

MY MEMORIES OF PRIMA MAESTRA THECLA



For me, sharing my memories of Prima Maestra Thecla is like talking about a beloved family member who, in various ways, enriched my life, consolidated my Pauline vocation and helped me to “think big” in order to open me to the vast horizons of our mission. *Universality* was a dimension of the Pauline vocation that struck me deeply, beginning with my first meeting with the Daughters of St. Paul in Verona, Italy.

Prima Maestra’s witness of life, her regular meetings with the community, the things she shared with us after her fraternal visits to various countries (including her last one to the Congo), her passion for the Pauline mission and for souls—none of this could leave us indifferent. She opened our minds and moved our hearts, making us understand that it was truly worthwhile to dedicate our lives to the Lord; to become, with his grace, signs of his presence, instruments chosen by him, loved by him, and sent to bring the light of the Gospel to everyone everywhere, in keeping with the example of Mary, the first great Apostle and our Mother and Queen of Apostles.

I had the opportunity to meet Prima Maestra personally several times. In the early days of my formation in Alba, I remember that it was always a celebration when she came to visit the community. She revitalized our enthusiasm and, as a result, reinforced my commitment to prepare myself well for what the Lord wanted of me.

In Rome, during my novitiate and in the following years when I was continuing my

studies, it was easy to run into her when she went to pray or visit the apostolate. Occasionally, I would see her speaking with Primo Maestro, Blessed James Alberione, after one of the functions in the Queen of Apostles Sanctuary. Whenever I saw her participating in various community duties like cleaning vegetables or performing other small services with the older sisters, I was always struck by her simplicity. She seemed to enjoy being with the sisters and her cheerful and friendly attitude was contagious.

It was also very edifying for me to see her absorbed in prayer and to be able to kneel in the same pew with her in church, in preparation for Confession. The intensity of her communion with the Lord shone in her spirit of recollection, and at the same time it was a message—a silent invitation to me to imitate her example.

After my profession, presided over by Primo Maestro himself in March 1956, our whole group went to his office, as was the custom, to have the small crucifix we had received pinned on our habits. On that occasion, Prima Maestra gave each of us a handkerchief and explained to us the meaning of that simple piece of cloth. From now on, she said, your life must be an unconditional gift for souls, in humility and total availability, just



like the handkerchief you keep in your pocket and use whenever needed. It was clear that this was what she had experienced herself in her role as the Founder’s collaborator. She was always docile and ready to cooperate with him in the development of the Congregation. I remember the “handkerchief moment” very well because it marked for me the start of a new stage of my Pauline journey, a

new sense of belonging to the Congregation and a renewed commitment to faithfully pursue the road I had undertaken.

In 1960 I had to temporarily suspend my studies in Rome in order to go home to assist my mother, who was in the hospital. Dad was alone at home and he was not well. My brother was away on military service. During this time, Prima Maestra was particularly close to me. After my mother's death on 29 March 1960, she sent me one of her precious notes, expressing her maternal participation in my pain. It was a great comfort to me. On my return to Rome, I immediately went to her with a swollen heart and tears in my eyes. She welcomed me with great affection, embraced me and with maternal tenderness whispered what she had already written to me: "Courage! Now I will take your mother's place." I will never forget the intensity of that moment and the grace of that gift. In my opinion, Prima Maestra's spontaneous gesture expressed more eloquently than words her place and role in the lives of all the Daughters of St. Paul.

She was truly a woman of great sensitivity—a strong, understanding and courageous mother. Primo Maestro said it well when he wrote to all the members of the Congregation after her death: "You will have many teachers but only one *Mother*. Prima Maestra was your mother to the point of *offering her life* for the sanctification of all the Daughters of St. Paul."

In June 1963 Sr. Sara Schena and I finished our studies and were waiting to be told what our new apostolic assignments would be. It was only in the year 2000 that I learned from Maestra Eulalia, who had returned from Korea for a short vacation in Italy, that the transfer of Sr. Sara to Korea and myself to England had been approved by Prima Maestra at the last council meeting she attended. This information gave me immense joy. The fact that I was in a specific place by her express wish was always a great support to me, especially in the most difficult moments. It heartened me to know that I was where the Lord wanted me to be.

In June of that same year, the spiritual exercises for the novices preparing for perpetual profession also ended. It was the last group guided by Maestra Nazarena and I was her assistant at that time. All the members of the group were looking forward to a personal meeting with Prima Maestra, but

everyone had to sadly accept the fact that this would not be possible because Prima Maestra had to be hospitalized at Albano. A sad premonition for us all!

Maestra Nazarena took Sr. Sara and I to say goodbye to Prima Maestra in the hospital before we left Italy. Our brief visit consisted of just a few words: her best wishes for the mission that awaited us, her repeated invitation to "become saints," accompanied by her embrace and a blessing sealed with the sign of the cross on our foreheads. Prima Maestra's intense, encouraging and eloquent gaze followed us as we left her room—a promise that her ever-vigilant and maternal presence would continue to accompany, guide and support us across the miles.



That was the last time I saw Prima Maestra Thecla but she has continued and will continue to accompany me in spirit on my Pauline journey. For all the Daughters of St. Paul throughout the world, she was always a shining beacon, illuminating our lives and incentivizing our efforts to be the holy Pauline apostles she desired, encouraging us to become ever-more effective instruments of light and signs of hope in the Church and world, open to all peoples and cultures, so as to share with everyone the incredible wealth of the Father's love manifested in Jesus, the *Truth* that enlightens everyone, the *Life* that nourishes and renews everything, the sole *Way* that leads to salvation.

I hope and pray that the Church, which Maestra Thecla loved so much and served so faithfully, will soon officially count her among its saints.

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