

Homily on the 51st Anniversary of the death of Sr. Thecla Merlo

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Dear Brothers and Sisters!
Dear Daughters of St. Paul!

I willingly accepted the invitation of your Superior General to celebrate this holy Eucharist on the occasion of the opening of your Congregation's Centenary of Foundation, which coincides with the 51st anniversary of the death of your Co-foundress and first Superior General, Sr. Thecla Merlo. It is an initial and very significant moment of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, to be followed by others as the year unfolds—a moment in which to express our gratitude to God for the gifts of grace and holiness he has poured out on you, on the sisters who preceded you, and on the Church over the past century. How many beautiful stories of fidelity to Christ and of service to the proclamation of the Gospel could be recounted! At the same time, this Eucharist is an intercession for the years to come, asking the Lord to make you faithful to your foundational charism. In fact, you Daughters of St. Paul are links in a chain of graces that continue in time.

The Word of God that was just proclaimed can help us penetrate the heart of the mystery of your vocation, which Prima Maestra Thecla, powerfully drawn by the example and proposal of Blessed James Alberione, incarnated and fecundated by means of her life.

The Gospel of Luke reminds us of an important incident with regard to the revelation of the identity of Jesus and those who want to follow him more closely. It says that, like other decisive moments in his life, Jesus was found praying in solitude (Lk. 9:18). He asked his disciples who the crowds thought he was and who they themselves thought he was, and Peter replied: "You are the Messiah." Jesus then delineated his mission very clearly, saying that his death on the cross would bring salvation to the world.

But the fidelity of the Son of God to his Father to the point of embracing such an infamous death was not a path he would travel alone. Jesus was no solitary hero: he proposed the way of the cross to everyone. It is the condition for being his disciple. Those who want to follow him must renounce themselves, that is, they must stop focusing on themselves and instead center their lives on the Lord Jesus. And this itinerary often bears the imprint of the cross—a cross one must carry day after day. In the life of a disciple of Jesus, the cross is not an exceptional situation—it is a permanent law that involves two things: to avoid getting lost in the things of this world and to never be ashamed of Christ. Fidelity to this journey of discipleship ensures participation in his resurrection.

Dear Daughters of St. Paul, your Co-foundress, Sr. Thecla Merlo understood and lived this fundamental law of discipleship, namely, that of following Jesus to the point of the cross. She embraced it on a daily basis, making it the purpose of her life in the certitude that by doing so she would share in the life of the resurrected Christ. In 1923 she wrote: "When he [Fr. Alberione] told me about a new institution of daughters who would live like sisters, I was immediately enthusiastic." Many years later, she remarked: "How many graces [I have received] in these years and how poorly I have corresponded to them! If I am still in the Congregation today, it is entirely due to the mercy of God!"

She was humbly aware that the Lord's plan for her life called her to embark on a new path: that of evangelizing the world through the Good Press. In fact, in 1918, the Founder sent her to Susa with these orders: "Go! You will work in silence and then the Lord will do something with you." Teresa—as she was still known at that time—followed the Founder's orders with great trust. She said:

“The house was very poor and the sacrifices were many, but we were happy—all of us aiming at a glowing ideal: to become holy and to do great good in the world through the good press.”

What do these words, which reveal the soul of Thecla, mean if not that one must follow the Lord by embracing the big and small crosses of daily life? The goal was clear: to form a community committed to personal interior transformation through a constant striving for holiness. Thus Thecla and the first young sisters launched out on the spiritual life by means of an itinerary that involved discernment, the conquest of personal defects and the acquisition of virtue to the point of explicitly and joyously offering one’s life to the Lord for the sake of the apostolate of the Good Press.

In 1922, at the end of a course of spiritual exercises, the first nine young women made their vows with the specific intent to evangelize through the apostolate of the press. On that occasion, Sr. Thecla was appointed Superior General. Why her? The words of your Founder can help us better understand and penetrate the depths of Prima Maestra’s soul: “Those who guide others must be obedient,” he said. “[Maestra Thecla’s] docility is one of the reasons why I chose her from among the others of that first little group to guide the community. What inclined me in that direction was the fact that she didn’t cling to her own ideas; she wasn’t always ready to give advice or to express judgments. No. She was attentive to everything that was going on around her. She stood out [from the others] for her obedience, her docility. In those first years in which no one could foresee what would become of the Congregation, her only thought was to surrender herself to the Lord; to allow him to guide her in everything” (PrPM, 22.02.1965).

In fact, in sketching out a spiritual profile of Sr. Thecla Merlo, Fr. Alberione called her a woman who never resisted the Holy Spirit. “The Lord,” he declared, “did whatever he wanted with her because she never resisted his will.” And she lived this interior attitude her whole life. We can say that it was one of the distinguishing features of her discipleship of Jesus.

On another occasion, your Founder exclaimed: “Oh, her life! She placed it entirely in the hands of God up to the very end—up to the moment in which he called her to eternal rest, to glory!” He then continued: “You well know that toward the end of her illness her only words were, ‘The will of the Lord! What pleases the Lord! May the Lord’s will be done!’ She was always extremely docile.... The Lord placed a great responsibility, a great mission, on her shoulders in spite of her fragile health.... During her time on earth, she was always ready to accept everything he disposed. Consequently, she was always ready to obey—not only a general obedience but obedience in everything she came to know that the Lord wanted of her. She was always ready to obey in everything.”

It was precisely this interior attitude of seeking to know, embrace and follow the will of God that guided her life. At the end of the course of spiritual exercises she made in 1951, she wrote: “We must not live our vocation in a state of terror and anxiety, but with love and trust in our heavenly Father. We should do what we have to do and trust in God. We will not be judged according to a divine decree but according to what we did. Never distrust [God]. As long as there is a spark of life in us, we can become saints. We were created for heaven and we conquer it by force.”

With regard to the struggle and renunciation involved in this, she followed the example of Jesus, saying: “Choose renunciation to the point of privation, to the point of humiliation, to the point of servitude. This is the tragic but inevitable choice one must make to become holy: to choose renunciation to the point of self-annihilation. It is necessary to renew this resolution every day and we will understand its importance only to the degree that we advance in holiness. This choice gives life all its beauty and value.”

This, dear sisters, is how your Prima Maestra followed the Lord: she carried the cross on a daily basis until she reached eternal glory.

In today’s First Reading, an excerpt from the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul counsels the Christians of Corinth to refrain from acting according to criteria that have nothing to do with the staggering innovations of the Gospel. He urges them to consider the fact that it is not reference to their evangelizers (Apollos, Peter, Paul himself) that counts. What truly counts is the work God accomplishes in a person. Consequently, if one must boast, he/she should boast about the crucified

and risen Christ. We receive everything from Jesus and thus everything must be attributed to him. This is the essence of evangelization. In an earlier passage of the same letter, the Apostle declares: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Co. 2:2).

To be instruments of the salvation that lead people to Jesus Christ, not to oneself: this was the clear goal to which Blessed James Alberione and Maestra Thecla dedicated their lives, making them holy persons who attracted others. The press, the cinema, the radio, television and all the other modern technologies—these are the instruments and languages they used, like true prophets, to bring the Kingdom of God to the world.

Reading the biography of Prima Maestra Thecla, one is struck by her interior attitude in inviting her sisters to carry out the apostolate. She knew that it is the Lord alone who touches and converts hearts and therefore that each person should be approached with respect and attention. First of all, respect. Prima Maestra was convinced that in carrying out an apostolate that uses the instruments of communication, the members of your Institute are making us of something that does not belong to you but that, instead, has been entrusted to you, namely: the *Word of God*, and that this Word must be offered in a dignified manner, with the same attitude of the priest who offers the Host.

She urged the Daughters of St. Paul to always be aware of *what it is* they are bringing to others, of *who those others are*, and of *who they themselves are*. The Gospel icon from which she drew her inspiration was that of Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth. For Prima Maestra, this icon was the foundation of what might be called the apostolic deontology (ethics) of service in the world of communications.

And then: attention to the cultural aspect of the world in which one works. Prima Maestra Thecla made 14 extended trips abroad from 1936-1963 and those trips made a profound impact on her life, triggering amazement, surprise and questions. In 1952, she told her sisters: “We are all Daughters of St. Paul—daughters of the Apostle of charity, who wrote to the Corinthians: ‘I made myself all to all so as to save all. I do everything for the sake of the Gospel.’ The whole world is our field of apostolate. We must love everyone so as to do good to everyone.”

She carried all peoples in her heart, asking herself: “Where is humanity going?” She said: “Our power idea should be souls. This is what should goad us on. We should be concerned about how to approach people so as to bring them the Word of truth and salvation. How many souls never hear a good word, never hear anyone speak about God.... Who should help them? Who should bring them to God if not we who have received so many graces from the Lord and who have in our hands such extremely efficient means of apostolate?” (1950)

Dear Sisters, may the courageous and timely witness of this great woman remain always alive in you so that you can pass it on to others. The Church of this new millennium—a troubled and confused millennium under many aspects—urgently needs apostles of the caliber of James Alberione and Thecla Merlo. We are drawn to their example, their style of life. Let us pray to them, asking them to transmit to us the passion for evangelization that led them to respond without reserve to the call of the Lord.

Permit me to make my own the words with which St. John Paul II ended his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, celebrating the great Jubilee of 2000:

“Let us go forward in hope! A new millennium is opening before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture, relying on the help of Christ. The Son of God, who became incarnate two thousand years ago out of love for humanity, is at work even today: we need discerning eyes to see this and, above all, a generous heart to become the instruments of his work” (n. 58).