

BOOK DISPLAYS AND ANORAKS



When I lived at Via Antonino Pio, Rome, during the 1950's, everyone took Maestra Thecla's presence in the community for granted. She was there. She was among us. We would run into her on the paths

leading to the Queen of Apostles Sanctuary and from time to time she would come to our various groups to hold what had by then become her traditional conferences.

Looking back on that time, I remember Prima Maestra as a serene person: she was almost always smiling, composed, self-possessed. In those days, I was one of the "Giovanissime," as the group of Juniors was called, and my work consisted in doing the graphics for some of our publications and also traveling around Italy to set up book displays. In those years, the dioceses of Italy organized many meetings and congresses—Eucharistic, catechetical, liturgical, Marian, etc.—and the FSPs were asked to be present at these events with their publications. The book displays were always accompanied by illustrated panels that served to underscore and embellish the products being offered.

It was on one of these trips that my first "close encounter" with Maestra Thecla took place.

In 1959 I was asked to go to Palermo to set up a book exhibit for a Marian Congress. The space set aside for this purpose was bright and beautiful, which facilitated my work and produced satisfactory results. While I was in Palermo, Prima Maestra arrived to visit our community there and at dinner that Sunday I found myself seated next to her. One of the sisters asked her: "Prima Maestra, have you visited the book display yet?" "Yes," she re-



plied promptly, "and I like it very much." Then, turning to look at me directly, she added, "See what skillful people we have in the Congregation? They are really competent!" I was speechless with surprise. I couldn't remember having ever received from any superior such open appreciation of my work, and to have Maestra Thecla herself say this so spontaneously and naturally filled me with joy.

The evening ended with a community recreation in which Prima Maestra put to good use the many games she always took with her on her visits to the houses. It was wonderful to see her laugh so heartily at all the jokes and pranks that followed!

My second direct contact with her took place in 1962, when Sr. Paola Baldo and I were studying art and book design in Urbino. Before heading back there for our third year of school, we went to say goodbye to Prima Maestra, who was in her office. She immediately asked us about our health. I replied that Urbino was very cold and that, as a result, Paola sometimes had stomach problems. "Dress warmly," Prima Maestra advised us earnestly. I told her that the year before, Maestra Paolina, the superior of our Rome community, had offered us anoraks (warm, thick, waterproof hip-length jackets) but then, falling prey to scruples, she said that perhaps we would give others a poor example of poverty if we wore them. So in the end we had returned to Urbino wearing nothing more substantial than our woolen scarves. When Prima Maestra heard this, she said emphatically: "But what kind of poverty is this, I ask you? What kind of poverty? The two of you have to keep healthy so as to make a contribution to the Congregation after you finish your studies!"

And then and there, with us still standing in front of her, she called Maestra Paolina to her office and said, "Listen, go get those two anoraks and give them to these sisters because Urbino is cold and they need to be warmly dressed!"

So thanks to the intervention of Maestra Thecla, we set out for our third year of school without fearing the wind and snow of Urbino because we were well protected by our toasty-warm jackets!

Once again I had experienced first-hand Prima Maestra's humanity and simplicity, which went beyond formalities and sought the good of others in a very direct and concrete way.

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