

MAMMA MARGARET
DON BOSCO'S FIRST COOPERATOR

(by Joseph Aubry)

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Riffling through the pages of the Salesian Bulletin that print the graces obtained through the intercession of our Saints, it is noticeable that the name of Mamma Margaret appears in ever-growing frequency.

Over the years the request has often been made that the cause for canonisation of this good woman be introduced; and at last the Salesian Congregation has overcome various problems and doubts and has seriously taken the matter in hand.

Imagine the great joy all Don Bosco's followers throughout the world would experience if eventually Mamma Margaret were to be publicly invoked as the canonised mother of the Salesian Family.

Officially proclaimed or not, the remarkable holiness of this woman is obvious to all who are acquainted with her life. Barely thirty years after her death, during the lifetime of Don Bosco, her biography had already been published through the efforts of Don Bosco's secretary and number one historian, Fr John-Baptist Lemoyne, under the title of Instructive events in the family life of Margaret Bosco - a pleasing and edifying account. This can be found in the June edition of the Catholic Readings of 1886. Fr Lemoyne made a solemn presentation of this book to Don Bosco on the occasion of his name-day celebration of 24 June. The saint accepted the gift as the most pleasing one he could have had. He read it through thoughtfully and was deeply moved. He suggested only two small changes.

Fr Lemoyne's pamphlet stirred up the enthusiasm of all those, young and old, who were in any way associated with Don Bosco and his work. The writer's sincerity had excited an unbounded admiration in its readers. The preface spoke enthusiastically of Margaret as not rich, but with a queenly heart, no doctor of science but well versed in the holy fear of God, early deprived of husbandly help in her life but with utter reliance on God's help; thus she was able to carry out the mission entrusted to her by her Creator. I feel confident that whoever reads this biography will see in Margaret the valiant woman of Scripture so well portrayed in the Book of Proverbs.

Fr Lemoyne quotes fifteen verses of the famous chapter 31 of The Book of Proverbs, and they are truly applicable to the mother and first collaborator of St John Bosco. He cites another three verses to conclude the biography and adds, Wherever Don Bosco's name is revered, the name of his mother will also be extolled. It will not be possible to tell the story of the Salesian work inspired by God and Mary Help of Christians without reference to the charity, self abnegation and holiness of Mamma Margaret. She prayed and laboured hard and helped the seed grow into a gigantic tree.

God's instrument in Don Bosco's formation

As we learn about the life of Margaret Bosco we are struck by the work of Providence in her life. She lived for her son and his work. God had implanted within her soul the seed of his future Salesian work. John Bosco owed his life and formation to her. With her he had founded his work and his educational system.

I make so bold as to compare Margaret with Mary, who was prepared by Jesus, became his mother, and eventually his collaborator in his work of salvation and the mother too of his disciples. To know

Margaret Bosco, to discover her charity, is to truly understand something of the depths of Don Bosco's character and discover the source of his holiness and the holiness to which all the members of the Salesian Family are called. Whilst other holy people draw their sanctity from various aspects of Don Bosco's Salesian charism, we are privileged to draw explore the very heart and source of his inspiration.

The life of Margaret can be divided into three distinct periods:

- her younger years up to the age of twenty-four;
- her mature years from twenty-four to fifty-eight;
- her final ten years (fifty-eight to sixty-eight) when she unexpectedly changed her whole life and became her son's first and definite cooperator.

MARGARET OCCHIENA

[AT CAPRIGLIO TILL HER 24TH YEAR (1788-1812)]

The 68 years of Margaret's life were lived in a turbulent era of revolutions. Her naturally strong character had occasion to be strengthened yet further: this 'valiant woman' had also to cope with a series of tragic events.

She was born during the French Revolution. As a child she saw her country invaded by Napoleon's troops and become a French province for many years, plundered by the coming and going of foreign armies, ravaged by conscription and expropriation: a country that even saw a Pope taken into exile and eventually freed.

At 29 years of age she was a widow and had to cope with periods of insecurity and want; she had three sons to care for in a time of political and social instability. This was the time when the Kingdom of Sardinia, restored in 1815, was continually plagued by the depredations of rebellious and liberal activists (1821 and 1830-31).

In Turin, with her son John, now a priest, she lived through the anxieties of the revolutions and wars of 1848-1849, suffered the terror of threats to her son's life, and experienced the tragedy of an entire whole city wilting under the cholera epidemic of 1854. This humble woman certainly had her full share of trials - but never gave in to discouragement. Indeed her whole life was marked by courage and strength of character.

A rugged farming family

Capriglio is a small district in the province of Asti, some thirty kilometres south-west of Turin. Its dwellings are scattered over green hills and surrounded by trees, vines and crops of maize and grain.

Part of the village is called Serra di Capriglio; and it was here that Margaret was born on 1 April 1788. Her parents were Melchior Occhiena and Domenica Bossone, both 36 years old and married for thirteen years. They were comfortably off, owning their house and the adjacent fields. She was the sixth child of the family, but had only a three-year-old sister, Marianna (who was later to come and help her at Valdocco). Three other sisters and a brother had died, for infant mortality was high in those days. The next child to arrive was a boy, who also died young; then came Francis (1791) and Michael (1795), and another sister Lucia (1793), who survived to make up a family of three girls and two boys. Such were the main

facts of Margaret's family - a family that perforce counted courage among its assets.

To this courage was added a strong faith. On the very day of her birth Margaret was baptised in the parish church.

It was in this ambience that Margaret was to grow and live until her 24th year: in a small country district with its church bell, its pleasant and fertile surroundings, and a family full of love, hard work, solid faith, prayer and confidence in God - a time soon to be sundered by the Napoleonic upheavals.

A girl with determination

Margaret's moral and spiritual character was evident right from her youthful years. Father Lemoyne writes: She had a resolute nature and sound common sense; and this coupled with God's grace gave every assurance of overcoming all spiritual and material obstacles that life could offer her. Sound too in her conscience, her affections, her thoughts, sure in her judgements regarding people and things, full of confidence in her way of acting, forthright in her speech, she knew no hesitation...This frankness was a safeguard to her virtue, being united to a prudence that was a safeguard against taking any false step.

Capriglio in those days did not have a school; and so Margaret had never learned to read or write. But though illiterate she was by no means ignorant: she was able to acquire an eminent wisdom by listening with a willing and perceptive heart to the liturgical readings in the parish church, the homilies, the catechesis - and furthermore by learning from her daily experiences.

The humble episodes mentioned in her biography should be read in this context. At eleven years of age she protested against the Austrian soldiers who had set up camp nearby: she even drove off their horses with a pitchfork when she found them eating the sheafs of grain in the fields. She was a kind, strong and healthy girl, and naturally the boys found her attractive and vied to accompany her to the church a kilometre's distance away; but they were hard put to match her speedy pace.

When on festive occasions her friends invited her to join them in the dances and games that were organised, she smilingly told them that she had work to do at home, and that sometimes in the evening the devil wandered among the dancers... She found her true happiness in prayer, in meditating on the love of God and offering her work to him for the happiness of her family and friends.

At twenty-three years of age she received a proposal of marriage but did not feel any particular attraction for the married life.

Courageous marriage

Two kilometres from Capriglio, on the hill facing the Occhiena farm there were a number of houses known as the Becchi. The hamlet was part of Morialdo and Castelnuovo d'Asti. A young farmer of 27 years of age lived there: he was Francis Bosco, whose wife Margaret Cagliero had recently died (28 February 1811) after six years of marriage. Francis was left with his three-year-old son Anthony, whose little sister Teresa had died two days after her birth. He also had to care for his mother, Margaret Zucca, 60 years of age and semi-paralysed. He needed to remarry and have someone to care for them and keep house.

Visiting Capriglio frequently to see one of his sisters, Francis had met Margaret and eventually proposed to her. Margaret informed him that she had to care for her parents who were now in need of

her; but Marianna and Michael promised to take on this duty, and her father approved of the union. Furthermore, Francis was by no means poverty-stricken: he owned a stretch of land, a few head of cattle and was a share-cropper for the country house and farm of the Biglione family who were lawyers in Chieri. They lived on the very spot where today stands the Temple of Don Bosco. Besides, Francis' mother was a dear old soul, sensitive and refined, and full of wisdom.

Margaret accepted the proposal and preparations were set afoot for the wedding and the dowry. She was married on the 6 June 1812 at the registry office and then in the parish church. That evening Margaret Bosco entered her new home at the farmhouse of the Biglione family, on the Becchi hill. She was welcomed with open arms by her mother-in-law, also called Margaret, and took the young Anthony of four years to her heart. She also had to care for two servants - she had assumed an imposing responsibility that demanded lots of love.

MARGARET BOSCO, MOTHER OF JOHN BOSCO

[AT THE BECCHI, FROM HER 24TH TILL HER 58TH YEAR (1812-1846)]

Margaret enjoyed five years of happiness. Francis was the best of husbands, a man of strong faith, of faultless rectitude, sound common sense, and a solid worker. It was a family of deep love, and it grew in numbers. On 8 April 1813 Margaret gave birth to her first son, Joseph, and two years later on the 16 August 1815 she was blessed with a second son, John Melchior - the future Don Bosco. He was baptised the next day by the assistant priest of the parish of Castelnuovo. Later, Margaret was to confide to her son, 'When you came into the world I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin',¹ surely a sign of Margaret's closeness to God during the months of her pregnancy.

All went well, and in that same year Francis was able to buy some nearby land and a shack that would serve as a cow-shed and barn - and eventually their home. In 1816 and 1817 they had to endure two years of drought that destroyed the crops; and then followed the family tragedy: the sudden death of Francis. One day in May 1817 he returned from working in the fields. In a lather of sweat he rested in the coolness of the cellar for a while. He dozed off and awoke cold and shivering and suffered a serious bout of pneumonia.

All the care that was given to him proved of no use. He made his will (in which he asked that thirty Masses be said for him), received Viaticum, confided to Margaret that God had given him the privilege of dying at 33 years of age, the same age as Jesus. He exhorted her to put her faith in God's providence. He died on Sunday 11 May. Margaret wept and put on her own finger the wedding ring of her dear husband.

John was only 21 months old, and the tragic event of his loss remained for him the only memory he had of the first five years of his life. 'When everyone had left the room where his dead father lay, I wanted to remain there with him. "Come with me, John", my mother said through her tears, "If daddy doesn't come, then I don't want to go away", I replied. "Poor boy, you no longer have a father. Come with me"; and saying this, she burst into tears, took me by the

¹ *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, Rome 1982 p.89

hand and dragged me away. I cried because she was crying. At this point all the family were in consternation.' ²

Further trials

Margaret, now 29, was left with a family and a farm to look after. Many others would have given up under such an unforeseen and heavy burden. She however was made of sterner stuff; and set about resolutely to tend the vineyard and the fields with her two sons, at least till November; at home she had to care for her three sons (9, 4 and 2 years of age) and also look after their grandmother.

In November she rescinded the lease contract and moved to the humble shack bought by Francis. She had added a kitchen and a large room. This was the poor abode that Don Bosco used to call 'my home', and which thousands of pilgrims now visit and are struck by the remarkable nobility of that can be found in poverty.

Margaret needed all her faith and all her love to bear up against the heavy burden of her trials. For two years she had to battle desperately with money problems - with outstanding debts to settle, the never-ending drought that practically reduced the crop to nothing, a questionable court case and the impounding of the crop for a whole year in favour of an employee of the former proprietor.

Things came to a head one day at the Bosco home, when hunger became a serious problem. The whole district was in trouble, with nothing available - nothing in the true sense of the word! Don Bosco recounts that Margaret then called the whole household together and spoke to them: 'When your father lay dying he told me to have confidence in God. Come, now, let us kneel and pray'. After a short prayer she rose and said, 'Extreme problems call for extreme remedies'. She then sought the help of a neighbour and they went to the cow-shed and killed a calf; they cooked a quick meal to assuage the famished family. We read Don Bosco's words: 'Just imagine how my mother had to suffer and slave in that calamitous year.' ³

A short time after, Margaret was offered the chance of a very comfortable marriage: the children would have been cared for by a tutor. She declined with the remark, 'God gave me a husband and has taken him from me. On his deathbed he entrusted three children to me and I would be a heartless mother if I abandoned them at the very time when they had most need of me'.

Faith education

Margaret now seriously set about fulfilling her task as an educator: to make of her three boys three men who would each carry out the mysterious design that the Lord had for him. It was in this task that she saw the very purpose of her life; and in carrying it out she manifested her exceptional talents: her faith, her virtue, her practical ability, and the wisdom she possessed as a simple Piedmontese working woman and true Christian filled with the Holy Spirit. Space does not allow us to pursue this part of her life in detail. Suffice it to note the essential points of this totally Salesian holiness.

First and foremost was her patient inculcation in her young charges of a solid faith, an awareness of an ever-present and loving God and a tender devotion to Mary. She proved herself a superb

² *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p.19

³ *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p.20

catechist, for although unable to read or write, he had committed to memory the small catechism and many of the most beautiful incidents of Sacred Scripture. She excelled in being able to foster union with God by means of prayer and the sacraments. Don Bosco tells us in the *Memorie dell'Oratorio*: 'Morning and evening we knelt for prayer and recited the rosary. The Angelus was said three times each day, and Sunday was kept as the feastday of the week.'

God's grandeur and goodness was perceived as a mysterious and providential presence; to be adored in the splendour of the stars, the abundance of his creation in the world, and even in times of devastating storms. Her constant refrain was that God watches over us always; and she used this thought as an invitation to her children to be loyal to the calls of conscience. She taught the children to encounter Jesus the Saviour in his mercy and pardon and in the Eucharistic banquet. Don Bosco recounts how in his seventh or eighth year his mother prepared him for his First Confession and accompanied him to the church for the occasion. She did the same with even greater care for his First Communion at Easter 1826 when he was eleven years of age. 'I am sure that on that great day God really took possession of my soul', Don Bosco said.⁴

Life education

It was through this emphasis on the presence of God that Margaret wisely formed her sons' characters and their moral outlook. She taught them by word and deed the great virtues of the Piedmontese humanism of her time: an awareness of their duties, their work, their daily courageous acceptance of a hard life, the openness and honesty and humour. She loved them deeply, never petted or mollycoddled them. They learned from her to respect their elders and to give willing help to those in need. They saw the exquisite respect their mother always showed their grandmother, her kindness to people who knocked on her door for help, whether beggars or fugitives, and how she willingly visited neighbours who needed her care. Witnesses tell us that she was an angel of consolation for all who were sick and especially for the dying. She was always calm and strong, never afraid to rebuke anyone who by word or deed could be a cause of the downfall of others. Such example made a deep impression on the three boys.

Salesian education

Without being aware of it they (and John in particular) were introduced to the educative system that later would be practised in the Salesian family and the apostolate. We can only be amazed at the intuition, the wisdom and serene strength, prudence, common sense and educative influence of this illiterate woman. She was indeed both mother and father to her boys.

Divine Providence endowed her with the grace of being a 'Salesian' educator, animated by a 'preventive' love that had the capability to understand, demand, correct, to be patient and to smile. She used the famous 'dialogue' approach that is on everyone's lips nowadays. Her children were supervised, studied, and guided, but never tyrannised. They had to obey and seek permissions, but she gave them a free hand to enjoy their happiness and their games. She never permitted any capriciousness and corrected with loving kindness. There was a cane in the corner of the room, but it was never used; nor did she ever slap them. Don Lemoyne attests: 'She wished at all

⁴ *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p. 33

costs that correction should not provoke anger, distrust or aversion. Her maxim was clear: Encourage children to do everything for love and to please the Lord. This certainly made her a mother to be adored.⁵ In later years Don Bosco used to say that education was a matter of the heart. This had indeed been his happy experience during his youthful days in his home at the Becchi.

Three very different characters

Margaret was well able to cope with the vastly different attitudes of each of her boys. Anthony had lost his mother when he was three years of age, and his father at nine: these tragedies had left deep scars. He had grown into an irritable lad with a chip on his shoulder, and in his later teens an arrogant young man bent on asserting his superiority as eldest of the family and the one who had the greatest burden of work. When his grandmother died in 1826 he became quite unbearable, frequently violent in both word and deed. There was no secret that he was particularly angry with what he considered John's presumption in spending time on study. The very sight of a book provoked him to anger. These outbursts went on for a matter of years.

Margaret had to endure the insulting name of *matrigna* (the Italian word for 'stepmother', but with overtones of harshness about it); yet with infinite patience she still treated him as her son, just like the other two boys, and at no time did she raise a hand against him. Nevertheless she remained just and firm: and for peace in the house and for the good of Joseph and particularly John, she found it necessary to make decisions that caused her pain and sorrow. At the close of 1830 she divided up the family assets, house and land. Anthony alone stayed on and married a lass of the district on 22 March 1831. He had seven children, was reconciled with his family and proved a good parent, well thought of and a good Christian.

Joseph, five years younger, was quite a different character, quiet and serene, with winning ways and generous disposition, despite occasional emotional outbursts. He was inseparable from his younger brother John, and in no way resented his ascendancy. He adored his mother, and during John's long hours of study he was his mother's industrious, hard-working and obedient son. He too married young, at twenty years of age. His spouse was Maria Calosso, a local girl; and they had ten children. The affection and mutual help between both Joseph and John remained constant and untarnished.

Margaret saw in John a very special character; she was somewhat puzzled as she noticed the extraordinary qualities he manifested. He had a simple and profound piety, he was quick-witted, sensitive, intelligent and astute, active and daring, open to his companions, who were drawn to him as a born leader, and always frank and trusting in his relations with his mother.

When he was nine, Margaret had heard him recount his dream of the wild animals that were transformed into lambs under the guidance of two mysterious personages, and her reaction was: 'Perhaps he will become a priest?'⁶ Actually two years later, on the day of his First Communion, he told her that that was his desire; he wished to be a priest who would work for young people. Margaret was convinced that Providence had not destined him to be a farmer, but a priest of God and that she was called to accept the primary responsibility for this singular vocation.

⁵ *Mamma Margherita*, p.51

⁶ *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p.25

The long road to the priesthood

Unfortunately it has to be noted that Anthony's determined opposition caused much distress in the home and Margaret had to battle for five years before her John had a free hand to study. It broke her heart to have him work for twenty months (1828-1829) as a cow-hand in the Moglia family's dairy. It was a great joy for her when the elderly Father Calosso, the Morialdo chaplain, took an interest in John and began teaching him Latin. The priest's death in 1830 soon dashed their hopes, however; but when the family broke up and Anthony took over his newly-acquired property, Margaret was able to send John to the public school at Castelnuovo the next year (1831). Sixteen-year-old John joined a class of eleven-year-olds, and lived in the house of Roberto the tailor. Her message to John was, 'Put your trust in Mary'.

From the Sussambrino farm, half way between Becchi and Castelnuovo, where Joseph was staying, John was able to attend the public school of Chieri. At last the way was open for him; but one great obstacle remained: poverty. His board and lodging together with his studies cost more than he was able to pay. Still, Providence was there to help him and also the generosity of all the neighbours - and of course his frugal style of life enabled him to get by.

John spent ten years at Chieri - 1831 to 1841: four at the public school and six at the major seminary. During the lengthy vacations he returned to Morialdo. Margaret had finally found peace and tranquillity, and lived happily and full of hope. She had now graduated to being the grandmother of the children of Anthony and Joseph. But her heart constantly reverted to Chieri. Few mothers would have followed a son's vocation with such respect, humility, disinterestedness, eagerness, joy and interior gratitude.

On 3 November 1831 she accompanied John to Chieri and put him in the care of the widow Matta who gave him food and shelter for a modest charge. These years of study were for John a kind of triumph: he proved to be of brilliant intelligence and had a remarkable memory; and he had the knack of gaining the affection of all he came in contact with.

The year 1834 brought on a crisis for him when he had to make a final decision about his future. How could he presume to be a financial burden to his mother with further years of study and the burgeoning costs involved? He also thought that there would be many dangers in what would be for him the added comforts of the life of a parish priest. He decided to enter the Franciscans, and discussed the matter with the parish priest at Castelnuovo. His mentor did not agree with his decision and counselled Margaret to talk him out of it. 'You should think of your own future, too: when John becomes a parish priest you too will be able to live at the parish centre.'

Margaret went to Chieri and spoke with John. 'I have nothing to say regarding your vocation, except that you should do what God inspires you to do. Do not be concerned on my behalf. You owe me nothing. Never forget that I was born in poor circumstances, have lived in poverty all my life; and I am happy to die poor; and I say this seriously to you: if you every become wealthy, I shall never set foot on your doorstep.'

Don Bosco, even in his seventies, still had a vivid remembrance of Margaret's decisive and emotional tone as she uttered these words.⁷

After serious discussion John decided to enter the seminary.

⁷ *Memorie Biografiche*, vol.I p.296

On 26 October 1835, at twenty years of age, he donned the clerical habit at Castelnuovo in the parish church according to the custom of those days. This change in his life was accompanied by strict resolves. We read, 'At that time my mother kept an eye on me and it was plain that something was on her mind. She spoke to me on the night before I was to leave and I shall never forget her words: "Dear John, you have taken the priestly habit and I am as happy as any mother could be. But never forget that it is not the habit that matters, but the effort to progress in virtue. If you ever come to have doubts about your vocation, be sure you never dishonour that priestly garb. Put it aside immediately. I would rather a poor peasant son than a priest who neglected his sacred calling".'

⁸ Then she added a thought that was probably much closer to his heart: 'When you came into the world I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin Mary. When you began your studies, I inculcated this devotion in you. Now I want you to belong totally to her. Make your companions those who are devoted to Mary; and if you reach ordination, never cease to inculcate and spread this devotion.'

Don Bosco adds that when she finished speaking she was greatly moved and he himself had a lump in his throat. His words to his mother were, 'Mother, I thank you for everything you have done for me. Your advice will not be forgotten. I shall treasure it always as long as I live'.⁹ Assuredly Margaret's words were sublime and inspired by the Holy Spirit. This uneducated peasant mother, now getting on in years, entrusted her son to the most perfect of mothers. Margaret was to accompany her son in prayer for the next six years, and with her assiduous work, noting with joy, whenever he came to spend a holiday with her, how John had progressed in the piety and seriousness that was expected of one who preparing for the priesthood.

Mother of a priest

John was ordained a priest in Turin on Saturday 5 June 1841. The following day he went to celebrate the Mass of Corpus Christi in the parish church of Castelnuovo. The whole district attended, proud and rejoicing to honour 'their' priest. Margaret received Communion from the hands of her son. The parish priest put on a special spread and invited all the relations - as well as the notables of the neighbourhood. They then went to the Becchi, and at seeing the place of his 'first dream', so full of memories, the young priest wept with emotion. His was further moved when in the quiet of the evening he sat with his mother and listened to her inspiring words as on the evening of his receiving the clerical habit.

'John, you are now a priest; you will be saying Mass; so from henceforth you will be closer to Jesus. Remember that to begin to celebrate Mass means also to begin to suffer. You will not realise this immediately, but little by little you will see that what your mother has told you is the truth.' [And Don Bosco wonders how this simple woman came by these words and this mystical vision of the priesthood.] 'I am sure that you will keep me in your prayers daily, whether I am alive or dead: and that is all I ask of you. From now on you must think only of the salvation of souls and have no thought for me.'

⁸ *Memorie dell'Oraatorio*, p. 89.

⁹ *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p. 89.

¹⁰ *Memorie Biografiche*, Vol I p.522

Six years before, she had entrusted her son to Mary. Now she committed him to the Lord and to all the souls he was to save.

Did Margaret think her task was now completed at 53 years of age? Providence was not long in making it clear to her that she had only fulfilled the half of it! In a short while she would be called to share her son's ministry and extend her motherly offices to hundreds of other young members of her 'extended family'.

`MAMMA MARGARET', MOTHER OF DON BOSCO'S ORPHANS

[IN TURIN FROM 58 TO 68 (1846-1856)]

On 3 November 1841, after having completed his four months of 'holiday', during which he had acted as assistant priest at Castelnuovo, John bade his mother and brothers goodbye and set out for Turin. On the advice of his saintly friend Fr Joseph Cafasso, he enrolled for three years at the ecclesiastical college for further studies in pastoral theology. Under the direction of his friend he lost no time in settling into his work for the young of the streets and the prisons. On the 8 December he inaugurated his religion classes with Bartholomew Garelli. This was the beginning of his great Salesian enterprise.

The story of these first exciting years is well known: the young priest's ever-growing band of youngsters at the ecclesiastical college, then at Marchesa Barolo' institution, then in the nearby fields, and finally in the Pinardi shed when he entered the Promised Land of Valdocco. This was the famous Easter of 1846.

Margaret's heroic acceptance

At this time Margaret was living in the calm surroundings of the Becchi, the happy grandmother of a tribe of grandchildren ranging from a few months to thirteen years of age. They were the children of Anthony (Francis, Margaret, Theresa, John, Frances) and Joseph (Philomena, Rosea-Domenica, Francis and Louis). Her life was full of joy and baby-sitting!

Then in July 1846 came the thunder-bolt: John became seriously ill and lay, exhausted by his apostolic labours, with his very life in danger. His boys prayed ardently and earnestly to Mary to intercede for his recovery, and their prayers were granted. He repaired to the Becchi for a lengthy convalescence; and mother and son renewed their intimate spiritual talks.

Don Bosco's heart and constant thoughts however remained in Turin. He needed to return there where so many youngsters awaited him.

However, there was a delicate problem to be solved: he was a young priest of thirty years of age, and had recently moved to the Pinardi dwelling in Valdocco. Unfortunately this was situated in a section of ill-repute. Nearby there was a certain inn called the Giardiniera, which was the resort of prostitutes and their customers. The wise advice of the parish priest of Castelnuovo was that John should take his mother with him to Valdocco.

John hesitated to ask her to give up her peaceful life in the country and to move into a noisy city at fifty-eight years of age. How could he expect her to take orders from him and subject her whole life to his needs? Was it fair to ask the 'queen' of the Becchi (Don Bosco's word!) to become a mere servant at the Pinardi dwelling!

He hesitated for a long time. The profound admiration and veneration he had for his mother sometimes prompted him to ask her to come with him - and at other times dissuaded him from making such a difficult request. Finally one evening he put before her his dilemma, and we have his account of her generous reaction. 'She understood the urgency of the problem and her immediate answer was, "If you think such a course is pleasing to the Lord, I am ready to come with you immediately".'¹¹ Her lively faith and her total unselfishness had placed in her heart the words of Gabriel to Mary, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word'. Selflessly she thought only of God and the new task he was offering her. As always with her, the decision to be taken was clear, immediate and total: Margaret, in self-donation, was ready for her 'exodus'.

On 3 November 1846, mother and son left the hill they loved and went on foot to Turin. Lady Poverty accompanied them. Don Bosco carried a few books, and Margaret had a large basket of linen and the barest of necessities. The old Salesian song, 'Down from the hills' (Giù dai colli) immortalised that journey of heroic hope. The two rooms in the Pinardi dwelling on the first floor, where they arrived worn out by their journey, were empty. They truly started from scratch.

Margaret's courage was able to joke about it. 'At the Becchi I had ideas of administration and ordering. Here I am very much more tranquil, for there is nothing to manage and certainly nothing to order.'¹² She had brought her humble wedding trousseau which she had always lovingly preserved (a few cheap jewels, and some linen articles). All were used to make clothing and altar linen, or sold to buy immediate necessities. Margaret sacrificed her all in order to make provision for her new motherly duties.

Mothering the nascent Salesian apostolate

Margaret now began the third period of her life, her last ten years in this world. She gave herself entirely to her son and took an active part in the very foundation of the Salesian apostolate. Her dedicated availability practically made her a co-founder with him; and she was his first and principal cooperator. She wholeheartedly made every effort to supply the maternal element of the foundation's charisma; she seemed to represent the very presence of our Help of Christians.

These ten years proved to be the most definitive period of the Congregation, and Don Bosco always referred back to them (especially in his famous Letter from Rome written on 10 May 1884). Margaret assumed a new name that remained with her always. She became Mamma Margaret, and she played an active part in the initial 'external' development of the Salesian apostolate. These were the years of the first oratory, the oratory quarters for the first apprentices and students, the first schools and the first laboratories, the church of St Francis de Sales, the press for the Catholic Readings - and all this at the revolutionary times when Don Bosco had to endure so many dangerous threats.

Margaret also stood by her son during his first 'spiritual' development - the formation of the typical Salesian method and spirit, and the time of the saint's 'co-founders', Cagliero (1851),

¹¹ *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p. 193

¹² *Memorie dell'Oratorio*, p.193

Rua (1852), Alasonatti and Dominic Savio (1854), the first sodalities, the first-fruits of holiness, the first clerics, and the preparation of the Salesian Society that was to be founded just three years after her death.

In the biography of Don Bosco, Teresio Bosco uses the inspired expression that 'The Salesian Congregation was nursed on the lap of Mamma Margaret'. I do not know of any other educational religious congregation that was founded with this lengthy feminine and motherly presence. To belong to the Salesian Family and understand its spirit presumes the acceptance of the light and influence of Margaret's luminous image.

Don Bosco often asked her advice, and many of his decisions during these years had the benefit of her wise judgement. When he had to go to the city or be absent for some days, he did so with the comfortable feeling that Mamma Margaret would be present with the boys and would see that all went well. At times even the reception of important visitors was left to her. When in his Catholic Readings her son's style became too erudite, it was Margaret who led him back onto the path of simplicity.

One of Margaret's special concerns was the danger to her son's life when at times his over zealous attitude prompted him to take imprudent risks. Turin at that time was going through difficult years of upheavals, political and religious revolutions and even wars. The winds of democratic freedom and independence were indeed violent.

During the period 1848-1849 the anticlericals stirred up much trouble against the archbishop, the priests and the religious houses: the Pinardi house lived in fear of robbers; a bullet came close to killing Don Bosco whilst he was instructing his boys. Margaret's concern for her son greatly increased in the period 1850 to 1853 when he decided to take up the cudgels against the intense Waldensian proselytising. He began to use his Catholic Readings as a weapon to help his people keep the faith.

His enemies swore to take his life. He no longer dared leave home at night without at least two of his bigger lads; and many a time the famous dog Grigio came to his rescue - even lying across the doorstep on one occasion to prevent him from going out at night. 'If you won't listen to me', Margaret said to her son, 'at least take notice of the dog; do not go out!'

The following year, 1854, there was an outbreak of the cholera that spread through the city.

Turin was assuredly different from the peaceful countryside of the Becchi!

Mother of an ever-growing family

Margaret soon understood that helping her son meant looking after the boys to whom he had dedicated his life. For ten years she was their mother - with all that word implies of patience, toil and tenderness.

In the first place she had to get used to the shouting and rough and tumble of the oratory, and it lasted all day and well into the late hours of evening classes.

Then came the first street orphans to be looked after. Don Bosco recounts in the Memorie dell'Oratorio how his mother began with the first group the beautiful custom of the so-called 'Good-night'.

Margaret's family grew and grew. In 1848 there were some fifteen lads; in 1849, thirty; in 1850 fifty. Building a house with two

stories made it possible to take in about seventy in 1853, and a hundred in 1854. Two thirds of these were artisans, and the remaining third were students or diocesan seminarians who went out during the day to work or study in the city.

At least about thirty were entirely under the care of Don Bosco.

One can imagine the endless work this entailed for Margaret: in circumstances of extreme poverty and inconvenience she had to arrange

for both board and lodging! She had to prepare meals (mainly thick soup and polenta - a kind of maize porridge). She had to tend to their little vegetable garden, feed the poultry and rabbits, do the laundering, cook, mend and iron - often well into the night while the boys slept (for many of them had only one suit of clothes); she had to care for them when they were ill; and with infinite patience put up with their noisiness, their carelessness and the usual faults and failings of young street arabs. It is well known how one day, playing at soldiers, they trampled over her flower garden; and another time knocked down the washing that was drying in the sun.

The crisis came when on evening in 1850 she poured out her woes to her son. Four years of this kind of life was enough for her! She could carry on no longer! 'John, I cannot take any more of this existence. Every day these boys manage to plague me with some new vexation. Let me get away from here. I should return to the Becchi and end my life there in peace.'

John heard her out with sadness. He looked at her and then raised his eyes to the crucifix hanging on the wall. Margaret followed his gaze and the tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks.

'You are right, of course', she said to John, and gathered up her apron. From that moment on, no further complaint was ever heard from her.¹³ The incident probably marked the culmination of the spiritual life of Margaret: she joined her Saviour in accepting her cross without reservation. 'Father, thy will be done, not mine'. Her sacrifice meant so much for the development of the Salesian apostolate.

Don Bosco realised that it was imperative for him to get further help, and good friends came to help Margaret from time to time. One of her chief helpers was Margaret Gastaldi, mother of the future archbishop of Turin; and another was the Marchesa Fassati. There was also her sister Marianna, who left Capriglio and came to Valdocco to share the work with Margaret.

Furthermore, the better boys, some of whom had already donned the clerical habit (such as Rua and Rocchietti), gave extra help in various kinds of tasks.

Born educator

So far no mention has been made of the most wonderful of the duties of Margaret, that which demanded not only her physical labours but her faith and her love and her innate talent as an educator. Since all her orphans called her 'mamma', it was clear that they considered her not merely as a cook and a laundress, but rather they regarded her as they did Don Bosco, putting their total confidence in her as orphans who had found safety and love and

¹³ *Memorie Biografiche*, IV p.233

readily returned that love. There was no red tape necessary to go and see their 'mamma', who was always kind and had a smile for them.

Margaret was always available for them - at any time of the day. They loved to chat with her; she was able to correct them, exhort and console them, give them opportune advice. In this way she helped them to develop their characters, strengthen their faith, be aware of the presence of God; and she could urge them to go to confession to Don Bosco, and to cultivate devotion to Mary most holy.

Like every true Piedmontese, he had a good store of proverbs and anecdotes to support her counselling. 'You have changed a lot these days! If you don't make an effort, what will become of you? Any weakling can slide downwards; only the strong can climb back.' To a lad who had plenty of excuses for not going to confession she said, 'It's a poor washerwoman who can never find a good trough'. And to a youngster who was weeping, 'Never mind. Try to be patient. We shall all be happy in heaven. Our present problems always seem worse than they really are'.

She knew all the boys at the oratory individually and was able to assess their characters. For two years she was able to observe a young lad who had come from Mondonio: his conduct impressed her greatly. She told Don Bosco, 'You have quite a few excellent boys in your care; but none of them can equal this Dominic Savio youngster. I notice how he prays before the tabernacle; he is like an angel from heaven'.¹⁴

When in 1854 the cholera broke out in Turin, everyone at the oratory was miraculously untouched despite the fact that the hygiene conditions of the day left much to be desired. In her effort to help and comfort the sick and the dying, Margaret gave all her linen, even the altar cloths, to the afflicted. There had been 1400 deaths, and when the scourge had run its course there was an unexpected influx of fifty very young orphans. Margaret was the natural one to whom they were entrusted; and at sixty-six years of age she found herself more than ever a mother.

Bereavement and poverty always claimed her heart. From her first arrival at Turin she wore the same patched and faded clothes. On two occasions Don Bosco gave her L20 to buy herself a new dress. But the old one remained, a little more worn, a little more patched. The money had been spent on things the boys needed. Don Bosco capitulated, and Margaret died with the same old dress.

Death and the first Beatitude

The only times of calm and rest in those years were the few weeks of the holidays spent at the Becchi. Actually the 'rest' was relative, for Don Bosco used to bring with him all the boys who had no families to go to. At least there was the fresh country air and rural quiet.

Returning from the Becchi in mid-November 1856, Margaret felt unwell and had to be confined to bed with a rasping cough. The doctor diagnosed pneumonia and gave no hope of recovery.

Joseph hastened from the Becchi (Anthony had already died seven years previously); and Margaret spoke her last words to her sons. To John her words were, 'There will be others who will take my place here; but Our Blessed Lady will always be the one in charge. Do not seek splendour or display, but only the glory of God. Poverty,

¹⁴ *Memorie Biografiche*, V 27

genuine poverty, must remain the basis of your hallowed undertakings'.

To Joseph: 'Bring up your children well. If God does not call them elsewhere settle them in the country. To abandon the land would be a great waste'.

On the evening of the 24 November Father Borel, her confessor, gave her the last sacraments; and she expressed a wish to speak with John again. 'God knows how much I have loved you; but in heaven I shall love you even more. I have done all I could. If at times I seemed to be abrupt, it was for your good. Tell the boys that I have worked for them with a mother's commitment. Ask them to pray for me and offer up their communion for me'.

John broke down, overcome with grief. She went on, 'Goodbye, my dear. This is my final farewell to you. Go to your room now and pray for me. You are broken-hearted, and it grieves me to see you like this'. She wanted all the calm she could muster to prepare herself, and Don Bosco left the room.

Margaret died at three o'clock in the morning. Joseph hastened to call John, and the two brothers embraced each other, overcome with sorrow. The Valdocco oratory became a house of sadness and prayer.

The great number of boys in the funeral procession to the parish church gave the appearance of a triumphal parade; but it was a pauper's funeral, and Margaret was buried in a common grave without ever having a tombstone carrying her name. She left nothing that belonged to her, absolutely nothing - except her immense love. Twenty year ago she had said to John, 'I want to die poor'.

There is no doubt that this resplendent light of evangelical poverty is Margaret's most moving impression. She did not 'put up with poverty'; she loved it as one of the Beatitudes, as the inevitable condition of genuine love and active service. Truly there is a lesson for us in this, victims as we are of today's consumeristic society.

Under the porticos of the old Pinardi house at Valdocco there is a marble slab that tells us that 'For ten years Mamma Margaret lived here a life of dedication, prayer and poverty'. And at the foot of the Becchi hill that is today called Colle Don Bosco, there is a magnificent bronze statue of Mamma Margaret by the sculptor Enrico Manfrini. It was solemnly blessed by the Rector Major Father Egidio Viganò on 29 March 1992. Among those present was the ambassador of the United States to Italy, a descendent of the Occhiena family of Capriglio.

But the far more important replica of Mamma Margaret, whose life was so completely evangelical and Salesian, is the one that has so special a place in the hearts of us all.