

# Henri Tiphagne writes about Claire

Madurai, September 22, 2013

Our dear Jacques and all in the family,

All of us at home feel so close to you while reading this message from you.

It is a time of rejoicing to the Lord to celebrate the life and death of our beloved "aunty Claire" as we called her and knew her. As you rightly said she is with HIM there to guide all of us from THERE.

We know what a loss it will be to all of you in the family. But still there cannot be a better life for one to have completed so successfully and then to live her last so peacefully and without any pain and suffering to herself before leaving us. The most surprising thing is that even in her last week of life in this world she had the possibility of attending the International Leprosy Congress in Brussels and meet many of her old friends also from India. This country owes a lot to her for her life, sacrifice and dedication to the cause of leprosy.

For me I know her as a young school boy playing in Polambakkam with my mother when we used to go there for holidays; in my youth when I used to go there on my own choice also for holidays with her and later also in my social engagement when she used to be so much in solidarity with what we were engaged in.

- My first days of knowing "my aunty Claire" was when I used to, as a small child accompany my mother Dr. Yvette Tiphagne, [also associated with leprosy and used to discuss for hours together with her on leprosy] who was not an 'AFI' but was a member of all their gatherings, annual retreats – I remember my days with them still in the old ISI Bangalore with Late Fr Volken SJ, in Kodaikanal for many years when they used to be there for their long annual retreats !!! All the time her affection to me was something that is so special to me. She was and therefore will remain for me a dear Aunty that she always was.

- My most important discussion with her was when she told me [as told to her by one of her close and trusted friends in the government who had done this confidential enquiry for her] as I had completed my Pre University Course and was waiting for my medical selections and was expecting to get into medicine that my seat had been swapped with another who had bribed the then DMK government in power !!! What a good news she passed on to me because I really am happy that I am where I am and doing what I am doing.

- My memories are about the breakfast discussions and after dinner sessions that we used to have in that beautiful Polambakkam dinning room with 'Arul' serving us and we discussing so many matters about the life of people, the violations that they used to suffer and what is the way out. I also recall me being there for once when the election results were being announced and the interest she showed in them. All this is about the early 70s – about 40 years and more ago.

- I used to go to Polambakkam in later years after 1977 when we were engaged in Vedsandur taluk working and organizing the poor landless dalits under the banner of REAL and she used to enjoy each of our narrations of our work with so much care and solidarity. For me she was not one who was only a medical doctor with specialization in leprosy - but also one who had a

perfect understanding of the caste ridden and exploitative Indian society and what it demanded from young people to change it with organizing the poor.

- It is in her place that I made my first meetings with Mr. Denis von der Weid and grew attracted by his working there with a four selected activists from Tamilnadu – Dr. Felix Sugirtharaj, Mr. S. Martin, Ms. Fatima Burnard and Mr. Manoharn – all working with the RCDA [ Rural Community Development Association] and then forming the Rural Harijan Agricultural Development Association [ RHADA] with its headquarters in Sitamur. I am used to know that most of their very intense trainings used to take place in the ‘quarters’ near aunty Claire’s house ..... And how much aunty Claire was in solidarity with the content of the trainings and the work that RCDA and RHADA were engaged in.

So this country has lost its own daughter ... someone who took this country as her own, worked hard to build an institution to eradicate leprosy in Tamilnadu, handed over this well built and reputed institution to the Government – nothing that any of us in the NGO movement can even dream of today - and then lived once again there to see the very same institution that she had built from the scrap in a dilapidated condition !!!! what a complete and wholesome life ...

There is so much more to say about my aunty Claire... I finally remember that I was to address a "solidarity meeting" in Brussels a few years ago and suddenly in the audience I see her enter the hall and come to listen to me address the meeting !!! that is the last I saw her... all my attempts to meet her in Jacques house thereafter or follow her to Polambakkam whenever she came here to India briefly were all in vain ....

We shall remember her specially and pray for her and for all of you on the 26th or 27th [we hope you will be able to inform us also] when the funeral will take place in Brussels in the chapel of the Little Sisters of the Poor where she was staying followed by the incineration at the crematorium at Uccle-Brussels.

I am trying to pass this on to as many people as possible who knew her or were associated with her.

I also just heard that there was a solemn function in Polambakkam yesterday

Lots of love, prayers and solidarity to the larger family in Belgium and throughout the world of the AFI and Polambakkam who all belong to her large family.

Henri Tiphagne