



**Society of Mary - Compañía de María - Société de Marie**  
*Via Latina 22, 00179 Roma*



**July 1, 2021**

### **Biography of Death Notice N. 16**

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother **Norbert J. KARPFINGER** of the Marianist Residence Community in San Antonio, Texas, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on June 23, 2021, in San Antonio at the age of 89 with 69 years of religious profession.

Brother Norbert was a beloved teacher, administrator, and prolific letter-writer – whose fruitful advocacy for the poor and disadvantaged was profiled in The New York Times in 2013. Reflecting on the decades he'd spent as a Marianist in early 2021, Brother Norbert wrote an appreciation of his vocation: "It is difficult to imagine that I am celebrating 70 years of Marianist religious life. I believe that I have been greatly blessed the entire time."

Norbert Joseph Karpfinger was born on May 20, 1932, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was one of seven children in the family of Karl and Maria (Neuhauser) Karpfinger, both immigrants from Vienna, Austria.

Baptized in 1932 at his home parish of St. Lawrence in Milwaukee, young Norbert attended the parish grade school and would first encounter the Marianists at Don Bosco

High School. He recalled receiving an invitation – as a high school student – to consider religious life from Brother John Kurz. “The response was positive, and the rest is history,” he wrote on the occasion of his 60<sup>th</sup> jubilee.

Following high school, Norbert entered the Society of Mary in the summer of 1950 at Galesville, Wisconsin. He professed first vows in 1951 and perpetual vows on July 16, 1956, all at Marynook. For his scholasticate years, Norbert studied first at Maryhurst in Kirkwood, Missouri, and then at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas, earning a bachelor of arts in 1954 with a major in Mathematics.

Brother Norbert would spend most of the next 43 years teaching and coaching at high schools across the province, with assignments that included McBride (St. Louis), Assumption (East St. Louis, Illinois), Roncalli (Pueblo, Colorado), Vianney (Kirkwood), St. Mary’s (St. Louis), Thomas More (Milwaukee) and Vincent Gray Alternative School (East St. Louis). In the early 1960s, he earned a Masters of Arts in Mathematics from Washington University (St. Louis) and a Master of Science in Mathematics University of Notre Dame. In addition, Brother Norbert held administrative positions at several of the high schools where he served through the years.

Retiring from the classroom in 1997, Brother Norbert began what he termed “the second section of my life,” focused on the poor people his community served in East St. Louis. With the encouragement of Brother John Laudenbach, Brother Norbert joined the staff at the Catholic Day Care Center in that city. There he helped young children develop basic computer skills, but his primary role was development – raising funds to keep tuition costs low.

Brother Norbert’s chosen tool for this development work was the handwritten letter. “I wrote letters to just about everyone I knew, and the response was generous,” he said. “Then I wrote thank-you notes to all those who shared.” Over the next 15 years, Brother Norbert averaged writing about 600 letters annually – and in the process managed to raise \$50,000 to \$60,000 each year on behalf of the daycare center.

This fund-raising work got a significant boost when one of Brother Norbert’s nephews contacted an editor at *The New York Times* to suggest a human-interest story. The resulting article produced nearly 150 new donors and attracted more than \$100,000 in donations in 2013. By the time Brother Norbert retired from the daycare staff in 2016, it’s estimated that his letters – all written on the same clipboard he’d been using since 1954 – had raised more than \$1.3 million for the ministry.

Even after moving to the Marianist Residence Community in San Antonio, Brother Norbert remained faithful to his letter-writing work until the end of his life – both continuing to thank donors who supported the Catholic Daycare Center and joining the Ministry of Gratitude program on behalf of Marianist Mission.

Brother John Laudenbach reflects gratefully on the many years he lived in community with Brother Norbert in East St. Louis. He marvels at how Brother Norbert, despite “possessing disturbingly poor handwriting (due, he claimed, to the fact that he was forbidden to crawl on the family’s dirt floor), still jumped into a robust handwritten fundraising campaign.” But no less impressive in Brother John’s mind was Brother Norbert’s devotion to his life as a Marianist. Through the years, he always “maintained his loyalty to community prayer life and cooking – chicken and homemade pumpkin pie every Tuesday!”

Director of Marianist Mission Linda Hayes recalls that “Brother Norb knew the power of a grateful heart. He was steadfast in his devotion to writing thank-you letters and delighted to be a part of our Ministry of Gratitude program. He was a gift to our donors and to the Marianist Mission.”

Brother Norbert himself once noted, “I think that my service of writing thank you notes is very appropriate for me. I have lived in gratitude all these years due to God’s goodness, and Jesus and Mary have been my constant companions.”

May he rest in peace.