

The Women Who Collaborated with St. Paul, from Sr. Anne Joan Flanagan, FSP

St. Thecla of Iconium

The first of Paul's women collaborators, according to Acts, is Lydia. According to Christian tradition, it's Thecla of Iconium. The Apostles are suffering rejection because of influential women, and their next step is Iconium.

So, Thecla, “Equal to the Apostles,” that was her title in the early Church, not just “first woman martyr,” but “Equal to the Apostles.” And she's long associated with St. Paul. And her shrine in Antioch came into the news some years ago. By the Fifth Century, her tomb in Syria was the most visited pilgrim site in the world after Jerusalem, and it was especially visited by women pilgrims traveling without male escorts. Women could go to Thecla's shrine in the Fifth to the Seventh Centuries unescorted because that was a shrine for women. And they have found souvenirs there—archaeologists have dug up souvenirs of Thecla in the form of hair combs, and practical things that women would use. So even the souvenir trade over there was directed to women.

There were monasteries, you know, the early Church, the monastic life took the form of being hermits in the desert in Egypt. There were women hermitages in Egypt named for St. Thecla in like the late Second Century. So, the word of St. Thecla got around.

It really bugs me when people say, “Oh, how can you be a Daughter of St. Paul? I thought St. Paul hated women.” This is what the early Church thought about St. Paul and women. They wrote novels about him and how he would empower these bold, apostolic women like Thecla who traveled around the world—lived to be 90, by the way. And, you know, she was empowered by Paul, by his Gospel, to do that, to make bold choices, to, you know, willingly be led to the arena to be fed to the lions that, as we saw, crouched at her feet like pussycats. So, these are the kind of women that the Christian tradition in the Second Century associated with Paul.

St. Prisca

Now, we get to the Acts of the Apostles, and we have Lydia, another woman of influence, a woman whose hospitality was so insistent that she forced Paul to accepting to stay at her house. We have Prisca and Aquila, and they open not only their home, but their future to St. Paul. And an interesting thing with Prisca, Luke always calls her “Priscilla,” which is a diminutive. Paul does not use the diminutive for her. And when you read between Acts and the letter where he names Prisca first in his list of greetings, Prisca is the first name: “Greet Prisca.” This is more than a sign of recognition. This is really Paul exalting Prisca's state in front of the whole community. It's an astonishing act of respect.

There's also, and we don't think about this, but because pretty much the ancient world didn't give it any attention, but a lot of these people associated with Paul had families. Prisca and Aquila, they may have been a young couple when they started out, but there's a tradition, there's a Church of Saint Prisca in Rome, and it's not Aquila's wife, it's their daughter, who became a martyr in Rome. So, we've got this, we've got this family-oriented apostolate happening connected with St. Paul.

St. Phoebe

Then we have Phoebe, the deacon, and here she's entrusted with the world's only copy of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul's *Opus Magnus*, and she had to carry that across three seas to get from—she was in the Corinth area—to get from Corinth to Rome.

St. Plautilla

Then we have Plautilla, and there's a gorgeous triptych in the Vatican Art Museum. Get to St. Peter's, ask to see the Stefaneschi triptych. It was commissioned in the 1300s by Cardinal Stefaneschi for the high altar in the Basilica of St. Peter's in the Vatican. One side is the martyrdom of Peter, the other side is the martyrdom of Paul, and Plautilla features very much so in the martyrdom of Paul. She got her eyesight back, you know, puts her veil on, gets her eyesight back, and starts proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ, who was preached by Paul, and ends up in the Roman prison. She converts her jailers, and then they all were martyred together. So, these are the bold apostolic women connected with Paul in the memory of the early Church.