

# Cathy remembers

(translation)

Dear Jacques,

(...) I came to Polambakkam in 1982 to work for the study THELEP (WHO), and I left Polambakkam in 1991, with one year interruption in 1989 when I went to work at Rawtakuppam. Claire stayed in Polambakkam for the time of my installation and then went back to Madras. She was traveling a lot at that time, she was working in Bihar for a new center with Damien Foundation, particularly with Dr. Diwedi.

Claire was coming to Polambakkam, it seems to me quite regularly. For me, it was important moments because even though my work continued normally, this was an occasion for relaxing, Claire brought gaiety, her good humor, her smile, her laugh, she was very confident, which gave a certain lightness to everything she undertook. Nothing seemed to be above her forces at the time and I think it is why nothing would stop her. She had a lot of humor and had a tendency to take things on the right side. The result of all this was a very serene and peaceful atmosphere. I sometimes accompanied in her travels within THELEP or to meet people she knew and showed her great interest and appreciation, and often a very sincere and visibly unwavering friendship. They were all ready to make hands and feet to serve her and help achieve her projects, even if it meant moving mountains.

At Polambakkam, people had for her a kind of veneration, which annoyed her a little because she was still very simple in her relationship with her environment. But she was also impressive and I think that it preserved her, otherwise she would have been submerged. She needed some peace and quiet, she was very early in the morning and when we were meeting for the breakfast at 5:30am, she had already spent some time to pray, meditate, write her mail... this strong link she had with countless friends around the world.

She often came to Polambakkam when there were people passing that would have been very disappointed not to meet her and to welcome many friends from India or elsewhere. She had a great sense of friendliness and received the people with simplicity, but she would welcome them with much warmth. Polambakkam was also often her pied-à-terre when she was coming back from her travels abroad, she was telling with enthusiasm about what she saw and about the people she had met. I remember once about large "rotten" eggs that smelled very bad, apparently a festive dish in China, and it was impossible to swallow it, but she had eaten them "alone" without apparent difficulty! She was not cooking (me either) but she could eat anything, that was not a problem. I remember one of her return from travel, saying she had a problem with a front tooth that broke, it must have been very annoying, but no, it was arranged. How? she had glued it with chewing-gum! And she laughed....

Working with her was a pleasure, and also a privilege of course. She had quite an experience in leprosy and knew so well the context in which these patients lived, the complexity of family situations, social segregation and then India in general, that India she loved and where she felt home.

When we know the context of her life, we understand quite well the heartbreak she could feel when she had to choose between India and Belgium, the links were certainly as strong on one side as on the other, for different reasons. I have to stop my writing here but it was nice to spend some time with Claire.

Cathy Pouchepadass