

Reflection Sister Mary Brenda Helis, SC

November 27, 1936 – April 9, 2026



“He walks with me and He talks with me
and God tells me I am His own.
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
none other has ever known!”
(vs. 1 – In the Garden)

“For everything... (and everyone)... there is a season.”

This is one of Mary Brenda’s favorite quotes and introduces us to Sister Mary Brenda, also known as “Bernadette”—born November 27, 1936, to Michael and Sabina (Mascuch) Helis. She later welcomed her sisters Susan and Mary, and her brother Raymond, who is now deceased.

Susan, Mary, and all of you who are family, in her daily walks and talks with God, Brenda would have shared your joys and your concerns and would have daily asked for graces beyond measure for you—and for ideas for the next “Aunt Bea boxes.” You are and will continue to be in our thoughts, our prayers, and our hearts.

Mary Brenda mentioned little about her schooling except that she took the trolley to grade school—and seemed to enjoy that. She then noted that she first met the Sisters of Charity at Johnstown Catholic High School. During a conversation with Sister Mary Clement, while helping her in the biology lab, Sister told Mary, “You can be both a teacher and a Sister.” Mary Brenda pondered this... visited Seton Hill—and the rest is history!

“...He tells me I am His own... and the joy we share... none other has ever known!” I believe that Mary Brenda brought her love for the Eucharist with her... She shared that “the Eucharist is the center of our spirit; it is how we are as recipients, as givers.” The love that she and Jesus shared in the Eucharist is the same love she shared with you, her loving family, and expressed itself in myriad ways—Aunt Bea boxes, cards, notes, nesting dolls, and phone calls. And during her last call to Mary and Justin, she wanted so much to hear about everyone—how you were and what you were doing. This gave her joy and peace. As a Eucharistic minister, she noted that she rejoiced to see love for Jesus reflected in a person’s eyes.

The daily walk with her loving God continued... For as much as Mary Brenda loved teaching and school administration, the “melody that God gave her was ringing in her heart,” reminding her that “there is an appointed time for everything... a time to plant...” Thus, she and Sister Pat Collins became co-managers at the new St. Therese Plaza. Mary Brenda wrote, “Pastoral care is one of the highest priorities in public health care. It is an apostolate of the greatest essence to the less fortunate—and critical to nurturing them. We are all God’s people!” Mary Brenda described her experience at St. Therese as “deeply enriching and vital preparation for my next position.”

“How deep are the riches, the wisdom, and the knowledge of God... how unsearchable are God’s ways...” For at this time, Mary Brenda’s mother required more assistance. So Mary Brenda became the pastoral care coordinator at Laurel Crest, the Cambria County nursing home in Ebensburg, and continued to care for her mother. She says of this time: “It was extraordinary seeing the Beatitudes in action with the clients, families, and employees in every segment of life meriting service.” Her nephew Justin came to Laurel Crest to perform some service hours. Instead, he was introduced to everyone—residents and staff. He notes that Sister Mary Brenda knew everyone’s story! And at the end of the day, he still needed his service hours! Her loving, conscientious work was clearly observed.

It was during this time that Mary Brenda received the Prince Gallitzin Cross from the Altoona-Johnstown Diocese. In presenting this award, Bishop Adamec said to Sister Mary Brenda: “I had in mind the contribution of self and time that you have made to the household of God. Your involvement has fostered positive growth among us as God’s people on a journey to the Kingdom. This is a small way of saying ‘thank you.’”

And in the April 28, 1997 *Catholic Register*, Franciscan Father James V. Morman, her pastor, wrote: “Sister Mary Brenda’s joyful commitment to the residents of Laurel Crest Manor has been a ministry truly universal in import. Sister Brenda has made great strides to reach out to the pastors of her ‘flock’ to invite them into Laurel Crest Manor for anointing services and pastoral visits... I very much believe that Sister Mary Brenda exercises the evangelizing spirit of the priestly Prince Gallitzin!”

High praise—well deserved!

When Mary Brenda’s mother moved to Caritas Christi, Mary Brenda worked in the adult day care until she “retired” in 2017—yet still volunteered with seniors at the center and ministered to our Sisters on the second floor. Seeing to others’ needs was a privilege for Mary Brenda, and she thanked God for bringing her this far on her “life’s road.”

“For everything there is a season.” Mary Brenda’s life of service to God and to us was not limited to “great matters”—wonderful as these were. She also believed that “God comes in the little things!” And so she was honored to beautify the second-floor dining room on a regular basis; keep the ground-floor bulletin boards current; hold the chapel door for us most evenings after prayer; remove the dead flies and bugs from the chapel floor as often as needed; and even put Dennis’ organ shoes in a bag as protection from stink bugs! She saw to the needs of all who prayed in the balcony—making sure there were worship aids, books, and the collection basket. She scoped out the “favorites” in the Kentucky Derby and took countless prayer walks around the halls and through the building with her loving God—as they enjoyed each other’s company.

Sister Mary Brenda, Heaven’s doors are wide open. Jesus is there, eager to welcome you into Heaven’s halls. Go in peace with our blessing, and cherish this eternal journey of love.