Foreword

Dr. Claire Vellut, popularly known as “Claire” among friends and “Amma” among persons affected by leprosy, was one of the few rare individuals who brought into the world divinity in humanness, and humaneness in care. She showed to the people around that it was not difficult to infuse hope among the suffering and strength of character among the seriously challenged. She always had in her mind welfare of the leprosy affected but her reach to those in need was definitely kind and understandably endearing without in anyway appearing to be overreach. She once told me that she was not good in articulation and her voice made her feel inadequate. I told her that she did not need that when every gesture and expression of her told a story of kindness, understanding and love. I am one of the fortunate few to have been associated with her, to have been under her benign influence, to have been guided by her.

She was a signpost. A true life well lived. A great soul well blessed. A great being well remembered.

This compendium of expressions of experience and encounters with the great lady and her life as seen and felt by others in interesting narrations is a rewarding, kaleidoscopic canvas that never ceases to draw us all even closer to her. I must thank specially her nephew, Jacques Vellut, for undertaking this thankful task and Damien Foundation India Trust for publishing it.

Dr. P. Krishnamurty
President, DFIT
Dr. Claire Vellut, the legendary leprosy activist, left us on 20 September 2013. Residing 55 years in India to serve the leprosy patients, she made umpteen eternal friends in India and across globe. She never wanted to have children, but she expanded her “familial ties”: with her 21 nieces and nephews who considered her more like an elder sister than an aunt; her relationship with several of her “sisters” in the AFIICA association with whom she shared a part of her life and with all those – friends & colleagues in India — who have been her “Indian family”.

We are printing this booklet as a token of tribute and acknowledge Claire’s life and her remarkable contribution for the cause of Leprosy and Tuberculosis.
Milestones

Childhood and Education (1926 – 1955)

Claire was born in Ixelles (Brussels) on 29 October 1926. Her father, Fernand, then aged 48, was working in a globally reputed insurance company, which led him regularly travel to Netherlands; and this is how Fernand met Lucie (Claire’s mother) in Gulpen (a village South of the Netherlands). Fernand and Lucie already had 5 children when Claire arrived: Jeanne, Lise, André, and twins Jacques and Henri. Claire often said she was the mischievous child; arriving as “the last one”, while her younger brothers-twins were already 13 years old and her elder sister only 18.

Claire received her primary and secondary studies at the Institute of St. André, Ixelles. She received her high school diploma (Greek and Latin) in July 1944, when the war was ending. Claire’s parents were quite liberal and open-minded: their home would regularly welcome priests (from China, India or other states) who came to study at the Catholic University of Louvain.

This was probably what influenced Claire to become a member of Lay Auxiliaries for the Mission (ALM), when she was only 18 years old (1944). By joining this young association, initially reserved for young ladies, Claire wanted to follow the example of Father Vincent Lebbe who put himself at the service of the young Catholic Church in China. In spite of her young age, she made the triple vow to “serve the Church in non-Christian countries, to help local bishops to train young local women and to consider the place of her work as her homeland”. Today the association has become AFI – ICA (International Cultural Association) and also welcomes men and married couples.

While following the general and spiritual training provided within
the ALM team, she simultaneously enrolled for medical studies in 1945 at the Catholic University of Leuven. Except for the first year, she mostly scored well (each time “with satisfaction”) and in July 1952 she completed her seven years of studies and graduated as a Doctor in medicine, surgery and obstetrics.

Meanwhile, as China was closing itself to foreigners, Claire was gradually planning to move to India. She completed her training in England where she got the “Diploma in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene” (July 1953, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine). In order to improve her English, she productively spent her time for several months in The Grail in Pinner (Middlesex), an association that she will continue to keep in touch with. Later, while already in India, Claire enrolled a short course on leprosy (July-August 1957) at the School of Tropical Medicine, Calcutta.

In March 1954, Claire flew to India and was accompanying Yvonne Poncelet, President of ALM. Claire initially got a job as pathologist at Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute, University of Delhi, with the help of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Health Minister of the Central Government, Gandhi’s follower and the first women to hold such important position. In October of the same year, two ALM colleagues joined her in Delhi: Simonne Liégeois (Belgian) and Hélène Eenberg (French). They were both nurses and they found a job at a reputed hospital in Delhi. But laboratory work, moreover in a big city, was not really what Claire wanted. Claire always wanted to be “closer to the people”. Perhaps, all three of them looked for an opportunity to work in the villages where there was a dire need for medical experts.
IN POLAMB AkKAM (1955 – 1980)

The “Polambakkam adventure” begins July 1955. As a matter of fact, we must go back to 1953. In February 1953, Belgium faces serious flooding on the coast and it appealed for international assistance. No sooner, India responds to this call by sending large quantities of jute bags (for filling with sand) to fill holes in the dikes along the Belgian coast. Miracle of international solidarity and the sheer feeling of oneness radiated from India. Touched by this solidarity and at the instigation of Jesuit Fathers Moyersoen and Fallon who lived in India, a group of Belgian philanthropists — including Ernest Solvay, Joseph Maisin, encouraged by King Leopold III — wanted to show recognition of Belgium. Leprosy is endemic in India and Belgium has some experience in this field in the Congo, Belgium proposed India to establish a center for treating the persons affected by leprosy, to make all investments (vehicles, buildings), to recruit and train the Indian staff needed to manage the center for a period of five years and then to hand it over to the Indian authorities in order to continue its management. The “Belgian Foundation for the fight against leprosy” was created and the responsibility for the project was entrusted to Dr. Frans Hemerijckx, who had 25 years of experience in Congo. During his first trip to India, Dr. Hemerijckx quickly selected the village of Polambakkam, a few hundred kilometres south of Madras (now Chennai). The area was known for a
high prevalence of leprosy and the village was close to the Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute, an agency of the Federal Government.

Meanwhile in Delhi, Dr. Hemerijckx met Claire and her two colleagues who had shown much enthusiasm to collaborate on this new project. Reaching Polambakkam, Dr. Hemerijckx telegraphed them that he intended to start the new center, asking them to wait one or two months to allow sufficient time to make bedrooms and living facilities. He received back a telegram: “We will arrive by train day after tomorrow.” And thus 9 July 1955, 160 patients were received during the first consultation. The recent discovery (1943) of a new drug — dapsone, oral tablets — allowed indeed to “a new hope to patients: they could heal and nourish the hope to live a ‘normal’ life”. The main motive for choosing Polambakkam was to Reach the Unreached. Polambakkam strategy was therefore to go to the patients and install the consultations in the villages; it was known as “clinics under the trees”. Thus, month after month, the network of these consultations was widening on a region covering about 884 villages and 3,000 km². Every morning 2 or 3 vehicles would leave Polambakkam with the doctor on board, para-medics, laboratory technicians, and all the necessary equipment (tables, chairs, microscope, patients’ sheets, etc.). According to distance and the number of patients at each consultation, each team would visit 1 – 3 “clinics under the trees”. As a matter of principle, patients would never be at more than a 5 km walk, which perhaps never hindered their daily routine work. During each consultation, they received their medication for 4 weeks and every 4 weeks the mobile team would visit again at same place same time. The team made sure every patient got their 4 week medicines. Dr. Hemerijckx always candidly opined his 52 “clinics under the trees” were more punctual than the govt trains! In between consultations, paramedics stationed in each area conducted survey of all patients in the villages of their vicinity, when they learnt the difficulties of the patients or the ones missing the monthly consultation they spoke about importance of health and hygiene in local schools.
At the center itself, a 50 - bed hospital was built in 1957 to accommodate patients who suffered of acute stages of the disease, or needed reconstructive surgery. A small operation theatre, a physiotherapy department, laboratory, administrative building and residential quarters for the staff would complete the set-up.

**Few vital events in Dr. Claire’s life**

**Sept.19, 1955:** Official opening of the Center by the Governor of Madras.

**March 2, 1960:** visit of King Léopold III and Princess Liliane.

**July 19, 1960:** The Polambakkam Center is handed over to the Indian autho-rities. Dr. Hemerijckx becomes consultant to the WHO for the national program against leprosy. The Madras government requests to Dr. Claire Vellut to continue managing the Center. Claire was establishing the budget and received from the government the required funds to pay the staff (including a small “honorarium” for herself) and to ensure all operations. Initially planned for 5 years, the agreement signed between the government and Claire was renewed until 1980.

**From January 1963 to March 1966,** Jacques, Claire‘s nephew and his wife Francine joined the team. Jacques and Francine were busy in Anandapuram, participating in the surveys in villages, schools and other social & logistical activities.

**February 11, 1964 :** Official visit of King Baudouin and Queen Fabiola, and celebration of the XI World Leprosy Day in the presence of Follereau and his wife.

**Establishing “The Beatitudes” or “Anandapuram” in 1964 -** This welcomed the “clinically cured” patients, apparently the ones with mutilations as a result of the disease or who were lonely or not easily accepted in their family. Anandapuram has been caring for up to thirty residents at a time, men and women, who were involved in various occupations: vegetable garden, crops, and small scale crafts. Even today the center is running actively, although the inmates are becoming older and older. Claire was always pleased to visit Anandapuram project.

**In 1965,** the quality of work was highly appreciated and reco-gnized. The medical autho-rities of Madras asked Polambakkam center to train paramedical workers specialized in leprosy for the whole State of Tamil Nadu. Several groups of 30 to 50 young men and women have been attending the 6 - month course in Polambakkam. The response to the training was so positive that we had to newly construct trainee’s quarters and classrooms.
However, the last event to report in this period is of great importance for Claire. Claire was approved for her Indian citizenship in June 14, 1979. It wasn’t easy to hand over her Belgian passport to the embassy, she could not go out of India for many months until all the paperwork was over and she even had to pass a test proving her sufficient knowledge of an Indian language. Claire was not gifted for foreign languages. She had an interview of a few minutes (in Tamil) with a senior officer, who gave her the benefit of the doubt! But Claire did not stop there: she followed diligently Hindi courses by correspondence and in 1982, she passed an examination in Hindi where she earned the distinction (152 / 200). Getting Indian citizenship was one of Claire’s dearest wishes, which would allow her to live in India throughout her life.

In September 1980 Claire leaves from Polambakkam

**IN INDIA AND FURTHER (1980 – 2009)**

1980 Claire leaves Polambakkam and begins a “nomadic” life across India: implementing with two new centers for the treatment of leprosy in Dehri-on-Sone (Bihar) and Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh, until 1986) on behalf of the Damien Foundation,
Dr. Claire participated in leprosy program in several States, assisted in developing the “Swaminathan Report” defining the new National Policy to eradicate leprosy in India; participating in the WHO study-group on the new multidrug-therapy in leprosy (1981), and working out the protocol for a controlled study of multidrug-therapy trials that begin at Polambakkam (1982); consultant for WHO and SIDA (Sweden) in the hyperendemic district of Purulia (West Bengal, 1982 to 1986); consultancy assignments in the Maldives (1984), Bangladesh (1986) and China (1986).

1986 In September, the Government of Tamil Nadu asks Claire to take over again the management of the Center in Polambakkam. She has been appointed as Secretary General of the Damien Foundation in India from 1984 to 1992, when she participated in the creation of the “Damien Foundation India Trust” which becomes an association of Indian law.

**HER “FAMILIES”**

Claire had chosen not to get married, in order to be more helpful for others, but she has created “family ties” around the world and throughout her life. We gather all those friends in three “families”

**Vellut Family** - Her biological family, in which she was born, mostly present in Belgium, but several members have migrated to different parts of the world

Claire was part of a large family; she was the youngest of six children. Her two sisters, Jeanne and Lise, came to visit her at Polambakkam as well as her brother Henri. They were able to discover the work environment of Claire.
Claire had chosen not to have children, but she had 21 nieces and nephews, and when you added the husbands and wives, it was for Claire many occasions of having a meal or chatting together each time she went to Belgium. Moreover, some of them considered Claire rather like an “elder sister” than an aunt. Several nieces and nephews visited her in Polambakkam, some repeatedly. The Vellut family is relatively “international”, some have been visiting her from their country of adoption: Hubert, from Japan, a Buddhist scholar; Cécile, from Pakistan, a Little Sister of Jesus; Pierre when he was working close to Bombay; Jean-Luc and Hélène on their return from Australia; Etienne from Peru; Jean from Chile.

We do not take the risk to count the number of great-nephews and great-nieces, but as they grew, many of them also wanted to discover India and visit their “Great Aunty Claire”. Children of Jacques and Francine were the first ones, Olivier born in Madras (with Claire’s assistance), Chandra, Barbara and Sebastien (who did his university thesis on the temples of Mahabalipuram); Fredo who enchanted the residents of Anandapuram with his flute tunes; Simon and Annick. Even great-great-nephews wanted to discover India and Polambakkam.

But Claire also enjoyed travelling. She often took advantage of these family visits to India to discover some
parts of India with her guests: some trips with Francine and Jacques; a trip with Agnes; a trip to Karnataka with Bruno and Simone; a discovery in Rajasthan with Jean, Paul, Marita and Tania. Claire also undertook some long journeys including Chile-Peru with Jean and Etienne, Japan with Hubert.

In 2006, the celebration of her 80 years was the occasion of a large “family gathering” in Rosières, which was attended by over a hundred cousins (children and grandchildren included).

When Claire decided to move home to the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poors, she not only regularly participated in one or another family gathering but she also received many visits (which was noted by some less visited co-residents): the most frequent were Agnes, Jean-Luc and Hélène, Bruno and Simone, Pierre and Martine, Jacques and Francine. Olivier, as a fire-fighter and emergency-paramedic often visited her.

Her “AFI-ICA family”- the association to which she joined as a teenager, to which she remained attached to the end. Claire made many journeys to visit her “sisters”, scattered in several countries, because they were important to her.

Her Family in India - Her family in India, which is more diverse because it includes both her “family of adoption”, some colleagues or people with whom she lived almost daily and finally some everlasting friends with whom she has been sharing a lot. This is probably the largest “family” as after all she resided 55 years in India.

To describe Claire’s family in India, it is difficult to know where to start as it is so vast and diverse: colleagues with whom she developed friendships, those around her in her daily life when she was in Polambakkam, her adoptive family, also friends she enjoyed meeting regularly to share difficulties and joys, and also to gain from their experience and advice.

The Little Brothers of Jesus (Charles de Foucauld) were also close to Claire. Michael, Arul and Shanti (the first two from France, the third one from Belgium) had worked among the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and as they knew already the local
language they expect to find some work in Tamil Nadu. Working visas were difficult to obtain for foreigners at the time, but the work for leprosy could be a possibility (as was the case for Jacques and Francine). Thanks to Prof. T.N. Jagadisan—a university professor who had contracted leprosy, and a great friend of Claire too—the Little Brothers were appointed as para-medical workers at Malavanthangal, another center for leprosy control in the region. They got their training in Polambakkam (1964) and settled in Alampoondi, a small village near Thiruvanamalai. Besides their special care for the leprosy patients in their area, they gradually developed several activities with the villagers: a center for the disabled, weaver’s cooperative, herbal medicine, etc. Arul had to return to France for health reasons, while Michael and Shanti have since long acquired Indian citizenship and now retired; they live in Bangalore and in Vellore respectively. For many years, the house in Alampoondi has been welcoming several foreign visitors, eager to learn about life in the villages.

The friends of Polambakkam

When Claire got Indian citizenship (1979), she felt she was becoming a little more “Indian” among the Indians—a long awaited wish—and she could live in India until the end of her life. Friendly relations had developed with the family of Leo Alex, one of her colleagues—he was supervising the paramedical workers posted in the region of Polambakkam and often helped Claire in the problems that could occur with the staff of the Centre. One of his daughters, Isha, stayed with Francine and Jacques hoping to study in Belgium. With Clara and Alex, and their seven children, Claire thought they could live together in their old age, and in 1980 they bought a house together in Chengalepattu. Unfortunately Alex passed away in 1992, but Chengalepattu remained Claire’s “home” until Clara also died in 2008. The seven children of Clara and Alex remained much attached to their “Auntie” and Claire continued to take part in the joys and family celebrations, particularly when staying with Asha in Madras.

P. Antony, a physiotherapist, was also one of the first team members with Dr. Hemerijckx. Very skilled in his work, Antony had the opportunity to specialize in Canada, but he preferred to continue his work “in the field” with leprosy patients. His wife Bala was also working at the Centre as a nurse, and on retirement, they settled in Pondicherry where their house became a friendly pied-a-terre when Claire wanted to have a few moments of rest.
Sadagopan was the chief-administrator of the Center. Suffering from leprosy, he had some disabilities on feet and hands, but it did not prevent him to unravel the mysteries of the government administrative rules and to make accounts as prescribed by the State Treasury. Claire had full confidence in him. Upon retirement, he moved near Polambakkam with his wife Kokila — who was a teacher at the village school, and beautifully mastered Indian classical singing. Claire loved to visit them. Since the death of Sadagopan, Claire kept the same friendly relations with Kokila and children who still consider her “their own family”.

Arul was well known to all visitors of Polambakkam as care taker of the kitchen. Able to adapt the Indian cuisine to sometimes fragile European stomachs, all in the simplicity of what is found locally, he has been taking care of Claire for over 40 years. When he also passed away before Claire, his wife Saleth Mary and his stepdaughter continued faithfully to prepare the meal for Claire.

V. Vedadri was for many years in charge of Anandapuram, the home for disabled patients 500m from the center. He was one of the last from the initial staff to stay in Polambakkam until the departure of Claire. Claire loved to spend some peaceful moments in Anandapuram, caring for the multiple ailments of the patients, and Vedadri thus became the “daily companion” of Claire, in addition to being already the “handyman” to solve all the small practical problems Claire would face.

Cathy Pouchpadass, Franco-Indian doctor, who worked with Claire especially for the WHO-THELEP therapeutic studies in Polambakkam. She settled back in France but kept close contacts with Claire.
Mr Muttumalla Reddiar, donated a land on which the Centre and staff quarters was built. He was an important moral support for Claire and with his wife, they were great hosts for friends or VIPs Claire received.

As she was “retired” and spent more time in Polambakkam, Claire was very interested in the work of Father John Suresh. In addition to being the parish priest, Father Suresh’s responsibilities included a large school (primary, secondary and technical) in Neerpair, a few kilometers away, the vast majority of student’s being dalits. And Claire was well aware that the best way for these young people to get out of their status as “outsiders” was to acquire a good education. She had also invited her friends to financially support the activities of Father Suresh.

**Friends outside Polambakkam**

Before leaving Polambakkam (1980) and extending her responsibilities to other leprosy centers, Claire had developed a special friendship with two other project managers. Dr. Yvette Tiphagne (1999) was in charge of a leprosy unit in Arisipalayam (Salem). Coming from France before the last war, she never returned to her native country and she had been adopting — over the years — 6 orphans of different Indian families. If Yvette and Claire had met to share their professional experiences in the field of leprosy, their relationship grew much beyond. Although she did not belong to AFI-ICA, Yvette loved attending meetings and retreats organized by AFI-ICA, and sometimes she was accompanied by her children. Thus, one of her son, Henri, now engaged in an association for human rights, remembers.

While the Polambakkam Centre regularly received requests to expand its work to new villages, an arrangement with the Foreign Missions Sisters in Pondicherry made possible to start a new service in Rawtakuppam, in a region adjacent to the Polambakkam area. Sister Mary Regina took the responsibility of that unit for many years (she died at the age of 102). The staff was trained in Polambakkam and Claire came regularly to support the team in Rawtakuppam, which also took afterwards the name “Hemerijckx Rural Centre”.

It is nice to recall that we, Jacques and Francine, we have been working with all these people, we shared many concerns and joys, and we feel they are also part of “our family of India” today.

On the other hand, we want to mention a few people who are less known to us, but we know they were dear to the heart of Claire who would visit them whenever possible.
Alina Cattani and Hildegard Sina, both AFI-ICA members, both medical doctors, one Italian and the other German. Both of them had created and worked in the small hospital of Mitraniketan in the mountains of Kerala, for the benefit of workers in tea plantations. The hospital is located near the Kurusimala Ashram, a Cistercian monastery of the Syro–Malankara Catholic rite founded by a cousin of Claire, Father Francis Mahieu (of Scourmont) known as Francis Acharya, and where Claire went several times for moments of prayer and contemplation.

Christine de Severy, a lab technician who lived in Kumbakonam, from Switzerland;

Sr Muriel, of Mogapair (Chennai), with whom Claire had tried to approach alternative medicine.

We wish to complete the list of the great “Indian family” by two people who are not Indian and do not live in India, even if their visits to Polambakkam did initiate a deep friendship between them and Claire.

Denis von der Weid, Doctor of Laws from Switzerland, met Claire in Polambakkam in the early 70s, while he was working with NGOs defending human rights in the region, which gave him the opportunity to return regularly thereafter. Claire greatly appreciated the information and sociopolitical analysis that Denis brought her about the problems of “marginalised people” in India and elsewhere in the world. And “the welcome extended by Claire was always a happiness of which the seeds bear fruit today”. (see also the Golden book)

And the very last person to be mentioned: Marie-Jo Colibeau. Osteopath, living in France, she also met Claire in Polambakkam. Claire – who had never been sick in her active life – had a total trust in her treatments with alternative methods, both for her body and mind, and when back to Europe Claire would make it a point to spend a few days with her. Thanks for her caring friendship.

**BACK TO BELGIUM**

Although Claire returned to Belgium only in September 2009, there were certain moments where she felt some discomfort to remain relatively alone in Polambakkam. Thanks to the excellent work done in Tamil Nadu, the leprosy incidence had fallen sharply and there was no reason to maintain a “vertical” program that only deals with leprosy. Claire has worked hard to give a new objective for Polambakkam, hoping that the land and buildings could benefit a new dynamic
project (disabled, AIDS patients, medical training, etc) and she has been disappointed that her efforts went futile, despite the support of her many friends (Dk. Oza, Dr. Baktha Reddy).

Realizing the solitude of Polambakkam weighed on her, she decided to “close her house”; she tried to find out another location in India later on. It was at that time that she wrote: “I trust in the Lord who takes me by strange and terrible ways which are necessary for me. All of you and all the friends who encourage me, give me hope of getting through”. Jacques went along to help her “packing 55 years of accumulated memories in India”, she still spent several days in Trivandrum, Bangalore and Chennai and all the staff and friends of Polambakkam gave a heart-rending and warm farewell on September 6.

**International Gandhi Award for Leprosy 2011**

Claire was pleased to learn her nomination for the 2011 Gandhi Award not only for the recognition of 55 years of work in India, but also because it gave her a new opportunity to return to “her country.” The Prize, delivered by Vice-President of India, was awarded to Claire in Delhi on May 28, 2012. Claire had insisted that two former employees of early Polambakkam be present at the ceremony.

As usual, Claire wanted to visit a maximum number of her friends, she travelled a lot, and despite everyone’s efforts to offer Dr. Claire Vellut, Founder and Author of the Trust receiving the “International Gandhi Award 2011” from his Excellency Dr. Hamid Ansari, Vice President of India.
air-conditioned & lavish accommodation she came back from her stay in India very happy but very tired. In midst of all she slipped in her bathroom which caused her a major fracture. She was quickly operated at the nearby hospital, but preferred to go home as soon as possible rather than following any advice for rehabilitation. It is from that time that Claire was no longer auto-nomous in her mobility, having to use a walker or a wheel-chair. In March 2013, she confided to a friend:

“Coming here, I was walking with a stick because I had a slight weakness in the left leg. Since my fall in July, everything has really changed. This was a loss not only physically but also psychologically and spiritually and it is this situation that I do not get over. I don’t have pain at all but I am very weak. Today, I walk again with a stick, having had to use a walker, and I come down for lunch and dinner. With this fall, my health has changed. I have almost never been sick before, and suddenly I found myself completely lost. But at the same time, I feel much better, because on top of the weakness I had a kind of depression. But we are well cared for and my doctor is a friend. For me, it was a kind of protection: I made the mistake of living alone in India and I was just looking for such protection I have found in this home where I was greeted by two AFIICA friends”.

This loss of mobility did not stop Claire to receive many visits — family, friends, almost every day her diary mentions some name — and even to take part in some family or friends meetings. Her last visit outside — Monday, September 16 — was particularly symbolic. For the first time, the International Leprosy Congress — which Claire had participated several times in different cities of the world — was held this year in Brussels. We insisted to register her but Claire was somewhat reluctant to have to get there in a wheelchair. Claire actually had the opportunity to attend the inaugural meeting (with the presence of Princess Astrid) and especially to meet many former colleagues, leprologists from India or elsewhere. It was a great joy for her to receive so many laurels and accolades from those alongside whom she had been working in India.

FAREWELL TO CLAIRE

Claire passed away on Friday, September 20, 2013, around 10:30 AM in her room at the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor where she was living in Brussels. That morning she was relaxed and smiling, the nurses helped her for her toilet. As usual, they had left Claire alone to finish her dressing. Only half an hour later, someone came to her room to bring her holy communion and she was found kneeling in
front of her chair, already lifeless. According to her doctor, she didn’t really suffer; it is her heart which let her down. For the few weeks before she passed away, she was absolutely fine. However, she had the opportunity to meet many friends and colleagues from India and all over.

On the same day the news actually spread across India as some former colleagues of Claire, who had attended to the Leprosy Congress were still in a working session in Brussels at the Damien Foundation. Dr. Shivakumar, secretary of the Damien Foundation in India, decided to postpone his return to India in order to represent all
the “leprosy community” of India at the funerals. A deep sense of melancholy was seen in everyone’s face.

Other Indians present at the funeral, Asha and Isha, the two daughters of Claire’s adoptive family. Asha, who is living in Chennai and had unexpectedly lost her husband few months ago, was visiting her sister Isha in Paris. They visited Belgium when they heard the sad news of Dr.Claire.

In the days that followed the death of Claire, we received hundreds of messages from Belgium, India and all over globe, to pay tribute to all what Claire had been for all those who had met her. The 3 – 4 nephews and nieces who were closer to Claire wanted to prepare a ceremony that would exude serenity and recognition: Her colleagues from those days remember her as very hard-working and always punctual. Despite her toil and long work hours, Dr.Claire enjoyed her work immensely. She was where she had wanted to be, doing the work she loved and living her life for serving the destitute.

**A prayers vigil** was first held on Wednesday, September 25, at a Funeral at Watermael-Boitsfort (Brussels). Close relatives and a few friends gathered around the body of Claire, before the coffin would be closed. Moments of prayers, a song sung in Tamil by Asha, a few personal testimonies.

**TESTIMONIALS...**

**From Peggy Siret, her AFI-ICA colleague residing at the same Home**

The “memory” of Claire remains “tattooed” in my heart, maybe I’m the only last one to have been with her almost daily and to have enjoyed some aspects of her deep faith, of her simplicity, just to the image of her patron St. Clara. Claire was to celebrate her birthday on October 29th, we were from the same year, 1926 ! To Claire: “When death will come to fetch you, when the end of your life will arise, nothing will exist anymore, only Love will remain, God will welcome you, your heart will illuminate.”

**From the Sisters of the Monastery of Ermeton (Belgium)**

Thank you to let us know about the “birth in heaven” of Claire Vellut. We loved to see her in Ermeton and listen to her, every time she came back from India. She now joins back, in peace and joy, so many destitute she cared, helped, encouraged, and inspired to relive our dreams. She also joined the members of her family, especially Sr Marie‐Jean Ricker through which we had the opportunity to know her and to benefit of her openness.
Dr. P. Krishnamurthy, Chennai, who succeeded Claire as General Secretary DFIT

It is difficult to reconcile to the fact that Claire is no more with us. My association with her spanned about three decades. The first time when I met her at Central Leprosy Teaching and Research Institute, I approached her with a touch of trepidation for I had known from the people at the Institute where I started my leprosy journey that she was a nononsense, professional who did not care for personal affiliations in dealing with people working in the programme. How wrong they were was proved by the way she treated me; not like a kid who was trying to take a few tentative steps in leprosy but like a like-minded professional. I could see the twinkle in her eyes when she saw my discomfort. It was affection first sight. The warm comraderie that started that day kindled an everlasting kinship. I came to know later that she could easily gauge the passion to serve in very people she met and that was one thing that made her believe and trust. Every encounter with her was a lesson in “patients first programme next numbers last” attitude. She never hesitated to ask questions; and she was always willing and ready to listen. Her regal bearing and humble disposition brought her instant recognition and positive response. When two years back she decided to leave India and settle in Belgium she cried. I had never seen her losing her composure. She said: “Sorry, I am leaving. I considered everything. I don’t know whether I am doing the right thing”. I consoled her and told her: “Claire, hitherto you have lived for others. It is time you live for yourself”. She was happy that she confided. She said she would not return.

But a few months later she had to return to receive the Gandhi award from the Vice President of India. That was the last time I saw her. I could see happiness writ large on her face. She was happy not because she got the award, but she was able to see her friends and well wishers. It is hard to believe that she is no more. Physically she is not here but she lives in my heart and in the heart of millions of others. She continues to live through her ideals and values that she has left as legacy. Claire was not a deity but she had the divinity of being a great human. She lived for others. Let us live for her values.

From Cheenu, son of Sadagopan, Chennai

All of us in India regarded Vellut aunty as our Mother. She was an exceptional person who had lot of Zeal and Love to the Mankind. Her Service to the mankind is Immortal. She visited our house and spent one night with us. When I said that when she is planning to come back she only smiled at us. For all of us it is painful to digest
this. Even though she was not physically with us we were happy that she is there somewhere and we will get a chance to see her or to speak to her. It is hard to accept the fact that we will no longer see her.

From Dr. Nevin Wilson,
Regional Director International Union for Tuberculosis, New-Delhi

I first met Claire Vellut as a young medical student – about 30 years ago. She made a profound impression on me. I then had the opportunity to briefly work under her guidance when I managed the leprosy project among tribal communities in the Nilgiris. She was an extraordinary woman and her strength was her faith in God. Her faith in His constancy upheld her and influenced others including me. She helped me to understand the suffering of patients with leprosy. Along with countless others, patients and care providers, I commend her spirit to the Lord.

From Luc Comhaire, in charge of projects in India at Damien Foundation Brussels

It is with great sadness that we learned of the death of Claire. I know Claire since 1990 and I had the privilege to cross her path and discuss with her long hours during these years. Her simplicity, her life of service to others and how she could bring light into the eyes of patients are an example to all of us.

From Swami Japananda, Swami Vivekananda Integrated Rural Health Center, Pavagada (Karnataka)

We had a very close association with Dr. Claire Vellut and whenever we were in need of guidance and support it was she who helped us in all respects to start the institutions. From then onwards Dr. Claire Vellut was a sort of inspiration for all of us. We remember her simplicity, dedication and total commitment to the cause of serving the most neglected ones. Her life was like a text book for all of us to follow. Even though, she hails from Europe but her heart and soul was dedicated to our country. She was a best Indian amongst the Europeans!

From Prof. P. Lakshmanan...

It was in the year 1985, I met Dr. Claire Vellut at Damien Foundation to understand the services being rendered by DFIT. Before answering, Dr. Claire wanted to know to the purpose. I told her the plans to teach the MBA students about Services Management as a subject. Dr. said that Services are different from the activities of DFIT and added that the services offered by NGOs are different in many ways compared to Services
She explained in detail about the activities relating to Leprosy Control through 29 projects in the country which were in active services then being funded by DFIT. She called Dr. Kandasamy, CMO in DFIT then. Both of them explained the mechanism of services being offered using the funds received from Belgium. After understanding the management of funds to achieve the set objectives it was included as a part of funds management by NGOs. Dr. Claire was happy to know that this is one of the approaches of creating awareness of Leprosy Control. I continued my interactions with Dr. Claire and Dr. Kandasamy. They took me to some of the projects to have first hand information of running such Service Projects.

In 1989, Dr. Claire came to Loyola Institute of Business Administration—Loyola College and met Director Rev. Fr. Louis Xavier. Dr. Claire was keen in giving some management inputs to the staff of DFIT and the Projects. We discussed the details and Dr. Claire was so keen that the training should be to meet the specific needs of DFIT and the Projects and added that it should include the organisational set up, job specification, job description, job analysis, responsibilities, authority, accountability and communication. Dr. Claire wanted the course materials to be prepared and she vetted the course contents. I could see the involvement in having perfection in what all she did.

(Log on to http://claire-vellut.net/ for more information)