

“READING” THECLA MERLO TODAY



I want to tell you about my first “meeting” with Thecla Merlo. As a child I was always in love with books, but these were very few in my home. It is no coincidence that I bought my first book from the

Daughters of St. Paul, in a small town in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. It was a sunny Saturday and the sisters were in front of our local church displaying their books. I was 8 years old. But time passed and those sisters who traveled the world in a van full of books disappeared and only some years later returned to enter my story once again as well as that of my family. This time they entered not only with their books, but with the call of the Lord, extended first to my sister Rosa, who today is also a Daughter of St. Paul.

AN ALMOST “FORBIDDEN” BOOK

I was 14 years old when Rosa, then making her vocational discernment, received a book on Thecla Merlo. But that book was to some degree “forbidden” for me, in the sense that I didn’t want my parents and sisters to think that I also wanted to be a religious. In truth I didn’t think about being a Daughter of St. Paul at all. Yes, of course they were nice and very happy people and I liked their simplicity, joy and the open way in which they came to my house. But still not the Daughters... I wanted to follow another path, one that was more contemplative. However, I was drawn by their books. I devoured them. When no one was around, I read the same ones again and again. But that book, with a picture of a sister on the cover, was always there in my sister’s drawer and those pages were patiently awaiting me. And the golden opportunity arrived! On the day my sister left our home to enter the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul, my parents accompanied her to São Paulo. This was the perfect opportunity to take that “forbidden” book and read it. I did so that afternoon, anxiously devouring it so as not to be caught by anyone.

THE “TASTE” OF GOD IN MY MOUTH

I like to think that every book leaves a “taste” in the mouth of its reader. And what I read that day remained with me. I recall only the physical sensation, a “taste”, and a deep feeling: my heart was beating strongly. The “flavor” remains with me until today: the “taste” of God in my mouth after I finished reading it left within me the peace and certainty that Thecla was a woman of God, a contemplative woman.

Other chapters followed in my life story. Today I am a Daughter of Saint Paul. Today that sister on the cover of the book is not simply called Thecla Merlo, but she is my Prima Maestra. For a long time, during my formation years, I couldn’t understand Father Alberione. He was a man of difficult words. It was Prima Maestra who helped me understand and know Alberione more profoundly and to be able today to call him Primo Maestro. For me this is a “grace” that I obtained through the intercession of Sr. Thecla Merlo. Her closeness to Fr. Alberione helped me discover this man of God who was contemplative and yet became *all things to all people* for the proclamation of the Gospel.

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Years have passed and now I have the grace of being even closer to Prima Maestra Thecla. Close to her intimate writings, letters, conferences, etc. to her sisters. I am graced, together with other sisters, to try to “read” her words in depth, valuing everything that has already been achieved and seeking to take a vital step to grasp her message for me today. With every discovery, even the simplest one, I confess that I relive the experience of my adolescence: a strongly beating heart, the “taste” of God in my mouth and the certainty of being in front of a woman of God.

Sixty years have now passed since the “transfer” of our dear Prima Maestra to heaven. Now our challenge is to welcome her message today, to go beyond the “surface” of language and to “dive” into the profound meaning of her person, of her gestures as a “mother”, of her words, “swimming” in the depths of a life that has the “taste” of God.

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