

‘Saintly man’ of Cumberland dies after life of service

A few years ago, Teresa Files gave Deacon Francis Werner Jr. a brand-new pair of gloves for Christmas. When she noticed a few days later that the longtime deacon and bookkeeper of St. Patrick in Cumberland was still wearing his old gloves, she asked him about the present.

“They were a gift, correct?” the deacon humbly asked his co-worker at the parish.

“Yes,” Files replied.

“And I’m allowed to do anything I want with a gift, correct?”

“Yes,” Files repeated.

Realizing what had likely happened, Files asked if her friend had given the gloves to the poor. The man just grinned, nodded and walked into his office.

“That’s the kind of person he was,” Files remembered. “He was very generous to the church’s true calling.”

Deacon Werner died Dec. 26 at age 89. A funeral Mass will be offered at St. Patrick Jan. 6 at 10 a.m.

Ordained in 1976, Deacon Werner spent all his diaconal ministry at St. Patrick and then Our Lady of Mountains in Cumberland after the Cumberland-area parishes united into a single faith community several years ago.

“He had a very deep faith, but it wasn’t a showy kind of faith,” said Capuchin Franciscan Father Gregory Chervenak, pastor of Our Lady of the Mountains. “He was very unassuming and never, ever drew attention to himself. He sacrificed himself for others.”

Files noted that although Deacon Werner had an important and demanding fulltime position working as a senior accountant in the finance department of Kelly

Springfield Tire Corporation for more than 38 years, he volunteered fulltime at St. Patrick as an accountant for much of that time.

“He worked more than 40 hours a week for us,” Files said, “yet he never once accepted a paycheck. That’s on top of everything he did as a deacon.”

Deacon Werner never wasted money, Files said, and he was extremely generous to the parish, the archdiocesan Heritage of Hope campaign and Bishop Walsh School in Cumberland.

“He never spent money on himself,” Father Chevernak said.

A 1946 graduate of LaSalle High School in Cumberland, Deacon Werner graduated from what is now Mount St. Mary’s University in Emmitsburg in 1950. He served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War from 1950 to 1952. He then worked for Kelly Springfield Tire Corporation.

Deacon Werner was active in the Knights of Columbus Council 586 and Alhambra Wamba Caravan 89. He served as the treasurer of St. Patrick’s St. Vincent de Paul Society and volunteered with many other parish organizations.

Father Chervenak said Deacon Werner had a “heart for others,” often visiting the sick. He was also involved in youth camps and assisted at numerous wakes and funerals.

Files remembered that Deacon Werner, whom she described as “extremely intelligent” and knowledgeable about current events, declined to preach homilies because he did not want to draw attention to himself. He also hated to sing in public. Once, when he was required as a deacon to sing the Exsultet at the Easter Vigil, Deacon Werner was a nervous wreck in the sacristy – almost to the point of becoming sick, Files said.

“He told me that he started to pray,” Files remembered, “and, somehow, he went out and did it. He said that it was with the help of the Holy Spirit that he was able to do it. He was very moved by that experience.”

Deacon Werner was a close friend of Bishop P. Francis Murphy, the late western

vicar. He was also a nephew of Bishop James Walsh, the Maryknoll missionary to China for whom Bishop Walsh School is named.

In a 2008 interview with the Catholic Review, Deacon Werner said he first met Bishop Walsh in 1938 when the future deacon took a “crash course” to become an altar server so he could serve Mass with Bishop Walsh in his hometown. Bishop Walsh decided to become a Maryknoll priest when Father Thomas Price, one of the co-founders of Maryknoll visited the Walsh family in Cumberland.

Throughout his life, Files said, Deacon Werner enjoyed a nightly glass of merlot. He loved crossword puzzles and walked everywhere he went in Cumberland.

“He was a very saintly man,” Files said.

Email George Matysek at gmatysek@CatholicReview.org.