

...AND YET I MET HER!



My name is Sr. Mariangela Tassielli. I was born in 1976 in Lecce, a small town in southern Italy, right at the tip of the Italian “boot,” where two seas meet and legend says that deep abysses can be found in the waters below them. I spent the first 19 years of my life in a town called Salento, which has three features that in a certain way characterize all of us who have roots there: the sun, the sea and the wind.

I met Maestra Thecla on 28 July 1991, in Castagnito, over a thousand kilometers from my home. I was 15 years old at the time and I remember that day as if it were today, because the morning I met her was also the day I discovered the face of God. And ever since then, nothing has been the same for me.

I know that those of you who love dates will have perplexed expressions on your faces right now, because it is obvious that the math doesn't add up. How could I meet Maestra Thecla in 1991 when she died in 1964? Yet I assure you I really did see her on that precise day. There she was, with one arm resting on the half-open window of a departing train, a broad smile on her face. And her words to me—a teenager totally locked in her own fears, unsure of everything, but curious—opened wide the gates of heaven to me. “Lower yourself so much that you draw God to you,” she said. “In order to do this, it enough to think of your nothingness. And, trusting in him, raise yourself so high that you can reach him.”

Her words breached my heart, and day after day, with her figuratively at my side, I came to discover the beauty and fullness of

the charism that was growing within me. That charism—the Pauline charism—encouraged me to look with fresh eyes at the future every teenager thinks and dreams about. It was a charism that would make me different, complete, both strong and fragile, and incite me to yearn every day, as she had, to have a thousand lives to “lose” for the Gospel.

I thank God repeatedly for allowing me to meet Maestra Thecla that day because now, thirty years later, I can say that it is her presence in my life that has made all the difference in the many yeses that God and history have continued to ask of me. I have encountered her tenderness in the solicitude of the FSPs who have taught me how necessary it is for a Daughter of St. Paul to witness to humanity, care, gentleness and concern for others. I have encountered her apostolic passion in the enthusiasm and totality with which many sisters have taught me to approach and live the apostolate. I have encountered her maternal spirit in the compassion with which they have dried my tears. I have encountered her determination in the strength and tenacity of the yeses of the countless sisters who have taught me and continue to teach me the immense value of an “amen” said in fatigue at the end of a long, tiring day, but with deep faith and unshakable trust in God.

Maestra Thecla, alive in so many of the sisters I have had the good fortune to meet and get to know, continues to be an important presence in my life, helping me to transform all that I am into a gift, reminding me that the only criterion for a life of self-offering is goodness. She patiently pulls me out of myself, urging me to move courageously toward God and toward the self-transcendence that he is pointing out to all of us.

Today I know that our vocation is as beautiful as it is demanding, because as Daughters of the Apostle Paul the wisest thing we can do is avoid the comfortable “couches” of the familiar and reassuring apostolate we have already experienced and push ourselves toward the risky and unknown peripheries of a proclamation kneaded with humanity, with the sharing of our charism, with new modes of investing in the future.

In my heart, I can hear Maestra Thecla's voice advising me: “Don't ask yourself if something is possible. Just ask yourself, ‘Will it do good?’ And if the answer is yes, then do it!”

Mariangela Tassielli, fsp