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Cheryl L. Reed/Special to the Star Tribune

Sister Margaret Traxler: "Just because I took a vow of obedience doesn't mean that I can't say what I think. I'm not a puppet. I have my own free will. I have to be obedient to the superiors of my order, but it doesn't mean I have to be obedient to the larger orders of the Church." She died on Feb. 12.

By Cheryl L. Reed
Special to the Star Tribune

Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler spent most of her life defying the conventional Catholic Church. She accused Pope John Paul II of hating women, publicly supported a woman's right to abortion, protested in front of cathedrals and marched at the Vatican. Church leaders called her belligerent and threatened her with excommunication, but she didn't back down.

Since her death last month, at the age of 77, Traxler has been touted as a legendary nun and the Catholic equivalent of feminist Betty Friedan and civil-rights activist Rosa Parks.

"She began questioning injustices as a Catholic woman and as a nun long before anyone else would dare to," said Sister Jeannine Gramick, who's been in trouble with the Vatican for ministering to gays and lesbians.

"She marched in Selma with Martin Luther King at a time when civil disobedience by nuns and priests was just unheard of," Gramick added. "She spoke out at a time when nuns were supposed to be very meek and mild — like children, seen and not heard. She suffered a lot of criticism in her life. She has since been embraced and loved and held up as a prophet."

Born in St. Paul in 1924, Traxler grew up in Henderson, Minn., 60 miles southwest of Minneapolis. She was the fourth of five daughters; her father was a doctor and her mother was his nurse. Traxler's sense of justice for the poor was instilled as she watched her parents caring for patients who often were unable to pay. Her father told her: "You go to bed happy if you've helped somebody that day, if you've made life a little better for someone."

Traxler joined the School Sisters of Notre Dame in

Mankato after finishing high school in 1941. She wanted to serve God, she said. She spent the first 20 years teaching at schools in North Dakota and Minnesota, including St. Andrews Grade School and St. Agnes High School in St. Paul.

In 1965, she joined the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and others marching for voters' rights in Selma, Ala. Wearing her black habit, she marched on the front lines. Traxler spent the rest of her life fighting for a host of causes, including the rights of nuns, blacks, Jews, gays and lesbians, female prisoners and the homeless.

"She was ahead of her time," said Sister Ann Schoch, provincial councilor at the Mankato convent and one of four sisters who were keeping vigil with Traxler when she died just before midnight on Feb. 12, one month before her 78th birthday. "She so strongly believed in the gospel. She lived without fear. She didn't think of those who opposed her."

And there were many. Traxler worked for the National Catholic Council on Interracial Justice from 1964 to 1974, giving workshops on civil rights and encouraging nuns to fill in at black colleges so that black faculty members could finish advanced degrees.

In 1969, she expanded her target to include the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, founding the National Coalition of American Nuns. Its first proclamation demanded that priests stop meddling in women's religious communities. At the time, Cardinal James McIntyre in Los Angeles was trying to mediate a split in the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters. Traxler called McIntyre "Cardinal Awful Guy."

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Sister Margaret Traxler's

faith journey took her

from teaching school

in Minnesota to national

leadership roles in issues

ranging from civil rights

to care for the homeless.

A LIFE ON THE FRONT LINES

Traxler stood on front lines in peace, justice conflicts

"We came out and said we represent the United States nuns. It was unprecedented that we told the cardinal he was transgressing the rights of sisters," Traxler said in one of her last interviews in February 2000, just before a stroke robbed her of her formidable deep voice.

Throughout her life, Traxler traveled across the country speaking out against bigotry of all kinds, even that of the Catholic Church. She told a crowd in Cleveland: "Every member of the Gestapo was a baptized Christian." Her speech made headlines, and afterward, a New York rabbi told her: "You are very rare to admit things like this."

"I knew I was saying things that should be heard," she said. "I don't think I made too many friends, though."

Traxler had a profound respect for Jewish women. She made many trips to Israel and co-founded the National Inter-religious Task Force on Soviet Jewry for which she was awarded a State of Israel medal by Prime Minister Golda Meir.

Working for prisoners

In 1974, Traxler formed teams of women — lawyers, judges, social workers, psychologists — who taught female prisoners about their legal rights. The teams also taught the women job skills, such as welding and carpentry, so that they could obtain good-paying jobs upon their release. For 15 years, Traxler and her team visited prisons across the Midwest and the South, advocating better conditions. In a few cases, they were able to get women released whose civil rights had been violated.

Traxler also had become a

harsh critic of men, particularly those in the Catholic Church. During the push for the Equal Rights Amendment, Traxler and her National Coalition of American Nuns spoke before 23 state legislatures.

"The Church was not in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment," Traxler said. "It was so typical; those men speaking their own decisions saying they speak for the Church. Well they don't speak for me. They don't speak for many other women."

That was why in 1984, Traxler decided to lend her name to an advertisement that ran in *The New York Times* during the presidential campaign. The ad was meant to support Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro, a Catholic whose support of publicly funded abortions was heavily criticized by Church leaders. The full-page advertisement stated that not all "committed Catholics" and theologians agreed with the Church's official stand against abortion. Twenty-four of the 97 signatures were Catholic nuns.

The Vatican ordered all nuns and clergy who signed the ad to recant or be kicked out of their orders. The four priests and brothers who signed the ad recanted immediately, but the sisters refused. The stand-off lasted more than a year. Eventually the sisters were allowed to meet with their superiors to draw up vaguely written clarifications. Traxler was forced to resign from a public board that advocated federal money should be used to pay for abortions in cases of rape and incest.

"Women must choose for themselves what they will do with their bodies," Traxler explained. "Women should have

Memorial set

Friends of Sister Margaret Traxler will have a memorial service on Tuesday — what would have been Traxler's 78th birthday — at the First United Methodist Church and Chicago Temple at 77 W. Washington St. in Chicago. The service, from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m., will include music and singing and sharing memories about Traxler.

the right to choose. The men want that right. Isn't that terrible? Aren't they awful? One day that's going to be as obsolete as the chastity belt."

Vow of obedience

Over the years, Traxler would continue to shock traditional Catholics. On several Mother's Days in the 1980s, Traxler and dozens of other Catholic women would demonstrate outside a downtown Chicago Cathedral, protesting the "Vatican's gender abuse" — its refusal to allow women to become priests and its opposition to birth control.

"Just because I took a vow of obedience doesn't mean that I can't say what I think," Traxler said. "I'm not a puppet. I have my own free will. I have to be obedient to the superiors of my order, but it doesn't mean I have to be obedient to the larger orders of the Church."

But Traxler did have her supporters.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin gave her an old parish church, school and rectory in Chicago in 1989 to start a homeless shelter for women and children. Bernardin, who told Traxler her shelter was his "secret church," was a frequent visitor to the shelter where non-Catholic women lined up to have their children blessed. Two years later Bernardin gave

Traxler another deserted church building to start a long-term safe house for women retraining for jobs and going through drug rehabilitation.

In February 2000, just days before her stroke, Traxler reflected on her more than 50 years as a nun: "I must say I admire the nuns," she said. "When I write my obituary, the one thing I'm going to say is that being a sister allowed me the privilege of knowing high-quality women who saw their duty and who pursued it with the utmost conscientiousness. That to me was the most outstanding privilege."

Her respect for religious sisters was reciprocated by those who worked with her. Traxler's long-time shelter assistant, Sister Maureen Boyd, saw her as a historical figure much like the nuns who founded religious orders in this country. "I believe we could be likening Margaret to Dorothy Day and Joan of Arc when history is written."

Traxler's long-time friend and fellow feminist and gay-rights activist, Sister Donna Quinn, agreed: "She was one of the legends. She was sort of like Rosa Parks. She called us to do more, to know that people were suffering and hurting. I think that's a call of a prophet — to reach out and say these are my people and to spend your life, which she did, bringing them out of their slavery — whatever it might be — and freeing them and letting them know they could empower themselves. That's what a prophet does."

Cheryl L. Reed is a freelance writer who spent several weeks with Sister Margaret Traxler before the sister's stroke in February 2000. Reed is writing a book about American nuns to be published by HarperCollins in 2003.