

MY MEETING WITH PRIMA MAESTRA THECLA



Our life is marked by innumerable encounters: some, even though fleeting, brighten our existence; others create friendship and communion, while still others—very significant ones—give direction to our journey through life and make a deep impression on our minds and hearts. My first meeting with Prima Maestra falls into this last category because she left a profound mark on my young life. That encounter took place in Alba, where I was in formation, having entered the Congregation at the age of ten, just before the start of World War II. I don't remember if I met Prima Maestra prior to that occasion because the war had interrupted communication and had made it very hard for her to get from place to place. Of course I had heard a lot about her from the sisters but I don't remember having seen her before that day.

The war, which had destroyed Italy's cities and transportation infrastructure and caused widespread sorrow and grieving, had only recently ended when one day a loud, insistent ringing of the community bell brought us all flocking to the courtyard of the Motherhouse. Once there, we were told that Prima Maestra had arrived after a long and hazardous trip from Rome. The air resounded with our glad cries as we raced to the front gate to joyfully greet her. When Prima Maestra got out of the car, she was covered with dust. She looked around at us, her penetrating glance resting on each face. It seemed as if she wanted to hug everyone with her gaze alone. I can still picture her smile and recall her first words: "Are you all well?" I was little more than a child at the time but I felt the impact of her

look and was fascinated by it, both humanly and spiritually. I've never forgotten that first meeting with her.

A few years later, I was sent to Rome to make my novitiate and then continue my studies. During those years, I had various opportunities to spend time in Prima Maestra's company, especially on Sundays when we all gathered in the big community room to listen to her conferences. She used those occasions to give direction to our life, provide us with encouragement and also reprimand us when necessary. With the profound gaze and open smile that were so characteristic of her, she would pass on to us the thought of Primo Maestro and urge us to live intensely for the Lord, to offer him the gift of our young lives, to cultivate a spirit of prayer and union with God, and to feel a deep yearning for souls. She told us about her first trips abroad to visit the Institute's new foundations and shared with us the problems and courageous apostolic activities of our sisters in those far-away lands.

One day, a short time after I was placed in charge of our catechetical magazine, Prima Maestra stopped by my office. I was about thirty years old at the time and did not yet have much experience in editorial work, even though as soon as I had finished my studies I had been assigned to the catechetical department. She dropped by unexpectedly, her arrival heralded by her quick step, and asked me how my work was going. She wanted to know what we were doing to promote our new publication, *Way, Truth and Life for the Families*, which was to be sent to all our branch houses, and she had some suggestions as to how to help our sisters give a warm welcome to this latest apostolic initiative.

I have many, many memories of Prima Maestra which of course I can't recount in this small space. But one "snapshot" of her remains fixed in my mind: the image of her at prayer in the Queen of Apostles Sanctuary. She spent a lot of time there, kneeling in the last pew on the left, under the big dome of the church. It was clear to see that she was absorbed in contemplation of God. Whenever I think of Prima Maestra, my heart is filled with gratitude to the Lord for having given her to us, for having allowed me to get to know her better over the years, and for having used her as an instrument to transmit to me a burning desire to live the Pauline vocation to the full.

M. Agnes Quaglioni, fsp