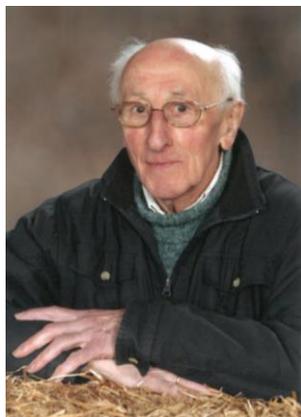


October 29, 2015

Death Notice No. 22 (To all Unit Administrations):



The Province of France recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother, **JOSEPH HILGERS**, priest, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on October 1, 2015 in La HULPE, Maison l'Aurore, Belgium, at the age of 93 with 77 years of religious profession.

Belgium is a small country with three official languages: French, Flemish and German. Father Joseph Hilgers, like many Belgian religious, was from the German-speaking region. The eldest of eight children, he was born in Elsenborn on October 25, 1921, into a family of Christian farmers. Joseph began to think very early on about giving himself to God: "Since the age of seven, when I made my First Communion, I felt called to the priesthood. When I was eleven years old, a Marianist recruiter came to us. He spoke about the Society of Mary and his words awakened in me the desire to consecrate my life to the Blessed Virgin." So in September 1933 he left the world of his family and his mother tongue to enter the Postulate of Rèves. Four years later, he was admitted to the Novitiate of St Remy-Signeulx, where he made his first vows on September 24, 1938.

Joseph pursued his studies in Rèves, but the storm was brewing and war broke out. After Pentecost of 1940, drafted into the Belgian army, he was evacuated with an entire group of Marianist religious to the south of France, in the region of Béziers, when he worked in the vineyard and rendered other services.... At the end of August, the group was divided and Joseph was sent back to Rèves. While continuing his studies, he began teaching. In 1941 he earned the equivalent of the *baccalauréat* and the primary teaching certificate.

That same year, seeing that he would certainly be drafted into the German army (which did happen in November), his request for renewal of vows was marked by his insistence about the total gift of self he wanted to make in the Society of Mary, whatever might come. After one month of basic training in the *Wehrmacht*, he was sent to the front.... When on leave, several times he stayed in the Marianist houses in Germany and Austria. Towards the end of the war, in charge of a unit of soldiers, he encouraged them to surrender to the Americans rather than to the Soviets in the area around Berlin. Made prisoner, he stayed in a camp on a peninsula in the Baltic Sea before being transferred to the camp at Vilvorde in Belgium, where he was freed on October 18, 1945.

The war had hit his family hard: his brother Nicola, a Marianist novice, also drafted into the German army, was killed in the Berlin area (the family did not learn of his death until 1950!); another brother and a sister also died during that period.

After a visit to his family, he went to Antony and prepared for the *baccalauréat* in Scholastic philosophy at the Institut Catholique in Paris. In Paris he made his perpetual vows on September 12, 1947, before going to Brugelette, Belgium, where he taught for a year.

From 1948 to 1952, Joseph Hilgers was a seminarian in Fribourg, Switzerland. He was ordained there on July 22, 1951, by Bishop Charrière.

During his seminary, our brother took pains to make the Society of Mary known through small publications or notices in magazines and newspapers in Flanders and the German-speaking region of Belgium, in Luxembourg and in Holland. For the sake of recruitment in the Flemish region, he spent the summers of 1949 and 1950 in Holland to perfect his use of Dutch and he toured by train and bicycle.... That concern shows up very strongly in his correspondence with his Superior. Joseph alerted him to the background of the non-French-speaking postulants and insisted that that be taken into account at the Postulate of Rèves, because of the boys who were leaving it after two or three years. He also strongly urged an openness to the foreign missionary vocation, which was finding a resonance among the youths.

Young Father Hilgers continued his own studies at Louvain and was responsible for the scholastics who were studying there. After earning his licentiate in philology and classics, he returned to Rèves in 1954, where he was a teacher and chaplain. He had a great missionary spirit and developed youth movements, like the Scouts of Pont-à-Celles. He also served as assistant pastor in the parish....

When Father Pierre Cerfont died suddenly, Joseph accepted the position of Director of the Institut Ste Marie from 1963 to 1980. He was everywhere, even driving the school bus. Fatigue followed from overwork and he often fell asleep, even when visiting homes....

Joseph had a personality which tended to hide his timidity and emotionalism. He would explode occasionally, but was also full of human kindness.

After his difficult time as Director of the *collège*, he continued his mission as the pastor in Rèves from 1980 to 2006, and three years more as assistant pastor.

When the community left Rèves, Father Hilgers had always wanted to serve at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Poor in Banneux, thanks to his knowledge of the three national languages. He lived in a reception center near the Shrine. After a few months, his health began to deteriorate, and he had to move into the local rest home for two months before being transferred closer to Brussels so that we might be able to visit him more easily. He had scarcely arrived at La Hulpe, when his health declined rapidly and he left to join the Father on the day that we celebrate St. Therese of the Child Jesus.

Father Hilgers was very attached to our Marian vocation. He worked very hard to make the Virgin Mary known, loved and served, especially in the Marianist *Fraternités*. Through Father Émile Neubert, while he was a seminarian, he had developed relationships with many priests of the Legion of Mary; he said he felt himself to be on the same wavelength as they were and that they were probably relaying each other for vocations in Flanders and Holland....

May the Blessed Virgin Mary welcome him to be with her.