

THE EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE EXPERIENCE OF LAURA VICUÑA¹

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In the events experienced by the young Laura Vicuña you can see a concrete demonstration of the effectiveness of the preventive System lived with conviction and commitment by the community of Junín de los Andes.² In her preteen story, both the extraordinary docility of an open and values-oriented personality emerge with the formative vigour of the people who accompanied her in her short but intense journey of growth in the College of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians.³

When Laura arrived in Junín it was the 21st January 1900. At the age of nine she had already lived the hard experience of exile. Her family, in fact, had been forced to leave Santiago de Chile because of the raging civil war, and moved south of the country, to Temuco; and then, after the tragic death of the head-family Giuseppe Domenico Vicuña, the mother Mercedes Pino with her two daughters Laura and Amanda, only five years old, had crossed the Andes Cordillera to settle in the Argentine Neuquén.⁴ The experience of uprooting from their native land and the loss of their father must have obviously affected the two sisters, who didn't find here a favourable environment for the healing of these wounds but, on the contrary, a place characterized by extreme economic poverty, social and moral.

Patagonia at the beginning of the 20th century was populated by indigenous people from neighbouring Chile, who were in the throes of civil war. In 1865 the region of Neuquén was inhabited by 60% of Chilean people. Material and moral poverty was strong and there was an almost completely absence of religious assistance from the Catholic priests. Consequently, in relation to Christian marriage, for example, 60-65% of the population lived without legitimizing the union either at ecclesial or state level.

In Junín there was only one state school, which opened in 1895 but started to operate in 1897. The harsh living conditions, the immense territorial expanses, the difficulties of communication and the precarious institutional structure were factors which compromised the educational work in the

¹ Il presente contributo è frutto di una rielaborazione dell'articolo pubblicato in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 42(2004)1, p. 44-57.

² Per la produzione bibliografica su Laura Vicuña si veda: SACRA PRO CAUSIS SANCTORUM CONGREGATIONE, Viedmen, *Beatificationis et Canonizationis servae Dei Laurae Vicuña virginis filiae Mariae Alumnae Instituti Filiarum Mariae Auxiliatricis, Positio Super Causae Introductione*, Roma, Tipografia Guerra et Belli, Roma 1969 [si abbrevierà *Positio*] e le pubblicazioni curate con serietà scientifica da CÀSTANO Luigi, *Laura, la ragazza delle Ande Patagoniche. Laura Vicuña 1891-1904 Alunna delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino (Leumann), LDC 1983; ID., *Tredicenne sugli altari. Beata Laura Vicuña, alunna delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice nelle Missioni Patagoniche 1891-1904*, Torino (Leumann), LDC 1988; ID., *Santità e martirio di Laura Vicuña*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1990. Cf anche la pubblicazione corredata da una bibliografia completa su Laura Vicuña di DOSIO Maria, *Laura Vicuña. Un cammino di santità giovanile salesiana*, Roma, LAS 2004. Altri apporti della stessa studiosa, che utilizzerò anche nel mio studio, sono: ID., *Preadolescenza e progetto di vita cristiana. Laura Vicuña e la sua impostazione di vita (1891-1904)*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 24(1986)3, 303-328; ID., *La «vicenda religiosa» di Laura Vicuña sullo sfondo della religiosità preadolescenziale*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 26(1988)1, 27-66; ID., *Fecondità di un metodo educativo: la beata Laura Vicuña*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 26(1988)3, 337-351.

³ D'ora in poi abbrevierò FMA.

⁴ La regione del Neuquén prima del XIX secolo era popolata da tribù di aborigeni chiamati "Pehuenches" e da altri di cultura "mapuche". Essi furono in seguito aspramente combattuti dal governo argentino ad opera del generale Julio Argentino Roca. Gli scontri più aspri avvennero tra il 1879 e il 1883, tanto che gli aborigeni furono costretti a spostarsi verso i territori di Arauco. Al termine di questa campagna militare parte delle terre conquistate furono lasciate in premio ai militari che vi avevano partecipato. Sul finire dell'Ottocento le terre del Neuquén cominciarono così a popolarsi di immigrati provenienti dal vicino Cile allo scopo di lavorare nei "ranchos" (cf NAVARRO FLORIA Pedro, *Historia de la Patagonia*, Buenos Aires, Ciudad Argentina 1999; BRUNO Cayetano, *Los salesianos y las Hijas de Maria Auxiliadora en la Argentina II [1895-1910]*, Buenos Aires, Instituto Salesiano de Artes Graficas 1983, 281-284).

territory. For this reason the presence of the Salesians, which began in 1892, effectively answered the questions of education and social promotion coming from this land.⁵

Laura's mother, Donna Mercedes, of a quick and lively character, came from the good society of Santiago and had received a decent education. That's why she was worried in Temuco that Laura would go to lower classes and she herself had taught her how to read. When she arrived in Junín, one of her first concerns was the education of her daughters.⁶ However, being in desperate economic conditions, she had agreed to live with Manuel Mora, a man without scruples who owned an *estancia* in Quilquihué. The decision to put the daughters under the guardianship of the FMA, as well as the desire to offer them a proper education, was certainly dictated by the need to keep Laura and Amanda away from the bad influence of Mora.

The FMA College was desired by Domenico Milanese⁷ director of the Salesian mission, a man of deep inner life and balance who, after the foundation of the male college directed by the Salesians, seven years later, in 1899, also wanted the female one directed by the FMA. His intention was to meet the strong demand for education and human promotion from the territory also and especially in favor of girls. Milanese himself had informed of the initiative through a circular in which he clearly stated the purpose: to educate as many indigenous children as possible in a Christian way.⁸ For the presentation of the women's college, he had been inspired by the Regulation of the Mornese School, where on 5 August 1872, the Institute of the FMA was founded. When the women's institution opened on 6 March 1899, there were nineteen pupils, ten of whom were interns. The FMA ran a modest boarding school, a sewing workshop and a festive oratory, but they also dedicated themselves to catechesis for the rural population by going to the "ranchos".⁹

1. Communities united around the educational mission

The two communities of the Salesians and the FMA, although having separate buildings, shared the church and kitchen, and both environments were placed under the direct responsibility of the FMA which involved girls to maintain their decorum. These communities, according to Brugna, constituted a large family in which, while maintaining the necessary separation, there was a deep and continuous collaboration so that it could be said that the work presented itself as a true mixed school although, Obviously, coeducation as conceived by contemporary pedagogy is not applied in it.¹⁰ The profound synergy of intentions and actions was fostered by the unique direction of the work entrusted to Don

⁵ Cf NICOLETTI María Andrea, *Educar a la mujer en la Patagonia: las Hijas de María Auxiliadora y las imágenes femeninas [1880-1934]*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 60 [2002] 1, 58-61 [traduzione mia]; cf anche ID., *Las imagen del indígena de la Patagonia: aportes científicos y sociales de don Bosco y los Salesianos (1880-1920)*, in MOTTO Francesco, *L'Opera Salesiana dal 1880 al 1922. Significatività e portata sociale I. Contesti, quadri generali, interpretazioni*. Atti del 3° Convegno Internazionale di Storia dell'Opera Salesiana. Roma, 31 ottobre – 5 novembre 2000. Roma, LAS 2001, 341-367.

⁶ Cf CÀSTANO, *Tredicenne sugli altari* 43.

⁷ Il Salesiano Domenico Milanese (1843-1922) fece parte della prima spedizione missionaria salesiana che partì da Genova nel 1877. Sacerdote zelante, attraversò la Patagonia portando la luce del Vangelo agli indigeni che erano duramente perseguitati dai governi locali. Nel 1883 salì fino al Rio Neuquén e poi affrontò da solo la Cordigliera andina. Ascese il Rio Negro visitando fortini e villaggi. Cavalcò per le pampe del Rio Negro fino a Conesa. Nella seconda tappa della sua vita missionaria fondò molti centri di irradiazione apostolica. Catechizzò in Patagones le tribù dei Ñicolás, Cachicuñán, Namuncurà, Foyel e Licuful (cf PAESA Pascual, *Don Domenico Milanese*, in VALENTINI Eugenio [a cura di], *Profili Missionari. Salesiani e Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Roma, LAS 1975, 42-47; cf anche NICOLETTI, *Misiones "Ad gentes": Manual misioneros salesiano para la evangelización de la Patagonia [1910-1924]*, in *Ricerche Storiche Salesiane* 31 [2002] 1, 11-48).

⁸ Cf BRUGNA Ciro, *Aportes para el conocimiento de Laura Vicuña*, Buenos Aires, Instituto Salesiano de Artes Graficas Don Bosco 1990, 89.

⁹ Cf NICOLETTI, *Educar a la mujer* 59.

¹⁰ Cf BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 82-83.

Milanesio and maintained thanks to the application of the Salesian educational method characterized by the continuous presence of educators among boys and girls.¹¹

Vicar and confessor of the Salesian community was Father Augusto Crestanello who followed closely the spiritual journey of Laura and guided her choices.¹² by Don Félix Ortiz master and assistant,¹³ and by Edoardo Genghini, Salesian coadjutor and lay teacher.

The FMA community was made up of five religious women who all had, although to different degrees, a decisive influence on Laura's itinerary.

The director, Sister Angela Piai, was a woman of great educational qualities and exquisite intuition; Laura considered her as her second mother and placed in her total confidence. Sister Angela left Italy in 1891 with the FMA mission to Peru. In 1899 she was appointed to the direction of the community of Junín where she remained for nine years, expressing great kindness in her educational action and working to give the girls a serious and complete education. The delicacy of the trait and her charity open to all won her in a short time the esteem and sympathy of the population. The love and maternal care were mainly directed to external and internal girls with a particular attention to those who were most materially or morally in need. With her affability and smile she won the hearts of all, thus being able to act significantly on their human and Christian formation. Intuitive educator, balanced and faithful to the preventive system, she noticed that Laura was a particularly receptive girl and followed her with attention and care, helping in a special way the action of the confessor don Crestanello.¹⁴

In the direction of the school, Sister Piai was assisted by two teachers: Sister Rosa Azócar, assistant to the interns, among whom were Laura and her sister Amanda, and Sister Ana María Rodríguez, whom Laura admired and valued beyond measure and who, as a catechist, had the task of preparing her for First Communion.

Sister Rosa Azócar, a Chilean, was a gifted educator and since her arrival in Junín in 1899 she had been supporting the teaching of girls attending school. She herself wrote of herself: «I was always and everywhere with the pupils, assisting them in the courtyard, in the refectory, in the chapel, in the dormitory. I had them in class and I took them for walks. From the beginning I sat even at the table with them, and I did not leave her a moment».¹⁵ Sister Rosa took care of the thirteen girls inside the college, among them were the sisters Laura and Giulia Amanda Vicuña.

Ana María Rodríguez, a Colombian, was a competent teacher with good teaching skills. Upright, firm, impartial with the students, she had no interest in anything but their wellness. She taught the lessons with simplicity so as to ensure the attention of the pupils. She had a strong and ready temperament. Despite the physical disturbances, she lived the patient charity and constant laboriousness of the preventive system, thus revealing herself as an authentic witness of the values proclaimed and profoundly influencing the boarders. When Sister Ana arrived in Junín, she was given the responsibility of the older girls, including Laura. She could thus exert upon her a strong spiritual influence. In particular, Laura had her as a teacher of faith in preparation for the first Communion she made on 3 June 1901. It is probably by looking at this teacher who lived with conviction and

¹¹ Il Brugna documenta come le FMA fossero presenti «tra le educande notte e giorno, nella classe, nelle ricreazioni e nelle passeggiate, nelle feste e nelle varie occupazioni giornaliere» (ivi 119-120 [traduzione mia]).

¹² Il salesiano Augusto Crestanello (1862-1925) partì dall'Italia per le missioni nel 1891. Lavorò nella missione di Junín de los Andes in qualità di parroco e vicedirettore della missione. Uomo di profonda vita interiore, fu un vero forgiatore di anime e in particolare fu direttore spirituale di Laura per i quattro anni della sua permanenza al collegio. Sette anni dopo la morte della giovane, don Crestanello ne scrisse la biografia avvalendosi di numerose testimonianze avute dalle compagne e dalle FMA che erano state sue educatrici. Più che mirare alla cronologia degli avvenimenti, don Crestanello cercò di documentare e mettere in luce le virtù di Laura. Per l'immediatezza e l'attendibilità dei ricordi che contiene, tale biografia possiede un innegabile valore documentario (cf CRESTANELLO Augusto, *Vita di Laura Vicuña Alunna delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice e Figlia di Maria Immacolata*, Santiago, Scuola tip. Gratitude Nazionale 1911, in *Positio* 209-305; cf anche la testimonianza di CÁSTANO, *Santità e martirio* 28-30).

¹³ Felice Ortíz (1881-1915) nacque a Dolores, provincia di Buenos Aires, e frequentò il collegio salesiano di Viedma (Patagonia). Dopo la professione fu assistente a Junín dove rimase quattro anni corrispondenti al periodo della permanenza di Laura nel collegio delle FMA.

¹⁴ cf SECCO Michelina, *Donne in controluce sul cammino di Laura Vicuña*, Roma, Istituto FMA 1990, 15-40.

¹⁵ Testimoniaza riportata da CASTANO, *Tredicenne sugli altari* 52-53.

consistency her educational religious vocation, that Laura and her friend Mercedita felt the ideal of religious consecration develop in their hearts. Sister Ana also often presented to her students some aspects of the life of the founders, Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello, helping to make their ideal of life attractive and concrete.¹⁶

There were also Sister Luigia Grassi, assistant to the external pupils and Sister María Rodríguez.

Sister Luigia Grassi, an Italian, arrived in Junín on 6 April 1900 together with Sister María Rodríguez and aspirant María Briceño, both Chilean. Sister Luigia was in charge of the group of nineteen external.¹⁷ Diligent educator, she helped to create the family climate that so effectively influenced the maturation of the young women, and in particular of Laura.¹⁸

Sister María Rodríguez, through the disengagement of domestic work, helped to create a family environment saturated with joy despite the economic constraints in which the community was. The FMA's collaborators were also María Briceño, a young Chilean woman who shared the lives of the interns and the work of the nuns, and the two sisters María and Mercedes Vera, the latter of whom Laura was friends and confidants.¹⁹

What gave the community the pedagogical vigour was, despite the limits present in every reality, the human quality of the Salesians and the FMA, together with the convergence of their proposals. First of all, in Junín was alive and concrete the example of total donation for the wellness of the girls and of the boys that animated each member of the community, while the serene and cheerful atmosphere of the environment helped to overcome even great sacrifices. The extreme poverty and the strong isolation of which suffered the Salesians and the Sisters were filled with deep faith and unshakable hope in the humanizing scope of their work. They believed in the educational value of their proposal, trusting in the educationists/s and their ability to open themselves to ideals and to make courageous choices in life.²⁰

The girls of Junín, then, could benefit from the environment of a community where they found a climate of high educational depth in which educators offered them a presence rich in pedagogical love that was expressed in the passion for their integral growth and oriented each one to spontaneously share human and spiritual resources and develop them. We can therefore say that in Junín there was the same educational climate that characterized the oratory of Torino-Valdocco and that it had produced excellent fruits in the lives of young people like Domenico Savio, Michele Magone, Francesco Besucco.

The loving-kindness as a pedagogical and methodological element was applied also in religious communities, directing the choices towards a real sharing not only of ideals but also of concrete life, and creating a climate of spontaneity where Salesians, FMA and teachers took part in the life of prayer, study and work in a healthy atmosphere of joy and free participation that matured people.²¹

This climate should not be an exception if the Salesian Inspector Don Giuseppe Vespignani, referring to the first foundation of the Institute of the FMA in Almagro (Buenos Aires), expressed:

What gave me edification was the sight and feel that everything is done as in Mornese. The spirit of that mother-house had been brought by those good nuns with their Inspectorate and they talked so much about it that they even wanted their little theatre in the new house to bring their beautiful Mornese and painted into the curtain! And so there was a nice competition in the two institutions; we with Valdocco [...] and they with Mornese! ... and it was not a matter of names, but of real similarity and affectionate nostalgia for the Salesian spirit! Having to listen a little more to those good sisters, I always saw in them a great

¹⁶ Cf SECCO, *Donne in controllo* 75-84; BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 121.

¹⁷ Cf NICOLETTI, *Educar a la mujer* 59.

¹⁸ Cf SECCO, *Donne in controllo* 55-62.

¹⁹ María Briceño, cilena, diventerà FMA nel 1908, mentre María e Mercedes Vera, argentine, lo divennero rispettivamente nel 1906 e nel 1908 (cf *ivi* 87-120).

²⁰ Cf BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 119-120.

²¹ Cf *ivi* 123-125.

esteem and reverence for their Inspectorate, always in agreement, always united and content, always cheerful in the midst of poverty, at work, at study, and by doing their works of charity».²²

To describe this climate, Brugna uses a metaphor comparing it to al *caldo de cultivo*, that is to say to that substance which possesses in itself all the ingredients suitable and necessary for the growth of the seed.²³

1. The quality of the educational presence

According to documentary sources, the Junín school was an environment suitable for the maturation of girls not only for the healthy and intentional educational relationships that were built within it, but also for the clarity of the goals that the community set itself to help the boarders in their integral growth and for the quality of spiritual life that was cultivated in it. The standard of education in the college, according to the school inspector Flores who visited the institution, was good, the teaching staff well prepared and the results appreciable not only from the point of view of vocational training, but also in favour of the moral and social education of young women. This assessment was not insignificant, considering that the inspector could have highlighted administrative and organizational shortcomings, while on the contrary he highlighted the quality of the training of teachers and young women.²⁴ The FMA's own Constitutions, moreover, provided that the action of teachers and assistants should not be limited to simply teaching as to educate girls by focusing on religion and life practice.²⁵

Inspector Flores' assessment confirms the approach of the educational project at the Junín school, which conceived the preventive system not only as a method to be applied in teaching but also in relations between teachers and assistants.²⁶ This project was pursued effectively despite the limits of cultural and economic poverty of the context in which the community was inserted and the normal difficulties arising from the commitment to a continuous and constant collaboration between Salesians and FMA.

²² *Alcuni dati che si riferiscono alla prima fondazione dell'Istituto delle FMA in Buenos Aires Almagro. Dalla Cronologia abbreviata della Casa Ispettorale di San Carlos, scritta nel 1884, in Archivio Ispettorale FMA [Buenos Aires], Scatola Orígenes/1. Richiamando questa prima comunità si vuole evocare la vita semplice, profonda ed evangelicamente genuina degli inizi dove educatrici ed educande vivevano insieme condividendo un progetto educativo ispirato al Sistema preventivo di don Bosco (cf *Un buon Istituto per le ragazze*, in *L'Unità Cattolica* del 1° ottobre 1873, in Cavaglià– Costa, *Orme di vita, tracce di futuro*, doc. n° 25, 86-87).*

²³ Cf BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 97.

²⁴ Cf CMA, *Informes de Inspectores, Informe del Inspector Flores*, Junín de los Andes, mayo 29-30 de 1917, mayo 29 de 1918, abril de 1919, in NICOLETTI, *Educare a la mujer* 62.

²⁵ Le Costituzioni dell'Istituto delle FMA esplicitano così tale finalità: «Sarà loro impegno di formarle alla pietà, renderle buone cristiane, e capaci di guadagnarsi a suo tempo onestamente il pane della vita» (*Costituzioni* 1885, I 4). E ancora, così recita il Regolamento per le Case di educazione: «Scopo generale delle Case della Congregazione è soccorrere, beneficiare il prossimo specialmente coll'educazione della gioventù allevandola negli anni più pericolosi, istruendola nelle scienze e nelle arti, ed avviandola alla pratica della Religione e della virtù» (*Regolamento per le Case di educazione dirette dalle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1895, I). E il Manuale del 1908 ribadisce tale assunto: «[La FMA] non si dimenticherà mai che scopo principale dell'insegnamento è la cristiana educazione delle fanciulle, perciò non si dovrà mai disgiungere la pietà dallo studio. Studio senza pietà è lavoro non diretto al suo fine, perché l'uomo è inseparabile dal cristiano, e perché, specialmente la donna, è portata alla pietà per sua natura» (*Manuale delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice fondate l'anno 1872 dal Venerabile Giovanni Bosco*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1908, n° 350). Cf anche le *Deliberazioni dei Capitoli Generali delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice tenuti in Nizza Monferrato nel 1884, 1886 e 1892*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1894, n° 379.

²⁶ Il metodo preventivo applicato nell'educazione deve, cioè, essere frutto ed espressione di una personalità equilibrata che ha saputo integrare gli stessi valori proposti alle ragazze. Tale istanza veniva opportunamente esplicitata nel Manuale: «Le Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice saranno profondamente religiose di coscienza, di mente e di cuore affinché divenga efficace la loro missione. Le giovanette ricevono quel che loro si dà, e le FMA non potrebbero dare mai quello che non possiedono» (*Manuale* 1908 n° 272). E ancora: «Chi attende all'importante opera dell'educazione deve mantenersi in quella nobiltà e di sentimenti e di azioni e di contegno, propria dell'educatrice cristiana, senza cui non vi può essere affatto autorità morale» (*ivi* n° 503).

The FMA community carefully cultivated its own continuing education through simple but effective mediations such as reading and understanding of the House Rules,²⁷ the Director's Weekly Conference,²⁸ the educational and teaching coordination implemented by the local school counsellor who was in turn in liaison with the general school counsellor.²⁹ In this way the educators deepened the importance of an educational mission whose meaning was rooted in their own life experience. They themselves, in fact, had known Salesians and FMA of the first generation who had transmitted to them the enthusiasm, ardor, educational and spiritual orientations of the Founders, as Sister Azócar herself states:

«Coming from Santiago, from the school that had been through the passage of Monsignor Costamagna, we were full of fervor; and Laura Vicuña was among the pupils most ready to follow us in our still youthful outbursts of piety, and there was no danger that he would drop a single word of our instructions or recommendations, especially if religious. She knew how to catch them on the fly, deepen and practice them properly, much more than we could expect from her age».³⁰

In conclusion, the training offer of the community of Junín included the inseparable binomial of evangelization and education because it was not limited to a simple human promotion, which however the girls and boys of the place were extremely in need, but it contained a Christian formation which, especially with regard to young women, constituted an indispensable contribution to the moralizing action of society.³¹

Going through the biography of Laura Vicuña, it is easy to see the beneficial effects that this pedagogical approach had not only on her but on all boarders.

2. Influence of the educational proposals on the Christian formation of Laura Vicuña

The educational environment of the Junín college was really the ideal *caldo de cultivo* for the growth of young women and for the FMA themselves. The fruits of this pedagogical action are not only found in the formative path of Laura, but also in that of other girls who spontaneously chose the religious Salesian life wanting to share the same educational ideal of their teachers and assistants.³² For her part, Laura responded with docility and openness to the proposals of the environment, submitting in particular to the guidance of Don Crestanello, her confessor.³³

²⁷ Nel *Manuale* si ribadisce che «nessuna sarà messa a insegnare o ad assistere se prima non avrà letto e compreso il Regolamento nella parte che la riguarda» (*Manuale* 1908, n° 348).

²⁸ Cf *Costituzioni* 1885 XVIII, 21; *Deliberazioni dei Capitoli Generali* 1884, 1886 e 1892 n° 164.

²⁹ Alla Consigliera scolastica, o “Seconda Assistente”, veniva affidato tutto quanto riguardava le scuole e l’insegnamento nelle varie Case dell’Istituto (cf *Costituzioni* [1878] III 9). Ad essa corrispondeva una consigliera scolastica locale che si caratterizzava come la “voce” pedagogico-salesiana della scuola perché, in continua interrelazione con le insegnanti, ne curava la formazione e ne stimolava la collaborazione, contribuiva a creare e mantenere nell’ambiente scolastico il clima familiare tipico del Sistema preventivo e, al tempo stesso, la serietà pedagogica e didattica richiesta da tali istituzioni (cf CAVAGLIA, *La consigliera scolastica nelle scuole delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Approccio storico-pedagogico*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell’Educazione* 32 [1994] 2, 189-221).

³⁰ Testimonianza di suor Rosa Azócar riferita da madre Clelia Genghini, in *Positio* 170.

³¹ Cf NICOLETTI, *Educar a la mujer* 63-71.

³² Anche Laura desiderava diventare FMA ma a causa dell’irregolare situazione della mamma questo non le fu possibile (cf CÀSTANO, *Tredicenne sugli altari* 97-105). Tra le altre giovani che entrarono nell’Istituto delle FMA vi erano Maria Briceño e le due sorelle Mercedes e María Vera. La comunità di Junín era simile a quella di Mornese nella quale la forza propositiva della testimonianza e della gioiosa fedeltà alla vocazione contagiava giovani quali Corinna Arrigotti (cf CAPETTI Giselda [a cura di], *Cronistoria [dell’Istituto delle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice]* I, Roma, Istituto FMA 1974, 260-261), Emilia Mosca (cf *ivi* II, 16-17); Maria Belletti (cf *ivi* 129-132).

³³ Fu la direttrice suor Piaì ad indirizzare Laura a don Crestanello come lei stessa conferma: «Quando mi accorsi di aver dinanzi a me una creatura così eccezionale, e me ne accorsi presto, ebbi come un senso di timore e mi domandai se [per] caso non avrei potuto guastare l’opera del Signore in lei. Per questo l’affidai particolarmente a don Crestanello, il quale più di me, deve aver intravisto subito il tesoro di quell’anima angelica, perché non si limitò ad ammirarne la bellezza, ma per quattro anni la coltivò con sacerdotale sapienza e salesiana paternità. Non è certamente uno dei minori meriti del piissimo don Crestanello questo di aver saputo entrare così perfettamente nei disegni di Dio a riguardo

Membership in such a well-animated and organized educational community, participation in the religious and apostolic association of the "Daughters of Mary", the meeting between educators and young people through multiple forms achieved to be able to translate the ideal in an accessible and engaging proposal of youth holiness³⁴ In fact, if holiness is the goal, education is the necessary methodological mediation, that is the "privileged human instrument" for the development of the potentialities present in every young person.

The proposal of the Salesian training project reached Laura and her companions through publications that the pupils had in hand such as the life of Domenico Savio written by Don Bosco,³⁵ the life of Luigi Gonzaga published by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Buenos Aires in 1891, the Rules for the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians,³⁶ e other books such as *La Spiga d'oro* and *Il giovane provveduto* by don Bosco.³⁷

In the Salesian educational project, the primacy goes to religion understood as the centrality of the presence of God in one's own life. The principle reaffirmed by Don Bosco is that in religion lies true happiness. The discovery of God as the unifying center of existence has as a consequence the inner peace and the gift of self as a response of love and therefore the acceptance of every situation with serenity and abandonment. It is a vital route that leads to the maturation of integrated personalities and helps to overcome any withdrawal into oneself.³⁸

The maturation of these attitudes in Laura was mediated by Don Crestanello and the educators,³⁹ in whom the girl placed her trust.⁴⁰ Such docility preserved her from illusions and spiritual deviations, instead directing her to a simple and true itinerary of encounter with God, to the perception of his continuous and loving presence in daily life and to an uninterrupted relationship with him. Laura's was a concrete and realistic journey in which the love of God poured out into hearts was at the center, and that which radiates into the environment and occurs in service to others. This is how Laura herself expressed herself when she spoke of her spiritual experience:

«“ It seems to me - she said - that God himself keeps alive in me the memory of his Divine Presence. Wherever I am, in class or in the courtyard, this memory accompanies me, helps and comforts me.” “It is that you - the confessor objected to her - will always be worried by this thought, neglecting perhaps your duties.” “Ah no, Father, she replied. I know that this thought helps me to do everything better and that it

dell'elettissima Laura, anzi lo credo uno dei suoi meriti maggiori. E penso che il tempo saprà darmi ragione» (Testimonianza di suor Angela Piaì, in *Positio* 170).

³⁴ Cf BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 99-101.

³⁵ Cf BOSCO Giovanni, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico allievo dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales, per cura del Sacerdote Bosco Giovanni*, in ID., *Opere Edite XI* [1858-1859], Roma, LAS 1976, 150-292.

³⁶ Cf *Regolamento per le Case di educazione dirette dalle Figlie di Maria Ausiliatrice. Parte seconda: Regolamento per le alunne*, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1895, 51-78.

³⁷ Cf BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 99-101.

³⁸ Questo stesso orientamento viene espresso nel Regolamento per le alunne che Laura conosce e che ricalca sostanzialmente i contenuti de *Il giovane provveduto* di don Bosco (cf *Regolamento per le alunne* 51-53; 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 ID., *Opere Edite II* [1846-1847], Roma, LAS 1976, 183-532).

³⁹ Le testimonianze sono concordi nell'affermare che Laura seguì sempre molto fedelmente, ma nello stesso tempo con grande spontaneità, i consigli e le direttive del confessore. Erano direttive provenienti da salesiani e FMA che esplicitavano il modello di santità giovanile da essi stessi assorbito a Torino e Mornese e che si esprimeva attraverso una presenza così autentica e spontanea da risultare oltremodo efficace e da incidere profondamente sulla personalità delle giovani (cf Testimonianza di Luigi Pedemonte, in *Positio* 8-9). La docilità al confessore era raccomandata anche dal Regolamento: «Abbiate gran confidenza verso il confessore; a lui aprite ogni segretezza del vostro cuore ogni 8 o 15 giorni» (cf *Regolamento per le alunne* 52-53).

⁴⁰ Lo stesso don Crestanello afferma: «Laura era molto sottomessa ed obbediente al suo direttore spirituale, che mai cambiò. A lui riferiva con candida semplicità tutto quello che le passava nel cuore, tutti i suoi desideri ed aspirazioni, e poi si assoggettava con completa sottomissione ai suoi consigli o ingiunzioni» (CRESTANELLO, *Vita di Laura Vicuña*, in *Positio* 239).

does not bother me in any way, because it is not that I am constantly thinking about this, but without thinking about you I am enjoying this memory”».⁴¹

Like the young people of Valdocco, for example Domenico Savio, Laura matured in a Christian life oriented to the development of the energies of good present in her person through consistent and courageous choices of life. She too, on the occasion of her first Communion (30 May 1901), committed herself to love God, to prefer death to sin and to make sure that God was known and loved by all.⁴²

Laura understood and translated in her simple daily life the ideal of holiness typical of Salesians and FMA and proposed by them to young people as a project of life, as a privileged way to be happy, as a gift and as a task.⁴³ The biographer testifies to this with these words:

« With the same attention (which she had towards God), she behaved in the fulfillment of all her other duties. She had understood and applied to herself that sentence: "Do what you are doing," and with holy freedom of spirit, joyous and content, passed from the church to the school classroom, from this to the laboratory or any other work, or recreation; and also left, Without any complaint or sign of dissatisfaction, practices of piety, if obedience or charity imposed on her; and in those circumstances he answered with fervent jailing or willingly doing what obedience commanded. For me - she used to say - praying or working is the same thing; it's the same thing: praying or playing, praying or sleeping. Doing what they command, [doing] what God wants me to do, and that's what I want to do; this is my best prayer”».⁴⁴

This unified existence in love manifests and concretizes the ideal of "giving oneself to God" proposed by Don Bosco to his young people.⁴⁵ It is a gift of self that is expressed in love for God and others, docility to one's own educators, a joyful life manifested in play and joy, and at the same time in prayer as a movement of openness to God, in the exact fulfilment of one's duty, in interpersonal relations oriented and vivified by loving-kindness.

3. Graduality of a journey oriented to the gift of oneself in love

When Laura entered the College of Junin de los Andes she was a pre-adolescent who was experiencing one of the most vivid moments of her psycho-socio-religious development. Open intelligence, determined will, keen sensitivity, cheerful and lively spirit, Laura was a good person, open, sociable, full of human warmth that manifested especially towards the companions who were more in difficulty.⁴⁶ Hers, however, was a temperament also conditioned by a certain impulsiveness and impatience, a pride difficult to control, a desire to appear.⁴⁷ Her authentic photo, which reveals firm gaze and strong traits, confirms the biographer's assessment.

Her path of maturation, therefore, passed through the normal stages of development and growth that characterize pre-adolescence. The decision to give her life for her mother was not improvised but matured over time as she came into contact with human and Christian values mediated in the collegial

⁴¹ CRESTANELLO, *Vita di Laura Vicuña*, in *Positio* 254. Anche suor Angela Piai conferma tale esperienza di Laura riportando le sue parole: «Mi pare, diceva ingenuamente alla direttrice, che Dio stesso mi conservi il ricordo della sua divina presenza, perché qualunque cosa faccia e dovunque mi trovi, sento che Egli mi segue come un buon padre, mi aiuta e mi consola» (Testimonianza di suor Angela Piai riportata da suor Giselda Capetti, in *Positio* 173).

⁴² Cf CRESTANELLO, *Vita di Laura Vicuña*, in *Positio* 7. È dimostrato dalle fonti in esame che anche nel collegio delle FMA di Junín si leggeva la biografia di Domenico Savio scritta da don Bosco (cf BRUGNA, *Aportes para el conocimiento* 99-101).

⁴³ È lo stesso ideale proposto da don Bosco nel testo *Il giovane provveduto* (cf BOSCO, *Il giovane provveduto* 13).

⁴⁴ CRESTANELLO, *Vita di Laura Vicuña*, in *Positio* 227-228.

⁴⁵ Cf in particolare le biografie di Domenico Savio, Francesco Besucco e Michele Magone (BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico* 150-292; ID., *Il pastorello delle Alpi ovvero vita del giovane Besucco Francesco*, in ID., *Opere Edite XV* [1864], Roma, LAS 1976, 242-435; ID., *Cenno biografico sul giovanetto Magone Michele*, in ID., *Opere Edite XIII* [1860-1862], Roma, LAS 1976, 150-250).

⁴⁶ CASTANO, *Laura* 53.38.63.106 s

⁴⁷ Cf *ivi* 55.122.

environment. In the study *Preadolescenza e progetto di vita cristiana. Laura Vicuña e la sua impostazione di vita* Maria Dosio focuses on this decisive moment. The occasion came to her thanks to a comment of the Gospel of Jesus Good Shepherd of 13 April 1902: «If this - thought Laura - gives his life for the flock who will prevent me from offering my existence for the conversion of my mother?». ⁴⁸ Other reasons that guided her were the meditation on the passion of Jesus, the figures of St. Agnes, Domenico Savio, Luigi Gonzaga and of course the influence of her teachers who with their charm of consecrated women happy and totally dedicated to the mission offered a strong model of identification.

This decision was in a sense the reason that guided all the choices resulting channeling them towards an authentic charity that pushed her to give herself to the companions without reservations, both with those kind and polite as with the difficult and rude. Says Maria Dosio: "A service [that of Laura] without poses and without reserve, in simplicity and fidelity to the daily. This openness to others is characteristic of a harmonious psychological development of the pre-adolescent in which the intellectual development takes place against the background of the total development of the person [...]. It can be assumed that in Laura, precisely because of the great challenges presented to her by concrete existential situations, the transition from identification to identity was accelerated. She shows that in a short time she has reached the abilities of self-discovery, self-evaluation and restructuring of her own being which are characteristic of a higher age». ⁴⁹

Gradually, but definitely, Laura had succeeded in expressing a personality who knew how to decentralize and take on board the proposals of her teachers. ⁵⁰ What is particularly striking is the "generative" attitude that despite her young age, Laura was able to express. Although she was active and committed to work and duty, she was willing to give up her commitments when it was necessary to help her companions. She was showing them her willingness and affection, which were immediately reciprocated, because she was the first to forgive the offenses and to look for every opportunity to make happy the people around her. ⁵¹ Her sister testifies: "Laura was always affectionate, patient and willing to forgive my lightness, my little whims and my outbursts of anger. And she did so not only with me, but also with her companions. I saw in her no preference for any companion; she was equally everyone's friend. ⁵² When Laura saw a new boarder coming, for example, she expressed her joy because "another girl comes to know God and learn to love Him ». ⁵³ And immediately, she approached the new arrival, inviting her to play and have fun, asking questions about catechism and various jobs and then offering to help her in everything, even introducing her to the habits of the house. The teachers knew that they could find in the young woman a precious help; for this reason they entrusted to her the pupils who needed the most support, with whom Laura showed special patience and dedication. With them she repeated the lessons for a long time, without showing fatigue, and was also available to help the little ones in the services they needed. ⁵⁴ She had a particular predilection for the poorest companions, so much that she made them the subject of a real will on her deathbed, as her sister testifies: "My little sister, be affable and charitable with your neighbour; never despise the poor, and look at no one with indifference. ⁵⁵

The growth and maturation of Laura, therefore, are evident from the relational expansion of the young woman in relation to the different "faces" present in her environment. Her openness revealed an evident decentralization, preserving her from a sterile and dangerous withdrawal into herself and helping her to face not only the life of the college but also the worrying family affair.

⁴⁸ CASTANO, *Laura* 112.

⁴⁹ DOSIO, *Preadolescenza e progetto di vita cristiana. Laura Vicuña e la sua impostazione di vita (1891-1904)*, in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* 24(1986)3, 37.

⁵⁰ Cf CASTANO, *Tredicenne sugli altari* 116-124.

⁵¹ Cf Testimonianza di Natalina Figueroa, in *Positio* 88; e di suor Maria Briceño, in *ivi* 48.

⁵² Testimonianza di Amanda Vicuña, in *ivi* 72.

⁵³ CRESTANELLO, *Vita di Laura Vicuña* in *ivi* 224.

⁵⁴ Cf *ivi* 224-225.

⁵⁵ *Ivi* 241.

Education helped her, that is, to transform the difficulties into resources without letting them compromise her growth.⁵⁶

She developed a rich relational capacity that could express itself in the willingness to dialogue and encounter. The root of this attitude was in the awareness of the presence of God and his love for her that guided her to trust and openness. It then manifested itself, without interruption, in the confidence and obedience to educators who, as we have seen, embodied educational models easily accessible and rich in fascination for the proactive strength of their testimony. Laura opened herself to the relationship embodying the life project proposed in Valdocco and Mornese, although she never lived there, and becoming a model for the companions and remaining as a hidden ferment without ostentation, but living in an attitude of helpful service.

Towards the family she showed a surprising attitude of self-giving, both towards her younger sister Giulia Amanda, whom she cared for like a mother, and towards her mother, of whom she became, in a certain way, the guide towards a radical change of life.⁵⁷

Towards herself, finally, Laura was clear, demanding but not rigid; she cultivated in her personality the traits of youth spirituality that were proposed to her by the educators and through confrontation, silence and prayer she assimilated them, she made them hers, translating them into the reality of her life.

In conclusion, Laura Vicuña is the mature fruit of an educational environment vivified by the pedagogical love typical of the preventive system expressed with consistency and joy, but it is also the result of a personal commitment to openness and correspondence to the values proposed and to God's work in his existence. It is confirmed thus the conviction that supports and feeds the educational action of Salesians and FMA and that that adolescence and youth are not time to wait, but seasons to develop the immense potential of good and creative possibilities at the service of their courageous choices, those that answer questions about the meaning of life.

This pre-adolescent is the vital demonstration of the goodness and effectiveness of the Salesian method, the proposal of educators who, like Don Bosco and Maria Domenica Mazzarello, believe in the potential of youth and know how to realize together with them a realistic pedagogy of holiness.

⁵⁶ È quanto seppe fare anche Giovanni Bosco trasformando il dramma della perdita del padre in un progetto di paternità che lo porta a diventare padre e amico dei giovani (cf STICKLER Gertrud, *Dalla perdita del padre a un progetto di paternità. Studio sulla evoluzione psicologica della personalità di don Bosco*, in *Rivista di scienze dell'educazione*, 25 [1987] 3, 337-375). Cf a questo proposito il concetto di *resilienza* che, utilizzata in campo educativo, punta sulla valorizzazione delle risorse della persona, sulla fiducia e sull'incoraggiamento (cf COLOMBO Antonia, *La risposta del metodo educativo di don Bosco*, in *Rigenerare la società a partire dai giovani. L'arte della relazione educativa*. Atti della 1ª Convention nazionale sul Sistema Preventivo. Roma 11-12 ottobre 2003, Roma, Istituto FMA – Italia 2003, 84-85).

⁵⁷ Cf CRESTANELLO, *Vita di Laura Vicuña*, in *Positio* 262-266.