



3. WITH YOU, MAIN, ON THE PATHS OF LIFE

3.4 Growth of Life – Valponasca

PERSONAL REFLECTION



SALESIAN READING

Maria Domenica, at the age of twelve, with "extraordinary concentration" and with a "joy that shone through her eyes," approached Jesus for the first time in the Sacrament of His Love. She had always felt forcefully attracted to Him. How often had her loving gaze been fixed beyond the valley, on the little parish church, adoring in the depths of her spirit that Jesus she had received into her heart that morning! When her parents sent her to town on some errand, she rejoiced greatly because she could visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. In the evening and at night, she prayed to Him with love from the little window. Her whole life revolved around this Eucharistic center.

(paraphrased: Kothgasser, Alosi. The Small Window from the Valponasca - "Icon" of a life. Rome 1996)

THE LITTLE WINDOW OF VALPONASCA



Little window of the Valponasca: Eye of Maria Mazzarello open to the horizon of God and to the demanding life of work.

Little window of the Valponasca: Opening of a young heart that searches beyond earthly things, beyond her own existence and discovers a story of love and salvation.

Little window of the Valponasca: Walking diligently through the arduous hours of the day and resting in the calm and peace of the night.

Little window of the Valponasca: Ineffable light of God's Love which fills the heart and opens wounds which gradually and consistently heal.

Little window of the Valponasca: Loving encounter for the Eucharistic Jesus in the treasured village Church, mystery of bread and wine, the Body and Blood of the Lord, given in love and outpouring in service.

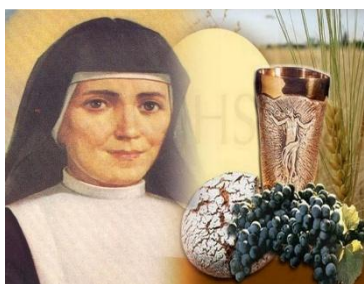
Little window of the Valponasca: Vision of the future: poor, abandoned youth emerging from every part of the world, thirsting for the Infinite.

Little window of the Valponasca: Cherished by so many Sisters who strive to be like Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth or seeing the needs of others at Cana, the one "Full of the Holy Spirit," is the Helper of all people.

Little window of the Valponasca: Eye open on yesterday, today, tomorrow, speaking, calling, inviting us to the Love of God poured out for us, a gift and a hope for the future.

(paraphrased: Kothgasser, Alois. The Little Window of the Valponasca. Rome 1996 p 193)

ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS IN THE EUCHARIST



The sacred moment of her life arrived for Maria Domenica on the day of her First Communion. Years of catechetical instruction and reflection prepared her for it. Fr. Pestarino understood that this was the right moment.

The deepening of the Eucharistic life unified and harmonized her personal faith journey as an adolescent.

This encounter with the Lord took place in 1850. It is recorded in the *Books of the State of Souls* kept in the parish. Maria Domenica, who then understood many things, ardently desired to meet the Lord, like the lover from the Song of Songs (5:2). After having spent Lent in serene recollection, the vigil arrived. This is how the Cronistoria describes that moment:

"The night was passed dozing and waking and in joyful, prayerful longing, and spiritual outbursts to overflow to those who slept near her and envied her good fortune." (Cronistoria I 23)

Maria Domenica experienced the divine. She lived through that day with the intensity of the love of that God. Maria learned to love from the beginning of her life. She opens out to the gift of God as in Ps 62:2-7.

She lived the excitement of the eve of that great day that marked a decisive step in her spiritual journey. Let us hear again from the Cronistoria:

"The celebration was timed for 8:00 am, but dawn had scarcely broken on this Wednesday of Holy Week (April 19, 1848) when Maria was already up and about, tidying herself and putting on her beautiful new dress and, for the first time, the white veil which meant so much to her.

Her father's last instructions on the divinity of the Eucharist and her mother's recommendations as to behavior and recollection must have sounded far more pleasant than usual in her ears. She did not speak, but her eyes shone with the inward desire to do everything well to receive Jesus in a worthy manner. Along the path, she went in the clear, chilly air, speeding her steps just as interior fervor gave wings to her soul. Maria's mother was unable not go with her because a new little one needed all her attention. But Maria was cheerful just the same as she tripped along between cousin Domenica and sister Felicina who looked up at her with admiration and held her tightly by the hand as if fearing she might take a flight to heaven." (Cronistoria, I 23-24)

The Eucharistic presence in her seemed to give wings to her steps. (Is 40:31). Love makes life light; nothing is a burden to those who love.

"Maria Domenica knelt devoutly and paid attention to no one except Father Pestarino who gave the last instructions. Once the parish priest had started Mass, her eyes did not leave the altar except to glance toward Father Pestarino, who was reading aloud the preparatory prayers for the great event. Maria did

not miss a word. Her face, which was more flushed than usual, showed that these sentiments had entered her heart and become her own, increasing her eager longing still more.

Finally, Father Pestarino began the Confiteor, and all the young voices joined in this solemn confession of sin for which they had been prepared. Maria's clear, sure voice could also be heard, and her step was firm as she went in pious recollection and radiant with joy and happiness to receive Jesus.” (Cronistoria I 24)

Her attitude shows what is passing through her soul: a mixture of joy and mystery. She knows where to go; her gaze is illuminated, deep, and collected in the love that inhabits her, where she keeps the flame burning.

"Radiant with happiness and joy, to receive her Jesus.” Each one experiences the true joy and happiness that no one can take away from us because it comes from the Lord (Jn 16:22). The light in her eyes shouts this joy, and her companions testify to it:

“...all who saw her on that day, those who received the Bread of Angels with her for the first time and especially Petronilla, were edified by her extraordinary recollection and radiant joy.” (Cronistoria I,25)

This experience marks a turning point in her life, and Maria Domenica begins to see the world with eyes full of a presence that is experienced in everything.

All this happened before her arrival at the Valponasca. Still, it is significant to remember that the beginning of this strong and ardent Eucharistic life will develop in its fullness among the fields and vineyards of the farmhouse at the Valponasca.

Maria will never again lose this "enchantment" for the Eucharist. Participating in the Eucharistic celebration becomes her daily commitment, and Jesus gently takes her by the hand, leading her on the path toward contemplation in everyday life:

"This [sacrament] kept Mary's thoughts always occupied by the Jesus she had received that morning or with the Jesus she was to receive the following day. Her heart kept her continually on guard and she had no other interest but God and the desire to please Him more every day." (Cronistoria I, 32-33)

The quoted text reveals the level of contemplation Maria reached. The focus of her life becomes twofold: prayer and action. In her, there is no dichotomy between action and prayer; on the contrary, the act itself is transformed into a prayer, that is, into a place of loving encounter with the Lord.

In Maria's journey towards the personalization of faith, conversion also happened. From the time of her First Communion, a change in her life's journey is evident. The tasks of development that awaited her directed her towards a new depth in her relationship with God. This development takes place mainly during the years at the Valponasca. New enthusiasm and renewed awareness permeated her work, family relationships and apostolic commitment. Maria became increasingly convinced that she could and should find God to love and serve in the crevasses of everyday life; for this reason, her commitment to do ordinary things extraordinarily well increased each and every day!

The union with God contemplated and loved in the Eucharist, with participation that soon became daily, was prolonged throughout the day and accompanied Maria Domenica in the hard work of the fields. Her heart was never detached from the love of her life. While she dug the soil, she continued the loving dialogue with Jesus received in the morning. The Cronistoria attests to this:

"From time to time, the hoe ceased its motion for an instant, and the men thought she was taking a respite! Her hands clasped, she glanced across the valley towards the church while her lips formed a fervent ejaculation, an act of love, a plea for the agonizing, an invocation to the Queen of Sorrows, or an offering of her work in union with the sufferings of Jesus and Maria for the conversion of sinners and peace in the Church." (Cronistoria I 43)

Maria's gaze sought her treasure; heart to heart. (Mt 6:21) Her "present" is in the "present" of God: not at times, for brief moments, but continuously. Maria moved from one activity to another without interrupting her loving dialogue with the Lord.

Prayer and work intertwine for her like hands in prayer, so much so that they lead her to a mystical level of communion that fulfills the words of Saint Paul: "It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). At the same time, this exceptional young woman formed a heart so sensitive to God's presence that she felt pain when she was distracted by it. Her self-accusation in front of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate is significant when she said she "spent a quarter of an hour without thinking about God."

Maria Domenica also sought help and support in spiritual reading and meditation, which she implemented during the brief moments of rest from work in the fields:

"So, while the workers gathered to chat during the rest periods Maria, under the pretext of wanting to enjoy a little shade, retired behind some trees either to read some spiritual book provided by Father Pestarino or to pray and meditate."
(Cronistoria I, 33)

Now, let us pause to reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist.

Eucharist = Jesus' action of grace is celebrated during a meal, a place of communion, fraternity, and joy. It is the place where everyone finds space. When someone does not fit in our hearts, the Lord makes the space. He alone can be where everyone is. So, the Eucharist is communion, fraternity. To participate at this table, we must live Jesus' commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Cf. Jn 13:34; 15:12-13). The commandment means "to apply/practice" in Aramaic, so the Lord wants us to apply/practice love. Maria Domenica lived this dimension of the Eucharist very well and, through her own correspondence, invited us at every moment to love one another.



In the Eucharist, there is also the sense of TODAH = offering of the sacrifice of praise (*Jn 13*). John, chapter 13 narrates Jesus washing the feet of his apostles to remind Christians that the meaning of the Eucharist passes through service, the stripping of all power; we must make ourselves servants. On Holy Thursday the Lord says: "Here is my body; take it and eat it...". He makes Himself a gift; He breaks Himself for His own. And this is not only a symbol; it becomes a true gift on Good Friday when he gives us his life on the cross. Truly his body is broken for our love. To participate in the Eucharist is to commit to living "great charity" (*as MM defines it*), to build communion, and for this to give one's life without reserve. MM went so far as to sacrifice her life for the Institute's good.

Furthermore, the Eucharist is BERAKAH = blessing (*thinking-feeling-saying*); only wanting the good about the other. This is a frequent and meaningful theme in the Sacred Scriptures. Wherever Maria was present among others, it was a blessing, a joy for all. Our presence must also bless everyone because we carry the Trinity.

Thus, sustained by the Eucharist as communion, sharing, and handing over of life, Maria Mazzarello's heart is contemplative yet always active! Maria not only prayed and meditated but also involved herself entirely in the work of the fields, to the point of her father's workers saying: "*That girl has arms of iron and it takes an enormous effort to keep up with her.*" A woman affirmed: "*No girl in Mornese ever worked like Maria.*" (*Cronistoria I*, 32)

Then, in the evening, at home, household chores awaited her. Her full self-giving knew no bounds.

From everything we have observed, we can safely deduce that Maria, though so industrious, never ran the risk of falling into activism. On the contrary, she knew she was only a humble instrument in the Lord's hand. That is why she left it up

to Him, and she continually gave herself to Him through her being active and loving at the same time. He was her strength. Maria was convinced of this, as she will often repeat later to her Sisters. (L 28,9)

THE HEART PRAYERS

Prayer methods inspired by the Letters of St. Maria Domenica Mazzarello

The letters of Mother Mazzarello to her Sisters were the main sources of these prayer methods. They are also fruits of my pilgrimage to Mornese, her birthplace, and the deepening of her spirituality during our reflections on Salesian Spirituality.



As FMA Mother Mazzarello is a woman of prayer. The Window of the Valponasca is the symbol of her contemplative prayer life. She advised the Sisters not to “neglect prayer; in it, you will always find consolation and comfort” (L 67,8). In another letter, she wrote, “Pray always and from the depth of your heart. Always remember that prayer is the key that opens the treasures of Heaven” (L 51,11). She also reminds the sisters “to pray with all your heart” (L 22,10).

The word **heart** flooded her letters. It refers to four hearts: the Heart of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother Mazzarello’s heart, and the heart of the recipients of her letters. She refers to the Heart of Jesus as the place of encounter with Him and each sister. Some of her words may illustrate this: “Although an immense sea separates us, we can meet and be close to one another at every moment in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.” (L 22,1). She also revealed that it is also where she always stayed: “I am, in the Heart of Jesus,” (L 19,3), and where she wished to meet the Sisters: “I will go there also, so we can meet often and tell each other many things” (L 17,2). Mother Mazzarello was a woman of great depth who guided others to grow in their interior life. She wanted each Sister to care for her heart like a gardener caring for the garden (L 50, 1-2).

The Heart Meditation and the **Heart-to-Heart Contemplative Prayer** are the results of months of pondering on the letters of Mother Mazzarello. They became methods of prayer after using them in personal reflection. They are



prayer methods that may open the hearts of those who practice them into deep intimacy with Jesus. Remember, they are simply methods. The Lord is the one who will lead His beloved to encounter Him during prayer according to His perfect time.

Heart Meditation with Jesus

1. Invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit to enlighten your mind and heart as you meditate on the Word of God. Ask Him to guide you into the passage you are about to ponder.
2. Read the passage slowly.
3. Read it again for the second time. Notice Jesus and the different personages in the passage.
4. Slowly enter into the Heart of Jesus. Sense how He feels in that particular passage. Stay in His heart. Feel what He feels.
5. Slowly enter the heart of one of the persons around Him (*the Samaritan woman, Bartimaeus, the leper, Zaccheus, the Pharisees, etc.*). How does that person feel as s/he listens to, talks to, or looks at Jesus and is being looked at by Jesus?
6. Then enter into your heart. Discern what is happening there as you experience being in the Heart of Christ and the heart of the particular personage in the Gospel.
7. Converse with Jesus. Open your heart to Him. Tell Him how you feel. Allow Him to respond to you from His heart.
8. As you reach the end of this meditation, you may ask yourself: How does Christ want me to live His message in my life?
9. End your meditation thanking the Holy Spirit for the grace He has given you.

Heart-to-Heart Contemplative Prayer

Preparation:

Stay in a quiet place where you can be alone and not be interrupted. Sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor. See that you can remain in that position for the entire prayer moment. Then take a deep breath and slowly exhale. Repeat this deep breathing several times. Gradually relax your whole body. Close your eyes and continue the breathing exercise. Next, quiet your mind. Acknowledge any thoughts, preoccupations, worries, or anxieties. You may bring them all to God in this moment of prayer. Start recollecting yourself.

Entering into the Heart of Christ:

Imagine that “you go into the Heart of Christ” (L 29,3). “The Lord loves you very much...” (L 27,2). Feel His love surrounds you as you go deep into your heart, where you can “enter often into the Heart of Christ” (L 17,2). Stay there where you can “hear the voice of Jesus” (L 22,15). Be still.

Remember always “to pray with all your heart” (L 22,10). You may use images from the Biblical passages where Jesus encounters someone intimately to help you focus on Him. You may use the images of the Samaritan woman, the rich young man, or the blind Bartimaeus.

If your mind is drifting away, you may repeat any of these words to bring you back to prayer: *“Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours,”* *“Heart of Jesus, have mercy on me,”* or repeat *“Heart of Jesus.”*

Speaking to the Heart of Jesus

You may begin sharing whatever is in your heart with Jesus at this moment. You might find yourself in any of the following situations:

- ❖ “When you are united to this adorable Heart, tell Him many beautiful things” (L 39, 2). You may share the joy of being in the community and the apostolate to Him. You may talk to Him about the significant events in your family. “Since the Lord sees the heart” (L 19,1) express how you truly feel about them to Him.
- ❖ “When you are tired and troubled [...] place all your worries in the Heart of Jesus... (L 65,3); “leave it to Him. He will put everything right” (L 25,3). You may

say, “Oh Jesus, You are my whole strength and with you burdens become light, fatigue becomes easy, thorns are turned into sweetness” (L 64,5). Bring to Him everything that is in your heart. “Always confide in Jesus, *[your]* Spouse....” (L 34,2).

- ❖ You may also “compare your heart to a garden” that needs to be tended and “must check every day to see if anything is obstructing it – some sentiments – and if so, put them out to wither” (L 50,2). Beg Jesus to show you your defects, and ... “once the Lord makes them known to you, do your part to correct yourself” (L 17,4). “The Lord accepts *[your]* heart” (L 21,6). Beg Him to heal it so that you will not “have such a small heart, but a big, generous heart” (L 27,14) and “give you the virtues that *[you]* need so much: humility, charity, patience, etc.” (L 39,3), “it is necessary to practice these virtues more from your heart than with external acts” (L 19,1).
- ❖ You may also beg Him to “teach you the science of becoming holy, which is the only true science” (L 22,12) and to “be on fire with the love of God...” (L 22,11). Ask Him to teach you also “the language of the soul” (L 22,12) so that you can speak to others about Him.
- ❖ You may also ask for the grace to “truly imitate *[your]* dearest Jesus in everything, especially in humility and charity” (L 26,4) or to “persevere in the service of *[your]* Spouse Jesus and *[of your]* dear Mother Mary” (L 26,6).

Listening to Jesus speaking to your heart

When you have shared with Jesus everything that is in your heart, allow Him to speak to you. Remain “recollected in *[your heart]* if *[you]* want to hear the voice of Jesus” (L 22,15).

Listen to His words and feel His presence. Gaze on Jesus, look at his eyes. They are the eyes of the One who loves you. Remember that “the Lord loves you very much; it is up to you to love Him in return” (L 27,2). Be still, Jesus is ever present, speaking to your heart in the silence of your being.

Concluding the Prayer

As you come to the end of your prayer, breathe deeply. Gather in your heart the fruits of your intimate moment with your Spouse, Jesus. When you are ready, pray one of these: Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be.

(This prayer may last for 20-30 minutes. Spend more time listening to the Lord than talking to Him. He already knows what is in your heart. Talking to Him is more for clarifying what is truly within you than for Him to understand your needs. You can write your reflection after the prayer using any of the following questions.)

Journal Writing:

1. What moved me to a more positive experience of 'living in His presence'?
Why?
2. Did I find anything disturbing / challenging?
3. What was revealed to me about myself?
4. What was revealed to me about Jesus?
5. What qualities of Jesus did I become aware of during prayer?
6. What was revealed to me about how Jesus regards me?
7. What was revealed to me about my disposition before Jesus?
8. What desires regarding my relationship with Jesus were awakened in me?

(NB: The words in the [brackets] replace the original words in the letters of M. Mazzarello. They are substituted to make them more personal.)



OPEN MY WINDOW

1. Open my window! ... "Look at my gaze,"

look at my window ... But first, look at the window of Main ...

To look at Main, one has to "open" the window

Open the window of my heart ...
Open the window of profound gazing ...
Open the window of....

Which windows did Main not open?



What window will I open?



What did Main see when she looked out through the window?

The bell tower, the houses of the city, the vineyards, the landscape, workers, Jesus,

And I ... What do I see when I look out the window?



MAIN GAZES WITH A HEART!

With what kind of heart was she gazing at ...?

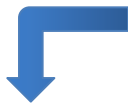
her town, the people
the Daughters of the Immaculate Conception
her parents, her family
her superiors
the girls and young people



With what kind of heart do I look at?

the Institute
my Province
my sisters in the community
my family
the Young people
the lay people
the place where I live

...



What does Main's heart look like?

compassionate...
charitable...
simple...
humble...
.....

.....



What does my heart look like?

...



In silence look at the window of your heart, and together with Jesus, you discover what you have to offer to others and what you need to change. Reading *Main's* encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist (*resources*) can help you delve deeper into her love story with her Beloved.

The ecological conversion necessary to achieve lasting change is also a community conversion. *Laudato Sì* (219-220)

What windows of ecological conversion should we open in our community and our apostolate?

COLLOQUY WITH MARY

More often than not, Maria would reach the fields before the other workers after hearing Mass. While waiting for them to arrive, she would say the rosary. “One of Maria’s acquaintances tells us that when her husband spoke of Maria Mazzarello, he often said: ‘I used to get to work on time, but that imp was always in the vineyard ahead of me! How many times I caught her saying the rosary with her sister Felicita!’” (*Maccono Vol. 1,37*)

