

“I will give you the Teacher.”

Reflections on the Preventive System starting from the dream of the nine-year-old¹

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In this year 2024, as we celebrate the bicentennial of the dream of the 9-year-old, the Rector Major, through the Strenna,² invites us to revisit it in the light of the Preventive System and with a key focus on educational spirituality. There are many perspectives from which one could approach the subject, and many studies and contributions will be offered for our deepening. As a Daughter of Mary Help of Christians, I have chosen to prioritize the Marian dimension that permeates not only the dream of the 9-year-old but the entire existence and pedagogical experience of Don Bosco. His experience of Marian sonship, indeed, is also the heart of his preventive method, aimed at making young people true children of God with the help of Mary. I will therefore try to justify whether and in what sense Marian filiation is a privileged path of preventive education.

1. “Taken kindly by the hand”

The revelation of Mary's motherhood in the dream of the nine-year-old

The three decades into which the Memories of the Oratory are organized are preceded by a very important prelude because here begins the history of the Oratory, which the narrator coincides with his personal experiences.³ In this out-of-text beginning, the presence and role of the Most Holy Mary are crucial. Don Bosco, indeed, almost to seal the Marian character linked to his origins, aligns his birth with August 15, the solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.⁴

Following the event of his birth is the recounting of the death of his father, a painful but imbued with serene Christian faith memory. Immediately after, the narration unfolds the story of the so-called "nine-year-old" dream.⁵

The first scene of the dream revolves around the *venerable man* who calls John by name, instructs him to lead the noisy youngsters, and provides guidance on how to behave towards them: “Not with blows, but with gentleness and charity, you shall win these friends of yours. Therefore, start immediately to instruct them about the ugliness of sin and the preciousness of virtue.”

In the second part of the narrative, the *majestic woman* enters the scene, the key to the entire dream. It is through her that John learns the name of the mysterious character: “I am the Son of She whom your mother taught you to greet three times a day.” Jesus presents himself as the Son of Mary, almost offering the little orphan the reassuring memory of a mother from whose lips he learned to pray and invoke the heavenly Mother. The Son of God addresses Mary as “my mother” and entrusts to her the leadership of what follows. Therefore, it is by virtue of her being a mother that Mary assumes a specific role in the narrative.

Among the primary tasks of a mother is the education and instruction of her children. It is she who opens them to life, serving as a mediator between them and the world from which she has brought them forth. Thus, to best express this role, Mary is presented to John as the teacher under whose firm guidance he will acquire wisdom.

In the face of the boy's confused and frightened reaction, the Madonna responds with understanding and kindness. As a mother, she knows that nothing can better calm an agitated child

¹ The present contribution is a synthesis of the broader study titled: *L'esperienza della filialità mariana e i risvolti educativi nel Sistema preventivo di san Giovanni Bosco* pubblicato in FARINA Marcella – SIBOLDI Rosangela – SPIGA Maria Teresa, *Filialità. Percorsi di riflessione e di ricerca*, Roma, LEV 2014, 312-331.

² This is the title of the Strenna 2024: “The dream that makes you dream.” A heart that transforms *wolves* into *lamb*s.

³ Cf. ALDO GIRAUDO, *L'importanza storica e pedagogico-spirituale delle Memorie dell'Oratorio*, in BOSCO Giovanni, *Memorie dell'Oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales dal 1815 al 1855*, Roma, LAS 2011, 21-22 (Hereafter mentioned as MO).

⁴ In reality, on parish records and civil documents, the date of birth is recorded as August 16th. (cf *ivi* 58 nota 6).

⁵ MO 62-63.

than physical contact and calm, reassuring words. Therefore, the writer narrates: "Taking me kindly by the hand, she said, 'Look.' Looking, I noticed that those children had all fled, and in their place, I saw a multitude of goats, dogs, cats, bears, and several other animals. 'This is your field, this is where you must work. Make yourself humble, strong, robust; and what you see happening with these animals right now, you must do for my children.'"

Mary guides John into the field of youth education and entrusts him with the task of transforming wolves into lambs, that is, taking on the educational mission in its most integral form, expressed in the inner generation of individuals. This weighty assignment, however, can be fulfilled because the Mother of God herself will vouch for it: "In due time, you will understand everything." It is a solemn declaration that the emerging work will unfold with her sponsorship and assistance.

The Virgin appears again in a dream to John on October 13, 1844.⁶ Almost as if continuing a discourse left unfinished, she presents herself as the key to understanding events connected to the first dream that, however, surpass Don Bosco's capacity for comprehension. He indeed describes it as "an appendix to what happened at Becchi when I was nine years old."⁷

The narrator dreams of being surrounded by many animals and, full of fear, wants to flee when a Lady, dressed as a shepherdess, takes the lead of the strange flock, preceding him. She guides the journey through several stages, and at each stop, various animals transform into lambs. The procession's destination is a vast courtyard with a portico, at the end of which stands a church. Meanwhile, other animals transform into lambs, and some young shepherds arrive to guard them, but after a short time, they depart. At that moment, some of those lambs, to the astonishment of the writer, turn into young shepherds and take care of the others. These then increase in number to the point where they divide and go elsewhere to gather more animals and lead them to new folds. The shepherdess finally invites Don Bosco to observe the field they have reached: "Then I saw a splendid and tall church [...] Inside that church was a white band, on which, in large letters, was written: *Hic domus mea, inde gloria mea*" (This is my house, hence my glory).

The maternal intervention of Mary accompanies the young, now a newly ordained priest, in understanding God's plan for his life and the Salesian work. Within this framework, Mary's role becomes central. It is she who takes the lead of the flock and, as a shepherdess, leads it toward a stable place, Valdocco, where the church dedicated to her will rise; a site that, in the solemnity of this vision, also represents the purpose of the emerging Salesian Congregation and the entrusted project: the care for the integral salvation of youth.

After this solemn prelude, the curtain opens on the supernatural, and Don Bosco continues the narration of his Memories, describing the simple life spent at Becchi under the watchful and wise gaze of his mother, Margret, and in the company of his little friends for whom he establishes a kind of "festive oratory," the first embryonic realization of the dream of the nine years.

2. The Maternal Role of Mary at the Origins of the Oratory

To be all for Mary, associate with Mary's devotees, and propagate her devotion are the solemn instructions given by Mother Margherita to her son John as he prepares to enter the seminary in Chieri. Let's continue reading the Memories of the Oratory by questioning the narrator about the role of Mary, both mother and teacher, in the development of the Salesian work.

The first realization of the oratory takes place at Becchi and consists of a simple proposal for afternoons spent together with games and jokes framed by the prayer of the Ave Maria, concluding with the recitation of the Rosary.⁸ These gatherings are an initial fulfillment of the dream of the nine years: preventing fights and bad conversations and doing good to friends, a practical implementation of the Preventive System, which aims to prevent evil and promote good. These initiatives are later

⁶ Cf. *ivi* 134-135.

⁷ *Ivi* 134.

⁸ Cf. *ivi* 66-67.

consolidated in Chieri when, as a young student, John founds the *Society of Joy*, an association also permeated with Marian devotion.⁹

After completing public school, John faces the difficult and challenging moment of vocational discernment, experienced in faith and in the shadow of the *Our Lady of Grace* of the city's Cathedral, prayed to with an intense novena. Don Bosco attributes the decision to go to the seminary to her intercession and, before her, pronounces his resolutions on the solemn day of clerical investiture.¹⁰

Arriving at the seminary, John puts into practice one of his mother's advice and finds in Luigi Comollo a companion particularly devoted and loving to the Virgin, who becomes for him the ideal friend, perfect guide, and incomparable example. Don Bosco's first written work narrates the life of this sweet confidant, prematurely departed in holiness.¹¹ In it, as Pietro Stella affirms, almost all elements of Don Bosco's Marian devotion are already outlined. Devotion based on Mary's motherhood, which must manifest itself in virtuous life and ensures possession of the "most powerful patronage" one can have while militating "in this world of tears."¹²

Comollo's life is the best representation of what it means to be true children of Mary, that is, to reflect in oneself the features of the Mother, in other words, to imitate her virtues. This is true devotion that leads to salvation because, ultimately, it leads to enjoying God and with Him every other good, without any evil. The resulting gestures, characteristic of popular piety of the time—acts of worship, sacrifices, little offerings—do not create devotion but express it, being the consequence of tender and sincere love for the Madonna, just as a child's naive gestures of affection towards the mother are the outward manifestation of his deeper attitudes: trust, love, and surrender into her secure arms.

The priestly ordination, celebrated on June 5, 1841, is a fundamental milestone marking the turning point in Don Bosco's life. To seal the culmination of his vocation, achieved also with the help of the heavenly Mother, he celebrates his second Mass at the sanctuary of Consolata in Turin, in gratitude for the benefits received from her.¹³

During the period spent at the Ecclesiastical College—also thanks to the guidance and example of his spiritual director and mentor, Don Giuseppe Cafasso—Don Bosco delves into the meditation of the Marian writings of St. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, according to whom true devotion to Mary guarantees the most powerful protection in life and death. He thus has the opportunity to consolidate and deepen his filial relationship with the Mother of God.¹⁴

For Cafasso, Mary is first and foremost the mother of all Christians because that is what Jesus wanted to leave her under the cross. As a mother, she possesses, perfected by her holiness, all the most beautiful qualities: particularly tender and strong love and continuous care for each of her children. She loves us because we cost her son's life and because Jesus himself wanted to give us to her as children at the moment of his death. Therefore, there cannot be a Christian who does not love Mary and reciprocate her action with filial devotion. As a Mother, Mary helps all her children, especially the weaker, fragile, and needy ones. She is like the Treasurer of every grace and the Businesswoman of Paradise. Thus, there is no better icon to represent her motherhood than that of Cana.¹⁵

Accustomed to popular preaching, Cafasso loves to offer the example of some saints who lived a particularly rich filial devotion to Mary, such as St. Luigi Gonzaga and St. Philip Neri, authors who

⁹ Cf. *ivi* 81-82.

¹⁰ Cf. *ivi* 101.

¹¹ Cf. GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Cenni storici sulla vita del chierico Luigi Comollo morto nel seminario di Chieri, ammirato da tutti per le sue singolari virtù scritti da un suo collega* (1844), in ID., *Opere Edite* I, LAS, Roma 1976, 1-84 (d'ora in poi OE seguito dal numero del volume e della pagina che si riferisce alla fonte originale).

¹² Cf. PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica. Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità* vol. II, Roma, LAS 1981, 149.

¹³ Cf. MO 121.

¹⁴ ALFONSO DE' LIGUORI, *Le glorie di Maria* I, s.e. Torino 1824.

¹⁵ Cf. CAFASSO GIUSEPPE, *Meditazioni sulla Madonna Ss.ma*, in ID., *Missioni al popolo. Meditazioni*, a cura di Pier Angelo Garamaglia, Effatà, Cantalupa (To) 2002, 271-293.

also become dear to Don Bosco and whom he places as models for his young people in the *Giovane Provveduto*.¹⁶

The years at the Ecclesiastical College and then those that follow until the establishment in Valdocco (1841-1846) describe the beginnings of the festive Oratory and the struggle to find a stable location.

In this part of the narrative, the maternal presence and intervention of Mary are more evident. In the architecture of the Memories, Don Bosco's intention seems clear to demonstrate how, in the years of itinerant oratories, a part of the 1844 dream is being realized. In fact, in the unfolding of events, Mary is actively present and involved in the often-adverse events experienced by Don Bosco and the young members of the Oratory. She takes the lead of the youthful group and, through different stages, leads them to the Filippi meadow, where the courtyard with the portico and the church dedicated to her will be built. With her presence, she instills confidence and helps not to be discouraged, encouraging the journey with the certainty that she is the one "taking Don Bosco by the hand" and leading him to the site prepared for his youth. As a mother, she does not abandon her children in times of uncertainty and need.

Don Bosco demonstrates his trust in Mary by meticulously specifying that each stage of the itinerant oratory is marked by a Marian recurrence: from the Ecclesiastical College, the oratory moves, with the help of the theologian John Borel, to the Refuge of Marchesa Barolo on the Sunday celebrating the maternity of Mary (October 14, 1844). The following Sunday, October 20, dedicated to the purification of Mary, officially marks the beginning of the oratory.¹⁷

The first chapel, created from two rooms of the little hospital of Saint Philomena, is blessed on December 8, 1844, the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. When the most difficult period approaches because Don Bosco and his young people are expelled from S. Martino ai Molassi and S. Pietro in Vincoli, and the oratory no longer has a stable location, the various destinations chosen by Don Bosco are churches or Marian shrines: Madonna del Pilone, Madonna di Campagna, Superga where the Basilica is dedicated to the Immaculate, the Consolata.¹⁸

Finally, the solemn arrival at the definitive destination, on April 12, 1846—Easter Sunday—is experienced in the company of Mary, considered as the main architect of the miracle that occurred: "Moved and transported by deep gratitude and to thank the Holy Virgin who had welcomed and heard our prayers that very morning we had made to the Madonna di Campagna, we knelt for the last time in that place and recited the Rosary."¹⁹

Rereading these events, Don Bosco identifies the Filippi meadow as the site indicated to him by the Madonna to build her house.²⁰ The house of Mary, here, is not only identified with the future church that will be erected in 1868 but primarily signifies the Salesian work. The project that unfolds in Valdocco is, therefore, an undertaking of Mary; it is her house, and here, she is at home. Prayed to with characteristic devotions (singing the Ave Maris Stella, reciting the Angelus, singing the Magnificat, and reciting the Office of the Madonna), Mary is present as a vigilant mother overseeing the course of days where prayer and study alternate with games and festivities.²¹

The discovery of a place to build the oratory is considered an intervention by the Madonna. From this point onward, in the house of Valdocco, Mary's maternal presence is increasingly evident not only through writings but also in the tangible unfolding of events. When Don Bosco falls seriously ill, the young people take turns in prayer before the Consolata painting, praying to her as a mother,

¹⁶ BOSCO GIOVANNI, *Il giovane provveduto per la pratica de' suoi doveri degli esercizi di cristiana pietà per la recita dell'ufficio della Beata Vergine e de' principali Vespri dell'anno coll'aggiunta di una scelta di laudi sacre* (1847), in OE II 183-532.

¹⁷ Cf. MO 135.

¹⁸ Cf. *ivi* 142.145.

¹⁹ *Ivi* 154.

²⁰ Cf. *ivi* 155.

²¹ Cf. *ivi* 156.

making vows and promises. Finally, it is to her – the mother of Don Bosco and the mother of the young people – that the miracle of his recovery is attributed.²²

Now, delving into Don Bosco's pedagogical experience and revisiting some of his writings, let's try to identify the existing relationship between Marian filiality and the application of the Preventive System.

3. Marian filiality as a path of preventive education

The filial relationship between the Mary Most Holy and Don Bosco, as expressed in the dream at the age of nine, is also central to the origin and development of his educative work. To understand in what sense Marian filiality can be a path of preventive education, it is necessary to shed light on the relationship between this experience and Christian education.

Indeed, as evidenced by the conclusions of the congress «*I will give you the teacher...*». *The courage to educate at the school of Mary* organized by our Faculty in 2004, «the story and figure of Mary of Nazareth, understood in their essential meaning, can indicate the indispensable coordinates to guide the educative process towards the realization of an integral personality considered in its context. In other words, in Mary of Nazareth, we can see not only the *full realization* of God's plan for the human person but also the *process* that leads to such realization. If it is true, as it is true, that a person is born, it is equally true that a person becomes. In the school of Mary, one can learn how to become a person; realizing one's own humanity means *discovering the meaning of life, responsibly taking one's place in it, affirming one's freedom in obedience to the truth of life*, its laws, its values, and a just hierarchy of values». ²³ Maria, in fact, «is at once the highest historical realization of the Gospel and the woman who, through self-mastery, sense of responsibility and the spirit of service, has fully realized herself on the human level». ²⁴

In addition to her exemplarity, Mary also has an indispensable role in the formative work by virtue of her being at the same time the beloved daughter of the Father and the mother, according to human nature, of Christ. She conceived him, gave birth to him, nourished him, took care of him, and educated him: «Between the incarnate Word – Jesus – and Mary, there is therefore an indissoluble maternal-filial bond, so that while she recognizes in the Son her God and Lord, he honours and loves her as a mother, thanking her for the gift of temporal life». ²⁵ The profound nature of Mary's presence among men is therefore that of being a mother, the mother of men, especially of the faithful. A mother who «with her maternal charity takes care of the brothers of her Son who are still pilgrims and in the midst of dangers and tribulations until they are led into the blessed homeland». ²⁶

In relation to Christians, therefore, Mary performs a function of generation, nourishment, education, and growth until they reach perfect conformity with Christ. ²⁷ In Don Bosco, there is the certainty of Mary's maternal mediation in the work of educating the youth. Let us try to justify this statement by drawing from the writings of the holy educator, especially those in which he explains these paths in various ways.

3.1. From the discovery of Mary's motherhood to the experience of marian filiality

For Don Bosco, Mary is above all and first of all a mother. The perception of her motherhood permeates his writings, his words, and even his dreams. In the booklet *Wonders of the Mother of God*,

²² Cf. *ivi* 167.

²³ MARIA DOSIO– MARIE GANNON– MARIA PIERA MANELLO– MARCHI MARIA (a cura di), «*Io ti darò la maestra ...*». *Il coraggio di educare alla scuola di Maria*, Atti del Convegno Mariano Internazionale promosso dalla Pontificia facoltà di Scienze dell'Educazione "Auxilium" – Roma, 27-30 dicembre 2004, LAS, Roma 2005, 15.

²⁴ PONTIFICIA ACADEMIA MARIANA INTERNATIONALIS [PAMI], *La Madre del Signore. Memoria Presenza Speranza. Alcune questioni attuali sulla figura e la missione della b. Vergine Maria*, Città del Vaticano 2000, nota 6 a pagina 14.

²⁵ *Ivi* 50.

²⁶ *Ivi* n. 62.

²⁷ Cf. PAMI, *La Madre del Signore* 83.

he addresses Mary as a common mother because, with her loving cooperation in the ministry of redemption, she truly generated us on Calvary into the life of Grace; in the order of salvation, we are all born from the pains of Mary. In those precious moments, she became our mother. She became the mother of all Christians.²⁸ Don Bosco is aware of the universal mediation of grace by Mary for those who, with faith, invoke her in her spiritual motherhood.²⁹

He is convinced of how internally constructive and healing it is for his young people to perceive Mary Most Holy as their mother in the supernatural order. Having or rediscovering a mother means finding one's roots, one's origin. Experiencing being welcomed into the world by a love that nurtures, protects, defends, lays the foundations of trust in oneself and others because one perceives one's own and others' existence as good and reliable.

Being aware and feeling accepted from the very beginning is also the premise for discovering the meaning of one's own existence. Having been loved, in fact, is the prerequisite for reciprocating the love received by giving oneself to others. This is the fundamental experience that Don Bosco lived in relation to Mary Most Holy, thanks to the mediation of Mamma Margherita. Similarly, he feels called to be, for his young people, a mediation of such fatherhood/motherhood.

Based on his own experience, Don Bosco speaks of Mary's motherhood in the realism of life and not proceeding from concepts or theories. Therefore, his words touch the hearts of his listeners, continually inviting them to trustingly entrust themselves into the arms of Mary, the beloved mother, and to commend themselves to her as an advocate. The fourth successor of Don Bosco, Don Pietro Ricaldone, affirms: «It was written, and we heard it especially from Don Bosco's oldest students, that when Don Bosco spoke about our Lady, the word, always so plain, sober, and meditated, took on a special tone and timbre and had an effectiveness that could captivate hearts and bring tears of tenderness to the young people who listened to it».³⁰

Addressing the young people of the oratory, many of whom were orphans, abandoned, or distant from home and family affections, he wanted to persuade them that, just as in the natural order, God has given them a mother, in the supernatural order, another mother had been given to them.³¹ In this mother, they must place all their trust because «she is our mother and loves us infinitely more than all the hearts of earthly mothers combined».³²

The examples he uses to talk about Mary are taken from the marian writings of Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori and are inspired by popular marian literature of the nineteenth century, which, especially in the *months of May*, highlights the protection truly bestowed by Mary and true marian devotion.³³ The marian hymns inserted in the *Giovane Provveduto* are simple signs of the filial affection and dedication that young people must offer to their heavenly Mother. One of these hymns sings: *At your feet, beloved Mary, all your children come. Dear Mother, accept the gift of our loving hearts*.³⁴

As a mother, Mary is present beside her children and is moved by their needs: «Mary has such a compassionate and tender heart towards men that there has never been a person who grieved for our pains as much as Mary grieves for the pains of others: therefore, as soon as she sees a need, she immediately comes to our aid».³⁵

In *Wonders of the Mother of God*, to express how our Lady is the help of God's people, Don Bosco comments on the Gospel passage of the wedding at Cana, an event in which Mary shows her

²⁸ Cf. GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice raccolte dal Sacerdote Giovanni Bosco*, in OE XX 7. 38-41.

²⁹ Cf. BRAIDO PIETRO, *Pedagogia della devozione mariana*, in ID., *Il sistema preventivo di don Bosco*, PAS Verlag, Zürich 1964², 270.

³⁰ RICALDONE PIETRO, *Don Bosco educatore II*, Colle don Bosco Libreria Dottrina Cristiana, (Asti) 1952, 413.

³¹ Cf. *ivi* 412-413.

³² MB VI 318.

³³ Cf. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica II* 152.

³⁴ BOSCO, *Il Giovane provveduto* (1885), in OE XXXV 475.

³⁵ GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Nove giorni consacrati all'Augusta Madre del Salvatore sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice* (1870), in OE XXII 8.

intervention and power with her Son Jesus rushing to our aid.³⁶ In her way of intervening, she demonstrates great gentleness and discretion: she only presents to Jesus the need, the lack of wine. In fact, «for hearts inclined to generosity, there is no need to tear grace away with force and violence; it is enough to propose the occasion».³⁷ Mary, Don Bosco continues, «is always by our side because hers is a heart full of mercy. Therefore, if she had so much compassion for the embarrassment of those poor people and provided even though not asked, how much more pity will she have for us if we invoke her with confidence?».³⁸

Even in dreams, Mary appears as a mother who intervenes, defends, protects, and brings to safety. In the dreams our Lady is a source of comfort and trust. She is the kind mother who encourages, exhorts to continue the educative work, and reveals a better future: a home and a church from which God will spread the glory of His Most Holy Mother. She is the shepherdess, the queen, the guide, and the mother. She characterizes the marian devotion in the oratory. Therefore, Mary is the heavenly mother, the mother of the incarnate Word, the protector. If one entrusts oneself to the mother of Jesus, one possesses a great guarantee of salvation.³⁹

With her maternal embrace, represented in dreams by the protective mantle under which the young people take refuge, Mary defends them from the attacks of evil. In the dream of the elephant, which enters the oratory, terrorizing and killing anyone in its path, the statue of the Virgin in the oratory courtyard comes to life and is enlarged.⁴⁰

The vividness of the narrative gives us a lively image of Mary, so involved in her maternal task that she becomes tired and anxious from shouting so much. This aspect strikes and convinces the hearts of the young people of the realism with which Mary intervenes in their lives, protecting them from evil. Similarly, in the dream of the country in trial, Mary spreads out a very wide mantle and invites the young people to find defense and security to be protected in the battle that rages in the country.⁴¹ Finally, the trusting prayer to Mary, in forms known to the young people, such as the Hail Mary, the Holy Rosary, in other dreams, is the true weapon that defeats the evil one.⁴²

In conclusion, in the oratory of Valdocco, Mary Most Holy is at home as a living presence, not only for her exemplarity but above all for her constant companionship, hand in hand, leading the young people toward Christ. From here begins the dynamism of the response, the opening of the heart, the authentic discipleship with which the young are formed.

3.2. From marian filiality to authentic Christian discipleship

If Mary is a Mother, every Christian must first and foremost be a true child by correspondingly embracing the love of predilection with which she loves him/her and thus live a sincere and deep marian devotion. This correspondence is realized in an authentic Christian life, which consists of becoming “children” in the Son, that is, conforming one's life to that of Christ, following Him, and

³⁶ Cf. GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Maraviglie della Madre di Dio invocata sotto il titolo di Maria Ausiliatrice* (1868), in OE XX 31-32.

³⁷ *Ivi* 33.

³⁸ *Ivi* 34.

³⁹ Cf. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica* II 151.

⁴⁰ «She became a person of tall stature, raised her arms, and opened the mantle, in which many inscriptions were woven with astonishing art. This then expanded immeasurably so much that it covered all those who took refuge under it: there they were safe in life, and a chosen number of the best ran to that refuge first. But when Mary Most Holy saw that many did not care hurrying to Her, she cried out loudly: Come to me all of you, and behold, the crowd of young people under the mantle grew. However, instead of taking refuge under the mantle, some ran from one side to the other and were wounded before they were able to take shelter safely. The Holy Virgin, distressed, red-faced, continued to cry out, but it was rare to see those running to her. The elephant continued the slaughter, and several young people, wielding a sword, some two, scattered here and there, prevented companions who were still in the courtyard from going to Mary by threatening and wounding them. And these the elephant did not touch at all» (MB VII 358).

⁴¹ Cf. *ivi* XI 260.

⁴² Cf. the dream of the serpent in *ivi* VII 239; the dream of the Rosary an “arm” against attacks of evil in *ivi* III 294.

becoming His disciples.⁴³ In this dynamic, Mary is present as a mother who contributes to the inner generation of each of her children.

For Don Bosco, a pedagogical dimension of marian devotion is introduced here, going beyond the historical and cultural sensitivities of popular piety. For example, in the booklet *The month of May dedicated to Mary Immaculate*, «Don Bosco explicitly and insistently frames marian devotion in a context aimed at a concrete and serious commitment to Christian life lived with fervour and love».⁴⁴ His proposal consists of three practices: «1. Do everything we can to avoid committing any sin during this month: let it be entirely consecrated to Mary; 2. Take great care to fulfill the spiritual and temporal duties of our state; 3. Invite our relatives and friends and all those who depend on us to participate in the acts of piety done in honour of Mary during the month».⁴⁵ The proposed practices essentially consist of «practical exercises to nourish union with God, spiritual fervour, and the exercise of virtues in daily life».⁴⁶

In the rest of the book, the readings and meditations proposed do not concern Mary but rather the truths that should illuminate the life of the Christian, common themes in spiritual literature and preaching of the time, concerned with instructing and catechizing. Don Bosco, however, takes them up in the context of spiritual pedagogy. What interests him is to «teach young people and the people that the celebration of the month of Mary, that true marian devotion, is an effective way to achieve continuous conversion, a growth in Christian commitment, simultaneously on the moral, spiritual, and daily duty levels».⁴⁷

Marian devotion is therefore aimed at offering her the beautiful bouquet of virtues.⁴⁸ She sees the small or great struggles in which her children, especially the young, are immersed, and can help them, provided they recognize themselves as such: «We need the grace of the Lord so that he may give us health of body and mind, and also help us do well in exams. If we want these graces, let us turn to Mary; but for her to intercede, we must show ourselves to be her true children, hating sin and keeping it away from us. Then she will be generous with us in temporal and spiritual gifts; she will be our guide, our teacher, our mother. All the bounty of the Lord come to us through Mary. Remember this. It is almost impossible to go to Jesus if we do not go through Mary. Therefore, commend all your things to her and especially your soul».⁴⁹

Marian devotion is also closely linked to eternal salvation: «Since the most beautiful ornament of Christianity is the Mother of the Savior, Mary Most Holy, so I turn to You, O most merciful Virgin Mary, I am sure to gain the grace of God, the right to Paradise, to regain my lost dignity, if you pray for me: *Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis*».⁵⁰ Well, Don Bosco is convinced that «Mary intervenes as the most effective advocate and the most powerful mediator before God to help us reach that lost dignity of children, that “image and likeness” of God in man that our ancestors compromised with their sin, for themselves and for their descendants. Therefore, to recover, through inclusion in Christ the Savior, a profound way of communication with God capable of regenerating us as new men».⁵¹ One must therefore entrust oneself as a child to Mary, turn one's gaze to her, especially in moments of difficulty, because she helps all her children.⁵² She is all-powerful by grace, and we must invoke her at every moment, and she will give us the strength to overcome all the enemies of our

⁴³ «For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will» (Ephesians 1, 4-5).

⁴⁴ ALDO GIRAUDO, *Don Bosco, un educatore mariano. La devozione mariana nella prospettiva di Don Bosco*, in *Maria Ausiliatrice. Rivista del Santuario Basilica di Maria Ausiliatrice – Torino*, 28 (2007) 1, 31.

⁴⁵ GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Il Mese di Maggio consacrato a Maria SS. Immacolata ad uso del popolo* (1858), in OE X 8.

⁴⁶ GIRAUDO, *Don Bosco, un educatore mariano* 31.

⁴⁷ *Ivi* 32.

⁴⁸ Cf. BOSCO, *Il Mese di Maggio*, in OE X 16.

⁴⁹ MB VII 676-677.

⁵⁰ BOSCO, *Il Mese di Maggio*, in OE X 63-64.

⁵¹ GIRAUDO, *Don Bosco, un educatore mariano* 32.

⁵² Cf. MB II 298-299.

soul;⁵³ she is our guide, our teacher, our mother, and for this, we must feel a special affection for her.⁵⁴

In this framework, one also understands the reference to the Immaculate present in Don Bosco's spiritual pedagogy. In the eighteenth century, as a Catholic reaction to the protestant reformation, devotion to the Immaculate emphasized her condition as a privileged creature. In Don Bosco's century, characterized by hatred towards the Church and the violation of the rights of the clergy and the Pope, Mary appears as the Immaculate who mediates between heaven and earth. These are times when «the problem of personal salvation is inserted into that of the survival of community faith and the survival of institutions that were felt to be custodians of the means of eternal salvation».⁵⁵ Therefore, Mary is seen as the Morning Star, the Immaculate who treads on the devil, who resolves human history in struggles and triumphs of good over evil. However, at Valdocco, the meaning is more intimate: Mary helps to arouse greater religious fervour and greater commitment to the overall educative work. Devout practices in honour of the Immaculate are primarily aimed at ensuring the protection of the great Mother of God in life and especially at the moment of death.⁵⁶ The educative intervention, therefore, «aims at leading young people to see Mary as an ideal of virgin purity, fascinating beauty, effective in encouraging the struggle and victory as the highest ideal of moral and Christian virtues».⁵⁷

In conclusion, it is noted that for Don Bosco, marian devotion aims to form in young people a filial heart towards Mary, but not to stop at devotional practice, but rather to fulfill the educative work. As Caviglia states: «For Don Bosco, marian devotion was one of the most effective educative factors on the hearts of the young and, more intimately, a spiritual factor. Making a boy pray to the our Lady to help him overcome a defect, or having him make the resolution to abstain from certain things for the love of the Celestial Mother, and, in short, inserting her presence, like that of the distant mother, into the circumstances of daily life, was a charming educative path way to achieve what might not have been achieved otherwise, and three Hail Marys said to resolve to 'put one's things in order' were the salvation of disoriented youngsters and misguided men».⁵⁸

True devotion, ultimately, becomes ontologically and theologically, but also psychologically, a wing that lifts upward, «with these two wings, that is, with these two devotions, Mary and the Blessed Sacrament, be sure that you will not delay in rising towards heaven».⁵⁹

4. Transformative efficacy of marian filiality

For Don Bosco, everyone is loved by Mary because she is the mother of all Christians, but especially she loves the young, the children, the little ones: «Mary loves youth [...]; she loves the little ones for these reasons: because she is a mother, and mothers have greater tenderness for the little ones who are still children than for those already adults; because the little ones are innocent; because they are more easily seduced and therefore more worthy of understanding, help, and protection; because they represent to her more vividly Jesus, who passed through childhood, adolescence, and youth under her eyes».⁶⁰

Mary's predilection for the little ones makes her mysteriously but truly close to them, for spiritual help, that is, persevering in the life of grace and avoiding sin, and for all other material needs. Like a mother, she takes them tenderly by the hand, as she did for little John in the dream of nine years old, to lead them to taste and live the beauty of their filiation with God. If wisely guided, they

⁵³ Cf. *ivi* XII 578; VII 293, 360, 387, 583, 626, 675, 680-681.

⁵⁴ Cf. *ivi* VII 676.

⁵⁵ STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica* II 158.

⁵⁶ Cf. *ivi* 162.

⁵⁷ BRAIDO, *Il Sistema preventivo* [1964] 272.

⁵⁸ ALBERTO CAVIGLIA, *Il «Magone Michele» una classica esperienza educativa*, in ID., *Opere e scritti editi e inediti* V Torino, SEI 1965, 155.

⁵⁹ Buona notte di don Bosco ai giovani dell'Oratorio, 20 giugno 1864, in MB VII 680.

⁶⁰ MB XVI 268.

personally perceive Mary's motherhood and respond with all the enthusiasm and capacity for abandonment that characterizes their age, letting themselves be led by her to encounter Christ.

Throughout his long educative experience, Don Bosco witnessed the effects of marian devotion in the young, especially in those whose biographies he wanted to narrate to instruct not only other young people but also Salesian educators. In these significant sources, one can discern the relationship between young people and Mary, placing it within their educational journey to understand its function, purpose, and effects.

The *Lives* of Michele Magone, Domenico Savio, and Francesco Besucco, as «testimonies of spirituality and narrative pedagogy»,⁶¹ are among the most important documents to understand the Preventive System in action. They serve as an «effective narrative illustration of the beliefs and formative practices, in the first two decades of activity, of the saint. They present three boys, different from each other, deeply rooted in the culture of the time and, together, significant for the freshness and liveliness, the ability to reflect, the quality of spiritual openness, determination, and the generous impulse that characterizes the perennial adolescent soul. The author stages them as docile and ardent disciples of dedicated and affectionate educators. He presents the stages of their short life journey in the different environments of their formation, in daily relationships, commitments, and feelings».⁶² Let's briefly focus on Michele Magone, one of the three boys.

4.1. Marian filiality of Michele Magone: decisive orientation to conversion

Among the young people whose lives Don Bosco wrote about, Michele Magone «can be said to be identified by marian devotion, and by the complete penetration of this spiritual movement, to the point of making it undoubtedly the typical feature of his figure and almost the *raison d'être* of his entire spiritual construction. Magone is a specialist in devotion to Mary, to whom all the sum of his virtues leads».⁶³ Thus, his devotion is entirely informed by «hatred of sin and the acquisition of the most solid virtues».

In Chapter VIII of the *Life*, Don Bosco describes the young man's devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. For Magone, the encounter with Mary is only apparently casual since the narrator frames the event within an intentionally spiritual horizon: "It must be said, devotion to the Blessed Virgin is the support of every faithful Christian. But it is particularly so for youth. Thus, in her name, the Holy Spirit speaks: *Si quis est parvulus, veniat ad me*».⁶⁴ To young Magone, an image of the Blessed Virgin with the inscription *Venite, filii, audite me, timorem Domini docebo vos* is given one day as a gift. The young man is struck, feels the invitation personally addressed to him by our Lady, and writes to his director about it: «He said that the Blessed Virgin had made him hear her voice, called him to be good, and that she herself wanted to teach him how to fear God, love him, and serve him».⁶⁵

Magone's experience is genuinely an interior inspiration that drives him to live the marian experience as a "school of the fear of God", that is, to place himself under Mary's guidance to renew his life from within. Caviglia appropriately comments by noting how «devotions or marian practices common to good Christians had already entered into the practice [...] of our young man, and he awaited them with exemplary fervour. But here the Holy Master wants to tell us more: how much, that is, and how the new impulse coming from those words and the circumstance of the marian month have produced in him a more intense spiritual activity and ignited a desire for higher perfection».⁶⁶ The effect of these words can be compared to what Domenico Savio experienced when he heard the

⁶¹ GIRAUDDO, *Maestri e discepoli in azione*, in BOSCO GIOVANNI, *Vite di Giovani. Le biografie di Domenico Savio, Michele Magone e Francesco Besucco*. Saggio introduttivo e note storiche a cura di Aldo Giraudo, LAS, Roma 2012, 16.

⁶² *Ivi* 5.

⁶³ ALBERTO CAVIGLIA, *Il «Magone Michele» una classica esperienza educativa*, in ID., *Opere e scritti editi e inediti V*, SEI, Torino 1965, 155.

⁶⁴ BOSCO GIOVANNI, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele allievo dell'oratorio di S. Francesco di Sales*, in ID., *Vite di Giovani* 132.

⁶⁵ *Ivi* 133.

⁶⁶ CAVIGLIA, *Il «Magone Michele»* 156.

sermon on holiness given by Don Bosco, a moment in which the young man decisively oriented himself towards Christian life.

Following the inspiration, a series of practices, called “fioretti”, to honour the heavenly mother, the divine teacher, the compassionate shepherd, ensued.⁶⁷ However, the description of the characteristics assumed by Michele's marian devotion goes beyond religious practices, describing a radical change in his life.⁶⁸ It is a “filial” relationship with the mother, permeated with trust and confidence, which urges the young man to adopt new behaviours in all areas of life: more intense and marian prayer, forgiveness of offenses, endurance of any discomfort. «Cold, heat, displeasures, fatigue, thirst, sweat, and similar inconveniences of the seasons were so many “fioretti” that he joyfully offered to God through the hand of his merciful heavenly mother».⁶⁹

Mary also becomes his guide and support in fulfilling the duties of a student: «Before studying, writing in his room or at school, he took out an image of Mary from a book, on the margin of which was written this verse: *Virgo parens studiis semper adesto meis*, Virgin Mother, assist me always in my studies».⁷⁰

All the simple daily activities are accompanied by the loving, benevolent, and encouraging presence of Mary: «I, he used to say, if I encounter difficulties in my studies, I turn to my divine teacher, and she explains everything to me».⁷¹ When a friend congratulates him on the successful completion of a school assignment, he responds, «You shouldn't congratulate me but Mary who helped me and put many things in my mind that I wouldn't have known otherwise».⁷²

Moreover, «to always have some object that reminded him of Mary's patronage in his ordinary activities, he wrote wherever he could, *Sedes sapientiae, ora pro me*: O Mary, Seat of wisdom, pray for me. Thus, above all his books, on the cover of notebooks, on the table, on desks, on his chair, and on any place he could write with a pen or pencil, one could read: *Sedes sapientiae, ora pro me*».⁷³

In May 1858, that month became decisive for Michele's life, prompting him to consider consecrating himself to Mary with a vow of chastity. Don Bosco changed the commitment - too burdensome for his age – into a «promise to the Lord to use the utmost rigor in the future to never say or do a word, not even a joke, contrary to that virtue», also linking the promise to the choice of embracing the ecclesiastical state if, at the end of his studies, he showed signs of being called to it. Michele was pleased with the proposals and «promised to do all he could on every occasion to put it into practice».⁷⁴

From then on, all of Michele's life is inspired and bound to Mary in a tender relationship of sonship. He feels primarily the son of Mary, and even his death is permeated with marian light, understood as “going to stay with her”.⁷⁵

Among the things that made him more serene at the end of life is precisely the relationship with this mother. The last dialogue between Michele and his director is moving, suffused with candour and innocence, and filled with trust, capable of revealing the level of familiarity with the supernatural that characterized the Oratory of those times. Michele said, «The thing that comforts me most at this moment is the little I have done in honour of Mary. Yes, this is the greatest consolation. O Mary, Mary, how happy your devotees are at the moment of death. But, he continued, I have something that bothers me; when my soul is separated from the body and I am about to enter paradise, what should I say? To whom should I address myself? If Mary wants to accompany you herself to judgment, leave

⁶⁷ BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, in ID., *Vite di Giovani* 133.

⁶⁸ This is the purpose of such practices. Braido states, «The little acts of devotion and novenas are placed on a practical level. They are the opportunity to enter into, under the guidance of Mary, “for the love of Mary” or “in honor of Mary”, a christianity that is increasingly concrete and demanding». (BRAIDO, *Il Sistema preventivo* [1964] 272).

⁶⁹ BOSCO, *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, in ID., *Vite di Giovani* 133.

⁷⁰ *L. cit.*

⁷¹ *L. cit.*

⁷² *L. cit.*

⁷³ *L. cit.*

⁷⁴ *Ivi* 134.

⁷⁵ *Ivi* 153.

all care of yourself to her. [...] When you are in paradise and have seen the great Virgin Mary, give her a humble and respectful greeting from me and from those who are in this house. Ask her to deign to give us her holy blessing; to welcome us all under her powerful protection, and to help us so that none of those who are, or that divine Providence will send to this house, will be lost».⁷⁶

In summary, among the three biographies written by Don Bosco, that of Michele Magone – due to his particular existential situation - better than the others allows us to understand the transformative efficacy of marian devotion. The awareness of having in Mary an affectionate mother and powerful aid contributes to urging the young man to make significant decisions regarding a real change of life. In his story, we understand how the devotion to Mary at the Oratory of Valdocco is indeed linked to piety, that is, the veneration of the Mother of God and prayer, but it is also indissolubly aimed at acquiring a sense of concrete commitment.

As Carlo Colli affirms, the marian devotion of Valdocco can be understood only in light of the fundamental principle of the Preventive System: «Whoever knows he is loved, loves, and whoever is loved obtains everything, especially from the young». Here, the transformative efficacy of this devotion is intertwined with the loving mother of the Oratory, who is also «the Immaculate with all that this title can contain of absolute incompatibility with evil and sin, and fullness of grace». Therefore, «to the young thirsty for light, innocence, goodness, Don Bosco presents Mary as the ideal of humanity untouched by the shadow of sin, the realization of his boldest dreams as an adolescent. Not, however, a bright but cold, abstract, distant ideal, but a person who intensely loves him because she is his Mother, caring for his true good; a Mother who accepts him as he is in his misery but does not share it; who understands him in his fragility and weakness but does not indulge in it; who does not replace his personal effort, although being very willing to help or prompt to rescue if she sees a glimmer of sincere good will».⁷⁷

In this way, the demands of the Christian life are no longer perceived by Michele as an external imposition and a moral code but as «something that arises from his innermost being, which springs spontaneously from the heart like the love he has for She whom he feels sincerely loved by».⁷⁸ The atmosphere of intense commitment, sanctification of duty, work, and study done with joy and generosity, with a “spirit of noble precision”,⁷⁹ sprouts from this change of course, which we can decisively call conversion and which has its concrete effects in a life entirely oriented toward God and others.

In this development, the presence and help of Mary are decisive. With his behavior, Michele demonstrates that he understood the efficacy of her motherhood for his conversion and expresses toward her a filial attitude of trust but also of supplication. He proves to be aware of the mystery of Mary’s precious spiritual motherhood toward her children and to have totally abandoned himself to her, placing in her the successful outcome of his journey. In this way, young Michele experiences in his life the miracle of Cana, and the simple waters of his brief existence transform into the wine of a happy life because fully realized.

Another aspect of Marian filiality concerns its effects on the person of the Salesian educator, called to embody paternal/maternal attitudes and behaviours, who finds in the relationship with Mary the opportunity to spiritually mature in this vocation that characterizes him/her.

5. Marian filiality as a paradigm of educative paternity/maternity

In his educational work, Don Bosco made fatherhood a profound experience, inspired by the fatherhood of the heavenly Father, whose boundless tenderness he made tangible to the youth. In this,

⁷⁶ *Ivi* 153-154.

⁷⁷ CARLO COLLI, *Ispirazione mariana del Sistema preventivo*, in PEDRINI (a cura di), *La Madonna dei tempi difficili* 176-177.

⁷⁸ *Ivi* 177.

⁷⁹ *Ivi* 178.

he was assisted by mamma Margherita and Mary herself. Indeed, certain aspects of the Father's face could only be revealed to the youth through Mary, who embodied them in her person and life.⁸⁰

Don Bosco wanted to imprint this experience, representing the core of his educative spirituality, in the members of the congregations he founded. Salesian educators, in imitation of their founding father, are called to live their mission in a style of filiality/fatherhood-motherhood.

The essence of the Salesian vocation is paternal-maternal, involved in the generation and education of the children of God. It operates according to a style that evokes maternal care, not driven by abstract ideologies but by the vital needs of the children. It demonstrates patient love, respecting the personal rhythms of growth of each one, being gentle and affectionate yet firm and decisive.

A prerequisite for realizing this vocation is the vital perception of Mary's motherhood, of whom one feels as daughters and sons and to whom one surrenders more consciously and completely. Don Bosco's instruction to his disciples is a crucial reminder: «In my circumstances, without means, without personnel, it would have been impossible to work for the youth if Mary Help of Christians had not come to our aid with special lights and with abundant help, not only material but also spiritual».⁸¹ According to him, the entire history of the Congregation is undeniable proof of Mary's presence and assistance, and she «wants us to place all our trust in her».⁸² This reality reflects in the lives of Salesian educators, emphasizing that the work of inner generation of individuals is a mystery beyond our control. It requires cultivating trustful surrender to Mary, letting her guide the educative work.

In concluding a letter to the Salesian community in Valdocco in 1884, Giuseppe Buzzetti adds to Don Bosco's lengthy instruction: «Preach to everyone, young and old, that they always remember they are children of Mary Help of Christians».⁸³

The generativity inherent in the educative act cannot blossom in the educator unless they have had a profound experience of feeling themselves as children of Mary. Similarly, one cannot be a good father or mother without experiencing healthy natural filiality. Therefore, the “sense of being children” of Mary forms the constitutive identity for all, educators and students alike: children of God and children of Mary, the mother of all Christians.

From this filial identity, assumed and lived as a response to God's call, springs the sense of one's “relativity” to God and Jesus. The educational mission finds its theological foundation: to cooperate with God in his salvific plan for the youth, to focus on Christ to participate in his pastoral love, and thus cooperate with God in Christ, “assisted” by Mary, who cooperates maternally with God and Christ.⁸⁴

From Mary and her maternal care, therefore, originates the Preventive System, an educational method and spirituality. Don Bosco's insistence on placing himself under the guidance of Mary, letting her lead, stems from the fact that without her, it is impossible to live out this method in its purpose and methodological aspects. The letter from 1884 further clarifies this: «She herself [Most Holy Mary] has gathered them here to lead them away from the dangers of the world, so that they may love each other as brothers and give glory to God and her with their good conduct».⁸⁵ The “field of work” in pastoral care is the one chosen and indicated by her in the prelude to the dream of the

⁸⁰ Cf. JOSEPH AUBRY, *Apostoli salesiani con Maria*, in ARNALDO PEDRINI (a cura di), *La Madonna dei tempi difficili*. Simposio Mariano Salesiano d'Europa, Roma, 21-27 gennaio 1979, Roma, LAS 1980, 147-148.

⁸¹ MB XI 257.

⁸² MB III 32.

⁸³ GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Lettera alla comunità salesiana dell'Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, Roma, 10 maggio 1884, in DBE 388.

⁸⁴ This is what is expressed in the Constitutions of the Institute of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians: «The Preventive System [...] is an experience of apostolic charity, which has its source in the very Heart of Christ and as a model, the maternal care of Mary. It consists of an educational presence that, with the sole force of persuasion and love, seeks to collaborate with the Holy Spirit to make Christ grow in the hearts of the young» (ISTITUTO FIGLIE DI MARIA AUSILIATRICE, *Costituzioni e Regolamenti*, Istituto FMA, Roma 1982, art. 7).

⁸⁵ BOSCO, *Lettera alla comunità salesiana dell'Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, in DBE 388.

nine years, reaffirmed in the progressive unfolding of the mission.⁸⁶ The “Shepherdess of dreams” designates the nature of the mission and identifies its recipients, the field of youth pastoral care. Her maternal presence is the very condition for the possibility of such a mission: «It is our Lady who provides them with bread and means to study with infinite graces and wonders».⁸⁷

She guides educators on the path to being signs and bearers of God's love to the young. The call to become “humble, strong, and robust” is directed to every son and daughter of Don Bosco, following a demanding ascetic line consisting of the commitment to purify one's heart from pride, acquire unwavering strength to contain and channel one's sensitivity, placing it at the service of charity that forgives everything and endures all adversities.⁸⁸

A more detailed explanation can be found in the dream of the garden of roses, where Mary explains the significance of walking among roses and thorns: «Know that the path you have chosen signifies the care you must take for the youth: you must walk in the shoes of mortification. The thorns on the ground represent the sensitive attachments, human sympathies, or antipathies that distract the educator from the true purpose, wound him, halt him in his mission, prevent him from advancing, and gathering crowns for eternal life. The roses are a symbol of the ardent charity that must distinguish you and all your collaborators. The other thorns signify the obstacles, sufferings, and displeasures that you will encounter. But do not lose courage. With charity and mortification, you will overcome everything and reach the roses without thorns».⁸⁹

This interpretation of the dream highlights some important features of the educative mission. The ardent charity for an educator transformed into affection shown, understood, and felt by the youth. Emotional involvement is the aspect that causes the most suffering because it requires enduring human sympathies and antipathies, guiding emotions in an oblation-oriented way, accepting an asceticism «of the same order as that of a father and mother, which is nothing but their love dedicated to their children, with all the toil and sacrifices it includes».⁹⁰

In this task, Mary is the ideal and model to whom «all those who, in the apostolic mission of the Church, cooperate in the regeneration of humanity are invited to look upon».⁹¹ Therefore, if all «those who consecrate themselves in the Church to the regeneration of their brothers and sisters must imitate Mary's maternal love, how much more must those whom God raises up for the regeneration of the little ones do so [...] with an educational method founded on a charity that translates into affection; a method that, to educate and lead to faith, addresses the intellect but takes the secret path through the heart».⁹²

Don Bosco is convinced that only with the help of Mary can those who have dedicated their lives to young people fully live the preventive method, overcoming all relational difficulties that may arise: «Let them remember that... with the help of their Most Holy Mother, that barrier of distrust that the Devil has been able to raise between the young and the superiors must fall, and he knows how to take advantage of it for the ruin of certain souls».⁹³

Hence, an apostolic lifestyle inspired by and in line with Mary, which is expressed in humility and servant zeal before God; motherly tenderness towards the young; the courage to fight in difficulties; hope that lifts the eyes towards heaven.⁹⁴

The marian filiality, consciously lived as a journey of Christian and Salesian formation, thus transforms into a source of educative fatherhood/motherhood, revealing its centrality and importance in the comprehensive application of the preventive system.

⁸⁶ Cf. il sogno del 1844 narrato in MO 134-135.

⁸⁷ BOSCO, *Lettera alla comunità salesiana dell'Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, in DBE 388.

⁸⁸ Cf. COLLI, *Ispirazione mariana del sistema preventivo*, in PEDRINI (a cura di), *La Madonna dei tempi difficili* 164.

⁸⁹ MB III 35.

⁹⁰ AUBRY JOSEPH, *Lo spirito salesiano. Lineamenti*, Cooperatori Salesiani, Roma 1972, 75.

⁹¹ LG n. 65.

⁹² COLLI, *Ispirazione mariana del sistema preventivo*, in PEDRINI (a cura di), *La Madonna dei tempi difficili* 168.

⁹³ BOSCO, *Lettera alla comunità salesiana dell'Oratorio di Torino-Valdocco*, in DBE 388.

⁹⁴ *Ivi* 138-141.

Conclusion

After partially exploring Don Bosco's filial relationship with Mary and identifying its impacts on the practice of the Preventive System, we might wonder about the emerging challenges for us today.

There is a significant gap between our hectic, technological world and that of our Founder and his youth. We may look at his simple yet vital and profound religiosity with a hint of nostalgia, which accompanied his childhood and youth. From this, Don Bosco learned to feel like a child of Mary, to pray and invoke her in every circumstance, enveloping his Oratory's youth in the same warm climate of trust and affection.

It's evident that much of that religiosity, tied to a generational transmission of faith that was simple yet effective, has faded away, if not entirely disappeared in some cases. Today, many parents and educators, disoriented and discouraged, are tempted to abdicate their roles as fathers/mothers, resulting in an increasing number of children and teenagers feeling orphaned.

Nevertheless, no human being can do without the experience of filiation. Being a child is the constitutive experience of being human, the only relationship from which none of us can abstain. The condition of being a child is in fact « the constitutive experience of being human, the only relationship from which none of us can abstain. We might spend our entire existence without ever being or becoming a father or mother, brother or sister, husband or wife, but we will never be able to avoid the experience of being a child».⁹⁵ Therefore, «the condition of being a child does not belong to a moment in life but to the entire life».⁹⁶

This is the optimal ground on which, in my opinion, the preventive educational journey can be grafted. However, this won't be possible without Mary. Without her, one cannot become a person, let alone a Christian. She remains the Teacher who guides us in the field of youth education. By firmly holding our hands in hers, we will find the way to enter hearts and walk and grow together towards holiness.

⁹⁵ ANNA BISSI, *Essere e diventare figli. La vocazione dell'uomo*, Paoline, Milano 2012, 20.

⁹⁶ BRUNO MAGGIONI, *Padre nostro*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1995, 32.