

## ST. CRISTEL SCHMID

*Walter Sparn*

Christel Schmid's spiritual life's work is the long-lasting and wide-reaching Community of the Casteller Ring, an ordered community of evangelical Lutheran Christian women in the Benedictine tradition that she founded in 1950 and led until shortly before her death in 1970. Her charismatic personality as both leader and peer exemplified the vocation of a Christian woman in times of political catastrophe, tectonic plate shifts in the social order, religious uncertainty, and changes in the relationship between the sexes.

Anna Christine Babette Schmid was born on December 1, 1892 in the town of Mörlbach as the youngest of thirteen children of Johann Andreas and Elisabeth Barbara Schmid. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of December she was baptized in the village church. Her father, like his ancestors, was a respectable farmer with prestigious brewing rights, and for awhile also the town mayor. The family fostered a distinctly evangelical Lutheran, biblically oriented piety, loyal to the church. Christel was confirmed on April 22, 1906 with the confirmation verse: "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

In the following year, Christel was sent to study domestic science at the center for deaconesses in Frankfurt am Main, though she graduated also with a degree in business. In the winter of 1910 she began her education as a kindergarten teacher at the Deaconess Home in Neuendettelsau. The form of diaconia she found there, molded by Wilhelm Löhe, impressed her deeply, both the life in community and the lofty self-understanding of the deaconesses as brides of Christ. After half a year of study she began her practicum in the town of Vohenstauss, where she quickly assumed leadership of the kindergarten.

At this point in her life, Christel became acquainted with the scouting movement. It took a critical stance against the oppressive conventions of middle-class German town life, striving to find a way "out of the gray city walls" into an unspoiled natural environment that allowed for both authentic inner freedom and a commitment to community at the same time, focused around hiking, camping, singing, and evenings around the campfire. The youth movement appealed to Christel and many others who sought to be

close to nature, poetically creative, and ardent in their religious self-expression across confessional boundaries.

Christel took part in the Free German Youth Day in October 1913, the most significant event of the German youth movement before the war. The following year she had to return to Mörlbach to help her now widowed mother; but at the same time she began to attend Bible courses. Soon she was able to put to use what she had studied, not only in helping her sister to run a grocery store in the town of Kitzingen, but also as a youth leader in the local Landeskirche community. At this time she also became close friends with another young woman, Hanna Burck, the founder of a scout group and a close companion of Christel's over the years to come. Christel also formed close relationships with men, particularly with the young local pastor Hermann Schlier.

In time, Christel and her friend Hanna took charge of the recently founded local branch of the Community of Christian Pathfinders (*Tatgemeinschaft Christlicher Pfadfinderinnen*, hereafter TCP) and went on to found the first Kitzingen group of the TCP in 1929, joining up with the local girls' Bible circle. Here already were two of Christel's great passions fused into one: intensive biblical piety and love of Christ with the "ordered" life of scouting under charismatic leadership. At Pentecost in 1933, Christel was elected national leader at a national assembly of all TCP leaders.

Patriotic but politically naïve, the TCP was overrun by the "revolution from the right" of the Nazi regime and co-opted (along with the entire scouting movement) without further ado. The merger of the Christian-oriented youth movement into the *Bund Christdeutscher Jugend* (Association of German Christian Youth) did nothing to help the situation. Although Christel, supported by Hermann Schlier, objected to the local Nazi propaganda, especially in a brave and clearly confessional protest letter sent to the regional leader of the Hitler Youth in Würzburg, by March of 1934 the Kitzingen group was "incorporated" (during a worship service!) into the Nazi youth organizations, despite the fact that the latter were much smaller in members.

In spite of the surveillance, interrogations, and house

searches by the Gestapo, Christel led a “Group of Evangelical Lutheran Youth,” distributed pamphlets from the Confessing Church, and organized educational trips under the banner of “youth instruction.” In the end, for reasons of personal security, Christel Schmid and Hanna Burck had to leave Kitzingen. In 1935 they moved to Weissenburg, where Christel became the youth leader of the local deanery, Hanna the housekeeper at the nearby parsonage. Christel formed a lifelong friendship with Pr. Balther Dyroff, and Hanna Burck married Pr. Haffner; both of these men were important sponsors in the time to come.

These troubled times brought to the fore a third factor in Christel Schmid’s life story: the liturgical movement. Already as a young kindergarten teacher she had been impressed by the rich liturgy in Neuendettelsau, a contrast to the “liturgical paltriness” of the Landeskirche. Christel became aware of the High Church Union and the Berneuchen Movement as well as of the ecumenical dimension of liturgical renewal that was embodied in the Marburg religion scholar Friedrich Heiler, a man of Roman Catholic origin but Lutheran confession. On August 3, 1937, she took a vow as a tertiary in the evangelical Lutheran Third Order of Franciscans, which had been founded by Heiler.

Just a few days later, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August, the external situation worsened: the TCP was banned. The pastor responsible for regional youth, whether he liked it or not, had to dismiss Christel from her position and forbid her from further contact with the church youth. As a result, she took a job as a leader in a youth recreation camp, where she got to know Hedwig Döbereiner, an important companion in the coming years. In April of 1941 she again got a position as a youth leader at St. Lorenz in Nuremberg, where the pastor, Otto Dietz, led Matins and Vespers.

Contacts with the Pathfinders continued when the Haffners leased the Witwenschlösschen (the “widows’

little castle”) in Castell. In Easter of 1942, about twenty Pathfinders gathered in Castell to design a new order for themselves, laying out ten rules for life together. They bound themselves under the “discipline of the Lord Jesus Christ” to in-depth Bible study, daily silence for prayer, love for “mother church,” readiness for help and self-sacrifice across boundaries, gratitude for creation, and expectation for the coming of Christ. Seven of these young women, during the night between Easter Sunday and Easter Monday, climbed out over the wall in the cemetery of the prince’s family to the garden of the little castle, along with Christel and Hermann Schlier, and gathered around a great stone cross made a solemn vow: “I say Yes to your community and pledge you my faithfulness.”

This extraordinarily moving vow, experienced by all parties as absolutely binding on their lives, forged an “inner ring” within the Pathfinders. Since all symbols besides the Nazi swastika were soon prohibited, these few identified themselves by wearing a kind of signet-ring. They communicated by sending around and passing on letters always addressed to “Dear Ursula,” mostly at Christel’s initiative. In these letters the members of the inner ring and a few other confidantes were responsible for information about people, events like the air raids, specific topics in Christian symbolism, liturgy, and lyrical poetry, even practical requirements for surviving in the time of war. Christel dealt above all with the pastoral care questions and themes of the community. During this time the name “Casteller Ring” came into use and was mentioned in the 1942 constitution of the Pathfinders. Yet the inner ring’s conspiratorial camouflage was so effective that, still in September of 1944, a twenty-two-page prayer booklet assembled by Hermann Schlier and Christel Schmid was still being distributed, and the perpetrators were never caught.

In the summer of 1943, Christel moved to Castell, into the attic of the

Witwenschlösschen. Rather coincidentally she encountered the Benedictine Theophil Lamm, who was the bursar of the nearby Abbey Münster-schwarzach. Christel, Hanna Haffner, and fellow member of the inner ring Elisabeth Decker met with Fr. Theophil and talked about the “pure being for God” in sacramental liturgy, in the daily office, and in committed communal life. Here Christel began to see a possible realization of her deep desire for total commitment to Christ in a community fashioned after his image. By July of 1945 she was certain that the worship wealth of the Benedictine tradition could be actualized in the evangelical Lutheran church.

After the war, Christel Schmid resolutely pursued the realization of her finally clear life’s goal. Contact with the Pathfinders became public again with the approval of the Allied government and regional youth pastors. Further, the daily office was declared to be the community prayer of the association. The association now saw that “the highest goal... of scouting aspirations are to be found in Christian orders.” The goal of “forming an ordered community” was stated in the association’s constitution of 1946, “to lift up again the old, often buried and petrified treasure of the church.”

Christel Schmid, who only became a Pathfinder when she was already almost forty years old, remained the leader of the “Association of Christian Pathfinders” (*Bund Christlicher Pfadfinderinnen*, the new name of the TCP after the war, whose Bavarian branch was called “Casteller Ring”; hereafter BCP) from 1945 to 1960. She imprinted on the whole movement her Christian piety, chiefly the “liturgical way” with an inclination toward life in an ordered community. Despite her wishes, both Hermann Schlier, to whom the BCP owed its introduction to individual confession but who personally preferred to think of the Pathfinders’ “order” as being similar to that of a medieval “order of knights,” and Fr. Theophil, who thought a “First

Order” of monastic *men* was a necessary preliminary, advised against the founding a possible “Third Order” of laity. Christel Schmid therefore continued as association leader of the BCP, organizing recreations and camps, and supported herself with the assistance of the Haffners, as an itinerant speaker for the Evangelical Lutheran Youth Work and also in the Bavarian *Mütterdienst*.

Fr. Theophil regularly came to Castell with approval of the abbot of Münsterschwarzach (and strict instructions not to proselytize). In December 1946 he led the first spiritual exercises in Castell under the marian title “Virgo—Mater—Sponsa,” modeled on “the eternal woman” of Gertrud von Le Fort. The event’s conclusion was dramatic, according to Christel Schmid: “*Fiat*—it happened to me. It was as though the eyes of whole the church looked into our attic, full of excitement. A pause—and then: almost angrily, a young monk, ardent for the kingdom of God, dictates the *fiat*, the formula, the framework for a profession of vows: the duty to engage in Scripture reading, prayer, participation in the liturgical movement, the good of and bond among the sisters—a union of our world and the world of the monks. The room is rearranged, and everyone sets up burning candles to signify her commitment. Then the priest removes the candles: ‘So in Christ is the world crucified to me, and I to it.’”

This experience presented Christel with the temptation to convert to the Roman Catholic church, whose mystery she could now finally experience as powerful and delightful. She frequently rode on her bicycle to Münsterschwarzach to take part in Matins, Lauds, and the monks’ mass. However, she did not commune, and she also did not convert.

An important motivation for this, as she often said, was her confirmation, which she understood as a sacramental oath, and her confirmation verse, which to her signified faithfulness to the evangelical Lutheran church;

Friedrich Heiler supported her in this decision. All the same, she began to suffer personally the division of the churches, especially in the sacrament of the altar. This suffering expressed itself in a health crisis of angina pectoris that never fully healed. The alternative to conversion was an ordered life as an evangelical Lutheran, as she had probably known intuitively for a long time. But Christel realized that actual evangelical Lutheranism would probably not be able to accept this, that the possibility of a Third Order was doubtful, and that her connection with the BCP could be a problem.

The barrier to ordered life was finally overcome by Maria Pfister, a member of the “inner ring,” kindergarten teacher, catechist, community helper, organist, diaconal youth leader, and pastor’s daughter, thirty-one years Christel’s junior. In July 1949 Christel consented to let Maria join her in living a common life. Maria moved in January 1950 to a second room in the attic of the castle in Castell. Without ceasing in her work for the BCP—and without the BCP knowing much of anything about it—Maria and Christel began their monastic community on February 15, 1950, at six o’clock in the morning, by praying Lauds.

Many years later, Maria Pfister described her “exodus” from the romantic life of a Pathfinder: “On this day, Christel became a ‘Mater.’ I don’t know whether she had already experienced it before, how with one and the same act you suddenly must begin a whole new phase. Though we were personally very close and familiar with each other, suddenly the second chapter of the Regula of St. Benedict, the image of the abbot, the image of the representative of Christ, came between us. I can see still the faltering smiles with which we greeted each other in the morning, helpless as to how we were supposed to act with each other. We were very careful and very scrupulous! It was a strict order that we began with in Castell, very strict. And this happened after the expansiveness of the scouting lifestyle—it was a

quite other, a whole new lifestyle, that began in our attic. The word ‘obedience’ played a big role; ‘asceticism’ was an important word for me. Though honestly, asceticism wasn’t that hard for us, for it was a time in which we had almost no money and even less to live on!”

The new ordered community began under very difficult personal, financial, and organizational conditions. The two women became seriously ill and needed a long time to recuperate. For their livelihood, the meager income of Christel Schmid and the support of the Haffners had to suffice; in the time to come, they could only accept as new members women who earned their own living. The attic had room enough but at first, before the walls were built, lines drawn with chalk had to mark out the tiny cells.

The organizational problem was the relationship to the BCP. Christel Schmid was still the leader of the association, and the offices had been located in the castle attic since 1950. In a speech given in 1948, Christel had asserted: “The association leads from the fire of scouting to the altar of the church.” The association could only answer the question: “What can I become?” but the ordered Christian life answered the question: “How can I serve?” Christel Schmid believed that the Pathfinders had a “mission” beyond themselves to the whole church, that it was a natural step from the association to the order. Each ordered community, she said, is “anchored in a mystery” and “fed from metaphysical sources,” but it also “has its demons that oppose God.” Because demonic aberrations lie so near to the surface in these chaotic times, the BCP must “muddle through to the ultimate sources of the church” and take strength from the long-darkened “glory of Christ” if it is to achieve its Christian mission.

Despite Christel’s convictions, the official order of the common life and its “Ten Rules” had to disappear for awhile “for the sake of the weak,” as she put it: this was the only way they could remain a part of the

regional youth office of the Bavarian Landeskirche. But still, she maintained, the work of the community, the Landeskirche, and the national church could be only a “secondary goal.” The “primary goal” was the “mystery of Christ, as he had revealed himself to the church... the mother church. To mother church belongs the youth association. To her belongs this community of young people. We are taking part in her power and beauty and suffering and way of the cross.”

It was true that the Landeskirche and the church youth associations had taken great offense at the community in Castell: being under the leadership of a Benedictine (Fr. Theophil), gathering seven times daily for prayer, focusing on sacramental worship, living according to the evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience, and celibacy, practicing individual confession, obeying the Rule of St. Benedict *in toto*, to say nothing of employing “Catholic” liturgical gestures and vestments! So the new community had to accept that for some years to come it would still not exist “officially” and that the newly-declared objective of association, to lead into the order, was not accepted by the BCP. The BCP’s national assembly even voted to let the small community take the name “Casteller Ring,” even though the whole Bavarian region of the BCP had used this name since the time of the Nazis, acknowledging both the order and the BCP as two different stems growing from the same root. Despite all this, the “Community of the Casteller Ring” (CCR) began to grow.

One last time Mater Christel had the chance to doubt her evangelical Lutheran path. The abbess of the Frauenchiemsee invited Mater Christel for three weeks’ retreat at the Benedictine women’s cloister in confinement—which even a short while before would have been unthinkable for an evangelical Lutheran guest. Christel later reported that she was “completely happy” there and “nothing would have hindered” her from becoming Catholic. What kept her

from doing so was the five hundred girls who belonged to the association.

Mater Christel took an important step in the development of the CCR when the recently vacated Schwanberg Castle and its surrounding site were rented in 1957 by the Pathfinders, then newly renovated and furnished for guests. The dedication took place on October 3. This was the first time that the community of women appeared in public, and even in their habits: long black vestments with white collars. Their invitation to local schoolgirls and neighbors to join them in the daily office and sacramental worship caused first mostly fear of re-catholicization.

Christel—now known by the name Mater Felizitas—gradually became aware of other similar movements: the Community of the Christ-Brotherhood and the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary. In 1958 she wrote with Eduard Ellwein, a theology professor in Neuendettelsau, a new order for the CCR, singling out liturgy and diaconia among youth as its specific calling. She outlined the four-step process of joining the community that would take place over the course of six years. The “full commitment” of a sister’s life to the community was pledged under the expectation of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God with the prayer “Come!” (Revelation 22:17).

Once the bishop of the Bavarian Landeskirche, Hermann Dietzfelbinger, visited Schwanberg in July 1959 and encouraged the community to continue its work, all external restraints were finally removed. Schwanberg grew by leaps and bounds as the spiritual and pedagogical center for the Landeskirche, including a school, a dormitory, the St. Michael’s chapel, and an actual house for the ordered women. Activities included meetings of all sorts, schooling for immigrant Germans (e.g. from Poland), and recreation for refugee children.

At the age of almost seventy, Mater Christel relinquished the leadership of the Pathfinders’ association. In the last years of her life, now fully confident

that “evangelical orders, including the Casteller Ring, are the sign of a future that has already begun,” she concentrated on her liturgical and pastoral tasks. In 1965 she received a Bavarian medal for service, but more is revealed about her life’s work in the comments of a schoolgirl: “It was quite a special experience for us to see the sisters at prayer. We never knew ardor like that. And Christel, she was radiant before God.” One of the Casteller Ring sisters experienced in Mater Felizitas the model of a “strong, self-possessed woman who took a powerful stand in the world.”

At the end of 1968 Mater Felizitas handed over her office within the Casteller Ring community to Sr. Maria (Scholastica) Pfister. By this time the community had thirty-one members. On the anniversary of her confirmation, April 22, 1970, Christel died after a heart attack and was taken to her final rest in the new cemetery of the CCR located between the park and the forest. She had prepared herself the year before for her eventual death by writing a poem.

White hosts in golden shells  
Only still by the beating of a wing  
am I separated from paradise.

And I am out of time to stand  
within time.  
My space is empty.

A new path showed itself yesterday  
Shadows of light over it, and I—  
almost blind  
groping  
may follow along it. LF

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