attention not only to your own work, but also to that of your companions, so that you can learn more and be more useful to the Institute.

At certain times she expressed the following regret:

Believe me, novices, you cannot imagine my pain when we arrive at the time of profession and the council is uncertain. Should a novice be sent away? It is regrettable. Should she be admitted to profession? This is a serious and delicate matter because one would not want to bring into the Institute a Daughter who leaves much to be desired. Therefore, pray, work, obey, learn to practise humility. Be sincere.

The novices listened. The expression on her face, her tone of voice, her whole aspect, were more eloquent than her words. And they went to speak to her with confidence.

Pupils and Past Pupils

And the boarders! As with Mother Mazzarello, it could be said that she had a special love for them, and it was reciprocal. This was demonstrated in the gracious and almost childlike candour with which they responded. “We met Mother this morning, so nothing will go wrong in school.” And every morning they made a point of encountering her, seeking at any cost to meet her. “Mother make the sign of the cross on my forehead.” “Mother, ask the Madonna not to let me be questioned in maths class. Mother we have a test in class today.” And she smiled, stopped, listened, and then said, “Be at peace, the Madonna will help you, but you must be good, study and pray”.

Sunday afternoon was for them. She received them in her office, listened to what they confided to her; their difficulties in study, their sufferings, the joys and sorrows of school life. Meanwhile she observed them, tried to understand their young hearts, and sometimes she discerned God’s designs for them.

The past pupils loved to return to that house that had welcomed them as adolescents. They were moved as they recalled their brief but very personal conversations with Mother Caterina.

Now that they were older and more experienced, they enjoyed reminiscing on how she had guided them in their first steps towards adult life.

They re-entered that room with different thoughts, different worries, and different hopes. Mother Caterina still listened to them, happy to see them again, and she still encouraged and enlightened them.

Like Don Bosco, she recognised that the past pupils were a strong and efficacious force for good and for the improvement of society, a Salesian force.

She would say, “Oh, our dear courageous past pupils, they give me such consolation with their hard work, piety and their plans to do good”!⁹²

Intuitive Understanding of Hearts

The Sisters of the motherhouse, like those of the other houses near and far, attest to the belief that, “Mother had an intuitive understanding of hearts”. They report facts that confirm this. They say that she could understand even the most intimate thoughts and secret struggles. Some Sisters recalled:

- I heard it said that Mother had a surprisingly intuitive understanding of hearts. One day I had proof of this. It was a memorable day for me. It happened that despite her goodness and the confidence she inspired in me, I did not tell her everything, and I left her office without opening my heart with regard to one of my difficulties and sufferings. How surprised I was when I noticed that she had understood because she had taken a decision in my regard that was just what I wanted.⁹³
- I was a bit intimidated, and did not know how to express myself with regard to certain difficulties. However, Mother understood everything from my first words, and she helped me to say what was in my heart.⁹⁴
- Mother had to leave, and I would have liked to speak privately with her. But how? There were too many who wanted to

⁹² Letters and memoirs, FMA General Archives.

⁹³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

approach her. Evening came, and Mother must have guessed my desire, because she sent for me when I was in the chapel for evening prayer. I was really happy and when I reached her I cried with joy.⁹⁵

- I couldn't speak. Mother looked into my eyes and guessed everything, yet I had not told anyone my secret.⁹⁶
- Oh, the kindness of Mother Caterina! After having allowed me to say everything, she placed her hands on my head and spoke to me with such kindness and gentleness that it cured all my suffering. 'Go in peace, she said, be content. You have a good disposition. Correspond to the grace of the Lord and you will be happy.'⁹⁷
- I went to confide in Mother, but I could not explain myself. I thought, 'Oh, why did I come here to Mother? I'll never come back again'. Mother looked at me, and before I left she said to me, 'You must not regret having come here. I believe what you have told me. Always come when you have some sorrow'. I was amazed!⁹⁸
- We went into her office and came out happy and renewed in spirit with the desire to return.⁹⁹

The Sisters of the motherhouse remembered this dear figure, they recalled her voice. They nostalgically recalled the time in which Mother Caterina was like the mother and queen of their house which is today known as the *House of Memories*. There are memories that never vanish, never grow faint, never become faded. Rather with the passage of time they become more vivid in the light of eternity.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Chapter X

Into the Sunset

Prayer, Gratitude, Joy

The years from 1920 to 1923 were bright ones for the Institute. They followed the restless years full of terrible anxieties, struggles, and dangers brought about by World War I. During that time, the Salesian apostolate had continued in the midst of tears and bloodshed.

In 1920 the majestic monument to Don Bosco was lovingly inaugurated on the square in front of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians in Turin. In 1922, there were the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Institute. With the closing of the golden jubilee in 1923, another fifty year period began, with its memories and hopes.

The circular letters of Mother Caterina addressed to all the provinces and houses documented these events and revealed her piety, gratitude, and joy.

She sincerely felt those recollections and hopes and lived them in a spirit of vigilance and readiness. But if her spirit was growing strong in the light, her body was declining toward the shadows.

Nonetheless, she did not give up her programme of work and her endeavours for the salvation of others. It was the programme of Don Bosco.

FMA Association of the Past Pupils

The celebrations of May 20-23, 1920, for the inauguration of the bronze monument to Don Bosco, also marked the definitive organisation of the Association of the Past Pupils of the Daughters

of Mary Help of Christians which involved both joy and work. She wrote:

During the solemn inauguration of the monument erected by the past pupils to the great educator and teacher, I wished that all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, that he established as a living monument, could have formed a beautiful and glorious crown around his first monument [the Basilica].¹

She would have liked to share something of the splendid festivities, but it would all be printed in a commemorative edition especially prepared to inform everyone. She announced that on the occasion of these celebrations:

The International Council of Past Pupils has been created and is eager to begin its work. Let regional, national, and local committees be established, all in accord with the central committee in Turin. All superiors and provincials are asked to work towards this goal.

She exhorted all to read the commemorative edition, particularly the report on the development of the Association of the Past Pupils. She explained that this would do much good, indicating how it was possible to broaden the circle of ideas that every past pupil could share in her own family and in society, provided she was animated by the spirit of Don Bosco.²

In founding the Association of the Past Pupils, Mother Caterina had insured for the future an admirable force of Salesian secular feminine apostolate such as Don Bosco would have desired. It was a force that found its source in the faith and sacrifice of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It stemmed from their untiring work as educators and apostles: the operative strength of the past pupils.

¹ Circular letter, May 24, 1920, FMA General Archives.

² Ibid.

She used to say to the dear past pupils, “Help us to save souls” and she taught them how. She exhorted the community animators to encourage the past pupils and to take advantage of their collaboration for a more effective apostolate in schools, sewing classes, and especially in the festive oratories.

In those splendid celebrations in Turin, Mother Caterina recalled having witnessed the first public glorification of the founder, when the title of Venerable was unexpectedly conferred on Don Bosco in 1907. She was radiant with joy and said, “May the Lord grant me life to see Don Bosco beatified and I will have nothing more to desire”.³ The Sisters who surrounded her, and were also participating in the celebrations, expressed the wish that she would see that wonderful day. She did not see it on this earth.

Golden Jubilee of the Institute

The year 1921 was dedicated to the spiritual and material preparations for the celebration of the golden jubilee of the Institute.

Mother Caterina dictated a letter to her vicar outlining what the Rector Major, Fr. Rinaldi had suggested for a successful outcome to the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary. She wrote:

They should be celebrations that make known the marvels accomplished by Mary Help of Christians through the ‘living monument’ that the Venerable Don Bosco wanted to create in order to manifest to the world his gratitude to Mary.

Above all, it should be a treasured celebration that each one of us can proclaim the golden jubilee as an opportunity for personal renewal. Through personal reflection each one is called to examine her past and present life, and to consider whether she has contributed to the happiness of the Institute which so lovingly welcomed her. Therefore, let her recommit herself to the observance of the Constitutions in the spontaneous

³ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

*fulfilment of duty, in fidelity to the traditions of the Venerable Father and founder. May this become the logical consequence of that effective renewal that is the primary purpose of the celebration of our solemn jubilee.*⁴

In another circular letter she specifically concluded, “The solemn golden jubilee celebrations at the motherhouse are intended to produce a true and lasting renewal of our life”. She expressed her wish in this way:

May the imminent jubilee celebrations at the motherhouse leave in each of us an indelible imprint of meaningful resolutions that we make, to live a life of prayer through assiduous work for the salvation of souls, first of all, our own, and may the same be true for the entire Institute gathered here in spirit and prayer!⁵

The celebrations took place from August 5-15. The provincials came from all the provinces with their delegates for the General Chapter and many community animators came from various provinces. During those memorable days, the motherhouse seemed to be more than ever the house of all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. The Sisters living there affectionately and joyfully welcomed the visiting Sisters and reached out to them extending their warmest and most cordial hospitality.

On August 15, there was the solemn coronation of the statue of Mary Help of Christians. A gold sceptre was placed in her hands containing the names of all the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The gentle, sacred ceremony was presided by the Salesian Cardinal, Giovanni Cagliero. Fifty years earlier, as a young priest appointed by Don Bosco, he had guided the initial steps of the first small group of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians at Mornese; a small group that had now become a legion. He had assisted at the

⁴ Circular letter, January 24, 1922, FMA General Archives.

⁵ Circular letter, July 24, 1922, FMA General Archives.

death of the Co-founder, Maria Mazzarello, and later, at the first election of Mother Caterina Daghero as Mother General.

He was now elderly but still vigorous in mind and heart, and splendid in his cardinal's robes. His presence made the sacred ceremony even more moving because the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, especially the more senior among them, saw in him the personification of the history and of all the memories of the Congregation.

Mother Caterina lived intensely those memories of the past and the great joy of the present, and everyone was conscious of this.

Sisters surrounded her, those whom she had sent near and far around the world to spread the apostolic spirit of Don Bosco and to seek the salvation of others. She saw them as daughters who were as united and faithful as on the day of their first departure. The hymn composed that year went as follows:

From beloved Daughters
Spread throughout the world
Comes a joyful poem
The cry of love
The powerful flags of great nations
Welcome them
As warriors of faith and valour.⁶

They had returned from those nations carrying an abundant harvest.

The great musician, Fr. Pietro Magri composed a melodrama-oratorio in three musical scenes which resounded of combat:

Five decades of struggles and victories!
Five decades of indomitable love!

⁶ Hymn composed for Mother Caterina's name day, G. Mainetti, FMA General Archives.

Crowned with divine splendour
Of the Virgin at the white altar.

The melodrama represented in visual and musical forms the growth and development of the great work and sacred achievements from that now distant 1872 to 1922. All the music was dominated by the famous motto of Don Bosco: *Da mihi animas coetera tolle*. It was reminiscent and powerful, illuminating and affirming each one of those sacred accomplishments.⁷

It was noted that Mother Caterina was visibly moved during this performance.

VIII General Chapter

After the jubilee celebrations, the retreat for those attending the general chapter was held. They gathered for the opening of the above on September 8. On September 9, there was the election of the superior general and the general councillors. The general chapter closed on the 18th of the same month.

The Acts of the VIII General Chapter reveal the seriousness of work accomplished and also the development in thought and action that had taken place in the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians under the leadership of Mother Caterina.

When convoking the general chapter, she exhorted all to prayer, to serious reflection and study of the themes to be dealt with:

You will be sent the themes to be dealt with for the forthcoming chapter. I feel the urgency of exhorting you to direct all your prayers, work, and particularly your sacrifices for the purpose of obtaining blessing on the now imminent general chapter, which at this time will have a particularly solemn character. May it be a manifestation of renewed fidelity and a more tender love for our

⁷ Hymn, *Regina Potens* – Mary Help of Christians. Words by G. Mainetti, music by the musician, Fr. Pietro Magri of Oropa, Vercelli.

heavenly patron, our venerable founder, and Mother Mazzarello, our first Superior General, and, hopefully, also our first saint.⁸

The themes dealt with in the meetings of the general chapter engendered lively discussions that Mother Caterina followed with great attention, and which the Rector Major of the Salesians, Fr. Rinaldi, guided and enlightened. His suggestions were diligently noted and later published in the acts of the chapter.

Not only this, but Mother Caterina established that they should be made known for the good of all. They were published, almost in instalments in her circular letters, so that, truly and effectively, all the work that had been done would be summed up in the spiritual renewal of each one. The vicar wrote:

Our venerated Mother, remembering the wise and prudent counsels and paternal exhortations that the Most Reverend Fr. Rinaldi gave to the chapter members last September, decided to quote about half a page from time to time in her circular letters.⁹

In one of these circular letters Mother Caterina wrote:

Our gatherings were a real school where the teacher, the venerated superior, admired for his patient goodness, explained with greatest clarity even in minute detail, the Salesian educational system. [...] We all were desirous to renew ourselves in the faithful following of it.

As in her younger days Mother Caterina revealed her humility and her fervour for the Salesian apostolate.

In the same year, 1922, she had the joy of returning to Rome twice, to be received in audience by the Holy Father, Pius XI. On June 13 and December 9, she had the grace of telling him

⁸ Circular letter, October 24, 1921, FMA General Archives.

⁹ Circular letter, June 24, 1923, FMA General Archives.

that during the jubilee year of the Institute the work of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians would spread to China, India, Australia, the Congo, Germany, Russia, and Poland.

She wrote, “The Holy Father could not hide his emotion and his satisfaction”.¹⁰

Revised FMA Constitutions

In another circular letter she announced that the Constitutions now in conformity with the new canonical laws were being printed. She exhorted all to a strong commitment to practise them with that perfection that was befitting to those who had already experienced the advantages of living these Constitutions.¹¹

The sun set on the golden year of the Institute in the light of prayer and work, and Mother Caterina began 1923 always in the same spirit.

The monthly circular letters of 1923 gave proof of this and reading them one admires her activity which did not diminish under the pressure of time and suffering. Her spirit always reached out to where there was work to be done, things to reorganise, to improve. She restructured and increased the number of provinces.¹² She presented the text of the revised Constitutions newly approved by the Holy See. She wrote, “Let us keep them precious and read them often. Let us consider them, as they are in reality, the living word of our founder and Father, Don Bosco and the explicit will of the Church”.¹³

She recommended reading the life of the venerable founder, of the late Fr. Rua, Fr. Albera, and the director generals of revered memory. She urged the community animators to respond to the charitable invitation expressed by the very reverend rector major in the Salesian Bulletin to assist the starving children of

¹⁰ Circular letter, September 22, 1922, FMA General Archives.

¹¹ Circular letters, June 24, 1922 and December 24, 1922, FMA General Archives.

¹² Circular letter, November 24, 1922. FMA General Archives.

¹³ Circular letter, November 24, 1923, FMA General Archives.

Russia. “Work and collect money so that this also may be presented to the Holy Father as a means of aiding the starving orphans of that suffering nation.”¹⁴

She encouraged the provincials and the community animators also to contribute to the great jubilee of the Salesian Missions that would take place in 1925.¹⁵

Her first circular letter of 1924 expressed her keen desire to take part in the Vatican Missionary Exhibit. She recommended supporting the house in Jerusalem which was founded in 1906 amidst many difficulties that did not diminish, but rather became ever more serious because of the opposition of some non-Catholic groups. She urged, “Let us offer contributions to provide for the urgent needs of the mission, all for the good of young girls living in the land that was sanctified by our Divine Redeemer”.¹⁶

Therefore, Mother Caterina began 1924 still active in the vast field of work that can be termed apostolic, but her poor body was already worn out by illness.

Intense Work but Declining Strength

As has already been seen, 1922 was a year of intense work and preoccupations, also caused by serious anxiety regarding her health. The diabetes, from which she had suffered for years, had become worse, and consequently, other illnesses became evident, especially a heart condition.

A Sister recalled that Mother suffered much, “... and she was suffering when she went to Rome on the last two occasions”, without counting the other journeys of that year. She added:

She did not let others know of her ill health, and she did not seem to worry about it. She accepted the treatments I gave her and told me in all simplicity how she felt, but nothing more.

¹⁴ Circular letter, January 24, 1923, FMA General Archives.

¹⁵ Circular letter, February 24, 1923, FMA General Archives.

¹⁶ Circular letter, December 24, 1923. FMA General Archives.

When in 1923 the animator of Bordighera invited Mother to visit the community, in all confidence, the same Sister continued, “Mother, don’t go, you are tired and you know what you have. That journey will do you harm. Don’t go.”

The Sister insisted and even confided in the vicar general, who on hearing the expressed wish of Mother Caterina, replied, “Let her go. Mother never refuses to please her Daughters”.

On April 16 Mother Caterina departed accompanied by her faithful councillor and private secretary, Mother Luisa. They travelled to Bordighera, Arma di Taggia, Alassio, Varazze, Voltri, and Pegli.

Meanwhile, in the motherhouse there were intense preparations for her name day, which had been transferred from April 30 to May 5. The house chronicle recorded:

- May 3, 1923 – There are intense preparations for the imminent feast day of our venerated Mother, and she who is so much desired, assures us that she will be here tomorrow to make us happy.
- May 4 – Our beloved Mother arrives among us, having travelled on the 5pm train. The whole community waits for her in the entrance. She moves among her Daughters bringing happiness to each heart.
- May 5 – Several provincials and fifty local superiors arrive.

It was to be her last official feast. The chronicle describes in greater detail than on other occasions the sacred functions in the chapel, the drama performances and wishes in the hall, and the delightful agape meal as family in the dining room filled with roses.

The provincials and community animators who came from afar for the feast, left with a sad feeling in their hearts. Though smiling and caring, Mother was suffering. Her eyes betrayed her because they did not have the brilliance which had caused people

to comment, “Oh, Mother’s eyes”. She still had a penetrating glance, one might even say that of a saint, but she had the eyes of someone who was not well. Some thought that even her greeting was the last.

The house chronicle on June 10 recorded that, “The superior strongly recommended praying for the recovery of our venerated Mother”.

- June 22 – The health of our venerated Mother is not getting any better! We intensify our prayers for her that the Lord may return her to us perfectly healed.
- July 7 – Unfortunately, the news of our venerated Mother is always less consoling. We know from our loving mother vicar that she suffers much and feels the need of the prayers of her Daughters. Oh, the Lord knows how much we want her among us and how much we pray for her recovery! May we be worthy of such a favour from the Lord!
- July 15 – Our venerated Mother continues to stay in bed. An altar has been erected in her room and this morning she had the consolation of having the rector celebrate Holy Mass.
- August 10 – Our venerated Mother, accompanied by Rev.Mother Marina, leaves by car for Asti. She is in poor health and, therefore, needs complete rest, and to try some vigorous treatment. In this house many prayers are being offered.

Grave Concerns

On the 17th of the same month Mother Caterina left Asti for Turin on the way to the house of Oulx where it was hoped that absolute rest and the mountain air would have a beneficial influence on her poor strength. This time, too, she was accompanied by Mother Luisa.

From Oulx on September 16 she again returned to Asti where she remained until October 15. The rest and the mountain air had not cured her.

The visits of the vicar general to the house of Asti on September 22 and October 3 are recorded in the house chronicle:

The venerated Mother continues to be in poor health. With great patience and serenity she bears acute pain in her leg. Her maternal heart still desires to do what will be to the advantage of the Institute and she responds to the prayers and sacrifices that her good Daughters offered to the Lord for her.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the motherhouse received a visit from Cardinal Cagliero. The house chronicle recorded that he arrived on September 28 and departed on October 2. For the first time Mother Caterina was not among the Sisters to welcome him in the house which held so many cherished memories for both of them.

On his return he met her again at the Asti station. She asked to be taken there to thank him once more for the outstanding assistance given to the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians in the name of the holy founder, and to receive his blessing.¹⁸

This was their last encounter. They would never meet again in this life.

Something similar had happened for Mother Mazzarello. She encountered the founder and Father, Don Bosco for the last time when she was in very poor health just a few months before her death.¹⁹

On October 15, 1923, the chronicle of the motherhouse recorded the return of beloved Mother Caterina:

While we rejoiced at seeing her, we suffered in noticing the terrible decline in her health and what pain she was in. Her leg did not allow her to put her foot on the ground much less would it support her. Still, with admirable serenity she withstood very

¹⁷ Circular letter, December 24, 1924, FMA General Archives.

¹⁸ Chronicle of the motherhouse, Nizza Monferrato, 1922-1923.

¹⁹ Testimony, FMA General Archives.

strong pain. May the Lord grant relief to our holy and venerated Mother!²⁰

Mother Caterina's sufferings intensified, forming the last flowers of her crown. She had to use a cane to stand. She smiled and showed that she still had a sense of humour.

They provided a wheelchair for her, saying, "Mother, in this way we can go to the veranda of the school, even to the orchard, and around the house, just like before, right"? She smiled and accepted.

She was serene, cloaked in benevolence. They took her in the wheelchair along the terrace of the school. One of the general councillors pushed the wheelchair and others accompanied her. The Sisters, on meeting her, hiding their inner pain, ran to greet her. These were tender and festive meetings. She welcomed them maternally, taking an interest in each one as she had always done in the past.

There was never a complaint, only the pain of not being able to do as much as she had previously done and of giving more work to others. The memoirs recorded:

She did not think of herself, but she asked about others in the house who were sick. She accepted what was given to her and asked for nothing. And to those who assisted her, she showed much gratitude. 'Rest assured, I will always remember your kindness.'

She was once asked what she wanted. She replied jokingly, "Fr. Rinaldi says, 'Those from Lu accept what is sent by the One above'". She would repeat this saying in Piedmontese.²¹

In that maxim Mother Caterina hid her profound principle, one that always guided her life and sustained her in times of difficulties, "As God wishes; always the will of God!"

²⁰ F. Maccono, Op.cit.

²¹ Chronicle of the motherhouse, Nizza Monferrato, 1923.

She thought of and recalled the examples of the unforgettable Mother Maria Mazzarello. She would say, “I remember that when Mother Mazzarello was ill she did not want us to give her any other relief than a warm brick, and she looked at her crucifix. A brief dialogue confirms this:

- Why are you crying?
- Mother, in seeing you so sick.
She took the crucifix.
- Look at who we have to imitate.

After having inspired and consoled me she sent me back to work.²²

Joy and Courage through Pain and Suffering

Her courage never abandoned her. She had taught this by word and example. “To be faithful in little things is the most beautiful expression of fidelity and courage that we can give to the Lord.”²³ With her eloquent example she still taught that faithfulness in small things generates fidelity and courage in significant things, even to martyrdom, a personal and silent martyrdom.

October with its clusters of red grapes had passed. The final days of November, the month of fog and sadness, were brightened by a festive occasion for the Sisters of the motherhouse.

The chronicle noted, “November 25 – the traditional community feast of St. Catherine [of Alexandria] is transferred to the 29th”. The Sisters of the motherhouse remembered.

The uncertainty disturbed the joyful expectation, “Will it be celebrated? Will Mother be able to come? Won’t it cause more pain than relief?”

The Sisters of the general council advised against it fearing it would cause further discomfort and tire her. She would have to

²² Testimony, FMA General Archives.

²³ Ibid.

be put in the wheelchair for the brief journey down the corridor to the Sisters' sewing room, which on the evening of the feast of St. Catherine, had been transformed into a festive theatre. They feared that she would be too moved by the sight of the Sisters gathered to be with her.

Mother Caterina opposed this, "No, no, poor Daughters, why are you depriving them of their celebration?" She immediately made it known that she would go, and said, "Let them do what they want". She would even eat chestnuts with them!

The Sisters of the motherhouse never forgot, but relived and recalled both the painful and joyful impressions they experienced on seeing her enter the room in her wheelchair, smiling, surrounded by the general councillors who were also smiling even if they were visibly moved. The chronicle continued:

The venerated Mother came among her Daughters and smiled indicating that she enjoyed the concert prepared for her entertainment. She showed that it was giving her some relief from her daily suffering. The Sisters living far away were not forgotten, especially those in China and India and Mother sent her affectionate thoughts to all.²⁴

A festive poem was read which, without any claim to literary value, was charming in its simplicity and its assertion of love:

Tell us Mother,
If there is a queen
More beloved than you,
Or a merrier kingdom,
More solid and faithful!

²⁴ Ibid.

I believe that on the throne
Of Elena of Savoy
Monotony, fear, and boredom
Sometimes will be experienced
But you, oh, good Mother
But you, our treasure,
Who loves us and forgives us,
Give us only joy.

You have in your heart only
Virtue, light, and fervour;
These make us good and strong
In our journey toward the Lord.²⁵

November flowed into December with the feasts of the Immaculate, Christmas, and the New Year. Mother Caterina's acute pain seemed to ease somewhat. She still worked, she wrote, she received people in her room.

Don Bosco was remembered on January 31. The house chronicle of the motherhouse recorded, "January 31 – The reverend Salesian professor, Secondo Rastello gave a beautiful conference in the oratory chapel, which for the occasion, had been arranged as a conference room".

In addition to the community of Sisters with the animators, novices, postulants and boarders there were also present past pupils, Co-operators, the diocesan clergy from Nizza, and civic authorities. The conference theme was centred on the missions.

Sitting in the little balcony, overlooking the nave of the chapel, our beloved Mother is present at the commemoration. The Sister who is near her sees the joy that shines out in her on hearing him speak of the Venerable Don Bosco. She listens to her words of maternal satisfaction when the speaker mentions the spirit of sacrifice and works of charity of her dear distant missionary Daughters.²⁶

²⁵ Chronicle of the motherhouse, Nizza Monferrato, 1922-1923, FMA General Archives.

²⁶ The feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria, November 29, 1923.

At that moment, in the darkness, Mother Caterina could not be seen by the numerous listeners present in the chapel. One could say that she was forgotten, yet she rejoiced in the light that shone around the figure of the founder, Father, and teacher.

She too had reached a summit, and perhaps felt it, a summit beyond which was no longer earth, but heaven.

In her last private conversation with Fr. Rinaldi she said, “I feel that the Institute will go on regardless; it no longer has need of me”.²⁷

Last Days

She prepared herself, like the saints, in all serenity and detachment. On February 11, 1924, her tireless and dear private secretary fell ill with erysipelas. Leaning on her cane and with concerned energy she disagreed with the Sister who tried to discourage her from visiting Mother Luisa. She went nevertheless to see her. The Sister shared, “Yes, I understood why she wanted to greet her. She had the presentiment that she would not see her again”. The house chronicle of the motherhouse recorded the following:

- February 20 – We are again in the most painful anxiety. Mother is affected by a serious illness.
- February 21 – The very high fever that consumes her does not alter for a moment the habitual calm of her strong virtue. In the house everyone prays and implores the Lord with great faith.
- February 22 – The doctors from the medical clinic of Asti come to examine Mother. They find that her condition is serious.
- February 24 – Our prayer for our Mother before the altar of Our Lady is more fervent than ever! At midday things take a turn for the worse and it is judged advisable to administer Extreme Unction. Toward evening Mother appears to be more comfortable...but we pray! In our sorrow we still hope.

²⁷ Chronicle of the motherhouse, Nizza Monferrato, 1924.

As the faithful person writing the chronicle recorded the grave news, the monthly circular letter dated the same day was sent out. Mother Caterina had prepared it earlier.

She recommended that in the forthcoming month of March, dedicated to St. Joseph, they should keep in contact with the great saint through the daily spiritual practice. She wrote, “He teaches us to live in silence, recollection, and work, as in the house at Nazareth where days were spent in joy and good deeds”. This last circular letter to the Sisters seemed to be her testament. The house chronicle of February 25 recorded:

Our venerated Mother’s condition continues to deteriorate. At midday her pulse is weaker and this moves the rector to recite the prayers for the dying. Later on our dear Mother recovers a little. Her lips continue to move letting us know the echo of her prayerful heart, ‘Holy Mary pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death’.

No one can describe the gentleness of her gaze, of her smile. When greeted with, ‘*Viva Gesù, Madre!*’ she responds with, ‘*Viva Maria!*’ It is the only greeting that for a moment awakens her from the feverish drowsiness and reconnects her to those she loved on earth. Mother vicar who is continually at her bedside, asks her for a few words as a remembrance. Slowly she responds, “Let us thank the Lord, let us always fulfil the will of God well.”²⁸

Thus, even on her deathbed Mother Caterina indicated the strength that had sustained and consoled her throughout her whole life.

February 26 - We are in the most profound sorrow. At precisely 5am this morning, at the sound of the *Angelus* bell, with the

²⁸ Fr. Filippo Rinaldi to the provincials and community animators, February 29, 1924, FMA General Archives.

blessing of His Eminence Cardinal, Giovanni Cagliero and His Holiness Pius XI, the great soul of Mother left this earth to be united with her Creator in eternal life with the saints.²⁹ She had not yet completed her sixty-eighth year of life. The sacred liturgy of the day sang, 'Life is changed, not taken away; when the house of this earthly dwelling is destroyed, your faithful, Oh, Lord, will obtain an eternal one in heaven'.

Salesian Family Mourns, Yet an Angel Rises

The whole Salesian Family was in deep mourning. There was widespread sorrow throughout the world because this humble Mother had so skilfully directed a worldwide institute.

During her lifetime, Mother Caterina valued and sought obscurity. Immediately after her death she was wrapped in light. Her name and the news of her hard work and great charity were published in many Italian and foreign newspapers and magazines. Condolences came to the general council of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians from the highest social classes, bishops, cardinals, ministers of State, magistrates, and chancellors of universities both in Italy and abroad, Queen Margherita also sent royal condolences.

But the most beautiful and consoling light for the Sisters who mourned her, was the tribute of honour, devotion, and faith that an innumerable crowd paid to her remains which lay in the oratory chapel, before the altar to the Sacred Heart.

Provincials, community animators, and Sisters came from other provinces and distant houses to contemplate for the last time the beloved remains. They had to step back from the coffin to allow space for the large crowd of those who wanted to place rosaries, medals and other objects on the coffin, because, as they said, they would be blessed through having touched the remains of this venerated person. The house chronicle continued:

²⁹ Chronicle of the motherhouse, Nizza Monferrato, 1924.

Wednesday, February 27, 1924 – the last honorary funeral rites around the coffin of our late lamented Mother were, once again, sure proof of this evangelical truth, ‘Those who humble themselves shall be exalted’.

In the morning the dear body was taken from the Chapel of the Sacred Heart, where it had rested, to be brought to the Sanctuary of Mary Help of Christians. The Auxiliary Bishop Del Ponte of Acqui, representing the kind leader of the diocese, Monsignor Disma Marchese, blessed it reciting the prayers of the prescribed rite. Then the procession was formed. At the head were the representatives of the city, and the reverend Salesians walking beside his excellency. These were followed by the coffin, relatives of Mother, the superiors, various provincials, local superiors, and Sisters.

The Mass, in the presence of the blessed remains was sung by the bishop. Everyone was moved when the trembling voice of the bishop pronounced the liturgical words, “*Te supplices exoramus pro anima famulae tuae Catharinae!* [We implore you for the soul of your servant, Caterina.]

In tears, as we regretted that she was no longer on earth as the strength, light, and guide of her beloved Institute, we prayed that this holy soul might be brought by the angels to heaven.

Representatives of the municipality, associations, youth groups, and schools of the city also participated.

During the day, neither the cold nor the overcast skies could restrain the large and pious throng who wanted to see her once more, and touch those hands that had done so much good with sacred objects that they would kept almost as relics. They wanted specifically to pray to her that she might present their prayers to God.

Around the coffin one could discern a distinct scent of flowers. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, the boarders and day students, the past pupils near and far had wanted to surround her with roses, carnations and violets.

The parlours of the motherhouse were crowded with people. A register placed at the entrance was soon covered with signatures.

The names of the most distinguished citizens mingled with those of ordinary men and women in beautiful harmony!

Meanwhile, in the church, the devotees continued to surround the coffin, and gentle insistence was needed to hold back the wave of those still coming in order to proceed to close the coffin.

A parchment was placed in the coffin bearing the personal data of Mother Caterina, which was signed by Bishop Del Ponte of Acqui, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi, other Salesians, civic authorities of the city, provincials, superiors, and Sisters. Other documents included a complete list of the members of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

Then a procession which lasted for more than two hours began. It was a triumph. Darkened banners lined public and private buildings and stores were closed. All the people of Nizza paid homage to her who could be called, the benefactor of all.³⁰

The house chronicle continued to transcribe the names of the people who were in the procession which finally arrived at the front gate of the cemetery. Various groups, associations and schools were all waiting at the entrance with flags and banners. Then, in a religious silence broken here and there by barely subdued sobs, the bishop spoke. His words were of glory and sorrow. “Of glory for the spouse of Christ who had reached happiness, and sorrow for the Daughters who remained behind and who needed to express their gratitude for having shaped their hearts according to the spirit of Venerable Don Bosco”.³¹

The bishop’s talk was followed by that of a past pupil. Last, but quite powerful, were the words of the third successor of Don Bosco, Fr. Filippo Rinaldi.

The coffin was lowered into the sepulchre of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and deposited in the cubicle under the altar while a choir sang the liturgical hymn, *Requiem Eternam*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Yes, she could enjoy peace, the peace of God that flourishes in the eternal fields the God whom she had so loved on earth, hoped, and believed in. She had strenuously struggled against evil so that the peace of God could reign in all hearts.

Mother Caterina finally encountered the holy Founder, Don Bosco and the Co-founder, Mother Mazzarello from whom she received a heritage which she had kept intact in spirit, increased in strength and expanded in works. She had guaranteed that it would continue to respond to the motto, *Da mihi animas coetera tolle*.³²

In a letter of condolence Cardinal Maffi wrote these words, “It is not a tomb that is opened. It is a star that is lit; an angel who rises. Look to her and trust in her. Heaven has become closer to you”.³³

These phrases of the illustrious cardinal are almost an anthem of glory. The Daughters of Mary Help of Christians hear it and rejoice. They pray and sing before the altar of their first Mother and Co-founder, Mother Mazzarello. When they go in pilgrimage to the cemetery at Nizza they feel that, in their devout memory, the tomb of Mother Caterina also becomes an altar.

³² When in 1881 Mother Caterina became mother general, the Institute consisted of twenty-eight houses and 166 Sisters. At her death she left to the person called by Divine Providence to succeed her, 484 houses and about 4,000 Sisters.

³³ Condolences, FMA General Archives.

ADDENDA

A Courageous Formator in Changing Times: Mother Caterina Daghero (1856 – 1924)

[An excerpt from the above article]

Piera Cavaglià, fma
Cumiana, October 8, 2006

Educational Power of the Family

If we ask ourselves what the factors were that allowed Mother Caterina Daghero to establish her formative work with the Sisters and the girls on such solid and secure foundations, we would not hesitate to attribute it to the educational and prophetic power of the family.

From childhood Caterina experienced the powerful words that bring latent energies to life, “I have confidence in you, you can, help me, I need you”.

This genuinely parental attitude is the secret to unleashing talents and possibilities, in order to develop a love of life, to project oneself towards a future with hope. We educate in-depth when we help young people to become responsible, when we show confidence in them, when we indicate strong ideals and values beginning from earliest childhood.

Our young people today have thousands of teachers around them, many lack a person to guide them, listen to them, show confidence in them, help them to understand reality with all its contradictions. They need someone who helps them to feel the warmth of a family, who accepts them without over-protecting them.

Acceptance is the secret of true family spirit. Children and young people understand immediately whether you consider them a burden or a gift from God.

No one is so small and poor that they do not possess something beautiful and good for themselves and to give to others. As Simone Weil says, in each person there is “a treasure of pure gold” that needs to be discovered and valued.

There are some children who suffer loneliness or depression. They suffer from the lack of a family. Many families are experiencing a crisis unprecedented in history. They are shaken by the winds of secularism, the consumer mentality, the power of the media that spreads pseudo values, and by legislation that is aggressive at an anthropological level.

It has been said that the family is in crisis, but in reality it is the person that is in crisis, and this, in turn, affects the family. There are many people who are fragile, vulnerable, affectively immature, and therefore incapable of caring for themselves.

Our society has a very high level of technological richness, but it is poor on a human and affective level. There is no love without sacrifice, without finding time for others, without mutual self-giving. True and faithful love risks being substituted by a ‘disposable’ sexuality, by a sense of the body that is standardised and devalued in an anthropological sense.

The great crisis of the family is rooted in the inability to make definitive choices. ‘Forever’ has been eliminated from the vocabulary of many people. From this comes the difficulty in understanding the family as being rooted in faithful love. Without the capacity for life-long fidelity the very term vocation, whether applied to religious life or marriage, loses its meaning. This is because the epicentre has been moved from God, who is the source of every call, to self who is merely the recipient. God does not withdraw his call; he does not fall short in his love. Our fragile and changeable will, loses its consistency if it ceases to lean on God for support.

During the world meeting of families at Valencia, Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the necessity of the family in a world thirsting for peace and hope. Rather than condemn false

understanding of the family, he proclaimed the beauty and educational fruitfulness of a family founded on an indissoluble marriage between a man and a woman.

“The affection with which our parents welcomed us and accompanied us in taking our first steps in this world is like a sign and a sacramental extension of the love of God from whom we come.” This experience of being welcomed and loved by God and by our parents, Benedict XVI explained, “is the solid foundation that always favours authentic growth and development of the human person and helps us greatly to mature on our journey toward truth and love, and also to move out of ourselves in order to enter into communion with others and with God”.

It is just such a foundation that is ever more lacking in our modern society. A family that is capable of passing on true love, trust, and faith is a guarantee of hope for the future of humanity.

Beauty and Joy of Faith

In the life of Mother Caterina Daghero, educator and formator, we find the solid rock of faith. She had tasted all its beauty and joy starting in her family. From an early age, she understood that God is a person to whom we can speak familiarly, and before whom father and mother, the adults, kneel as a sign of respect and love. She remembered with emotion that her parents not only prayed, but also sang hymns to Mary Help of Christians and taught them to their children.

In her family she had breathed a simple faith, but one as strong as granite that withstood suffering, or rather was strengthened by it. It was a faith that radiated as charity and solidarity. In fact, her mother was known to all to be a woman of great kindness and altruism, a reference point for the people of the village. Faith without love is empty.

In the Daghero family, they believed that God existed and that he was a God of love.

Today faith is weakening at all levels. This is the great drama of our times that challenges the Church to engage in the new evangelisation.

The need for God is one of the fundamental needs of the human person, created in his image and likeness. In many persons this need has been suffocated, extinguished, or in others, dismissed for many reasons.

Unfortunately, in many people there is the danger of a faith that is so superficial that it requires tangible signs, that is, it does not start from listening to the Word of God, but only believes after having seen. For example, people travel around looking for a message, trying to meet a visionary or a magician! In fact, there is a danger of emptying Christian faith which is founded on a convinced and obedient adherence to the Word of God, not on the anxious search for signs that are very often ambiguous.

The Spanish psychiatrist, Dr. Enrique Rojas, writes that we are living in a time of spiritual repression. People tend to forget that the human person is made up of two dimensions: the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the metaphysical, the imminent and the transcendent. The need for God is written in fire in our very being!

We Christians do not follow a book or a philosophy, but a living person: the Lord Jesus. When there is a lack of religious education in a formation system, the person experiences an insurmountable emptiness and, therefore, searches for surrogate forms of happiness.

Christianity responds to the great demands of life and educates us to place what is important at the centre: love. Where the gospel vision is lacking, life becomes empty. There is no greater treasure that one can give to one's children than the treasure of faith.

According to Mother Caterina Daghero's great teacher, Don Bosco and other Christian educators, religion is the

foundation of all authentic education. It is impossible to educate without religion!

For Don Bosco, religion is not an individualistic feeling, a need for security, psychological, or affective support. Neither is it a set of practices, formulas, rituals, even though these are necessary. It is a horizon of meaning, an encounter with the God of Jesus Christ, which transforms life and illumines it with new meaning. Grace is not an optional extra, but an irreplaceable dimension for the formation of the person.

According to the prophetic dream of Don Bosco (May 29-30, 1867), the three great plagues for young people, which he compared to forms of hunger were: hunger for material bread, hunger for spiritual help, and hunger for the Word of God. These young people, in fact, live in places, “where the Word of God is not listened to and only the pleasures of the world are being sought”.³⁴

Don Bosco concluded this still very relevant diagnosis with the following observation, “This scene shows the very real suffering of many young people in the midst of the world”.

Anyone who approaches young people becomes aware that they are not only the bearers of disadvantage, but also bearers of resources. In many of them there is a deep nostalgia for spirituality, for holiness, for God!

The work of education consists fundamentally in helping people, from their earliest years, to make space for God in their lives, to believe in his love and in his mysterious working in the hearts of people. Then they will experience the maximum expansion of the human person who, opening to the presence of God in Christ, fully realises the thirst for the infinite, becomes ever more free from personal weaknesses and is filled with joy, freedom, and hope. Then one recognises that an increase in

³⁴ MB VIII 841-842. [*Memorie biografiche di Don Bosco*, Italian edition]

education corresponds to an increase in happiness, that profound happiness that no one can take away.

Solidarity as an Attitude for Life

This is another typical dimension illustrated by the life of this great educator from Cumiana. She had the ability, not without crises and initial suffering, to go beyond the boundaries of her own village in order to be in solidarity with the world, with all those who suffer and are in need of help.

Her world was the many FMA who increased from 166 to about 4,000! They were now spread throughout four continents and looked to her presence for guidance and direction. The 'world' was also the refugees, the war orphans, the wounded soldiers, the families stricken by an earthquake.

In her eyes this world, so varied in mentality, culture, formation, geographic distance, was her family. Therefore, it had been entrusted to her and there could be no distinction or discrimination. All were 'her children' and she was their mother, sister, friend and wise guide even though she was young.

It was her desire to see with her own eyes, and almost touch with her hands, by approaching people in the place they came from or that of their missionary activity. Her more than 400 journeys witness to the broadness of Caterina's horizon and her untiring courage in overcoming the indescribable difficulties that she met.

One who knew her wrote that the account of these journeys presents the true profile of Mother Caterina:

A contemplative soul who kept her eyes habitually fixed on God and with ease, she was lifted up into the intimate joy of union with him. She was a soul of extraordinary action who never distanced herself from reality, rather she embraced it, studied it with an expert eye and strong will so as to bring everything into the orbit of faith for the glory of God, the salvation of souls, and social regeneration.

In this context, a few examples of how great Mother Caterina's heart was will be cited. It was open to welcome all people and to help them in their need, without distinction of region, religion or place of origin.

In 1908 after the earthquake in Messina, she wrote a circular letter to all the houses not only so that they would collect money and clothing, but asking that they might welcome into their communities, "the greatest possible number of orphans" (June 1, 1909).

In 1912, at the beginning of the war in the Balkans, she sent out a circular letter to all the provincials of Italy asking that they might welcome refugees from Albania and at the same time she offered the Italian government two hundred places in FMA houses. She also arranged that some Sisters would go to the places where the refugees were concentrated: Brindisi, Naples, Palermo, and Genoa to receive the refugees into their family-homes and to accompany them. Rome, Catania, Naples, Civitavecchia, Lugo di Romagna, Turin, Chieri, and Intra were all communities that offered hospitality to girls of different ages, "...in a gentle and generous expression of Salesian charity".

During World War I (1914-1918) the works of the Institute were modified to respond to the dramatic consequences of the conflict, the FMA hastened to bring help to 32 military hospitals. Three Sisters died, others became ill due to contagion, but they did not leave their field of work for as long as it was needed. Mother Caterina wrote to the Sisters near and far, "*Renounce everything, usual occupations, study, works even though they are being done for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, accept with joy the privations, fatigue, discomfort, and illnesses. Let everything be offered as a prayer of petition and of reparation*".

Some houses were transformed into hospitals: 26 buildings were freely handed over, 14 orphanages were opened for war orphans, 15 hostels for young women working in factories, 95

kindergartens and nursery schools, 75 oratories, schools and after-school care, 20 sewing classes, 22 food distribution centres providing 5,706 meals per day, 28 houses for refugees, and 10 for refugee children. In all, 1,028 refugees were helped and 2,827 families were reached.

Even part of the motherhouse of Nizza was organised as a military hospital. She said and witnessed to the fact that charity knows no boundaries.

She, like the unforgettable Fr. Roger Schutz, was capable of living the words, 'to broaden'.

To broaden the horizon of our hearts, to welcome whoever is in need, these attitudes open up paths toward peace.

When we discover the unknown riches of another religious tradition and of a different culture, we ourselves are interiorly renewed. The Lord, Father of all, wants to give us each day anew that kind of heart that continues to open up, in such a way that our lives become ever deeper and richer.

Multiculturalism is a reality that is growing in the world because of the increasing phenomenon of migration and the ease of communication. It is a great challenge for all. It can lead to forms of racism, ethnic tension, conflict, and exploitation.

On the other hand, it contributes to a growing awareness of the interdependence of one culture on another. It favours knowledge of the world: the North gets to know the South and the South gets to know the North. It also leads to a growing need for difference and to respect difference.

From multiculturalism can come a new civilisation of citizenship. Every person is an inhabitant not only of a city but of a state, indeed of the whole world.

The journey is toward a culture of solidarity, according to the new vision of the human person and of the life of the world. Solidarity is considered to be the new name for charity today.

Multiculturalism is, therefore, a great resource for humanity, for making the whole world more human.

To know and understand others, we need to know and understand ourselves. It is a question of identity. Only a person who possesses a clear identity can be open in a mature way to others and is capable of interacting without levelling, without losing one's individuality.

We are all brothers and sisters, we are all equal yet different. We live not only in a multicultural society, but in one that is intercultural. We are all on a journey to the common goal which transcends us, therefore, we are called to educate ourselves more toward a life shared with others.

This is a theological-anthropological reality. We are sons and daughters of God, with equal dignity and with individual differences in culture, formation and habits.

We are moving towards an ever more hybrid society, that is, one with a mixture of culture and races. However, we need to move away from an unconscious multiculturalism, in which there is always a risk of oppression, colonialism, considering one's own culture to be superior to another. We must move towards an interculturalism that values and welcomes what is different, overcoming prejudice and discrimination.

Interculturalism involves mutual relationships, exchange, and communication. It is a dynamic reality that is realised in a positive relationship between individuals and peoples.

Being Christian implies self-disclosure, and allowing oneself to be open, as happens with the grain of wheat which dies, but by opening itself it bears fruit.

The greatness of persons, and this may seem to be paradoxical, depends on their availability and ability to share. It is only by making themselves small, participating in everything, that they become great and fulfil themselves, leaving their mark in history.

Conclusion

At a time in which we experience an unprecedented educational deficit, we welcome the message of Mother Caterina Daghero. The best use of resources is for education because it determines the future of the person and of society. Education, which aims at a genuine human reawakening, is the most efficacious way to prepare a new future for the world.

Among the areas of formation that need to be focused on in a particular way today are: attention to the family, opportunities for human development and formation to love, rediscovering the beauty of faith as a source of meaning that is indispensable for life, and a formation to solidarity in a world that is ever more multi-racial and multi-religious. Mother Caterina teaches us that the question of ‘what to do’ should not take first place, but rather ‘what to be’ in order to be able to act.

Let us not abdicate the dignity of our vocation as educators! It will enable us to continue to be a word of hope where we live, even in Cumiana! The human development of a people, a nation, can only take place locally. A region does not grow theoretically; it does so within families, neighbourhoods, and communities. It is here in the local area, with the logic of small steps, and the choice of communion, that ‘human capital’ is promoted, which can be invested to reanimate society from within. This is the supreme lesson of the great formator that we celebrate in Mother Caterina Daghero.

In an age when the word 'commitment' is somewhat feared, we find the forty-three years of Mother Caterina Daghero's leadership inspiring. This commitment, because it was an expression of who she was and all that she could become, holds the power of how she moulded and shaped her world. A woman of extraordinary action who never distanced herself from reality, she brought everything into the orbit of faith. Therefore, Caterina's fidelity to her commitment to God was unswerving throughout her almost 50 years of religious life. She remained ever alert to the needs of the times, and was ready to give a courageous response. In everything she united awareness of God with commitment to social regeneration. She never withdrew her gaze from heaven, while remaining with her feet firmly on the ground.

