

I THANK GOD THAT I KNEW HER



Venerable Thecla Merlo's life was an example of a missionary of the Gospel and of one familiar with the supernatural. She exemplified joyful love for God. When speaking of her, it is as if one intones the "Magnificat", giving thanks to God for the marvels accomplished in his servant.

And I thank God that I knew her.

My first encounter with Maestra Thecla was in the crypt of the Queen of the Apostles Temple. It was on the occasion of a historical Pauline event which was witnessed by others who were present, especially other Daughters of Saint Paul. It was the year 1950; the crypt was being used as a studio for producing catechetical documentaries and the religious films: *The Son of Man* and *Mater Dei*. It was in these years that Fr. Alberione embraced new apostolic works with an equation that was already cherished by the Paulines working in the editorial and Book Center sectors: "The *Sanpaolofilm* production studio is our church, the editing machine and the counter of the agencies our pulpit, the film is a page of the Bible". More than ever the comparison: "the church is the same as one's place of apostolate" became even more prominent. The crypt was transformed

into the temple of Jerusalem where the production of *Mater Dei*, the first Italian color film, was completed. We young Pauline men and women were often invited to participate, that is, to dress in costumes for the crowd scenes. We did this especially on Thursdays, the day off from school, dedicated entirely to the works of the apostolate. This memory is always alive in me: in the morning the scene of elderly Simeon was filmed. He held the Child in his arms and sang his final canticle. In the afternoon, at the door of the Temple, Maestra Thecla looked out, being filmed in the role of the prophetess Anna, amidst the enthusiasm of her Daughters present in the stands. The scene, which was shot several times, was an opportunity for us to exchange a few words with Maestra Thecla who, with simplicity and professionalism, gave us the example of one who firmly believed in this new means of apostolate. She, who used to say: *Let's lend our feet to the Gospel*, lent her appearance to Luke's story. When I asked the director Fr. Cordero if it had been difficult to convince Prima Maestra to participate in the film, the answer was that it had been sufficient to say that Fr. Alberione too had been willing to participate, not in costume but as a priest who administered Baptism. Once again, the disciple had followed in the footsteps of the master. Later on, in the *Sampaolofilm* archives, I found more than one letter from the Founder in response to Fr. Cordero, who felt overwhelmed not only by economic challenges but by the various difficulties in initiating this new apostolate.





The Founder invited Fr. Cordero to speak about these matters with Maestra Thecla, who was understanding and sensitive to the new apostolate.

Venerable Maestra Thecla walked in the footsteps of Fr. Alberione in every circumstance. She was his interpreter, and she knew how to mediate and complete his works in a way that perhaps has not yet been fully explored.

Fifty years later, in 1965, when Maestra Thecla had already received the reward for her labors, Fr. Alberione confessed to the Daughters of St. Paul: "I too owe a lot to Prima Maestra because she enlightened and oriented me in both happy and painful moments. She was a comfort in the difficulties that at times hindered the (Pauline) journey...".

I believe that the entire Pauline Family should continually remember how Fr. Alberione summed up Venerable Thecla's life: "Maestra Thecla directly or indirectly, and not

only with many prayers, but in various forms and ways, contributed to the other institutions of the Pauline Family: the Pious Society of St. Paul, the Pious Disciples, the Pastorelle Sisters, the Apostoline Sisters (he also lists the consecrated Institutes and the Cooperators). She had a *big heart!* A heart conformed to the heart of Jesus. She felt the difficulties and she rejoiced in the progress made". This important testimony of the Founder reveals M. Thecla's greatness of soul. When Alberione looked back on his apostolic works, he confessed that it had been an immense grace to have had this great woman near him.

Certainly, Maestra Thecla was above all a faithful disciple, who knew how to carry forward the Pauline ideal in herself and in her Daughters, even when it cost her suffering and trials. Our Founder wrote. "The two secrets of Maestra Thecla, which are also the secrets of the saints and the apostles, are humility and faith: *humility* which leads to docility, and *faith* which leads to prayer. Everyone knew of her spirit of prayer.

I think it was due to the Divine Master's benevolence that at the end of M. Thecla's earthly journey, Fr. Alberione was next to her, leaning down to listen to her. She had heard that same voice, speaking in the name of Jesus, in the sacristy of Alba, inviting her: "Come", and now it was making a final suggestion: "Offer your life, Prima Maestra".

Not much time has passed since Fr. Alberione, while inviting us to always pray for Maestra Thecla, confessed that he often prayed to her for the Pauline Family.

Fr. Attilio Monge, ssp
Homily of 5 February 2009