

MAESTRA THECLA: STRENGTH AND TENDERNESS



“She who has knowledge, mental ability, a big heart, a spirit of sacrifice, an immense desire for holiness and a great thirst for souls...will see that the road ahead of her becomes always longer, wider and more beautiful when carrying out the apostolate of the editions” (cf. J. Alberione).

Reflecting on M. Thecla Merlo, I like to imagine the morning of 27 June 1915 when she and her mother arrived at St. Damian's parish in Alba for their appointment with Theologian James Alberione. Mrs. Merlo went to see him first, and then her daughter Teresa. “What did the Theologian ask you?” Mrs. Merlo asked afterward. “To collaborate with him for fifteen days.” “And what did you answer?” “I said yes.”

We all know that those *fifteen days* never ended!

When I was in formation, our Pauline groups were big and numerous: aspirants, postulants, novices, young professed and older professed. We were a boisterous lot: exuberant, zealous, hard-working, spontaneous...but we *didn't* want to be called “pious” because we had been told that “pious” sisters did not accomplish much in life. The Superior General would meet with each group—she from the “teacher's chair” in our respective study halls and the rest of us seated at our desks. Prima Maestra's face and words radiated her wisdom, her inner freedom and her common sense. She wanted us to be quick in the apostolate, in our comings and goings, in our conversations, in the confessional, etc. Her words were condensed into what became known as her *Decalogue of Quickness*. But she did not spend much time at the teacher's desk. Instead, she spent a lot of time visiting the technical apostolate and our various groups of sisters. During recreation periods, she could be found sitting on a stool among the other professed sisters, cleaning vegetables. When she visited the different departments of the apostolate and our formation sectors, she listened to the sisters responsible for them and also to their mem-

bers. She was always ready to launch new projects if they were aimed at doing good. “If this project will do good to souls,” she would say, “then go ahead with it!”

Those who have knowledge, mental ability, a big heart, a great thirst for souls...

Why were the walls of our hallways and classrooms papered with maps? Why did a globe of the world sit on every desk? “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on him if they have not believed in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how will they hear about him without someone to proclaim him? And how can they proclaim him if they have not been sent out? *How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!*” (Rm. 10:14-15)



Maestra Thecla, mentally I can visualize you once again at your place in chapel—a sweet expression on your face as you gaze at your Lord! But I am sure that there was more torment than sweetness in your heart at those times because your heart was not in chapel but far, far away...intent on embracing all human beings thirsting for the presence of Jesus Master, Way, Truth and Life. With you the Pauline Family prays, “May the presence of Christ the Master spread out into the world through Mary, Queen of Apostles.... May the modern means of communication lead all humanity to him!”

The Daughters of St. Paul have always been known for their quick arrivals and quick departures. Passports in hand, they set out on ships and planes...and many new red dots were added to those maps that covered the walls of our Motherhouse and General house as our Congregation reached the different continents and opened new Tabernacles. “From the Tabernacle—everything!” Prima Maestra would exclaim. “Without the Tabernacle—nothing!”

Thecla, you always walked in the steps of Paul of Tarsus because you were his daughter: "I have made myself all things to all people. I carry you all in my heart."

Ever onward toward eternity. You live in the world but you are not of the world. Blessed are the messengers of God, who bring the Gospel of love to every family....

These expressions were the Pauline "daily bread" that Thecla's heart communicated to us, causing our own hearts to overflow with serenity and joy.

She brought these intentions to the Mass and to her daily Eucharistic adorations. She fervently prayed the *Pauline Offertory*, which concretizes the specifics of our Pauline charism, mission, spirituality and life. This prayer is the true "identity card" of every Daughter of St. Paul!

I want to close this reflection on Thecla with a brief personal memory:

On 30 June 1962 a large group of us were

gathered in the foyer of the Queen of Apostles Sanctuary in Rome. We were milling around, big smiles on our faces, as we congratulated one another and exchanged best wishes with great joy. We had just made our perpetual religious profession and Maestra Thecla had received our vows. I went up to her and said, "I would love to be hugged by my sister, Sr. Cecilia, but she is in Canada." With a warm smile, Prima Maestra threw her arms around me and said with great tenderness, "I will very gladly stand in for your sister and hug you on her behalf!" For me, this was just one more reminder that Maestra Thecla was both a strong and tender mother.

Thank you Jesus Master for the gift of Maestra Thecla, of Primo Maestro, and of the spirituality, charism, mission, modernity and universality of the Pauline vocation. Help me to always be my own unique expression of Pauline holiness, not a copy of someone else!

M. Atanasia Seganfreddo, fsp
