



Society of Mary - Compañía de María - Société de Marie
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January 24, 2023

Biography of Death Notice N. 39

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother, **Alva James GILLIS**, of the Marianist Residence Community, San Antonio, Texas, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on December 31, 2022, in San Antonio, at the age of 92 with 37 years of religious profession.

Brother Al was a pastoral minister, a maintenance worker, and a valued volunteer. His varied life experience enabled him to connect easily with people. Brother Al had an unusual path to the Marianist brotherhood. He entered the novitiate at age 53, following a 25-year marriage that blessed him with six children but ended in a painful divorce. Despite this atypical route, Brother Al is remembered as a committed and generous Marianist.

Alva James Marion Gillis was born on February 14, 1930, in Troy, Ohio. He was

the youngest of five children in the family of Gayle Gillis and Myrtle (Holman) Gillis. He attended Troy public schools. Al served in the United States Army from 1951 to 1953 during the Korean War. His unit was responsible for logistics and training, mainly in Germany. He was honorably discharged as a corporal.

Al's family was Christian, but they did not attend church regularly while he was growing up. But, as a young man recently returned from war and in love with a Catholic girl, Al was baptized in the Catholic Church in late 1953.

In 1954, Al married Amelia Dorothy Caserta at St. Boniface Catholic Church in Piqua, Ohio, just north of his hometown. He and Amelia had six children, all baptized and confirmed at St. Boniface. The couple divorced in 1979.

Al was a union worker for 30 years (1953 – 1983) at Hobart Corporation, a manufacturing company in Troy.

The proud father became a devoted, active Catholic – lecturing and singing in the choir at his parish and serving on various committees. Following his divorce, he became active in ministry for divorced and separated Catholics and began considering religious life. He knew that not every order would accept a man of his age and background, but he connected with the Marianists and believed, correctly, that he'd found his calling.

Al completed two years as an aspirant, and, in 1983, at age 53, he entered the Marianist novitiate at Mount Saint John in Ohio.

As a skilled "fix-it man," Brother Al spent the first year of his novitiate repairing electrical wiring, landscaping, hauling, and fixing appliances at Bergamo Center on the Mount Saint John Campus. This was in addition, of course, to his religious studies. He professed first vows on August 10, 1985. He then moved to St. Aloysius Parish in Cleveland, Ohio. In tandem with his continued formation, he took college classes in pursuit of certification as a pastoral minister, which he earned in January 1987. He professed perpetual vows on August 13, 1988, in Dayton.

Brother Al remained at St. Aloysius for another three years. He helped with sodality meetings and communion calls, attended pastoral council meetings,

tackled needed repairs, and shouldered the myriad of small but vital tasks that keep a parish running well.

In 1987, Brother Al moved to St. John's Parish in Albion, Michigan. He was, as he put it, "associate pastor in duties but not in title." He coordinated religious education and youth ministry, created and moderated a support group for divorced and separated parishioners, and held communion services on the pastor's day off. Not surprisingly, he was also tasked with overseeing repairs and construction projects.

Brother Al was called back to Ohio in 1990, where he spent a year as the night property manager at Bergamo Center. It was a challenging assignment that included late-night security rounds. Brother Al missed community life and decent sleep.

St. John's Home, now called St. John's Residence for Boys, was the next stop on Brother Al's ministerial journey. Beginning in 1991, he served at the Rockaway Park, New York, facility as a trainer to young men in maintenance and remodeling skills. The program was intended to help young men – "many of whom had never held a paintbrush or hammer," according to Brother Al – gain marketable skills. In the process, Brother Al ensured that the facility got needed repairs and updates. He remained there for two years.

Beginning in late 1993, Brother Al, now age 60, served primarily as a maintenance worker at North Catholic High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After about a year, he transitioned to a pastoral role at St. John Vianney Parish, also in Pittsburgh. He took communion to the sick and homebound and helped coordinate the parish's emergency food bank, among many other duties. He retired from this role in August 1996. He then returned to North Catholic High, where he volunteered for the next three years, helping with such tasks as filing, maintaining mailing lists, and tracking student attendance.

In mid-1999, Brother Al returned to St. John's Parish in Michigan, where he ministered for a year as director of Christian Services.

"Al was resilient," said Brother Mike O'Grady, who was Brother Al's community director for many years. "He remade himself to join our Marianist life. He retrained himself for a different form of service. And whenever he was assigned a new

location and ministry, he figured out a way to use his gifts. He served our mission well.”

In 2001, Brother Al moved to the Marianist Residence Community in San Antonio, Texas, where he could continue his dedication to volunteer service at St. Mary’s University, including in the alumni office.

“Brother Al was an important part of our alumni relations office for more than 16 years,” said Pete Hansen, St. Mary’s executive director of alumni relations. “Our alumni board really loved him, and he was a great ambassador for us. He would represent the Marianists at all our events. He was a great mentor to our student workers as well.”

“I met Brother Al in early 2005 when he invited me to have lunch with the brothers at their community. Over the years, Brother Al shared stories of his life before joining the Society of Mary and described how much peace and commitment he felt as a brother,” said Susie Salazar, senior executive assistant in the office of St. Mary’s president. “I learned a lot from Brother Al: to take pride in your work no matter how small the task, to be patient, and that all things are passing.”

May he rest in peace.