



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



**October 31, 2023**

### **Biography of Death Notice N. 18**

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother **Francis Richard HEYER** of the Marianist Residence Community in San Antonio, Texas, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on October 19, 2023, in San Antonio at the age of 102 with 83 years of religious profession. At the time of his death, Brother Francis was the oldest Marianist in the world.

Dedicated to the success of every student he encountered, Brother Francis was revered as a teacher – one who credited his “mature alliance” with Mary as the reason his own work bore fruit in the classroom over the course of many generations. Then, for many years following this professional career, Brother Francis turned his focus toward nature, planting trees and tending to landscaping around his communities, ever confident that his outdoor labors would provide a

welcoming environment for all – except perhaps for squirrels, the only creatures he found it difficult to love.

Francis Richard Heyer was born on September 1, 1921, in Detroit, Michigan. He was the second of nine children born to Oscar and Ethel (Hebestreit) Heyer. Tragically, only he and three siblings (a brother and two sisters) lived past infancy, the others claimed by a blood disease later identified as Rh-factor conflict.

As a young man, Francis credited another family hardship with planting the seed for his religious vocation. Following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, his parents lost the home they'd been working to buy and moved their family to live with his grandmother. They then became members of Holy Redeemer parish in Detroit, and Francis attended high school there – where he first encountered the Marianists.

After graduating from high school in 1938, he entered the postulancy at Maryhurst in Kirkwood, Missouri, and one year later, began his novitiate there. Brother Francis professed first vows at Maryhurst on August 25, 1940. He began Scholasticate studies at Maryhurst and then enrolled at the University of Dayton, where he earned a bachelor of arts in science in 1943. He later received a master of arts in education from Saint Louis University, and professed final vows at Maryhurst on July 18, 1945.

Brother Francis taught in St. Louis-area schools throughout most of his career, beginning at McBride High School in 1943. He continued on McBride's faculty through 1949, before moving to DeAndreis High School for the next three academic years. After taking the opportunity to make a second novitiate at Glencoe, Missouri, in 1952, Brother Francis moved to San Antonio, Texas, teaching at Central Catholic for several years – where he also served as a speech coach. He then returned to McBride in St. Louis. At each of these stops, Brother Francis taught classes in religion, mathematics, reading, and science. In 1958, he moved to St. Mary's High School in St. Louis – where he went on to serve for more than 40 years. For most of this tenure, he focused on teaching biology in the classroom, along with designing and building several labs to support that course of instruction.

When the time came in 1989 to dial back on his teaching career, Brother Francis'

interest in biology took a practical turn – as he began devoting most of his workday energies toward groundskeeping and landscaping tasks. No mere hobbyist, Brother Francis would continue in his outdoor role for the next ten years at St. Mary's before taking on a similar set of responsibilities at the Maryland Avenue Community in St. Louis from 1999-2010.

Looking back on his time as a teacher, Brother Francis readily admitted having experienced rough spots along the way. He recalled his first year at one school as “the worst year of my life,” finding that he and his students “were always at odds.” Working through the difficulty, he recognized in himself “a tendency to be defensive,” and resolved to do better. “No matter what,” he said, “you’ve got to make sure the kids know that you like them, that you’re interested in them, and that you’re not fighting with them.” What’s true in the classroom, he discovered, is also true for religious life in general. “Make sure you’re living for other people,” he advised. “The greatest contribution of the Marianists to the Catholic Church is community. Community implies equality, which in turn implies openness and mutual respect.”

Kevin Hacker, former principal at St. Mary's High School, grew to deeply admire the “no one left behind” attitude he saw manifested in Brother Francis' professional demeanor. “He was dedicated to our students and their academic pursuits,” Kevin says. “Daily, Brother Francis spent 60 to 90 minutes after school in his classroom working with young men who needed to make up missed labs, tests, or assignments. He generously gave of his time so that his students would be successful.” Kevin also appreciated Brother Francis' late-blooming passion for tending to the green spaces around campus. “It was not unusual to see him mowing the lawns and pruning the shrubs well into the evening,” Kevin recalls. “His labors provided a welcoming natural environment for the St. Mary's community and our guests.”

Brother Ken Straubinger, who lived in community with Brother Francis for many years at Maryland Avenue, grew to appreciate the personal qualities he displayed in daily life. “Francis was very honest in his assessment of self, with deep humility and understanding of his own shortcomings and strengths,” Brother Ken says.

Father Al McMenemy also noted the depth of Brother Francis' personality as providing a worthy contribution to community life. “He was certainly more of an

introvert than an extrovert,” Father Al says. “And yet, he never seemed to miss a beat when he was with a group of people. He was ‘right there,’ knowing what the conversation was about. He was perceptive of small things.” In addition, an enduringly helpful spirit was something that stood out about Brother Francis. “In the later years of his life in community, even when his health was failing, he would find small chores to do around the house. He was quite generous,” Father Al says.

This is a legacy perfectly in keeping with Brother Francis’ personal philosophy, about which he once wrote: “In the consecrated life, whatever is not downright wicked is God’s work.” In an essay marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his profession of vows, Brother Francis declared, “Oh, what a life of blessings! What gifts God strewed in my Marianist path! For every quirk in my character, He gave me a way out; for every fault, He doled out mercy.”

May he rest in peace.