

Setting the course: Assembling instead of dissipating

Remembering Traudl Wallbrecher, initiator of the Catholic Integrated Community

By Ludwig Weimer*

Traudl Wallbrecher was, together with her husband, business lawyer Dr. Herbert Wallbrecher, the initiator of the Catholic Integrated Community (CIC). She passed away on July 29, 2016, in Munich, at the blessed age of 93.

After first beginnings in post-war Germany, the group presented itself to the church public as "Integrated Community" in 1968. In 1978, it was officially acknowledged as an "Apostolic Community" in the archdiocese of Paderborn by archbishop (later Cardinal) Johannes Joachim Degenhardt, and in the archdiocese of Munich-Freising by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the later Pope Benedict XVI. Further dioceses followed: Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Augsburg, Münster and Vienna, later Rome, and Morogoro and Daressalam in Tanzania.

According to their statutes, this community of priests and laymen is trying, "in a world estranged from the Church, to make the Gospel present in such a way that those whose path has led them away from the Church can again find new access to the faith of the Church".

This impetus is connected to Traudl Wallbrecher's biography and to the constellation she grew up in. She came from the Catholic Youth Movement and lived through the Nazi regime. The holocaust, the attempt to eradicate the Jewish people and thus the name of God – and all this under the very nose of a so-called Christian world – was something that shocked her profoundly. She understood the crisis, which today is often called a crisis of God, of the church, or of faith, in a similarly fundamental way as Elie Wiesel, who once said: "The reflective Christian knows that it was not the Jewish people that died in Auschwitz, but Christianity."

This reflectiveness encouraged Traudl Wallbrecher to wage a new beginning: to look out for companions who were willing, like in an expedition, to seek and try out a new form of Christianity; and to find allies who, with their criticism, with their love of the world, and with their questions and expectations towards Christianity, could be of help.

But who are the real allies? Well aware that early Christianity did not see religions as its allies, but rather the critics and searchers of the philosophical enlightenment, Traudl Wallbrecher tried to appeal to those who were disappointed with the church or couldn't find an approach any more.

She found inspiration in the works of modern writers like Samuel Beckett and filmmakers like Luis Buñuel, in Martin Buber's writing and in the findings of the historical-critical Protestant exegesis. In the 1960s, she visited kibbutzim in Israel and was encouraged to try a new form of communal life in modern times.

Her particular interest had always been the widely forgotten scriptures of the Old Testament – as the root of the church and an instruction for the forming of a people of God. “God has not created religion, but the world” – this quote of the Jewish religious philosopher Franz Rosenzweig became one of Traudl Wallbrecher's guidelines, as well as the question Hans Urs von Balthasar posted in his afterword to Paul Claudel's “The Satin Slipper”: “How is it possible to be entirely in the world and entirely in God at the same time?”

For her 85th birthday, Pope Benedict XVI, who had been a companion of the Community since 1976, wrote to Traudl Wallbrecher: “The new flame that you kindled in 1948 has not died. The flame of the Holy Spirit burns a good deal of human thinking, but it sparks off a light and gives a warmth that surpasses time, since it originates in the spirit of God. May the quiet flame of your community always be nurtured by the big flame the faith of the Church holds for all of us, and thus become one of the fiery tongues the Holy Spirit uses to speak in this world.”

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