

Camminando con te, Main

Pellegrinaggio virtuale verso Mornese



LIFE BORN OF LOVE (1837-1848)

Mornese. A small town that recalls another rural village, on the hills of Galilee. Humble houses, dirt paths, wells, in an unstable land oppressed by foreign domination. Nazareth, from the Hebrew verb *nāṣar*: to guard, to act as a sentinel.

Mornese. Another “small town on the hills of Monferrato, in the diocese of Acqui. It is located not far from the city, but rather out of the way, so as not to attract any commercial company and it cannot be reached by any railway network.”

Today a municipality in the province of Alessandria, it has ancient origins. Mentioned in a document of 1188, as Molonesio, it was a fief of the Doria, Lords of Genoa and a large hinterland. In the 1930s, Mornese was experiencing the serious consequences of an unstable political situation, the succession of wars of independence, economic difficulties, famines, recurrent epidemics. Moreover, foreign domination is not far away. In this context, in Mornese, as in Nazareth long ago, a child is born from the love of a family. Two villages, two families, two residences destined to... guard two lives, different but both extraordinary.

The family Mazzarello and the Mazzarelli

“Some groups of houses called the Mazzarelli, from the surname common to several families who live there. There are three fractions, just a few minutes from each other. The people call the first, the Mazzarellis here, the second, the middle ones, and the third to the east, the Mazzarellis there.” This is the hamlet, which becomes the ‘cradle’ where the story of Main begins, intertwined with an authentic faith in Mary Help of Christians.

In 1815, Pope Pius VII had solemnized devotion to Our Lady with the title of “Help of Christians”, in gratitude to the Virgin for his release after the imprisonment during the Napoleonic wars. In the hamlet of Mazzarelli, between 1835 -36, the construction of a chapel began, dedicated to Mary Help of Christians and St. Lawrence Martyr. Maccono specifies that “the white church with a small square bell tower” rose “one hundred and twenty meters” away from the Mazzarello house. The town had been hit by cholera in 1836, there were many deaths, and Joseph had welcomed his orphaned niece Domenica into the house. The chapel will be officially inaugurated in 1843. Main was born and raised under the eyes of Mary Help of Christians

We all owe the gift of life to our parents, to the family that called us into existence. Who were the parents in Mary Domenica's family?

“The small house, tall and white”, in which Main will be born, housed her family and that of two paternal uncles at her birth. Papa Joseph was an honest and hardworking farmer, wise, and a sincere believer. Mamma Maria Maddalena Calcagno was a woman of deep faith, with a fiery character, witty, and practical, devoted to Our Lady. She could be defined as the ‘CEO’ of the family and hers was numerous. Mary Domenica, in fact, will be the first of thirteen children. On 9 May 1837, the happy event; the firstborn was born who was given the name of Mary Domenica. The little girl is baptized the same day and she begins her adventure in this world.

Joseph, an authoritative and affectionate man, holds the significant role of educator for his daughter (“If there is any little virtue in me, I owe it to him”); mama Maria Maddalena takes care of the family, of the growth and education to the faith of the children.

In those years, this family context was common and, at the same time, not taken for granted. Families did not live the experience of the current disintegration, but love and respect did not always reign at home. In a patriarchal society, women were submissive to men, illiterate. The ‘model’ was that of the devoted and obedient bride/mother/housewife. Usually, faith was ‘a question of women’. The education of children, including Christian education, was delegated to mothers. The family in which Mary Domenica grew up can perhaps be defined as ‘a happy oasis’ or a gift from Providence.

“The couple deeply understood their duties as Christian parents. Therefore, they always regarded their children as a sacred trust from Heaven, for whom they would have to give a severe account one day, and they took every care in raising them in the holy fear of God.”

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Family relationships were affectionate and, although Joseph and Magdalene were two simple people, they transmitted to their children the testimony of a rigorous Christian faith and serenely rooted in daily family life.

Mother Petronilla stated, "One day she told me that, while still a little girl, she had asked her father what God did before creating the world, and her father had replied: what was he doing? He contemplated Himself, loved Himself and was blissful in Himself. And that answer had remained deeply etched in her mind and she had never forgotten it." (Watch movie sequence)

This episode is significant in which father and daughter contemplate the starry sky. A moment of intimacy and confidence in which Joseph passes the 'witness' of faith to his daughter. Mary Domenica will live and make her own the richness of her family experience.

Main's human and Christian growth seems to be marked, almost... prophetically, by the spirituality of St. Francis de Sales. He too grew up in a Christian, Catholic family, educated in the faith by his parents. A courageous choice because, in those times of clashes between Catholics and Protestants, choosing meant 'being on the side of' and taking risks. In the Christian Humanism of St. Francis de Sales, we find some of the 'ingredients' with which Main's faith was carefully prepared by her parents: the perception of a God close to us and who trusts in us; faith as the incarnate Word who speaks to humanity (the pastoral charity of St. Francis de Sales can be considered 'the equivalent' of Don Bosco's 'pastoral zeal' and of Main's 'charity in freedom'); the will to weave relationships and build dialogue in every circumstance, in a patient work of ecumenism. While taking into account the different historical periods, in the spirituality of this Saint, there were already the 'seeds' of synodality: welcoming, dialoguing, valuing differences in order to walk, as brothers and sisters, to meet a God who is the Father of mercy. (The "Hotel of Virtues": the idea of a communion of different charisms)

Main's faith fits fully into this spiritual context.

Mornese and the Mazzarelli, places of the "Yes"

Lively and intelligent, Mary Domenica grew and matured. The education to the faith by her parents is exemplary:

"They didn't lose sight of her; they wanted her to be obedient, pious, modest, mortified. Knowing that children are imitators, and that, more than the commands, warnings, and advice of which they do not understand the importance, they pay attention to the facts. Her parents try to offer themselves as a model of every virtue, through prayer and work, mutual respect and mutual compassion.

For Main, this season of life is also the time for many "Yeses" pronounced with faith. "Yes" that ideally bring Mornese closer to... Nazareth.

- **Yes to life.** After the experience of being welcomed and loved, Main will be able to communicate this experience to all those who approach her;
- **Yes to faith.** Lived as a priority dimension of existence, in the joyful serenity of those who perceive the spiritual dimension as an experience of infinite love, mercy, and punctual counterpoint of everyday life;
- **Yes to trial.** To Maria Domenica, from an early age, educational values are indicated to be pursued even with sacrifice. Care and responsibility become the essential binomial of Main's gratuitous love. She 'works' on herself with firm tenacity. Mary Domenica, in fact, was not born a saint! Imagining her as a young girl, meek, a 'little saint' character, is an understatement. She was lively, intelligent, with an iron will. She will learn to model these aspects of her character in the light of evangelical values and they will flourish in a humility that is not lukewarm submissiveness but a loving approach towards everyone. At every call from God in her life, Main will always pronounce her Yes in full awareness and total gratuitousness.

Food for thought for today's reflection. At a time in which the value of sacrifice and effort is being lost, in which there is a tendency always and, in any case, to simplify the way for children by eliminating obstacles ... Main and her family still have much to say to us today, to our families, to our educational strategies ...

I conclude by leaving as a gift three words, inheritance of the Mazzarello spouses, of Main, and recalled in recent days by the sons of David Sassoli during their father's funeral services:

"Dignity: in a world of excuses and justifications, the only way to fight is to continue to work, to know, to feed endless passions, smiling. Passion. It means cultivating sensitivity and care for little things, for the history of people, aware that from each one, we can learn and that each deserves to be listened to. And finally Love, perhaps the most banal, but it is the word repeated most often, with its last strength as a cry, as an exhortation. Until the end you talked to us about hope." Dignity, passion, and love.

Three Yeses, the same ones we are called to pronounce today.

Federica Storace