

Father Wouters, Gerardus Augustinus Henricus, CM.

Gerrit Wouters was born in Breda on July 5, 1909, as the eldest son of the married couple Adrianus Josephus Wouters and Maria Johanna Hendriks.

After finishing his grammar school education at the minor seminary Wernhoutsburg in Zundert, he entered the Congregation of Mission (the Lazarists) in Helden-Panningen on September 17, 1928. Two years later, on September 18, 1930, he took his final vows.

On September 16, 1934, he writes to his Provincial Superior: "I will, of course, always go wherever God will call me, through you; there one will certainly be in one's place, but if it depends on me, I choose for the mission of China, to which I feel especially attracted of late."

His fellow student Adriaan Vermeulen later testified of him: "As a good student, Gerrit did not always hide behind the books, and understood that companionship in the world of a student made its demands, which one cannot ignore without penalty. And so he was always ready to help, was amiable and jovial in his relations with everyone, and knew how to enliven the joy of recreation with a well placed witty remark. He loved fun and laughter, while his own reserve prevented it from turning into exuberance. On evenings of stage performances he showed both his good taste and sympathy. Seriousness and geniality characterized him. One may safely say that



seriousness dominated with him. When he played the organ he gave of himself completely. Those who listened knew that he felt more deeply and was more serious than a superficial onlooker might guess. These character traits were expressed in a solid piety and simplicity." (Vermeulen, in Memoriam).

On July 21, 1935, he is ordained priest by the bishop of Roermond, Msgr. G. Lemmens in the parish church of Panningen. His superior writes: "Gerrit is a man with a deep religious conviction; he was interested in his studies, he performed well and quietly what he had to do, he has a good and sensitive heart, is blessed with a good intelligence and a clear mind, preaches well and with conviction, and is a capable organist. In the field of teaching one can entrust anything to him. One can count on

him." (Dossier Wouters in the Archives of the Lazarists, Panningen).

Together with his classmate Hubert Schlooz from Venlo he is appointed to the vicariate of Zhending, which is situated 260 km. South of Peking, where Msgr. Frans Schraven is bishop.

Ten days after his ordination, on July 31, his mother passes away. For his father's sake the day of departure to China is postponed for six weeks. Mid October he leaves with Hubert Schlooz.

On December 3, 1935, both young missionaries arrive in Shanghai and continue their journey via Peking to Zhending. There they meet both Msgr. Schraven and Brother Antoon Geerts from Oudenbosch.

Gerrit reserves the Chinese name 'Wei Zhi-gang'. His first task is to learn the Chinese language. In the cathedral of Zhending there is a high music culture. For many years the missionary Henri Alers played the cathedral organ, as well as the organ of the nearby minor seminary. He was the leader of the choirs and wrote many new compositions; for Health reasons he has lived at this time in the Netherlands. Gerrit would have replaced him quickly at the organ and before the choirs. During the year of 1937 the organ of the cathedral was completely overhauled by the Czech organ repairer Biscopitz.

At the beginning of the new school year 1936-1937 Gerrit is appointed to the minor seminary at Paitang, which is situated at a distance of 4 km. From Zhending. Father Jan Ramakers from Echt has been the superior there for many years already. Gerrit is given the job of teaching Latin and Greek, and, of course, with the music lessons. Each Sunday before High Mass he goes to the cathedral.

"At the seminary he settled in very well: the boys loved him, none of the Chinese priests had anything against him, on the contrary (...) and as for me, I often went to the seminary to talk with Gerrit for a few hours; a letter which either he or I had received from Holland would be read out aloud, and then: "Gerrit, keep well! Ber, keep well! Until next time." (Hubert Schlooz, Nov. 1937)



Father Wouters with brother Anton Geerts

The seminary is situated close to the railway line from Peking to Shijazhuang. During the summer of 1937, when the hostilities between Japan and China started, thousands of Chinese soldiers dug trenches along the railway line, because the Japanese troops would make use of it during their advance.

In the second half of September nearly 60 foreign priests take part in the yearly retreat at the residence of Zhending. On September 27 Msgr. Schraven tells them that, because of the war situation, they can stay in town, but most of them prefer to return to their own mission posts, so also Hubert Schlooz. Superior Jan Ramakers goes back to the seminary. Gerrit Wouters stays behind at the residence.

After heavy fighting Zhending is captured by the Japanese troops in the morning of October 9. On the mission property with the cathedral, residence, hospital, orphanage, several schools, and the three convents of brothers and sisters, there are now also staying thousands of refugees, mostly women and children. Soldiers climb over the walls, kick down gates to rob and plunder, but are called back by their own officers.

At 7 pm in the evening the bishop sits at table with all his priests for the evening meal. Suddenly ten soldiers run into the room; they handcuff the bishop, the 5 foreign priests, among whom Gerrit Wouters, two brothers, including Anton Geerts from

Oudenbosch and the organ repairer Biscopitz, and lead them away. The Chinese priests remain behind in shock.

Nobody knows where the nine men are taken. Many weeks later the whole World realizes that on that evening the nine chained men were murdered and burned some 300 meters from the mission. Their mortal remains were buried on the mission graveyard beside the seminary of Paitang.

Due to the tense political situation in China, Gerrit wrote in one of his letters: "I believe that our dear Lord does not know well that going to China is in itself already a big sacrifice, for He is often not content with it and demands more."

When he wrote this he did not know how soon the Lord would ask the greatest sacrifice from him.

For further information about the murder, see under Msgr. Schraven and Antoon Geerts.

Was signed: W. Bellemakers cm.