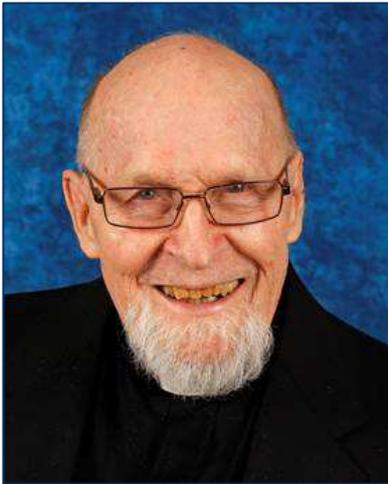


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Death Notice No. 9 (To all Unit Administrations):



The Marianist Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother, **ROBERT EARLE BACKHERMS**, priest, of the Siena Woods Community (Dayton, Ohio), who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on April 18, 2016, in Dayton, Ohio, USA, at the age of 88 with 69 years of religious profession.

Father Bob served the Society of Mary and the Church as a high school teacher, retreat leader and administrator. He spent several years in formation work in India and Eastern Africa. He was a self-professed “general practitioner” in ministry who will be remembered for his joyful, generous spirit.

Father Bob was born on April 17, 1928, in Akron, Ohio. He was one of four children in the family of Alvin and Ruth (Roberts) Backherms. The family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where young Bob met the Marianists at Purcell High School.

He entered the novitiate at Beacon, New York, and professed first vows a year later, on August 18, 1946. He earned a bachelor’s degree in education from the University of Dayton in 1949. Father Bob began his long teaching career that autumn, with a three-year stint at North Catholic High School (now Cardinal Wuerl North Catholic) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He taught theology, Latin and English, and greatly enjoyed assisting with drama and cheerleading.

“As a high school student at Purcell in the 1940s Bob was a cheerleader – thus beginning a lifelong ministry of ‘cheerleading,’ especially as a Marianist,” said longtime friend Brother Tom Schroer. “Bob was always positive, smiling and encouraging.”

Father Bob taught one more year – at Chaminade High School in Dayton, Ohio – before entering the seminary at Fribourg, Switzerland in 1953. Father Bob immersed himself in academics and earned STB and STL degrees. He was ordained in Fribourg on July 22, 1956, and stayed on to earn a doctorate in sacred theology in 1958. He wrote his thesis on religious joy.

For the following two years, Father Bob returned to teaching at Chaminade (1958-1959) and North Catholic (1959-1960). He was then called to serve in formation for four years at the Marianist postulate in Beacon, where he taught religion and French.

Beginning in 1964, Father Bob ministered as Assistant for Apostolic Action for the former New York Province. He remained in that role until 1968.

Father Bob returned to the classroom in 1968, teaching at St. James High School in Chester, Pennsylvania. He taught religion, led campus ministry and served as moderator of a number of clubs.

A St. James High School alumnus, Mike Wasno, began a lifelong connection with the Marianists because of Father Bob.

“Bob’s excitement for life and prayer attracted me to the Marianists over 38 years ago. In high school he moderated the Adventure and Experience Club – we did clowning workshops, a huge paper airplane contest, and so much more,” Mike said. “Bob taught me that being silly and fun is a great way to evangelize.” Mike currently is chairman of the Marianist Lay Network of North America.

Father Bob remained at St. James through 1980, with time out for a one-year sabbatical beginning in 1973. During this time, Father Bob also became involved in the Catholic charismatic movement, a calling he pursued in various places for more than a decade.

Now beginning his fourth decade of ministry, Father Bob was called to teach at Chaminade High School in Hollywood, Florida, where he remained until 1985. That same year, he embarked on a new role, serving as a retreat leader at the Marianist Retreat Center at Cape May Point, New Jersey.

“We enjoyed summer family weeks at the Cape with this special man,” wrote Grace Leone Whitmore on Facebook. “We are grateful for his years of service and for the joy he brought to the family retreats.”

Father Bob considered himself a “general practitioner” priest; he enjoyed variety. This attitude served him well. From 1992-1995, he served as assistant director of novices for the Region of India. He also served in the Region of Eastern Africa, ministering in Zambia and Kenya for periods of time between 1995 and 1998. Father Bob said these years working in unfamiliar cultures were “to my own great spiritual benefit.”

Upon returning to the United States, Father Bob tackled a different role, serving at the Marianist Provincial House in Baltimore, Maryland, as archive director for the former New York Province. He held that post from 1998-2001.

“Bob saw the good in everyone and in each situation. He was very generous with his time and willing to help wherever and whenever he was asked,” said Father Pat Tonry, formerly a provincial of the New York Province. “Bob was a man of vibrant faith who was wide open to the Holy Spirit and to all that life could offer.”

In 2001, Father Bob became a member of the pastoral care team at St. Leonard’s, a health care facility for elderly and infirm religious in Centerville, Ohio. He assumed a similar role when the Marianists moved to the nearby Siena Woods Community.

Brother Jim Vorndran worked with Father Bob during part of this time. “He was absolutely the Energizer Bunny,” said Brother Jim, citing an advertising character known for endless energy. “He always had projects in mind, such as organizing a wheelchair dance for residents.” Brother Jim noted that Father Bob had eagerly gone up in a hot air balloon despite being in his senior years.

As years went on, Father Bob transitioned again – this time to being on the receiving end of care at Siena Woods. He retained his cheerful nature and his trademark signature, which conveyed his joy and his pride in the Society of Mary: “Keep SMiling.”

May he rest in peace.