

By Edward Pentin

ROME, January 24, 2013 (Zenit.org) - "The only worthwhile striving is after the highest ideals: If you aim for an easy target, your standard will inevitably decline, and no progress is ever made, except through real effort and real suffering."

These are words attributed to Fra' Andrew Bertie, the 78th Grand Master of the Order of Malta, whose cause for beatification is expected to open next month, according to informed sources.

Andrew Willoughby Ninian Bertie, a distant cousin of Queen Elizabeth II whose family has had royal ties for centuries, was the first Englishman to be elected to the post of Grand Master in the Order's 900 year history. He served in the Rome-based position from 1988 until his death in February 2008 at the age of 78.

But for all the lofty titles and blue blood, those who knew Fra' Andrew remember him as a down-to-earth yet eccentric personality, a true gentleman with impeccable manners, and greatly loved by former pupils at Worth Abbey School in Sussex, England, where he taught for 23 years.

"He was an extremely vivid person and one of the teachers whom the pupils all remember," said Father Stephen Ortiger, a colleague and friend at Worth, a Benedictine school. The priest said he felt Fra' Andrew would be "convulsed with laughter" if he heard his cause for beatification was to be opened.

He didn't have an aura of holiness, Father Ortiger said, "not because he wasn't holy but because he would rather die than exude an aura of holiness -- he would do everything by stealth and wouldn't wear his heart or his goodness on his sleeve."

"If he saw a balloon was coming," he said, "he would prick it."

Alumni of Worth recall how, on his way to breakfast each morning, Fra' Andrew would give the fullest possible voice to the Moslem call to prayer -- Allah u Akbar. "No other Roman Catholic school in England, indeed anywhere, could boast this distinctive feature and it stayed in the memory of many," said Father Ortiger. "He was deliberately zany and deliberately eccentric."

Highly knowledgeable, Fra' Andrew was employed to teach French and Spanish at Worth but would also happily teach a variety of other languages -- Russian, Tibetan and Sanskrit -- to anyone who asked him. He was also greatly interested in Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism, though was never a relativist wavering from the true faith. A judo black belt, he also learned the sport of fencing.

"I learned from him that the accumulation of knowledge was a lifelong obligation to oneself," said Father Ortiger, a trained aircraft pilot and former headmaster and abbot of Worth School and Abbey. "He was an inspiration to me and, I am sure, to the thousands who followed me at Worth. His knowledge of the world and mastery of so many languages was like opening an encyclopaedia when you spoke to him."

He was also ascetic, apparently wearing just two suits, and driving a rusty old Fiat during his summer holidays in Malta. He also liked the odd whisky or two (he could drink to be the last man standing, according to one acquaintance) and smoked Gauloises cigarettes.

Friends say he showed signs of heroic virtue, the primary requirements for sainthood, and had no shortage of fortitude, stability, humility and a profound sense of service. He also always had an eye for the underdog. "He was one of the most generous people I knew, an absolute gentlemen who would go to great trouble for people," said Father Ortiger. "He liked to offer hospitality."

Others who knew him remember Fra' Bertie (pronounced Barty) as a very humble and very focused individual with a deep devotion to Our Lady. He took care of the sick very seriously, and would love to visit Lourdes. Soon after arriving at Worth in 1960, Fra' Andrew began to promote Lourdes pilgrimages and pioneered visits from Worth and Downside, incorporating them into the Order of Malta Volunteers -- a group aimed at encouraging a sense of service in the young.

Friends say Fra' Andrew was never happiest than when at the service of young people, and many remember him for those Lourdes pilgrimages. "To be doing something useful for them was very important," said Father Ortiger, "to get them to think outside the box and to think in terms of Lourdes, about helping other people."

It was his concern for the sick that prompted him to join the Knights of Malta in 1956 and then, in 1981, to become a professed Knight -- to live under solemn vows. The Order's work for the poor and the sick is extensive, providing hospitals, hospices and medical services in some 120 countries. But more than merely setting up facilities, Fra' Andrew rolled up his sleeves and would regularly tend to the sick himself. As Grand Master, he would frequently visit San Giovanni Battista Hospital at La Magliana on the outskirts of Rome.

In an address to Pope Benedict XVI who visited there in 2007, Fra' Andrew recalled how the first hospitallers chose to dedicate their lives to those they called "our lords the sick." Remaining faithful to this choice, he said, "we, too, consider the sick the most important aspect of our mission."

Born in London in 1929, Fra' Andrew Bertie was the son of the Earl of Abingdon, a direct descendent of the Stuart line of monarchs. He was educated at Ampleforth College, a private Benedictine school in northern England, and graduated in Modern History from Christ Church, Oxford before moving on to study at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. From 1948 to 1950 he carried out military service in the Scots Guards, becoming a commissioned officer in 1949.

After taking Solemn Vows in the Order of Malta in 1981, he was elected to the Sovereign Council, the Order's ruling body, in 1983. Forced to choose between Worth and Rome, he felt he must go where his vows beckoned, and five years later he was elected Grand Master. He was perhaps "quite miffed" at being sent to Rome, Father Ortiger said, but he would never say it, accepting the change out of a sense of duty and obedience.

The Order of Malta grew exponentially during his time as head of the Order, where fellow members say he left a legacy of "selfless humility and service."

"As Grand Master, he combined intelligence with dignity and authority, presiding over the Order at this very difficult time in the history of Europe and its increasing secularisation," Prince Rupert Zu Loewenstein, president of the British Association of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, told mourners at Fra' Andrew's funeral. "In our area of influence he worked hard to increase the relevance of our ancient religious Order."

Regarded by those who knew him as someone in the world but not of the world, who always continued to strive after the highest ideals, many see the opening of his cause for beatification as a logical step -- even if he himself would be both amused and surprised.