



## Archabbot Emeritus and Abbot Primate Emeritus Dr. Notker (Werner) Wolf OSB

*Missionary Benedictine of Sankt Ottilien*

*21 June 1940 – 2 April 2024*

Abbot Notker Wolf died unexpectedly in the airport hotel in Frankfurt am Main in the late evening of 2 April. He had been accompanying a pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Benedict in Italy since Easter Monday. As he was increasingly feeling unwell, he took a flight home to St. Ottilien early. During the necessary overnight stay in Frankfurt, he died of a heart attack in his room. Only a few weeks earlier, his companion in profession and long-time prior Fr. Claudius Bals preceded him into eternity.

He himself and others have described his life in various publications, most notably in a biography that appeared in 2010. According to this, the family came from the Mosel region and ended up in the Allgäu during the war years, in Grönenbach, Unterallgäu District, Diocese of Augsburg, where Werner was born on 21 June 1940 as the first son of the tailor and factory worker Josef Wolf and his wife Katharina, née Haas. His childhood was characterized by deprivation and a lack of nutrition, so that the boy's growth was stunted and he was to suffer from stomach problems for the rest of his life. He only met his father after his return from captivity as a British prisoner of war in 1947. A daughter was born in 1952. Elementary school in Grönenbach was followed in 1951 by the Oberrealschule in Memmingen. The sickly but highly gifted boy found learning extremely easy, excelling particularly in music and languages. His life changed after reading the Ottilien monastery magazine *Missionsblätter*, which he came across by chance. The descriptions of magnanimous missionary life in exotic countries inspired him and he was able to convince his parents to enroll him in the St. Ottilien mission seminary.

The community of the mission seminary with its natural camaraderie, a broad-minded humanistic education, drama and music was to have a great influence on the boy. After graduating with straight A's in the summer of 1961, he went on a pilgrimage to La Salette and Ars with a fellow seminarian before entering the novitiate at the archabbey. He was given the name of the St. Gallen monastic scholar and poet Notker the Stammerer, whose musical activities attracted the monastic candidate. Further steps in monastic life included temporary profession on 17 September 1962 and solemn vows on 10 October 1965. With the winter semester of 1962, he began his philosophy studies at Sant'Anselmo. His time studying in Rome coincided with the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which, according to him, had a profound impact on him in the areas of liturgy, the understanding of church and mission. In the winter semester of 1965, he moved to Munich to study theology, where he took numerous courses in philosophy and various scientific subjects in preparation for his doctorate. He was ordained a priest on 1 September 1968 while still studying theology, which was quite common at the time. After graduating from the University of Munich in 1970, Father Notker began a doctorate in natural philosophy at Sant'Anselmo, supervised by Prof. Zeno Bucher OSB, whose successor he was probably intended to be, and at the same time began teaching in this subject area as well as in the philosophy of science and related issues. During these years, he also immersed himself deeply in the urban world of Rome, so that he would speak the Italian he was very familiar with, with its soft Roman accent. He completed his doctorate on the "cyclical world view of the Stoa" in 1974. He also directed the schola at Sant'Anselmo. He would later take up the title of the schola's "Jubilate Deo" recording as his abbatial motto.

There was a change in his life in the late summer of 1977. In a chain of events, Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland was unexpectedly appointed archbishop of Milwaukee at the Abbots' Congress, whereupon Archabbot Viktor Josef Dammertz of St. Ottilien was elected as his successor. The archabbey community then elected the Roman professor Notker Wolf as the new archabbot on 10 October 1977. Fortunately, the new Abbot Primate Viktor accompanied his successor to the 1977 General Chapter, whose reports and insights were a great help to the new abbey leader as he was introduced to the totally unfamiliar field of congregational leadership. Another stroke of luck was that the new superior was largely relieved of the burden of managing the house thanks to the highly competent Prior Paulus Hörger (1910–1996). At the time, out of around 1100 missionary Benedictines in total, the archabbey juridically had around 380 monks around half of whom were in the foreign missions. The style of the new head of the monastery was described as *rapidissimo* (very fast); although this was due to a high level of intelligence, a generous and trusting willingness to delegate, a distinctly fraternal style, and a humane sense of humor it was not perceived as detrimental.

Thanks to an extensive release from internal monastic duties, the archabbot was able to make several trips abroad to the houses of the Congregation every year. Thanks to the new archabbot's dynamic style there were a number of shifts in emphasis that enabled the Congregation to further necessary developments. These included the change from classic European missions to local indigenous churches and with it the related reorganization of the mission monasteries to focus on special diocesan tasks, the transition of primarily European communities into local communities, the accompaniment or integration of indigenous communities such as in India or Togo, new foundations such as in the Philippines with a primarily monastic approach and the opening to interreligious dialogue. Archabbot Notker was particularly interested in this, so he

encouraged the exchange between Christian and Buddhist monasteries, which continues to this day, and visited Buddhist monasteries in Japan many times for this purpose.

Archabbot Notker was particularly interested in exchanges with the church in China. After the expulsion of the European missionaries by the Chinese government in 1952, contact with the parishes established there was broken off. After an initial cautious opening up of China, Archabbot Notker undertook a trip to the former Diocese of Yenki/Yenji in northeast China in 1985. The remaining Christians, many of whom had suffered difficult fates, were reached by adventurous means. The archabbey then began a series of aid projects for the former mission areas (now the Diocese of Jilin) that included the construction of a new seminary, a hospital, churches, schools and kindergartens, social projects, further training for local priests and religious and much more. Human contacts were strengthened by numerous invitations to Germany and return visits to China. Several large Chinese bishops' delegations to Germany were particularly important for building confidence. A social commitment in the former mission territory of North Korea was achieved through the construction of a hospital near the former diocesan seat of Wonsan.

In St. Ottilien, Archabbot Notker guided a series of renewal processes such as the closure of facilities and operations that were no longer sustainable, the increased involvement of lay staff, liturgical renewal, and the major renovation of the church. In each case the community was fully involved so that there were few conflicts. Above all, however, he brought about changes in style that transformed a rather hierarchical style into a horizontal one. In doing so, he was not shy of contact and also appeared as the "rocking archabbot" with an electric guitar at performances by the former student band Feedback. He likewise mastered the classical repertoire, which he presented on the flute for decades at the serenade by the pond during the Benediktusfest.

Archabbot Notker was already under discussion as abbot primate at the Abbots' Congress in Rome in 1996. He rejected the idea, referring above all to the ongoing and very complex projects in China. However, when the question of a new abbot primate arose again in 2000, Archabbot Notker felt he could no longer refuse and so was available on 7 September. As Abbot Primate, he continued his usual traveling activities, something he also enjoyed doing. In addition to his language skills (besides German, he spoke fluent English, Italian, French and was able to express himself in several other languages) that were of great help to him in his visits to the monasteries, he benefited above all from his ability to engage with every situation and every person, showing a strong presence and genuine commitment. At Sant'Anselmo, a major renovation and modernization program was on the agenda, including renovation of rooms, new windows, an efficient internet system, reorganization of the university and much more, for which much coordination and committee work within the university and with the order, the Vatican and Roman authorities was necessary. On 13 October 2012 at the Abbots' Congress, he was confirmed for a further four-year term. At the following Abbots' Congress on 9 September 2016, he was then able to hand over the office to his successor Gregory Polan.

Before his return to the monastery, the Benedictine Confederation gave him the gift of a trip around the world so that the well-traveled abbot could visit with a little more leisure the places he had mostly only touched at a fast pace. He then returned to St. Ottilien, which he always called "my home" with great conviction. Even though he was now released from all obligations, he was still involved in the monastery in the areas of future planning, fundraising, public appearances and always found an appropriate word in community discussions. However, he also took on an impressive and sometimes an almost unbelievable workload of lectures, radio broadcasts, television appearances, retreats, liturgies, and events of all kinds, which took him all over Germany and the world. Thanks to an iron discipline and a great self-expectation of being available for his fellow human being, he managed this program, even if it sometimes took a toll on his health. On the other hand, the encounters with other people inspired and delighted him, so that his mammoth program was always an elixir of life for him. The high demands he placed on himself he formulated in his socially critical and spiritual writings, in which a great deal of freedom, but also a great deal of responsibility, is entrusted to and expected of the individual. The Liturgy of the Hours, which he readily and faithfully attended, and community life, which he obviously enjoyed, always remained a point of rest for him.

His literary activities deserve special mention. For decades, this was limited to occasional academic treatises and spiritual reflections. This was to change after his election as abbot primate with his somewhat less full obligatory program. The Hamburg-based Rowohlt publishing house invited him to produce a book in 2005, which resulted in the work *Worauf warten wir?* (What are we waiting for?) published the following year. This put forward provocative theses on the social situation in Germany and made Abbot Primate Notker a bestselling author. Since then, Abbot Notker annually published several books or wrote stimulating reflections for magazines, some of which had a high circulation and earned him a lot of sympathy with the public since he communicated his rich experiences of life and faith in a clear and understandable way.

Among the more than 30 honors and awards that Abbot Notker received, we will only mention the Bavarian Order of Merit (1986), the Grand Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (2007) and the Bavarian State Medal for Social Merit (2021) as well as two honorary doctorates and several honorary citizenships including Norcia and Grönenbach.

We are grateful for the many seeds that our confrere was able to sow during his life and pray that his last great journey led him to the one he proclaimed throughout his life!

*The requiem with burial is on Saturday, 6 April 2024, at 10:30 a.m., in the abbey church of Sankt Ottilien  
Archabbot Wolfgang Öxler and the Community of St. Ottilien Archabbey*