

## A MOTHER AND BEACON



The word “mother” is non-temporal in character because it is a reality that goes beyond space and time. This is true of both physical and spiritual motherhood. A mother is a person who welcomes life in all its stages and expressions. A mother is a person who knows

how to understand and love, even when her role and mission in life are not recognized. That role and mission continue even after her children leave home, sometimes forgetting her years of self-denial and gratuitous love.

In my opinion, the word “mother” is the one that best defines Prima Maestra Thecla. “You will have many teachers,” our Founder said, “but only one mother.”

I remember my first meeting with this wonderful Mother. I had gone to visit the Naples/Capodimonte community of the Daughters of St. Paul and I was told with great enthusiasm that their Superior General, Maestra Thecla, was also there. The sisters had spoken to me about her on several previous occasions, their words filled with affection, veneration and filial love. But since my family upbringing had taught me to remain unswayed by the words and emotions of others, I reserved judgment and waited to see this personage myself. When she came into the room, I saw a dignified and gentle woman with a penetrating gaze. She spoke simply but her words were filled with humanity and love. She greeted me cordially and then asked me about myself, my family, my studies, my hopes and my thoughts about the Pauline mission and spirituality. I was struck by her insight into people and situations, and by her ability to connect with others. She asked me what I would like to do in the future. Because at that time I was working as a teacher, even though I was still in high school, she assured me: “You can be a teacher here too,” and she was right!

My first meeting with Prima Maestra Thecla made an impact on me and filled me with the certitude that the Lord had placed at my side a person who would be a beacon for me, illuminating the path of my religious life. In fact, whenever I went through difficult times later, the advice she gave me was both en-

couraging and enlightening—words that only a true mother could speak.

Leafing through the pages of memory, I once again see her kneeling in chapel, absorbed in prayer, her gaze fixed on the Tabernacle. I recall my personal and communitarian encounters with her, when she would gather us together on Sundays to offer us guidance on both big and small things, share her joys and worries concerning the different countries and continents she had visited, invite us to pray for new apostolic initiatives, pass on to us the directives she had received from the Founder, and urge us to lead always more faith-filled lives.

My “book of memories” also includes an important page concerning the period of Vatican Council II. The Council’s deep sensitivity and breadth of vision gave us the chance to see “up close” the universality of the Church, the problems of the Third World and the yearnings of peoples, which prompted us “to do something” for our brothers and sisters by preparing, holding and animating a big *Exhibit on the Church*.

In sketching out (albeit in a very small way) the gigantic figure of Maestra Thecla, I cannot fail to mention her important and concrete collaboration with Fr. Alberione in the foundation of the other Pauline Institutes, her love for priests and for the Pauline Family, her passion for the apostolate.

The last time I saw Maestra Thecla was when she was hospitalized and, with the awareness of a mother, was serenely preparing herself to say “goodbye” to her daughters, realizing that her meeting with her Lord and God was imminent. Still very lucid, she asked me about my mother, whom she had met many years ago at our family home in Naples. Her words and gestures were tender and I was deeply moved, realizing that this would be my last meeting with this woman who had truly been a second mother to me.

On 5 February 1964, after a lifetime spent traveling the globe by land, sea and sky, Prima Maestra made her final and definitive trip—her flight to heaven, where she was welcomed into the arms of our loving God and Father.

Fifty-six years have passed since our Institute was orphaned through the loss of its Mother and Superior General, but Prima Maestra continues to walk with us, to watch over our Institute, and to serve as a beacon illuminating the path of her daughters, in keeping with her role as a vigilant and loving mother.

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