



The story of a friendship

Pope John Paul II and Father Werenfried

It endured for almost 40 years - the moving friendship between the great Pope from Poland and the tireless helper of the Church in need around the world. Usually it is not easy to say when acquaintance turns into friendship. In the case of these two towering figures of the universal Church, in all probability, the blossoming of the relationship came with the construction of the spectacular “Ship Church” in Nowa Huta near Krakow, built with ACN funds **between 1967 and 1977**. Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was then Archbishop of Krakow, and Father Werenfried campaigned energetically among the benefactors for support for this immensely difficult undertaking. In one *Mirror* letter he described the construction of this church in the satellite town of Nowa Huta - planned as a city without God - as “one of the boldest campaigns ever carried through in a communist country”.

Thanks to our collaboration in this project, Father Werenfried was able to say, the day after the historic conclave of **16 October 1978** which elected the Pope: “I know him very well... He is known as a great supporter of social justice and for his opposition against oppression and injustice, on the communist as well as on the capitalist side, and he was always very courageous and unequivocal.” Father Werenfried congratulated the Holy Father, assuring him of our oneness in faith, in prayer and in action and pledged to place “our whole charity at the fraternal disposal of the suffering Church”. Pope John Paul II replied, thanking him in a letter of **6 November 1978**: “On this occasion I should like to thank you, Father, and your collaborators for your charitable work. I thank all your benefactors, who so eloquently bear witness to their Christian charity and their solidarity with the poor.”

In **March 1980** Father Werenfried wrote in the *Mirror*: “Pope John Paul II is a friend of our charity... We know him as a courageous man, of unshakable faith



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In 1999 Pope John Paul II gave Father Werenfried an image of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa.

and childlike love for the Mother of God. May God grant that through him the Lord's resurrection becomes a resurrection of the Church, so that she may once more understand that her only task is the Imitation of Christ.”

On **15 May 1981**, deeply shaken by the “terrible and sacrilegious attempt on the life of the Holy Father”, Father



13 May 1981 - an image that shook the world

Werenfried urged the benefactors “to unite in prayer begging our Lord to grant a speedy and full recovery to the visible Head of the Catholic Church, who is himself a son of the Church in need and a witness to its sufferings”.

In the same year, the General Assembly of ACN took place in Rome. On **16 November 1981** the participants were received in audience by the Pope. In his words of greeting, Father Werenfried expressed his profound respect for the Holy Father. John Paul II replied: “In the two-thousand-year history of Christian charity you have indeed made a moving and effective contribution, that is fittingly expressed in the name of your charity: Aid to the Church in Need. I address myself to dear Father Werenfried van Straaten, in order to express to him my gratitude for myself and on behalf of the many bishops, thousands of priests, religious men and women, novices, seminarians and millions of the ordinary faithful. I exhort you all anew, zealous co-workers of this beautiful charity of ecclesial solidarity, and impart to you my special apostolic blessing.”



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The “three Popes” - Father Werenfried and the Abbot General of the Norbertines, together with the Holy Father

On **6 November 1987**, on the occasion of the next General Assembly, Father Werenfried handed the Holy Father a plaque with the “Bacon Priest” motif and said: “*God has entrusted our charity to the popes. They have always wrapped us in the mantle of their protection...*” In his address, the Pope again paid tribute to the founder and his charity: “*Who can tell what it costs to launch and organise a Work of this kind, and who can measure the generosity it aroused for Christians in need?*”

Pope John Paul II and Father Werenfried also shared a lively sense of humour, as was demonstrated at their meeting on **3 December 1991**, during the European bishops’ synod in Rome. Father Werenfried and the Abbot General of the Norbertines were guests at the Holy Father’s table. Noting the similarity in their clothing during the photo shoot, the Holy Father remarked: “*What are people going to say about these three Popes?*” And when Werenfried addressed the synod about the help given by ACN to Eastern and Central Europe and for the new evangelisation, he remarked (alluding to his well-known slogan, “God is better than we think”): “*Even bishops are much better than we think*”, a comment which, as he later remarked, “*provoked a*

hearty laugh and warm applause from the usually solemn cardinals and his Holiness himself”.

From 1981 onwards, during his private audiences, Father Werenfried repeatedly asked the Pope to release him from his duties as head of ACN. The Holy Father’s answer was both friendly yet firm: “*You must carry on for ten more years... And this period might be extended.*”

In **1992**, in another of his many personal meetings with the Pope, the Bacon Priest obtained the blessing of the Pope for his help for the Orthodox Church in Russia. On **10 October 1993** Father Werenfried again addressed the Pope during the ACN General Assembly in Rome: “*We have come to bear testimony to our love and to thank Your Holiness for the kindness and support that we have so often been privileged to receive. We have also come to promise you that all of us present here, together with the 700,000 benefactors of our charity who pray and make sacrifices, all desire to remain your faithful children.*”

In the **autumn of 1994** Father Werenfried fell gravely ill and wrote his last testament. In his concern, the Holy Father sent a message of friendship and “get well” wishes, via Archbishop Giovanni B. Re: “*United with his most*

fervent blessing, the Holy Father wishes to convey to you his deep union of prayer. May Christ, the help of the sick, who through His sufferings has brought Salvation and Life to mankind, be for you a source of strength and new hope in your trials.” Within a few months Father Werenfried had recovered so well that he was able once again to actively take part in the work of ACN with his prayer and counsel.

On **8 October 1999** the Bacon Priest was received in audience by Pope John Paul II, together with the newly elected leadership of ACN. Father Werenfried assured him that “*every wish of the Pope is a command for us*”. This is also stated in his last testament.

In the Jubilee Year 2000, the founder of ACN, now suffering poor health, led his charity on a pilgrimage to Rome. There, he also celebrated his Diamond Jubilee of the priesthood. During Holy Mass in St Peter’s on **4 May 2000**, the Pope’s greetings were conveyed to him by Cardinal Castrillón, the direct superior of ACN in Rome. On **13 May** of the same year, Father Werenfried concelebrated Holy Mass with the Pope in Fatima.

27 April 2002 saw the last meeting between Father Werenfried and Pope John Paul II in Rome. Together with all the ecclesiastical assistants of ACN, the Holy Father concelebrated Holy Mass with him in his private chapel. Afterwards he gave him two personal gifts - his Paschal candle and an image of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa.

On **1 February 2003** the Holy Father conveyed his sympathies following the death of Father Werenfried. He described him as “*an outstanding apostle of charity*”. He gave thanks “*for the exemplary apostolic zeal he showed, in fidelity to the teaching and spiritual legacy of St Norbert, and also for his deep human and spiritual qualities and his commendable contribution to unity among Christians*”.

The moving story of this friendship fills us with pride and gratitude and is a great legacy for our charity, ACN. ●

Marek Zurowski

