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Death Notice No. 28 (To all Unit Administrations):



The Marianist Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear brother, **DELBERT LEO WILLETT**, of the Marianist Residence (San Antonio, Texas), who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on November 14, 2015, in San Antonio, Texas, USA, at the age of 90 with 71 years of religious profession.

Brother Leo ministered as a high school teacher, guidance counselor and principal for four decades. He was the first principal of Daniel J. Gross Catholic High School in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1968. One of four “houses” at Gross Catholic is named in his honor.

Delbert Leo Willett – who was called Leo – was born August 11, 1925, in East St. Louis, Illinois. He was the older of two sons in the family of James and Teresa (Toon) Willett.

During the Great Depression, the family moved to an ancestral home in Fancy Farm, Kentucky, where Brother Leo attended St. Jerome School. When the family returned to East St. Louis, he attended St. Joseph Elementary School and Central Catholic High School. It was at Central Catholic that he first met members of the Society of Mary.

Brother Leo entered the Marynook novitiate at Galesville, Wisconsin, in 1943, and professed first vows there on August 15, 1944. He attended the University of Dayton, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in education in 1947. He began teaching history and math at Southside Catholic High School (now St. Mary’s High School) in St. Louis, Missouri. He professed perpetual vows on July 15, 1948, in Galesville.

Brother Leo remained at St. Mary’s High School until 1954. During that same year, he earned a master’s degree in education from Saint Louis University.

In his early career, Brother Leo served at Don Bosco High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1954 – 1962), Our Lady of Victory (now Nolan Catholic) High School in Fort Worth, Texas (1962 – 1963) and Catholic Central High School in San Antonio, Texas (1963 – 1967).

During his time as assistant principal at Don Bosco, he pioneered the use of computerized punch card systems for grade processing. He continued to push this technology as vice principal at Central Catholic, using Univac systems bought as surplus from the United States Army. To help pay for the system, he contracted to process grades for two other area schools. The system saved teachers countless hours of manual grade tabulation.

In 1967, Brother Leo was called to prepare for a fresh challenge: to serve as the first principal of a new high school in Omaha, Nebraska. Daniel J. Gross Catholic High School was named for its major benefactor, owned by the Archdiocese of Omaha and staffed by Marianists and Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Help. It opened in 1968 with about 175 students and by the end of Brother Leo’s tenure in 1974, enrollment had grown to 600 students.

In a 1971 letter, Fr. James Young, provincial of the former St. Louis Province, described Brother Leo this way: “Brother Willett is the quietest, least spectacular and most effective secondary school principal I have ever seen. His organization and foresight are so far ahead in so many areas that his school is a marvel of effortless harmony.”

One of four school “houses” at Gross Catholic was named in honor of Brother Leo in 2014. “He set the tone of how we have established a sense of family here at Gross,” said current principal Dorothy Ostrowski. “It’s very much a Marianist characteristic, but it’s also very much a Brother Leo characteristic.”

Brother Leo returned to the St. Louis area in the fall of 1974 for ministry at Chaminade College Preparatory. Over the next 14 years, he served as assistant principal, principal and as a guidance counselor.

From 1987 to 1999, Brother Leo worked at the St. Louis Provincialate as a staff assistant. School ministry remained dear to him, however, and he frequently returned for alumni reunions at schools where he had served.

In August 1999, Brother Leo was called to the novitiate in Dayton for a ministry of presence as the “elder brother.” A natural people person, he was well-suited to the role.

“Brother Leo had a sincere and genuine concern for others,” said Brother Dennis Bautista, who was a novice at the time. “I witnessed this when I helped him with the grocery shopping. In whichever store we went, not only did he know almost everyone there, he even knew a little detail about their families, where they were from or a recent life event. That experience taught me about the importance of making a personal connection with others. Brother Leo had a truly Marianist approach to relationships.”

Father Bob Jones also was at the novitiate with Brother Leo. “We referred to Brother Leo as ‘the dean,’” said Father Bob. “He was there to offer advice and model Marianist life well-lived. He did this mostly through telling stories. He loved an audience and could sit for hours regaling us with stories of his family and of his time as a teacher and administrator.”

In 2008, at age 83, Brother Leo moved to the Marianist Residence on the campus of St. Mary’s University. He was a joyful and popular participant in the university’s “Marianist Friends” program, which pairs elderly brothers with students for friendship and fellowship.

“Brother Leo would come to the orientation meetings at my request to share his experiences with the students,” said Joanne Sanchez, manager of operations at the Marianist Residence. “His presentations were short and sweet, but he loved to share his experiences. He was the poster boy for the Marianist Friends,” she said, noting that Brother Leo served as a confirmation sponsor for one of the students he met through the program.

St. Mary’s student Allison Ayala was among the students involved with the Marianist Friends program. She was initially paired with Brother Bill McCarthy.

“When Brother Bill died in 2013, I felt lost and orphaned,” said Allison. “But then Brother Leo adopted me. He was like an adoptive dad. Being with him meant everything. He was kind and a good listener. He loved to tell stories about being a Marianist, and after telling stories for a while he would always say, ‘well enough about me, what about *you*.’”

May he rest in peace.