

MY MOTHER IS HOLY!



I never imagined I'd ever be writing a testimony about Maestra Thecla, even though she has always been someone I love very much and have felt close to me as a sister and a Mother and, more specifically, as a point of reference due to the many years I have spent in the service of governing in our Congregation.

Maestra Thecla flew to heaven on 5 February 1964. My sister Adele and I entered the Congregation on 11 February that same year, only six days after her death.

As a girl, I was not familiar with the life of Thecla Merlo. Those who spoke to us about her simply referred to her as the Superior General of the Congregation. Since we had several aunts who were members of religious Institutes, I instinctively grasped that Sr. Thecla had a very special job. When I arrived in Alba as a postulant, I found it filled with the Congregation's major superiors, who had come to Italy from all over the world to attend Maestra Thecla's funeral and they told us a lot about her when they visited our formation groups. Thus it was that their repeated declaration, "Prima Maestra is a saint," which they voiced with great conviction, made a profound impression on me. This unanimous testimony of the sisters who had known her closely left me with the desire to get to know Maestra Thecla better so as to understand their reason for saying this.

Among our Mother's personal characteristics, the elements that struck me most deeply about her were the love, humanity and sensitivity she manifested toward all people, her firm resolve to correspond to what the Lord was asking of her, and her desire to become holy. Her yearning for holiness and to do as much good as possible for the salvation of her brothers and sisters was unwavering—a desire she expressed very clearly in the face of even difficult apostolic choices, when she would ask, for instance, "Will these records do good? If so, then go ahead with this initiative!"

When I was a Junior, I was sent to France to carry out summer propaganda, and one

morning I was in a serious car accident that immobilized me for a long time. At a certain point, I found myself impatient about having nothing to do, so I welcomed the visit of a sister who had lived with Maestra Thecla for many years. This sister possessed several of Prima Maestra's manuscripts and personal journals. She brought an armload of this precious material to my room one day and said, "Here. Read this. You will find it helpful." That material was a huge gift for me because it allowed me to get to know something about Prima Maestra's interior life. What she wrote helped me discover how to live in total adherence to Christ the Master, and how to live in a spirit of faith, self-surrender and obedience to the Founder. Her notes revealed her immense love for the sisters, the needs of humanity that pressed on her, and her urgent desire to make Jesus known to everyone.



I would like to speak to you about Maestra Thecla with the same heart with which one speaks of one's mother, but, as I have already said, I belong to a generation that did not live with her. She is, however, a vital presence in my life and her spiritual message is her legacy of love to every Daughter of St. Paul. Her personal writings offer us wonderful glimpses into her spiritual journey, her profound roots in Christ and her passion for the good of souls. *Have faith*, was Prima Maestra's constant recommendation. In every letter she wrote, especially to our missionary sisters, she would repeat with great firmness: *Have faith. Pray. Stay serene. Trust God.*

In her fifty years of Pauline life, Maestra Thecla focused her message to us on a single goal: *our personal and communal vocation to become holy*. This goal was the secret

Moving Ahead with Thecla



of her spiritual life and at the same time the heart of all her teachings to the Daughters of St. Paul. She insisted that holiness is the sole and essential condition for ensuring that evangelization through the means of social communication will be effective: "Apostles of the press should all be saints!" she would exclaim. "Do we at least have the unwavering desire to reach this goal?"

Maestra Thecla loved to contemplate Mary, who generated the Word, meditated on it and kept it in her heart. Let us entrust our journey to Mary, Queen of Apostles, ask-

ing that each one of us may approach Prima Maestra with a daughter's heart, enter her spiritual climate, imitate her apostolic courage and allow her to lead us to holiness.

I would like to end with the testimony of Cardinal Larraona, who knew Maestra Thecla well. In his homily at her funeral, he said: "Whenever I was in Prima Maestra's presence, I sensed that she felt God, that she united contemplation and action in a marvelous way.... Not two lives, but a single life, simplified and synthesized—a life in which everything was aimed at seeing God, serving God, communicating God. That was your Prima Maestra. Her very intense life was made up of work, worries, apostolic inspirations, concern for many daughters and communities, constant travel.... Her eyes were like twin headlights on a car, illuminating her path. She carried God in her heart. She found him in his creatures.... She was a competent, soft-spoken woman. But along with her sweetness and serenity, she possessed great strength—a strength that made itself felt without imposition, but which was irresistible. She was a holy religious, a holy superior, a holy apostle of the press!"

Thank you, Jesus Master, for gifting us with Primo Maestro and Prima Maestra Thecla—the Founder and Co-foundress of our beloved Congregation!

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