

Margaret Traxler lived her passion for justice

Teacher marched in Selma, carried a banner in St. Peter's Square

Patricia Lefevere

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She was a dynamo, a thorn in the side to a repressive church, a tireless activist and advocate for the poor. A founding member of an organization of nuns who would speak out for justice and equality everywhere, she marched in Selma with Martin Luther King Jr., attended the Paris peace talks during the Vietnam War and was detained for protesting in St. Peter's square.

She was my friend. We never really said goodbye. She was seated in her wheelchair in front of the television news in a convent infirmary when I last saw her in September. Unforgivable, I thought, that God should let his loyal handmaiden, Sr. Margaret Ellen Traxler, sit mute, unmovable, unable to vacate that chair to rail against injustice, poverty, racism, sexism, and – in her view – the church's authoritarianism, its pomposity and, at times, its distance from the gospel.

She died Feb. 12 at age 77 two years after a paralyzing stroke had placed her in retirement at the motherhouse of her community, the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Mankato, Minn.

How merciful of God to require of her no more Lents, letting her return to dust without the smudge of Ash Wednesday on her forehead.

But dust was no stranger to this rural Minnesota woman. I had often seen her drop to her knees in front of a large picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, praying aloud for assistance with the dumb, the deviant, the ever-daydreaming adolescents in her homeroom at St. Michael High School in St. Michael, Minn. No matter that for the rest of the day her habit would carry the imprint of dust and chalk in its thick woolen folds.

In the classroom Margaret Ellen, named Sr. Mary Peter during the first two decades of her religious life, kicked up the dust of activity. The exploits of Alan Shepard, the poverty of Africa and of America's inner cities, the horrors of segregation and the Klan, and her delight that a Catholic finally occupied the White House were all reasons for her to cheer, give news quizzes or fire up debates. It didn't seem to faze her that few students read the newspapers, and that many were unsure why African nations had any right to our harvests and that most of our parents had voted for Nixon.

Hiding her own heartaches

In the hallway when no one was looking, she'd take my sister, Marie, and me aside and comfort us – separately – give us reason to hope, squeezing our arms above the elbow

Our mother was dying of cancer that year. She had been dying the year before and the one before that and would finally succumb three months after our graduation in 1961.

What we did not know then was that this same solicitous nun had buried her father the year before. John Traxler, the country doctor, and Marie Fitzgerald, a nurse, served in World War I. They married after the war and “Doc” opened a practice in Henderson, Minn, while Marie raised their five girls and a foster daughter. Margaret, called “Peggy,” was born in 1924 and, at 18, followed her sister, Mary Lou, into the convent.*

Consoling us while hiding her private heartache was but one sign of the humility I would witness over the next four decades. After our graduation, Margaret Ellen moved to Washington, D.C., then to Chicago, where she would spend the next 30 years. Our next visit, and many of the dozen or so that followed it, would be in O'Hare Airport.

It was there in 1967 that I watched her, in full habit and sandals, approach business travelers headed for Atlanta on Delta Airlines. In soft, confident tones, she told awaiting passengers of the airliner's than discriminatory hiring policy. She encouraged them to choose another carrier for their next trip.

Her passionate belief that all are sons and daughters of the same father had taken her to Selma, Ala., in 1965 where she marched in the front row with 12 other sisters and with Martin Luther King Jr. Selma happened shortly after Traxler had been named educational director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice in Chicago.

From her Chicago base, she organized half a dozen sisters into a “Traveling Workshop” that toured the nation in a station wagon, bringing teacher training to schools preparing for integration. She encouraged sisters to “fill in” at black colleges to allow the regular faculty to get away to study, said Loretto Sr. Mary Ann Cunningham of Denver.

Traxler's joy and much of her following came from the National Coalition of American Nuns, which she founded with other sisters in 1969. The coalition describes itself as 1,800 grassroots nuns dedicated to speaking out on issues of justice in church

and society. The group held its last two board meetings at Mankato so that Traxler could attend.

Silent in her wheelchair at the September gathering, Traxler moved her lips to the strains of "Salve Regina," which the nuns chanted to open their session. Dominican Sr. Donna Quinn, who attended, recalled Traxler's blue eyes. "They would cry with you, laugh with you, but they called each of us to something beyond ourselves.

"Her passion was for feeding, clothing, housing, educating and helping women give birth to a new generation," said Quinn, who gave the eulogy at Traxler's funeral Feb. 18 at the Mankato motherhouse. "For many of us she was a real sister. She was Peter the Rock, and now we must hold on to each other in her memory."

Italian police detained Quinn, Traxler and six other sisters when they protested their exclusion from the 1994 Bishops' Synod on Religious Life in Rome. The banner they held in St. Peter's Square – "They are meeting about us without us" – appeared in news photos around the globe.

Traxler was one of the first to call for women's ordination in 1971, making her unpopular with many bishops. "There was nothing too high for her to climb over," said Mercy Sr. Betty Barrett of Chicago who worked on economic issues with Traxler in the 1970s at a time when she sought corporate responsibility from firms in their purchasing policies.

In 1974 Traxler founded the Institute of Women Today to empower, mentor and support women. She was 50 years old, but some of her most important work lay ahead. That same year she attended the Paris peace talks of Vietnam. She organized the National Coalition of American Nuns' Task Force to Northern Ireland and co-founded the Interreligious Conference on Soviet Jewry for which she received an award from Golda Meier.

Everyone can help

Early in 1977 she was approached to serve as an undersecretary of education in the Carter administration, a job she declined in order to continue her work with Chicago-area women. By this time, the women who merited her services included murderers, robbers and drug felons at Illinois' Dwight Prison. Traxler arranged for two men to tutor some of the inmates in carpentry and electrical work so that they might find jobs when released.

She also secured sewing machines, allowing inmates to make clothes for their children. Traxler once paid for two pairs of boy's jeans shoplifted by a woman in a store in which the nun was shopping. She urged the manager not to have the woman arrested, arguing that the mother had stolen nothing for herself, just items her boys needed to go to school.

Perhaps her most remembered work in Chicago is the founding of Sisterhouse, a rehab facility for women prisoners preparing to enter the job market, and of Maria's Shelter and Casa Notre Dame, both on the city's south side. The latter two houses provided shelter for homeless women and children – many of them the victims of abuse – and for homeless bag ladies. Traxler received donations from across the land. Often a truck loaded with toiletries would arrive at the shelters, funded by Chicago-based *Playboy* magazine. "Everyone can help the poor in their own way," she told me.

When she turned 60 in 1984, Traxler related how shocked she was to see so many homeless women her age around Chicago's Union Station. Many evenings she gave rides to those willing to stay overnight at a shelter. She won support for her work from the late Mayor Harold Washington and from Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who turned over to her for one dollar the property of a parish school that had closed. Soon she opened a food pantry, clothes closet and senior center on the site, and had local students of landscaping plant roses outside the convent where she and the nuns who ran Maria's Shelter resided.

'Someone to pray to'

In 1984 Traxler was one of 24 nuns who signed their names to a *New York Times* ad stating that there was more than one Catholic position on abortion. Traxler upheld the church's teaching opposing abortion, but believed each woman had a right to make the choice for herself. Although some 70 priests and laymen also signed the ad, it was the sisters who drew the Vatican's wrath and who had to retract their statement or risk expulsion from their orders. The four-year ordeal that ensued saw two of the 24 leave religious life, and heralded the start of Traxler's heart troubles. "The tension that comes with Rome on your back is enormous," said Sr. Betty Barrett, who added that Traxler suffered greatly when Rome forbade her friend of 30 years, Sr. Jeannine Gramick, to continue her pastoral ministry with gays and lesbians. Gramick called Traxler "a giant of a woman, a prophetess to us all, unafraid to speak truth to power."

Mercy Sr. Theresa Kane, who also felt Rome's rebuke, pointed to Traxler's holiness and her compassion for priests. "I have no doubt she will be compared to Dorothy Day," said Kane, of Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. "Now we have someone else to pray to."

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, the most recent of the American nuns the Vatican has tried to silence for her support of women's ordination, thought it ironic that the church – whether it realizes it or not – will miss Traxler the most. "The loss of her may be the reason that the church does not come to fullness nearly as soon as it otherwise could. If we really want to honor her memory, we'll all need to do more now to fill so huge a gap."

I think often of this woman who I knew twice as long as my mother. No longer bound by age, infirmity or structures, she abides now among her School Sisters of Notre

Dame in their private cemetery atop Good Counsel Hill in Mankato. In my mind's eye, she is still teaching, still firing debates. No need to say goodbye.

*Editors Note: Peggy entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1941 and because of extensive dental work had 3 years of candidature. Mary Lou entered in 1942.