 Reading time: 9 min.

(continuation from previous article)

4. Exodus to her son's priesthood

From the dream at the age of nine, when she was the only one to understand her son's vocation, "who knows, maybe he will become a priest", she was the most convinced and tenacious supporter of her son's vocation, facing humiliation and sacrifice for this: "His mother then, who wanted to support him at the cost of any sacrifice, did not hesitate to make the resolution to have him attend the public schools in Chieri the following year. She then took care to find truly Christian people with whom she could place him to board." Margaret discreetly followed John's vocational and formation path, amidst serious financial straits.

She always left him free in his choices and in no way conditioned his path towards the priesthood, but when the parish priest tried to convince Margaret why John should not choose the religious life, so as to guarantee her financial security and help, she immediately reached out to her son and said words that would remain engraved in Don Bosco's heart for the rest of his life: "I only want you to examine carefully the step you want to take, and then follow your vocation without looking to anyone. The parish priest wanted me to dissuade you from this decision, in view of the need I might have in the future for your help. But I say: "have nothing to do with these things, because God is first of all. Do not bother yourself about me. I want nothing from you; I expect nothing from you. Think well: I was born in poverty, I have lived in poverty, I want to die in poverty. Indeed I protest to you. If you resolve to become a secular priest and by misfortune become rich, I will not come to pay you a single visit, indeed I will never set foot in your house again. Remember this well!"

But along this vocational journey, she did not fail to be strong for her son, reminding him, on the occasion of his departure for the seminary in Chieri, of the demands of the priestly life: "John, you have donned the priestly habit; I feel all the consolation that a mother can feel at her son's good fortune. But remember that it is not the habit that honours your state, it is the practice of virtue. If you ever come to doubt your vocation, ah for pity's sake, do not dishonour this habit! Lay it down quickly. I would rather have a poor peasant, than a priest son who has neglected his duties." Don Bosco would never forget these words, an expression both of his awareness of his priestly dignity and the fruit of a profoundly upright and holy life.

On the day of Don Bosco's First Mass Margaret once again made herself present with words inspired by the Spirit, both expressing the authentic value of the

priestly ministry and her son's total surrender to his mission without any pretence or request: "You are a priest; you say Mass; from here on you are closer to Jesus Christ. Remember, however, that to begin to say Mass is to begin to suffer. You will not realise it at once, but little by little you will see that your mother has told you the truth. I am sure that you will pray for me every day, whether I am still alive or already dead; that is enough for me. From now on think only of the health of souls and do not take any thought for me." She renounce her son completely to offer him in the service of the Church. But losing him she found him again, sharing his educational and pastoral mission among the young.

5. Exodus from the Becchi to Valdocco

Don Bosco had appreciated and recognised the great values he had drawn from his family: peasant wisdom, healthy shrewdness, a sense of work, the essential nature of things, industriousness in keeping busy, optimism to the full, endurance in times of misfortune, the ability to bounce back after beatings, cheerfulness always and in any case, the spirit of solidarity, living faith, the truth and intensity of affection, a taste for welcome and hospitality; all goods that he had found at home and that had built him up that way. He was so marked by this experience that, when he thought of an educational institution for his boys, he wanted no other name for it than "home" and defined the spirit that would be impressed on it as "family spirit'". And to give the right imprint, he asked Mamma Margaret, by now old and tired, to leave the tranquillity of her little house in the hills, to go down to the city and take care of those boys picked up from the streets, those who would give her no small amount of worry and sorrow. But she went to help Don Bosco and to be a mother to those who no longer had family and affections. While John Bosco learned the art of loving concretely, generously, unselfishly and towards everyone at Mamma Margaret's school his mother would share her son's choice to devote his life to the salvation of the young to the very end. This communion of spirit and action between son and mother marked the beginning of the Salesian work, involving many people in this divine adventure. Having reached a peaceful situation, she accepted, despite being no longer young, to leave the quiet life and security of the Becchi, to go to Turin in a suburban area and in a house stripped bare. It was a real departure in her life!

So Don Bosco, after thinking and rethinking how to get out of the difficulties, went to speak to his parish priest at Castelnuovo, telling him of his need and his fears.

"You have your mother!" The Parish Priest replied without a moment's

hesitation: “have her come with you to Turin.”
Don Bosco, who had foreseen this answer, wanted to make some reflections, but Don Cinzano replied:

“Take your mother with you. You will find no one better suited to the work than her. Rest assured; you will have an angel at your side!”

Don Bosco returned home convinced by the reasons put before him by the provost. However, two reasons still held him back. The first was the life of privations and changed habits to which his mother would naturally have to be subjected in that new position. The second came from the repugnance he felt at proposing to his mother a task that would have made her in some way dependent on him. For Don Bosco his mother was everything, and with his brother Joseph, he was accustomed to keep her every wish as unquestionable law. However, after thinking and praying, seeing that there was no other choice left, he concluded:

“My mother is a saint, so I can propose to her!”

So one day he took her aside and thus spoke to her:

“I have decided, mother, to return to Turin among my dear young people. From now on, as I will no longer be staying at the Refuge, I will need a servant; but the place where I will have to live in Valdocco, because of certain people who live near there, is very risky, and does not leave me calm. I therefore need to have at my side a safeguard to remove every reason for suspicion and gossip from malevolent people. You alone could remove all fear from me; would you not gladly come and stay with me?” At this unanticipated exodus, the pious woman remained somewhat thoughtful, and then answered:

“My dear son, you can imagine how much it costs my heart to leave this house, your brother and other loved ones; but if it seems to you that such a thing might please the Lord I am ready to follow you.”

Don Bosco assured her, and thanking her, concluded:

“Let us arrange things then, and after the Feast of the Saints we will leave.”

Margaret went to live with her son, not to lead a more comfortable and pleasant life, but to share with him the hardships and sufferings of hundreds of poor and abandoned boys; she went there, not attracted by greed for money, but by love of God and souls, because she knew that the part of the sacred ministry Don Bosco had taken on, far from giving him any resources or profit, obliged him to spend his own goods, and also to seek alms. She did not stop; on the contrary, admiring her son’s courage and zeal, she felt even more encouraged to be his companion and imitator, until her death.

Margaret lived at the Oratory bringing the motherly warmth and wisdom of a

profoundly Christian woman, heroic dedication to her son in times that were difficult for his health and physical safety, thus exercising an authentic spiritual and material motherhood towards her priest son. In fact, she settled in Valdocco not only to cooperate in the work begun by her son, but also to dispel any occasion for slander that might arise from the dubious premises nearby.

She left the quiet security of Joseph's home to venture with her son on a mission that was not easy and was risky. She spent her time in unreserved dedication to the youngsters "of whom she was a mother". She loved the boys of the oratory as her own children and worked for their welfare, education and spiritual life, giving the oratory that family atmosphere that would be a characteristic of Salesian houses from the beginning. "If there is the holiness of ecstasies and visions, there is also the holiness of pots to clean and socks to mend. Mamma Margaret was such a saint."

In her relations with the children she was exemplary, distinguishing herself by her refined charity and her humility in serving, reserving the humblest of occupations for herself. Her intuition as a mother and spiritual woman resulted in recognising in Dominic Savio as an extraordinary work of grace.

Even at the Oratory, however, there was no lack of trials and when there was a moment of hesitation due to the harshness of the experience, caused by a very demanding life, the glance at the Crucifix pointed out by her son was enough to infuse her with new energy: "From that instant no word of lament escaped her lips. Indeed, from then on she seemed insensitive to those miseries."

Fr Rua summed up the testimony of Mamma Margaret well, after living for four years at the oratory: "A truly Christian woman, pious, generous-hearted and courageous, prudent, who devoted herself entirely to the good education of her children and her adoptive family."

6. Exodus to the Father's house

She was born poor. She lived poor. She died poor wearing the only dress she used; in her pocket were 12 lire destined to buy a new one, which she never bought.

Even at the hour of death, she turned to her beloved son and left him with words worthy of the wise woman: "Have great confidence in those who work with you in the vineyard of the Lord… Take heed that many seek their own good instead of the glory of God…. Seek neither elegance nor splendour in works. Seek the glory of God; have poverty of deed as your basis. Many love poverty in others, but not in themselves. The most effective teaching is for us to be the first to do what we command others."

Margaret, who had consecrated John to the Blessed Virgin, had entrusted him at the beginning of his studies to her, recommending devotion and the propagation of love of Mary, now reassured him: “Our Lady will not fail to guide your affairs.”

Her whole life was a total gift of self. On her deathbed she could say: “I have done my whole share.” She died at the age of 68 in the Valdocco Oratory on 25 November 1856. The Oratory boys accompanied her to the cemetery, mourning her as “Mamma”.

Don Bosco, saddened, said to Pietro Enria: “We have lost our mother, but I am sure she will help us from Heaven. She was a saint!” And Enria himself added: “Don Bosco did not exaggerate in calling her a saint, because she sacrificed herself for us and was a true mother to us all.”

In conclusion

Mamma Margaret was a woman rich in interior life and with a rock-solid faith, sensitive and docile to the voice of the Spirit, ready to grasp and realise God’s will, attentive to the problems of her neighbour, available to provide for the needs of the poorest and especially the abandoned young. Don Bosco would always remember the teachings and what he had learned at his mother’s school and this tradition would mark his educational system and spirituality. Don Bosco had experienced that the formation of his personality was vitally rooted in the extraordinary climate of dedication and goodness of his family; that is why he wanted to reproduce its most significant qualities in his work. Margaret intertwined her life with that of her son and with the beginnings of the Salesian work: she was Don Bosco’s first “Cooperator”; with active goodness she became the maternal element of the Preventive System. At the school of Don Bosco and Mamma Margaret this means caring for the formation of consciences, educating to the fortitude of the virtuous life in the struggle, without discounts and compromises, against sin, with the help of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, growing in personal, family and community docility to the inspirations and motions of the Holy Spirit to strengthen the reasons for good and to bear witness to the beauty of faith.

For the entire Salesian Family, this testimony is a further invitation to adopt a privileged attention to the family in the pastoral care of young people, forming and involving parents in the educational and evangelising action of their children, valuing their contribution in processes of affective education and encouraging new forms of evangelisation and catechesis of and through families. Mamma Margaret today is an extraordinary model for families. Hers is a family holiness: as a woman,

a wife, a mother, a widow, an educator. Her life contains a message of great relevance, especially in the rediscovery of the sanctity of marriage.

But another aspect must be emphasised: one of the fundamental reasons why Don Bosco wanted his mother beside him in Turin was to find in her a guardian for his own priesthood. “Take your mother with you”, the old parish priest had suggested to him. Don Bosco took Mamma Margaret into his life as priest and educator. As a child, an orphan, it was his mother who took him by the hand, and as a young priest it was he who took her by the hand to share a special mission. One cannot understand Don Bosco’s priestly holiness without the holiness of Mamma Margaret, a model not only of family holiness, but also of spiritual motherhood for priests.