

# A Thousand Lives for the Gospel

*Let us lend our feet  
to the Gospel*

*so that it may race ahead  
and reach everywhere".*



*With Thecla  
Toward the Centenary*

# **“Bring warmth to many souls who are waiting...”**

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*The power-idea that should spur us on  
is the thought of souls.*

*We must be concerned about reaching them,  
about bringing them the word of truth and salvation.  
How many souls never hear anything said about God....*

*Who will lead them to him, if not we  
who have received so many graces from the Lord  
and who have in our hands such powerful means of apostolate?*

(VPC 140)

## **“To do good”: Her Lifelong Yearning**

“The Lord has brought you together so that you might become good and do good to others.” These words of the *Regulations*, written by the Founder in 1916, penetrated M. Thecla’s heart profoundly.

*To do good:* This burning desire of Teresa Merlo gave rise to the enterprising spirit and courage that led her to willingly take on every instrument of social communication: the press, cinema, catechetical filmstrips, records, magazines, etc.

From the time of her first meeting with the Theologian, followed by her initial apostolic experience in Susa, Teresa clearly understood how powerfully the press could influence people. Journalist Luigi Chiesa wrote:

In 1919, the Bishop of Susa, Joseph Castelli, asked them [the small feminine group of Alberione’s followers] to take over management of the weekly diocesan newspaper, *The Valsusa*. What this concretely meant was that 7 or 8 young girls would be printing the periodical. I remember my first meeting with the little community. The first per-

son I noticed was Teresa Merlo. Her gaze impressed me deeply. Her pale, thin face was dominated by her big eyes, which shone with a supernatural light. I said to myself: "This is an ascetic. She probably lives on air...." Instead, she lived on prayer. I was astonished to hear her say: "You are Mr. Chiesa, the reporter, aren't you? When are you going to convince your two good cousins, Margaret and Gina, to enter our Congregation?" I was dumbfounded. My impression of Teresa Merlo as a result of that meeting was that she burned with zeal for the [Pauline] apostolate and I was sure that it was her ardor that won over new followers to the fledgling Institute. She was already taking advantage of every opportunity to find new recruits.

Chiesa then goes on to say:

I never forgot how intelligently and conscientiously Teresa Merlo collaborated with me to continually improve *The Valsusa*. She channeled all her skills into printing, proofreading, choosing the right typefaces for titles...and the newspaper's circulation steadily increased.

Teresa was radiant about this but all she said was: "The more the newspaper is disseminated, the more people will read it and receive a good thought, a reminder about what is good. This is the apostolate of the good press."

In Susa, the Daughters of St. Paul took their first steps in the writing, printing and diffusion apostolates. The small book shop they opened was more abundantly stocked than the one in Alba and so it was better able to satisfy the needs of the clergy and public. The young women also began to undertake the studies that would help them carry out their apostolate more effectively. The Founder said: "For the Daughters of St. Paul, it concerned a new vocation. Prima Maestra was very well taught by Canon Francis Chiesa. Consequently, her mind and heart reached out to souls. She also began to learn [how to use] the technical instruments and saw how important they were for disseminating good."

For the Daughters of St. Paul, the 1928-1936 period was marked by an especially resourceful and creative missionary spirit. Expansion in Italy and abroad made it difficult for them to adhere to the traditional structures of the religious life, prompting them to invent their own particular way of living it, based on a strong sense of responsibility, a solid interior life, intense prayer and a profound attachment to the Institute.

The expansion of the Daughters of St. Paul took place in a spirit of humility, without any special recognition or invitations on the part of religious authorities. The first homes of the sisters were temporary and poor lodgings, in keeping with the directive of the Founder, transmitted through Maestra Thecla: “[We must] begin from the stable in Bethlehem and follow the Divine Master to Calvary—this sums up our life!”

In January 1926, the Institute had opened a house in Rome. In November 1928, it began to open other branch houses. Deeply moved by this expansion, the sisters recounted: “Three days after our first vestition ceremony—that is, on 1 November 1928—following evening prayer, Primo Maestro called all the Daughters back to church, exposed the Blessed Sacrament, gave a copy of the Gospel to the five sisters who were leaving, delivered a beautiful little sermon, and concluded everything with solemn Benediction. That small ceremony marked the beginning of the movement to open local communities” (*The Story of Our Communities: Salerno*).

In groups of two or three, armed with enormous faith, but with scanty preparation and the same poverty lived at the beginning of the Institute, the sisters went to the cities chosen by the Founder (Salerno, Bari, Verona...). Their arrival was preceded by a letter introducing them to the Bishop of the area. Prima Maestra took part in these first foundations: she either accompanied the sisters on the trip or went to visit them after a few days. With them, she lived the problems, adventures and uncertainties of the beginnings.

Udine’s weekly newspaper spoke about the sisters as follows: “It’s been almost two years since the well-deserving Sisters of St. Paul took up residence in our city. Everyone sees them and no one knows them, but their silent and persevering work outstrips any kind of praise....” (Reprinted in the *Pauline Cooperators Bulletin*, 17 Oct. 1930).

It was precisely in those years that the “Daughters” began to move toward new cultural horizons: a group of sisters began systematic studies in philosophy and theology, considered at that time to be a basic preparation for the writing apostolate.

These were also the years in which new geographical horizons opened to them through their foundations abroad. It is impossible to forget how enthusiastically Maestra Thecla supported the Founder’s drive to expand the Pauline apostolate. We have only to think of the

launch of *Famiglia Cristiana* (Christmas 1931), the beginning of the cinema apostolate (1948), the financing of 50 *catechetical documentaries* (1951), as well as all the other forms of apostolate that were introduced little by little over almost half a century. Also to be kept in mind is the fact that the FSPs were running printing presses and driving cars at a time when, in Italy, there were no women typographers and almost no women drivers. In addition, we can recall the many conferences, book displays and Bible Weeks that M. Thecla encouraged the sisters to organize, as well as the *Ut Unum Sint* project...all new forms of apostolate that were still being "tested," sometimes in the face of great problems.

Prima Maestra strongly supported all these initiatives and kept an attentive eye on them, rejoicing immensely in their outcomes. When presented with the results, she would exclaim: "Why are you so amazed? It's the Lord who is doing everything! All we have to do is trust him..." (cf. M. Ignazia Balla, *Regina Apostolorum*, March 1971).

## One of Maestra Thecla's Primary Concerns

*From a testimony of Sr. Addolorata Baldi<sup>1</sup>*

One of Maestra Thecla's primary concerns was the apostolate. When she visited Brazil, the first thing she asked was what we were doing for the good of souls. She wanted to hear what the propagandists had to say about their missionary trips. She listened attentively to their descriptions of these and it pained her to learn about the many souls who still had not heard the Gospel. She urged us to pray and to live uprightly so that the Lord would send many vocations to the Daughters of St. Paul and thus enable us to reach more souls.

## "Sacrifice the Mass...but go out!"

*From a testimony of Sr. Elena Ramondetti<sup>2</sup>*

During Prima Maestra's first visit to the Philippines in 1949, we told her that our sister propagandists frequently visited the barrios on the outskirts of the city. Because of the distance they had to travel, the sisters often had to miss Mass and communion because there were no

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<sup>1</sup> Sr. Addolorata Baldi: 1910-1999.

<sup>2</sup> Sr. Elena Ramondetti: 1909-1999.

churches or priests in those shanty towns. We asked Prima Maestra what to do about this and she said very decisively: "Sacrifice the Mass and communion but go out! Those poor souls never have anyone who visits them, who brings them a good word, who speaks to them about the Lord, who offers them the Gospel.... Go wherever you have to and be at peace." She also advised us repeatedly to learn how to adapt to the usages and customs of the people.

## **"We need to think about those who don't know how to read..."**

*From a testimony of Sr. Giuseppina Balestra<sup>3</sup>*

In the summer of 1952, we went to France and Spain for the first time by car. Fr. Alberione accompanied us on that trip. I remember that in Barcelona and Valencia, Prima Maestra wanted to know all about the propaganda apostolate. She asked the sisters how they traveled from place to place, since at that time public transport was scarce in Spain. When she heard that the sisters always used the train, whose schedules were very inconvenient for them, and that they took with them many packages of books that often weighed a total of about 250 lbs. (she discovered this for herself by trying to lift a few of them!), she realized the strain and fatigue involved and said: "One of you must immediately learn how to drive a car. Then go out and buy one, no matter how big the sacrifice!" She dismissed the fact that the people would be amazed to see a sister driving a car and said firmly: "In this way, you will be able to do more good without ruining your health!"

In 1954 we began producing records and filmstrips at Grottaferrata [Italy] and Prima Maestra strongly supported this apostolate. Once I said to her: "Prima Maestra, this is the age of 16mm films! Aren't we taking a step backward with this initiative?" And she replied: "Oh, no! Filmstrips are excellent, especially for catechism lessons because you can stop at each picture and explain it better. That way, everyone will understand the lesson. Actually, you need both types of media because we have to think about the people who don't know how to read, about those who can't buy a film projector, etc. Primo Maestro said that this is the time for records and filmstrips."

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<sup>3</sup> Sr. Giuseppina Balestra, born in 1915.

## **Maestra Thecla and Catechesis**

*From a testimony of Sr. Redenta Commentucci<sup>4</sup>*

Maestra Thecla was very concerned about catechetical work. It was said that she was an excellent catechism teacher before she entered the Congregation. She saw to it that some sisters pursued advanced studies in catechetics and pedagogy so as to be able to write catechisms for various age levels. She set up the “Pauline Catechetical Center” to prepare catechisms, filmstrips, records, guide books and study aids for this apostolate. She supported the catechetical magazine *Way, Truth and Life*, and encouraged the Daughters of St. Paul in many cities in Italy and abroad to collaborate with diocesan and national catechetical teams.

She was very open to the ecumenical movement. Indeed, even before Vatican Council II she had already told some sisters to reach out to “our distant brothers and sisters” (as they were called back then). Little by little, as the initiative developed, she gave impetus to the biblical apostolate through the Bible correspondence courses produced by our *Ut Unum Sint Center*.

One point on which she was very clear and demanding was that Sacred Scripture and the catechism always hold first place in our publications, book centers and diffusion, “because,” she said, “through our apostolate we must give the truths that are essential for salvation.”

Little by little, as vocations increased, new centers of light were opened. Prima Maestra rejoiced whenever a new foundation was made, especially in poverty-stricken countries. She said: “It doesn’t matter if the people don’t take a lot of books. Even if they don’t take anything, leave them at least a leaflet free of charge. And if they don’t know how to read, then leave them a picture of the Blessed Mother. It will do them good!” She urged us all to be *missionaries*: to have a missionary spirit and to unite our prayers, sacrifices and labors to all the missionaries at work in the Church.

When she returned from her trips abroad, she would tell us about her experiences, saying: “Now I’ll tell you about what I learned on this trip.” Her accounts always concluded with a mention of the “poor people who still did not know the Lord.” “And there are still so few of us

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<sup>4</sup> Sr. Redenta Commentucci: 1912-2007.

[Daughters of St. Paul]!" she would lament. This great pain weighed on her and she would encourage us to live our vocation better so as to draw other vocations to help spread the Word of God.

She was always vigilant to see that we remained faithful to the doctrine of the Church. Our many publications included collections of the teachings of the Pope. Prima Maestra recommended that we read these books, study them and disseminate them widely "because we must get to know the words of the Pope and help others get to know them." She wanted our sisters both at home and abroad to print papal and Council documents in large quantities, in the local languages, and to diffuse them widely.

She also urged us to pay our employees a fair wage. I remember that she didn't want us to exploit them by paying them only half of what their work merited. When it came to purchasing things, she didn't want us to ask for discounts. "It's not fair!" she would exclaim. "Those poor people have to live too!" It grieved her to see the condition of the simple people in the Philippines. I remember an old woman who used to sell us fresh eggs that she brought with her from the barrios. It was easier for us to buy them if she came to our residence, which she did willingly because we bought a lot of eggs. We would pay her for the eggs and that was that. But once this happened when Prima Maestra was visiting us. She saw the transaction and said: "Buy her whole supply of eggs! Why should that poor old woman be obliged to continue on from door to door, trying to sell the few eggs she has left? And when you pay her for the eggs, add on the price of what it cost her to take the bus here and then home again. How will she be able to meet her needs if she has to use part of her meager earnings for the bus trip? We must witness to the Gospel! Remember that love for our neighbor also involves justice!"

## Her Courage and Apostolic Creativity

*From a testimony of Sr. Assunta Bassi<sup>5</sup>*

When problems came up in the apostolate, I often discussed them with Maestra Thecla and I can testify that I never found her uncertain or wrapped up in human concerns. Whenever I presented a sugges-

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<sup>5</sup> Sr. Assunta Bassi: 1915-2012.

tion or initiative to her, she would always ask: "Will it do good? Does Fr. Alberione want it? Does he think it would be well to do it?" If my answer was "yes," then she had no doubts and would say: "Then do it! We must do good with the press! We must disseminate the books that do the most good. We must make Jesus Christ known!" She repeated these sentiments often. When she asked for more detailed explanations, it was to ensure that the initiatives would do good. This certitude gave her the courage to forge ahead, without letting economic problems create obstacles.

I was amazed at how clear-sighted and prompt to act she was when faced with new and risky projects that were necessary to undertake if we were to fulfill our vocation in the Church. A simple and shy person by nature, her decisive, strong and courageous attitude in these circumstances impressed me deeply. She was sustained by two pillars: her faith, which urged her on to do good, and fidelity to the charism of the Founder.

It is precisely due to this attitude that the Daughters of St. Paul launched quite a few apostolic activities: collaboration with the radio apostolate; the production and diffusion of records; the organization, preparation and holding of Catechetical and Biblical Missions in many areas. "We must do good...." "As long as it does good..."—these constant refrains were typical of Prima Maestra.

I remember the Founder saying that the Daughters of St. Paul had to reorganize their diffusion work. He insisted that we needed to make contact with collectivities/businesses so that our outreach would be vaster on the national level. But there was a problem: how to "motorize" the sisters so that they would be able to reach numerous collectivities quickly.

Maestra Thecla took immediate action to implement this project. She herself got in touch with a company that manufactured motorbikes and asked if there was any possibility that they could adapt their "Guzzi" model to permit the sisters to travel in pairs with all their books. It was a new undertaking—a big risk—but this didn't stop her. What was important to her was "to motorize the sisters so as to do good," without worrying about what people would say. (In the end, instead of the motorbikes she opted for a type of car known as the "Fiat Giardinette"—a model that ensured greater travel security and also more baggage space.)

I noticed that Prima Maestra suffered when the Daughters of St. Paul received a lot of praise and thanks. I remember once when a priest thanked her for the apostolic activities the sisters had carried out, she said very humbly: "Please, I beg you, don't praise or thank us anymore because we are only doing our duty." But she rejoiced and her face would light up when priests and bishops approved the *mission* of the Congregation.

## "We must have faith...boundless faith!"

*From a testimony by Sr. Rosaria Visco<sup>6</sup>*

In September 1947, Maestra Thecla summoned me to her office and asked me to begin the cinema apostolate in collaboration with the Society of St. Paul. Our work consisted of choosing films to be converted to 16mm. format so that they could be shown in parishes and local theaters. We also set up distribution agencies for these films and later, still in collaboration with the SSP, we attempted to produce our own religious, educational, catechetical and formative films. Maestra Thecla often told me that we had to give great thrust to this apostolate because the cinema could do even more good (and also more evil) than books and so we had to use it well. She encouraged us and gave us advice concerning what movies to choose, urging us to select films that were worthwhile from the apostolic perspective because they aimed at the true good of humanity. She often said: "We must use all the means that bring the message of Christ most rapidly and effectively to the greatest number of people."

When Fr. Alberione wanted to produce the film *Mater Dei*, Maestra Thecla gave him her wholehearted support and collaboration. Not only was she happy to allow many Daughters of St. Paul to take part in the filming, production and distribution of the movie, but she also complied with the request that she play the part of the prophetess Anna in the film. She rejoiced that the movie would spread greater love for the Blessed Mother and that its message would be preached to hundreds of thousands of people.

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<sup>6</sup> Sr. Rosaria Visco: 1916-2005.

Her zeal for the cinema apostolate also prompted her to support the production of a series of 50 short catechetical films that were dubbed in different languages. It was an arduous undertaking but she never lost heart and always encouraged everyone. Knowing that Fr. Alberione wanted this project, she often said: "If Primo Maestro wants it, then that is a sign it is the will of God...."

She moved ahead in this field with the decisiveness of one who knows she is corresponding to the will of God, in keeping with the apostolic charism of the Congregation. There were a lot of financial problems involved in this initiative but she never let them discourage or defeat her. Instead, she put all her trust in God and urged us to have the same faith, "because," she said, "the Lord knows that our apostolic instruments are expensive, but if we use them for the apostolate and live in a spirit of poverty, then certainly divine Providence will not be lacking."

She became personally involved in the search for films and film equipment to serve the cinema apostolate and she also studied the possibilities for beginning this work abroad.

When Fr. Alberione wanted the sisters to develop the writing apostolate by preparing catechisms and launching *Così* (a magazine for young women), Maestra Thecla did not hesitate, doubt or become discouraged. We were discouraged a lot of times, but she would vigorously remind us to have faith in God and in the grace of our vocation. Even though things might be difficult, totally new and beyond our strength and abilities on the human level, she would always say: "We must have faith...boundless faith! And we have to pray, because prayer is our strength and God's weakness." She lived the *Secret of Success* and wanted us to live it too: "We see that we are very weak, ignorant, incapable and inadequate in every way.... We trust in you alone who said: 'Whatever you ask the Father in my name, you will receive it....' For our part, we promise and commit ourselves to seeking wholeheartedly, in all things, only and always your glory.... Give us a good spirit, grace, knowledge, and the means for doing good...."

# What She Learned from Her Trips

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Maestra Thecla's visits to the branch houses, which began in 1936 and ended in 1963, carved ever-more deeply into her heart her yearning to save souls, which she lived to the point of suffering. This was particularly true of her trips to Asia:

I want very much to draw your attention to a thought that struck me profoundly during this trip: how many souls there are in the world who neither know nor love the Lord! We really need to come out of our shells a little in order to persuade ourselves of this sad reality! [...] We, who are called to an apostolate so vast that it embraces the whole world, must feel the necessity of helping all those poor souls, of doing good to them and contributing to their salvation through prayer and through the whole apostolate.

We must feel the needs of poor humanity: of immense Asia, of the two Americas, of promising Oceania, of troubled Europe.... I would like all the Daughters of St. Paul to feel this need, this love for souls. When we read the statistics: "so many million people..." it is quickly said. But to see them, even if only in passing through their countries as we did: to see those cities swarming like ant hills with people... what an impression it makes! It truly grips the heart (VPC 12).

This "tightening of the heart" was transformed into a sense of responsibility toward others because it made her ever more deeply aware of the fact that "the whole world is our field of apostolate. We must love all people so as to do good to all!" (VPC 153)

Maestra Thecla shared the human situation of suffering: she too experienced the sorrows and anxieties caused by World War II; she participated in the sufferings of the sisters' families, and in that of people struck by natural disasters. All this was summed up in her constant plea to "ask the Lord for a big heart—a heart that feels the needs of the whole world!" (VPC 126)

## Carrying All People in Her Heart

Returning from her trips, Maestra Thecla loved to talk about the countries she had visited: their customs, climate, natural wonders. But she spoke most often and with great pain about their moral wretchedness, saying: "If only those multitudes of people knew the Lord!" Then she would conclude vigorously and with great conviction: "It is up to us to make him known!"

Aware that indigenous Daughters of St. Paul would know how to reach the people of their countries better than foreign missionaries, she urged the sisters to work for vocations: "Let us always be generous so that the Lord will send us vocations because there is so much good to be done in the world!"

And once she said with a deep sigh: "If only we could print sisters the way we print books!"

Her presence, her enlightening words and above all her profoundly missionary heart were able to infuse the sisters with joy and courage in the face of the sacrifices that needed to be made in view of the future.

At times Maestra Thecla's voice and words would take on a poetic tone: "Just as a pilot, once he reaches port, no longer remembers the long, boring days at sea or the many dangers encountered there, so it will be with us when we reach the port of eternity. We will no longer recall the years gone by—unless we have to pay the consequences of them. So let's not worry about the sacrifices to be made; instead, let us work for heaven."

She took a lively interest in *Cosi*, a magazine for young women that had been launched to combat the spread of the pornographic press. Through the periodical, she wanted to help improve society, taking as a starting point its fundamental cell: the family. "You must make this a beautiful magazine!" she urged the sisters. "It should be so appealing that young women will prefer it to the many worthless magazines [out there] and help them prepare well for marriage. It should form them to be good mothers who live like true Christians. Our society needs people who are Christian through and through."

She helped the magazine's small editorial staff in every way possible, including by procuring for them a variety of gifts to offer the

readers through different types of contests or else as bonuses for the periodical's most faithful subscribers.

She looked forward to receiving a copy of the magazine fresh off the press every Thursday morning. For Christmas 1958, she wrote to the editorial staff: "How beautifully you have 'dressed' *Così...* Make [the periodical] always more beautiful so that it will appeal to everyone and do a lot of good."

Maestra Thecla demonstrated the same love and encouragement for the monthly catechetical magazine, *Way, Truth and Life*: she took a deep interest in that periodical too and begged the sisters to work hard to increase its number of subscribers month by month.

She lived in the present with her gaze fixed on the future, saying in one of her conferences: "We must use the most modern means of apostolate."

When it came to apostolic initiatives, Prima Maestra was very decisive: she clearly pointed out to the sisters the route to be taken. If economic problems posed obstacles to implementing a project, she resolved all doubts with the words: "If it will do good, then do it. As for the rest, let's not worry about it. We need to have faith–divine Providence will help us. The first thing we must do in the apostolate is seek the good of souls, not our own interests."

She intuitively understood the important role the cinema could play when placed at the service of good: "It concerns millions and millions of people who spend two, three or four hours a week in movie theaters. There, they learn good or evil; truth or error. If films are bad, they teach error. Just think how many souls they ruin!"

Sr. Assunta Bassi recalls: "I can still see how her eyes shone and the feminine and maternal way in which she attentively followed the production of the film *Abuna Messias* (Alba, 1937-1938). And everyone knows how much she encouraged and collaborated with the production of 50 short catechetical films (Rome, 1953)."

It was Fr. Alberione who proposed these bold and risky initiatives and for Prima Maestra that meant they were the will of God.

Speaking about the radio, she affirmed: "The radio apostolate fulfills what God said in Sacred Scripture through the mouth of the prophet: 'My word will go out to the whole world.'" And with her

customary determination, she did her utmost to ensure that the FSP radio ministry would broadcast the truth to as many people as possible.

Sustained by this power-idea and literally overwhelmed by the beauty, necessity and timeliness of the Pauline apostolate, she declared: "The apostolate that the Lord has entrusted to our small Congregation is so beautiful, so vast! It is a sacred duty!" (VPC 140)

## Her Trust in the Lord

*From a testimony by Sr. Ignazia Balla<sup>7</sup>*

In both big and small events, as well as in welcoming and promoting new initiatives, Maestra Thecla was always sustained by a great faith that was concretely expressed, shining through her attitude and words. "It's the Lord who does things," she would say, "not us. So let us trust him."

And she practiced what she preached. She trusted the Lord when she opened communities under difficult conditions and when she urged the sisters to undertake new and daring apostolic enterprises that women in Italy rarely engaged in at that time: for instance, she launched them on the study of dogmatic and moral theology; had them learn to drive cars, assume the directorship of magazines, run printing presses, linotype machines and film projectors; critique films....

With maternal solicitude, she kept close track of whatever concerned the good of her daughters, and with an apostle's boldness and zeal, she looked to the future, sustained by her immense faith and lofty ideal.

"How beautiful our apostolate is!" she once exclaimed. "Just today I was thinking that we must always use the most modern means to carry out the apostolate. That's what our Constitutions say. Therefore, we should see to it that our activities are up to date. We must always move ahead in step with the times." But then she immediately added: "But we must never lose our spirit of faith or of prayer, nor our conviction that we are good for nothing and that it is the Lord who does everything."

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<sup>7</sup> Sr. Ignazia Balla: 1909-2003.

Her whole life was traced out by a very simple—almost elementary—adherence to the Gospel, lived heroically to its ultimate consequences. It was consumed in sincere love for God and for her neighbor—a love that was the admirable fruit of her faith and hope, matured through suffering, hard work and heroic patience, with the goal of becoming holy for the glory of God and cooperating in the salvation of all humanity through the dynamic thrust of the Pauline apostolate.

## **“Do it right away...”**

Goaded on by the need “to do good,” Maestra Thecla urged the Daughters of St. Paul to be courageous. If an initiative would do good, then no obstacle should stand in its way because the spirit of the *Pact* would come into play: “By myself I can do nothing but with God I can do all things.” Faith in God became the secret of the sisters’ most daring apostolic undertakings.

Sr. Stefanina Cillario recounts:

On her last visit to Curitiba, Brazil, in 1959, Prima Maestra took a deep interest in the work we were doing in the Archdiocese’s small radio station. She carefully assessed our efforts, desires, possibilities and problems, and became pensive when she learned that many other radio stations were willing to broadcast our pre-recorded catechism lessons and conferences but that technical and practical problems made it impossible for them to do so.

As we left the station, Prima Maestra suddenly said, as if concluding a conversation, “Listen: if it’s not possible to air the tapes of your catechism lessons and conferences, then disseminate them through records. People listen to records everywhere, don’t they?”

I was astonished. It seemed to me that the problems involved in such an undertaking would be even greater. We were few in number...we felt incapable of carrying out such a project...we were not in a big city.... I began to object, but Prima Maestra said firmly, “No, no. Do it! Do it! We must do good! The Word of God must be proclaimed!”

I timidly replied: “We’ll try to find out about it and do what we can.” “Do it right away,” she insisted, and then added: “Even if the records

are not very professional at first, that's not important. It's enough that they do good. Little by little, they will improve."

The following day, while driving to the airport, I pointed to a building under construction and asked if we could open a book center in it. She agreed, but her main preoccupation at that moment was the radio apostolate—so much so that she abruptly changed the topic of conversation, saying: "I'm telling you once again: start producing catechetical records immediately. I'm sure you will do a fine job and that the records will do good. Don't waste time consulting a lot of people. Don't create a lot of fuss and bother. Just do it right away and trust in the Lord! He will bless you. I'll be praying for this [intention]."

### **"See to it that everything moves ahead..."**

In August 1960, Maestra Thecla once again urged Sr. Stefanina Cillaro to begin the record apostolate in Brazil:

Dearest M. Stefanina,

I am very happy with the catechism records and so is Primo Maestro. I called M. Addolorata to tell her that we have been entrusted with the catechisms in Latin America. See what can be done [in this regard] and in the meanwhile continue with your work. M. Dolores will bring you the program.... Move ahead in the name of the Lord. Work for the glory of God and the good of souls. Do everything for heaven.

A year later, she wrote:

Dearest Sr. Stefanina,

You have already done a lot with records. Of course there are problems—that always happens when a work is doing good! Don't get discouraged but "see to it that everything moves ahead," as Primo Maestro wrote in the Pauline Calendar.

Naturally, you should do things as well as possible. Jesus merits much more than the little we can do for him! It's not important if progress is slow. What is important is that [the project] succeeds. I'm glad to hear that you are preparing radio programs. Let us pray and trust in God, seeking only his glory and the good of souls. Have great faith!

I can only imagine what is needed not only to begin but also to continue [this apostolate]. But it is a beautiful and good thing. Whenever

you do something, write to Primo Maestro about it. He will be happy to have the news. Our dear Father says, "I'm getting old," but he's becoming more and more holy. He is always very pleased to receive consoling news about the apostolate.

See to it that [the record] apostolate moves ahead well. Our pace might be a little slow but the Lord is far ahead of us...and also far above us. So be courageous! *Affectionately, M. Thecla*

Prima Maestra's last trip to Asia in 1962 brought her both joy and suffering. She rejoiced because she saw how the Congregation was developing, and she suffered because she understood the needs of the Church and realized it was impossible to reach everyone quickly.

While in Taipei, Taiwan, she jotted down in her notebook: "How sad to see all those poor people working in the water.... Almost all of them are pagans or Buddhists. Lord, have mercy on these poor people who don't know or love you."<sup>8</sup> A few days later, in Nagoya, Japan, she continued the same prayer: "How many souls still don't know you, my God! How sad! Send [our Congregation] many local vocations to make you known and loved."

Maestra Thecla's circular letters give us a glimpse of her grief at the plight of the countless souls who did not know or love God—a grief that incited her to infuse the Daughters of St. Paul with a great apostolic spirit.

One of the last decisions she made before her death reveals her missionary spirit. The Congregation was planning to open a community in Bolivia in October 1963 but the sisters involved were uncertain about this move and wanted to know how to carry out the apostolate of the editions in a country in which the majority of the people were illiterate. Prima Maestra, who was always enlightened by God when making important decisions, banished their doubts, saying firmly: "If the majority of the people don't know how to read, then do good through pictures and records. It is important that we open an apostolic center in Bolivia. The Lord must be made known in that country too. The Gospel must be proclaimed in some way there!"

Sr. Assunta Bassi remembers phoning Prima Maestra at Albano about ten days before she died. Maestra Thecla's illness had advanced

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<sup>8</sup> T 6 (1962), p. 39.

to the point that she was not able to speak, but it was clear that she was grieving because no one had given her any news about a Bible Mission that had just ended. Sr. Assunta hastened to Albano and found Prima Maestra huddled in an armchair. When she entered the room, Maestra Thecla straightened up and held out her hand, her eyes eloquently conveying the thoughts she was unable to voice. The only thing she was able to say, with great effort, was: "Deo gratias."

## Like Paul

Breadth of vision, a focus on essentials, total dedication, a readiness to adapt to every situation, union with Christ, living together charitably in a family spirit...these were the great inspirations that Maestra Thecla drew from Paul, whom she always considered to be her "father":

May everyone make the effort to resemble our Father St. Paul, especially in his love for the Lord, his zeal for souls and his efforts to cultivate a charitable, family spirit (VPC 192).

St. Paul said: "Woe to me if I don't evangelize." We too can say: Woe to me if, having entered this Congregation, I don't place all my energies at the service of God. The worst thing that could happen to a religious would be to fail to dedicate herself entirely to the service of the Lord, to use only half her energies for him and to get lost in trifles (VPC 104).

In expressing this commitment to leaving self behind, Prima Maestra used a vocabulary that is very familiar to us: *to help* [others], and *to do good* by means of prayer, the apostolate and self-sacrifice.

– *To help* [others]. "Let us think about the souls who are being lost because they have no one to help them" (VPC 166). The help we must give them consists first of all in offering them the witness of our life, and then in cultivating a big heart that understands all people in their different cultural situations. Our help is also expressed through prayer and sacrifice. Maestra Thecla continually insisted on this dimension: "Let us make some sacrifices for [these people], striving to do well what is asked of us by obedience."

– *To do good.* The explicit desire to do good is indispensable. This calls for a discernment that involves sifting messages and instruments of communication: “We must not give souls the things that bring more material gain but those that do them greater good, whether by means of the press, films, radio, or any other instrument we use” (VPC 140). This requires us to cultivate the Pauline attitudes of creativity, industriousness and the effort to make constant progress. Above all it requires great courage.

Here are a few excerpts from Prima Maestra’s circular letters and conferences that reveal her as a great apostolic animator, a true daughter of the Apostle Paul.

### **“Channel all your energies into this holy apostolate”**

St. Paul said: “I am an apostle of the Gentiles.” In thinking about the lofty apostolate to which we have dedicated ourselves, we should reflect on our duty to consecrate ourselves and channel all our energies into it.... We will make progress if we do not trust ourselves but have great trust in the Lord. Let us not erect obstacles by thinking that we are already doing a lot and that we can do everything all by ourselves...” (VPC 93).

Our apostolate is a participation in the apostolate of Jesus. May every Daughter of St. Paul make the effort to irradiate the light and grace of the Divine Master always better and to an always greater degree: to give Jesus to souls, like Mary and with Mary (VPC 246).

How sad it is to see all those people going and coming on the streets. I wonder how many of them are thinking about their souls? How many of them think about the fact that they will one day die and have to appear before the tribunal of God? Let us remember these souls! We Daughters of St. Paul must have a big heart. We must keep all people in mind and recommend them to the Lord. May they all be saved! (CSAS 76, 8)

A lot of good can be done with the radio.... How important and vast our apostolate is! We must dedicate our whole mind, heart and will to carrying it out always better. We should not aim at “big” and “import-

ant" things that satisfy only ourselves; we should aim at the things that do good to souls. The Divine Master preached simple truths that everyone could understand... (CSAS 91, 4-5).

Do we really have the desire, the yearning, to do good to souls? Not a vague desire limited to pious words, but rather a desire that is concretized in generous and constant deeds? We have been consecrated to the apostolate; we have taken upon ourselves the sacred obligation of working with modern instruments—the press, cinema and radio—to bring glory to God and peace to all people. Have we been faithful to this duty? We have deviated a little in our estimation of the apostolate. Too often we consider it from the material, financial perspective—almost as if it were a search for money.... This is a mistake—a big mistake! It is because of this that discouragement, disillusionment and dissatisfaction set in. Souls! First of all and above all: souls. "The rest," Jesus tells us in the Gospel, "will be given you as well." This is the word of God and it will last forever. Let us believe this (VPC 140).

At times we are satisfied to recognize and repeat that our apostolic instruments are "the swiftest and most powerful" but then we let opportunities slip by for using them effectively for the salvation of souls (VPC 145).

# A Woman of Communion and Collaboration

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Maestra Thecla began the Pauline apostolate from nothing. She watched the instruments of communication grow in power and effectiveness. She rejoiced immensely to see the expansion of the good that was being done. She took heroic steps to adopt costly instruments so that the Gospel would reach the poor and those far away. But she remained small, surrendered into the hands of the Lord: "To be so humble that God will be drawn to me. And, as a result, to have the trust to raise myself up to God" (T 1947).

Her discipleship was characterized by this *littleness*: "Do we want to be true disciples of Jesus? Then let us imitate him.[...] Keep firmly in mind that humble and kind words in reply to courtesy and rejection are seeds that will sprout and produce great good" (VPC 25).

Because of this attitude, Maestra Thecla was capable of *communion* and *collaboration*, which favored the development of the Institute's foundations and helped forge the profound bonds that undergird the Pauline Family. Her life and teachings contain the secret for living a very important "sign of the times": collaboration in the Pauline Family and in the Church.

During the long apostolic trips she made by car and plane with Fr. Alberione, Maestra Thecla was the recipient of his confidences and she shared his joys and sufferings. Much of what she said and wrote reflect this communion. On 16 October 1939, while in Rome, she penned this note to M. Paolina Pivetta: "By now you know that I had to leave suddenly. I was asked to see if anything could be done to help Primo Maestro, who needs assistance badly. Never before has he had such pressing economic needs. I feel so sorry for him. I would do anything to help him...."

Maestra Thecla carried out a role of *continual mediation*. As Fr. Renato Perino, ssp, reminded everyone during the *Vi porto nel cuore* Congress: “I believe that Prima Maestra’s greatest mission and the most important lesson she taught was this continual mediation, carried out in a spirit of fidelity to Fr. Alberione and in an obedience that was at times heroic—an obedience that was always exercised *on her feet* [that is, intelligently]....”

At that same Congress, Fr. Silvano Gratilli, ssp, affirmed: “Maestra Thecla carried out an important intermediary role between the Daughters of St. Paul and the inspirations/intuitions and directives of the Founder. She accepted, assimilated and transmitted them and thus enabled [her daughters] to accept, assimilate and live them. The result is the Pauline apostolate throughout the world. It is not just rhetoric but sincerity to say that Prima Maestra Thecla Merlo was the Mother of the whole Pauline Family.”

## **Remembering Maestra Thecla, let us share our thoughts with one another...**



1. How am I living the continual plea of the Founder and Maestra Thecla to “feel [the needs] of souls”? What does this statement mean to me today?
2. Does Paul’s declaration, “I spend my energies to the utmost,” truly embrace my whole life?

### **Let us pray with Maestra Thecla**

Divine Master, use this wretched instrument  
to do a little good to souls. I want to be docile.

May you be the one to think, love, speak...  
not me, but you.

Help me to have always greater faith, even when things are dark.  
Help me not to claim to see, to feel...instead, help me to believe.  
Lord, increase my faith.

Generalate of the Daughters of St. Paul  
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