FOUNDING THE FHF

The idea for the association of Friends of the Holy Father originated from a BBC Radio news item in 1979 when the then head of the Vatican’s financial affairs, Cardinal Egidio Vagnozzi, was interviewed. He reported that the Holy See’s annual budget deficit was spirally dangerously into the red, to the tune of £50 millions.

An organization had already been established in London to assist the Pope in 1926 called the Society for the Maintenance of the Apostolic See. It had wide support and continued to flourish until 1941, when Cardinal Hinsley reluctantly wound it up as Vatican City was by then cut off within enemy–occupied territory. He did so with the fervent hope that it would be “revived in happier times”.

Pope John Paul II in his first speech to the world after his election in 1978 exclaimed:

“ this unworthy successor of St. Peter, whose desire is to explore the unfathomable riches of Christ, has the greatest possible need of your help, your prayers, your self-sacrifice, and for this in all humility”. At the next annual meeting of the Catholic Union of Great Britain Dr. Michael Straiton suggested that we could respond to this call by forming an organization that would help the Pope directly, even in a modest way, to ease his heavy burden. The idea was well received.

Having obtained a letter of encouragement from Cardinal Vagnozzi and gaining the bishops’ permission to go ahead, a public meeting was advertised and held in London to gauge likely support, and the people came along. A volunteer came forward to organize membership and the Catholic Truth Society generously gave free use of a tiny office on the top floor of their office in Eccleston Square, London.

**Registered Charity**

Following a successful application for charitable status the Friends of the Holy Father officially came into being at their first public meeting held in June 1980 when the committee was elected : Colin Edwards, a chartered accountant, as chairman; journalist Leo Simmonds, David Murphy, the general secretary of the C.T.S., and Count Stanislas Grocholski , a veteran of the Polish forces fighting in WWII, as vice chairmen; Dr. Michael Straiton, a medical practitioner, as honorary secretary; Lord Craigmyle, the historian Rosemary Rendel and lawyer Martin Dean as members. The society was up and running with membership soon in the hundreds, aiming to offer the Holy Father modest but practical support, which it has continued to do ever since.

The society has been fortunate in having Mgr. Ralph Brown, the coordinator of the historic first Papal Visit to Great Britain in 1982, as its ecclesiastical adviser.

From the outset the Friends’ A**nnual Mass** for the Pope’s intentions has been celebrated in Westminster Cathedral by a prelate who then presides at the annual meeting afterwards.