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# For “Good Education of my Beloved People”\*: Agostino Valier and the Company of St. Ursula of Verona

## *Para la “buena educación de mi amado pueblo”: Agostino Valier y la Compañía de Santa Úrsula de Verona*

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**Abstract:** In the post-Tridentine period the Company of St. Ursula –founded in 1535 by Angela Merici in Brescia– became a model for other Companies which, following the example offered by Milan at the time of Carlo Borromeo, spread to other dioceses, taking an important role in the teaching of Christian doctrine. The city of Verona at the time of bishop Agostino Valier represents one of the first stages of this expansion process. This research reconstructs –for the first time in a systematic way– the origins and the initial phase of consolidation of the Company of Verona, with the support of the most recent bibliography and printed sources, in order to highlight the many educational objectives assigned to the Company within the pastoral plan of one of the most representative players in the post-Tridentine period.

**Keywords:** women’s education; religious education; catholic reformation; Agostino Valier.

**Resumen:** Durante el periodo postridentino, la Compañía de Santa Úrsula –fundada en 1535 por Angela Merici en Brescia– sirvió de modelo para otras Compañías que, siguiendo el ejemplo de las surgidas en la ciudad de Milán durante la época de Carlos Borromeo, se extendieron a otras diócesis, desempeñando un papel importante en la enseñanza de la doctrina cristiana. Su implantación en Verona, bajo el episcopado de Agostino Valier, fue una de las primeras etapas de este proceso de expansión. En esta investigación se reconstruyen por vez primera de modo sistemático, los orígenes y la fase inicial de su consolidación, a partir de fuentes impresas y con el apoyo de la bibliografía más reciente. Se ponen así de relieve las numerosas labores educativas asignadas a dicha Compañía dentro del plan pastoral de uno de los representantes más destacados de la reforma católica en Italia.

**Palabras clave:** educación de la mujer; educación religiosa; reforma católica; Agostino Valier.

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\* Valier, 1575, p. 137.

## PREFACE

There are now many studies, produced in Italy and abroad, which have recognized the important role played by the Company of St. Ursula and its founder, Angela Merici, in the renewal of the forms of female religious life and, more generally, of the evolution of the condition of women in the modern age (McNamara, 1996, pp. 452-488; Hufton, 1996; Zarri, 2000, pp. 466-474). However, the scope of this survey cannot be said to be exhausted, especially if we take into consideration the breadth and spirit of the institutional model proposed by the Company in the various dioceses, and the specific educational and pastoral projects that animated it in the aftermath of the Council of Trent.

Founded in Brescia in 1535 on the initiative of the Franciscan Tertiary Angela Merici (Ledochowska, 1968; Mariani, Tarolli, Seynaeve, 1986; Belotti 2004), the Company of St. Ursula was addressed to those women who wished to consecrate themselves without becoming nuns; this was a very old need, –as highlighted by the presence of tertiaries, *bizzoche* and *beguines*– to which the Merician Company provided a ‘institutionalized’ solution (Pelliccia and Rocca, 1980, vol. 6, col. 834-857; Zarri, 2000, pp. 453-480; Mazzonis, 2007). A rare example of “devout association entirely composed and managed by women”, independent of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and religious orders (Mazzonis, 2007, p. 31), the Company of origins turned to young virgins of every social class, requiring from them a continued religious commitment, and offering them the opportunity to live in the condition of *Sponsa Christi* in the world, through a consecration without a convent, community life or solemn vows and dress, which allowed them a certain level of spiritual and material autonomy.

The Company of St. Ursula, following its founder’s death in 1540, went through a complex period of evolution, which led to very different solutions, but which still remained faithful to its original charisma. During the second half of the sixteenth century, the Merician institution saw a remarkable expansion, but significantly changed its form and purpose, putting catechetical instruction at the heart of its objectives. In this phase of profound change, the survival and expansion of the Company was mainly enabled by the support of post-Tridentine bishops and, especially, by Carlo Borromeo. The Archbishop of Milan, in fact, reformed the Institution of Brescia and introduced the Company to Milan, by preparing –under his leadership– the Regulations for both institutions, which were used as models by the new foundations that in those years were emerging in other Italian and French cities.

The Company of St. Ursula of Verona also adhered to this pattern. This article is dedicated to the Scaliger city’s foundation and is part of a larger research proj-

ect, focused on the pastoral action carried out by Agostino Valier during his 41-year (1565-1606) at the helm of the Diocese of Verona (Patrizi, 2012).

#### A PERFECT ORGANIZATIONAL MACHINE FOR THE PROTECTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMPANY

Founded on initiative of Bishop Agostino Valier (Cipriani, 2009; Valier, 2000; Valier, 2001) in 1586, who thus followed up the ‘proposal’ publicly advanced just four years before by Card. Carlo Borromeo, the Company of St. Ursula of Verona presented itself as a “union of virgins”, aimed at those women who, “having no intention to become nuns, or being unable to do so due to their particular situations and various rightful reasons”, chose to serve the Lord in the world. The Institution was immediately endowed with a Rule, “gathered from those of other cities and, especially, of Brescia” (Regola, 1594, pp. 2-3).

This information derives from the preface to the *Regolamento della Compagnia delle vergini di Sant’Orsola di Verona* (“Rule of the Company of Virgins of St. Ursula of Verona”), and indicates the ‘double instance’ from which the foundation of Verona starts. On the one hand, in fact, we have confirmation of the strong influence exerted by the archbishop of Milan on the spread of the Company, especially to dioceses in northern Italy belonging to his ecclesiastical province or, as in the case of Verona, to the circle of ‘satellite dioceses’, which constantly looked to ‘Borromeo’s laboratory’, and were very receptive towards all measures and ‘devices’ which were more effective in the cause of Catholic renewal. On the other hand, however, the inspiration to the Brescia model is emphasized, very much in the case of the Verona institution, like the other foundations of the Company of St. Ursula, which were all certainly autonomous without links to each other, but were clearly aware of the original bond with Brescia, which normally –beyond the large range of specific local variations– was recalled directly in the Rules.

This dependence on the Brescia paradigm is proven by the internal analysis of the Rule of the Company of St. Ursula of Verona, which –although not materially written by Valier, the contents were approved by him and certainly reflected his position on this ‘congregation of pious women’– which was introduced with a pastoral letter addressed to the daughters of the Company. Divided into twenty-four chapters and preceded by an unnumbered preface, the Verona Rule follows the structure of the Brescia Rule confirmed by Borromeo and printed in 1582 (Merici, 1975; Belotti, 2009, pp. 441-455; Rinaldini, 1971), which however greatly simplifies and readjusts, shortening many steps and, in some cases, borrowing elements from the Milan Rule, published for the first time in 1567 (di Filippo, 2009; di Fil-

ippo, 2006, pp. 180-184; Rinaldini, 1971, pp. 266-280). As in the reference models, the Verona Rule devotes the first twelve chapters to the definition of the features of the institution and reserves the remainder of the description of the organizational structure; in this latter part it appears to depend solely on the Brescia model.

The reading of the Verona Rule reflects the image of a foundation that seems perfectly in line with the process of institutionalization of the Company, which had led to the introduction of a ritual for the entry of virgins in three subsequent stages (Regola, 1594, pp. 4-5; Pelliccia and Rocca, 1980, vol. 6, col. 839-840; Rinaldini, 1971, pp. 218-227; Belotti, 2009, pp. 425-428), a black distinctive dress, characterized by a veil and leather *centurino* (girdle), and which had determined the definition of a less individual and more community focused spiritual life, under the confessor's control, marked by moments of prayer and shared feast days (Regola, 1594, pp. 5-6, 10-11, 14). In addition, the Verona Rule confirms the secular status of the Ursulines and presents the 'virginity, obedience and poverty' triad not as vows, but as virtues and values to adhere to through one's own free will. The Rule proposed one style of life centered on prayer and on a discreet and charitable presence in the world, realized through the fulfillment of specific tasks, among which –as will be stated– the teaching of Christian doctrine occupied a central position.

On the side of governance, the Company of St. Ursula of Verona did not follow the Milan model of autonomous communities based on parishes, but adopted in toto the unitary system proposed in Borromeo's rule of Brescia, which established new roles of government and direct subordination to the bishop. It was a hierarchical system headed by the bishop, as Superior of the whole Company, supported by "many other people, as coadjutors (...), and primarily by a Father of the Company (*Vicario*), with another substitute priest (*Sacerdote coadiutore*), and a Chancellor", directly chosen by the bishop (pp. 15-16). Below them, playing second fiddle to the male authority, there was the female hierarchy, composed primarily of General Mother, "elected by all, virgins as well as superiors", but confirmed by the bishop, helped by a *Vicaria*, who could stand in for the Mother when she was absent, and by a small group of women consisting of four advisors, called *Assistenti*, which included the Vicaria herself (pp. 17).

This complex organigram included other roles, relating to the division of the town into sectors, each of which defined three figures with precise duties of care, education and protection of the virgins: the *Governatrice*, who had to obtain information on the "condition of life, customs and occupations taken (by the virgins) at home as well as outside"; the *Maestra*, who was in charge of "teaching the observance of the Rule"; and finally the *Avvisatrice*, who had the task of "visiting –some-

times without notice— the virgins, keeping information about their conduct and reporting to the *Governatrici* or *Maestre*" (pp. 19-21). On a lateral level, therefore, the system of government of the Company of Verona, as in the Brescia model, gave an exclusive role to female authority, which applied in assembly meetings, and at general congregations—extended to all the daughters of Company— and at special congregations—available only to the superior figures, i.e. *Governatrici* and *Maestre* or General Mother, *Assistenti* and *Governatrici* (pp. 21-23).

To complete this organization system, respecting the Brescia paradigm, the foundation of Verona also established the presence of some *Protettori*, chosen among "the most important gentlemen of the City", as a network of social protection and support for the material needs of the Company (pp. 23).

Over the years, the institute consolidated its presence in the city of Verona, strengthening its governance structure and relations with the surrounding social fabric, as witnessed by the *ad limina* Report of 1607, written one year after Agostino Valier's death, by his nephew and heir to the Episcopal chair of Verona Alberto Valier.

"The spirit of these virgins—the document reads—is supported by two priests of our clergy who lead highly exemplary lives, whose temporal requirements are attended by two *Protettori*, who are fully religious gentlemen. To these, twelve matrons are added as *Reggitrici*, eminent women of moral integrity and piety. They are also noble and very rich. The bishop elects all these persons or, at least, approves and confirms those proposed to him. This congregation, in the twenty-five years from when it was founded, grew so much both in numbers and in piety, that hardly anyone is not astonished" (Valier, 1607, p. 15).

One cannot help but notice that the Report, apart from confirming the vitality of the Company of Verona, traces its founding to 1582, i.e. four years before the official date stated in the Rule and places it in the very year when, as indicated in the Rule itself, Carlo Borromeo proposed to found the Merician institute in Verona during a public intervention in the city's cathedral (Regola, 1594, p. 2). This time gap can be explained by the fact that, as was common in the history of religious institutions, the community of the Ursulines of Verona had already been active for several years, perhaps even before 1582, when it obtained canonical recognition by Agostino Valier in 1586.

But, let us put aside this aspect, to which we will return, and let us resume the analysis of the information provided on the organization of the Company of Verona in the *ad limina* Report of 1607. From this document we learn for example that, according to a scheme that was already established in the original foun-

dation of Brescia, some of the Verona Ursulines lived with their families, “remaining (...) in their homes”, while others lived “together in houses purchased for them” (Valier, 1607, p. 15). In this regard, the historian Giovanni Battista Biancolini reports that the Ursulines of Verona lived “separately in their homes” until 1603, when the first Mother General of the Company, Lucrezia da Sacco, decided, according to other sisters, “to take a rent in the heart of City”. In that same year, some sisters settled in a rented house, which they left in 1610, to move to a house in the *Cittadella* area, where a few years later (1619) they also had the opportunity to build their church, dedicated of course to St. Ursula (Biancolini, 1749-1771, vol. 4, pp. 427-428). The practice of common life gradually assumed greater importance within the Company, so that the new Rule of 1670 –ordered by Bishop Sebastiano Pisani– stopped the practice of entrusting the role of General Mother to matrons who lived outside the Company’s home, and gave the role of Mother Superior to the figure of the Mother of house, originally subordinated to that of General Mother (Regola, after 1670).

#### SERVICE TO OTHERS AND THE SECOND PRAISEWORTHY STATE OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

The Report of 1607 still described the Ursulines’ conduct and duties that: “they lead a virginal life and take care to their own health and that of many other girls and women, attending to holy works and teaching the rudiments of Christian doctrine”. This suggests that this “very flourishing” congregation of pious women, who lived at home or together (but not cloistered) was actively engaged in catechism education (Valier, 1607, p. 15). In this respect, the Company of Verona –no more than two decades from its official foundation– seemed to have fully realized the mission to which it was entrusted in the establishing Rule, where in Chapter X, entitled “On charity”, it was stated:

“during feast days (the Ursulines) will act in a wide field to offer spiritual alms, going into schools to teach Christian doctrine, always accompanying this exercise with a short exhortation to observe the doctrine which they teach, performing this office, however, with great humility and a low sense of themselves” (Regola, 1594, p. 13).

In this part the Rule of Verona seems to refer to the Rule of Milan and, more specifically, to the chapter entitled “How (the Ursulines) should exercise themselves during feast days”, which –in addition to the usual “private devotions, such as reading,

meditation, and prayer”— assigns a prominent role to the catechism activity conducted at the Schools of Christian doctrine (*Regola della compagnia di Sant’Orsola di Milano*. In Rinaldini, 1971, p. 275).

These educational institutions were founded, as we know, to spread the knowledge of the rudiments of faith and saw significant growth during the post-Tridentine period, thanks to support given to them in the various dioceses by religious orders and bishops. The Schools of Christian doctrine also carried out a function of initial literacy, which in the case of schools for young girls acquires a sense of particular importance, considering the scarcity of educational initiatives aimed at women in Old Regime society (Turrini, 1982; Grendler, 1988; Turchini, 1996).

We can thus see that, especially for the bishops, the consecrated virgins of the Company of St. Ursula would have appeared as the best people to take on the task of teaching at female schools of catechism, also by virtue of their high cultural level. Indeed, many of them would at least have known how to read, if in Chapter XII of the Rule of Verona reads: “All (Ursulines) had to have the Rule with them, and read it often or, if they could not (read), were advised to give it to someone else to read” (Regola, 1594, p. 14; cfr. *Regola della compagnia di Sant’Orsola di Milano*. In Rinaldini, 1971, p. 269). It was certainly not laid down that all Ursulines should be able to read, but it was encouraged for the majority of them.

The field of religious literacy was only one example of the enormous pastoral potentialities of the Company, which had already been tried—even before Carlo Borromeo’s Milan—in Brescia itself, not only in catechism schools, but also in healthcare facilities and city shelters, as documented in the famous letter written in 1566 by the confessor of the Ursulines of Brescia Francesco Landini to the Milanese preacher Franceschino Visdomini (AEM, 1582, cc. 338v-339r).

One can imagine that even Agostino Valier, following the example of Borromeo, had wanted the Company in his diocese, precisely by virtue of his specific recognition of the great contribution that this would provide in the field of religious education for girls, especially those belonging to poor classes, an aspect that—as it has been shown elsewhere—he had so much at heart (Patrizi, 2012).

In fact, he had been able to reflect on the pastoral utility of the Ursulines many years before their arrival in Verona, as we know by reading his work *Institutione d’ogni stato lodevole delle donne cristiane* (“Institution of every praiseworthy state of Christian women”), printed for the first time in 1575 by the Venetian publisher Bolognino Zaltieri (Valier, 1575).

The work was conceived by Valier for three specific conditions of women’s lives, for each of which he dedicated a specific book, introduced by evocative titles: *Del Modo di vivere proposto alle vergini che si chiamano demesse* (“The Way of life offered

to maidens who are called Demesse”), *Della vera et perfetta viduità* (“Of true and perfect widowhood”), and *Instituzione del modo di vivere delle donne maritate* (“Institution of the lifestyle of married women”). Each book was aimed at a different woman –two of the bishop of Verona’s sisters, the Ursuline Donata Valier and the married Laura Valier in Gradenigo, and the widow Adriana Contarini– and seemed to be planned, as was to happen successively, also for independent circulation.

Different information on Valier’s conception of the Ursulines can be obtained from the first two books of his work. In particular, with regard to the status of ‘*demesse*’, turning to his sister Donata as the dedicatee of the first book and representative of this condition of life, the bishop of Verona provided the following definition:

“It is certain that your condition of life is very grateful to the Lord God and his divine Majesty is pleased by your decision to serve Him admirably, as you can in many ways, outside the monastery. And in truth virgins of this kind, servants of God, who in some cities are called companions of the blessed Company of St. Ursula, in some others are said to be from the Company of the Madonna, under another name are termed *Demesse*, are very fruitful in the Church of God; because their prayers often assuage the his Majesty’s wrath against those households that are badly governed by fathers and mothers, who do not fear God; with their devotion and frequency of holy sacraments many times provide solace to fathers and mothers, and lead them back to the Lord; they help married brothers and sisters, often madly in love with the world; they educate the children in homes and in a certain way provide a benefit to the world, teaching the principles of Christian piety to those who are called to rule others. And finally they become teachers of neighbours, coadjutors of parish priests and bishops, ministers of Christ in hospitals –where He lies in the poor– and they are like maidservants in those homes where his divine Majesty deigns to dwell with his holy graces” (Valier, 1575, pp. 19-21).

Once explained that mentioned ‘*demesse*’ are just virgins belonging to the Company of St. Ursula, Valier is also turns to providing an etymological explanation of the word. Indeed, according to a use attested in Lombardy and Veneto (Pelliccia and Rocca, 1976, vol. 3, col. 503-504; 1980, vol. 6, col. 834-857), he states that ‘*demessa*’ “simply means anything that is lowered and humbled under the hands of God, and under the care of his divine Majesty” (Valier, 1575, p. 38).

He presents this women’s status as the “second praiseworthy degree” of Christian women and associates it immediately with a model of active religious life, ex-



emphified in the Gospel figure of Marta that, according to a very commonly found conception in the medieval and modern eras, is opposed to the figure of Mary, who is more a model of contemplative life (Zarri, 1998, pp. 46-47). The hierarchy between the two *status vitae* is illustrated by the classic metaphor of the social body of the Church, in that the cloistered virgins represent the noblest part of this body, i.e. the eyes, the '*demesse*' are likened to the hands which, although the "lower limbs" of this body, contribute significantly to its operation.

Agostino Valier emphasizes the educational and welfare role played by the '*demesse*' within their families, in parishes, hospitals and other charitable institutions of the city. On these issues he returns several times in the book, specifically in the short chapter devoted to "Charity to one's neighbour" in which, addressing his sister Donata, urges her and the virgins of the Company of St. Ursula of Venice –to which his sister belonged– to engage in the service to others. He illustrates the many possibilities of applying this apostolate, beginning from catechism education, an issue on which he lingers in detail, showing the places and contents of the teaching:

"However, great charity and great alms are given to those children, to whom it is taught: the Christian Doctrine, the twelve articles of the Church instituted by Our Lord Jesus Christ, the ten commandments that the Lord has given in Decalogue, the prayer made by the son of God, i.e. the *Pater Noster*, model of all prayers, which contains seven questions, that include all of what a good Christian may ask. And giving charity to one's own grandchildren means giving charity to one's home country, because it is too damaging and too shameful that such a noble and well educated Republic (i. e. the Republic of Venice) is often governed by people who do not know the meaning of being Christian and have never learned the fundamentals of the holy religion, by which Christians are appointed. I would like you not only to teach children at home, but also neighbours' children, and that on feast days you go to do this holy and important task at church, leading our brother's children with you, as an example to encourage neighbouring fathers and mothers to bring their children to Church" (Valier, 1575, pp. 86-88).

It is clear that for Valier, '*demessa*' meant first of all 'educator'. That vision foreshadowed the enormous contribution that for centuries the different institutions of Ursulines would give by coming into the field of women's education and whose foundation lay in the exemplariness of their way of life and the message of charity conveyed by their works, starting from the vital activity of teaching the Christian

doctrine, which was presented by Valier as the Company's main mission (Belotti, 2009; Zarri, 2000, pp. 178-181).

But the work of the Ursulines' had many educational values and the bishop of Verona provides several examples of this. In fact, he dwells on the role of 'mediator of faith' that the '*demesse*' virgins could play within families of origin –especially in the case of Ursulines who lived at home– and with the surrounding families through wives and mothers who turned to them, seeking comfort and advice on household management and how to behave with their loved ones.

“The *demesse* virgins –the bishop of Verona notes in this regard– could exercise charity towards married women whose miseries who they hear every hour, keeping secret the passions which they discover, urging them to accept happily the cross which they bear and to make the effort of governing their homes well, educating their children well, persevering with constant prayers to the Lord, trying with humility and esteem to make their husbands into better men, and, failing that, to tolerate them, repeating over and over again that the Lord God rules this world with admirable foresight, that we ourselves do not know what we ask, that one can find good from any misfortune, if your eyes are turned towards God and one thinks of the end, which is eternal life” (Valier, 1575, p. 90).

It was not simply a matter of family harmony, the Tridentine Church had recognized marriage as a way of sanctification and the Ursulines had the task of making married women (*forma vitae* to which Valier devotes the third and last book of his work on praiseworthy states of Christian women) aware of their fundamental educational mission within the family: to supervise the religious training of their children and to keep alive the faith of their husbands, not by words, but through the prayers and the traditional female virtues of humility and obedience.

As a deep connoisseur of the different forms of apostolate promoted by the Company, Valier does not fail to highlight the function of *cura animarum* carried out in hospitals:

“The *Demessa* shall visit sick kindred men and women, and they shall benefit from this charity –which is often overlooked by those women who should use it more– to remind the sick to help themselves with the spiritual doctor, who is the Confessor. She will remind them to resolve their own affairs with the Lord, and thus everything else will be easy to resolve. (She will remind them) that the true physician is Jesus Christ Our Lord, doctor of soul and body, who

helps us wonderfully to recover our bodily health, having appeased the soul; that this life is like a peregrination, that the Lord God is the master of life and death" (Valier, 1575, p. 91).

The bishop of Verona outlines a very rich and varied background, in which the Company of St. Ursula is in touch with highly varied social and educational contexts, from the schools of Christian doctrine to the hospitals, and dialogues with various female figures, from family mothers to nuns. He closes the chapter on "Charity to our neighbours" by encouraging the '*demessa*' to attend the female monasteries, to fuel their personal journey of spiritual perfection as well as that of the cloistered religious women themselves, sharing with them reflections on death, on the passion of Christ, recalling the example of Mary and the holy virgins, and above all the common privileged status of *sponsae Christi* (Valier, 1575, p. 94; Zarri, 2000, pp. 417-451).

#### WIDOWS AS "TRUE TEACHERS OF THE DISCIPLINE OF CHRIST"

The value of the example offered by women who, while remaining in the lay state, led a devoted life in the world, is reaffirmed by Valier in another book of the triad enclosed in the work *Institution of the most praiseworthy state of Christian women*, which provides additional evidence to shed light on the importance given by the bishop of Verona to this condition of life within his diocese. It refers to the book *Of true and perfect widowhood*.

Dedicated to the illustrious Venetian noblewoman Adriana Contarini, a living example of ideal widowhood, the book aims to outline the profile of perfect widow. On the one hand, Agostino Valier said that "nobody can (...), nor must condemn holy matrimony: because (...) it is ordained by God and confirmed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and widows who get married cannot be reviled, because they use the remedy that the Lord has left for their malady". On the other hand, continuing to use the metaphor of 'remedy', he stresses as "it is a most desirable thing to be so healthy in body that you have no need for doctors, so it is most commendable and desirable thing, (that) the widow has no desire to be bound by another knot, other than the knot of Christ" (Valier, 1575, pp. 130-131). From these Pauline premises it follows that those widows who choose to not marry a second time are more praiseworthy, because through this choice they show that they "have extinguished all carnal desires, even more if they convert those thoughts and those concerns, which they had in order to please their husbands, into union with God and pleasure for his Divine Majesty" (p. 127).

Valier's idea of the 'perfect widow' obviously coincides with the condition of the religious woman. In this regard, the bishop of Verona, who was an attentive interpreter of his times, not only presents the option of monastic life –which remains the main ideal model (Terraccia, 2012)– but also emphasizes the value of a choice of consecrated life lived in the world; indeed it can be said that his treatise is focused precisely on this female condition. Valier fully perceives the importance of this way of life above all for those widows who, in the absence of male protection, chose to remain in the world and he, careful bishop as he was, takes pains to define and clarify the reference points in making this very often troublesome existential choice that was unusual for the time. Here we can hear the peremptory tone of the bishop when he asserts:

“Therefore, those who wish to persuade widows to marry again should be silent, in their reasoning that they should not be useless to human race. On the contrary, as widows they are free and unfettered by the many ties and obligations of marriage, they can more effectively be of benefit to the world, and to anyone else, if they are imitators of Anna and those holy women who are teachers of Christ's true discipline, and moderator of behaviour in their homes, and models in their lives for virgins and remarried women, in addition they are consolations in adversity and prosperity, prudent counsellors, excitors of holy prayer and of taking the Holy Sacraments and all good institutions, and they are finally advisers and firm bases of harmony and peace, not only in homes but also in quarters. The more they are mortified, the more they will be wise, because most human perfection consists of this, which is to die to the world, beginning to converse with God during this our human life, on our human misery” (Valier, 1575, pp. 140-141).

A model of perfection of widowhood emerges which is performed by the service of others and by work in the world without belonging to it. 'Living as if dead to the world' was difficult art which required a specific educational path, which Valier describes step by step, certainly inspired by the lifestyle offered by the Company of St. Ursula, which he –as we have seen– knew very well, but taking as a point of reference also the Company of St. Anna of Milano (di Filippo, 2006, pp. 177-184), that we can imagine he knew very well too, considering his special friendship with Carlo Borromeo (Tacchella, 1972).

It should be noted that the St. Anna's widows were established in Milan in 1570 and were developed in parallel to the Ursulines. Indeed, inspired on the Brescia model –which included the presence of *Governatrici*, mostly widows of the aristocracy to whom the virgins of the Merici Institution were entrusted– the archbishop

of Milan had thought of a congregation of widows, willing "to work in the schools of Christian doctrine for girls", and in charge of dealing with "the protection of virgins of the Company of St. Ursula, visiting them and helping them in their spiritual and temporal needs" (Regola, 1578, c. 7r). Chaste life, black dress with "girdle", mental prayer twice a day, daily recitation of eight *Pater* and *Ave Maria*, monthly confession and communion: the rule of life intended for the widows of St. Anna was almost identical to that of the *puellae* protected by them; a similarity further strengthened by the sharing of the same confessors and by the subordination to the same Prior, placed at the head of the Company of St. Ursula (Regola, 1578, cc. 4r, 5v). A perfect union, therefore, designed to confer legitimacy on two female conditions, which otherwise was difficult to accept for the society of the time.

There are many points of contact between the draft prepared by Borromeo for the widows of St. Anna and the book *Of true and perfect widowhood* by Valier and they extend far beyond the common reference to the biblical figure of Anna, from whom the Company of Milan took its name, and that often occurs in Valier's work as a reference paradigm for the condition of widows. The most important similarities with the Rule of the Company of St. Anna are, above all, in the measured and controlled way of life that the bishop of Verona proposes to widows. Eyes lowered, turned only toward the contemplation of sacred images; well guarded ears, far from any kind of 'murmuring'; moderation in food and "in the necessary things for life"; judicious and considered use of the tongue, mainly spent in prayers; black dress, without "other ornament that is different from the soul's ornament": these were the rules of the body that Agostino Valier, in line with the educational and devout treatises of his time, advised to widows in order to take away the lure of "brief and false pleasures" as well as all the "bad patterns", suggested by the memory of their previous life as married women (Valier, 1575, pp. 166-167). This is an existential model that had to be cultivated day by day to achieve the fullest expression of their earthly condition that –the Bishop of Verona reminds– if pursued outside the cloister, can bring great utility to the world.

Agostino Valier dwells greatly upon this last aspect, showing through the shining examples of the cities of Venice and Verona, the enormous pastoral potential of the widows who choose to dedicate themselves to the service of others. First of all, he recalls the fundamental work of the Venetian widows –one whom was the dedicatee of the book Adriana Contarini– in hospitals, in "the house of spinsters and converted women" and many other works of charity, as well as the teaching of Christian doctrine (Bonora, 1998, pp. 447-450). After that he introduces a discussion on the widows of Verona who belong to the Company of St. Ursula, also known as the Company of the Madonna, by saying:

“In this town many of my sister widows offer the same usefulness by performing these holy deeds. They nonetheless continue to preserve and enhance the Company of the Madonna, whose work consists in no small part of the good education of my beloved people. We may call it a seminary of good customs in the homes of Verona, seeing clearly by experience that sons, daughters and grandchildren keep those first beliefs and those first memories of piety that they receive from their fathers and mothers, and sometimes much more from those women and from those mothers-in-law, in such a way that we could say that the widows are maidservants of Christ, inhabitants of his buildings and teachers of his people, of great assistance to the towns and to the Republics” (Valier, 1575, pp. 136-137).

From this passage we can gather that the Ursulines had started their activities in Verona long before the bishop’s official recognition of 1586 and before Borromeo’s ‘proposal’ of 1582, so their presence in Verona can be brought forward by at least one decade, if we consider the fact that Valier’s work on the praiseworthy state of Christian women was published for the first time in 1575. This part of Valier’s work testifies an important participation of widows within the Company of St. Ursula of Verona following its inception and this aspect finds further evidence in the Rule of the Company of St. Ursula of Verona, where we can read, concerning the characteristics of General Mother: “she will be one of the *Superiori* Virgins or Widows of the Company, a mature woman of least forty years, with a very exemplary life, who has for many years worked in the service of the Lord, so that she can guide and lead many servants, and brides of Christ” (Regola, 1594, p. 17).

On the basis of the specific definition of the Company of St. Ursula, which was an institution dedicated to young ladies destined to celibacy, who represented the effective members of the Company, we can well imagine that the widows of Verona were given –like in other foundations created to emulate the Brescia prototype– a role of patronage, i.e. protection of virgins, as witnessed by the presence of the twelve eminent, rich and full of piety *Reggitrici* mentioned in the *ad limina* Report of 1607 (Valier, 1607, p. 15), who remind to the model of perfect widow proposed by Valier in his work and represented by the noble Adriana Contarini. But there is more. The chance to become General Mother of the Ursulines allowed widows to hold the most important leadership role in the Company. This was a sign that at the end of the sixteenth century, as Gabriella Zarri noted, “the female condition rigidly classified into the anthropological-religious categories of *status vitae* did not observe strict separations in social practice” (Zarri, 2000, p. 269).

## CONCLUSION

The bishop of Verona believed firmly in the practice of consecrating lay women carried on by the Company of St. Ursula, which was a model for other female congregations that arose in those years at local level for the spiritual improvement of women and for the service of the community. The first institution which came near to that of the Ursulines was the Congregation of *Dimesse*, founded in Vicenza in 1579 by the Franciscan and former Barnabite Antonio Pagani (Zarri, 2000, pp. 466-474). Not surprisingly, in very last period of his episcopal government, more precisely in 1602, Agostino Valier allowed Father Galese Nichesola to establish the Congregation of *Dimesse* in Verona, created in imitation of the Vicenza Institute, to which Valier himself had given his approval as apostolic visitor in 1584 (Biancolini, vol. 4, pp. 424-426, 826; vol. 8, pp. 261-265).

Unlike that of the Company of St. Ursula, which was addressed mainly to young ladies who wanted to live a consecrated life within their own families, the Congregation of *Dimesse* welcomed women of any age, virgins and widows, and offered them the possibility of an alternative home to that of family. The *Dimesse*, like the Ursulines, followed a rule of life that had a lot in common with a monastic rule, but without a public profession of vows, and they played an active role in the teaching of Christian doctrine, in caring for the sick and other charitable works. This was not simply coincidental. Behind it stood the will of ecclesiastical hierarchy –just as the rules of seclusion became more rigid– to favour the presence of alternative models of life for women compared to the usual ‘convent/marriage’ scenario, which gave them dignity and value, placing them within a well defined organizational-network, headed by a bishop and responding to a specific pastoral plan, having reference to a fundamental categorical imperative: the sanctification of society. Certainly an ambitious goal, but at the same time inevitable for the post-Tridentine Church, which tried to respond with newer models of spiritual development, closer to the needs and peculiarities of the individual, including also –as in this case– those ‘solitary women’ who caused so much fear in the society of that time.

Thus for Agostino Valier the virgins and widows of the Company of St. Ursula, and then those of the Congregation of *Dimesse*, certainly represented an attempt to offer a different frame of reference for those women who wanted to express their choice of faith in the world, but also exceptional pastoral tools, endowed with an enormous educational potential: models of holy life and at the same time promoters of charitable works in society, able to act within family households, to intervene in the relief of suffering at hospitals and to work for the promotion of knowledge of Christian doctrine in catechism schools.

In this regard, the history of the Company of St. Ursula of Verona, outlined here, can be definitely inserted into the complex pattern of Catholic renewal, which during the sixteenth century travelled many roads and assumed many forms, but it all related to a reflection on *pietas* that sought new and different routes of perfection, capable of meet the needs of women and men of a society which was in constant change and which is difficult to describe using the usual schematic tools of historiography. No wonder if the new religious institutions founded during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period drew on the great spiritual Catholic tradition of early modern age, adapting it to their time. In particular, the female religious congregations, which increased significantly during the nineteenth century, realized on large-scale the Merician project of ‘third way of life’ between the convent and marriage, and experienced the huge potential of Charity – intended not only as assistance but above all as education– which the first foundations of Ursulines, starting from the ‘mother-house’ in Brescia, had chosen as the main field of their mission in the world (Gheda, 2012; Sani, 2009).

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