

Thecla

A Prophetic Voice
in Media Evangelization



Domenico
Agasso

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by Domenico Agasso



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Foreword

The year 2015 marks 100 years of life for the Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul, which was born from the heart of a great prophet, Blessed James Alberione, with the enlightened and wise collaboration of a pint-sized woman, Teresa Merlo, known in religion as Thecla.

Father Alberione was well aware that, a few decades after his invaluable contribution to the inspiration for a new religious family, he would identify June 27, 1915 as a “day of blessing.” This was the day on which he would meet the young Teresa in the Church of St. Damian. Their meeting would make *the hour of God strike*, favoring the realization of *a brand new vocation* in the Church (see the charismatic history of the Pauline Family written by Father James Alberione, *Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae [AD]*, 109–110). Their encounter would concretize that “definitive step” of which Alberione would later write: “. . . writers, technicians, and propagandists, but religious [men and women . . .] to give more unity, more continuity; to make it a more supernatural apostolate” (see *AD* 17, 24). Alberione’s charismatic intuition developed in harmony with his reflections on women’s potential in the work of evangelization. He had

already expressed these reflections in the book *Woman Associated with Priestly Zeal*, which took on an almost genetic significance for the feminine foundations of the Pauline Family. In January 1938 Father Alberione would say, "From 1910 . . . you Daughters of St. Paul were thought of, desired, prepared, born, and raised until this very day."

With the vocation of Mother Thecla, the young Alberione's conviction that *the priestly mission is part of the feminine mission* became a reality. In the pre-foundational document, *Woman Associated with Priestly Zeal*, woman's presence at the side of man is elevated:

. . . Beside the great benefactors of humanity and the great saints of Christianity you will always find the sweet figure of a woman who, in a sense, completes the work being done. At the side of St. Benedict, the great patriarch of Western Monasticism, is St. Scholastica; beside St. Francis of Assisi . . . is St. Clare; beside the Dominican Fathers are the Dominican Sisters; beside St. Francis de Sales is St. Jane Frances de Chantal. . . .

From the very beginning Maestra Thecla played a mediating role of charismatic grace, trusting completely in God's chosen instrument. From the earliest days of the Congregation she confessed: "I have much trust in the Lord but also in the Theologian [Alberione] because I know that he is sent by God; and where he goes I can be at peace that I will not make a mistake." And this meant to accompany a Congregation that started "from zero." With her the community began to grow; it refined its apostolic awareness; it educated itself in its deep relationship with the Divine Master; and it took on its own style of simplicity, supernatural spirit, and quickness. She followed the Founder not in a businesslike way but with *docility of heart*, knowing that through him, God would show the way. And

Father Alberione felt that Maestra Thecla shared and corresponded to the designs of God: he kept her informed of each step, asked for her presence in visiting the small communities, awaited her viewpoint on different issues and initiatives, and gave her the responsibility of deciding norms for the apostolate so that the sisters “would do it well and not injure its spirit,” disposing them to a right relationship with the other feminine institutes of the Pauline Family.

Prima Maestra received and applied each directive of the Founder with the richness of her gift or, when the will of God was not obvious, contributed her experience for a more profound discernment. And Father Alberione placed before the Daughters this Mother in whose footsteps they needed to walk. “The docility of the Daughters of St. Paul to Prima Maestra explains their rapid development and the success of their apostolate.”

Always at Father Alberione’s side on his long apostolic travels, whether by car or by plane, she was able to put together all of his confidences, joys, and sorrows. On September 2, 1954, the Founder urged the sisters to take the words of Prima Maestra as if they were his own thoughts: “There are not two thoughts but only one, which I believe to be the thought and desire of God.”

All her life Maestra Thecla pursued two objectives: *evangelical perfection* and the *full development of the Congregation*.

Her union with God, by the time of her death, reached mystical levels. Father Alberione spoke of it thus: “I have been a witness of her life from 1915 to the very end, on February 5, 1964. Prima Maestra was in a constant ascent to God.”

He had seen the Congregation grow and expand under her direction—which was loving and strong, wise and prudent—leading the Daughters of St. Paul on the road of communication,

on paths not yet trodden, which they are called to walk with the quality of apostles and with the expertise of professionals. . . .

To celebrate our first hundred years of life and to remember the woman whom the Spirit associated to the work of Blessed James Alberione, we present this revised biography written by Domenico Agasso, journalist and author, who deserves our congratulations and undying thanks. Dr. Agasso knew how to penetrate the secret world of Teresa/Thecla and, with historical precision and journalistic passion, has reconstructed the journey of a life that, with good reason, could be defined as “extraordinary”: in bold and prophetic faith, in openness to all peoples, in the witness of holiness. *“I believed and so I speak”* (see 2 Cor 4:13).

Maestra Thecla loved to repeat that she would have wanted “a thousand lives to dedicate to the Gospel.” We are part of those *lives*, and we wish with all our heart that her witness will be a light for those young people whom the Lord—we are certain—will continue to call so that his Son will be lived and communicated with all the instruments, forms, and languages of communication.

SISTER ANNA MARIA PARENZAN

Superior General of the Daughters of St. Paul



Preface

I thank God that I had the pleasure of knowing Venerable Thecla Merlo. She was an example of a modern missionary of the Gospel and one familiar with the supernatural; an example of joyful love of God and service to others.

Back in the year 1950 I had my first encounter with her on the occasion of a big event in Pauline history. In Rome, the crypt church of the great sanctuary of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, not yet completed, was being used as a theater for the filming of the first catechetical documentaries and religious films: *Il Figlio dell' uomo* [*The Son of Man*] and *Mater Dei* [*Mother of God*]. It was in these years that Father Alberione—whom Blessed Paul VI in an audience with the entire Pauline Family recognized as *having given to the Church new instruments of evangelization*—applied to this new apostolate the equation already dear to Paulines who worked in the typography and the book centers, that is: “The studio for San Paolo Films is our church, the editing machine and the counters are our pulpits, the film is a page of the Bible.” Never did the equation “the church equals the place of apostolate” fit as perfectly as it did in those days. And in the crypt of the sanctuary, transformed into

the Temple of Jerusalem, he was finishing *Mater Dei*, the first Italian film in color.

Often we young Pauline brothers and sisters were invited to participate in costume for the crowd scenes—especially on vacation days from school. I remember that one day it was time to film the scene of the old prophet Simeon who, with the baby in his arms, intoned his final canticle; while at the doors of the Temple, there she was, Maestra Thecla, in the role of the prophetess Anna. And there, in front of the camera and the enthusiastic Daughters in the stands, she too “praised God and spread the good news regarding the Child to all those in Israel who looked forward to the redemption.” The scene, which had to be repeated many times, gave us an excuse to exchange some words with Maestra Thecla. With much simplicity and professionalism she set an example for us of believing firmly in this new means of apostolate. She was in the habit of saying: “Let us lend our feet to the Gospel,” and so she lent her face to Luke’s story. When I asked the director, Father Cordero, if it had been difficult to convince Prima Maestra to participate in the film, the response was that it had been enough to say that even Father Alberione was willing to participate (although not in costume) as a priest administering Baptism. Again the disciple followed in the footsteps of the master. Later in the archives of San Paolo Film I found a letter of the Founder responding to Father Cordero—who was besieged by many difficulties, not only economic—and inviting him to speak to Mother Thecla, who was understanding and sensitive toward the new apostolate.

If one day—we hope not too far in the future—the Church will raise Venerable Mother Thecla to the honors of the altar, it will not take much imagination to elect this Apostle of

Communication as patron of those who act in films, a category that has much need of patron saints.

The way Venerable Thecla Merlo walked in the footsteps of Father Alberione in every circumstance, how she could interpret his thought and knew how to mediate and complete it, is an aspect that perhaps has not yet been studied in depth. But we all know the beginnings of this mutual journey. With the encounter on June 27, 1915, in the sacristy of the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Alba, and with a faith worthy of Abraham, Teresa Merlo's great Pauline adventure began. Out of devotion to St. Paul she would later take the name of Thecla (the first female disciple of the Apostle). Nobody imposed it on her: she chose it on her own, just as the first male disciples of Alberione chose to be called Timothy and Titus. And it was precisely on the day of this meeting that the first edition of a book written earlier by Father Alberione was released: *Woman Associated with Priestly Zeal*. With Maestra Thecla's vocation, the theory of the young Theologian from Alba that "the priestly mission is part of the feminine mission" was translated into practice.

If not always immediately clear, the Pauline design embroidered by Providence was understood later by both protagonists of the story. Fifty years later, in 1965, Maestra Thecla had already received the reward of her labors. Speaking to the Daughters of St. Paul, Father Alberione—who often forgot the date of his own birthday—confessed: "Tomorrow is a very important day: it is the fiftieth anniversary of the first meeting between me and Prima Maestra Thecla. It was a blessed day." From that day, as happens often enough in the lives of holy founders, Providence had called to the side of his chosen one the discrete but effective figure of a feminine collaborator. She

would not only follow in his footsteps; she would sometimes feel called to support him with suggestions and works. In 1960, when Prima Maestra was suffering from illness, he said: "To Prima Maestra even I owe much because she has enlightened and directed me in things and circumstances both joyful and sad: she was a comfort in difficulties that hindered the path. . . ."

I believe the whole Pauline Family would remember how Father Alberione summed up the life of the Venerable: "Maestra Thecla directly or indirectly—not only with many prayers, but in various forms and ways—contributed to the other institutes of the Pauline Family: the Society of St. Paul, the Pious Disciples, the Sisters of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Queen of Apostles Sisters (and add to the list the consecrated Institutes and the Cooperators.) A great heart! Conformed to the Heart of Jesus. She felt the difficulties and rejoiced in the development." It is an important witness by a Founder, revealing his greatness of soul in that, when weighing the achievements of his apostolic life, he confesses having had this great woman at his side.

The words of Father Carlo Dragone, one of the most beautiful Pauline minds and a man close to Father Alberione, always struck me. He was an author and famous Dante scholar, but also a mystic who assisted Maestra Thecla spiritually, particularly during her last year of life. Not only out of professional bias, but also because of conviction, he compared Maestra Thecla to the image of Beatrice. (I can imagine how the comparison would have interested her. And how, with humility and a sense of humor, she would have dismissed the idea.) He writes: "In her presence one experienced how the saints implement the designs of the Creator, who wanted woman as a help to man in order to elevate man to himself."

Certainly Mother Thecla was first of all a faithful disciple who knew how to achieve the Pauline ideal both in herself and in her Daughters, even at the price of sufferings and trials. But she wanted to have the adventure of being at the side of the master right from the first hour, in the great apostolic journeys by car and by plane, gathering up the confidences, the joys, and the bitterness. And many of her expressions, both written and spoken, came from this shared communion. That doesn't mean to say she was weak or submissive; on the contrary. "I am a witness to her life," the Founder summarizes. "The two secrets of Maestra Thecla that are the secrets of the saints and apostles are: humility and faith. Humility that leads to docility and faith that leads to prayer. Everyone knows her spirit of prayer."

Coming back again to a personal story: years ago, working in San Paolo Films, I often had to be behind the scenes viewing documentaries about the Pauline Family, and therefore also about Maestra Thecla. It was impossible not to notice in many of the scenes being filmed without her knowledge the intensity of her face in prayer. I remember the exclamation of the technician who was helping me put the film together: "This one really believes!" *Vox populi!* The secret of her exceptional life was her constant dialogue with God: "I would like to have a thousand lives to dedicate to the apostolate." It is the secret of a journey taken and the steps of a prophet of our times.

I believe it was through the kindness of the Divine Master that, at the end of her earthly journey, it was Father Alberione who bent over and whispered into her ear. And she heard the same voice that in the name of Jesus had said to her in the sacristy of Alba: "Come!" and that now greeted her with a final suggestion: "Offer your life, Prima Maestra."

Not much time passed before Father Alberione, now Blessed, while urging us to pray always for Maestra Thecla, confessed that he prayed to her often for the Pauline Family.

ATTILIO MONGE
Society of St. Paul



Translator's Note

Maria Teresa Merlo's name in religion, Thecla, is spelled in accordance with the Congregation's custom in English language publications. Similarly Father Giacomo Alberione is so well-known as James to English speakers that he, too, has been made an exception to the rule that all Christian names, some of which have no clear English equivalent, are spelled as in their language of origin.

The title of *Maestra* by which Thecla was known throughout her life was originally intended by Father Alberione to be used by all professed members of the Daughters of St. Paul. The story is told in Chapter Two. No single word in English conveys its precise blend of meaning, which extends across the notions of "teacher," "expert," "guide," and "model." The word also echoes the devotion to *Gesù Maestro*, Jesus, the Master, a central element of Pauline spirituality.

As the international character of the Congregation increased over the years, more and more Daughters preferred to be known as Sister, and *Maestra* came to be used only of the older members of the Congregation. Few survived much beyond the Second Vatican Council. Because of the frequency of direct

quotations in which the word appears, I have followed the author's convention of using it of those who were so called at the time they appear in the narrative. The title *Maestra* did not indicate any seniority, other than seniority of profession, over those who were known simply as Sister.

As the first Superior General, Thecla was also referred to as *Prima Maestra*.

Father James Alberione was known both as the Founder and as *Primo Maestro*.

JOHN MOORE



CHAPTER ONE

The Beginnings of a Great Adventure

It was the spring of 1936. Among the passengers boarding the Italian liner the *Augustus* at Genoa was the Mother General of a new institute of women religious, who was setting out to visit two of her houses in Brazil and Argentina. She would then sail north to the United States, where they had recently established another house in New York. This nun's proposed itinerary would hardly have troubled the world's news desks. Yet if the names and circumstances of the people involved are filled in, the story begins to look strangely out of place in the twentieth century, for in reality theirs was an adventure typical of the Church in its earliest days.

The Mother General, known by the unusual title of *Maestra*, was Teresa Merlo. She had taken the name in religion of St. Thecla, one of St. Paul's first followers, and was now the superior of the Daughters of St. Paul, a new Congregation that was still waiting for pontifical approval, though it had already

established three houses on the other side of the Atlantic. These had been founded by just two sisters in each country. All were Italian, and they had arrived without any knowledge of the language, with nowhere to live, and without any clear idea of how they might accomplish their mission. They had not been invited by the local hierarchy, who at first regarded them as a disturbing phenomenon rather than welcome helpers in the apostolate. Nuns who went around knocking on doors and offering books, pamphlets, and leaflets for sale had not been seen before in those parts, and their missionary style was unfamiliar to local custom.

Their most dangerous leap in the dark had been the foundation of the third house, New York. The two young nuns, who stepped unsuspectingly off the boat in June 1932, were arriving at the worst possible moment. America was in the depths of the Great Depression, with tens of thousands of bankruptcies, fourteen million unemployed, and everywhere lines of people at soup kitchens. In the country districts, farmers who had nothing left to hope for were abandoning their debt-ridden homesteads. In his native Illinois, the future President Ronald Reagan left college to look for work because his father had lost his job, and the grocer would no longer give credit. Ruined businessmen sold apples on Fifth Avenue.

This was the situation facing the two sisters as they embarked on their mission in the great metropolis. They knew no English, so they began by selling books to Italian immigrants. Their ultimate task would be to establish book centers and to organize a printing activity—though God alone knew how this was to be accomplished. They had left Italy with 4,000 lire, quite a respectable sum for those times; but no sooner had they landed than they sent most of it back home, choosing to undertake their American mission and to face the economic

blizzard with what they had earned from their apostolic work during the ocean crossing—just 90 lire, or roughly a week's wages for an unskilled laborer.

On arriving in the New World, the sisters had received their first support from a small group of Italian priests of the Society of St. Paul, of whom the Daughters were the sister organization—two families of religious founded for the same purpose by the same man, a small priest from Piedmont in northwest Italy called James Alberione. It was he who had pioneered the method (if such it could be called) of simply throwing his young men and women into the world, without invitation or guarantees of support, regardless of the suitability of the moment, and despite the misgivings of the many people who predicted failure, financial ruin, and humiliation. Instead, the young Pauline Fathers and Brothers not only survived; they flourished, putting down firm roots and recording successes from the beginning.

Father Alberione decreed at an early stage that there should be equality between the sexes, and he had no hesitation in placing women in the same front line positions as his men. He was confident that nuns of little more than twenty years of age could meet the challenge, and he refused to be swayed by accusations that it was foolhardy to send women into situations they had never faced before. He refused to be bound by the past, drawing on the Apostle Paul for his answer to all objections: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13–14).

In the course of a very few years his dream had become a reality; still a small reality, but already vibrant with life, and above all something that was recognized and valued. Those who at first had been shocked by the idea of two nuns crossing the

world to distribute books were soon calling for tens and indeed hundreds more of them to come to their countries and further God's work. What is more, in the Americas this new interpretation of the feminine apostolate soon began to attract local vocations.

In this stage of his work, Father Alberione had the help of a very special woman, one who was able to enrich her religious obedience with singular creative gifts. This was Maestra Thecla, who—at the age of forty-two—was venturing beyond the shores of Italy for the first time. She meant to see all that the six pioneers had achieved on the other side of the Atlantic, work in which they had been encouraged by her frequent, though usually brief, letters that blended spiritual guidance with practical instructions about management of the centers, delivery details, pricing policies, and bookkeeping.

The notes on her journey are similarly brief, though they deal with a wide range of subjects, for Thecla was interested in everything new and was quick to adapt to unusual situations. Once on a coastal steamer she found that there was no chaplain, and so no Mass—even though it was the feast of *Corpus Christi*. Her journal records her reaction: “I am the only religious on this boat, the only Italian, the only European. All the others are Americans; they speak English; one or two of them Spanish. So I have made a little altar in my cabin and in front of it I say my prayers, reading the Mass from my missal, meditating, and making a spiritual Communion. On Sunday I even sang Vespers and I hope to do the same today.”

All very calm and matter-of-fact; indeed, so was her whole plan of life, which she expressed with her usual economy of words, “To make myself holy, but through commonplace things.” In other words: to achieve the most difficult results by the most unremarkable means. Now that her work is over, we

can better understand the full significance of that expression. Thecla knew the secret of transforming difficult and risky undertakings, with their burdens of weariness, worry, and sorrow, into “ordinary things.”

Her virtue was indeed “heroic,” as was later confirmed by the solemn document signed on January 22, 1991 by Pope John Paul II, marking the first step toward her canonization as a saint of the Church and recognizing her achievement of the highest and most complete form of self-sacrifice.

So this is a story of true heroism—but heroism of an uncommon kind, acted out on a small scale and almost in silence, even in moments of the bitterest pain. She taught her Daughters, “I have learned that if we trust only in God and offer calm and untroubled obedience, everything will turn out right, even when it may seem to us just the opposite.” Who knows how often it must have seemed “just the opposite” to her during the dark hours as she was torn between the prospect of failure and the misery of being misunderstood? And beyond all this she had poor health to contend with all her life.

She also had to deal with many painful problems that were barely noticed at the time because she made so little fuss over them. These were the trials and tribulations that she tried to keep to herself, difficulties that she overcame and then made light of to the outside world as “ordinary things,” thanks to her enormous capacity for enlightened obedience. For she did not simply bow her head and comply woodenly; her obedience was rooted in the realization that there are reasons that go beyond understanding, an obedience that fulfills itself by “leaving things to God.” That is why her silent struggles went unnoticed by many of her colleagues, for throughout her trials Thecla was able to remain calm and untroubled. This was her real victory.

As was already mentioned, the journey of 1936 was her first venture abroad, and, apart from the interruption of World War II, she was to travel the globe for the next twenty-seven years. Meanwhile the sisters with their books and newspapers would multiply across the continents, always encouraged by her along the new paths indicated by the clear but exacting vision of Father Alberione—a great father, master, and prophet, but, like all prophets, an uncomfortable colleague and, for good measure, one endowed with inexhaustible energy.

With an organization led and managed in this way there had to be someone to keep the group together, urging it on and at the same time smoothing the path up ahead. These women were entering on an adventure that was new to them all, for they were the first in the history of the Church to take up the challenge of this kind of mission. There had to be someone like Thecla, someone who would never lose sight of the final destination, someone who would help them to refresh their spirits and lighten their burdens.

A quotation from 1930 gives some idea of what Father Alberione intended his book centers to be and how he meant them to function.

They must be centers of the apostolate, points of contact backed by a supply of suitable material. We don't have a display window so much as a banner fashioned from St. Paul and the Gospel; not a point of sale, but a place where people are offered a service. We don't practice salesmanship, but the apostolate; we don't have customers, but rather disciples and collaborators; we aren't interested in business or financial returns, but in the Gospel that spreads light and warmth to all. What matters is not what we take in payment, but what we offer as a gift. Our aim is not to control, but to offer humble collaboration with the Church. Our objective is not money, but souls.

That was his way. He wanted everything, and all of it immediately—a vertical take-off. These very demanding instructions were addressed to all the sisters, and Maestra Thecla passed them on without alteration. However, she showed the diplomatic touch by choosing as a heading “Guidance and encouragement,” while at the end she added, “Read these words carefully, and bit by bit we shall get there. Don’t get flustered; we will accomplish this a little at a time. But meanwhile it is well to know what we are aiming to achieve.” It was a perceptive and simple postscript that lent an encouraging familiarity to those rigorous marching orders.

Maestra Thecla was now just over forty years old and in the prime of her life. But we have not yet given the customary description of her background, her childhood, her call to the religious life, and the successive stages of the development of her vocation. The story is hard to tell in her case because her life followed no natural sequence.

She had wanted, even as a child, to join the Cottolengo Sisters, but was refused on account of her delicate health. This disappointment seemed to put an end to her hopes of becoming a nun, and the years began to pass by. Quite unknown to her, however, unexpected developments were taking place in the universal Church, even within a few miles of her own village, and it was because of them that this country girl was called to take on one of the most intractable problems of the Catholic world in the twentieth century.

The Church needed her for a venture so unprecedented that at first no one dared speak about it; it still did not have a name. It would even involve her in working undercover; for long periods she was not free to speak about what she was doing. But her greatest surprise came when, one beautiful summer morning after a retreat, she and her companions took private religious

vows; then, before nightfall, she found herself appointed superior of her tiny community, the future Congregation of the Daughters of St. Paul. She thus found herself in the situation of having to be her own novice mistress, to form and mature her own character as she went along, and to learn the arts of religious leadership by exercising them. Few women in the history of the Church have been faced with a comparable challenge.

Thecla was blissfully unaware of the adventure in store as it began to take shape around her. It all began when her name was first mentioned to Father James Alberione, at that time a young priest, who was working on an idea that he dared not even mention because of the fears it might provoke.

A Man of Broad Vision

This story really begins with Father Alberione. The setting is the province of Cuneo in lower Piedmont, an area of northern Italy bordering France, with plains fertile and well watered and with hills made fruitful by the patience and ingenuity of generations of farmers, despite wars, invasions, revolutions, and pestilence. The families of Michele Alberione and Rosa Teresa Allocco originated in the area of Bra, a town ten miles to the west of Alba, and locally celebrated as the hometown of St. Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo. They were tenant farmers and had to move fairly frequently from one holding to another. It was while they were working in the plain of San Lorenzo di Fossano that James was born on April 4, 1884, the fourth of their five sons. Not long afterward the family moved to Cherasco, also in the province of Cuneo.

James was already talking about becoming a priest when he was at school at Cherasco, and he entered the junior seminary of the Archdiocese of Turin at Bra in October of 1896. His first

years passed unremarkably, though with excellent results. However, in April 1900, at the age of sixteen, he experienced a serious crisis that upset him so much that he left the seminary in the middle of the academic year. We do not know if he was unsettled by the endless and indiscriminate reading that he indulged in at that time, whether he was influenced by the example of some companion, or if he found it hard to get along with his fellow students. Nature had clearly not endowed him with the most docile of characters, for he was nicknamed *fiammifero*, firebrand, because of his easily aroused temper. The humility he later displayed was a hard-won conquest rather than a gift of nature.

But in October of the same year he was back at his studies, this time at the seminary of Alba, the diocese in which the town of Cherasco lay. His re-admission had been made possible by the intervention of the parish priest, Father Giovanni Battista Montersino, whose faith in James had never wavered. This time, after a period of observation, James' studies ran their uneventful course through to his ordination in the Cathedral of Alba on June 29, 1907. Ten months later he was awarded his degree in theology at the Thomas Aquinas College at Genoa, and from that moment he became known to the whole diocese as *Il Teologo*, the Theologian, and was usually referred to by that title.

In the meantime, he had begun to gain pastoral experience as assistant parish priest at Narzole; but in October 1908, the bishop who ordained him, Giuseppe Francesco Re, appointed him to the post of spiritual director of the seminary at Alba. It was then a city of some 14,000 inhabitants boasting a long history. A Roman settlement was founded there in the first century B.C., and, over the next thousand years, Alba gave to the ancient world and the Dark Ages both political adventurers and

ambitious prelates, including a bishop who sided with Emperor Henry IV against Pope Gregory the Great.

The office of spiritual director, to which Father Alberione added teaching duties, is both sensitive and of fundamental importance to every seminary. Indeed it was about this time that Pope Pius X, with his keen interest in everything that concerned the formation of future priests, emphasized the importance of the role. So at the age of only twenty-four, Father Alberione, amid expressions of amazement and dismay, was placed in this position of great prominence. Many people questioned the bishop's wisdom in loading so much responsibility onto such youthful shoulders.

However, the bishop had made no mistake; his choice was supported by an exceptional educator of priests, Father Francesco Chiesa of Montà d'Alba—a graduate in dogmatic theology, canon and civil law, and philosophy—who was well aware of Alberione's ideas and plans. Father Alberione was to remain as spiritual director of the seminary until 1920, though he also undertook other duties: preaching in the churches of the diocese (often traveling on foot between villages), teaching catechism, advising on liturgy, and taking part in Catholic social action over a wide area.

At the same time Father Alberione was trying to develop another ministry, one running parallel and in secret, which he recalled as beginning during the historic night of December 31, 1900. The ninety-year-old pontiff, Leo XIII, had proclaimed a Jubilee Year "now that the century is hastening to a close in which We, in God's mercy, have passed almost the whole of Our life." At midnight on that December 31, the whole Catholic world celebrated Mass, and afterward the *Te Deum* was sung and the Blessed Sacrament exposed until dawn. The sixteen-year-old James Alberione, having by now overcome the crisis of

his immaturity, spent those hours with his fellow seminarians in the Cathedral of Alba, while on its throne, in the topmost niche of the lofty sanctuary wall, the monstrance shone brightly as the world entered the twentieth century.

Later he was to recall those hours in which his new thoughts took shape. Speaking of himself in the third person, he said: "He felt a profound duty to prepare himself to do something for the Lord and for the men of the new age with whom he would live. . . . He felt he had to work with others in the service of the Church. . . . From then on these thoughts dominated his studies, his prayers, the whole of his priestly formation; and the idea, which at first had been rather confused, became clearer with the passing of the years and finally took shape in a specific project."

After a long period of careful reflection, Father Alberione finally saw that what was needed was to make the Word of God accessible to the men and women of the new century by using methods appropriate to the times and imparting a new vigor and efficiency to the task. At first he thought of setting up an informal partnership or guild with a voluntary apostolate of writers, printers, and distributors to produce material inspired by Catholic teaching. Later he abandoned this idea in favor of something more radical: he would found a properly constituted religious congregation with its own rules and vows, but dedicated exclusively to this purpose, and with both masculine and feminine branches.

Women Dedicated to a New Apostolate

There was sure to be widespread nervousness, given the time and place, about involving women in the world of publishing; and though the project never left his mind, Father Alberione took care not to speak about it openly. Meanwhile