

# Farewell to Claire Vellut

Testimonies during the Eucharistic celebration (26-09-2013)

## Welcome address

by Olivier Vellut (translated)

On the first moments of my life in a nursing home at Madras (India), Claire was the first person to look at me with emotion. As was the custom, my father was confined in a waiting room, and it was my great aunty who accompanied my young mother at this first delivery. Links have been forged between us over time, during my visits to India or during her visits to Belgium and, more particularly, since she came here in this Home.

Today I want to recall with you a few moments of Claire's life, starting with these 55 years of service to leprosy patients. Arriving in India in 1954, she joined - next year - Dr. Hemerijckx, with two other AFIs nurses - Simone Liégeois and Hélène Eenberg – and she then embarked on the great adventure that became Polambakkam.

Because it initiated new methods of struggle against leprosy - the famous "clinics under the trees", which allowed to treat patients in the village rather than isolating in a leprosy colony - this Health Centre has quickly gained a reputation both in India and abroad. Besides hundreds of Indian medical staff and dozens of African and Asian professionals who came there for training, the Guestbook of Polambakkam also witnessed the visit of so many Belgian and Western people who were welcomed by Claire, that she listened, and to whom she communicated her enthusiasm.

Wanting to be Indian among Indians, Claire wanted to acquire Indian citizenship which she was granted in 1979, after endless steps, but only after proving her knowledge of Tamil. However, we suspect the examiner of having been sympathetic !

From 1980 onwards, her work extended to the whole of India, with the creation of new centers in the North, supervision of new clinical trials in the South, and consulting assignments in Bangladesh, China, ...

Reaching the age when, here, we would retire, she decided to reduce her medical responsibilities. She followed with great interest and supported the work of education undertaken by Father Suresh for dalit youth (untouchables) near Polambakkam.

As some Indian women without children, Claire was "adopted" by a family who was watching over her - and vice versa, in their common home. Unfortunately, both the parents died before her, and other deaths around her have upset her life. In 2008-2009, she will be very hesitant between India and her return to Belgium.

Finally, what everyone will remember of Claire after these past four years in the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, it is the picture of a doctor, a competent leprologist, a woman who has been through with her commitment, drawing her strength from her deep faith, in silence and prayer. She wanted to live a simple life, enjoying every moment of encounter.

All of us here, let us rejoice to have crossed her way for a little while or to have walked a long way with her.

## **Prayers Intentions**

(translation)

Claire was an open-minded woman, she was sensitive to all sufferings.

With her, let us pray for those whom she often cared for : the children in hospitals, the teenagers so often confused in our society, and our seniors who are lonely or sick;

Let us pray for all those who live in regions of conflict, especially for the Palestinians that Claire had the opportunity to visit on numerous occasions;

Let us pray for all those who suffer from hunger, while others speculate on food markets.

### **Let us pray to the Lord.**

Claire committed herself in the group of AFI when she was only 18, and she devoted all her life to the leprosy patients.

Let us pray for all those who are committed in the AFI group,  
for those who preceded Claire in the house of the Lord,  
for those who returned to their home country, living in simplicity and brotherhood,  
and for all those who continue, all over the world, to live their commitment for the poor.

We pray for all leprosy patients, those at Polambakkam, for all those who get trained to fight against this disease, and all those who work in the field, especially all those who worked with Claire, doctors and paramedics.

### **Let us pray to the Lord.**

Claire was keen to meet people, even away from her home country she was interested in our families.

Let us pray for the residents of the Home for the Sisters and those who accompanied Claire during these four years;

Let us pray for the members of "the large family of Claire in India", but also for the members of her family dispersed around the world, in Japan, in Pakistan, in Mauritius, in South Africa, in Peru and in Chile;

Let us pray for all our families here in Belgium;

Let us pray that we would be capable to live our commitments in confidence, and with attention to those who are poor - materially or morally.

### **Let us pray to the Lord.**

## **Testimony of Marie-Odile on behalf of the AFI - ICA**

(translation)

Claire became a member of the AFI-ICA (International Cultural Association) on 6th October 1944 when she was 18. The AFI-ICA was formed in 1937 in Belgium at Yvonne Poncelet's initiative. Inspired by the ideal of universal brotherhood, Yvonne answered the call of Father Vincent LEBBE for the formation of the laity in the young Christian churches.

The three principles from the spiritual point of view of the AFI commitment are "total renunciation, true love and constant joy", which are the three principles of Father Lebbe. Through our work and in all aspects of our lives, the members that we represent today, continue the implementation of the THREE LINES OF FORCE of the association:

- To assist in the fulfillment of the Word of God revealed through Christ who calls all men to live in love, justice and dignity.
- To join in the effort of men and women engaged in the struggle for justice, for respect and dignity of every human being.
- Living universality as a requirement of faith in Jesus Christ. To work for building an international community based on the recognition of the rights and values of each people, each group, each human being.

Currently, the AFI-ICA group, headquartered in Brussels, has about 220 men and women, single or married, from 24 countries in Africa, Europe, Asia and America and inserted in 27 countries.

During her AFI training, Claire chose to study medicine. She wanted to go to China or India as secular. China closing the arrival of foreigners, she turned to India and together with Yvonne Poncelet, our founder, she left in 1954 to explore possible commitment for the people in New Delhi. There she noted that the Indians had no need of European general practitioners, and with her AFI-ICA companions they then seek another place of work.

In 2010, she would explain herself how their choice was related to a specific event :

*"If we started working in Polambakkam it is because of the floods on the Belgian coast in 1953. Belgium made an international appeal for jute bags required for making sandbags to keep the flood and India sent tons of jute bags. So, a group of people in Belgium, around Jesuits and King Leopold, wanted to make a gesture to thank India (...). - We are a small country, no major industries, but we had experience of the fight against leprosy in Congo. Then they selected Dr. Hemerijckx who had 29 years of experience in Africa. Having met the AFI in Brussels, Dr Hemerijckx came to us in Delhi in 1954. First he did not want to interrupt our project but when he understood that we wanted to leave Delhi, he requested us to join him at Polambakkam.*

*We arrived in India at the right time in the fight against leprosy and we have seen a nice evolution of this struggle (...). Dr. Hemerijckx had a very strong personality and Indians loved him. Parallel to our work, the government began outpatient treatment programs (in the villages). Our Belgian organization had received an oral commitment that the Centre would be taken over by the Indian Government after five years. The Madras Government asked me to stay another five years and finally I still remained for twenty years." (...)* Claire, October 2010

Later on, the Indian government requested Claire to work also at the national level, and she responded to that demand with the Damien Foundation. It is also to support national programs against leprosy that Claire went to China, Bangladesh, Burma (Myanmar) and Maldives.

Although she was the only AFI in India, Claire has always maintain strong links with her AFI-ICA sisters. Our structure is based on "unit", privileged place for everyone exchanges, dialogue and sharing. Claire in India was invited and hosted by the Unit Middle East (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine). She participated in the annual meetings and made several trips to Ramallah in Palestine. Her participation at the annual meeting was for all "an opening to another reality, different from the Middle East". In Ramallah, a special link has been created between her, Geo Wilmet and Huguette Boule. Whatever the circumstances or places, this friendship was unwavering. She attended Geo in the last hours of his life. And Huguette, being sick, decided to

return to Mauritius but she had fairly regular visits from Claire. When these were no longer possible, they decided to stay in contact and every week Claire would phoned Huguette and they maintained a living contact between them and the AFI. This strong fidelity, that nothing would stop, will remain for us a testimony of attention, understanding and presence to one another.

With all our heart, we say her thank you.

Marie-Odile Brunet & Bie Delaby

## **Testimony of Dr. Shivakumar on behalf of India**

Friends,

I am Shivakumar from India, working as a Secretary of Damien Foundation India Trust. I am one among several thousands of people inspired by our beloved Madam Claire Vellut. Today I am here to represent on behalf of people from Polambakkam, Damien foundation India Trust, DFB and whole leprosy community to pay our tribute to our beloved madam Clair Vellut.

It's a coincidence or the destiny which made Dr. Claire Vellut to adopt the cause of the leprosy patients and more particularly the leprosy patients in India. It was around sixty years back, when she was at 29 years. She started her leprosy work in Polambakkam, a small village near Chennai in southern part of India. The village Polambakkam in Tamil Nadu was chosen because it had already an history of caring for leprosy patients started by Dr Cochrane. It was situated in a highly endemic area. Moreover, the local population proved to be very cooperative. This was to be a leprosy centre "on wheels", with ambulatory service in the midst of the people. It grew to become a model project for mass treatment. Being aided by a Belgian foundation.

At the end of 25 years of project in Polambakkam, records showed more than 50,000 leprosy patients were taken care through 52 mobile "clinics under the trees" with the support of dedicated staff of Polambakkam. In the meantime, a voluntary organization, called "Friends of Father Damien", was founded in Belgium by Fr. Obbels and Jacques Vellut. Back in Belgium, Jacques Vellut took an active role in organizing the "Damien Foundation" (now called Damien Action) with the backing of generous donors, for sponsoring dynamic projects all over the world and Dr. Claire became the Secretary of Damien Foundation India trust. She served as secretary of Damien Foundation from 1984 to 1992.

Dr. Claire received Indian citizenship in 1979 and she was offered India's prestigious "Padmashri Award" in 1981 and International Gandhi Award in 2012. Dr. Claire was never interested in awards and rewards. She was very happy when she was offered International Gandhi award, she was very happy not for the award but was very happy that she could come to India and visit her people. That was her last visit to the country of her choice.

The life style of Dr.Claire was very simple and she was extremely humble towards leprosy patients and staff. Her simplicity and humbleness attracted many young doctors, politicians, health professionals, philanthropists and general public.

Dr. Claire Vellut has witnessed and was part of an important evolution in leprosy control in India and in the world, the treatment evolving from Dapsone monotherapy to multi-drug therapy. Under her leadership and at the request of the Indian government Polambakkam evolved as a training centre for Tamil Nadu and other states as well. Thousands of paramedical staff were trained here.

Many doctors and students on work placement, Indian and foreign, have also undergone their practical training at Polambakkam.

Through her acquired experience, communicated with enthusiasm, and through her integration in the Indian population, Dr. Claire Vellut has certainly fulfilled more than her part of that wish. What she could realise was possible because she believed in it. I would like to read a few words written by our beloved Madam Claire about her achievements.

*“All this was not possible without our many friends in Belgium. My Alma Mater, the University of Louvain (KUL), made me “doctor honoris causa” in public health. The Belgian Govt also added several awards in token of recognition for the many years of constant service to the cause of leprosy. All this sounds good, but honestly, it cannot compare with the sense of gratitude for having been able to live and work so long in India, the country of my choice. I could live in a village, take care of chronic patients and be in close contact with their families. I could share my life and expertise with colleagues and friends, while discovering the esteemed values of Indian hospitality and deep spirituality. Listening to the heartbeat of the common people, I experienced a strong force of resilience in the face of the hardest situations, which fills us with confidence for the future of our great human family. In summary, I feel I have lived a very privileged life !”*

I am greatly fortunate that I could meet her on Monday, 16th evening at the International Leprosy Congress. I was really fortunate that I could discuss with her about our future plans at Polambakkam, the origin of Damien Foundation and origin of her initiatives. She was very happy to hear about future plans in Polambakkam. She was extremely happy to meet large number of delegates from India. I remember that, when I met her last year, she was extremely happy to hear about the next International Leprosy Congress which would be held in Brussels and expressed that she could meet many Indian friends in 2013. Delegates from India were fortunate to meet her and fulfil her desire. Perhaps she was just waiting for that last occasion ?

Claire who had become one with Damien Foundation; Claire who represented the spirit of divine humanness; Claire whose hand was always ready to reach out to those who sought support; Claire who showed real meaning of the word love; Claire who made the journey of 'the people' her journey; Claire who respected peoples' ability to go beyond expectation; Claire who saw only goodness in every being. Claire is no more. It is hard to believe. The only thing we can do is to remember the values she stood by and the principles with which she led herself and others.

Dear Claire, Your life certainly is great. It is a great loss for leprosy community which includes leprosy workers like me. My deepest condolences to all leprosy community and especially Mr. Jacques Vellut and his family.

Dear Claire, I strongly believe that, you are not physically present today but you are now inside our hearts and you cannot escape from our hearts. We all promise you today and every day that we will walk in the same path laid by you and you will be the inspiration for our work.

On behalf of Damien Foundation Belgium, Damien Foundation India Trust, people from Polambakkam, people from India and on behalf of leprosy community, I stand with my head lowered to a great human being, Claire.

May yoursoul rest in peace in our hearts.

## Testimony of Véronique Thomas

(translation)

My dear little Claire,

You were so eager to go to Our Lord that you didn't wait a few more months in order to celebrate the 80th anniversary of our friendship.

We were sitting on the same school benches at the Sisters of St. André when war separated us. Then you began your medical studies and I studied childcare. Then the Lord directed us to very different paths : I got married, and you left Belgium to go to India, and in the footsteps of Father Damien, you have been caring for leprosy patients, other sick and poor people with such humility. Every time you came back to Belgium, we were meeting each other again and you, my dear Claire, when you were returning back to India, you brought them the love of God, not in words but by your dedication, body and soul, at Polambakkam.

If I could define you, I would say that you were "a hero in the shadows".

You have always had a sweet character and when I told you : "call someone to help you", it was always the same answer : "No, no, I don't want to bother".

You have been leaving us on tiptoe, alone... not to disturb anybody. Now that you are with the Lord, I ask you : pray for all who are gathered here, especially for the Little Sisters, and we, let us pray to thank God for your beautiful example of humility and devotion.

Goodbye, my little Claire.

Véronique Thomas, childhood friend  
and staying with her at the Little Sisters' Home