

BROTHER JOHN TOTTEN, SM



The Marianist Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother, JOHN TOTTEN, of the Marianist Residence Community (San Antonio, Texas), who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on April 28, 2017, in San Antonio, Texas, USA, at the age of 103 with 83 years of religious profession.

The oldest member of the Province of the United States, Brother John was a respected educator who was known for his great love and knowledge of Marianist studies. In his later years, he became a cherished wisdom figure.

John Reynolds Totten was born on October 21, 1913, at Fort Monroe, Virginia, one of two boys in the family of James and Julia (Walke) Totten. His was a military family that moved often, and Brother John attended school in a variety of places, including the Panama Canal Zone. He graduated from Main Avenue High School in San Antonio, Texas.

He had expected to join the military like his father, but was drawn to religious life. At age 18, he decided to enter the Jesuits, but was told he needed to brush up on his Latin. He sought help at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, where he met Marianists for the first time. He later wrote that he was "deeply impressed by the family spirit of the brothers there." And so he chose a different path.

Brother John entered the postulate at Maryhurst in Kirkwood, Missouri, in 1932. He entered the novitiate in 1933, and professed first vows at Maryhurst on January 22, 1934.

Brother John spent a few years as a librarian at Marianist schools in Texas, Missouri and Illinois before earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics at St. Mary's University in 1939. He taught at schools in St. Louis, Missouri, including Chaminade College Preparatory (1939-1941), Eugene Coyle (1941-1942), Maryhurst (1942-1946) and De Andreis (1948-1949). He also taught at Central Catholic High School in San Antonio (1946-1948). In these early years, he taught math, science, religion and English, and was the moderator for sodalities, science clubs and student councils.

He professed perpetual vows at Maryhurst on June 30, 1939, and he earned a second bachelor's degree (library science) at Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio in 1941.

Brother Bill Chewning, 11 years Brother John's junior, was at one time his student. "John Totten was an excellent teacher of math and chemistry," Brother Bill said. "However, his

greatest gift was that he was a very astute scholar of the Society of Mary – its history and traditions.”

Brother John served for a year on the staff of Catholic Authors Press in St. Louis, a publishing and distribution center for Catholic educational literature. Here Brother John worked alongside Father John Leies. “Brother John was always very assiduous and very pleasant to be with,” said Father John. “He didn’t engage in a lot of ordinary small talk, but he had a great interest in intellectual projects.”

Brother John was then called to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to teach at Don Bosco High School from 1950 to 1954. Later in 1954, he returned to San Antonio, teaching for two years at Central Catholic. By studying over the summers, he earned a master’s degree in philosophy in 1956 from Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Brother John then spent a year on staff at the scholasticate in San Antonio. His dedication to the Blessed Mother and scholarship in the Society of Mary made him well-suited to work in Marianist formation. He wrote a paper titled “Mary’s Apostolic Role in History,” and was one of the presenters at the first Marian Institute at the University of Dayton in 1953.

“Of all Marianists, John Totten had the greatest influence upon me as a Marianist,” said Father Nobert Burns, who met Brother John in the early 1940s. “He inspired me to want to spend my life in houses of formation.”

Now in his mid-40s, Brother John embarked upon the phase of his ministry for which he may be best remembered. In 1957, he became a professor of philosophy at St. Mary’s University, a role he would hold for the next 28 years. Among the courses he taught was a popular class called “Marriage and Family,” to which many alumni would later credit the success of their marriages.

Father Franz Schorp taught in the philosophy department with Brother John. “Brother John said that when you take a vow to teach, teaching should be more than instruction. The instruction should turn into education that forms Christians,” said Father Franz.

Among the comments on a Facebook post noting Brother John’s death were the following: “An amazing philosophy professor and person.” “Your lessons have stayed with me.” “One of my favorite professors.” “A brilliant teacher.” “One of the purest souls to visit this earth.” “He always represented faith, reason and intelligence … and an ever-present smile.”

Brother John retired from St. Mary’s in 1981, but continued to share his gifts as a teacher by serving at the Marianist Formation Community for the next three years.

Within the Society of Mary, Brother John was elected to both the St. Louis Provincial Chapter and the General (international) Chapter. He also was the author of the textbook: "A Philosophy of Science in the Thomist Tradition," as well as myriad articles and monographs.

"Bro. John emerged as one of the top 10 interpreters of the thought of Father Chaminade among all Marianists in our history," said Brother Larry Cada, resident scholar at the North American Center for Marianist Studies. "In this he influenced the course of Marianist studies, especially in the United States," said Brother Larry.

"I never had Brother John as a teacher," said Father Stephen Tuts, age 91, "but he had a great impact on my life as a Marianist. He wrote long proposals by hand for the Provincial Chapter, and I was assigned to type them for him. I learned so much about our Marianist heritage from him in this way," said Father Stephen.

In his later years at the Marianist Residence Community, Brother John remained active, participating in the "Marianist Friends" program, which pairs elderly Marianists with St. Mary's students for friendship and mutual encouragement. With his gentle ways and quiet smile, he was popular among the students.

"A life like his is a ripple in a river, the goodness of God reaching out to so many," wrote Maria McRae on Facebook. "Thank you, God, for allowing our brother to be with us for so many years."

May he rest in peace.