

## *Introduction*

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As our Sisters, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, prepare to celebrate their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, let us read from the *Cronistoria*, the account of the first years of the Institute, highlighting the significant events that led up to the first profession of vows on August 5, 1872. During this novena, let us pray in a special way for all the Sisters throughout the world: in thanksgiving for their vocation and to ask God to grant them the graces they need to remain faithful to His call. And we pray for continued vocations to the Institute so it will remain fruitful for another 150 years!



### *July 27: Don Bosco Proposes an Idea*

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**From the Cronistoria:** (1871) At the start of Mary's month, Don Bosco called together the Council of the Pious Salesian Society. It consisted of Fathers Rua, Savio, John Cagliero, Durando, Ghivarello and Albera. His eyes shone with the supernatural light noted on the most solemn occasions. His face was serenely thoughtful as with a voice filled with emotion he said he had called them together for an important communication.

“Many worthy people have repeatedly exhorted me to do for girls the same little bit of good we are doing for boys by God's grace. If I listened to my inclinations I should not embark on this type of apostolate. But since the plea has been repeated so often and by persons worthy of esteem I feel I would hinder Divine Providence by not giving the matter serious consideration. I therefore put the proposition to you, inviting you to reflect before the Lord, weighing the pros and cons in order to come to a decision for the greater glory of God and the advantage of souls. So all our community and private prayers during this month will be directed to this end, to obtain from God the light necessary in this important matter.” (Vol I, p 237)

**Reflection:** Don Bosco entered into a communal discernment with his Council to discover what God was calling him to do. How often do we ask others to join us in prayer as we discern God's invitations in our lives? Do we give adequate time and prayer to discernment?

### *July 28: Mornese as the First Community*

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**From the Cronistoria:** The month passed. He called his Council together again and asked them one by one to give their opinion... All declared unanimously that Don Bosco should provide Christian education for girls as he had done for boys. Don Bosco concluded, "Very good, now we can be certain that is the will of God that we should work for girls. Let us now get down to something practical; I propose that the house Father Pestarino is now building in Mornese be used for this work." You know that this building was intended for boys but the Curia of Acqui does not agree. We shall invite Father Pestarino, a member of our Society, to place the Daughters of Mary Immaculate in that house. He is their Director in that parish. Those who wish to belong to the new Institute will form the nucleus of a religious family that will open festive oratories and educational establishments for girls." (Vol I, p 238)

**Reflection:** Wanting to remain faithful to the Bishop, Don Bosco changed the intended plan for the Collegio, knowing that this decision could bring about conflict in Mornese. How often do we change our plans because obedience to the Holy Spirit asks us to? How have we seen that things work out better according to God's plan when we do this?

## *July 29: The Pope's Approval*

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**From the Cronistoria:** On the 23rd of that same June, Don Bosco went to Rome and in a private audience with the Pope spoke about the light he had repeatedly received in his dreams from "his divine Inspirer" regarding the care of girls. He also gave the reasons why up to that time he had refrained from beginning this delicate undertaking. Yet recent events had made him believe it to be the will of God. Means suited to the task had been presented to him still more clearly and he begged advice about it. The Vicar of Jesus Christ listened. Then he said, "I will consider what you have said and, in another audience, I shall tell you what I think."

Don Bosco returned after a few days and heard Pius IX say before he himself had mentioned it, "I have thought over your plan to found a congregation of religious women and I feel it will be for the glory of God and the good of souls. Therefore, my advice is that it should have as its primary aim to do for the instruction of girls what the Society of Saint Francis de Sales does for boys. Regarding dependence, let them depend on you and your successors just as the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul depend on the Lazarists. Formulate their constitutions on these lines and give them a trial. The rest will come in time." (Vol I, p 240)

**Reflection:** What is our relationship like with our all our Salesian brothers and sisters in our Salesian Family? Do we work closely with them as Don Bosco intended from the start? How can we do a better job of collaborating?

## *July 30: Signs of a Vocation*

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**From the Cronistoria:** Therefore, perhaps on the occasion of his postponed feast day in July, when Father Pestarino was present, Don Bosco told him what the Vicar of Jesus Christ had said regarding his Institute for women... When Don Bosco had finished talking about his project all that came from Father Pestarino's trembling lips was the question, "How can I tell who among the Daughters has a vocation?" Our good Father replied, "Those who are obedient even in the smallest things. Those who are not offended when they are corrected and who show a great spirit of mortification. For the rest, Father Pestarino," Don Bosco must have continued, "do not be upset. Let us do things calmly, trusting in Divine Providence regarding the time and manner of carrying out our plans. Let us do one thing at a time." The talk was over.

Never before had Father Pestarino put so much feeling into his action as he reverently and with faith kissed the hand of his Superior. Don Bosco had spoken to him with such fatherly affection and had held his hand in his as if to give him supernatural support. Never, as on that day had he felt the gentle yet binding weight of his vow of obedience. Yet, although suffering, he was pleased to have a sacrifice, the greatest sacrifice of his life, to offer the good God. (Vol I, p 240, 242)

**Reflection:** Am I obedient in the smallest things? Do I get offended when I am corrected? Do I have a spirit of mortification?

## *July 31: The First Rules*

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**From the Cronistoria:** During that same summer in fact, and probably while he was at Countess Corsi's in Nizza Monferrato, or at Lanzo during the spiritual retreat, Don Bosco, as he had promised, handed Father Pestarino the first outlines of the Rule telling him to look at it. It was only a sketch that would surely need to be worked on and corrected but on the basis of it he could begin forming those good

Daughters in the Salesian spirit, seeing which of them would attain the end in view. It was what Our Lady wanted and success was bound to come a little at a time. Father Pestarino received the copybook as a gift from heaven and broke into the spontaneous exclamation, "Oh now I can do something! With this notebook I know how to proceed." Our good Father smiled. His vision was broad and he had great esteem for his humble, generous son.

On his return to Mornese to study the precious booklet, Father Pestarino placed on the cover in his own hand, a date that says everything both for him and for us, May 24, 1871, signifying that it was a flower which blossomed on the feast of Mary Help of Christians. The booklet reveals all Don Bosco's loving interest in the nascent institution. (Vol I, p 244)

**Reflection:** How often do I read my Rule? Do I allow it to guide my everyday thoughts and actions?

### *August 1: Feast of the Epiphany*

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**From the Cronistoria:** (*January 7, 1872, Varazze*) Once Father Pestarino was alone with Don Bosco they reverted again to the subject of the Daughters... "We can now start what we spoke about in the summer. If you think it possible, once you are back in Mornese, call all the Daughters together. Get them to cast their votes for the formation of a council and call also those of the town who belong to the Congregation of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate or the New Ursulines. Tell them to pray and be courageous. Everything must be done for the greater glory of God and the honor of the Blessed Virgin. I shall pray to God and the Blessed Virgin for them and for the blessing of heaven on the new Institute, here from my bed."

In the mind of Don Bosco, the Institute had already emerged since he asked heaven to bless it, and he revealed this on the feast that records the manifestation of God to the Gentiles through the Magi. Epiphany of 1872: Let us write this date which marks the birth of Don Bosco's Second Family in letters of gold! Everything took place in silence, in the shadow, but this did not make it less important. Heaven spoke to Don Bosco in dreams. Its will was expressed in no uncertain terms and was sanctioned by the words of the angelic Pontiff and with the same serene docility of Don Bosco to the designs of Divine Providence. The world knew nothing of this any more than it knew of the miracle of God in the hearts of the Magi. The exterior signs would be seen only later with the necessary forms for establishing such a beautiful work before men. But this was the day on which Don Bosco's Daughters came into the light and brought to the heart of their convalescing Father the smile of hope that would never fade. (Vol I, p 265-267)

**Reflection:** How often do I call attention to the things I do? Am I okay not receiving recognition? Am I content knowing that God sees what I do even if others do not?

### *August 2: The Religious Habit*

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**From the Cronistoria:** (*written by Br. Peter Enria, Don Bosco's nurse while he was in Varazze*) At that time, (while Don Bosco was ill and then convalescent at Varazze) Father Pestarino was alone with him after the visit of the men from Mornese, and they spoke of the future Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Since no decision had yet been made regarding the habit they were to wear, Father Pestarino presented Don Bosco with a light coffee-colored model in order to have his opinion. Don Bosco examined it well and then said, "Someone should put it on so that we can see it better." "How can we do that?" said Father Pestarino. Don Bosco looked at me, then said, "You put it on and see how handsome you are dressed up in this style. . .!" I obeyed and Don Bosco burst out laughing to see me dressed up in such a manner. He

thought the habit quite well made but said he would have preferred a darker color. Such was the first habit of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.” (Vol I, p 273-274)

**Reflection:** Do I remember that I am the Temple of the Lord and that my outward appearance should reflect this truth?

### *August 3: Preparation Day*

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**From the Cronistoria:** (*August 4, 1872*) Don Bosco expressed his pleasure at seeing them and told them that as he had to go away again the following day and could not return, the Bishop had permitted an alteration in the retreat timetable, holding the clothing and profession ceremonies on the morrow. He added that since a retreat is so important it should not usually be interrupted but this time the Bishop had suggested it and his voice expressed God's will. On the other hand, no better day could be chosen to start a new religious family than when the Church kept the feast of Our Lady of the Snow. The retreat would be continued afterwards and he was sure the little interruption would do no harm because of the great grace God was giving them. He concluded by saying with obvious pleasure that they would be called Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and their Institute would be the living monument of his gratitude to the Blessed Virgin under the title of Help of Christians. He then went to supper with the Bishop and the other priests.

After supper, tired though he must have been, he called Mary Mazzarello, Petronilla, and Joan Ferrettino, the elected leaders of the little family. Petronilla says, “After settling certain matters with the three of us, Don Bosco spoke to all of us together except the ladies. He explained in a few words the importance of the ceremony and how it should be carried out, naming those who were to receive the religious habit only, and those who were to be professed. He then made us read the answers we were to give according to the formula that the foreseeing Father Pestarino had had written out for each of us and made us learn almost by heart, before the retreat began. To save time he got us to read together the formula of the vows, informing us clearly, however, that in chapel we should read it one by one.

He taught us how to carry our habit to the altar. Then he instructed us about the manner of wearing the religious habit in order to honor it and our new title of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. "Your gait," he told us, "must be correct, neither too quick nor too slow. Your whole behavior should be discreet, recollected, not affected but self-possessed, revealing your peace of soul. Your head should be held high but your eyes lowered, in such a way that not only your habit but your whole deportment will show you to be religious, that is, persons consecrated to God. You must walk like this." Then, as the room was a large one Don Bosco, knowing the poor peasant girls we were, had the goodness to walk up and down demonstrating how we should be at the same time both grave and easy. He continued saying that we should be very reserved in our manner of speaking, not raising our voices too high and that our laughter should not attract notice because being cheerful does not mean being noisy and dissipated. Such things do not concern us anymore. Then as it was already late and we still had several things to see to, he let us go with this happy wish, "Tomorrow at nine o'clock you will be religious!" (Vol I, p 295-297)

**Reflection:** As we recall the events of August 5, 1872, let us reflect on our own First Profession, First Promise, First Pledge. Take time to relive the days leading up to the actual day. Ask Jesus for the grace to live your commitment as joyfully as you did on that day.

## *August 4: First Professions*

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**From the Cronistoria:** The four novices left the altar while the Bishop turned his attention to the eleven remaining on their knees. He questioned again: "My children what do you ask?" Eleven voices answered firmly: "We ask to profess the Rule of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians." There was fresh whispering among the people as the Bishop went on, "Have you practiced these Rules?" The affirmative response called for other questions: "Have you considered what it means to profess the Rules of this Congregation?" ". . . Are you ready to profess by vow what you have said?" "Yes, we are ready. With all our hearts we desire it and with God's help we hope to keep our promise." "For how long do you intend to make these vows?" "Although it is our intention to spend our whole life in this Congregation, nevertheless in order to conform to what is laid down in the Rules we begin by binding ourselves for three years." The Bishop continued: "May God bless your resolution and grant you the grace to keep it faithfully. Now place yourselves in His presence and recite the formula of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience according to the Rules of the Congregation."

Up until then the eleven had answered in chorus and in the excusable confusion of the moment they forgot Don Bosco's instructions and began the formula of the vows in unison. The Bishop turned to Don Bosco and whispered, "No, no, this must not be said together." The good Father smiled, understanding the emotion of the moment. Then he made a sign to the novices.

Immediately a single, energetic voice full of emotion was heard, "I, Sister Mary Domenica Mazzarello, mindful of my own weakness and distrusting the inconstancy of my will, place myself in Your presence, almighty and eternal God and imploring the light of the Holy Spirit, the assistance of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of my Guardian Angel, I promise you, Your Excellency, and I make the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience for three years. You, oh my most merciful Jesus, have inspired me to make these vows; help me with Your holy grace to observe them. Immaculate Virgin, powerful Help of Christians, be my defense and my guide in all the perils of life; my Guardian Angel and all the saints of heaven, pray for me. Amen."

It was only just that she who preceded all in love of God and encouraged all on the new way by word and example should now be the first to give herself the title of Sister, publicly binding herself with the holy vows which consecrated her to Christ.

Next came her faithful companion Petronilla Mazzarello and then Felicina Mazzarello, Joan Ferrettino, Teresa Pampuro, Felicita Arecco, Rosa Mazzarello and Catherine Mazzarello from Mornese. These were followed by Angela Jandet from Turin, Maria Poggio from Acqui and Assunta Gaino from Cartosio.

One after another the eleven consecrations were received by the Pastor of the Diocese assisted by the Founder, to be presented by the Help of Christians at the throne of God. Monsignor blessed the crucifixes and presented them. With the assistance of Don Bosco, they were then placed around the necks of the newly professed.

Don Bosco turned humbly and almost pleadingly to Monsignor and said, "Your Excellency, please say a few words to the new religious." But the Bishop refused saying, "No, no Don Bosco. You speak to your Sisters," and he sat down surrounded by his priests. Don Bosco who was evidently overcome, began to speak. He spoke of the importance of the action that had taken place, the sanctity of the vows and the duties they entailed. He noted discreetly that ill humor might surround them because all the things of God bear the signs of suffering but, he added, it would all work out for their sanctification, making and keeping them really humble:



“Among all tiny plants is one with a powerful scent. It is the spikenard, often mentioned in Sacred Scripture. In the office of the Blessed Virgin we read, *Nardus mea dedit odorem suavitatis*, (My spikenard gives out a sweet perfume!) But do you know what must happen before its scent is diffused? The plant has to be well crushed. Therefore, do not be upset if you have to suffer. Whoever suffers with Jesus will reign with Him for all eternity.

You now belong to a religious family that is all Mary's. You are few, deprived of means and not supported by human approval, but let nothing disturb you. Things will soon change and you will have so many pupils you will not know where to put them, and so many postulants that you will find it hard to choose from among them. Yes, I assure you that the Institute will have a great future if you remain simple, poor and mortified.

Be faithful then, to all the duties of your new state as religious and, protected by our tender Mother, Mary Help of Christians, you will come unharmed through all the troubles of life and do much good to your own soul and the souls of others. Let your beautiful title of Daughters of Mary Help of Christians be your glory and often think that your Institute is to be a living monument of Don Bosco's gratitude to the great Mother of God under the title of Help of Christians.”

Another prayer or two, the triple blessing of the Bishop, and the celebration was over. Mary Help of Christians now had the family she had sought from Don Bosco for many years. A mystical snowfall lay on the hills of Mornese just as real snow had fallen on that same day in Rome, many years before. A gentle fall of fresh, pure flakes that would consume themselves on God's altar in order to diffuse the candor of virtue and faith. (Vol I, p 300-303)

**Reflection:** Take time to reflect on Don Bosco’s words to the new Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Imagine he is saying them to you. What message will you carry with you as we celebrate tomorrow?

