

July 20, 2022

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother Robert Hanss of the Marianist Residence Community in San Antonio, Texas, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on July 10, 2022, in San Antonio at the age of 88 with 66 years of religious profession.

Brother Robert “Bob” was a beloved teacher, professor, geologist, missionary, novice master and community director. While devoting much of his life to the classroom, he felt particularly blessed by the years he spent in parish ministry – work that brought him in close touch with the poor and gave him a new “way to know Jesus.”

Robert E. Hanss was born on August 17, 1933, in St. Louis, Missouri. He was the eldest of three children in the family of Joseph and Margaret (McNamara) Hanss.

Baptized as an infant, he attended St. Engelbert School as a youth before encountering the Marianists, first at McBride High School and then at DeAndreis High School in St. Louis. He fondly recalled how the Brothers helped him develop an affection for mathematics and science, his favorite subjects, and how they broadened his interests to include the school paper and playing on the basketball and baseball teams as a second-stringer. After high school, Bob earned a bachelor of science degree in Mining/Geology from the Rolla School of Mines (now Missouri S&T University). His constant companion during those undergraduate years was a book he and his classmates had studied during high school: “My Ideal, Jesus Son of Mary.”

Bro. Bob entered the Society of Mary in 1954 at Marynook in Galesville, Wisconsin, and professed first vows there a year later. Next, he entered scholastic studies – first at Maryhurst in St. Louis and then at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas. He professed perpetual vows on July 19, 1959, in St. Louis.

Brother Bob began his teaching career at Marianist high schools in San Antonio and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, before entering graduate studies in 1961 at Washington University in St. Louis. He earned a Ph.D. in Geophysics in 1965, preparing him to launch a 20-year stint on the faculty at St. Mary’s University – where he served for a time as Chair of the Geology Department. Brother Bob later pursued additional graduate studies at Stanford University (Palo Alto, California) and Wayne State University (Detroit, Michigan) to augment his expertise as a geologist. He was once called upon by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to analyze rock samples brought back from the moon by Apollo astronauts.

While on staff at St. Mary’s, Brother Bob also collaborated in formation work at the scholastic during the 1960s and ‘70s, a role he would describe as “a challenge” given the tenor of the times. By the early 1980s, Brother Bob discerned that he was being called to a ministry outside the classroom, which he would pursue in earnest by heading to Mexico in 1985. He lived there for the next 25 years, discovering in a variety of roles that his “sense of collaboration in the mission of Mary at the foot of the cross has become more real for me,” as he wrote on the occasion of his 50th Jubilee.

This sense of solidarity was obvious to Father Quentin Hackenewerth, who lived and worked with Brother Bob for many years in Mexico. “Brother Bob had a great compassion for the poor,” Father Quentin says. “I do not believe any poor person left our house empty-handed.” Many of the same qualities animated the formation work they did together. “In formation, we try to help candidates overcome their faults,” Father Quentin notes, “but Brother Bob focused much more on developing their potential good. Perhaps he said an unkind word to someone, somewhere, but I never heard one. And it was an inspiration to be with Brother Bob during silent meditation in chapel – he always seemed to be completely absorbed in God.”

From the time Brother Ed Longbottom first met Brother Bob in Mexico in 2005, he was impressed by his kindness. “Bob only spoke kindly to and about others,” Brother Ed says. “There were some who took advantage of that, and yet, when a brother brought this to his attention, he would courteously tell them they must be mistaken. Bob’s voice was soft and measured, his look was compassionate, and his smile was genuine. I think these all reflected the abundant kindness he possessed.”

Father Jim Schimelpfening remembers crossing paths many times through the years, beginning with his time as a scholastic at St. Mary’s, where he experienced Brother Bob as a man of deep faith and prayer. “His commitment to prayer was evident in both his personal prayer as well as his commitment to community prayer,” Father Jim says. “As a professed Marianist, Bob was involved with the whole Marianist Family, accompanying lay men and women in their Marianist formation. Bob was also a good strong witness to young Marianists in formation in Mexico, demonstrating a deep commitment to Marianist religious life and to the poor. For me personally, Brother Bob was an older brother ready to guide and support, an exemplary person, man of faith, and ‘Brother of Mary.’”

Novitiate classmates Father Gerry Haby and Father Jim Tobin both fondly remember Brother Bob as a quiet and prayerful man.

While admiring Brother Bob’s work as a mining engineer and geologist, Father Gerry noted that his classmate “loved working with people more than rocks.” He was impressed by the many different roles Brother Bob played (teacher, professor, department chair, community director, and novice master, among others) and the many locations in which he served (Wisconsin, Missouri, Texas, Ecuador, Mexico). “Brother Bob was a nonobtrusive, efficient, effective presence in our communities and apostolic works, a Marianist missionary inculcating the Marianist Charism,” Father Gerry says.

For his part, Father Jim considered Brother Bob an inspiration. “I had a sense that he took his vocation seriously and had a deep and personal love of our Lord and our Blessed Mother, and a firm commitment to his Marianist vocation,” Father Jim says. “He served the Society of Mary well both in the classroom and for many years in Mexico. He was open to go wherever he was sent. Then due to Alzheimer’s, he carried a heavy cross of diminishing health, bearing it with peaceful acceptance for many years. I am sure our Blessed Mother welcomed him home with love and gratitude for serving her with the gift of his life.”

May he rest in peace.