



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



**July 15, 2024**

### **Biography of Death Notice N. 10**

The Province of the United States recommends to our fraternal prayers our dear Brother **John R. LEMKER** of the St. Leonard Community in Centerville, Ohio, USA, who died in the service of the Blessed Virgin Mary on July 4, 2024, in Centerville at the age of 91 with 72 years of religious profession.

Brother John was a beloved teacher, religious formator, and acclaimed photographer whose images appeared in many prominent publications, as well as anchoring Gallery St. John at Mount Saint John in Dayton, Ohio. He considered his work “behind the lens” a form of prayer, once noting in an interview, “There comes a point when you can see with your whole self, and your soul says, ‘that’s it!’”

John R. Lemker was born on October 3, 1932, in Covington, Kentucky. He was the second of two sons in the family of Frederick and Anna (Niehauser) Lemker.

Baptized as an infant, John grew up in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, where he attended Blessed Sacrament School. There, he was taught by a community of Benedictine Sisters; he remembered feeling the call to a religious vocation even as a sixth grader. Because his father worked seven days a week as a milkman, John recalled how he, his mother, and his brother typically walked to church on Sundays – except every sixth week when his father had the weekend off. Then, the four of them would drive to Mass together in the family’s car.

As an eighth-grader, John discussed with his pastor the possibility of entering the seminary to become a diocesan priest. The pastor encouraged him instead to enroll at Covington Catholic High School, which is where John first encountered the Marianists. While admittedly drawn to the family spirit that the brothers displayed toward their students, John credited the example of a few classmates for igniting his desire to pursue a vocation in the Society of Mary. As a sophomore, he began joining some classmates at daily Mass – later noting that “the beautiful gift of my vocation is largely a result of this pious practice.”

In the fall of 1948, John left Covington Catholic to begin his postulancy at Mount St. John in Dayton. He entered the novitiate at Chaminade Prep in Marcy, New York two years later. He professed first vows there in 1951. Brother John then returned to Dayton, pursuing scholastic studies at the University of Dayton (UD), where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Physics in 1954. He also professed perpetual vows at UD on August 15, 1955.

Brother John began his teaching career at Cathedral Latin School in Cleveland, Ohio, where he served as a physics and math instructor until 1962. He next taught at Purcell High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, for ten years, completing a Master of Science degree in physics at Ohio State University along the way. During his time at Purcell, Brother John applied for a National Science Foundation grant to develop teaching materials for a geology course. This grant allowed him to spend three summers in Arizona, Colorado, and Utah – where he used a borrowed camera to capture images of the “glorious” geological formations he saw there, planting the seed for an avocation that would blossom in memorable fashion for decades to come.

After moving to Michigan in 1972, Brother John continued teaching for ten years at Hackett High School in Kalamazoo and earned a Master of Arts in Religious

Education from Boston College in 1979. From 1983 to 1999, he worked for the Diocese of Kalamazoo, offering scripture courses to adults at various local sites.

During this time, Brother John honed his photography skills, discovering a visual muse in the colorful fall vistas he encountered in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Colorado, and Texas, among other locations. Prominent publishers began to take note of his eye for contemplative natural beauty: The Sierra Club, Time-Life Books, International Wildlife, and Harrowsmith magazines, and several textbook publishers were among those who reproduced his images on their pages in the 1980s and '90s.

In 1999, Brother John was assigned to the Marianist Novitiate in Dayton, where he would continue to minister for the next 23 years. "It was thrilling, a sign from heaven" to be called to this formation work, he later said. In 2021, on the 70th anniversary of his first vows, Brother John wrote that his years spent as a formator "have been such a blessing, to ponder these words and reflect on the communion of saints, Mary, Joseph, John, Chaminade, family and all the living ones in Marianist communities." He moved in 2022 to the Marianist Community at Siena Woods and would go on to spend the final months of his life in hospice at the St. Leonard Community in Centerville, Ohio.

Marianist Brother Joe Kamis fondly recalls Brother John. "My most vivid memory of Brother John is that he loved nature," Brother Joe says. "He made so many trips out west, using his photography to capture the beauty of God's creation. John was a quiet, reflective human being who, like Mary, pondered much in his heart. He used his pictures in his own prayer life but also shared them with others in his courses on scripture and prayer. His quiet manner, friendly smile, and love of others will remain in the hearts of many."

Marianist Father Jim Fitz first met Brother John when both were teachers at Hackett High School. "I could tell many stories," Father Jim says. "But what I remember most about Brother John is his talent to find God in the beauty of nature. In his many photography adventures, he often found himself standing in awe. His photographs did the same for me. His keen prayer and observation helped me to find deep truth in the book of Genesis. We read there that God looks at his creation and says, 'It was good.' Because of Brother John, I can say the same about creation – it is good!"

Former Director of Novices for the Marianist Province of the United States, Father Chris Wittmann, remembers Brother John as “a very cheerful, pleasant Brother to live with.” He recalls with gratitude that Brother John had a wonderful progression of ministries and vocations within his larger vocation as a Marianist. “Brother John touched the lives and hearts of many persons through his enthusiasm for science as a high school teacher; through his passion for the Word of God in his scripture courses for adults; through his stunning nature photography, which communicated his love of the outdoors and his love of God, our Creator; and through his personal example as a faithful elder brother in the Novitiate Community. He touched decades of novices, brothers, and other members of the Marianist Family as a model of faithfulness and prayer.”

May he rest in peace.

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