

Sister Helena Johanna van Bentum

Deceased on 30th April 2023 in Boxtel, The Netherlands

At the age of 98

She was born on 3rd April 1925 in Driel (Utrecht), The Netherlands

First Profession on 29th October 1950 in Esch, The Netherlands

Leny (as she was called) was born into a large Catholic farming family on the 3th April in 1925 in Driel, by Arnhem. With 6 sisters and 4 brothers, she was the 10th child. She had a wonderful childhood, according to herself, and loved working on the farm, milking cows, singing together and playing outside on the dyke at the river and in the orchard. They went to school on foot over the dyke along the river and also took a few small children with us. They walked for half an hour. After she had completed primary school in Driel, she briefly followed the Industrial School in Arnhem, but she wanted to stay at home on the farm. At her First Communion, when she was 6 or 7 years old, she already wanted to join the mission, undoubtedly inspired by the fact that there were 3 cousins White Fathers in the family and a niece, Jane Vernooy, who was with the White Sisters. Her eldest brother Gerard became a priest and her two Sisters, Agatha and Margret, later followed Leny in the mission of the White Sisters. Her Sister Agatha had told her that she also wanted to be a White Sister, but Leny wanted very much to be the first to enter.

The Second World War had a major impact on the family. During the battles around Arnhem in September 1944, the farm was fired upon from the other side of the river and went up in flames. They had to flee into the shelter they had build themselves and, via various shelters, with other farmers. They only returned with all the children 9 months later to Driel. Everything had to be rebuilt from the ground up. They first camped in the *old sheep barn* and later in *an emergency-built house*. A mission calendar from the White Sisters hung on the door, which really captured the imagination of Leny and her two Sisters.

Her heart's desire was to become a nurse in Africa and help people there, but not necessarily to become a nun. She had even dated, but absolutely did not want to get married and become a stay-at-home mom! When she heard that her sister Agatha wanted to go too, she wanted to go just ahead of her. She really wanted to be the first. She enlisted her brother Gijs to tell her parents. They were not really happy about this, because they knew she would go to Africa forever, but accepted her choice. In 31th of May 1948, Leny entered the White Sisters in Maarn, and after the novitiate she made her first vows in Esch in 29th October 1950. She then left to follow a year of International Formation at "Saint Charles" the Motherhouse in Algiers.

After this international year in Algiers, where she met her cousin Zr Egide (Jane Vernooy) again, Leny started Nursing Training in Veghel in 1951. At the end of 1955 she was appointed to Zambia, where she worked for 13 years in both mission and government hospitals in Chilubula and Lubwe, often together with Irish, American and Canadian sisters. From them she learned English and Chibembe. Here she only saw her first birth. In addition to deliveries, caesarean sections and other operations, there were also many malaria patients.

After their mother's death in 1957, her father and Priest brother Gijs came to visit the three Sisters in Tanzania and Leny could join. After that, Leny never saw her father again, because he died in 1965 after a tragic car accident. In October 1968 she went to the Netherlands for holidays in the Community van Mook and followed the "Third Year" of renewal in Frascati.

After training as a Midwife (which in fact she already was for years) in Liverpool and the Anesthesia course in Oxford, Leny returned to the mission hospital in Lubwe in 1971. A few years later she started working as a matron in the maternity ward in Mansa and another four years later she was transferred to Chilubi Island. Leny sometimes said that she kept the premature babies warm in the pocket of her coat. After a short time, she had to fill in as a hostess and purchaser for the sister's communities in Lusaka and the surrounding area. It was a real pity she could not work as a nurse/midwife anymore.

In October 10th 1978 she started the year's course in Regina Mundi, in Rome.

After this she returned to Chilubi and two years later to Lusaka. In March 1984 she was sent home to do 'home service' for 3 years as a nurse with the older sisters in the Community of Sterksel. After working for a year as a driver in the Mother House of the Congregation in Frascati, she was some time in France, in Toulouse, to again serve as driver. Leny was allowed to return to Zambia for another 2 years. Meanwhile, the AIDS epidemic was at its peak there. So she could be of much use.

In 1991 she returned permanently to the Netherlands, to Sancta Monica Convent in Esch. Leny did not want to leave Zambia at all, but yes, she simply had to obey the Congregation. Fortunately, she found a new apostolate as a nurse at De Kruispost (the Cross post) in the Red-Light District in Amsterdam. It was a medical facility for the homeless and prostitutes. Just like in Zambia, Leny also worked here for the outcasts and in the periphery. She had a great time. At the end of 1998, she retired at the age of 73 and when the house of Esch was sold, she moved in 2004 to the residential care home called Molenweide, now the Wereldhuis (World house) in Boxtel.

At first Leny lived in the care home, but when she became more and more forgetful, she was transferred to the PG-ward Smaragd, where also other White Sisters lived. She stayed there for more than 5 years. Every morning she went downstairs to read the newspaper, drink coffee with the sisters, and pray in the chapel. However, walking became increasingly difficult but she continued to sing along at mass.

Leny was a big, tough, articulate Sister and certainly not afraid of difficulties. Sober as she was, she took life as it presented itself. She was not afraid, not even of death. Joking, she held her own, even as her dementia progressed. As she herself always said: "Growing old is beautiful, but being old is not interesting at all". To the very end she kept calling her younger Sister Aggie by name. After more and more health problems and an unfortunate fall in which she broke her hip.

Leny stayed a short time in bed, but quietly and peacefully passed away in the presence of her fellow Sisters. She was ready, at the high age of 98 years old. Dear Leny, we will miss you and continue to pray for you. Rest in peace in the Eternal Love of the Lord.