



## Mary is Presence: Support, Model, Guide

Sister Linda Pocher, FMA

The living presence of Mary in our houses is the support and model of our making ourselves present to those entrusted to us. The more we learn to recognize her, the more we become capable of letting ourselves be guided by her.

### **In the first Christian community**

In the first Christian community awaiting Pentecost (Acts 1: 12-14), the Mother of Jesus is the only one, besides the eleven, to be called by name, a detail that gives a certain authority to her presence.

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel - of which the Acts constitute the second chapter - the author claims to have made careful inquiries with direct witnesses of the facts concerning Jesus "from the beginning" (Lk 1: 4).

This methodical declaration is followed by the story of Jesus' childhood, which has Mary as its protagonist, who in this way is presented as a living memory of Jesus, a privileged witness of his origin and therefore of his deepest identity.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the book of Acts indicates in the "concord" a characteristic feature of the first community. Before Easter, however, Jesus had prophesied the dispersion of the disciples (Mt 26:31) and, in fact, following his arrest, some flee, others deny.

Some, however, together with the women and Mary, find the courage to stay until the end. The first community, therefore, was in fact divided into two. And the presence of Mary could have been a kind of constant reproach for those who had betrayed.

If this was not the case, we also owe it to Mary's ability to forgive her Son's traitors and to welcome them all again as her children.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the first Christians agreed "in prayer". In chapter 4 of the Acts, the way of praying of the community in the face of persecutions is described: after having remembered the wonders of God, they invoke the Spirit and try to discern God's call in the present moment. God responds with a new outpouring of the Spirit, which makes them capable of persevering in proclaiming the gospel.

Mary's prayer is described by Luke in the scene of the encounter with Elizabeth (Lk 1: 46-55). It is very likely that the Magnificat reflects Mary's way of praying in the first Christian community awaiting the Holy Spirit and that the evangelist inserted it retrospectively in the account of the visitation.<sup>3</sup>

Mary's prayer also begins with gratitude for God's gifts, it opens to the gift of the Spirit and to the discernment of the present moment: in his mercy, he initiated a process of liberation which will culminate in Pentecost, but which has its beginning in the secret of her womb.

Mary, therefore, in the first Christian community is a presence that helps believers to remember Jesus; to live mercy; to welcome the gift of the Spirit in view of discernment of the present and of the mission.

### **In Don Bosco's experience**

Don Bosco's Marian dreams are a precious source, from which to draw, so to speak, "from within" the characteristics of his relationship with Mary and the role that her presence had in the development of his educational method and his spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

In the dream of the elephant, for example, we see the statue of Mary placed by the Saint in the Valdocco courtyard growing larger and animated to protect the young people from the aggression of the animal, which at first seems to want to play with them, but, after having attracted them to himself, he wounds them to death by trampling them under his feet.<sup>5</sup>

Those who take refuge under Mary's mantle are saved; the wounded heal; the healthy become his collaborators with his companions. Saving, healing, transforming: these are actions that only the Holy Spirit can perform in the life of believers.

The open mantle of Mary, therefore, represents the action of God, who makes himself present in a particular way with his gifts in those who entrust themselves to Mary, who in Don Bosco's educational experience also assumes the task of helping his own children to open themselves to the action of God in the Spirit.

Furthermore, the story narrated in the dream begins with Mamma Margherita, who knocks on the door of her son's room, to warn him of the danger. Margherita then disappears from the scene for the whole time in which Mary is at work. It appears again, when the image of Mary goes back to being just a statue. The educational continuity between the two figures could not be expressed more eloquently.<sup>6</sup>

Like the Church, so the oratory is first of all a body, a community, in which the Lord gathers his children. The attentive and active presence of Margherita and Mary who, alongside Don Bosco, share his educational mission, have contributed to the maturation of the awareness that the oratory is an environment that educates through a multiplicity of positive interactions, which stimulate participation. active and responsible for everyone.

### **In the community of Mornese**

Throughout the history of the Institute, the Help of Christians has been constantly perceived as a living and active presence. "She is the true superior of the House", said Mother Mazzarello and placing the keys at the foot of her statue, she expressed all her trust in that protective and inspiring presence,<sup>7</sup> while also expressing the choice to exercise her authority in the educational community starting from a strong fraternal awareness, which favored "the active and creative participation of all, despite the diversity of roles and tasks".<sup>8</sup>

This style of government, which today we would not hesitate to call synodal, has its roots in the experience lived as a girl. in the Association of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate. In fact, in her friendship with Petronilla, Maria Domenica learns to open herself to the joy of the Magnificat.

In fact, Mary's song of joy and gratitude is the fruit of an interpersonal encounter that opens up to the discernment of God's action in the present moment. Like Mary and Elizabeth, Maria Domenica and Petronilla learn to recognize the presence and work of God in each other. The gaze that knows how to recognize the action of God in the other, consoles and strengthens in faith, hope and charity.<sup>9</sup>

This female alliance will naturally extend into the foundation and governance of the nascent Institute and is particularly evident, for example, in the episode of the walk to the sanctuary of the Graces in Lerma, when the group of the first sisters, in formation and professed, by chance meet a little girl dirty and ragged, who needs to be fed, educated and cleaned up.<sup>10</sup>

A look capable of seeing the need is immediately followed by the industriousness of the hand. Like Mary with Jesus and the servants at Cana, Mother Mazzarello turns to the sisters to encourage responsible collaboration from all: some take her to the stream to wash her; others make a new dress from a petticoat; still others give her a little catechism.

"Do freely what charity requires", Mother Mazzarello loved to repeat to the first Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: "Do freely what Jesus tells you", we could translate, paraphrasing Mary's words at Cana. And it was certainly not a way of saying, but the putting into words of a truth of faith embodied in everyday life.

Only love, in fact, makes you free. And these country women were truly free, in their capacity for sincere friendship and charity always ready to give, lived in the presence and with the help of Mary.

<sup>1</sup> Cf RATZINGER, J., *L'infanzia di Gesù*, Città del Vaticano 2012, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Cf GIOVANNI PAOLO II, *Dives in Misericordia* 9.

<sup>3</sup> Cf VALENTINI, A., «Magnificat», in S. DE FIORES – V. FERRARI SCHIEFER – S. PERRELLA, ed., *Mariologia*, I dizionari San Paolo., Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2009, 785-790.

<sup>4</sup> Cf BOZZOLO, A., «Presentazione», in ID., ed., *I sogni di don Bosco. Esperienza spirituale e sapienza educativa*, Roma 2017, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Cf CERIA, E., ed, *Memorie Biografiche di San Giovanni Bosco*, Torino 1939, XVIII, 357-360.

<sup>6</sup> Cf CARELLI, R., «"Ha fatto tutto lei". La Madonna nell'esperienza di don Bosco», in A. BOZZOLO, ed., *Sapientiam dedit illi. Studi su don Bosco e il carisma salesiano*, Roma 2015, 191.

<sup>7</sup> Cf CAPETTI, G., ed., *Cronistoria dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Istituto FMA 1977, II, 132.

<sup>8</sup> CAVAGLIÀ, P., «Il carisma educativo di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello», in M.E. POSADA, ed., *Attuale perché vera. Contributi su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, Roma 1987, 171.

<sup>9</sup> MENEGUSI, M. – RUFFINATTO, P., ed., *Con te, Main, sui sentieri della vita*, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice Ambito per la formazione, Roma 2007, 67-69.

<sup>10</sup> Cf *Cronistoria*, II, 258.