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***A nun’s killer says forgiveness of her family has given him ‘new life’***

The man who served a prison term for the murder of a Franciscan Clarist nun in 1995 said that the forgiveness shown to him by the slain nun’s family has given him “new life”.

Samandhar Singh told Catholic News Service (CNS) that he experienced a “rebirth” during a visit in 2002 by Sister Selmy, the younger sister of slain Sister Rani Maria Vattalil, while he was in prison.

Sister Selmy, also a member of the Franciscan Clarist Congregation, offered words of forgiveness and tied a rakhi, or sacred thread, on his hand, signifying that she accepted Singh as her brother. He recalled this in an interview in his native Semlia village, near Indore in central Madhya Pradesh State.

Rakhi is a Hindu festival that celebrates love and duty between brothers and sisters. It includes a ritual whereby sisters tie a sacred thread on their brothers’ wrist, symbolizing protective relationship between men and women, whether related or unrelated.

“It gave me a new life,” recalled the 46-year-old Singh with beaming eyes, sitting at his farm. Singh said that even his wife deserted him after his conviction.

Police said Singh stabbed Sister Rani Maria fifty-four times in front of more than fifty bus passengers in a jungle area near Udainagar, allegedly at the behest of money lenders affected by the nun’s social work among village women who were organizing self-help groups.

He was convicted of the murder and sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted to life in prison.

“I had visited him in the jail on August 22, the day of Rakhi and the feast of the Queenship of Mary”, Sister Selmy said, explaining that she had decided to forgive Singh soon after her sister’s death. Sister Rani Maria’s name means Queen Mary, she said.

Sister Rani Maria was given the title Servant of God in 2007. Documents are being collected about her life and ministry for possible consideration of sainthood.

Sister Selmy told CNS at the Clarist Convent at Udainagar that it was Fr Swami Sadanand, a member of the Order of Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, who paved the way for her encounter with Singh. The priest had visited Singh several times in prison in Indore.

Fr Sadanand eventually advocated for Singh’s release from prison. Court officials agreed in 2006 after mandatory declarations were signed by Sister Selmy, her parents and church officials.