

REMEMBERING PRIMA MAESTRA THECLA



When I entered the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul in 1957, the Institute was experiencing a great influx of vocations and was under full missionary expansion. At that time, the community of Rome had more than 400 members and its various buildings within the Antonino Pio compound, together with the impressive Queen of Apostles Sanctuary, made it seem like a little city in itself. The various apostolic sectors throbbed with life and fervor. It was wonderful to gather together in the Sanctuary to pray. The Founder, with his powerful charismatic spirit, supervised everything and at his side was Maestra Thecla, of whom he said: “You will have other Prime Maestre but she alone is the Mother of your Institute.”

It was not easy to spend time with Prima Maestra personally. With daughters scattered throughout the world, she was often away from Rome, visiting FSP communities in Italy and abroad. When she was home, she would give us conferences in our big community room. As a speaker, she was not gifted with great eloquence but her words went straight to the heart thanks to the interior spirit that permeated them. Shy and unsure of myself as I was, I never dared to approach Prima Maestra and open my heart to her. I contented myself with her maternal smiles and words of encouragement whenever I would run into her on the paths of the Antonino Pio compound.

After my religious profession, I was assigned to the Salerno community. I had been there only a few weeks when the local superior announced that Prima Maestra Thecla would be coming for a visit. Shortly after her arrival, Maestra Thecla asked to see me and with a gaze overflowing with goodness and affection said that she had come to Salerno precisely to see me and ask me if I would be willing to go to the United States as a missionary. I was speechless—flattered that she had made a special trip to Salerno just to talk to me—and her proposal filled me with enthusiasm. Riding high on the tide of that enthusiasm, I said yes to her request. It took a year-and-a-half for me to receive a visa for America: I left by ship for Boston on 31 January 1962, accompanied by another FSP missionary, Sr. Innocenza

Cellini, who was headed for the same destination. During the long sea trip, I spent a lot of time looking at the endless, rolling waves and thinking about the new land toward which I was headed.

At that time, the provincial superior of our United States circumscription was Maestra Paula Cordero, who had a boundless esteem and veneration for Maestra Thecla. For her, every desire of Prima Maestra, even if unexpressed, was an order. In the meditations she guided for the community and in her conferences to us, Maestra Paula constantly spoke about Prima Maestra—her words and example, virtues and teachings. You could say that the entire atmosphere of the Boston community was impregnated with this veneration. Naturally, this made an impact on me. After the death of Prima Maestra, Maestra Paula’s esteem for her became even more evident. Every time a problem arose in one of the apostolic sectors, she would invoke the help of Prima Maestra in a voice that rang throughout the room: “Saintly Prima Maestra, pray for us!” While I was in Boston, I was asked to translate into English a good part of the enormous quantity of letters that Maestra Thecla and Maestra Paula had written to each other over the years. The resulting picture of their beautiful friendship revealed to me an aspect of Maestra Thecla with which I was less familiar: that of friendship.

After 26 years in the United States, I returned to Italy and was assigned to the Generalate community to work in the International Secretariat for Spirituality. One of the first jobs assigned to me by Sr. Antonietta Martini, at that time the head of the Secretariat, was to prepare for printing the conferences given by Prima Maestra Thecla to the Daughters of St. Paul: a text that was published in 1993 under the title *Un cuor solo un’anima sola (One in Mind and Heart)* (CSAS). This job, which required great patience and careful editorial work, took a long time to complete but it enabled me to penetrate the thought and spirit of Prima Maestra and unite myself even more closely to her. I felt her presence alongside me. I prayed to her frequently and I am sure that she obtained many graces for me from the Lord.

Today I often recite the prayer for her beatification but at times when I pause to contemplate her picture on the front of the holy card, I can feel her whispering to me: “Don’t be so concerned about praying for my beatification. Pray instead that all the Daughters of St. Paul might become saints. It was for this intention that I offered my life.”

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