 Reading time: 8 min.

Fr Lemoyne leaves us a truly outstanding portrait in his preface to the life of Mamma Margaret: “We will not describe extraordinary or heroic events, but we will portray a simple life, constant in the practice of good, vigilant in the education of her children, resigned and able to foresee the anxieties of life, resolute in all that duty imposed upon her. Not rich, but with a queen’s heart; not instructed in worldly knowledge, but educated in the holy fear of God; deprived at an early age of those who were to be her support, but secure with the energy of her will leaning on heavenly help, she was able to happily carry out the mission that God had entrusted to her.”

With these words, we are offered the pieces of a mosaic and a canvas on which we can build the adventure of the Spirit that the Lord gave to this woman who, docile to the Spirit, rolled up her sleeves and faced life with hard-working faith and maternal charity. We will follow the stages of this adventure with the biblical category of the “exodus”, an expression of an authentic journey in the obedience of faith. Mamma Margaret also experienced her “exodus”; she too walked towards “a promised land”, crossing the desert and overcoming trials. We see this journey reflected in the light of her relationship with her son and according to two dynamics typical of life in the Spirit: one less visible, consisting of the inner dynamic of self-change, a prior and indispensable condition for helping others; the other more immediate and documentable: the ability to roll up one’s sleeves to love one’s neighbour in the flesh, coming to the aid of those in need.

1. Exodus from Capriglio to the Biglione farmstead

Margaret was educated in the faith, lived and died in the faith. “God was at the forefront of all her thoughts. She felt she lived in God’s presence and expressed this conviction in words that were customary for her: “God sees you.” Everything spoke to her of God’s fatherhood and great was her trust in Providence, showing gratitude to God for the gifts she had received and gratitude to all those who were instruments of Providence. Margaret spent her life in a continuous and incessant search for God’s will, the only real and practical criterion for her choices and actions.

At the age of 23 she married Francis Bosco, who was widowed at 27, with his son Anthony and his semi-paralysed mother. Margaret became not only wife, but adoptive mother and help for her mother-in-law. This step was the most important for the married couple because they knew well that having received the sacrament of marriage in a holy way was a source of many blessings for them: for serenity and

peace in the family, for future children, for work and for overcoming difficult moments in life. Margaret lived her marriage to Francis Bosco faithfully and fruitfully. Their rings would be a sign of fruitfulness that would extend to the family founded by her son John. All this would arouse a great sense of gratitude and love for this pair of holy spouses and parents in Don Bosco and his boys.

2. Exodus from the Biglione farmstead to the Becchi

After just five years of marriage, in 1817, her husband Francis died. Don Bosco recalled that as he left the room his mother in tears “took me by the hand” and led him out. Here is the spiritual and educational icon of this mother. She takes her son by the hand and leads him out. Already from this moment there is that “taking by the hand” which would unite mother and son in both the vocational journey and the educational mission.

Margaret found herself in a very difficult situation from an emotional and financial point of view, including a specious dispute brought by the Biglione family. There were debts to pay, hard work in the fields and a terrible famine to face, but she dealt with all these trials with great faith and unconditional trust in Providence.

Widowhood opened up a new vocation for her as an attentive and caring educator of her children. She devoted herself to her family tenaciously and courageously, refusing an advantageous marriage proposal. “God gave me a husband and took him away from me; when he died he entrusted me with three children, and I would be a cruel mother if I abandoned them when they needed me most… The guardian… is a friend, but I am the mother to my children; all the gold in the world could never make me abandon them.”

She educated her children wisely, anticipating the pedagogical inspiration of the Preventive System. She was a woman who had made the choice for God and was able to pass on the sense of his presence to her children, in their everyday lives. She did so in a simple, spontaneous, clear way, seizing every small opportunity to educate them to live in the light of faith. She did this by anticipating the “word in the ear” that Don Bosco would later use with the boys to call them to the life of grace, to the presence of God. She did this by helping them to recognise the work of the Creator, who is a providential and good Father. in creatures. She did this by recounting the facts of the gospel and the lives of the saints.

Christian education. She prepared her children to receive the sacraments, passing on to them a vivid sense of the greatness of God’s mysteries. John Bosco received his First Communion on Easter 1826: “O dear son, this was a great day for you. I am convinced that God has truly taken possession of your heart. Now promise Him to do all you can to keep you good until the end of your life.” These words of

Mamma Margaret make her a true spiritual mother of her children, especially of John, who would immediately show himself sensitive to these teachings which have the flavour of a true initiation, an expression of the capacity to introduce the mystery of grace in a woman unlettered, but rich in the wisdom of children.

Faith in God is reflected in the demand for moral rectitude that she practised with herself and inculcated in her children. “Against sin she had declared perpetual war. Not only did she abhor what was evil, but she strove to keep away the offence of the Lord even from those who did not belong to her. So she was always on the alert against scandal, cautious, but resolute and at the cost of any sacrifice.”

The heart that animated Mamma Margaret’s life was an immense love and devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist. She experienced its salvific and redeeming value in her participation in the holy sacrifice and in accepting the trials of life. She educated her children to this faith and love from an early age, passing on that spiritual and educational conviction that would find in Don Bosco a priest in love with the Eucharist and who would make the Eucharist a pillar of his educational system.

Faith found expression in the life of prayer and in particular prayer in common in the family. Mamma Margaret found the strength of a good education in an intense and caring Christian life. She led by example and guided by word. In her school young John thus learned the preventive power of God’s grace in a vital form. “Religious instruction, which a mother imparts by word, by example, by comparing her son’s conduct with the particular precepts of the catechism, causes the practice of Religion to become normal and sin to be rejected by instinct, just as goodness is loved by instinct. Being good becomes a habit, and virtue does not cost much effort. A child so educated must do violence to himself to become evil. Margaret knew the power of such a Christian education and how the law of God, taught in catechism every evening and frequently recalled even during the day, was the sure means of making children obedient to their mother’s precepts. She therefore repeated the questions and answers as many times as was necessary for the children to learn them by heart.”

Witness of charity. In her poverty, she practised hospitality with joy, without making distinctions or exclusions; she helped the poor, visited the sick, and her children learnt from her to love the least of these disproportionately. “She was of a very sensitive nature, but this sensitivity so much became charity that she could rightly be called the mother of those in need.” This charity manifested itself in a marked ability to understand situations, to deal with people, to make the right

choices at the right time, to avoid excesses and to maintain a great balance throughout: “A woman of much sense” (Fr Giacinto Ballesio). The reasonableness of her teachings, her personal consistency and firmness without anger, touch the souls of the children. Proverbs and sayings flourish with ease on her lips and she condensed precepts for life in them: “A bad laundress never finds a good stone”; “Whoever does not know at twenty does not do by thirty and will die foolish”; “Conscience is like a tickle. Some feel it and some do not.”

In particular it should be emphasised that John Bosco was to be a great educator of boys, “because he had had a mother who had educated his affectivity. A good, nice, strong mother. With so much love she educated his heart. One cannot understand Don Bosco without Mamma Margaret. One cannot understand him.” Mamma Margaret contributed with her maternal mediation to the work of the Spirit in the shaping and formation of her son’s heart. Don Bosco learnt to love, as he himself declared, within the Church, thanks to Mamma Margaret and with the supernatural intervention of Mary, who was given to him by Jesus as “Mother and Teacher”.

3. Exodus from the Becchi to the Moglia farmstead

A moment of great trial for Margaret was the difficult relationship between her children. “Margaret’s three sons, Anthony, Joseph and John, were different in temperament and inclinations. Antonio was coarse in manners, of little or no delicacy of feeling, a manic exaggerator, a true portrait of “I couldn’t care less’! He lived by bullying. He often let himself go and beat his little brothers, and Mamma Margaret had to run to get them out of his hands. However, she never used force to defend them and true to her maxim, she never laid a hair on Antonio’s head. One can imagine what mastery Margaret had over herself to restrain the voice of blood and love she bore to Joseph and John. Antonio had been sent to school and had learned to read and write, but he boasted that he had never studied or gone to school. He had no aptitude for studies, he did the work in the countryside.”

On the other hand, Antonio was in a particularly difficult situation: older than his age, he was wounded by being fatherless and motherless. Despite his intemperance, he was generally submissive, thanks to the attitude of Mamma Margaret who managed to control him with reasoned kindness. With time, unfortunately, his intolerance towards young John in particular, who did not easily allow himself to be subdued, would grow and his reactions towards Mamma Margaret would also become harsher and at times stronger. In particular, Antonio did not accept that John should dedicate himself to his studies and tensions would reach a climax: “I want to end this grammar. I’ve come big and fat, I’ve never seen

these books.” Antonio was a child of his time and his peasant condition and could neither understand nor accept that his brother could devote himself to his studies. Everyone was upset, but the one who suffered most was Mamma Margaret, who was personally involved and had war at home day after day: “My mother was distressed, I wept, the chaplain grieved.”

In the face of Antonio’s jealousy and hostility, Margaret sought a solution to the family conflict, sending John to the Moglia farmstead for about two years and then, in the face of Antonio’s resistance, she adamantly arranged for the division of the property in order to allow John to study. Of course, it was only the 12-year-old John who left home, but his Mother also experienced this profound detachment. Let us not forget that Don Bosco in his *Memoirs of the Oratory* does not speak of this period. Such silence suggests a difficult experience to process, being at that time a twelve-year-old boy, forced to leave home because he could not live with his brother. John suffered in silence, waiting for the hour of Providence and with him Mamma Margaret, who did not want to close off her son’s path, but open it up through special ways, entrusting him to a good family. The solution taken by the mother and accepted by the son was a temporary choice in view of a definitive solution. It was trust and abandonment in God. Mother and son live a season of waiting.

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