

## TALKING ABOUT PRIMA MAESTRA...



I am a Daughter of St. Paul but not a sister of the “first hour,” like many of the FSPs who lived in direct contact with Maestra Thecla. I consider myself to be part of the “second half” of our 100-year history, grateful to have known Prima Maestra personally, even though this

knowledge derived from her occasional visits and long-distance presence. I got to know her during the last 8 years of her life, starting in 1956, when I was transferred from Alba to Rome to continue my aspirancy there. I was a member of our FSP community in Via Antonino Pio, Rome for almost my entire formation period.

While there, I lived in the same building as Prima Maestra and because of this I thought I would see her often. But that didn't happen. The Daughters of St. Paul were expanding in Italy and throughout the world and this expansion required her time, visits and presence. My community was a very large one, made up of different groups of professed sisters and young women in formation. I remember Maestra Thecla coming to give all of us conferences in the community room or else, on Sunday morning after Mass, she would come to speak to my own particular group. When she returned from a trip abroad, she would always come to see us so as to greet us on behalf of our far-away sisters, tell us about their apostolic activities (which filled us with enthusiasm), and ask us to pray for them. These encounters took place in a climate characterized by great serenity and cordiality. Even when Prima Maestra had to recall us to our duty or reprimand us, she did it seriously but also with great tact and kindness.

I was always struck by how clear and practical her conferences were. She took as her point of departure the Letters of St. Paul in the Liturgy, inciting us to live well charity, community life, the apostolate and prayer. She spoke simply but her enthusiasm for

the Pauline mission and her yearning to do good and live the religious life well offered everyone great encouragement and motivation. I was deeply struck by how *normal* Prima Maestra was, to the point that she joined the other sisters in even the simplest things like dishwashing and communal recreations, which she enjoyed to the full. This set her apart from the Superiors General I knew in other religious Institutes.

Maestra Thecla was very faithful to the practices of piety and I could see that her prayer was very intimate and profound. She had a fixed place in chapel and she would kneel there with her hands clasped and her eyes lowered. I remember stopping to watch her more than once from a distance when, in the early afternoon, she left the Queen of Apostles Sanctuary and headed for the Divine Master building, where she lived. She would walk with a firm and rapid pace, her behavior composed and her face luminous, as if she were continuing her private conversation with God.

One special memory of Maestra Thecla stands out in my mind: the time for me to make my first profession was approaching. I had already submitted my request for this and I knew it had been accepted, but knowing my limitations, I was still unsure....

One day Prima Maestra called me to her office, as she did with each sister right before profession. Happy and at the same time a little nervous about this personal meeting, I told her about my worries. She listened to me and then said in a voice that was both firm and loving: “You know you were admitted to profession. Those of us on the Council were guided by the Holy Spirit. We were the ones who made the decision to admit you, but it was under his guidance and he doesn't make mistakes. So be tranquil and go ahead with faith.” Prima Maestra spoke firmly and convincingly and in a flash all my doubts and worries disappeared. I intuitively grasped that her words sprang from a profound conviction in the work of the Holy Spirit—a conviction that she lived. Those words, accompanied by her luminous, profound, loving and reassuring gaze, heartened me. I felt empowered by her faith and the memory of that moment has provided me with light, strength and support on my journey. Thank you, Prima Maestra!

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