

# Maestra Thecla's Spiritual Journey

Thecla



*The Lord  
did whatever  
he wanted with her  
because she never  
resisted his will.*

(Blessed James Alberione)

*With Thecla  
Toward the Centenary*



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# Maestra Thecla's Spiritual Journey

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## Premise

The proposals of the Chapter invite us to reflect more deeply on the writings and teachings of Paul, Alberione and Thecla from the perspective of faith so as to nourish the apostolic mysticism that continues to be a wellspring of fecund missionary thrust for us today.

Fr. Alberione summarized the essence of this *apostolic mysticism* in nine verbs: "May Christ alone live, think, work, love, pray, suffer, die and rise again in us." We can say that Maestra Thecla's whole life was directed to realizing this profound unity by continually striving to "attain complete transformation in God." Her powerful aspiration was: "To live in intimacy with the Divine Master: mind, will, heart, works, senses, hands, feet, eyes, hearing—everything for him and with him. To reach the point of 'it is no longer I who live; it is Jesus who lives in me.'" This intimacy was transformed into intense activity. It led her to adopt the same feelings of Jesus regarding the salvation of every person and made her yearn that the Gospel might reach everyone through the most rapid and effective means.

Let us take a look at Maestra Thecla's spiritual journey as recorded in her personal notebooks, taking note of the guidelines she received, one after the other, from her spiritual director, Fr. James Alberione. By doing this, we have a wonderful opportunity to penetrate the heart of M. Thecla and glimpse the pedagogy of the Divine Master and also that of the Founder, who led her on a true formation journey in view of the duty entrusted to her: the role of Mother, Superior, our dearest "Prima Maestra."

## An Authoritative Voice

The most authoritative person to describe Maestra Thecla's spiritual journey was certainly Fr. Alberione, who accompanied her very closely. He spoke about her frequently while she was still alive and even more after her death. These statements of the Founder offer us a quick synthesis of Maestra Thecla's journey toward God:

15 September 1960

*Prima Maestra gives you an example that everyone, without exception, can use as a mirror. She has always done this, from the beginning of the Congregation. Her attitude has always been one of simplicity, humility, recollection.... You owe everything to Prima Maestra and I too owe her a great deal because she has enlightened me and offered me orientations in both happy and sad circumstances; she provided comfort when problems hindered our journey. I would like you all to be like Prima Maestra. Do nothing without her; do everything with her.*

### "She never resisted the Spirit..."

Fr. Alberione declared that M. Thecla reached the point of removing every resistance to grace:

*"Her life! It was completely in the hands of God, in the will of God. She was docile to spiritual direction from the outset—from the moment she entered [the Institute] up until the moment the Lord called her to eternal rest, to glory. You all know that during her last illness her only words were: 'The will of the Lord; whatever pleases the Lord; may the Lord's will be done.' She was always extremely docile.*

*"In spite of her frail health, the Lord placed on her shoulders a great responsibility, a great mission... Throughout her life, she was always ready to do whatever he disposed; thus [she practiced] not only obedience in general but also everything she came to understand the Lord wanted of her. She was ready to do anything for him....*

*"On the one hand, she had to be docile to what the Lord was asking of her personally, while on the other she had to be ready to do whatever he manifested to her day by day to consolidate the Institute and help it grow. So we can say she was extremely docile! Continually enlightened by God, she was always ready to seek what he revealed to her.*

*"The Lord did whatever he wanted with her because she never resisted his will" (12 Feb. 1964).*

Maestra Thecla was *sure* that Fr. Alberione was God's instrument. Faced with his directives, she had no doubts: "I have great trust in the Lord but also in the Theologian because I know he has been sent by God and so wherever he goes I too can be sure of not making a mistake."<sup>1</sup>

Prima Maestra has left us a rich heritage of circular letters, conferences, spiritual notebooks and letters, which offer us glimpses of her intimate life and reveal a journey based on her great loves: *Jesus Master in the Eucharist, the Gospel, the Church, souls....*

## HER SPIRITUAL NOTEBOOKS

Maestra Thecla's *notebooks* contain the thoughts she jotted down throughout her life from 1926-1963. Some of the notebooks contain jottings on the spiritual life, while others consist of notes she made during meditations (especially during retreats, courses of spiritual exercises, etc.), general and specific resolutions, monthly self-assessments, points on which to make an examination of conscience, graces to ask, advice from Primo Maestro....

In these notebooks she recorded, among other things, the almost-weekly orientations she received from her "spiritual father." She transcribed these directives with great care into her notebooks, mindful to include the dates on which they were given and the name of her guide: "P.M." (Primo Maestro).

When a personal meeting with Fr. Alberione was not possible, Maestra Thecla would write down her resolution and send it to him. He would then confirm the proposal and add a directive. Because those few words were very precious to Maestra Thecla, she would cut them out and paste them into her notebook alongside her resolution.

Her notebooks manifest a Jesuit influence, revealed in her great effort to live her spiritual life methodically: she noted down her progress day by day, week by week, the number of her victories and fail-

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<sup>1</sup> *Our Beginnings*, p. 10.

ures, the difference and relationship between her current situation and that of the preceding week. Her victories always outnumbered her failures. Above all, M. Thecla devoted great attention to the examination of conscience and the sacrament of confession. In fact, from the number of times she noted down that she had gone to confession, we can calculate that she received this sacrament more than once a week, especially in the 1950's.

The notes she took during homilies often include personal reflections. These jottings require careful reading so as to understand the things she did not write down or else wrote down in an extremely summarized way. Some of these snippets of thought are not easy to grasp. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to know the context, personal life, congregational life and spiritual climate in which M. Thecla was writing.

Gathered together, these jottings form the "tiles" that make up the mosaic of Maestra Thecla's life. They reveal her energetic and strong-willed character and her yearning to correspond to the will of God at any cost, including by overcoming her problem with accepting a duty that she felt was superior to her strength.

Both her notebooks and letters reveal a Fr. Alberione who, with highest respect for the action of God, helped Maestra Thecla respond to the promptings of the Spirit, directing her always more toward "union with the Divine" (*Letters to M. Thecla*, 58) and guiding her toward the path that would come to define her spiritual physiognomy: "On our part, to cultivate humility: to hope in the Lord like children" (T 2).

Maestra Thecla's journey was motivated by her great yearning for holiness—a yearning founded on humility and trust. She gradually eliminated every form of trust in herself so as to throw herself completely on the mercy of God, in keeping with the advice of Fr. Alberione, who also pointed out the means for growth: the examination of conscience and silent, operative charity (LMT 30).

Maestra Thecla felt the full weight of her weakness and littleness but she was filled with trust. From the outset, she declared: "I was never afraid, in spite of all the crosses there were in the House." Consequently, she had complete faith in the Founder, the instrument to whom she entrusted her life: "I know he has been sent by God and so wherever he goes I too can be sure of not making a mistake."

In 1927-1928, Fr. Alberione guided an extended course of spiritual exercises for the adult members of the Congregation so as to help them give direction to their life and we are sure that his oft-repeated words penetrated her heart: "Now let us take a look at the path to follow so as to reach holiness. We need a model to imitate and this model is Jesus Way, Truth and Life—the Divine Master. It is he who will teach us, who will blaze the way for us. Indeed he himself is our Way...."

## God: the Foundation of Everything

In one of the first meditations of the aforementioned course, Fr. Alberione said to the sisters:

*"Let us place our wretched condition, all our defects, in the bedrock [of the Institute] and then found ourselves solely on God. Let us count only on him. It will be enough for those who come after us to count on God, but we must count on him alone. Jesus is the living stone"* (Retreat, May 1928).

To count on God alone, no one else.... The bedrock of our Congregation consists precisely of the humility and littleness of Maestra Thecla and our first sisters. And thus our bedrock is healthy and sound because it is grounded not on human strength or abilities but on God alone.

M. Thecla's notes from 1927-1928 already reveal her yearning for sanctity. She frequently says: "This year, with the grace of God, I want to become a saint, a great saint—and quickly."

Prima Maestra had a strong sense of being "nothing." Her notebooks are filled with statements such as: "I am nothing. God is everything." "To reach the point of fully understanding my nothingness. I am only capable of doing wrong."<sup>2</sup> This feeling of being nothing sprang in part from her poor health and scanty education, but above all it was the result of her profound sense of God: it rested on her awareness that "God is everything." Thus, "Every good thing comes from God. Everything is his. [Therefore,] full, complete, total confidence."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> T 5, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

To become always more humble: “By myself I can do nothing, but with God I can do all things.” And this ability “to do all things” with the help of God extended to every aspect of her life: apostolic projects, community life, study, poverty, suffering, economic investments, trips, etc. Because of this, she was not afraid of obstacles, poor health or hard work. It was as if she were carried along by the power of God. In 1927, she wrote in her personal notes:

*“My God, in your goodness you allowed me to begin this year. I want to live it well, if you are pleased to allow me to continue it. If instead you want to call me to yourself, may your most holy will always be done. I place this year under the protection of the Divine Master and the Queen of Apostles. I promise to not want to lose even a minute of time.*

*“Beginning right now, I unite my prayers and sufferings to the intentions of Jesus in the holy Host, and I want to renew this offering with every beat of my heart.*

*“At night, may every breath I take while asleep be an act of continual communion with my God. With every breath I take, I want to say: Jesus is with us and we are with Jesus....”<sup>4</sup>*

## In Complete Docility

Maestra Thecla did not carry out Fr. Alberione’s directives like a robot. She did so with a “docile heart,” realizing that the Lord was using him to point out to her the path to follow in both the interior and the active life. Thus she wrote in 1950: “I have complete confidence in his words.” And in another letter dated the same year:

*“Act like a Father who corrects his daughter. You know I am in your hands. Use me as you would a handkerchief. I am always afraid of not doing [things] well and of leading the Daughters of St. Paul astray....” (LMT 87).*

M. Thecla welcomed with particular fervor the invitation of her father and spiritual director to live in profound union with Jesus Master. In a note that she wrote to accompany a leaflet outlining her spiritual work, she begged him:

*“Reverend Father, I don’t know how to say many things, but I am trying to belong always more to God. I have so many defects! I hope that [by now]*

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<sup>4</sup> T 1, 1927.

*you know me. I have complete trust in your words. If you see or know about anything I am not doing well, then for the love of God tell me. I want to become a saint in spite of how bad I am. I am attaching to this note a leaflet outlining the spiritual work I want to do this year. See if it is all right and, if so, bless it. If it is not acceptable, then please change it. Deo gratias. M. Thecla" (LMT 86).*

## **A Journey of Faith in the Midst of Trials**

The first test to purify M. Thecla was the self-discovery that she was a person who resisted God, who "spoiled things." She wrote in her 1927 notebook: "I only do wrong things." She felt that she was part of the world of sin. In a certain sense, she cried out her poverty to the Lord by means of the phrase she used as a title for her 1927 notebook and repeated on every page of it: "My Jesus, mercy!"

Awareness of her poverty led Prima Maestra to:

- *work intensively* by means of the examination of conscience to remove every resistance within her, especially pride, so that there would be nothing between her and God: "To seek him alone";
- *constantly grow in trust in God.*

Over time, this trust would be transformed into a profound, personal and explicit love for Jesus Master. This emerges in the resolutions she made in January 1938, the year in which the Congregation's journey was very bleak and her health was put to the test with particular severity:

*"I have begun this year. Will I finish it? I don't know. I know that if I do the will of God, if I love the Lord very much, I will go to heaven with him....  
A long or a short life is not important. What is important is to love God."*

The Congregation and the Pauline Family were going through dark times. She wrote: "At times things were so dark I didn't understand anything" (1918); "Here we are really in the dark" (1937), "but we do what we are told...."

At least twice when Prima Maestra was superior (1923-1928 and 1938-1939), she found her role being carried out in actual fact by others. These were very significant events in her journey of purification. She was not looking for extraordinary signs because she knew that

the will of God was communicated to her through the mediation of the Founder:

*"It is the will of God that I concentrate on things in general and not worry about the details.... It would be easier the other way around but it is not the will of God"* (February 1927). *Floweret: "To keep to my place."* (April 1927).

What was happening in the Alba community? What did Prima Maestra mean by the phrase "concentrate on things in general"?

In 1970, Sr. Clelia Bianco testified that after M. Thecla was appointed Superior General in 1922, she had to bear for many years the hostility of the group of FSPs that had formed in Alba: "No one paid any attention to her precarious health, or to her position [in the Institute]. But from that time on (the announcement that she had been made Superior General), Maestra Thecla manifested her heroism by taking the last place and allowing Teresa Raballo to run everything."

Teresa Raballo herself writes in her *Memoirs*:

*"When the two communities of Susa and Alba were united in 1923, the integration was not easy. The Susa group was made up of young girls already trained in typographical work, in the spiritual life, in study..."* Teresa Raballo admits that the group of sisters in Alba gave them a cold welcome: "The Alba group, made up almost entirely of adults, carried out domestic duties almost exclusively. The members [of this group] were less spontaneous and tended to enforce rigid rules. The situation required the group from Susa to make a new start and it was hard for Maestra Thecla to begin governing as Superior General since there was already a local superior in Alba."

The other very dark time was the twenty-year period of difficult discernment concerning the juridical recognition of the Pious Disciples as a separate Institute.

## **Her Gaze Fixed on Jesus**

During the first stage of her life, Prima Maestra's relationship with Jesus was one of imitation—she wanted to copy him, to make him the point of reference in all her actions:

*“May my thoughts and affections become always more humble and united to those of Jesus. To unite myself to him; to transform myself in him” (October 1931).*

*“To be humble like Jesus. He said: ‘Learn from me.’ We want to be spouses of Jesus, but we don’t want the cross of Jesus” (November 1931).*

Maestra Thecla fixed her gaze on Jesus and this gaze was transformed into the commitment to imitate him and unite herself profoundly to him. This is her examination of conscience:

*“Jesus is good; I am bad.  
Jesus is everything; I am nothing.  
Jesus is humble; I am proud.  
Jesus is gentle; I am hard.  
Jesus is merciful; I am demanding.  
Jesus suffers and I want to enjoy things.  
Jesus wants to save me and I resist.  
Jesus loves me; do I love him?” (April 1934)*

What she lived became a constant teaching to the Congregation:

*“Do we want to be true disciples of Jesus? Then let us imitate him. He always responded gently and kindly even to sinners.... Let us remember well that humble and kind words in response to rudeness and rejection are seeds that will sprout and produce great good” (VPC 25).*

Her prayer was expressed through the practices of piety proper to the Institute. She jotted down this resolution:

*“Take the points of piety one by one:*  
1) *First instants – spirit of energy*  
2) *Preventive exam – recollection*  
3) *Mass according to our method*  
4) *Communion*  
5) *Union with God – ejaculations, etc.*  
6) *Visit – Rosary.”*

To help herself, she assigned a special intention to every day of the week and above all she underscored the attitude to be adopted: *spiritual vigor and energy*. Those were the years in which she called the annual spiritual exercises “*exercises of conversion.*” She gave great

importance to the sacrament of reconciliation, which she faithfully received every week or even more frequently.

## **Humility – Littleness – Self-Surrender**

*Humility and littleness* are two words that occur very frequently in M. Thecla's circular letters and notebooks—a humility and littleness that are rooted in her contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation, above all the manger and life in the house of Nazareth.

*"We need to become small, very small" (VPC 18).*

*"Let us bow our head before the manger...and promise that we too want to become small so that we can enter the kingdom of heaven promised to children and little ones" (VPC 77).*

M. Thecla reached the conviction that "we can't do anything without grace" (VPC 38).

She experienced this "nothingness" on both the spiritual and apostolic levels: "We are nothing" (VP 56). But she realized that our nothingness is embraced by God, who "bends over us," grants our requests, has pity on our weakness and supports us with a strong arm (VPC 76).

From this sprang her insistence that we "remain in humility," after the example of the Divine Master who "is gentle and humble of heart" (VPC 118), and "take our place, which is the last one" (VPC 76) "in loving and operative silence" (Ibid.).

M. Thecla's sense of littleness sprang from her total trust in God: "To be small; to consider ourselves as such, and so to distrust ourselves and have great trust in the Lord's goodness" (VPC 107).

## **To Cling Firmly and Lovingly to the Will of God**

Another "essential phrase" that determined Prima Maestra's spiritual journey was "the will of God." The term contains everything: vocation and mission, health and sickness, life and death, the divine and the human. This sensitivity to the will of God ran through her entire life, from beginning to end. In fact, in October 1963, she wrote:

*“I want to become a saint by doing the will of God always and in everything. Does he want me to be sick? Fiat. Tempted. Fiat. Opposed? Fiat. Always: not what pleases me but what pleases you, my God.”*

The way to get to know and adhere to the will of God is *prayer*:

*“The function of prayer in life is to obtain the help [we need] to carry out the will of God and correspond to our vocation. It is not to obtain what we want, but to do the will of God—what pleases him.”<sup>5</sup>*

To do the will of God is the way to give him glory. Maestra Thecla seemed to translate into life the attitude of Jesus toward his Father: “I always do what is pleasing to him” (Jn. 8:29).

## **A Spiritual Life with a Marian Tone**

Maestra Thecla lived her whole life in the presence of Mary. Mary was the Mother to whom she entrusted everything: herself, the Daughters of St. Paul, the Congregation. The best expression of her devotion to Mary can be found in the prayers in which she entrusted herself to the Blessed Mother. These prayers are scattered throughout her spiritual notes. Here is one dated October 1954:

*“I entrust everything to you, Mary: my entire being, with all my senses; my soul, with all its faculties; the merits I can make with the grace of God: meritorious, expiatory, impetratory. I place everything in your hands. Do what you want with them, Mary. I know that I am in good hands and that is enough for me. Cover me at all times with your mantle, and cover all the Daughters of St. Paul. Hold us always close to you and bring us all to heaven. May no one be missing. You are our sole hope in life, in death and in eternal joy. Mary, I entrust myself to you. Mary, I confide in you.”*

## **Trust in Divine Providence and Simplicity**

From the letters Fr. Alberione wrote to M. Thecla, we infer that toward 1941 her spiritual life underwent a profound development under the aspects of *simplicity* and *passivity*, characterized by her “desire for the hidden life” (LMT 58)—a time during which she also experi-

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<sup>5</sup> T 5, January 1955.

enced profound obscurity and “utter darkness.” Her spiritual director fostered this turning point, which introduced M. Thecla into a more contemplative journey, confirming it with these words:

*“Allow yourself to be drawn by the Lord.... Let us love the Lord with simplicity and strive always more for union with the Divine, until we reach the point that our soul has no desires or rest except in God” (LMT 58).*

M. Thecla had immense trust in God, our provident Father:

*“If one seeks God alone, he, who is our Father, will send us food and clothing every day.... We will be nourished by the immaculate flesh of our Savior; we will be nourished with his Gospel” (January 1932).*

*“To believe that everything is arranged by our good heavenly Father—both the things we like and the things we don’t like. [...] To examine myself on whether or not my heart rests tranquilly in the Lord, on the heart of God, who is continually thinking about me” (May 1931).*

With him, one can live without anxiety, even if the trials are many:

*“Don’t be anxious. Things will get done a little at a time. Meanwhile, that’s the goal we must reach” (VPC 7).*

Her strength sprang from profound trust:

*“If the Father gave us what was most dear to him, his Son, then let us trust that he will give us all the graces [we need]” (VPC 74). Consequently, “We should recognize and acknowledge our wretchedness, but then, with great trust in God, we must strain ahead like our Father St. Paul, saying: ‘I can do all things in the One who gives me strength’” (VPC 124).*

From a sense of God’s fatherhood, Prima Maestra moved to a relationship based on always deeper trust in him because help comes from him alone:

*“Trust: the Lord loves me.... He arranges everything for my good.... He is thinking about me continually and wants to help me. And he can do it! He promised this and he will not fail [to keep his promise] (1933).*

*“To believe that everything is arranged by our good heavenly Father—both the things we like and the things we don’t like” (May 1931).*

Leafing through the notebook covering the years 1947-1950, we notice that M. Thecla’s journey was marked by simplicity. As she her-

self underscored in an entry for April 1947: “Spiritual work—[keep it] very simple.”

She had reached the point of great trust:

*“My Jesus, I want you alone—nothing else.” “Jesus, go ahead and use me for whatever you want and think is best. [...] I want to be a docile instrument in your hands. Do what you like [with me].” “Total, complete surrender to God.”*

This attitude of trust led her to a familiar relationship with God, which blossomed into total *self-surrender*:

*“To remain trustingly with the Lord, in the serene knowledge that he loves me and I love him”* (February 1947).

*“Total trust in Jesus and in the Blessed Mother. Patience in everything and with everyone. Trusting serenity”* (April 1947).

This sense of “total and complete surrender” was extended to all things. Prayer became rest in the Lord, a way of living in his presence. In approving the resolutions Maestra Thecla submitted to him, the Founder emphasized:

*“Live in Jesus Master. May Jesus Master be light for your mind; may he be your comfort and intimate joy. May you feel always more his continual presence in your soul, speaking to you, comforting you and sanctifying you”* (LMT 75).

It is interesting to meditate on M. Thecla’s spiritual project for 1950, which she renewed up until 1961, when she offered her life to the Blessed Trinity for all of us:

***Holy Year 1950-1951***

- *“This year that has just begun—will I finish it? I don’t know.*
- *I want to dedicate all the minutes, hours, days and months of this year to God—to HIM alone.*
- *I renounce my own will and cling only to the will of God.*
- *I renounce my preferences and my way of seeing things, so as to have only God’s preferences.*
- *I want to do everything for him—for him alone.*
- *Mary, my good Mother, may I love you and Jesus alone. Help me with your grace. I trust in you. I entrust myself to you like a small child. St. Paul, help me. St. Thecla, pray for me.*

- *May my life be a continual ‘Magnificat’ and an ongoing adoration for the many graces I have received.*
- *Everything only and always for the glory of God and the good of souls. (Exercises for May: Complete, total surrender to God. This sums up my resolution)”*

### ***“The Trinity is my family”***

From imitation, Prima Maestra advanced to a more profound level—that of a sharing of life, immersion, uniformity with the Triune God. She was fully aware that: “It is Jesus who lives in me, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. To remain united to the Divine Master.”

In October 1951, she wrote: “The Trinity is my family.”

The letters of Fr. Alberione sustained her in this journey marked by greater passivity and aimed at conformity to the mystery of Christ:

“Live in Jesus Christ” (LMT 75). “Let yourself be guided by Jesus in complete trust” (LMT 78). Relish “his continual presence in your soul, speaking to you, comforting you, sanctifying you” (LMT 75). Maestra Thecla’s spiritual notes confirm that she opened her life to the mystery of the divine Presence dwelling within her. She wrote:

*“To live in intimacy with the Divine Master: mind, will, heart, works, senses, hands, feet, eyes, hearing—everything for him and with him. To reach the point of ‘it is no longer I who live; it is Jesus who lives in me.’”<sup>6</sup>*

Her interior attention focused always more on “what pleases the Lord,” condensed in the phrase “Glory to God and peace to all” (LMT 78), and she surrendered herself completely to the divine will.

From 1950 on, she would have no resolution other than complete surrender to the Lord. She simplified her spiritual life even more and gave it a Trinitarian dimension. This is revealed in the note:

*“Holiness—I want it! To live the Trinitarian life like Mary most holy. To trust the heavenly Father; to love his Son, who came to save me; to rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit. The heavenly Father is always close to me, within me, thinking about me and providing for everything. Jesus is with me; the Holy Spirit sanctifies me. To live in union with the three divine Persons.”*

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<sup>6</sup> T 6, September 1961.

Thus she identified holiness with intimate union with the Trinity dwelling within her. She seemed to live in that divine presence as if in her own home:

*"To think often that the most holy Trinity is within me. Adoration, union, recollection and...to keep such distinguished guests company."*

And since we are children of God, then in the Trinity "we are a family."

Prima Maestra strained with her entire being toward this intimate and familiar union with the Trinity, to the point that she wanted to be hidden in that divine Mystery like drop of water in the ocean. "My God," she wrote, "I want to hide myself in you, to lose myself in you, like a drop of water in the ocean."<sup>7</sup> Her desire for this union reached the point of self-immolation, expressed in the offering of her life to the Trinity on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity 1961. Her yearning to dwell in the Trinity, her great nostalgia for the Eternal, was translated into a term very familiar to her: *heaven*. This was the "place" where she would receive her reward—a "firm, stable" place—a state of complete communion where "we will always be with the Lord."

During the last years of her life, her desire to be conformed to the will of God and to live for his glory increased more and more: "I want to become a saint only for the greater glory of God;"<sup>8</sup> "to do everything only to please him."<sup>9</sup> This reveals that her life was lived in the Spirit—a reality she expressed as follows:

*"Divine Holy Spirit, give me your love, your gifts. I want to let you work in me. I don't want to erect obstacles to your sanctifying action. Glory to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit"* (June 1963).

Her notebooks written in 1963, which contain her jottings during her illness, reveal an adherence to the will of God that led to unity:

*"I take everything from you, both good things and misfortunes, physical and moral sufferings. I am united to you now and always"* (October 1963).

*"To live in unity of life with Jesus Master"* (January 1963).

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<sup>7</sup> T 5, 1957.

<sup>8</sup> T 5, January 1959.

<sup>9</sup> T 8, September 1963.

*"To remain united to Jesus. May my thoughts be his; my will, his. To love God [the Father] above everything. [To do all] for him and with him. To make sacrifices for souls" (January 1963).*

*"To imitate St. Paul's union with the Divine Master: 'Who will separate me from the love of Christ?'" (January 1963)*

*"Today: greater intensity of life with Jesus Master. Everything with him: unity" (27 January 1963).*

M. Thecla was above all fascinated by the relationship between Jesus and the Father and she wanted to live like him:

*"Jesus always did the will of the Father; I too want to always do the will of the Father. To see his will in everything" (February 1963). "I want to live your obedience, Jesus." "It is Jesus who lives in me with the Father and the Holy Spirit" (Ibid.).*

Maestra Thecla lived the Pauline and Alberionian directive of *Donec Formetur* in an eminent way:

*"To live in union with God like St. Paul: My life is Christ. To do everything for him, with him, in him" (3 June 1963).*

To live in Jesus *"so that our thoughts and affections are his, our will is his; so that we have his very same desires" (CSAS 157/3).*

Consequently, her goal was to reach intimate union with the Divine Master (CSAS 123/6), the highest degrees of prayer, the point of *"it is no longer I who live but Jesus who lives in me" (CSAS 154/1)*, so that her life would be transformed into praise of God.

## Called to Sanctity

In her 50 years of Pauline life, Maestra Thecla concentrated her teaching on a single goal: *the vocation to sanctity*. Sanctity is the sole and essential condition for evangelizing effectively with the instruments of social communication:

*"The apostles of the press must all be holy: do we at least have the firm, unshakeable will to achieve this?" (VPC 76)*

*"May we all always have a single concern: to become Pauline saints. What must we do on this earth? What must we do in the Congregation? We must*

*become saints. This is the only thing we must do. [...] When something worries us, we think about it, reflect on it, ask for advice. We are always fixed on that thought, on that preoccupation. Primo Maestro says that in everything we do, we should always keep this thought in mind: I must become a saint. I want to become a saint—a Pauline saint.*<sup>10</sup>

This striving for holiness motivated and supported her continual invitation to act dynamically, to make progress, to grow. In fact, the key word of her teaching was the phrase *to make progress*:

*“To make progress in our spiritual work: examinations of conscience made always more diligently; a greater spirit of recollection; a continual struggle to conquer our defects; greater interior life.*

*“To make progress in living the religious life always better, in an always more fervent observance of the vows and the Constitutions.*

*“To make progress in the exercise of the apostolate: to organize and carry it out with ever-greater intelligence, supernatural spirit and generosity” (VPC 152).*

*“To take a step forward in religious perfection and in the true Pauline life”; “to make progress in the spiritual life and in carrying out the apostolate always more intelligently”; “to make progress in virtue and union with God” (VPC 199, 255, 203).*

To make progress to the point of total self-surrender, to the point of living “in continual adoration,” to the point of singing *magnificat* by means of one’s life.

*“Let us see to it that our heart is filled with God so as to bring him to souls” (VPC 149).*

*“How beautiful and holy it is to communicate Jesus to souls—that Jesus whom we want to always carry in the center of our heart” (VPC 25).*

Let us seek to penetrate M. Thecla’s experience through the last notations she made in her personal notebook:

31.10.1963 – *I take everything from you: both good things and misfortunes, physical and moral sufferings. I am united to you now and always.*

10.11.1963 – *Everything only for God, through Mary most holy. I entrust myself to the two of you. I am a wretched but penitent creature. My Jesus,*

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<sup>10</sup> CSAS 79.

*mercy! How many graces! How many absolutions every day this week.*

11.11.1963 – *To be always ready to die.... Jesus and Mary, forgive me.*

15.11.1963 – *Lord, I am ready to do your holy will in everything. I can't remember things anymore; I can't remember names; I find it hard to breathe, but I accept everything for your sake, out of love for you and...in penance. For all the needs of the Congregation, for the Pope, the Council, Primo Maestro and the whole Pauline Family.*

16-11-1963: *Five months have gone by since [the first attack of] the illness that almost took me to heaven. Today I'm in bed with a cold and Primo Maestro gave me an absolution for my whole life. To think only of God, and with great trust. To do his holy will now and always.*

## Toward Supreme Self-Offering

It is interesting to note Fr. Alberione's concern about M. Thecla, when she became ill during a trip to Asia. He wrote the following letter to her while she was in the Philippines (cf. LMT 110):

Rome, 21.02.1962

*Good Prima Maestra, I don't know where to send this letter. However I thank the Lord that you have had a good trip up to now and ask him to accompany you with his grace.*

*...I am worried about your health, which is clearly not good. Is it prudent for you to continue your trip? At least spend a little more time in a community where the climate is favorable and where the atmosphere is one of serenity and trust. **Rest well on the adorable breast of Jesus and in the arms of Mary, in serene self-surrender. Don't even bother to pray. Let Jesus inspire you: he is in us and we are in him.***

*I send you my blessing. Our Father in heaven loves us. I want frequent news about you. **In everything, only and always: trust.** M. Alberione*

It is beautiful to note that in the last pages of her personal notebook, after leaving several pages blank, M. Thecla recopied the above invitation of Fr. Alberione to surrender herself to God (the sentences in bold print). For M. Thecla, these words were surely the light that led her to make her supreme self-offering, in complete self-surrender and in obedience to her spiritual father.

## **“Completely pure and clear...”**

At Maestra Thecla’s funeral, Cardinal Arcadio Larraona said: “You don’t know—you can’t know—how much your Prima Maestra suffered, worked and prayed.... At this point, you find everything done. But things didn’t get done by themselves. How much hard work, how many inspirations, how much correspondence, how many sacrifices, how much faith [were involved]! How necessary it was to hope against all hope. Your Prima Maestra’s life was a poem, a beginning of the religious life. [...] I remember your Mother. Her life reflected her essence: she was clear as glass; in her, nothing was exaggerated.”

Prima Maestra was a person who carried out a spiritual journey. Fr. Alberione declared that she reached the point of eliminating every resistance to grace.

She is also an example to us of a unified life. In her, the apostolate and a profound spiritual life went hand in hand: “If recollection—a spirit of prayer—is lacking,” she wrote in 1951, “we cannot do good to souls.” Consequently, contemplation is not an impediment to more intense action: “The apostolate is vital prayer that unites us to God. Contemplation—or the divine life in us—must always be present. If this is true, then when we give a book, we give grace.”

## **“She always lived under the gaze of God”**

To reach this goal, Maestra Thecla lived an intense itinerary of faith and love. She carried out a constant spiritual work that led her to complete self-surrender and to the heights of Pauline mysticism.

After her death, Fr. Alberione said:

*“She felt it was the Lord who supported her. She was a contemplative soul. She also knew how to have recourse to people, but first and always she turned to God. Everything had to come from him and everything was for him”* (13 Feb. 1964).

## **Conclusion: “According to the style of God”**

Let us conclude these reflections with the testimony of Sr. Assunta Bassi, who lived and worked alongside M. Thecla for many years:

*“She guided the Congregation for 48 years. She was able to cement its members among themselves and the communities among themselves through a strong sense of belonging [to the Institute] and, at the same time, she sent the Daughters of St. Paul out to their ‘neighbors’ in every part of the world. She was the soul of [the Institute’s] organization and apostolic journey. She left ample breathing space for initiatives to develop but she was also vigilant and, if necessary, recalled everyone to essential principles. Her life could be defined by the word fidelity: she was a woman faithful to God and to her specific vocation. In spontaneity and simplicity, she allowed God to work in her and to carry out great things through her. We witnessed these things but were unaware of how great they were because they were done according to the style of God.”*

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



1. What struck you most in reading Maestra Thecla’s spiritual itinerary?
2. Under what aspects do we have to grow so as to follow in the footsteps of our Mother?

# Suggestions for an Hour of Adoration

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## *Hymn of adoration*

**Guide:** With the attitude of Prima Maestra Thecla, let us come before the Father with renewed wonder at his love. Prima Maestra Thecla allowed herself to be progressively immersed in a “one to one” experience with God. Her reciprocal exchange with him became the motivating force of her life. She expressed her relationship with the Lord in this way:

*“I am always with Jesus. I go to chapel. I take my place there. I look at the Tabernacle and think: ‘Jesus is there. And with him are also the Father and the Holy Spirit. The whole Trinity is there, along with the Church, all the saints and blessed in heaven, the Apostles, the confessors, the virgins....”*

And she added:

*“When our heart is filled with the love of God, then this love necessarily overflows onto the world...”*

## *Silent adoration*

**1<sup>st</sup> Reader:** “Consider how you were called; not many of you are wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families. No, God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who by human standards are common and contemptible—indeed those who count for nothing—to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something, so that no human being might feel boastful before God. It is by him that you exist in Christ Jesus, who for us was made wisdom for God, and saving justice and holiness and redemption” (1 Co. 1:26-30).

**Refrain:** *Adoramus te, Domine*

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reader:** "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you. It was because the Lord loved you" (Dt. 7:7).

**Ref.:** *Adoramus te, Domine*

**1<sup>st</sup> R:** "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.... I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.... It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain" (Jn. 15:9-16).

**Ref.:** *Adoramus te, Domine*

**2<sup>nd</sup> R:** "The Lord has given us a great grace: he has given us a vocation—the Pauline vocation! What a huge grace! And we have his promise that he is with us: we must have faith in this! In our chapels it is written: 'Do not be afraid. I am with you.' If the Lord is with us, then what do we have to fear? Our vocation is so beautiful, so great! Let us entrust ourselves to St. Paul. May he make his daughters copies of himself: generous apostles who work to do good and to reach heaven with many souls" (CSAS 67).

**Ref.:** *Adoramus te, Domine*

**1<sup>st</sup> R:** "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. He chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love" (Eph. 1:3-4).

**Ref.:** *Adoramus te, Domine*

**2<sup>nd</sup> R:** M. Thecla said:

*"For a Daughter of St. Paul, the Tabernacle is everything.... We lack nothing when Jesus is with us."*

*"If we remain firmly attached to the Lord, we will not lack help. We will not lack graces...."*

**Ref.:** *Adoramus te, Domine*

**G:** Let us welcome the Founder's invitation:

*"Each Daughter of St. Paul should check herself in the mirror of the life and virtues of Prima Maestra Thecla, imitating her:*

- in her continual union with God;*
- in the serene way she faced the events of life;*
- in her knowledge of and affection for each Daughter of St. Paul;*
- in her spirit of docility to the dispositions of God;*
- in desiring, contemplating and synthesizing the virtues of faith, hope and charity in her life" (RA 1965).*

*Pause for silent prayer*

**G:** As we prepare to celebrate our Centenary, let us strive to preserve in our hearts the same aspirations, the same availability to the Spirit, that characterized our first sisters. Like Fr. Alberione and M. Thecla, let us listen to the heart of God, the heart of the Church and the heart of humanity, so as to truly become "new apostles" who relish new things and who are capable of envisioning, like Paul, new paths so that the Word "will race ahead and reach everyone." Let us call upon the Holy Spirit, asking him to work in us with all his power.

*Hymn to the Holy Spirit*

**G:** In making the examination of conscience, let us allow ourselves to be enlightened by the words of Maestra Thecla:

*"Everyone should ask herself: Am I making the effort to leave my heart free for the work of grace, removing my ego, which is the main obstacle to achieving my good and that of the others? Am I convinced that we, weak creatures, cannot do anything without the grace of God?"*

In silence, let us check to see if our life is in harmony with the orientations of Prima Maestra.

*Examination of conscience*

*Hymn asking for forgiveness*

**1<sup>st</sup> R:** “I am praying fervently for you—for all of you—that we might all reach the holiness to which we are called. I write this to you not only with my pen but with my heart. I want you all to become saints: for this, I have offered my life—for all of you—that we will attain the holiness that the Lord wants of us” (*M. Thecla, Christmas 1961*).

**G:** Awareness of our weaknesses invites us to weave afresh our bond of love with the Divine Master and to tell him, like the spouse in the Song of Songs, that we want our fidelity to him to be whole-hearted and marked by the same faith that lies at the foundation of our Pauline story. Certain of the Lord’s fidelity, let us renew our Pact with him—the covenant that runs like a golden thread through our whole history.

*Prayer: The Pact*

**G:** Together with all our sisters scattered throughout the world, let us renew our “yes” to the Father. Let us thank him for having placed in our hands and hearts a great treasure: the treasure of the Gospel, the treasure of the apostolate, the treasure of the call to a life of complete self-donation. And let us make our love more concrete through the renewal of our consecration.

*Renewal of the vows (Pauline Prayer Book)*

**G:** Let us reflect on the precious heritage M. Thecla left us: a heart open to universality, a missionary spirit and a great docility to grace. Truly, as our Founder emphasized: “The Lord did whatever he wanted with her because she never resisted him. She never resisted the will of the Lord.”

Bearing in our hearts M. Thecla’s directives, let us make ourselves the voice of every creature in our spontaneous petitions to the Lord.

*Spontaneous prayers*

**2<sup>nd</sup> R:** From a letter of Fr. Alberione to M. Thecla:

*“I think that Maestra Thecla is on a good path—one that will earn her a beautiful heaven. It is the path of God! We must not doubt the Lord: he is a Father to all those who serenely entrust themselves to his care. There are dark tunnels, but then Jesus will reveal himself anew with his light and comfort. Let us allow Jesus to do whatever he wants with us...it is enough that he is content. I place Prima Maestra’s name in the chalice every morning and I bless her every night.... The cross is the sign of love that Jesus is with us. Courage! Then...heaven. Forward! I ask for your prayers” (04.06.1959).*

**G:** Convinced that Maestra Thecla has been given as a gift not only to us, let us ask for the grace of her beatification so that the whole Church can look to her as a model of virtue, prayer and love for one’s mission.

*Prayer for the Beatification of Maestra Thecla*

*Concluding hymn*

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