

MARIA DOMENICA MAZZARELLO AND THE QUESTION OF LITERACY

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Introduction

There are many influences which affected Maria Domenica Mazzarello's (1837-1881) learning and experience: the socioeconomic class she was born into: a hardworking Italian farming community; the politico-religious climate of her time – Italy's restless years between Church and State and its own political *risorgimento*; the eldest of 10 children (7 survived to adulthood); her vivacious and resolute character with its inclinations, passions, emotions, desires and intellectual stimuli; the picturesque surroundings of her neighbourhood; the severe illness she contracted as a young adult; the impact of her education upon the education of others; the influence of both females and males in her life: her friendship with her closest friend Petronilla Mazzarello (no relation), the women of both the Pious Union of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (PUDMI) and the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (IDMHC), the influence of her parents, the local and diocesan clergy together with the Salesian Fathers and Brothers. All of the above point to the fact that these influences make up the unique traits and characteristics of Maria Domenica Mazzarello. Her specific uniqueness is our most precious endowment.

Academic studies, in greater and lesser degree, have addressed some of the above influences in relation to the figure of Maria. Some of the extensive works centre on the relationship between Maria Mazzarello and Don Bosco¹;

¹ Joseph AUBRY (a cura di), *Fondatore e confondatrice, Don Bosco e Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in *Rinnovare la nostra vita salesiana*. II. Leumann (Torino), LDC 1981, pp. 127-143; Maria BORSI-Piera CAVAGLIÀ, *La relazione di don Bosco con le donne secondo alcuni contributi storico-biografici*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 29 (1991) 1, 17-46; Anita DELEIDI, *Il rapporto tra Don Bosco e Madre Mazzarello nella fondazione dell'Istituto FMA (1862-1876)*, in *Don Bosco fondatore della Famiglia Salesiana*, a cura di Mario Midali. Roma, S.D.B. 1989, pp. 305-321; Maria Esther POSADA, *Don Bosco Fondatore dell'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, in *Don Bosco fondatore della famiglia Salesiana*, a cura di Mario Midali. Roma, S.D.B. 1989, pp. 281-303; Egidio VIGANÒ, *Rediscovering the Spirit of Mornese. Letter of the Rector Major Father Egidio Viganò on the occasion of the centenary of the death*

her interaction with Salesians², Fr. Domenico Pestarino³, Fr. Giuseppe Frassinetti⁴; Maria's contribution to the Salesian charism⁵ and to Christian education⁶; the implications of "the feminine question" and the spirituality and educative style of Maria Mazzarello⁷; studies relating to Maria's own human

of Saint Mary Domenica Mazzarello, in *Acts of the Superior Council*. 24 February. Rome, S.D.B. 1981, pp. 1-71.

² Enrica ROSANNA, *Un messaggio che viene da lontano: le lettere di Madre Mazzarello ai Salesiani*, in *Attuale perché vera: Contributi su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di Maria Esther Posada. Roma, LAS 1987, pp. 99-106.

³ Adolfo L'ARCO, *Don Domenico Pestarino in orbita tra due astri*. Torino, LDC 1980. Fr Domenico Pestarino (1817-1874), a native of Mornese, was ordained in Genoa on 21 November, 1839. He remained in the seminary as Prefect and returned to Mornese as curate to the parish priest till his death. Having met Don Bosco in 1862, he became a Salesian and continued his ministry in the parish of Mornese. He became the first spiritual director of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. Maria's acquaintance with Pestarino began in her preadolescent years and continued until his death.

⁴ M.E. POSADA, *Storia e santità: Influsso del teologo Giuseppe Frassinetti sulla spiritualità di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*. Roma, LAS 1992. Paolo Giuseppe Maria Frassinetti (1804-1868) was the first of 10 children of whom five survived to adulthood. The four boys became priests and the girl, Paola, the founder of a religious congregation of women, the *Sisters of St. Dorothy*. Known as the "pastor of souls", Frassinetti lived most of his life in Genoa ministering to the spiritual and cultural formation of the clergy and laity as pastor, writer, founder of associations and a religious congregation, preacher, confessor and spiritual director. In 1827 he established a congregation for the formation of the clergy, *Congregazione del Beato Leonardo di Porto Maurizio* which was suppressed in 1843. In 1848-9, having taken a stance in his literary works against Jansenism, he was forced into exile for the year. During this period he read extensively and studied the works of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and John of the Cross (1542-1591) writing spiritual treatises based on their teachings. In his work of founding a variety of associations, one became a religious institute for men in 1860 entitled, *Figli di S. Maria*, which is still active today. In a span of thirty years he profusely published short works for devotional reading and more extensive academic publications for the instruction of the clergy, most notably, *The Compendium of the Moral Theology of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori*. Maria met Frassinetti on his visits to Mornese to see Pestarino, a close friend of his, and as extraordinary confessor to the PUDMI.

⁵ Luigi CÀSTANO, *Madre Mazzarello: Santa e fondatrice delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*. Leumann (Torino), LDC 1981; Carlo COLLI, *Madre Mazzarello Fondatrice*, in *Patto della nostra alleanza con Dio*. Roma, Istituto FMA 1984, pp. 35-51; ID., *The Spirit of Mornese*. New Rochelle, Don Bosco Publications 1982; Mario MIDALI, *Madre Mazzarello: Il significato del titolo di Fondatrice*. Roma, LAS 1982.

⁶ Maria Angela BISSOLA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello: le note caratteristiche della sua opera di formatrice*, in *La maestra delle novizie di fronte alle nuove istanze formative*, a cura di Enrica Rosanna-Giuseppina Niro. Roma, LAS 1995, pp. 193-206; P. CAVAGLIÀ, *La riscoperta di un volto: un'educatrice e una maestra di vita*, in *La sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià. Torino, Società Editrice Internazionale 1994, pp. 24-32; ID., *Fecondità e provocazione di un'esperienza educativa*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 30 (1992) 2, 171-197; A. DELEIDI, *Alcune premesse per uno studio su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello educatrice*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 19 (1981) 215-228; Gabriella SCARPA, *Dall'ambiente educativo di Valdocco e di Mornese sorge l'associazionismo giovanile salesiano*, in *Da Mihi Animas* 27 (1980) 20, 571-578.

⁷ P. CAVAGLIÀ, *L'eredità educativa di S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in *1° Congresso mondiale degli exallievi ed exallieve di Don Bosco e delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Atti e

and Christian journey⁸. One aspect of her early education which has not been investigated thoroughly and which has implications when examining Maria Mazzarello's spirituality through her correspondence is the learning she experienced through reading. This is the focus of my approach in this paper.

documenti. Roma - 3/9 Novembre 1988, a cura di Charles Cini, Tommaso Natale, Teresita Osio, Angiola Maria Bompard e Laura Benedettini. Roma, Editrice VELAR S.p.A., Gorle (Bergamo) 1991, pp. 131-144; ID., *Educazione e cultura per la donna: La scuola "Nostra Signora delle Grazie" di Nizza Monferrato dalle origini alla riforma Gentile (1878-1923)*. Roma, LAS 1990; ID., *La scuola di Mornese: alle origini di una scelta per la promozione integrale della donna*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 26 (1988) 2, 151-186; Ornella CONFESSORE, *La proposta spirituale di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 34 (1996) 2, 188-196; Maria Grazia FASOLI, "Questa è la mia lettera al mondo", in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 34 (1996) 2, 202-206; Matilda PARENTE, *Per una pedagogia dell'incoraggiamento*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 34 (1996) 2, 197-201; Caterina Verga GUARNA, *L'identità femminile e l'attualità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 34 (1996) 2, 207-212; Rosella Annalisa MILLETTI, *Vivere i valori al femminile: Maria Domenica Mazzarello, donna del suo tempo, donna d'oggi*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 32 (1994) 2, 182-185; Franca ZITO, *S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello: Una vocazione pienamente femminile a servizio della dignità della donna*, in *Rivista di vita spirituale* 44 (1990) 6, 640-654.

⁸ Domenico AGASSO, *La passione di spendere con gioia la vita per "qualcuno": Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 32 (1994) 2, 178-182; Carla BARBERI, *La pratica della religione popolare in Santa Maria D. Mazzarello*, in *Religiosità popolare a misura dei giovani*, a cura di Cosimo Semeraro. Leumann (Torino), LDC 1987, pp. 123-137; Anna COSTA-P. CAVAGLIÀ, *Criteri di edizione delle lettere*, in *La sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià. Torino, SEI 1994, pp. 47-55; P. CAVAGLIÀ-Isabel Madrid CISNEROS, *Tratti della personalità di Maria Domenica Mazzarello emergenti dall'Epistolario*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 34 (1996) 2, 213-245; A. DELEIDI, *Maria Domenica Mazzarello: maestra di vita con la vita*, in *La maestra delle novizie di fronte alle nuove istanze formative*, a cura di Enrica Rosanna—Giuseppina Niro. Roma, LAS 1995, pp. 21-30; ID., *Maria Domenica Mazzarello: Una vita ed un'unica passione, Dio nel volto di ogni giovane. Itinerario storico-biografico*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 32 (1994) 2, 170-177; Giulia Paola DI NICOLA, *La Mazzarello e i paradossi della santità*, in *La sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià. Torino, SEI 1994, pp. 33-46; Gabriel-Marie GARRONE, *Come limpida sorgente*, in *La sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià. Torino, SEI 1994, pp. 11-14; Maria Pia GIUDICI, *Linee bibliche dell'epistolario*, in *La sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià. Torino, SEI 1994, pp. 15-23; Maria KO, *Fondamento biblico-teologico dei temi principali della spiritualità di S. Maria D. Mazzarello*, in *Sulle orme di madre Mazzarello donna sapiente*, a cura di Anita Deleidi-Maria Ko. Roma, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice 1988, pp. 75-159; Alosis KOTHGASSER, *The Little Window of the Valponasca*. New Rochelle, Don Bosco Publications 1982; Giacomo Maria MEDICA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello: Catechesi per una gioiosa vita cristiana*, in *Grandi Catechisti: Dai catechisti del passato, Orientamenti per la spiritualità e stimoli per l'azione*. Leumann (Torino), LDC 1989, pp. 237-245; M. E. POSADA, *Introduzione*, in *Sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*, a cura di M. E. Posada, A. Costa, P. Cavaglià. Torino, SEI 1994, pp. 3-10; Gertrud STICKLER, *Personalità religiosa e discernimento del vissuto patologico: Sapere "prescientifico" e scientifico a confronto*, in *Attuale perché vera: Contributi su S. Maria Domenica Mazzarello*. Roma, LAS 1987, pp. 177-195; Egidio Vi-

1. Basic literary skills in pursuit of human and christian advancement

The movement for the educational advancement of Italian women in both Church and State institutions occurred at a much slower pace than in other European countries.⁹ Italian unification was supposed to have initiated immediate social improvement but a strong national identity was lacking.¹⁰ Women's education, like many other changes, was linked with the general retardation of those reforms.

1.1 A shift in interpretation

Maria's childhood transpired during the preunification era. Mornese had no school at that time for girls. Less well-to-do girls, like Maria, could not afford to go to the city or pay for private lessons. Biographers of the last eighteenth and early nineteenth century¹¹ do not emphasise the fact that while education was denied Maria at an early age because of her sex and social class, she gradually acquired some literary skills particularly that of reading. Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, who collaborated with Maria during the last years of her life, amassed enough information to write five consecutive articles in 1881 and 1882 in the official Salesian magazine, *il Bollettino Salesiano*. He makes no reference to Maria learning to read in her youth.¹² Alberto Caviglia states that Maria only learnt the rudiments of reading paralleling her to Catherine of Siena, "*Come Caterina da Siena: santa senza libri e fuori dei libri*".¹³ Giuseppe-

GANÒ, *Radicata nella speranza: Esercizi spirituali predicati dal Rettor Maggiore alle novizie dei noviziati d'Italia*, *Salesianum*, 24/31-7-1993. Roma, Istituto Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice 1994; Maria Cristiana VILLEGAS, *Speranza e ottimismo in Madre Mazzarello*, in *Atti della XVII settimana di spiritualità della famiglia salesiana. I sentieri della speranza nella spiritualità salesiana. Rendere ragione della gioia e degli impegni della speranza testimoniando le insondabili ricchezze di Cristo*. Roma, S.D.B. 1994, pp. 171-178.

⁹ Simonetta SOLDANI, *Scuole femminili per il lavoro*, in *Le donne a scuola: L'educazione femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, a cura di Ilaria Porciani. Firenze, Sedicesimo 1987, p. 159; Marino RAICICH, *Verso la cultura superiore e le professioni*, in *Le donne a scuola: L'educazione femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, a cura di Ilaria Porciani. Firenze, Sedicesimo 1987, p. 191.

¹⁰ Donna GABACCIA, *In the Shadows of the Periphery: Italian Women in the Nineteenth Century*, in *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World 1500 to the Present*. Edited by Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert. New York, Oxford University Press 1987, p. 167.

¹¹ Giovanni Battista LEMOYNE, *Suor Maria Mazzarello*, in "*Bollettino Salesiano*" 5 (1881a) 9, 11-13. ID., *Suor Maria Mazzarello*, in BS 5 (1881b) 10, 6-8. ID., *Suor Maria Mazzarello*, in BS 5 (1881c) 12, 15-17; Alberto CAVIGLIA, *Beata Maria Mazzarello*. Torino, SEI 1938; Giuseppina MAINETTI, *La prima discepola di San Giovanni Bosco: Beata Maria Mazzarello*. Torino, SEI 1938.

¹² G.B. LEMOYNE, *Suor Maria Mazzarello...* (1881a) 11-13.

¹³ A. CAVIGLIA, *Beata Maria Mazzarello...* p. 9.

pina Mainetti attributes Maria Mazzarello's growth in Christian perfection not to her reading voluminous books or listening to brilliant sermons on the love of God but from her sole knowledge of the catechism and simple words from her parish priest and confessor.¹⁴

It is not until the second half of this century that biographers highlight Maria's ability to read as one of the key means of her own human and Christian development.¹⁵ From my research to date I have not located any academic studies which locate and analyse all the known texts Maria read. It is my intention in this paper to name these texts. The examination of each work and its correlation to the correspondence of Maria Mazzarello is subject matter for further inquiries. The findings of this present investigation will not uncover all the literary sources Maria read but will indicate the major authors she consulted with and indicate the orientations which shaped some of her thinking demonstrable throughout her correspondence. To determine how Maria gradually conquered proficiency in reading, discover with whom she shared the literature and investigate what she actually read, I draw on the sources from the documentation of Maria Mazzarello's beatification and canonisation process in the Catholic Church, the *summarium*¹⁶; the Chronicles of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (CIDMHC) edited by Giselda Capetti¹⁷; and key biographies particularly those written during the twentieth century.

¹⁴ G. MAINETTI, *La prima discepolo di San Giovanni Bosco...* p. 38.

¹⁵ D. AGASSO, *Maria Mazzarello: Il comandamento della gioia*. Torino, SEI 1993, pp. 15,25; M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time: Saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello (1837-1881)*. Rome 1981, p. 29; L. CASTANO, *Madre Mazzarello: Santa e confondatrice delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*. Leumann (Torino), LDC 1981, p. 27.

¹⁶ Out of the numerous texts that can be analysed in relation to Maria Mazzarello's process of canonisation I have selected the volume *positio super virtutibus*, focusing on the *summarium*, officially decreed on 23 December, 1932 by *The Sacred Congregation of Rites* and published in 1934. The accumulation of data for such a publication began in 1911 when the bishop in the diocese where Maria died introduced her cause for canonization. The format of this particular document opens with witnesses declaring that they had been acquainted with Maria Mazzarello over a certain period of time. In 1911 and through to the mid 1920s there were people still alive who personally knew her. This initial disclosure is followed by the witnesses' recollections of Maria's parental background and childhood; the affirmation of the heroicity of her virtues; the testimony of any extraordinary manifestations Maria might have shown; the acknowledgement of her death and burial, that fame of her sanctity in life and after death and finally the disclosure of graces and miracles obtained through her intercession.

¹⁷ On 19 August, 1884, at one of the meetings of the first General Chapter of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, it was suggested that the chronicles of the Institute be written. This did not occur until the 1920s and the gathering of information spanned two decades, 1922-42. From 1974 to 1978 five volumes were published by Giselda Capetti, the then archivist of the IDMHC. Clelia Genghini prepared the first three volumes and the material for the fourth; Capetti completed the fourth and wrote the fifth. Posada asserts that this document is generally reliable and represents the most vast collection of material regarding the origins and development of the IDMHC.

1.2 *The art of reading: how, to whom, for what purpose*

The initial acquisition of the art of reading was first taught to her by her father during the long, cold winter months at the Valponasca when farm work was less demanding.¹⁸ As she assisted her mother in rearing her younger brothers and sisters, Maria would “relate to them what she had heard in church or read in spiritual books”.¹⁹ In the quiet of the evenings when the family chores were completed and the others had gone to bed, Maria would “remain a little longer in prayer and spiritual reading”.²⁰ As a preadolescent she and her close friend Petronilla Mazzarello received a book as a prize from Fr. Domenico Pestarino (1817-1874), the parish curate, for learning the catechism. It was handed to Petronilla. Turning to Maria she said, “It is a pity to split it [the book] in half. Let us read a little each”.²¹ Ferdinand Maccono records that Maria used to study the catechism on the way to and from church.²² When in the fields each day helping her father, rest periods were allocated to the workers. During these moments Maria would go off by herself and either pray or read some ascetical books.²³ Pestarino obtained many pamphlets and leaflets from his friends in Genoa and would distribute them among those he considered the more devout in the Parish. Maria was one of the recipients of such literature.²⁴ Maccono relates that when Maria read a prayer or a passage from a book that appealed to her “she would read expressively while others listened”.²⁵ When stricken with typhoid at the age of twenty-three and a long convalescence was needed, “there was plenty of time to devote to reading”.²⁶

Once she joined the PUDMI²⁷, the reading of ascetical books became

¹⁸ Giselda CAPETTI (a cura di), *Cronistoria: Chronicles of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*. 5 vols. Translated. New Rochelle, Don Bosco Publications 1981, I, p. 23; Eugenio CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello: Confondatrice dell’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*. 2a edizione Torino, SEI 1952, p. 7.

¹⁹ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 44.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 22.

²² Ferdinand MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello: Co-Foundress and First Superior of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*. 2 vols. 2nd edition. Translated by Catherine Hurley 1980 [1934], I, p. 11.

²³ SACRA RITUUM CONGREGATIONE. Aqueen. *Beatificationis ed Canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Dominicae Mazzarello, Primae Antistitae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis. Positio super virtutibus. Summarium Super Dubio*, Romae, Typis Guerra et Belli 1934, p. 60. This text will be cited as *Summarium* in subsequent references; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 27.

²⁴ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p.41.

²⁵ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 40.

²⁶ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 64; see G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 88.

²⁷ The PUDMI was a lay association begun under the initiative of Angela Maccagno

part of the structure of the group's weekly meetings.²⁸ One of the tasks of this group was to assist mothers in the formation of their children. Each member of the PUDMI was assigned a group of five mothers. At the regular meetings there was "a short reading from a prescribed book [which was followed by] explanations if needed and suitable applications" given by the leader.²⁹

When she began her work with youth Maria was keen to assist them in their spiritual formation. Maria Pia Giudici documents that Maria helped them to appreciate worth-while books "the best available at the time", in the field of Christian development.³⁰ When the girls attended Maria's classes she would read from meditation or ascetical books.³¹ On Sundays when she gathered girls together from the whole village to offer them social and spiritual activities to occupy their leisure time, she would read edifying stories to them.³² To those wishing to deepen their spiritual life she would gather every fortnight and would read passages from ascetical works or lives of the saints.³³

(1832-1891) of Mornese and officially approved by the local bishop of that region in 1857. The members of this association consisted of women who, not wanting or not being allowed to enter a religious congregation or order mainly because of a lack of a dowry, wished to live out their Christian life with greater commitment while still living at home. The aim of the association was to give glory to God through one's own personal perfection and that of setting an example for others to follow. The specific objectives were as follows: to foster a spiritual union with Jesus Christ through prayer, worship, study; to obey the spiritual director; to take vows (obedience and celibacy) annually with permission of spiritual director; to perform charitable works (assist the sick, instruct mothers and girls); to uphold the association (financially if possible); and defend the cause of religion. Every Sunday the group met in Maccagno's house and each encounter followed a definite format: spiritual formation (reading from devotional books); community confession of faults; apostolic action-group discussion on how best to be of service to others. In 1848 the Italian peninsula had just experienced its first major war of independence. The State had confiscated Church property; secret associations sprang up against the Church and religion. Maccagno's aim was to try to "reinstat[e] God into the family and the State...".

²⁸ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 47; *Summarium ...* 1934, p. 62; E. CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello...* p. 16.

²⁹ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 69.

³⁰ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All ...* p. 89.

³¹ E. CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello...* pp. 20, 27; SACRA RITUM CONGREGATIONE, Aqueen. *Beatificationis ed canonizationis Servae Dei Mariae Dominicae Mazzarello, Primae superiorissae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis, Positio super introductione causae. Summarium super dubio*, Romae, Typis Guerra et Mirri 1925, p. 55; ID., *Summarium...* 1934, pp. 29, 38, 104.

³² F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, pp. 101, 103; *Summarium...* 1934, pp. 103, 112.

³³ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 103.

2. Socio-cultural and politico-religious context

The above exposition points to the fact that the literature Maria assimilated was mainly of a spiritual and ascetical nature. The justification for what is an overemphasis on the “spiritual” rests on a number of factors. These include the fact that Maria was situated within the sociocultural boundaries of nineteenth century Italian peasantry and the prevailing traditions of the Roman Catholic Church: close family ties; distinct gender roles; frugal lifestyle; intense Christian devotional practices; loyalty to the Church in its defence of the Papacy; adherence to Church doctrine and morals that conflicted with emerging secular ideologies.³⁴ Following the principles of the Catholic Church the education of women in particular meant Christian education. The role women were to play as good Christians was that of obedience and service within the confines of the home.³⁵

Maria’s upbringing matched the traditions afforded women of her social status in a patriarchal society. She was strongly influenced by her father and the local clergy.³⁶ It was Pestarino who supplied Maria with most of the books during her adolescent years³⁷ and trained Maria in ascetical practices³⁸. When Maria did have her own financial resources she continued to purchase books which fostered the doctrinal, moral and ascetical practices advocated by the Catholic Church for women.³⁹

Jean E. Howard affirms that many clergymen during the nineteenth century tried to prevent women from being educated.⁴⁰ This was not the case with Pestarino. In 1858 the local municipal council, composed of clergy and lay men (Pestarino was a member), inaugurated a school in Mornese for girls.⁴¹ Young women, Maria included, attended classes at this school on Sundays.⁴² The CIDMHC mention that one of the text books studied was a bible history book.⁴³ The above innovation for women in Mornese did not dispute that the Catholic

³⁴ M. E. POSADA, *Giuseppe Frassinetti e Maria D. Mazzarello: Rapporto storico-spirituale*. Roma, LAS 1986, pp. 74-8,94.

³⁵ O. CHADWICK, *The Popes and European Revolution*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 1981, pp. 11-13.

³⁶ E. CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello...* p. 4; M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 16.

³⁷ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, pp. 33, 41.

³⁸ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, pp. 21-4.

³⁹ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 181.

⁴⁰ Jean E. HOWARD, *Feminism and the question of history: restituting the debate*, in “*Womens Studies*” 19 (1991) 2, 152.

⁴¹ P. CAVAGLIÀ, *Educazione e cultura per la donna...* p. 67.

⁴² D. AGASSO, *Maria Mazzarello...* p. 24.

⁴³ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 78.

Church taught its faithful to be submissive to the instructions and counsels of the clergy. "Father Pestarino recognized the chosen soul [Maria Mazzarello] God had sent him so he took special care to form her according to the heart of God... The two girls [Maria and Petronilla] had great confidence in Father Pestarino and did nothing of consequence without first consulting him."⁴⁴ Pestarino saw as his responsibility the care of Maria's "soul" and Maria saw as her duty to comply.

3. A list and an orientation

What are the known books Maria read? The list will never be complete. While writers expand on specific texts, they state that she read other spiritual works which are never identified.⁴⁵ I have divided the known literature into four groups: 1) writings she assimilated on her own as a teenager and young adult; 2) texts used by the PUDMI; 3) books she employed in her work with youth, and 4) literature regarding her involvement as the congregational leader of the IDMHC.

3.1 *Maria's first library*

The earliest known book Maria was acquainted with was the catechism⁴⁶ first studied in her preadolescent years.⁴⁷ There are numerous references regarding Maria's desire to study and have others study the catechism.⁴⁸ Frequent mention is made of the times Maria taught the catechism in her youth and adult life, applying its contents to the lives of her audience.⁴⁹

Maccono enumerates the books Maria read during the intervals from work in the fields: *The Eternal Maxims* and *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* by St. Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787)⁵⁰, *The Spiritual*

⁴⁴ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, pp. 21, 112.

⁴⁵ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, pp. 33, 41, 44, 69; *Summarium...* 1934, pp. 38,60; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 40,47,69; M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* pp. 64, 89; E. CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello...* pp. 16, 27.

⁴⁶ The catechism in question is *Catechismo Romano: adattato alla diocesi di Aquì* by Monsignor Sappa printed in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁴⁷ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I p. 20; L. CASTANO, *Madre Mazzarello...* p. 26.

⁴⁸ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 165; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 11, 296; Maria SOMAGLIA, *Santa Maria D. Mazzarello: Confondatrice delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice Salesiane di Don Bosco*. Torino, SEI 1951, p. 21; *Summarium...* 1934, p. 28.

⁴⁹ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 91-2; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 11, 18, 28, 184-5; *Summarium...* 1934, pp. 22, 107, 112.

⁵⁰ Alfonso Maria De' LIGUORI, *Apparecchio alla morte: cioè considerazioni sulle massime eterne utili a tutti per meditare e a sacerdoti per predicare*, in *Opere* 7 Napoli: S. Giorgio dei Genovesi 1871 pp. 1-146; ID., *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo*, in *Opere ascetiche* I, Roma, Redentoristi 1933 pp. 1-243.

*Diary*⁵¹ and *The Imitation of Christ*⁵² by Thomas à Kempis (c1379-1471).⁵³ He does not mention where or from whom Maria obtained these books. Giudici mentions the same books stating that these formed the bulk of her library.⁵⁴ Domenico Agasso cites the books of Liguori and *The Imitation of Christ* as books she carried with her to work. Agasso leaves out *The Spiritual Diary* and adds *Esercizio di perfezione e virtù cristiane*⁵⁵ by Alphonsus Rodriguez (1526-1616) and the lives of the saints. Agasso comments that Pestarino gave her other texts which came to him from time to time.⁵⁶

While convalescing from typhoid fever the CIDMHC record that two biographies of young women, Rosina Pedemonte and Rosa Cordone written by Giuseppe Frassinetti (1804-1868)⁵⁷, were “Mary’s ordinary reading during these days and were her companions, comfort and instructors”.⁵⁸ The CIDMHC also cite another book by Frassinetti read at this time, an ascetical work, *Industrie Spirituali*,⁵⁹ and notes that she read it continually till she knew it by heart.⁶⁰ Giudici cites the same biographical texts but makes no mention of the aforementioned ascetical literature.⁶¹

⁵¹ *The Spiritual Diary* is a book comprising spiritual, moral, ascetical and devotional practices anonymously published for the first time in Naples during the eighteenth century. It has been re-edited many times up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Many editors re-elaborated the work during the nineteenth century making their own additions and reorganising the content. The closest edition located in reference to Maria Mazzarello is dated 1878. *Diario spirituale che comprende una scelta di detti e fatti de’ santi adattati ad incitare le anime all’acquisto della perfezione ed i loro direttori a condurvele. Coll’aggiunta di un’utilissima appendice [sulla pratica dell’umiltà e della carità fraterna, della confidenza nelle tentazioni e nelle aridità di spirito]*, a cura di Giacinto Marietti. Torino, Tipografia Librario, 1878

⁵² There is no official documentation which attributes the authorship of *The Imitation of Christ* to Thomas à Kempis since he was both a copyist and a writer. Many scholars agree to a high degree of probability that he was the author of the text in question, others continue to debate the issue of authorship. For a comparative textual analysis between *The Imitation of Christ* and Thomas à Kempis’ devotional treatises see M.J. POHL, *Thomae Hemerken a Kempis, Opera omnia*, 7 vols. Friberg 1902-1922.

⁵³ F. MACCONO, *St. Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, 36.

⁵⁴ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 29.

⁵⁵ Alphonsus RODRIGUEZ, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection*. 3 vols. Translated from the French. Dublin, James Duffy and Sons 1882.

⁵⁶ D. AGASSO, *Maria Mazzarello...* p. 15.

⁵⁷ Giuseppe FRASSINETTI, *Il modello della povera fanciulla Rosina Pedemonte morta in Genova in età di 20 anni il dì 30 gennaio del 1860*. Torino, G. B. Paravia e compagnia 1860; ID., *La rosa senza spine: memorie sulla vita della pia zitella Rosa Cordone morta in Genova ai 26 novembre 1858*. 3^a edizione, Tipografia e libreria salesiana 1882.

⁵⁸ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 87.

⁵⁹ G. FRASSINETTI, *Industrie spirituali*, in *Opere ascetiche* I, a cura di Giordano Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 97-134.

⁶⁰ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 88.

⁶¹ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* pp. 64-5.

3.2 *Maria's reading material regarding her option for an ascetic life "in the world"*

With reference to books used at the meetings of the PUDMI, the first to mention is its rule or constitution. It was first printed in 1859 by Frassinetti⁶² and members were to read an article of the rule at each meeting. The CIDMHC note that Maria was able to have a copy of her own.⁶³ In 1861 the rule was revised⁶⁴ and the CIDMHC record that it was probable that Maria was eager to study the new rule to find out how it differed from the old.⁶⁵ Most biographers give a detailed description of the compilation of the rule and its subsequent development.⁶⁶ Known texts used during the weekly gatherings were *The Nun in Her Own Home* by Frassinetti⁶⁷, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection* already cited and the life of St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)⁶⁸. The CIDMHC assert that the group discussed the above texts in order to gain a better understanding of their contents and apply them to their Union.⁶⁹ The CIDMHC make mention of the fact that Maria memorised the maxims of St. Teresa.⁷⁰

Maccono cites the book by Rodriquez as read by the PUDMI and adds one

⁶² G. FRASSINETTI, *Regola della Pia Unione delle Figlie di santa Maria Immacolata*. Appendice I *La Monaca in Casa*, in *Opere ascetiche* II, a cura di Giordano Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 66-74.

⁶³ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 79.

⁶⁴ G. FRASSINETTI, *Regole delle Figlie di santa Maria Immacolata sotto la protezione di s. Orsola e di s. Angela Merici*. "[s.l.; s.e.; s.d.]".

⁶⁵ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, pp. 95-7.

⁶⁶ E. CERIA, *Santa Maria Domenica Mazzarello...* pp. 14-5; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, pp. 42-5; G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, pp. 53-8, 95-7; M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* pp. 36-9; L. CASTANO, *Madre Mazzarello...* pp. 43-8; D. AGASSO, *Maria Mazzarello...* pp. 17-20, 30-1.

⁶⁷ G. FRASSINETTI, *La Monaca in casa*, in *Opere ascetiche* II, a cura di Giordano Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 1-66.

⁶⁸ There is no clear indication as to which life of Teresa was read. It is probable that the women of the PUDMI read an autobiographical account of Teresa's life in a format adapted for popular reading.

⁶⁹ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 68.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100; TERESA OF JESUS, *Maxims of St. Teresa*, in *Minor Works of St. Teresa: Conceptions of the Love of God, Exclamations, Maxims and Poems of Saint Teresa of Jesus*. Translated from the Spanish by the Benedictines of Stanbrook. Revised with notes and an introduction by Benedict Zimmerman. London, Burns Oates, pp. 154-160. In this edition Zimmerman explains that a collection of sixty-nine short sentences attributed to Teresa appeared under the title of *Avisos de la Madre Teresa de Jesús* in the first edition of *The Way of Perfection* published by Don Teutonio de Braganza, Archbishop of Evora, at the request of Teresa herself in 1583, shortly after her death. Neither the publication itself nor the correspondence of Teresa contains any indication as to whether the manuscript of these advices or maxims was supplied to the editor by Teresa, or whether he obtained it from a different source.

of Liguori's *The Holy Nun*⁷¹. Luigi Càstano makes reference only to the book by Frassinetti.⁷² The PUDMI also distributed literature. The CIDMHC record that the Union bought one hundred copies of *A Girl Who Wants to Belong Completely to Jesus*⁷³, by Frassinetti and dispersed them around the neighbourhood.⁷⁴ Giudici remarks that Maria used this book with the girls she educated.⁷⁵ Agasso numbers it among the most read books of Frassinetti in Mornese.⁷⁶

Maccono refers to some of the books used during the meetings with the mothers by the PUDMI, *Spiritual Friendships* by Frassinetti⁷⁷ and *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* already quoted. He notes that every member of the PUDMI possessed a copy of *Spiritual Friendships*.⁷⁸ Giudici cites the same two books utilised for the same purpose.⁷⁹ Agasso includes the text *Spiritual Friendships* in a list of the most popular books written by Frassinetti.⁸⁰

The CIDMHC also record that Maria enjoyed reading about the spread of the PUDMI. There were already foundations in Chiavari and Cremona, in the province of Lombardy, Italy.⁸¹

3.3 *Maria selects her reading material for youth*

There are a variety of texts which Maria used for the Christian education of girls. Some are those employed by the PUDMI and others, those of her own choice. Maccono records *The Little Garden of Mary* by Frassinetti⁸² as an ascetical work chosen by Maria to promote virtue in the young.⁸³ In an extensive study of the influence of Frassinetti on the spirituality of Maria Maz-

⁷¹ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, pp. 43, 45. The correct title is *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*. A. DE LIGUORI, *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*, in *The Complete Ascetical Works of St. Alphonsus de Liguori*. X-XI of 22 Vols. Edited by Eugene Grimm. Second edition revised. Brooklyn, Redemptorist Fathers 1929.

⁷² L. CASTANO, *Madre Mazzarello...* p. 47.

⁷³ G. FRASSINETTI, *Ricordi per una figlia che vuol essere tutta di Gesù*, in *Opere ascetiche* I, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 637-45.

⁷⁴ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* p. 181.

⁷⁵ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 95.

⁷⁶ D. AGASSO, *Maria Mazzarello...* p. 16.

⁷⁷ G. FRASSINETTI, *Le amicizie spirituali: imitazione da Santa Teresa di Gesù*. Torino, Tipografia e libreria dell'Oratorio di S. Francisco di Sales 1875.

⁷⁸ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 46.

⁷⁹ M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* p. 46.

⁸⁰ D. AGASSO, *Maria Mazzarello...* p. 16.

⁸¹ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 87.

⁸² G. FRASSINETTI, *Il giardinetto di Maria*, in *Opere ascetiche* II, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I., 1978, pp. 455-62.

⁸³ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 104; see G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 124; *Summarium...* 1934, p. 30.

zarello, Maria Esther Posada⁸⁴ states that Frassinetti encouraged parish priests to use the following texts written by him for the formation the faithful particularly in their devotion to the Mother of God: *Amiamo Gesù; Amiamo Maria; Il Giardinetto di Maria; Ora di santa allegrezza ossia divozione di cento allegrezze ad onore della B. Vergine Maria ed orazioni; Via Matris*⁸⁵. It can be assumed that Maria read the above, since Pestarino was in constant contact with Frassinetti and both promoted the distribution of Catholic literature. Mary's readiness to use the above material can be deduced from a testimony from the *summarium*, "...ci leggeva o ci narrava degli esempi di virtù e della vita della Madonna".⁸⁶

The CIDMHC state that during the day Maria read to the girls from the biographies of Pedemonte and Cordone, texts already cited, and the life of St. Aloysius Gonzaga (1568-1591).⁸⁷ The records state that she read other popular booklets of Frassinetti. There is no mention of what these texts are.⁸⁸ Posada makes references to books Frassinetti wrote and promoted for the formation of girls which Pestarino would have obtained for Maria and others interested in the education of youth. These books are: *La gemma delle fanciulle Cristiane: ossia la santa virginità; L'arte di farsi santi; Vita dell'Istituto di S. Angela Merici; Due gioie nascoste*.⁸⁹ One of the above books is noted in the CIDMHC. The records state that at the end of the day Maria "...usually read a page of *Maxims for Eternity* by Saint Alphonsus Marie de' Liguori or

⁸⁴ M. E. POSADA, *Storia e santità...* 1986 p. 79.

⁸⁵ G. FRASSINETTI, *Amiamo Gesù*, in *Opere ascetiche I*, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 429-45; ID., *Amiamo Maria*, in *Opere ascetiche II* a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 339-50; ID., *Ora di santa allegrezza ossia divozioni di cento allegrezze ad onore della beatissima vergine*, in *Opere ascetiche II*, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 411-21; ID., *Via Matris*, in *Opere ascetiche II*, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I., 1978, pp. 351-61.

⁸⁶ *Summarium...* 1934, 112; see also G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 20.

⁸⁷ The most widely used and reprinted books of this saint were those of Virgilio Cepari and Antonio Cesari. Since Mornese was geographically located near Genoa, the work of Alessandro Maineri could also have been circulating. Virgilio CEPARI, *Vita del beato Luigi Gonzaga della Compagnia di Gesù*. Roma, Luigi Zannetti, 1604; Alessandro MAINERI, *Vita di S. Luigi Gonzaga della Compagnia di Gesù*. Genova, N. e P. Scionico 1734; Antonio CESARI, *Vita breve di S. Luigi Gonzaga scritta novellamente*. Verona, Tipografia Paolo Libanti 1823.

⁸⁸ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 103; see F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 103.

⁸⁹ M.E. POSADA, *Storia e santità...* p. 78; G. FRASSINETTI, *La gemma delle fanciulle cristiane ossia la santa virginità*, in *Opere ascetiche I*, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale: F. S. M. I. 1978 pp. 505-42; ID., *L'arte di farsi santi*, in *Opere ascetiche I*, a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 83-90; ID., *Due gioie nascoste*, in *Opere ascetiche I* a cura di Giacinto Renzi. Roma, Postulazione Generale F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 619-36.; ID., *Vita dell'Istituto di S. Angela Merici*. Torino, Tipografia dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales 1863.

The Art of Becoming Saints by Frassinetti...”.⁹⁰ Readings from *For a Girl Who Wants to Belong All to Jesus* by Frassinetti became a daily occurrence.⁹¹ There are testimonies in the *Summarium* which state that Maria and her companions read from “...*qualche buon libro principalmente di S. Teresa*”.⁹² This implies that Maria could have read not only the life of Teresa to the girls but some of Teresa’s other works.

At meetings for teenagers who wished to deepen their spiritual life Maria would read “...a passage from the life of St. Teresa or *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* or some other spiritual book...”.⁹³ The only recorded work by a woman besides Teresa of Avila which Maria read is *Guide and Nourishment for the Piety of Young Women* by Elizabeth Girelli (1839-1919).⁹⁴ This ascetical work was in circulation among the PUDMI. It was written for the Christian formation of young women of the working class.⁹⁵

3.4 Maria’s approach to reading as congregational leader

The gradual interaction of Maria, Petronilla and their other companions with Don Bosco’s educational system and spirituality put them into contact with literature specifically written and promoted by Don Bosco (1815-1888). Around 1863, just a year after Maria began to hear about Don Bosco’s work, Pestarino gave her a manual of piety, *The Companion of Youth*⁹⁶ written and printed by Bosco in 1847. The CIDMHC record that Maria wanted to read it to the girls.⁹⁷ Petronilla testified that after the new congregation was formed, the women religious and girls all “said prayers similar to those found in the *Companion of Youth* of Don Bosco”.⁹⁸ There are other works of Bosco documented in the CIDMHC. It is not explicitly stated that Maria read them: *The Wonders of the Mother of God, invoked under the title of Mary Help of Christians*⁹⁹,

⁹⁰ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 118.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 128.

⁹² see *summarium...* 1925, 22.

⁹³ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 112.

⁹⁴ Elisabetta GIRELLI, *Indirizzo e pascolo alla pietà delle giovani. Riveduto ed ampliato da brevi meditazioni per un intero mese*. XXIV Edizione. Brescia, Tipografia e libreria vescovile queriniana 1896. Elizabeth Girelli was born in Brescia in the province of Lombardy, Italy. She wrote extensively particularly for the Christian formation of young women. In 1866 Girelli was responsible, with her sister Magdalene, for restoring in Brescia the *Company of St. Ursola* whose foundation resides with St. Angela Merici (1474-1540). Girelli knew of the structure of the PUDMI and wanted to establish it in her locality.

⁹⁵ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 235.

⁹⁶ Giovanni BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto*, in *Opere Edite* II. Roma, LAS 1976, pp. 183-532.

⁹⁷ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 126.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 286.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 206.

*The Companion of Catholics: Practical Piety with Suitable Advice According to the Needs of the Time*¹⁰⁰, *The Crown of Virginity* and *The Young Christian Girl*.¹⁰¹

What is clear in relation to Maria reading Bosco's works centres on the gradual development of the rule or constitution that would govern the IDMHC. In 1867 Bosco gave Maria and Petronilla a little notebook.¹⁰² It contained a schedule or rule handwritten by Bosco for them and for the girls.¹⁰³ In the summer of 1871 a manuscript¹⁰⁴ written by Bosco was given to Pesarino containing the first draft of the rule of the new Institute. Maria and the other women of her group began to apply the rule to themselves. In January, 1872 that manuscript was presented to everyone in the PUDMI.¹⁰⁵ Every member was to read it to ascertain whether she wanted to embrace the new religious congregation of women founded by Bosco for the welfare of girls of the working classes or remain within the structures of the PUDMI. On January 23, 1876, three and a half years after the IDMHC was established, a decree was issued by the local bishop, Monsignor Sciandra, giving full approval of the constitutions.¹⁰⁶ By 1878 the first printing of the constitutions was made.¹⁰⁷ Bosco was the author of the aforesaid rule in its various stages of

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p. 207.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* pp. 244-5. *The Wonders of the Mother of God*, invoked under the title of *Mary Help of Christians* was a pamphlet Don Bosco had worked on himself and printed in his *Lecture Cattolice* in May 1868 which coincided with the dedication of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians he built in Turin. During that same period he put on sale a book he had worked on for several years, *The Companion of Catholics: Practical Piety with Suitable Advice According to the Needs of the Times*. In the 1871 August edition of *Lecture Cattolice* he printed the booklet *The Crown of Virginity*, an Italian translation of an anonymous French author of the fifteenth century regarding the specific practice of the virtues of purity, humility, charity, patience, faith, obedience and constancy. The following issue in September carried the work *The Young Christian Girl*, literature offered to girls regarding their relationship with God and neighbour and norms relating to study, order and politeness.

¹⁰² The manuscript has not been preserved. Petronilla Mazzarello remembered the basic structure of its contents. It outlined the schedule of prayer, work and recreation for each day. At the end of this daily timetable were various counsels on one's relationship with God and one another especially when dealing with youth.

¹⁰³ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 137; G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* pp. 220-1; *summariusum...* 1934, 96.

¹⁰⁴ For a full exposition of this manuscript see Appendix 11, in G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, pp. 335-53.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 245-7, 267-70; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 141-3; M. P. GIUDICI, *A Woman for All Time...* pp. 129, 133.

¹⁰⁶ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, p. 261.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* II, p. 38. For a full historical development and exposition of each draft of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians see Cecilia ROMERO (a cura di), *Costituzioni per l'Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice (1872-1885)*. Roma, LAS 1983.

development¹⁰⁸ and Maria studied and assimilated the contents making the observations she felt appropriate.¹⁰⁹ As congregational leader of the IDMHC she read the rule to the women religious and explained the articles in detail.¹¹⁰

Notwithstanding the above, once the congregation was established there is scant mention of the literature Maria actually read. Other than the *Companion of Youth*, a prayer book by Carlo Fogliano was used, *A Little Book of Treasures: The Devout Daughter of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and Mary Most Holy and Seeking Her Own Perfection*.¹¹¹ There is indirect reference to an ascetical practice of Frassinetti, the *Twelve Stars*¹¹², introduced by Maria among the boarders at the school.¹¹³ Maria still interested herself in distributing literature to youth. One of the girls of the school recalls that Maria sent her a rosary with a message that she should treasure it. The message also urged her to read and meditate on the *Imitation of Christ*.¹¹⁴ On another occasion Maria gave a young woman a book to read by Alphonsus de Liguori, *L'Apparecchio alla Morte*.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸ For the first draft of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians Bosco sought the advice of the congregational leader of the Sisters of St. Anne of [Divine] Providence, Mother Enrichetta Dominici. Bosco sent the Salesian rules to her and asked her to adapt the rules of her own congregation and that of the Salesian Society into a draft copy as the new rules for the IDMHC. Dominici entrusted the task to Sr. Frances Carelli, Dominici's secretary. Garelli's original draft was not the one given to Pestarino by Bosco in the summer of 1871. The handwriting of the manuscript of the first draft does not correspond to Garelli's. It is presumed that Bosco had Garelli's work transcribed by another person and used as the basis for the new rules for the IDMHC. The original draft of the 1871 Constitutions of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, still in existence today, has many corrections, additions and cancellations throughout the document. In 1875, three years after the foundation of the IDMHC Bosco with two other Salesians, John Cagliero and James Costamagna revised the rules. The CIDMHC record the words of Costamagna of that event. He was speaking to the women religious of Mornese when he returned from the meeting with Bosco at Ovada. "I read them [manuscript draft] for him [Bosco], article by article; he corrected, developed, added; then I read the new version to him. Now your Rules correspond more than ever to the Salesian spirit. You will see". The revised edition was approved by the local bishop, Giuseppe Maria Sciandra, on 23 January, 1876. On 3 September, 1879 the women of the IDMHC received the first printed copy of the rules which was printed in the previous year. There were no substantial alterations of the text Bosco had revised in 1875.

¹⁰⁹ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, p. 143.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 319.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 116. The English translation of the Chronicles mentions two prayer books. The translator interpreted the Italian title and subtitle as two books. In the Italian edition only one book is named, Carlo FOGLIANO, *Un libretto ed un tesoro: ossia la figlia divota di Gesù sacramentato e di Maria Santissima e amante della propria perfezione*. Torino, Libreria Salesiana 1880.

¹¹² G. FRASSINETTI, *Le dodici stelle: ossia le virtù della B. V. Maria*, in *Opere ascetiche* II. Roma, Postulazione Generale: F. S. M. I. 1978, pp. 423-34.

¹¹³ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* II, p. 309.

¹¹⁴ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzaello...* I, p. 185.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* II, p. 129. This book is cited in footnote 50.

The most numerous references to literature in this period rest with a magazine initiated by Don Bosco in 1877 – a monthly publication informing people of religious issues and of “matters Salesian”, the *Salesian Bulletin* ¹¹⁶. It is obvious that a subscription was taken out by Maria because of the frequent references made by the CIDMHC to this magazine.¹¹⁷ There are explicit references where Maria read certain articles and commented on them to others.¹¹⁸ Maria also referred to *Catholic Readings* ¹¹⁹ but there is no documented evidence that she read extensively from this source.¹²⁰ Maccono notes that Maria wanted the young women joining the new congregation to be proficient in religious studies ¹²¹ but there is no mention of individual texts in reference to the above. In reference to scholastic texts the CIDMHC outline the subjects taught to the students but there is no mention of the specific texts.¹²² In a letter written to John Cagliero Maria wrote of her desire to learn the Spanish language and asked for the appropriate texts.¹²³

There are two main reasons why there is a decrease in the known texts Maria read during the last decade of her life. Firstly, reading in religious institutes of women and men during the nineteenth century was strictly employed to foster asceticism and was a communal activity.¹²⁴ Meditation, spiritual reading and readings at meals in silence were read by one person. Secondly, there would have been little time for Maria to devote to personal reading as she had done as a young adult since her role as congregational leader of a new congregation involved travelling extensively to establish new centres and maintain existing ones, taking on the responsibility for the formation, direction and placement of personnel, managing the administration of the congregation and interacting constantly with civil and ecclesiastical authorities.

¹¹⁶ Today the *Salesian Bulletin* is published in 45 nations and in 19 different languages. The Italian edition is linked via World Wide Web: <http://www.sdb.org>

¹¹⁷ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* II, pp. 302, 316, 365, 368-71; III, pp. 2, 4, 35-7, 48, 51, 55-6, 60, 77, 128, 171, 175, 189, 200, 203, 220, 238, 258, 279-80, 311, 316

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* III, pp. 72, 171.

¹¹⁹ *Catholic Readings* was a journal begun in 1852 and edited by Don Bosco to promote Catholic literature among the Christian masses.

¹²⁰ F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* III, p. 121.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p. 184.

¹²² G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* III, pp. 431-2.

¹²³ M. E. POSADA, et al, *La sapienza della vita: Lettere di Maria Domenica Mazzarello*. Torino, SEI 1994, p. 70.

¹²⁴ Alison WEBER, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 1990, p. 102.

4. Conclusion

4.1 *Contemporary and classical literature*

All of the documents quoted above do not concord with each other as to the exact date or circumstance in which Maria Mazzarello received, read or promoted the specified literature. There is an overall agreement regarding the variety of texts familiar to her. Texts she assimilated in early adulthood were the literature she promoted as an adult. All of these designated works reveal that Maria was kept abreast not only with the latest literature in the field of Christian advancement proper to her sex and class, *Guide and Nourishment for the Piety of Young Women*, but that she assimilated classical material, the *Imitation of Christ*, and voluminous ascetical works, *The Practice of Christian and Religious Life*. Maria's gamut of literature not only encompassed material written by popular writers of the day (Frassinetti and Bosco) but centred on works written by women and men officially proclaimed by the highest authority of the Catholic Church as "doctors" in matters theological and spiritual (Teresa of Avila and Alphonsus de Liguori).

The research discloses that Maria cannot be considered illiterate in the strict sense of the term. The reading skills she acquired enabled her to make her own interpretations of texts at a much deeper level than Lemoyne, Caviglia or Mainetti were prepared to acknowledge. There are several instances documenting not only the literature Maria read but the fact that she would interpret what she read to others.¹²⁵ Reading became an internalisation process. Maccono records, "From this activity [spiritual reading] she learned the great maxims of the spiritual masters, which enabled her to direct herself and her spiritual daughters".¹²⁶

There is no question that Maria Mazzarello synthesised in her own right what she considered the components of the Christian and religious life for women within her milieu. Before examining how this is manifest in her correspondence, it is necessary to engage in a study of nineteenth century Italian spirituality both of a general and specific nature. The former undertaking allows an investigation into the distinctive characteristics of spirituality operating within the structures of the Italian Catholic Church of that century. The latter determines what aspects of those characteristics are evident in the Maria Mazzarello correspondence, which ones are omitted, and highlight trends within her correspondence which are not prevalent in nineteenth century

¹²⁵ G. CAPETTI, *Cronistoria...* I, pp. 37, 68-9, 118, 122, III, p. 171; F. MACCONO, *Saint Mary D. Mazzarello...* I, pp. 87, 112.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 37.

Italian spirituality. It is necessary to examine all these aspects which will provide the means to uncover the liberating as well as the constraining forces evident in Maria Mazzarello's correspondence.

4.2 *Three areas of exploration*

From a historical and political perspective there is need to critically question and examine the tenets of nineteenth century Italian Catholic spirituality and ask whose interests did it serve. In relation to the above I maintain that three specific areas need exploration. Firstly, the contemporary sense of the unity and equality of the Christian call to holiness (*Lumen Gentium*) inevitably calls into question the clerical and monastic elitism present in nineteenth century spirituality. There is need to retrieve those groups or traditions which offer some kind of historical model for lay life and for women's roles in the Christian community. Only nine of Maria's forty-four years of life were spent as a member of a religious congregation. There is need to heighten her contribution to the spirituality of the laity as well as her role as congregational leader of the IDMHC and in doing so the role and status of women in the Catholic Church.

Secondly, and related in some respects to the equality of Christians, there is a sociocultural perspective which leads one to ask who "lost out" in history and how the process took place. Such a position examines ways in which spiritualities encapsulate particular sociocultural, as well as religious, values. Paramount to any reflections about Maria Mazzarello is the continual allusion to Don Bosco. While I do not deny a significant influence of Don Bosco upon Maria's life and spirituality, I maintain that, as well as academic studies on the significant relationship between the two figures, other influences of her spirituality should have equal scholarly consideration such as the study of the ascetic literature Maria Mazzarello read. This is a major argument in this paper.

Thirdly, the contemporary interest in the wisdom of the past, as the source of insights into the spiritual journey of individuals and groups, means that there is need to develop an appropriate theory of interpretation in order to re-read classical spiritual texts in a helpful as well as an accurate manner. I identify the ascetical literature Maria read and her own writings, her correspondence, as spiritual classics for the women who follow her tradition. Philip Sheldrake defines such material as "wisdom documents" and states, "The value of a [spiritual] classical text is not so much that it bridges the gap between the present and a normative past as that it makes the presence of divine truth accessible to our world."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Philip SHELDRAKE, *Spirituality and History, Questions of Interpretation and Method*. New York, Crossroad. 1992, p. 164.

Insights into past spiritual treatises have value precisely in the degree that they dispose people who read them to respond to God's self-communication in the present. In reference to the literature Maria read and its correlation to her correspondence I am not only looking for her original intention but allowing myself to be transformed in the present by an imaginative use of her works. Her correspondence articulates something distinctive about Catholic identity and provides a source of precedents against which my present interpretation can be made. I am not dealing with two quite disconnected moments, the historical moment of her writing the letters and her interpretation of what she read and my moment in reading them. Any two moments are linked as well as separated by what comes between them. In this continuum, or the continual formation of tradition, I receive not only Maria's interpretation of what she read through her letters but also its subsequent history and the effect of that on my moment of reading. I cannot escape from history into timeless truth. History opens up new possibilities to dialogue with it. Without ignoring the historical context, a subsequent study to this paper is to reveal new and richer truths which Maria never knew, by bringing the text of her correspondence and the literature she read into contact with new questions. In putting questions to the text, they are, in turn, reshaped by the text itself. Maria Mazzarello's correspondence is not a timeless moment that demands mere repetition but a constant reinterpretation where I question and listen within my own historical circumstances.