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Dear Friends,

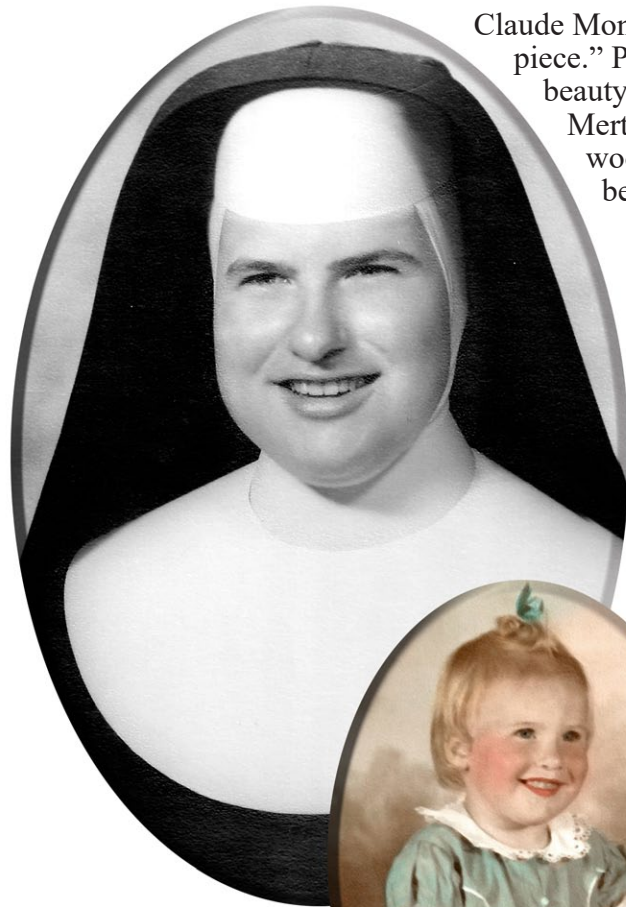
Claude Monet once said, “My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece.” People down through the ages have enjoyed the beauty of his gardens in his many paintings. Sister Helene Mertes resonates with Monet for gardening, and a love for woodlands has been woven into her life since the very beginning.

Born in June 1939, Sister Helene grew up with her seven brothers and sisters in Nekoosa, Wis. In addition to working at the paper mill, her father, Aloysius, raised two acres of green beans which were sold to the canning factory in Pittsville, Wis. She recalls how they received six cents a pound for the beans. From this, three cents went to the children to buy their school books. It was in the bean field that her father instilled in her a love for the earth and for gardening.

Life on the farm was not always convenient. Water needed to be heated and hauled to the basement to do the laundry. Wood needed to be chopped to heat their home. Pigs, cows, and chickens needed to be fed and later butchered. It was not unusual to see Sister Helene leading the horses as her brothers and Dad cultivated and plowed. Her favorite place for respite from the hard work was the woods and creek where she would delight in the wild flowers and fishing and swimming in the cranberry reservoir.

As she was growing up, her mother, Aurelia, was planting a seed within her daughter. She often spoke of how it would be nice to have a Sister in the family. In 1954, when Sister Helene was 14, that seed began to sprout as she took the train with her parents to Milwaukee, Wis., to enter the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, the same sisters who had taught her at Sacred Heart of Jesus School. She shared with me that she always had a desire to dedicate her life to God and others.

She attended St. Mary’s Academy, where she not only took classes during the school year, but the summer as well, making it possible for her to graduate within three years. One of her memories of high school was of



Sister Helene’s profession photo in 1959, and a colorized photo of her as a toddler.

Sister Rosanne Sanders, her aspirant director. She had the aspirants get a briefcase to carry their school books and school supplies so they wouldn't ruin their clothes. As a student, she thought it was pretty classy to be able to walk around with a briefcase rather than an ordinary school bag.

After her first profession in August 1959, she expressed that she had no interest in going on to school. So instead, she was sent to do

housekeeping at the Archbishop's residence in downtown Milwaukee. Her days were spent in serving meals, cleaning, and washing many, many windows. Through this experience, she found out that housekeeping was not for her and desired to do something else.

Two years later she was called to help out in the Motherhouse kitchen assisting Sister Jane Hoffmann (†2018) with preparing meals for the sisters. Much to her surprise, she discovered that

Sister Jane didn't know how to cook in large quantities. Rising to the challenge, she was able to figure out what to do and enough food was prepared for each meal. No Sister ever went hungry!

Little did Sister Helene know that her experience in the Motherhouse kitchen would be the seed that would blossom in many places throughout her years of ministry. In 1962 she made her final profession and was missioned to Cardinal Stritch College, now

known as Cardinal Stritch University (CSU). Besides taking classes in food management, Sister Helene found herself working in a brand new kitchen with Sister Donata Lins (†1996) who was the food service manager and head of the Home Economics Department. Under Sister Donata's mentorship, she learned efficiency in food preparation and the principles of management, as well as how to make good bread. These lessons have served her well throughout her life.



(Above)  
Sister Helene  
with her parents  
and siblings.



(At Left)  
Sister Helene with  
Sister Elaine Weber  
at her graduation  
from UW-Madison.

This was evident when she was asked to be the director of food service at St. Ann Health Center on the Motherhouse grounds. After many years of working in the old kitchen, she redesigned the kitchen so it would be more efficient for preparing 400 meals a day. She spoke of how she matched the tasks to the skills of those who worked with her. To work with Sister Helene meant having fun just as long as the work got done.

If there was a need, she met the challenge, from preparing 100 meals for St. Ann's Guild, to assisting in making 2,000 pounds of fruit cake. When Sister Edna Lonergan needed furniture for St. Ann Adult Day Care, Sister Helene volunteered to help her out. With a reupholstering how-to book in hand and a hammer, she began to rip apart old chairs and make them look like new. This became a relaxing activity for her after a busy day in the kitchen.

After 15 years at St. Ann Health Center, she wanted to minister outside of the Milwaukee area. An opportunity arose when Sister Esther Hofschulte (†2011) and Sister Jane Denning went to Lexington, Kentucky, to work at Catholic Charities. She went along with them with no idea of what she would do.

After working as a teacher-aide in a Montessori two-year-old classroom, the Episcopal Church approached her about supervising their soup kitchen. Depending on government surplus food and donations of fresh fruits and vegetables, Sister Helene and her volunteers prepared and served delicious meals for those in need of a hot meal. She saw those who came as guests and enjoyed getting to know them. Those she served would comment on how the soup kitchen was the nicest place in town to eat.

One of her treasured memories was helping one of the men learn to read. One day the Sisters took him to a restaurant to celebrate his accomplishments. He was so thrilled that he was able to read a menu and order what he wanted on his own for the first time in his life.

Through the invitation of Sister Elaine Weber (†2017), who was the administrator at St. Coletta of Wisconsin in Jefferson, Wis., Sister Helene was able to put what she had learned from her father to good use. With help from the clients, vegetable and flower gardens were given tender loving care. In being asked to work in the newly built greenhouse, she decided to further her education in horticulture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Under her nurturing guidance, the clients learned the skills they would need to work in a greenhouse.

When Sister Elaine was named president of St. John's Villa in Carrollton, Ohio, a residential home for persons with developmental disabilities, Sister Helene



(At Left)  
Sister checking on the potted geraniums in the greenhouse at St. Coletta of Wisconsin in Jefferson.

(Below)  
Baking is a talent Sister Helene has put to good use over the years.



(Below) Reupholstering furniture was one of her self-taught skills.





(Above) Sister helped students with working in the craft shop at St. John's Villa - and she created baskets to sell.

went with her. Believing in the dignity and worth of each person, the Sisters worked hard to create a more home-like living setting for the residents. To achieve the goal of giving the residents more independence and responsibility, Sister Helene ran a restaurant on campus where the clients could learn the skills of food preparation and serving meals. The restaurant became well-known in Carrollton for its excellent food and service.

After working at St. John's for 17 years, Sister Helene decided to retire and return to the Motherhouse.



(At Left) This large kohlrabi from the convent garden is just one example of Sister's green thumb.

It didn't take long for her to get involved with the Land Use Committee that was working on restoring the wetlands on the Motherhouse grounds, and planting trees and bushes to form an urban forest. Just as when she was a child, one can find her in the vegetable garden gathering beans and other vegetables. The convent grounds are filled with colorful flowers grown from seeds and raised in the hoop house. She loves sharing her passion for caring for the earth with others.

(Below) Volunteers work with Sister in the vegetable gardens at the convent each growing season.

In retirement, she has discovered a new way to share her love for creation through her poetry and by weaving beautiful baskets that are sold in the CornerStone Gift Shop, which she manages. Throughout her life, Sister Helene has been planting seeds and nurturing them, whether that be in a garden or in the lives of others.



Throughout our history, our sisters have responded in loving service to those in need. Today our retired sisters depend on your generosity to help with their personal and health care needs. I thank you in advance for your generous response, and promise that our sisters will remember you in their prayers every day.

In the spirit of Francis and Clare,

*Sister Mary Kemen, OSF*

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