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MARY DOMENICA MAZZARELLO

WOMAN ALWAYS... ONE STEP AHEAD

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Past Pupils of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians

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To begin to outline the figure of Mary Domenica Mazzarello, lay person, creative entrepreneur in her time, a resilient woman who was able to reinvent herself after being hit by typhus, it seems interesting to me to report a short passage from President Mattarella's speech, addressed to women who have received the Golden Apple this year in the context of the Award named after the entrepreneur Marisa Bellisario, today's words that seem to recall the actuality of the figure of Mary Domenica Mazzarello. Referring to the awards, the President underlines:

“On the one hand, they express the awareness that effective equality between women and men makes our country grow, provokes, produces, determines a social, economic, and life growth of our country (...). They underline how strong growth in the female role has been and is underway, even if there are still disparities and conditions to be removed. Inequalities and conditions to be removed that have emerged in a further serious way as a result of the crisis after the pandemic.

And it is also paradoxical because, during the pandemic, in all the most important and significant fronts, even the most exposed and riskiest in fighting the virus, the role of women was particularly high, strong, and intense.” (1)

Therefore **entrepreneurship** that affects the growth of the social context, a resilient and tenacious response in a pandemic context, the need for female and male co-responsibility. Three elements, among many that emerge in the reading of the events of Mary Domenica and contribute to making her a model of challenges, paths, and perspectives, today more than ever for the whole Salesian Family and, in particular, for the Past Pupils.

It is necessary to ‘start’ briefly from ... the origins, that is the family context of Mary Domenica, the first school of life and education in the faith. A reminder that challenges us today more than ever, to reflect also on the role of the family (in the pedagogical-formative and therefore social sphere).

1) The importance of education to the faith in the family

Mary Domenica was born on 9 May 1837 from Giuseppe Mazzarello and Maria Maddalena Calcagno at Mornese, Mazzarelli Hamlet, the first of seven children. She is baptized immediately and ‘suckled’ the Christian faith with her mother's milk and her father's care. Two peasants who possessed a deeply rooted Christian faith which permeated daily life.

Mary Domenica will live and make her own this characteristic acquired in the family: faith and work, authentic but essential devotion (she will show her discomfort with the ‘excesses’ of devotion she lived in the period she spent at the Bodrato house, "Yes, I liked being good, but without staying all those hours in church and without letting everyone see too much") (2).

An interesting note is that from childhood, she developed a particular devotion to Mary Help of Christians, nourished among the Mornese people also thanks to the fresco in the nearby chapel (only one hundred and twenty steps writes Maccono!) in her home, a devotion strongly desired by Pius VII after the Napoleonic wars. Mary Domenica grows under the gaze of the Help of Christians.

Lively, intelligent, witty, she soon learns to take care of the housework and responsibly attend to the younger brothers and sisters who come after her.

Like all women of her time, especially those belonging to less well-off classes, she could not attend school. She was illiterate but her father teaches her the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic (The first school regulation is the Casati Law 1859 and is ineffective). Women were not destined to study, unless they came from a wealthy family and could afford private education.

Society was patriarchal, the head of the family decided for everyone. Girls could not make any free choice, except to devote themselves to female affairs at home or in the fields, marry, and bear children. Often they were abused even at home. The men (who in the countryside were used to drinking ... a lot) considered them almost as ‘objects’ and, especially the younger girls, often inexperienced due to the situation of ignorance in which they lived, risked ruining their reputation merely by dating a peer and an unwanted pregnancy was sufficient reason to destroy an existence.

Already in the family, therefore, Mary Domenica:

lives a faith that is combined with daily work and is essential: far from both ostentation and Jansenist rigors;

learns care and attention to the needs of those around her by identifying it even before it is ‘requested’;

deeply rooted in her land and in the rhythms of peasant life, she learns the importance of waiting, patience, industriousness, and moderation that also relies on the times of nature by learning to conceive creation as a gift. An ante litteram ‘sustainability’ that she will often use operationally and from an educational point of view;

assumes responsibility towards those entrusted to her by developing a kind of ‘leadership’, already innate in her nature but matured in her being, in the family, the elder sister on whom her mother relied heavily;

acquires resistance and tenacity in a context of work and fatigue. In 1843, the family moved to Valponasca, property of the Marquis of Oria, from whom the father had rented the vineyard and the relative farmhouse.

In 1850, she asked her father to be allowed to go to work in the fields, first arousing the wonder of the workers and then their annoyance. Mary Domenica, in fact, worked better and more than the men, so much so that her father had to invite her to "take things more blandly" (3) because the laborers left the Valponasca, humiliated by the confrontation with a girl who, in moments of pause, prayed in the middle of the vineyards, and then still worked at home to help her mother with the housework;

understands the importance of culture;

all 'elements' that will contribute to her formation and that will be evident in her pedagogy and in her work with the girls of the Workroom and Oratory.

2) Typhus: springboard for a new spiritual and entrepreneurial 'adventure' (The branch is pruned to bear much fruit)

In 1858, the Mazzarello family moved from Valponasca to Mornese after having suffered a theft.

Between 1850-1860 the second war of independence was fought and the repercussions of political and economic instability were felt also in Mornese where a typhus epidemic broke out (already in 1836 the country had been hit by cholera). Yesterday's Covid in a society impoverished by war, by poverty in which there were very few drugs and no tests, vaccines ... (as in some areas of the world today...)

As is well known, the disease also affects the family of an uncle in which the most serious patient was the mother or the 'organizational engine' of the family unit. The woman asks for the presence of her niece Mary. Fr. Pestarino initially hesitates, aware of the danger, but Mary had long ago joined the "Pious Union of the Daughters of the Immaculate" which had the obligation, by regulation, to assist the sick in the town. The spiritual Director of Mary Domenica, therefore, goes to the girl's house (she was 23 at the time) to ask for that work of charity.

Immediately the parents, out of fear, refuse. But in the end, the father leaves his daughter the freedom to decide:

"Send Mary in there, no, never: at most, if she wants to go, I will not object" (4).

Mary Domenica accepts even though she feels absolutely certain that she will fall ill. She goes to her relatives and is efficient, capable, attentive, tireless in caring for those sick and in comforting them by guiding them to confident prayer until, once her task is finished, the typhoid hits her. The girl becomes so seriously ill that she fears for her life. However, she faces the disease with courage, confidently abandoned to the will of God. She has to face a long convalescence to realize, after months, that her life will no longer be the same as before. Her body has become irremediably fragile. "Her strength did not show any sign of returning" (5). Mary Domenica will no longer be able to return to work in the fields. In fact, God had prepared a new field of work for her.

And instead of being despondent, she reacts. Illness becomes a new starting point, fragility an opportunity, the strength in which to let Grace act ("My power in fact manifests itself fully in weakness", St. Paul 2 Corinthians 9).

“If I knew how to work as a seamstress, how many I could gather” (6). Her thought was for the girls.

Cloth, needle, and thread, from that moment on would make Mary Domenica a real entrepreneur whose goal was clear from the beginning. She would teach the young girls a job in an educational context that would form good Christians and autonomous women, practically no longer completely ignorant (she values culture a lot), capable of reflection and discernment.

As a good manager, she involves the inseparable Petronilla and Fr. Pestarino.

Intelligent and practical, Mary Domenica had already decided that they would go to learn the trade from the village tailor, Valentino Campi, a reliable person from all points of view (good Christian, father of a family, competent in the trade). In any case, it was unusual to say the least for two girls to go to a man's shop but the reasons for this choice, which initially aroused the derision of the Mornese people, were part of what today we would define an excellent 'business sense' and made Mary Domenica even more determined.

In fact, the two young women would have learned from the tailor:

- to evaluate the quality, value, and price of the fabrics (the tailor in fact sold them), a skill that would serve them when they would be working independently also to elaborate what would become their 'rate';
- to cut and sew men's clothes (more difficult but more profitable);
- to do the simplest jobs commissioned to the tailor by women who however, the man could not deal with (they would have had experience of working in the evening on their own and would have 'prepared' a female clientele for the future in the town and in the surrounding areas);
- not to compete with the local seamstress (who, once she moved elsewhere, will leave her clients to Mary Domenica and the Workroom).

The goal was to achieve independence, in the second half of the nineteenth century in a small country town in southern Piedmont!

Having learned the trade, Mary Domenica and her friend would:

- rent a room on their own;
- accept the girls who wanted to learn to sew (with the main objective of protecting them from dangers and leading them to the Lord);
- achieve economic independence to support themselves without being dependent on the families of origin.

A project that... was flawless but above all absolutely innovative. It really was ahead of its time in a society in which female autonomy was not contemplated from any point of view and, much less, separation from their families in a context other than that of marriage.

Because the last point of the plan elaborated by Mary was the separation, first gradual and then definitive, from the respective families of origin whose consent would arrive, as previously had been obtained for that of going to work at the tailor of the town both by Giuseppe, Maria's father and then by Petronilla's father who faced the grudges of his sisters-in-law. But it was the heads of the family who decided and both, with the approval of Fr. Pestarino, had approved an 'entrepreneurial-pastoral project' from which a reality would be born, at that moment as yet unimaginable.

3) Mary Domenica and her relationship of respect and autonomy towards men.

Mary Domenica was an extremely current woman also in the way she set up the relationship with men. In a patriarchal society, still far from female emancipation, Mazzarello knew how to respect, appreciate, sometimes tolerate, in fact, the authority of the men she had to deal with while maintaining her freedom of opinion and discernment and managing to propose it with decision until it reaches her goals.

We have already mentioned the relationship with the tailor Valentino Campi but fundamental figures for Mary Domenica were three other men whom she knew how to obey but in a context of intelligent 'equality' which, even today, has much to teach us too. A serene and balanced exchange, characterized by **autonomy** and **complementarity**, built with meekness and decision, intelligence, humility but with a well-rooted security and ability to evaluate.

Giuseppe Mazzarello, the father. Fundamental figure for the growth and formation of Mary Domenica. He understands and values her gifts; he is a sure, authoritative, wise point of reference. Even though he has no qualifications, he transmits to his daughter, together with his wife, the 'fundamentals' of the Christian faith. While always maintaining his role as head of the family, he will never exercise coercion but will guide Mary to an interior maturation and to the development of a great critical and self-critical capacity and discernment that she will then be able to use with her girls. Endowed with the great ability to leave room for what he read as God's plan for his daughter's life, always with faith and charity, Mary Domenica will often remember the figure of her father with great affection and admiration ("Father spoke very little and everyone ran to obey him.") (7)

Fr. Domenico Pestarino, born in Mornese in 1817, studied at the Acqui seminary and then in Genoa. He returns to Mornese and maintains relations with the cultured Genoese clergy. From a wealthy family, he wishes to preserve the local church from Jansenism and moves with intelligence, humility, goodness, and great availability for everyone. He soon became the spiritual reference of Mary Domenica and the Daughters of the Immaculate but he quickly sensed that there was a special plan for Mary Domenica and "he began to cultivate it with a very special commitment" (8). Graduality and continuity were the two most important attitudes that he will use with Mary Domenica and Mary Domenica will always share with and confide in him, and ask permission of Fr. Pestarino who will guide her, leaving her the autonomy necessary to carry out her mission.

Don Bosco The meeting with Don Bosco can be defined as 'a lightning bolt'. "Don Bosco is a saint and I feel it!" (9) said Mary Domenica during one of Don Bosco's visits to Mornese. Yet so much admiration and sincere devotion, all the affinities that linked Mary Domenica to the cornerstones of the spirituality of the Salesian Congregation, just think of the two 'pillars', the

columns of the Salesian charism, the Eucharist and Marian devotion, did not prevent Mary Domenica from giving a typically feminine imprint to Don Bosco's teachings. A preventive system conjugated in the feminine, with the nuances of humanity, care, attention to the needs of each individual person. As a lay woman, even before being a consecrated woman, her relationship was maternal albeit demanding, attentive also to details, an anticipatory and concrete love, almost ... tailored to the personality and history of each girl she met or rather that Mary Help of Christians entrusted to them.

4) The preventive pedagogy of Mary Domenica Mazzarello

Petronilla worked a lot and with care and their services were in great demand so that after several vicissitudes and changes, the Workroom became a flourishing reality.

Mary Domenica and today, what we would define as an excellent quality/price ratio for the added value of attention and charity that was shown to the girls, whom the mothers of the town and the surrounding area gladly sent to "Mary of the Valponasca", and to whom the women themselves came and were always welcomed, supported, advised, and to any 'customer' who turned to them to ask for a service.

Mary Domenica had an undisputed role of 'leadership' but a 'team' had been created with which to 'network' and respond with diligence and in the best possible way, to appeals, requests, and needs. There was always an atmosphere of joy, of authentic familiarity and cheerfulness that she combined, in the opportune times and ways, with spiritual formation, catechesis, a sincere spirituality immersed in everyday life.

As is well known, the workshop moved on to the Oratory and then to the first 'nucleus' of the School when the first girls began to be welcomed even for the night and Mary and Petronilla gradually left their respective families.

Work was a point of departure for a broad educative and apostolic project.

And there was no lack of tireless assiduity, strength, and tenacity by Mary Domenica and Petronilla who tirelessly divided themselves between looking after the girls and looking for work even in the neighboring areas.

There was no lack of requests and not even economic autonomy considered essential, to avoid dangerous and unsuccessful steps backwards, even by Fr. Pestarino and Don Bosco.

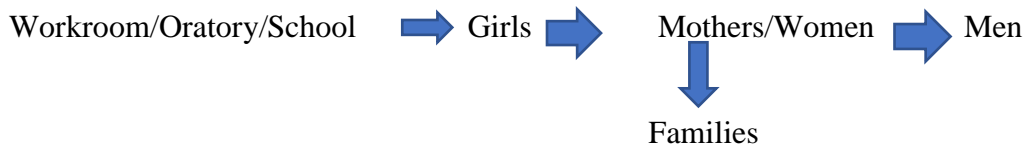
It is interesting to note that the revenues are reported with some precision:

Mary Domenica, who dedicated herself to tailoring work, earned 2 lire, 2 and 50 lire a day; Petronilla, who took care of linen, earned 1 and 50 or 2 lira a day. Then there were the small incomes for the jobs of the girls, the modest monthly fees of the interns for those who could pay them, and then a lot, a lot of work, and an extremely moderate lifestyle.

This type of organizational strategy in our day would be called 'self-empowerment' or being conscious protagonists of one's life, managing to enhance one's talents until they flourish in their maximum expression. It is to become autonomous architects of their own existence. At the basis of this process (which is not new today if one thinks of the Gospel parable of the talents and the "point accessible to good" that Don Bosco believed to be present in every young person), there is great hope in the future, openness to ever new opportunities and continuous improvement.

In our case, an added value of no small importance is faith. It is the particular feature that this path, experienced firsthand by Mary Domenica in a historical era in which it was practically unthinkable, has become one of the most important aspects of the educational system for girls and beyond.

The wide-ranging educational activity of the Workroom/Oratory/School had in fact, an immediate impact on the girls, secondarily on their mothers and on the women of Mornese and the whole area, up to the men, and therefore to the families (this was one of the objectives of the apostolate of Fr. Pestarino which he saw fulfilled in Mary Domenica).



The apostolic dimension of Mary Domenica's activity as a layperson was therefore also inserted in the social context by anticipating the principles of subsidiarity and social participation, topics of the current socio-economic debate and values of the Identity Document of the Past Pupils Confederation.

This Document in which we also find solidarity and reciprocity or the experience of Mary Domenica from childhood, gratuity, and the principles of respect for the dignity of the human person, solidarity and freedom, all themes that we have had the opportunity to touch in this brief presentation.

We started with the family. A large family of peasants, simple and beautiful, from the Mazzarelli hamlet in Mornese, to conclude by talking about family again, the families of today who question us with all their needs, in all the countries of the world, the Salesian Family and the Family of Past Pupils. A family that was born from the experience of Don Bosco's paternity and of Mary Domenica Mazzarello's maternity and which combines the lay dimension with the consecrated one in a context of co-responsibility.

This very important aspect is evident in the story of Mary Domenica Mazzarello, a woman who knew how to be fully a mother both as a lay person and as a consecrated person. Indeed, from a chronological point of view, more as a lay person than as a consecrated person given the time necessary for the foundation of the Institute, a living monument of gratitude to Mary Help of Christians. In any case, her life still speaks to us today, challenges us lay people, women and men, and invites us to be a sign of life, tenacity, and hope in our world. A challenge to be grasped as Mary Domenica was able to grasp those that presented themselves to her, transforming them into rationally unthinkable paths and objectives.

But, like you, we too know that ... nothing is impossible for God.