

Obituary: Father Christian Janson, SM

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother **Christian Aloysius “Cris” Janson**, priest, of the Marianist Residence Community of San Antonio, Texas, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on September 14, 2024, in San Antonio, at the age of 83 with 64 years of religious profession.

Father Cris was a beloved teacher, pastor, chaplain, campus minister, and vocation director who considered learning “the core passion” of his life. As a young man in formation, Cris noted to a superior that he had “no special desire to be sent to the missions.” Still, his priestly ministry would eventually take him to Mexico for 16 years—where he served in four different cities. He literally came to be identified by this mission work, adopting “Cris” as his nickname because it was easier for Spanish speakers to pronounce than “Chris” (as he’d been known before going to Mexico.)

Christian Aloysius Janson was born on March 6, 1941, in St. Louis, Missouri. He was the third-oldest child in a large family, one of 14 siblings (11 sons and three daughters) born to Gregory W. and Emma C. (Groner) Janson. Baptized as an infant, Cris attended various parish grade schools in the St. Louis area and enjoyed an upbringing “in a totally Catholic environment,” as he later wrote. From early on, Cris developed an attraction to daily Mass and other religious practices and remembered thinking, even as a grade-schooler, that he might become a teacher one day. He first encountered the Society of Mary when he enrolled at St. Mary’s (South Side) High School in the mid-1950s. Asked by one of the Marianists in his sophomore year whether he’d ever thought of becoming a brother, he replied “yes” – a response that led to Cris finishing high school at Maryhurst in Kirkwood, Missouri. He then entered the novitiate at Marynook in Galesville, Wisconsin, and professed first vows there in 1960. Brother Cris returned to

Maryhurst to begin scholastic studies. He went on to enroll at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1963.

Prior to commencing seminary studies, Brother Cris taught Latin and English for several years, serving first at St. Joseph's School in Victoria, Texas, and then at Don Bosco High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He returned to St. Louis in 1968 and enrolled in graduate studies at Saint Louis University, earning both a Master of Arts in Education (1969) and a Master of Divinity (1972). He was ordained to the priesthood on January 20, 1973, at Our Lady of the Pillar Church in St. Louis.

For the next seven years, Father Cris continued working in the classroom while also serving as chaplain, first at St. Michael High School in Chicago and later at Nolan Catholic High School in Fort Worth, Texas. Then came a turning point in his ministry when he was asked by his Provincial to consider a parish assignment in Mexico. "That I did not know Spanish did not disturb him," Father Cris later wrote. "He simply replied, 'learn it.'" Agreeing initially to a three-year commitment, Father Cris would spend most of the next 16 years in Mexico – serving as a pastor, teacher, and chaplain in three different cities as well as working in formation at the Marianist novitiate in Querétaro.

Upon his return to the United States, Father Cris taught and served as chaplain for two years at Chaminade College Preparatory in St. Louis and then joined the provincial staff as assistant vocation director in 1998. He moved to San Antonio in the early 2000s, working in campus ministry at St. Mary's University until 2005, when he was named pastor at Holy Rosary Parish. Father Cris served in that role for the next 11 years, always bringing to it his love for teaching. "I fulfilled that passion, especially in writing a weekly bulletin message," he recalled on the occasion of his 60th anniversary of profession. He continued in parish work after leaving Holy Rosary, serving as a pastoral associate at St. Joseph's Parish in Sykesville, Maryland, until suffering a debilitating stroke in 2019. Father Cris then moved to the Marianist Residence in San Antonio, where he began to "devote a great amount of time to the ministry of prayer...[and] to the

ongoing fraternal support of my brothers in the Marianist residence, especially [those] in our St. Joseph nursing wing,” he wrote in 2023.

While Father Cris cherished his relationships in the Society of Mary, he also deeply loved the family of his birth. The extended Janson clan welcomed his presence at numerous family celebrations through the decades – both formally, when he presided at weddings, baptisms, and funerals; and informally, when he joined them at Cardinals baseball games, the Muny Opera, family golf outings, and more. Family members recall, in particular, how he loved to tell of the chance he’d had to meet Mother Teresa (now St. Teresa of Calcutta) and offer her Holy Communion when he presided at a Mass attended by the Missionaries of Charity.

Marianist Lay Affiliate Nancy Davies remembers Father Cris as “a joyful person with a smile for everyone. I recall his support for the affiliates and for his help with retreats and prayer days. I give thanks to Jesus with Mary for his gift to the Marianist family.”

A niece, Sharon Sweet, personally experienced the gift of Father Cris’ priestly vocation when he presided at her wedding almost 40 years ago. He did the same for her two daughters, along with later baptizing four of their children. Sharon remembers “Uncle Cris’ as my fun, adventurous uncle, but also one who was carrying my heart through the worst days of my life. He always had words that resonated with me. His smile, hugs, laughter, compassion for life, and his love for God and his people will be forever in my heart.”

Another niece, Teresa Lunte, was in the act of praying for Father Cris at a family gathering when she received word that he had died. “He was leaving this world with the prayers of many of the women of the family following him home. As the day went on, we shared so many stories. Everyone felt like they had a special place in his heart,” she says. Family recipes often became part of his community celebrations. “The last proud moment I recall was when he made our southern buttermilk pie,” she says. “It was a hit and he made it over and over again, sharing pictures as the pies came out of the oven.”

She also recalled the things that made Father Cris especially happy, such as singing out loud (whether Christmas carols or show tunes) and spending time in or near the water. “Cris wore sunshine on his face, always lighting up the room,” she says. “He loved me with the heart of a parent and will be greatly missed.”

Marianist Brother Larry McBride remembers fondly the time he spent with Father Cris in Mexico. Now serving in India, Brother Larry appreciates how Father Cris helped orient him to work in the missions. “He was totally absorbed in what he was, a priest to serve the people,” Brother Larry says. “He was indefatigable in his efforts to help the people grow in their faith and was always practical. In one poor area of the parish, the people who came had to stand for Mass in a corrugated tin building. Cris started building benches for the people and got them to help him build. That’s just one example of how Cris saw the world and the people in it. I always told him he was one of the best Marianist priests I ever had the grace to live with.”

Marianist Father Ted Ley knew and admired Father Cris from as far back as their seminary days. “One really noticeable thing was his friendship and devotion to Father Jorge Da Silva,” Father Ted says. “Due to a medical condition, Jorge was rendered paraplegic and used a wheelchair. Cris was the one who would wheel him around and take him everywhere. They became close friends and were just two peas in a pod. Cris provided a marvelous example to everybody else. And there was an ‘Americana’ about Cris, a true American for all seasons. His homilies, whether in English or Spanish, had an ability to elaborate that was particularly attractive for younger Hispanic men. Cris knew exactly how to speak to them from the heart. He was a wonderful and saintly man, one whose death we now celebrate as a real birth into eternity.”

Father Cris himself often wrote about how being in community with the Marianists enriched his entire experience of life. “Sharing our charism with others in our Marianist family – and beyond – has always given me joy,” he said.

May he rest in peace.