August 31, 2020

Biography of Death Notice No. 18

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother, **Hugh BIHL,** of the Marianist Residence Community of San Antonio, Texas, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on July 27, 2020, in San Antonio, Texas, at the age of 89 with 67 years of religious profession.

Brother Hugh was an educator and theologian who had a passion and gift for sharing the Marianist charism. His long ministry included a decade teaching in Nairobi, Kenya, an experience he greatly treasured. His most important legacy may be as a mentor, formator and developer of Marianist Lay Communities. He was, like Father Chaminade, a developer of people. And many of those he developed went on to become leaders in the Marianist Family and the Church.

Hugh William Bihl was born on September 30, 1930, in Lynbrook, New York. He and a sister, Mary Alice, were the children of Albert and Alice (Harrigan) Bihl. Young Hugh attended St. Joseph Elementary School in Garden City and Chaminade High School in nearby Mineola. It was at Chaminade that he first encountered Marianist brothers and priests.

"My Marianist life began when I was a freshman at Chaminade," Brother Hugh later wrote. "I strolled into the opening session of the after-school sodality meeting and I heard (the brother) speaking about 'Mary's big job' and how we could be part of it. I was hooked instantly."

At the insistence of his parents and in spite of his own preferences, Hugh delayed entry into the novitiate until he was nearly 21 and had completed two years of college at Fordham University. He joined the novitiate at Marcy, New York in August 1951 and professed first vows there on September 5, 1952.

Brother Hugh completed a bachelor's degree in English at UD in 1953 and began teaching at Chaminade High School (now Chaminade Julienne) later that year. He professed perpetual vows on August 15, 1956, in Dayton. He remained at Chaminade through mid-1959 and then taught at Cathedral Latin School in Cleveland, Ohio, for the following three years.

Brother Tim Phillips first met Brother Hugh when he was a freshman and a member of the sodality guided by Brother Hugh at Cathedral Latin. Their paths would cross again many times in the ensuing decades. "Brother Hugh had a passion for Mary and Marianist life," said Brother Tim, calling Brother Hugh a great mentor. "He understood how people worked … he excelled at leading people to make a commitment to the Marianist spirit."

During his time in Cleveland, Brother Hugh worked toward a master's degree in English from Case Western Reserve University, which he was awarded in 1962.

In January of 1962, Brother Hugh began teaching English at the University of Dayton and was also named to a new provincial position: Sodality Secretary. As such, he spearheaded development of post-high school Marianist sodalities, known now as Marianist Lay Communities. "I began with a group of four or five people at UD who had shown an interest in their faith, meeting with them individually and as a group," Brother Hugh said decades later in an article in Marianist *Alive* magazine. Brother Hugh's work in lay faith formation yielded great fruit. As one example, the Visitation Marianist State Community, which he helped found, is one of the oldest continually

operating Marianist Lay Community in the United States.

"Brother Hugh dedicated his life to Mary's mission, to cultivating a family of mature faith and hope," said Marge Cavanaugh, a 52-year member of the Visitation State Community. "He always looked deeply into the times, asking penetrating and uncomfortable questions, inspiring communities to responsibility and action. And yet with Hugh there was also patience, humility, humor, joy and singing."

From 1967 to 1976, Brother Hugh lived and worked at communities in Cincinnati, Ohio, and nearby Covington, Kentucky. He taught English at Purcell High School (now Purcell Marian) and Covington Catholic High School, served as director of multiple communities, and continued his work as sodality moderator, helping create and develop young adult and adult faith communities.

For most of the next two years, Brother Hugh attended Fordham University in his native New York. He earned a master's degree in theology in 1978. He then returned to Cincinnati, continuing his work mentoring adult sodalities while also serving on the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission. He returned to the University of Dayton in 1980 and taught theology and peace studies for the following three years.

During the mid-1980s, Brother Hugh was back in New York. He worked toward a doctorate in theology and also spent time teaching at the College of St. Elizabeth and serving in the deacon formation program in the Diocese of Metuchen in nearby New Jersey. He was awarded the doctorate in 1987 and later wrote that the studies were "an important spiritual as well as an intellectual experience. It was a movement of grace as well as a call to deeper prayer."

Now in his fourth decade of ministry, Brother Hugh accepted a post teaching at Xavier University in New Orleans, the only Black Catholic college in the United States. Grateful for the exceptional opportunity, he later referred to this as a "fascinating stint" and "a mind-blowing experience."

In 1989, Brother Hugh was asked to leave the students and culture he'd come to love at Xavier to serve in Kenya. True to his vows, he agreed.

For the following decade, Brother Hugh ministered in Nairobi. He taught systematic

theology at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary and again worked to create and develop lay communities. He came to be considered one of the instrumental founders of Marianist Lay Communities in Kenya and is remembered for his sense of humor and "the spirit of Mary within him."

"In a time when very few people knew what a religious brother in the Church was, he shone a bright light on what the vocation of a brother is and needs to be," wrote Father Gabriel N. Kirangah, Regional Superior of the Marianist Region of Eastern Africa. He called Brother Hugh a "generous and good formator" and "a welcoming and fraternal Marianist."

Among his former seminary students are numerous priests and two bishops. One of the priests he taught wrote, upon hearing of Brother Hugh's death: "He really inspired our class. We will continue to do a lot for the Church from his inspiration, a small thing that builds the Kingdom of God."

Brother Hugh, now 70, returned to the United States in late 2000. After a year's sabbatical, he moved into the Marianist Novitiate Community in Dayton, continuing informally as a formator and mentor. He also contributed his deep theological knowledge and Marianist experience as a volunteer at the North American Center for Marianist Studies. "This dimension of Hugh's life is often overlooked," said Brother Tom Giardino, who first met Brother Hugh as a student at Cathedral Latin's Sodality and became a lifelong friend. "Hugh was an intellectual. He produced significant writings in theology, Marianist spirituality and apostolic method."

In 2008, at the request of the Superior General Father Manual Cortés, Brother Hugh moved to Davao City in the Philippines to serve at the fledgling novitiate. For nearly two years he taught and provided spiritual direction to the aspirants and novices, adding what Father Manual called "the gracious gravitas of a brother of your standing" to the young community. He returned to Dayton and to work at NACMS in 2010.

From 2014 to 2015, Brother Hugh lived at the Maui Marianist Community in Hawaii, assisting with parish work as he was able. For health reasons, he moved the Marianist Residence Community in 2015.

Through his teaching, mentoring and the example of his life, Brother Hugh guided thousands of students, novices, seminarians and Lay Marianists into a richer apostolic faith experience in the spirit of Mary. These faithful men and women, and the countless lives they continue to touch, are Brother Hugh Bihl's greatest legacy.

May he rest in peace.