

Women, Religion, and Education in Early Modern Italy. Some Case Studies (16th-18th c.)

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Abstract. The problem of the female presence in the world of early modern schools has attracted growing historiographic interest in recent years. However, a comparative approach to the study of the female religious orders of teachers in the post-Tridentine age is difficult to establish. This article aims to analyze, in the light of the most recent historiographic acquisitions, the educational experience of some Italian female religious orders at that time, in particular the Ursuline Nuns and the Venerini Pious Teachers. The method of investigation adopted will take into consideration the most significant examples on the Italian peninsula trying to consider the cultural, economic, geographical and chronological differences that characterized these pedagogical experiences. The intention is to bring out the plurality of female educational experiences in Italy and at the same time the common denominators.

Keywords. Female Education – History of School – Religious Orders – Ursuline Nuns – Early Modern Italy

The problem of women in early modern Italian schools is articulated and irreducible to predefined schemes. One feature, however, certainly emerges: the scarcity of the female presence compared to the male one. For about fifty years now, the historiographic production concerning the participation of women in Renaissance culture has aroused interest and participation¹. We can observe that the scarce feminine presence in educational institutions is a widely shared theme in literature. As Paul Grendler writes, «a limited number of girls [...] attended school. Female teachers, another minority, helped teach»². Other historians have confirmed Grendler's statement. To give a few examples, as Elisabetta Rasy said, during the Renaissance «we hear female voices either as background noise, behind and through men's speeches, or as songs, or isolated cries»³. The hidden presence of women in early modern culture has also repercussions on this research. The scarcity of documents on females' roles in the schools is caused by the fact that the pro-

¹ Cfr. A. J. Cruz-R. Hernández, ed., *Women's Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*, New York, Routledge, 2011; B. J. Whitehead, ed., *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe. A History 1500-1800*, New York-London, Garland Publishing, 1999; E. R. Sanders, *Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

² P. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300-1600*, Baltimore-London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 87.

³ L. Miglio, *Governare l'alfabeto. Donne, scrittura e libri nel medioevo*, Roma: Viella, 2008, p. 7.

duction of texts, both literary and documentary, was largely a male prerogative. This article, therefore, cannot and does not want to exhaust a very complex investigation, even for a limited territorial area such as the Italian peninsula. As Luisa Miglio observes, «writing is a male monopoly and in the male world it finds justification and legitimacy: to transmit, record, memorise, document; for women it is only an unproductive moment, for which it is not appropriate to spend even a few florins»⁴.

However, it should not be taken for granted that the issue of women's education was not perceived as important, even during a period of substantial narrowing for women's margins of social action, as in the case of 16th century Europe. The overall situation was complex. In this period, indeed, it was possible to find examples of educated charismatic women such as Paola Negri or Ludovica Torelli, who gave birth to the order of the Angelic Sisters (*Le Angeli*), in connection to male religious teaching congregations, like the Barnabites. Nonetheless, it remains true that Rome quickly imposed limits on them. These women were still moving in the socio-political spaces of the late Middle Ages that between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century had seen in northern Italy a strong feminisation of the territorial aristocracy also in active government roles, but they clashed against the wall of a rapidly changing world⁵. The fact remains that some women tried to give the religious changes taking place during that period an original imprint that, despite the obligation of claustration imposed by Rome in 1552, did not fail to bring future developments. The Italian cultural context, in fact, until the end of the 16th century, was not totally and prejudicially closed to an active role of women in society⁶.

Nonetheless, even in the deeply confessionalized world of the post-Tridentine school, institutions specifically designed for girls' education were not lacking. Real religious orders, indeed, were established specifically for the education of girls and the initiative was often taken by women themselves.

1. The Ursulines

Among the most representative experiences of this female phenomenon is the order of the Ursuline Nuns. In the profile of their foundress, Angela Merici, we find points of contact with the experiences of the origins of other male religious orders born in course of the 16th century. Just as in the case of the Barnabites and the Somascans, it was the Lombard-Venetian context that gave great impetus to this new educational adventure.

Angela Merici was born in 1474 in the village of Desenzano, on the shores of the Garda Lake, in a territory that was culturally Lombard but under the political rule of Venice. Even the era in which Angela was born was not yet that of the militant counter-reformation and the fight against Protestantism, but that of the late medieval eschatological anxieties and late humanism. These eschatological anxieties were the same that allowed and pushed other women to take important initiatives in the field of religion and

⁴ E. Rasy, *Le donne e la letteratura*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1984, p. 37.

⁵ S. Ferente, «Le donne e lo Stato», in *Lo Stato del Rinascimento in Italia*, eds., A. Gamberini-I. Lazzarini, Roma, Viella, 2014, pp. 313-332; L. Arcangeli-S. Peyronel, eds., *Donne di potere nel Rinascimento*, Roma, Viella, 2008.

⁶ The Renaissance treatises of humanistic tradition on women's education demonstrate this. Cfr. D. Salomoni, *Scuola, maestri e scolari negli stati Gonzagheschi e Estensi*, Roma, Anicia, 2017, pp. 335-338.

education. Nonetheless, Angela Merici's order also clashed against the changes brought during the mid-16th century by the resurgence of secular and ecclesiastical fears against non-cloistered female religious communities⁷. This, however, did not prevent the order from developing and spreading throughout Europe and other continents.

We know little about Angela Merici's early life. She belonged to a wealthy local family, from which came ecclesiastics and magistrates who were active in the region. The young Angela could not write even though she might have been able to read. After the death of her parents she became a Franciscan tertiary, a valid option for a life of devotion as an alternative to a life of seclusion. She took her religious commitments very seriously, attending them all with rigor. Among the duties she had assigned by her Franciscan superior was the task of going to Brescia in 1516 to console the widow Caterina Pantegola, who had recently lost her husband in the context of the first phase of the Great Italian Wars. It is in this environment that we find the religious ferments I mentioned earlier. Lombardy, during the early 16th century, was devastated by wars and by the passage of armies to the service of the Valois and the Habsburgs families for the control of the region. Violence and corruption of religious and secular authorities were the norm. A strong sense of distrust pervaded both rural and urban local societies. Fear, however, was counterbalanced by a strong desire for renewal. Congregations of lay people often sprung up to take care of charitable works such as hospitals and orphanages. Young Angela was very impressed by this world suspended between crisis and regeneration and wanted to take an active part in it.

The lay people involved in this renovation often came from the nobility or the rich bourgeoisie of the city. The widow to whom Angela was sent was one of them. Through the contact with Caterina Pentegola, Merici met the Countesses Laura Gambarà and Elisabetta Prato, who together with other noble widows ran the Conservatory for the Converted Girls of Charity (*Conservatorio delle Convertite della Carità*), an institution aimed at the recovery and education of young girls, often orphans or repentant prostitutes. The institute insisted on some characteristic elements of modern devotion, such as frequent confession and communion. We do not know if Angela took part directly in the activities of the Conservatory, but certainly this could represent for her a model to be developed. Countess Prato herself later became a disciple of Angela and her successor as Mother General of the Ursulines. The late medieval nature of Angela Merici's profile was also underlined by her pilgrimages to the Holy Land. In 1532 a group of women from all social backgrounds had gathered around her, while in 1535 Angela and 28 other virgins formally gathered in the church of St. Afra in Brescia to create the Company of the Ursuline Sisters, whose rule was approved in 1536 by Lorenzo Muzio, Vicar General of the Bishop of Brescia Francesco Cornaro. On March 18th, 1537, Angela was elected "Superior and Mother General" for life. In 1539 she dictated the *Testamento* (Legacy) and her *Ricordi* (Memories) as a spiritual testament to the Mothers and Governors of the Company.

⁷ On Angela Merici and the Ursulines see: Q. Mazzonis, «Angela Merici», in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation*, ed., Margaret King, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012; Id., «Ursulines», in *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Renaissance and Reformation*, ed., Margaret King, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013; Id., *Spirituality, Gender and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula, 1474-1540*, Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2007, and C. J. Blaisdell, «Angela Merici and the Ursulines», in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen, New York, Fordham University Press, 1994, pp. 98-136.

Angela died on January 27th, 1540, when the Company had about 150 daughters. However, so far we are still in the flexible space of the charitable works typical of that time.

How do we get from here to the world of education?

As Charmarie Blaisdell observed, the informal aggregation of women around Angela's charism resembled the early stages of the Society of Jesus around Ignatius of Loyola in Montmartre. The first rule of the Ursulines was also very influenced by Franciscan simplicity⁸. The accent was placed on the austerity of the costumes, at the base of which the essential element was the virginity of the sisters. Initially, the educational activity of the Ursulines had to proceed in a semi-formal way, almost as if a minimum degree of literacy with religious purposes was implicit in their apostolic activity. In her *Testamento* and *Ricordi*, Merici was clear about the importance of education. In those documents, she explained the methods to use with the virgins in order to give them examples of pedagogy, discipline, and love to use with their young students. In addition, Ursulines were widely present in the Schools of Christian Doctrine, although probably their educational activity in Brescia began before the introduction in the city of the schools created by Castellino da Castello. A source dating to 1566, in fact, says that «all the hospitals and all the schools of Christian doctrine for girls are staffed by the Ursulines»⁹.

The death of the foundress was followed by a period of internal conflict in which various orientations within the order were competing for leadership. It was in this period that the Ursulines conformed more rigorously to the dictates of the Council of Trent and their educational activity became more institutionalized and widespread. In 1572, after the revision of the original handwritten rule of 1569, Elisabetta Prato, the old friend of Angela Merici, was elected mother general of the order. This was a turning point. Under the Generalate of Prato, in fact, the Ursulines were intercepted by the Archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo, who understood their educational potential. Borromeo, however, proceeded in an authoritarian manner, partially overturning the balance just achieved. Within the diocese of Milan, Borromeo put the order under the control of Gaspare Belinzaghi, prior-general of the schools of Christian Doctrine, effectively invalidating Prato's authority. It was with this overlap, almost a fusion with the Schools of Christian Doctrine, that the educational identity of the Ursulines was definitively stabilized. Through a further modification of their rule, Carlo Borromeo established that their main charism should be directed to the education of young women. He then converted and regularized various charitable institutions run by the Ursulines for this purpose. In addition, in 1576 Borromeo declared it the duty of every bishop of the Archdiocese of Milan to create an Ursuline company in their dioceses for educational purposes¹⁰.

During the years of Borromeo's bishopric, the Ursulines experienced an impetuous spread in Italy and abroad. In Italy, the Ursulines settled in various cities and

⁸ Cfr. Blaisdell, *Angela Merici*, cit., p. 107.

⁹ Historical Diocesan Archives of Milan (ASDM), Sezione XIII, Vol. 61, "Regola della Compagnia santa Orsola (Per Pacifico Ponte nel mese d'ottobre, 1569)"; Francesco Landini, Estratto, pp. 27-32; Mariani et al., *Angela Merici*, p. 532. The source is reported in Blaisdell, *Angela Merici*, cit., p. 111.

¹⁰ Cfr. ACTA ECCLESIAE MEDIOLANENSIS AB EUS INITIIS USQUE AD NOSTRAM AETATEM, 4 vols. (1892), (Acts of the Fourth Provincial Council, Milan, 1576), 2:493; T. Ledochowska, *Angela Merici et la Compagnie de Ste. Ursule*, Rome-Milan, Ancora, 1967, pp. 387-88; M. Marcocchi, *Le origini del Collegio della Beata Vergine di Cremona, istituzione della Riforma Cattolica (1610)*, in «Annali della Biblioteca statale e libreria civica di Cremona», XXIV, (1974), p. 10; Blaisdell, *Angela Merici*, cit., p. 112.

smaller towns of Lombardy. After Brescia and Milan, we find them settled in Cremona (1656/1616), in Como (1570/1576), in Busto Arsizio (1572), in Lodi and Bergamo (1575), in Legnano (1576), in Desio (1577), and in Novara (1593?/1625). After 1595, we find them settled in different territories of the pre-alpine belt among which was the territory of Varese, including Arona, Angera, Arsago, Somma and Appiano; the territory of Monza, including Vimercate and Cantù, and the territory of Lecco. Between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, the Ursulines also settled in various towns on the plain, including Melegnano, Abbiategrosso, San Giuliano and San Donato. It is no coincidence that many of these villages were important manufacturing centres that experienced both rapid demographic growth and economic transformations during the second half of the 16th century¹¹. In the city of Milan, in the mid-17th century, the Ursulines were organized into congregations of city gate: Santa Lucia in Porta Nuova, Santa Sofia in Porta Romana, Santa Cristina in Porta Comasina, Santa Marcellina in Porta Tosa, and Santo Spirito in Porta Ticinese, but were absent from Porta Vercellina and Porta Orientale¹². Outside of Lombardy they expanded first in the Venetian and the Emilia-Romagna regions. Convents of theirs were established in Bologna (1565/1603), in Venice (1571/1593-1642), in Ferrara (1584-1587), in Verona (1586/1594), in Parma (1590/1623), in Treviso (1590-1600/1603), in Modena (1603), in Reggio (1611), and in Feltre (1600/1637). More modest in this initial phase was their spread in central and southern Italy. Ursuline's convents were opened in Foligno (1570/1600), in Naples (1609) and in Pergola (1623)¹³.

A peculiar aspect of the Ursulines was that often, a community that settled in a town would establish itself as an autonomous congregation, while remaining faithful to the Augustinian rule and to the charisma of Angela Merici. This was the case, for example, of the Ursulines of Arona. They arrived there in 1590 by the will of the Jesuit father Giovanni Mellino. In 1598, Margherita Trivulzio Borromeo, mother of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, asked and obtained the erection as a congregation of the Ursulines in Arona in order to raise them spiritually¹⁴. The bishop of each diocese could approve the new Ursuline congregations within their cities, approving a new rule that could be more or less modified with respect to the original regulations of Merici. New rules were approved in Brescia (1582), Ferrara (1587), Verona (1594) and Treviso (1603), drafted by the entourages of the local bishops.

¹¹ Cfr. L. Chiappa Mauri, *Paesaggi rurali di Lombardia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1990.

¹² For the early expansion of the Ursulines see: A. Turchini, *Sotto l'occhio del padre. Società confessionale e istruzione primaria nello Stato di Milano*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1996, pp. 290-292. For their presence in the city of Milan see: G. Vigotti, S. Carlo Borromeo e la Compagnia di S. Orsola. *Nel centenario della ricostituzione in Milano della Compagnia di S. Orsola figlie di S. Angela Merici, 1872-1972*, Milano, Scuola tipografica S. Benedetto Viboldone, 1972, p. 59; Q. Mazzonis, «The Company of St. Ursula in Counter-Reformation Italy», in *Devout Laywomen in the Early Modern World*, ed., Alison Weber, London-New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 51. See also: M. Sonnet, «L'educazione di una giovane», in *Storia delle donne in Occidente. Dal Rinascimento all'età moderna*, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991, p. 135 and D. Zardin, *Confraternite e comunità nelle campagne milanesi fra Cinque e Seicento*, in «La scuola cattolica», 112, (1984), p. 13.

¹³ Cfr. Mazzonis, *The Company of St. Ursula*, cit., p. 51.

¹⁴ Historical Diocesan Archives of Milan, Section X, Arona XII, papers 131-137, visit of 1602, folder containing the Statutes of the «Congregazione delle filiole della Madonna Santissima in Roma». Reported also in Turchini, *Sotto l'occhio del padre*, cit., p. 295; Vigotti, S. Carlo, cit., p. 72, Marcocchi, *Le origini*, cit., p. 18.

The purpose of this flexibility was to have the action of the Ursulines available within each diocese for the most urgent apostolate issues, even if the educational activity always remained the main one. The original hierarchical organization of the company was essentially feminine. At the top was the Mother General, under whom were the *Matrone* (aristocratic widows dealing with practical issues) and the *Colonnelle* (virgins who acted as spiritual guides). In the new congregations, however, a central role was played by the bishop who approved them¹⁵.

In the middle of the 17th century, there were two main types of schools run by the Ursulines. The first was structured along the lines of the boarding schools for nobles, where girls from the aristocracy or rich bourgeoisie resided for a fee. In these colleges, similarly to the *Educandato*, the girls learned the vernacular curriculum, in addition to arithmetic, domestic arts, music, dance, and painting. The second type of school was instead represented by free schools for poor young people to learn how to read, write and do the house-works¹⁶. Within the Ursuline schools, it was also possible to give the girls some professional education. In this way, at times, the school could earn some extra money, as in the Lombard community of Besozzo, where the nuns earned money with the weaving work to which they initiated the young women. Sometimes, according to the previous municipal tradition, Ursuline schools could be financed by the municipality in which they were located. Such was the case in Trezzo, located east of Monza, where in 1591 the schools of Christian doctrine were managed in common by the local parish priest, the schoolteacher and some Ursuline nuns¹⁷. However, the education of each nun could vary greatly, at times preventing them from playing an active teaching role. In some cases, in fact, we find Ursulines who couldn't read or write. In those cases, then, they devoted themselves to manual work or craftsmanship¹⁸.

Overall, the origin and definition of the Ursuline's educational identity followed the path of most of the male teaching congregations of that time. They went from an initial phase oriented in responding to the spiritual and material needs of a rapidly (sometimes traumatically) changing society to a more institutional and post-Tridentine approach. However, this normalization, despite the profound transformations of the initial intuition of Angela Merici, did not lose the originality of an educational proposal for women, promoted by women for other women. Moreover, the importance of the territorial aspect in the promotion of this experience still emerges clearly. It is not by chance that the vocation of Angela Merici originated in the fertile Lombard-Venetian territory, as in the case of Barnabites and Somascans. Among the factors to be considered, is the rapid economic and technological development, especially in the field of agriculture, which increased the demand for adequate education. These changes in society did not only concern men but also women. The increase of an educated and literate female public was a characteristic of early modern Italy, and the Ursulines knew well how to intercept this social transformation¹⁹. Moreover, as Querciolo Mazzonis pointed out:

¹⁵ Cfr. Mazzonis, *The Company of St. Ursula*, cit., p. 54.

¹⁶ Cfr. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, cit., p. 392; Ledochowska, *Angela Merici*, cit., p. 841-842.

¹⁷ Cfr. Biblioteca Ambrosiana (Ambrosian Library), Manuscript C 321, page 314. Reported in Vigotti, cit., p. 86 and Turchini, cit., p. 296.

¹⁸ Cfr. Turchini, cit., pp. 294-297, and Vigotti, cit., p. 82.

¹⁹ Confirmation of this comes from 16th century writers themselves. Ludovico Ariosto, for example, in his

The case of Italian Ursulines challenges the view that after Trent the church adopted a monolithic or repressive policy toward devout laywomen, forcing them to accept enclosure or otherwise restricting their ability to live a consecrated life. [...] Although Ursulines were more subjected to the church's control after Trent, they nevertheless retained the freedom to remain in the world and keep significant aspects of Merici's original spiritual model²⁰.

2. Rosa Venerini and Lucia Filippini: the Pious Teachers

The educational experiences in favour of women in post-Tridentine Italy, however, were not limited to the north and the Po River Valley. We have seen that some Ursuline schools were also created in central and southern Italy, Emilia, and the Venetian region, although to a lesser extent than in Lombardy. There was therefore an educational gap to fill. The initiative started in the city of Viterbo, in northern Lazio. In 1685, the bishop of the city asked Rosa Venerini, a devout local woman, to open a school for the Christian education of girls. Rosa accepted, and with the help of two friends, Gerolama Coluzzelli and Porzia Bacci, she started a first school. However, Rosa Venerini was not just a pious woman. She was born in 1656; her father, Goffredo Venerini, was an educated person, a physician from Rome who moved to Viterbo to work in the city's largest hospital; her mother was Marzia Zampichetti, the descendant of a local noble family. Rosa's origins, therefore, give us a glimpse of a wealthy but especially an educated background capable of giving Rosa an instruction, at least according to the traditional domestic forms expected for a girl²¹.

Rosa Venerini, however, was also not just an educated woman. As in the cases of Angela Merici, Rosa was also a devout woman. Part of her youth was dedicated to discerning whether to undertake a consecrated life instead of a married one. Finally, in 1676, she entered the local Dominican monastery where she remained only a few months due to the rapid deaths of her father, brother and mother. After the death of her spiritual director, a Dominican, Rosa approached the Jesuit father Ignazio Martinelli, originally from Perugia, who was at that time professor of philosophy in Viterbo²². Father Martinelli was a key figure in the creation of the Pious School of Rosa Venerini. She revealed to him that she already had an informal school of Christian doctrine for girls at her home. The Jesuit thus asked the Bishop of Viterbo to institutionalize this work that was clearly needed, and the school started in 1685.

Orlando Furioso very often winks at the female audience, aware that women represented a considerable portion of his audience. Cfr. I. Mac Carty, *Women and the Making of Poetry in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso*, Leicester, Troubador Publishing, 2007, p. 2.

²⁰ Mazzonis, *The Company of St. Ursula*, cit., p. 50. See also: Id, *Donne devote nell'Italia post-tridentina: il caso delle compagnie di Sant'Orsola*, in «Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia», 2, (2014), p. 350.

²¹ On Rosa Venerini's life and pedagogical experience: P. Zovatto, ed., *Storia della spiritualità italiana*, Roma, Città Nuova, 2001, p. 339; M. Mascilongo, *Ho creduto nell'amore. Itinerario spirituale di Rosa Venerini*, Roma, Città Nuova, 2006; L. Bellatalla-S. S. Macchietti, *Questioni e esperienze di educazione femminile in Toscana: dalla Controriforma all'ultimo Ottocento*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1998; S. S. Macchietti, *Rosa Venerini all'origine della scuola popolare femminile: l'azione educativa del suo istituto dal 1685 ad oggi*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1986. See also: *Regole per maestre pie dell'istituto della serva di Dio Rosa Venerini ricavate dalla vita, dalla relazione e dai manoscritti della medesima*, Roma, coi tipi vaticani, 1837.

²² Cfr. G. A. Patrignani, *Memorio di pie memorie d'alcuni religiosi della compagnia de Gesù*, Vol. 2, Venezia, presso Niccolò Pezzana, 1730, pp. 177-180.

The funding, in step with the widespread practice in early modern educational funding, came from a rich noble lady of Viterbo. A first issue about the nature of the newly founded school concerned the audience to be admitted. There was no doubt that the institution was dedicated to girls, but Rosa Venerini initially wanted to admit only poor girls from the populace. However, Father Martinelli eventually convinced her to also accept impoverished young nobles.

Ignatius Martinelli thus became the spiritual guide of Rosa Venerini and her school, which can be fully incorporated into the Jesuit educational charism and spirituality. In this case, we can speak of true Jesuitesses. The first years of the school's life saw a slow but solid growth. The suspicions of the local society towards a group of women characterized by a wide margin of mobility and active life hindered the flow of girls to the new school in its early years. In six years, however, the number of pupils grew, and the number of teachers increased from three to five, until the temporary removal of Father Martinelli from Viterbo in 1692²³.

It was in that year that the real expansion of the Venerini schools began. The bishop of Montefiascone, Cardinal Marcantonio Barbarigo, in fact, having heard of the activity of the Pious Venerini School, wanted to open another school under Venerini's direction in his diocese. Subsequently, the bishops of Civita Castellana, Sutri and Bagnoregio also wanted to establish Venerini Schools in their dioceses, and from there also in the regions of Marche and Umbria²⁴. Between 1692 and 1694, she established a total of ten new schools in the villages surrounding Lake Bolsena. It wasn't long before the fame of the Venerini schools reached Rome. After a first disappointing attempt to open a school there in 1706, Pope Clement XI invited Rosa to open her own school in the Capital of Catholicism in 1713, at the foot of the *Campidoglio*.

During Rosa Venerini's stay in Rome, the Jesuit Ignatius Martinelli returned to Viterbo to take care of the spiritual direction of the teachers of the first school founded by Rosa Venerini. This direction corresponded to a real co-direction of the school with the foundress. The moment of ultimate success arrived on October 24th, 1716. On that day, Clement XI together with eight cardinals went to the school to attend a lesson. The outcome was so positive that the Pope said to Rosa: «Signora Rosa, you are doing that which we cannot do. We thank you very much because with these schools you will sanctify Rome»²⁵. Consistency with the educational charism of the post-Tridentine militant church could not have been greater.

The charism of the Venerini schools is summarized in their motto "educate to save" and was part of a non-intellectualistic educational concept. The main purpose of the schools was the moral education of the girls rather than their intellectual construction. The aim was to make them good Christians and good wives if eventually they did not choose religious life. Even the hierarchical structure remained quite simple. To the founding mother and confessors, in addition to some charismatic figures of spiritual guidance such as the Jesuit Martinelli, were submitted the directors of the individual schools and under them the teachers. These teachers were not nuns, but lay women who took a vow of poverty and chastity. They were soon called *Maestre Pie* (Pious Teachers). Both

²³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Cfr. *Regole per maestre pie*, cit., IV.

²⁵http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20061015_venerini_en.html.

girls and mature women were admitted to the Venerini schools. The emphasis was on teaching the catechism, the mysteries of the rosary, and reading and writing.

However, despite the religious emphasis of the education given in Rosa Venerini's schools, there was no lack of a real willingness to provide the women who attended them with some concrete instrument of social emancipation or redemption, at least with respect to social conditions that in some cases were of real misery. All this occurred, obviously, in a social context in which the woman remained essentially subject to her husband or father. And yet, compared to an original condition of illiteracy and hard work in the fields, a girl able to manage the domestic economy through reading and writing, eventually teaching her children, could legitimately aspire to a better life than the context in which she was born. Venerini wanted to give women an experience that would allow them to «conquer the necessary education of all that they had to believe, hope, operate»²⁶. When Rosa Venerini died in 1728, forty of her schools had been opened in the small towns of central Italy²⁷.

Among the teachers active in the Venerini schools, Lucia Filippini began to stand out at a certain point. She was born in 1672 in Tarquinia. Orphaned, she spent her childhood with an aristocratic aunt. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Lucia developed her spirituality at the local convent of Benedictine nuns. Although during the 17th century the female branch of the Benedictines were not particularly committed in education, written culture remained among the founding elements of the Benedictine charism. We cannot know to what extent, but it is reasonable to assume that the young Filippini was marked by these elements of the spirituality of that monastery. Lucia met Cardinal Marcantonio Barbarigo during a pastoral visit to Tarquinia. The bishop of Montefiascone, struck by Filippini's intelligence, thought that she could be a useful help in the school opened by Rosa Venerini in his city in 1692. Initially, brought to Montefiascone by Cardinal Barbarigo, Lucia was placed in the local convent of Santa Chiara. But she was not a girl like all the others. Lucia, in fact, received from the bishop the task of teaching the other girls in the monastery. Lucia thus became one of Rosa Venerini's closest collaborators in Montefiascone. The turning point in Lucia Filippini's apostolic activity was when Rosa Venerini left to go back to Viterbo, to take care of some problems that arose in those schools after her departure, and later for Rome, called by Clement XI. Filippini was left with the task of continuing to direct the school of Montefiascone and to continue the work of opening new schools in the region. Cardinal Barbarigo supported Filippini in this task²⁸. Lucia, assisted by some new carefully selected teachers, including Chiara Candelari and Margherita Casali, continued the work of opening schools in central Italy, which reached a total of 52 in the course of her life. The educational and institutional model of the schools opened by Filippini was essentially the same as the Venerini schools. The only significant change in her action was the passage of spiritual direction from

²⁶ Bellatalla-Macchiotti, *Questioni e esperienze di educazione femminile*, cit., p. 62; Cfr. Macchiotti, *Rosa Venerini*, cit., pp. 77, 83, 132; and Mascilongo, *Ho creduto all'amore*, cit., p. 16.

²⁷ Cfr. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, cit., p. 392.

²⁸ On the life and activity of Lucia Filippini, see: N. D'Amico, *Un libro per Eva. Il difficile cammino dell'istruzione della donna in Italia: la storia, le protagoniste*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016; R. Pomponio, *Il tredicesimo apostolo. Santa Lucia Filippini*, Roma, San Paolo Edizioni, 2004; F. Di Simone, *Della vita della serva di Dio Lucia Filippini superiora delle scuole pie*, Roma, per l'Ansillioni al corallo vicino alla Chiesa Nova, 1732.

the Jesuits to the Congregation of Pious Workers, founded by Carlo Carafa in Naples in 1600, which helped Filippini to open a school in Rome in 1707.

How are we to evaluate the overall activity of these school-founders?

A first aspect to consider is the delayed arrival of these pedagogical experiences as compared to those of northern Italy. There are essentially two causes. The first is the economic stagnation of the central Italian towns between the 16th and 17th centuries. While the hard-working cities of the Po River Valley, despite the devastation inflicted by the Italian Wars, underwent a profound transformation of agricultural structures that would lay the foundations of the 18th century proto-industrialization, the cities of central and southern Italy, with their mountainous geography that made communications difficult, remained economically backward. This contributed to a low demand for literacy²⁹. The second cause is the different conception of the feminine role in central-southern Italy as compared to the north, where women were granted greater social margins of action. The freedom of movement enjoyed by Rosa Venerini and Lucia Filippini, in fact, was seen with suspicion and distrust by local societies and by most of the religious authorities and the lower clergy. It is no coincidence that the bishop of Montefiascone, Cardinal Marcantonio Barbarigo, the “talent-scout” who discovered these two women and allowed them to make use of their educational genius, was originally from Venice.

The role of patronage played by male profiles is also a key factor in this school experience. The position played by figures such as Barbarigo or the Jesuit Ignatius Martinelli, in fact, was never intended to control the orientation and original characters of the pedagogical intuitions of Rosa Venerini and Lucia Filippini. These men spontaneously opted for the forms and charisms offered by Venerini and Filippini without ever failing to bring their original idea to life. Venerini’s story is exemplary. Her pedagogical method was certainly inspired by the programs and discipline of the *Ratio Studiorum*, but in the field, she adopted original solutions such as the use of several teachers for the same class. Overall, therefore, the Venerini and Filippini Pious Schools managed to create a synthesis of traditional and innovative educational elements, led by female boldness but ever following the Tridentine dictates.

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²⁹ Cfr. C. M. Cipolla, *Istruzione e sviluppo: il declino dell’analfabetismo nel mondo occidentale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002.

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