

Loving tribute to Doctor Claire Vellut

erstwhile member of "Sarva Maitri" wider fraternity in the spiritual family of Brother Charles in India
by the contribution of our grateful admiration
(edited by **Shilanand Hemraj**, s/o Dr Frans Hemerijckx, 28/09/2013)

We were having breakfast, after early Sunday worship on 22 Sept, when Sudeepta opened the mail. She started crying: "aunty" Claire is no more! And we followed suit: Kavari called her "akka" (elder sister in Tamil) and I called her "didi" (in Hindi). Doctor Claire was revered as "annai" (mother) in her home-village Polambakkam (Tamil Nadu). The sad message was from her nephew Jacques Vellut. (...)

Last visit to our Bangalore home (2012)

Her last goodwishes were to do what "God wishes" throughout her life.

Claire was not an expert in writing e-mails, and surely she would type a few mistakes. We received the last mail from her on 15th Sept, and unknowingly she wrote "god wishes!"; indeed 5 days later it was God's wish to call her home. The very life she lived was her total response. How?

While doing her medical studies at the Catholic University of Louvain, Claire-Marie-Jeanne Vellut joined the A.F.I. (International Fraternal Association), one of the first "secular institutes" for committed lay women. This group was inspired by the example of Lazarist father Vincent Lebbe, who inculturated himself deeply into the Chinese way of life and strongly advocated the appointment of native bishops. He was captured by the Chinese Communists in 1940, which led to his death the same year. He had groomed Miss Yvonne Poncelet to found the A.F.I. in 1937 with formation house in Brussels, in order to prepare dedicated "auxiliaries", helpers in the loving service of humanity, to which the universal church is committed. Yvonne responded with extraordinary dynamism and within 20 years there were some thousand consecrated lay friends all over the world, who would form small teams of mostly professionals, leading a gospel life in the midst of the world. Unfortunately Yvonne died in a plane crash at the age of 48 in Febr 1955. Just then, Claire made a most important decision. She had come to India one year earlier, being assigned work at the Dr Patel Hospital in Delhi, together with two other A.F.I. companions, Simone Liégeois and Hélène Eenberg. Guided by her spiritual mentor, Jesuit Father Fallon, she decided to accept the invitation made by Dr Frans Hemerijckx TO JOIN in starting an ambulatory leprosy control project in Polambakkam (T.N.). And this was probably a right decision.

But what about the decision she made 55 years later TO LEAVE Polambakkam? It is said, when still young our decisions are mostly right, since we take into account the experience of others. However, our "mature" decisions tend to be incorrect – except in the case of aged Pope Benedict who decided to quit, while Pope Francis decided to accept, hopefully rightly so! Claire wrote to me in 2010: *"The Holy Spirit and myself will decide about the future"*. Could she not have continued to camp at Polambakkam, as she once planned to stay there at the Anandapuram home of the "elders", ex-patients with burnt-out disfigurements? Or HAVE WE FAILED to assure her of our kind support in India, in spite of her deteriorating frailness?

In any case, the centre at Polambakkam is more than a dream come true, not only for leprosy treatment, but also for its healing touch of hospitality. If we turn the pages of its golden "Visitors' Book", we realize that Claire is very much at the centre of this "sangam" or confluence of hundreds of well-impressed passers-by from any country under the sun! It starts mentioning what triggered the project: In 1953, the Belgian seacoast suffered severe hightide floods. Surprisingly, India sent emergency aid in the form of tons of jute-bags to be filled with sand for repairing the dikes. In order to reciprocate for this timely help, ex-king Leopold and other prominent people in Belgium came up

with the idea to support India in the fight against leprosy. Leprologist Frans Hemerijckx, who had already 25 years experience in Congo, was proposed as leader of the project. While roaming in India to find a suitable place with high prevalence of leprosy, he happened to contact Claire and her companions, and thus in Jan 1955 the plan started rolling with a message of hope by the then minister of health Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: "Leprosy could be abolished in a relatively short time if we were to bring every patient under modern treatment". And soon wheels started turning to reach the remotest villages around Polambakkam.

(Claire's declaration, see <http://www.damienfoundation.in/about>)

More clarity about Claire:

- She never locked the door of her thatched room quarter, except for monkeys, and every night she would check up on reptile guests. Simplicity and no multiplicity of buildings is the secret of hard and joyful work. The mantra of the centre was: enthusiasm is more contagious than leprosy.
- Although "tata" Dr Hemerijckx was Flemish, his three French speaking "daughters" were quite at ease with him and Claire was the one who would tease him most. Once, she tied his long belt around the three of them and said, "Doctor, you should really slim".
- Since my father was her guru, she called me "guru-bhai". Passing through Lucknow she got news of her Padmashri award; but she didn't mind sitting at the back of my cycle to go and share sweets at Hotel Park.
- When the Louvain University conferred the honorary doctorate in 1989, the citation mentions: *"She would visit every house in the project area and collect information about leprosy patients (with statistical data representing 400,000 person-years of observation), so that an epidemiometric model could be developed by Prof. M.F. Lechat (her class-mate), President of the International Leprosy Organization. Among the fellows in our Academy, let us have one who has walked miles and miles on dusty village paths in search of the poorest of patients, with kindness and concern, but with equal academic interest in leprosy."*
- Whenever she visited Belgium, she was invited by queen Fabiola to dine at the royal table. She will never forget the noble gesture of late king Baudouin during his visit at Polambakkam in 1964: he shook hands affectionately with every leprosy patient in the ward, and afterwards refused to wash his hands! In 2009 the Belgian court gave her the honorific distinction of the Great Cross of the Order of the Crown.
- Another friend and admirer of hers was the French academician Raoul Follereau, travelling around the globe with his Charlie Chaplin hat and stick, and famous for his letter to both Presidents of USA and USSR: What do you want? A nuclear bomb or the bomb of charity to explode? If each one of you supply the costs of just one fighter jet, we can cure all the leprosy patients of the world! Dr Claire Vellut received the Raoul Follereau award in 1999.
- In May 2012 Vice-President Hamid Ansari presented her the International Gandhi Award 2011 "for having rendered more than five decades of selfless service to alleviate the sufferings of leprosy patients in India". She had already received a "Stri Ratna" award with 49 other outstanding women in the 50th year of Indian independence.
- Even in her "peaceful" rural abode (where the local benefactor Muttumalla Reddiar reached the age of 102!) Claire kept abreast with all the world's turmoil. She always sided with more socialist and progressive views, and chided me for keeping to my books. But she was happy about Kavari's project Setukaran for upliftment of rural women through mass-education at Allahabad and she accepted to be on our Governing Body. She felt that the economic factor is equally important, even for the incidence of leprosy, as mostly the very poor are affected. One exception being Prof Jagadisan, who was removed from his university post when signs of leprosy appeared on his hands. He became the president of Hind Kusht Niwaran Sangh and struggled for the eradication of

the stigma surrounding the Hansen's disease. He signed a petition for the canonisation of Father Damien, whose tomb he visited with doctor Claire in Louvain.

- It is Prof Jagadisan, who invited Gandhi-ji for inaugurating the Kasturba Memorial Leprosy Hospital (where Bapu-ji asked to be invited again for the closure of the same, after the task would be completed!). Jagadisan readily enrolled the Little Brothers of Jesus as bare-foot leprosy workers in the village unit of Alampundi. That's how little brothers Michael, Shanti and Arul got trained in Polambakkam, and of course befriended Claire for many years to come.

- Otherwise, Claire remained faithful to her A.F.I. inspiration, even after the original association dissolved in branches with new vision and mission. She would try to link to her "nearest" companions in Ramalla, Alexandria or Mauritius, and took pains to visit them. She was aware of her weaknesses, as her closest associate Simone would be able to tell. She passed on to me one of the papers presented at their Cairo meeting. It was about "hope", with her pencil markings (showing that she had meditated on it!). It may have helped Claire not to be disappointed about expectations. Hope could be self-illusion. The verb occurs only 5 times in the Gospels, rather negatively : hope should not be selfish (expecting something in return, Lk 6:34); one should not hope for miracles (Lk 23:8); we should not imagine another kind of world, without suffering (Lk 24:21; Jo 5:45). But real hope is about converting our expectations into service. In Mt 12:21 it is said about the Master: people hope in his name, and next verse tells about the loving care he bestowed in curing an inhibited person. When disciples asked expectantly: Are you the one?, he referred to what is to be seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, leprosy patients are cured and the poor heed the good news! So, let us give up easy expectations and walk on the path of concrete involvement. Hope is to be translated into down-to-earth love, together with the Master. And in the case of leprosy, real charity is not the feeling of pity, but acquiring the expertise to give proper treatment, so that the need for charitable work is being prevented.

- Too much expectancy may lead to lack of acceptance of the reality. Like Mother Teresa, Claire had to go through a dark tunnel. In recent years, she felt depressed by seeing the dilapidation of the hospital in front of her eyes: waste of buildings, no dedicated government staff, pilferage, politics, institutionalization. She felt also critical of the hypocritical, authoritarian clerical church, although she could see things in a larger perspective. She showed understanding for the youth, and respected freedom.

- She was so broadminded. She personally encouraged and supported the Pavagada unit of the Sri Ramakrishna Sevashrama, directed by Swami Japanandaji. This is how he felt about her last visit:

"Age has not diminished Dr Claire's spirit and strength. The word 'impossible' doesn't exist in her dictionary. She has a great sense of observation: she never fails to record every aspect of relevance to the disease or the affected, which turns out to be a textbook for others to study. It is ever a great pleasure to have her in our midst and make new discoveries listening to her. And she is endowed with a wonderful heart to feel for anyone who needs support and assistance. Every visit of hers rekindles in us the fire of compassion and commitment to the neglected masses".

What about her participation in the wider fraternity or lay fraternity of little brother Charles?

Claire wanted to meet and share in close friendship. She wanted to be part of a family, and not just to travel around staying in guest-rooms – that's why she enjoyed having a room with the Alex family in Chingleput. The idea of participating in fraternal friendship within the larger family of "the universal little brother" Charles de Foucauld attracted her (her own niece, Cécile, is a little sister of Jesus in Pakistan). She wrote to me in May 2001 when an attempt was made, at the initiative of little brother Mani, to transform the existing circular letter "Maitri" into a wider "Sarva Maitri", aiming

especially at enlarging our circle of friendship and to spread the spirituality of the ordinariness of a Nazareth family:

“Congratulations for giving a new birth to Maitri and very best wishes for the new publication. With Michael, I have often discussed the possibility of having a ‘pakka’ (solid) unit of the lay fraternities of CdF with regular practices, meetings and sharings. I have some contact with the lay fraternities in Belgium... (and she proposed the creation of the first ‘pakka’ fraternity, forgetting the distances): there are you 2 in Bangalore, Anthony and Bala at Pondy, Christine at Kumbakonam, myself... anyway, we could think it over. The Brothers would also be happy if a meeting of the CdF Family be held at the end of the year”.

But, ten years later, she wrote again:

“About the lay fraternity, we go round and round. Let us hope you will get some light. What is the problem to accept that we are a group of friends of CdF, but not a lay fraternity! If the General Assembly of the Lay Fraternity accepts us as such, O.K. Tell me about next developments...”

So, Claire was at the beginning and at the end. What about the next generation? Let us “hope” (which means doing something about it) that a younger group of friends will arise, altogether a different kind of fraternity or sorority. Brother Charles felt intuitively that he himself must die like the grain in order that a fresh crop may arise. Therefore, a term we can learn from our elder sister Claire is not “resignation”, but the next word in the dictionary “RESILIENCE”: the ability to recover in face of difficulties, to spring up again after being bent! Claire always looked forward. The eradication of leprosy will come about by new approaches and inventiveness, not just by a return to segregation methods, although they produced saint Damien of Molokai.

Where to get light and strength for renovation? The initial inspiration for Claire comes from Father Lebbe in China. May be, we have to turn to the east which is being re-shaped within our global family. In her heart Claire was an eastern contemplative, as she gazed at her Lord’s face in the patients. She would visit the Saccidânanda ashram, to consult Swami Paramârubyânanda (Monchanin) or Abhishiktânanda (Le Saux). She would equally climb half way on Arunachala mount of Tiruvanmalai, or go for a retreat at the Kurusimala monastery, meeting Âcharya Francis. She would have liked to enter the mystic of the âlwar bhakti saints. So, for us the question arises whether the foucauldian spirituality has failed us, or whether WE FAILED in living it fraternally?

Otherwise, doing a balancing act in our tribute to Didi Claire, we could mention one secular lay person in India, recently beatified, living his Nazareth as well as his Calvary 250 years ago, further down south from Polambakkam. Undoubtedly Claire had heard of him, namely blessed Devasahayam, who was a court official in the former Travancore kingdom. His original name was “Nilakandan” (lord Shiva), and “Pillai” was added in reference to his high caste and social position. He was born in the year 1712 at Nattalam in the present district of Kanyakumari. His father was Vasudevan Namputhir and his mother Devaki Amma. Educated in Tamil, Malayalam and Sanskrit, science and martial arts, he started a career in the army. He was also officiating in the Nilakandaswamy temple at Padmanabhapuram.

Meanwhile Eustachius De Lannoy, a Dutch military officer, was arrested by King Marthanda Varma, after the Dutch were defeated at the Port of Colachel in 1741. They were given a lease of life on condition that they served the Travancore army. De Lannoy was put in charge of the modernization of the Udaygiri Fort, where also Nilakandan was to look after the expenses. Deep friendship developed between the two. De Lannoy married Margaret, the daughter of a Syrian Christian who was serving as interpreter. But Nilakandan experienced heavy losses of property and was besieged with worries. Finding no relief in performance of religious rituals, he shared his

problems with his friend. De Lannoy explained to him the meaning of suffering in the light of the story of Job. Nilakandan was impressed by Job's absolute surrender to God. Subsequently, De Lannoy told him the story of the Master of Nazareth and the mystery of his sufferings on the cross for the sake of our sins. As a pearl evolves within an oyster, so dharma matures within a soul. Convinced of the love and truth of the Guru, Nilakandan expressed his desire to become his disciple – for which he had to move outside Travancore, because there was a ban on new conversions. Only the fisher folk along the coast and in interior hamlets were allowed to practise their faith. Fr. Giovanni-Battista, a Jesuit missionary instructed Nilakandan for 9 months and then the eager learner was reborn from the water in the church of Vadakkankulam in May 1745. At his initiation he adopted the name "Devasahayam" (Tamil rendering of Lazarus, meaning "God helps"). He regained peace and joy. Witnessing positive changes in him, others felt equally attracted. His own wife Bhargaviammal initially resisted, but also got convinced about the source of new blessings. She took the name of "Gnanapoo" (Theresa of Avila). Because of his newly found faith, Devasahayam disregarded caste distinction and integrated with the dalit community, fellow believers who were considered the lowest in society. He chatted and ate with them. He opposed injustices perpetrated by the ruling class. They accused him of betrayal and contempt of religious practices and of insulting gods, Brahmins and the royal throne. The officials arrested Devasahayam, who was paraded through the capital seated backward on a buffalo. He was cruelly tortured, beaten with thorny sticks and chilly powder was smeared over the wounds. He was made to stand in the hot sun. Twice he was condemned to death, but each time the sentence was revoked for fear of some calamity to happen. His last prison cell was at Aralvaimozhy, where people managed to meet him, "so that the garrison looked more like a populous fair than a solitary place". He consoled his wife who was all in tears and encouraged her to trust in the Master, saying:

"My loving spouse, do not be disheartened that you have had no happiness but only suffering on account of being married to me. You have been a partner in my sufferings and humiliations. If you bear these sufferings with patience, you will be a sharer in the heavenly prize that God will offer... If you remain in this country after my death the members of your community will bother you a lot. So you should flee to some other place. There the Lord will protect you from all harm. Do not be anxious that we will lose our relatives. The Lord is our relative and our helper. You should pray to God for me that, just as He has given me the grace I needed to patiently endure the sufferings that have been inflicted upon me till now, He might strengthen me so that at the time of my death, I may not waver out of fear."

The authorities feared that he may gain popularity, and decided that he must be done away. After three years of tortures, in spite of the good will of the king, he was finally executed secretly at Kattadimalai, on 14 January 1752. He was only 40 years old and had been disciple for 7 years. As he was chained in fetters, he was carried away like an animal for sacrifice, hanging from a stick. As they reached the spot of execution he begged for time to pray. Then he was shot at and he fell down crying aloud "Jesus, save me". The guards checked to see if he had died and seeing still life in him, they fired two more shots. Afterwards his body was thrown into the forest. His mortal remains were discovered by the villagers and they buried him in front of the main altar in the church of St. Francis Xavier, which is the present Cathedral of the Diocese of Kottar, for they admired his exemplary life of virtue, prayer, penance and final martyrdom.

The places connected to his life and death became important places of pilgrimage. The story of his courageous death is told in popular poetry and drama, notably by Thomman Thirumuthu who was for a short while in prison together with Devasahayam. A report on the holy life of Devasahayam was written by the then bishop of Kochi just 4 years after his martyrdom. Fr. Giovanni-Battista gave also extensive first-hand witness, found in the archives of the Jesuit Madurai Province.

So, dear doctor Claire, every person is unique. You are what you are, and we thank you for the life you lived in front of us. For us, you are also a blessed sister, in so many ways. You will always be remembered by the thousands of brothers and sisters whom you have restored to a life of dignity and acceptance. Our greatest tribute is to realize all the “good wishes” you yourself have experienced as God’s wish for the greater good of all. A big “nanri” to you, and continue to be with us.