

# Nalini remembers Claire

Claire's departure did shake me. Although she was ageing and even getting frail, for me she had a perpetual sense of youthfulness..... interested in everything that was happening. Moreover, she was the last AFI in India and although the AFI did not exist as a group in India since 1974, my life was very intertwined with AFI around the world and the spirit of the group. Claire and Simone Liégeois were the two AFI pillars in my life.

I had met Claire and other AFI when I was 16. I had this long friendship with her which also meant I saw her through various phases of her life, working as a young doctor in the leprosy outdoor clinics, getting integrated into the Indian government programme still as a foreign national, getting recognized for her services by the State that bestowed the Padmashri on her – becoming a celebrity, building and expanding of the work of the Damien Foundation in north India and even finally questioning the approach of western medicine and making an attempt to develop skills of non drug therapies. But there was the other side to Claire as well, as an AFI who came to India with Yvonne its founder, as team leader of the first AFI team, as someone who desired to remain in India even when the AFI group dissolved and therefore creating her space in the family of Alex and Clara, remaining faithful and close to Geo Wilmet and Huguette and giving time to care for them when she could, keeping up her relations with people who were involved with people's struggles, particularly close to the Little Sisters and Brothers of Jesus and their spirituality, getting depressed when she could not accept that she eventually could not live alone in Polambakkam, and finally deciding to live with the Little Sisters of the Poor on returning to Belgium. She seemed happy to live there 'incognito' and attend to the door or make the sandwiches for distribution to the hungry. This was an incredible change of role and situation and she seemed to do it with amazing ease.

We also grew as friends. I as a young girl who admired her and the life and work of the AFI and drew inspiration from them, to getting involved myself and engaging in people's movement work and in return becoming a source of hope for Claire. In 2011 I was able to get her to write about her life as an AFI in India. She did it with ease recalling all the dates and events so lucidly. She had a fantastic memory for dates, events and people.

Both of us were/are 'positive personality' types which made us a bit insensitive to more sensitive people around us. It took Claire pretty long to realize this and when she did, she desired to make amends and suffered deeply when she felt she had hurt others. She realized she did not negotiate well between the dual roles of being in the position of power in which there was a vertical hierarchy and being one among the others in a team and in a community in general. She actually suffered from this and I could empathize with her although those who lived close to her found it difficult. We talked about this and in this way I realized how she reviewed her life and asked God's pardon in true humility. Yes, she had a deep faith and when I saw her last in June 2013 when she was lying on her bed after a fall, she held my hand tight and said, 'I do not want to have to lie like this'...God obviously heard her prayer. I did not expect her to say good bye so soon. I miss her.

Nalini

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