

Reflections of Michael

From Br. Michael. (Little Brother of Jesus)

We came to Polambakkam in April 1964, coming straight from Europe to be trained as para-medical workers for the eradication of leprosy. I had met Claire one year before for a short visit to finalize our coming to India. We were 3 Little Brothers of Jesus, 2 from France and one from Belgium. Claire had helped us to meet Shri T.N. Jagadisan who had started a centre close to Polambakkam for the eradication of leprosy and was ready to accept us and sponsor our applications for visas.

In those days Polambakkam hospital was bursting with all kinds of activities related to leprosy: treatment in villages, surveys, reconstructive surgery, re-education through physiotherapy, training centre, etc. Claire was at the centre of these projects, helped by several doctors, together with a large group of para-medical workers, and also by 3 other members of her own community. Claire's outstanding gifts for organization and animation were fully and usefully employed during these years. I must admit that I was very much impressed and even felt rather shy in front of her !

After a few months training we joined Prof. Jagadisan's centre, but our friendship with Claire remained and we were often consulting her when our young medical experience was at a loss before the difficult problems we had to face in the villages. And Claire was always ready to help. We always found ourselves on the same wave length with her as far as the people were concerned, and also when discovering the rich traditions lived in the villages, marked by many celebrations and practices.

I don't remember exactly when we decided to meet regularly to pray together, specially each year during the Holy Week. It came rather soon, I think, because we felt it was a good complement to our medical activities. A simplified and adapted liturgy of the Holy Week became a kind of tradition among us.

After a long span of time out of India (almost 15 years), I met again Claire in Polambakkam where the general situation had changed : the number of patients had dramatically reduced, due to the new drug therapies and a severe and continuous medical control. But Claire hadn't changed : she remained always welcoming and willing to share. I think that during these last years of the 20th. century our sharing became more personal: she was one year elder to me and we had both of us to deal with the problems of old age. It was a time of a new apprenticeship, of acceptance of a life linked with new kinds of fragility and of solitude. Claire had always been suffering not to be able to live closer to the poor people living around her because of her limited knowledge of Tamil (she has never been able to take enough time for studying the language at the beginning); and also because she was always looked respectfully as the "Doctor Amma", even if her responsibilities had been transferred to others long ago. I feel that Claire went through a difficult and austere time during the last years she spent in India. After a long hesitation and reflection she decided to go back to Belgium where she could find the medical help she needed. I think it was the right decision.

This deep friendship with Claire has been a blessing. She leaves us with a message of courage and quiet enthusiasm. She lived it at the beginning when she was able to answer the needs of many, and she lived it also, perhaps painfully, at the end of her life when discovering that *"when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart. And where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders"* (Tagore. Gitanjali).