

# Eucharistic Celebration in Honor of Sr. Thecla Merlo

Homily of  
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**W**hen she was a child, the future Sr. Thecla Merlo dreamed of entering the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph Cottolengo but she was not accepted because of her delicate health. However, her dream is very significant: she wanted her life to be *a gift of love*. She had very clear ideas!

John Paul II never tired of saying, “Life achieves fulfillment in the complete gift of self,” and he was right.

Today, the logic of [offering one’s life as a] gift is fading. The world is populated by selfish people who live *alone-together*: a terrible reality! The crowds in our cities are groups of people who live alone.

Teresa Merlo’s meeting with Fr. Alberione offered the future Mother Thecla an expected chance to offer her life to Jesus for the sake of souls.

In fact Thecla Merlo’s life reveals her intense love for Jesus—the “engine” that powered all her initiatives. Her missionary passion sprang from her love for Jesus—remember this!

She was deeply impressed by the missionary vocation of the Church: “*the Church that goes forth*,” as Pope Francis loves to say.

Her first trip abroad in 1936 was very significant because it revealed her heroic courage, which was always anchored in her passionate love for Jesus. She herself recounted: “There is no chaplain aboard the ship so there is no Mass, not even today, which is the Feast of Corpus Domini. On this boat I am the only religious, the only Italian and the only European. All the others are Americans. They speak English and a few also speak Spanish.... I set up a small altar in my cabin and I pray there. I read the Mass in my missal, I meditate and I make a spiritual communion. On Sunday I recited Evening Prayer and I will do the same today.”

Thecla Merlo never lost sight of the reason for her missionary endeavors. She could well say: “I know the One in whom I have believed!”

And this missionary passion accompanied her throughout her life, keeping her young at heart.

Today there is a shortage of interiority in the Church’s apostolate, which means there is a shortage of love for Jesus and instead an excess of self-love. Apostolic activities may be perfect in structure but if they are not enlivened by an enthusiastic love they will not evoke a similar enthusiasm in others. And consequently they will not communicate Jesus. This was not the case of Fr. Alberione and Sr. Thecla Merlo.

George La Pira often compared the time in which St. Paul lived with our time and asked himself: “Why was the Gospel able to spread far and wide back then with such limited means?” And he answered his own question, saying: “Because back in those days the Christians were inflamed with love for Jesus. They wanted to spread that love and they succeeded.”

Carlo Carretto, a very prayerful man who carried out an intense apostolate, said over and over again: “Never forget that the apostolate is an interior state that flowers and then overflows onto others.”

This was what happened to Fr. Alberione and Sr. Thecla Merlo.

Sr. Thecla was very obedient to the directives of Fr. Alberione, who saw well ahead of the times the important role the instruments of communication would play in disseminating both the good and the bad. By now, willingly or unwillingly, we live in a media-driven era.

Fr. Alberione was very foresighted in this regard and so was Sr. Thecla. She faithfully translated the lines of action he laid down for the apostolate, giving them a delicate, feminine touch.

Here is an example dating from 1930: in that year Fr. Alberione wrote a circular letter explaining how to understand the function of the Pauline book centers. He said: “They are not ‘show windows’ but centers of apostolate that transmit the teachings of St. Paul and the Gospel. Not stores but a service. Not sales but an apostolate through all their initiatives. Not customers but disciples and cooperators. Not business and numbers but the Gospel, which irradiates light and warmth in the area. Not prices but offerings; not domination but humble collaboration with the Church. Not money but souls....”

When it came to the Gospel, Fr. Alberione was very clear and coherent and he wanted things to happen immediately. He wanted the Institute’s take-off to be vertical. His rigorous directive was directed to all the sisters, wherever they happened to be situated and Maestra Thecla transmitted it to them integrally. But her tact in entitling the circular, “*A Directive and Plea*,” gives the letter’s rigor a refreshing family tone. She then adds something more: a two-line spontaneous and tranquil comment that is very instructive: “Read this well. Little by little we will reach this point. Don’t get agitated. It will happen a little at a time-for now, this should be our goal.” Here we see the touch of a mother and the sweet fragrance of a humble woman.

Sr. Thecla was fired by the relentless desire to become a saint, that is, to give herself joyously to Jesus for the sake of souls. Pope Francis insists very strongly that it is the joy of the believer that draws people to Jesus. And Mother Teresa said out of her personal experience: “Joy is the magnet that draws souls.”

In Mother Thecla, the yearning to become a saint went hand-in-hand with her desire to incite all the Daughters of St. Paul to strive for the same goal because saints know that they cannot and must not journey alone.

In fact, these two yearnings (for personal sanctification and the sanctification of others) can never be separated. St. Therese of Lisieux expressed the dynamic action of the Christian apostolate in an admirable way when she said: “The more I immerse myself in the ocean of God’s love, the more I will draw to Jesus the souls I meet. So draw me so that we can race ahead together!” There is great harmony between Sr. Therese of Lisieux and Mother Thecla.

Unfortunately, our contemporary era is characterized by a widespread spiritual tepidity that is sterilizing the apostolate. What is missing is immersion in the fire and thus the warmth of God is not transmitted. We have to rediscover fervor!

Sr. Thecla’s offering of her life (28 May 1961) so that all the Daughters of St. Paul would become saints is very moving and is a sign of the high level of love in her heart. She made this offering simply and spontaneously because saints are not aware that they are heroes.

Sr. Thecla was profoundly convinced that a branch cut off from the vine could not bear fruit. This is why she gave first place to praying for the sanctification of her sisters.

During a particularly trying time, a wonderfully evangelical exclamation burst from her heart: “We don’t know where to beat our head, so let’s beat it against the Tabernacle!”

This is the faith that moves mountains, by which I mean a faith that overcomes all problems. It is the faith typical of humble souls—those that have subdued the monster of pride.

On 14 October 1943, Sr. Thecla jotted down the following thought: “I thank the Lord for helping me understand that I am the most backward, the most wretched [of all people], that I understand very little and that I am the greatest sinner in the world. Then, with the help of his grace, I came to understand that everything is arranged and permitted by him, even sickness, weakness and wretchedness. Jesus, I trust in you! Mary most holy, help me!”

What beautiful sentiments! Jesus does great things with souls like this, and Mother Thecla is the proof!

I want to end by asking you a question: Why devotion to St. Paul? Certainly because he was a tireless apostle. In fact, even today it is impressive to read the account of his trips and his fervor, which could not be blocked by any problem. It is enough to read 2 Corinthians 11:24-29: “Five times I have been given thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked, and once I was on the open sea for a night and a day; continually travelling, I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from the gentiles, in danger in the towns and in danger in the open country, in danger at sea and in danger from people masquerading as brothers; I have worked with unsparing energy, for many nights without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty, and often altogether without food or drink; I have been cold and lacked clothing. And, besides all the external things, there is, day in and day out, the pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. If anyone weakens, I am weakened as well; and when anyone is made to fall, I burn in agony myself.”

But what brought St. Paul’s inner “engine” to life? It happened on the way to Damascus. The short dialogue goes like this:

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

“What must I do, Lord?”

“Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

In this brief exchange, Paul came to understand that God’s sole power is Love: God is omnipotent Love! And his love to us is a pure gift, without any merit on our part!

On the way to Damascus, Paul was a persecutor of Christ. And Christ sought him out, called him and loved him out of pure mercy. The same is true for us.

Paul understood this and the realization triggered his love: his “engine” roared to life. He responded to Love with Love. In fact, he would later say: “Without love, I am nothing.”

The apostolate is a matter of love, not technical equipment. Fr. Alberione and Sr. Thecla fully understood this.

On his deathbed, St. Francis said to his brothers: “I did my part. May God allow you all to do your part.”

Remember that charisms are not inherited: every generation must make the charism its own, beginning all over again.

This is what Fr. Alberione and Mother Thecla ask of you.

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