Voices of Sisters

Spirituality



Elsykutty (Sister Caridad) Paramundayil and her little sister, Sr. Celine Paramundayil, in Ávila, Spain (Courtesy of Celine Paramundayil)



by Sr. Celine Paramundayil

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Elsykutty (Sister Caridad) Paramundayil and her little sister, Sr. Celine Paramundayil, in Ávila, Spain (Courtesy of Celine Paramundayil)

On Aug. 17, 2020, while I was at our community U.S. vacation home, my mobile kept ringing, around midnight. I had just fallen asleep after my friend and I had been praying for my sister, who was on a ventilator in Kolkata, India. I was afraid of the news and decided not to take the calls. Around 5 a.m., I opened my mobile; my heart shattered into pieces!

Elsykutty — known for her cheerfulness and vivacity — was born as the first girl after three boys in our family, while I was the last of the eight children. When she was in class 10, she would take me to preschool — which I hated. One day, I followed her after she dropped me off; since it was time for her class, she hid me under her desk and told me to "be quiet" since the math teacher did not like kids in her class. Though the tiny 4-year-old remained silent during the entire class, that was the end of my nursery school!

Soon after high school, Elsy joined the Sisters Adorers convent in Odessa and went to Spain for her formation. Almost a decade later, when she came for a home visit, I hardly recognized her, in a habit like a European nun! She had taken the name Sister Caridad — "Charity" in Spanish. Like her name, she was special.

Years later, she arranged for me to come to Carmel College in Goa, India, since she studied and lived nearby as the novice mistress of her congregation. I looked forward to the weekends: escaping from the hostel, visiting my sister, and eating some Kerala food!

One day as she was sewing, she said the words of St. Teresa of Ávila: "Let nothing disturb you, nothing frighten you, all things are passing — God alone is sufficient." This touched me and later inspired me to become a sister.

We lived very few years together at home, but eventually she became my mentor, guide and best friend. Her strong faith and love influenced not only me but all who came to her life.

Caridad had degrees in history, psychology, theology, education, and an English course from Oxford. She spoke Malayalam, English, Hindi, Oriya and Spanish.



Sister Caridad with friends in Spain (Courtesy of Fernando Perez Martin)

Once a Spanish Catholic organization interviewed her about the congregation's ministry to sex workers in India. The TV anchor asked her, "Why are you wearing a sari?" — since she spoke Spanish like a native.

She ministered as a teacher, school vice principal, director of the Working Women's Hostel, superior and formator in Goa and Odessa, editor of the Catholic Herald, and with the Conference of West Bengal Religious.

Her diagnosis of breast cancer in 2007 shocked us all. Thanks to loving care from a good doctor and her community, she survived and even traveled to Spain in 2009. She used her expertise to translate Adorers' foundress St. Maria Micaela's autobiography and many letters to English for the non-Spanish speakers, making trips between India and Spain until 2016 while raising funds for the congregation.

I visited her in Spain in 2014, and she took me to Madrid and Ávila — the birthplace of St. Teresa — my long-cherished dream!

In 2016, the cancer reappeared in her spine with severe pain, and she was taken back to India for further treatment. I flew from Philadelphia to Kolkata to be with her, but she remained in the ICU and the doctors could not guarantee her survival.

Her condition worsened and all my siblings and some of their children came. (We had lost a brother in 2015 and now another gravely ill sibling was too much.) We prayed for a miracle at the tomb of Mother Teresa — for whose burial Caridad, as a journalist, had given the commentary.

Known for her willpower, and happy to see her dear ones, while in the ICU Caridad cheered us saying, "Don't worry, my time has not yet come." After a prolonged recuperation, though handicapped she continued her translation work and visited home in 2018.



Sister Caridad with nieces and nephews (Courtesy of the Paramundayil family)

Sister Caridad enjoyed parties and fun, and was the favorite aunty of her nieces, nephews and their kids. When she celebrated her golden jubilee in 2019, her nephews and nieces living and working in six countries planned it online and the local ones organized the event. Even the 2- and 3-year-olds had parts to play; what a lovely celebration with representatives from community, parish, family, and friends!

The pandemic prevented her from coming for a first Communion, and by July, cancer invaded her lungs. On Aug. 17, well-prepared and conscious till the end, she completed her mission on earth and returned to her creator at the age of 71.

At her death, Matters India reported:

> The only woman to edit India's first Catholic weekly, who had spent years to rehabilitate sex workers, died of cardiac arrest in Kolkata, eastern India. ... [She] was the editor of The Kolkata-based Herald, the oldest Catholic weekly in India. She was the only female editor of prominent Catholic weeklies in India that have been edited by priests even after a century.

"Sister Caridad had updated the whole computerizing system of the weekly. The Archdiocese will remain indebted to Sr. Caridad," said Fr. Dominic Gomes of the Kolkata Diocese.

Only Manoj, our nephew could represent our family on her last journey, but her beloved community gave a beautiful last farewell to their dear Caridad.

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A year after her death, some friends in Alicante, Spain, wrote her a letter, talking about the pandemic, and expressing appreciation for her many gifts:

> Being a friend is one of the most precious gifts. Friend, connecting with your Being remains for me a gift that transcends time.

> Friend Caridad, what are you doing on that side? I imagine you in your "bridging" task, for which you were well prepared. During your stay on this beautiful planet, you brought us India to Spain and surely you brought Spain to India. Through you we got to know its landscapes: Bombay, Calcutta, Kerala, Siliguri ... through your images we reached the Himalayas. You showed us your culture, the beauty of the oriental soul and the pain that has historically hovered over underprivileged women. Through you we got to know the colors and contrasts of India, we loved all your things with you.
>
> Caridad, we are all on this journey back home. Now that you are a few steps ahead, put signs on the road, turn on ideas, send us codes so that we can interpret the clues that Life sends us and be a bridge again, a bridge that brings to this planet the medicine of the soul that it needs, the antidote that heals us and sets us free. In the "Apothecary of Heaven" you will have many prepared doses of unconditional Love. Come by with the big bag, I believe they are waiting for you to hand them out.
>
> We love you, Caridad. Your friends continue to send you hugs
>
> *—Dora + Sole and Fernando*

Enjoy the eternal bliss, my beloved *chachi* (elder sister). Your love and inspiration remain with us, though nothing can ever fill the void. We miss you and love you always and ever grateful for your life, a blessing from God.