 Reading time: 5 min.

The 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's birth was commemorated in 1965. Among the conferences for the occasion was one given by Bishop Giuseppe Angrisani, then Bishop of Casale, and National President of the Past Pupils Priests. Referring to Mamma Margaret, he said of Don Bosco, "*Fortunately for him that mother was at his side for many and many years, and I think and believe I am right in saying that the eagle of the Becchi would not have flown to the ends of the earth if the swallow of the Serra di Capriglio had not come to nest under the beams of the very humble house of the Bosco family*" (BS, Sept. 1966, p. 10).

This was a highly poetic image, which nevertheless expressed a reality. 30 years earlier, G. Joergensen, without wishing to profane Sacred Scripture, allowed himself to begin his *Don Bosco* published by SEI with the words "*In the beginning there was the mother*."

The maternal influence in the religious attitudes of the child and in the religiosity of the adult is recognised by experts in religious psychology and is, in our case, more than evident: St John Bosco, who always had the greatest veneration for his mother, copied a profound religious sense of life from her. "God dominated Don Bosco's mind like the midday sun" (Pietro Stella).

God at the top of his thoughts

It is an easy fact to document: Don Bosco always had God at the top of all his thoughts. A man of action, he was first and foremost a man of prayer. He himself recalls that it was his mother who taught him to pray, that is, to converse with God:

"*She made me kneel with [my brothers] morning and evening. We would all recite our prayers together*" (MO 33).

When John had to leave his mother's roof and go to work as a farm hand at the Moglia farmstead, prayer was already his habitual food and comfort. In the house in Moncucco "the duties of a good Christian were fulfilled with the regularity of inveterate domestic habits, always tenacious in country families, very tenacious in those days of healthy country life" (E. Ceria). But John was already doing something more: he prayed on his knees, he prayed often, he prayed at length. Even outside the house, while driving the cows to pasture, he would pause occasionally in prayer.

His mother had also instilled in his heart a tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin. When he entered the seminary, she had told him:

"*When you came into the world, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin; when you began your studies, I recommended to you devotion to this Mother of*

ours; and if you become a priest, always preach and promote devotion to Mary." (MO, 79).

Mamma Margaret, after educating her son John in the cottage at the Becchi, after allowing him and encouraging him on his hard vocational journey, lived for ten more years at his side, carrying out a very delicate maternal role in the education of the youngsters he had gathered, with a style that continues in so many aspects of Don Bosco's educational praxis: awareness of God's presence, industriousness that is a sense of human and Christian dignity, courage that inspires works, reason that is dialogue and acceptance of others, demanding but reassuring love.

Without any doubt, therefore, the mother played a unique role in the education and early apostolate of her son, profoundly influencing the spirit and style of his future work.

Having become a priest and begun work among the youth, Don Bosco gave the title "Oratory" to his work. It is not without reason that the driving centre of all Don Bosco's works was called the Oratory. The title indicates the dominant activity, the main purpose of an undertaking. And Don Bosco, as he himself confessed, gave the name Oratory to his "house" to clearly indicate that prayer was the only power he relied on.

He had no other power at his disposal to animate his oratories, start the hospice, solve the problem of daily bread, lay the foundations of his Congregation. So many, we know, even doubted his sanity.

What the great did not understand, the little ones understood implicitly, that is, the young people who, after getting to know him, could no longer tear themselves away from him. They saw in him the living image of the Lord. Always calm and serene, always at their disposal, fervent in prayer, humorous in speech, paternal in guiding them to the good, always keeping the hope of salvation alive in everyone. If someone, one witness asserted, had asked him point blank, "Don Bosco, where are you off to?" he would have replied: "Let's go to Paradise!"

This religious sense of life, which permeated all Don Bosco's works and writings, was an obvious inheritance from his mother. Don Bosco's holiness was drawn from the divine source of Grace and modelled on Christ, the master of all perfection, but it was rooted in a maternal spiritual value, Christian wisdom. The good tree produces good fruit.

She had taught him this

Don Bosco's mother, Margherita Occhiena, had been sharing a life of deprivation and sacrifice with her son at Valdocco since November 1846, when at 58 years of age, she had left her home at the Becchi, a life of deprivation and

sacrifice all spent for young urchins on the outskirts of Turin. Four years passed, and she now felt her strength waning. A great weariness had penetrated her bones, a strong nostalgia in her heart. She entered Don Bosco's room and said, "Listen to me, John, it is no longer possible to go on like this. Every day the boys are up to something. They throw my clean laundry lying in the sun on the floor, and they trample my vegetables in the garden. They tear their clothes so that there is no way of patching them up. They lose socks and shirts. They take things away from the house to play with and make me walk around all day to find them. In the midst of this confusion, I am losing my mind, You see! I'm just about ready to return to the Becchi."

Don Bosco stared into his mother's face, without speaking. Then he pointed to the Crucifix hanging on the wall. Mamma Margaret understood. Her eyes filled with tears.

"You are right, you are right, she exclaimed" and she went back to her chores, for another six years, until her death (G.B. LEMOYNE, Mamma Margherita, Torino, SEI, 1956, p. 155-156).

Mamma Margaret nourished a deep devotion to the Passion of Christ, to the Cross that gave meaning, strength and hope to all her crosses. She had taught this to her son. One glance at the Crucifix was enough for her! For her, life was a mission to be fulfilled, time a gift from God, work a human contribution to the Creator's plan, human history a sacred thing because God, our Lord, Father and Saviour, is at the centre, beginning and end of the world and of humanity.

She had taught all this to her son by word and example. Mother and son: a faith and hope placed in God alone, and an ardent charity that burned in their hearts until death.