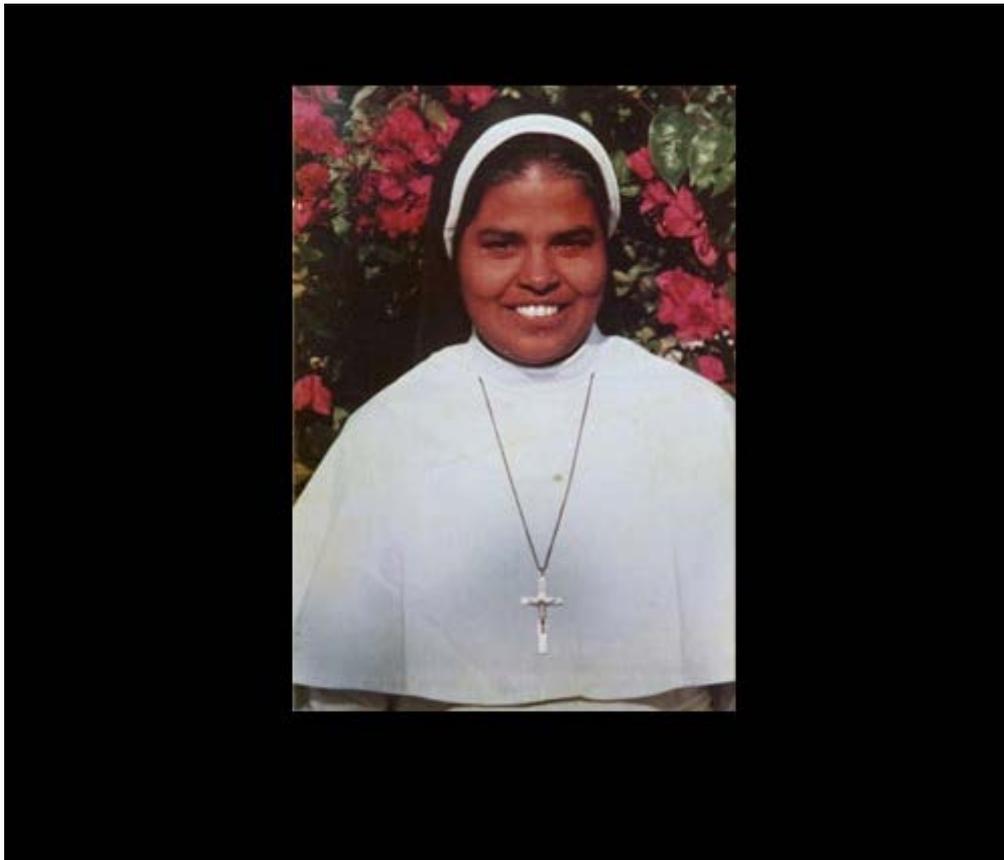


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Nun's killer says forgiveness of family has given him 'new life'

by **Anto Akkara** posted Monday, 27 Oct 2014



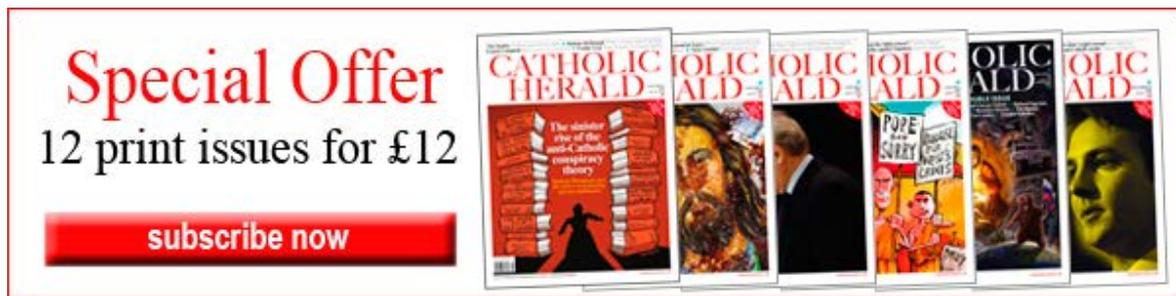
Sister Rani Maria Vattalil, from her Wikipedia page

Samandhar Singh stabbed Sister Rani Maria 54 times in front of bus passengers

The man who served a prison term for the 1995 murder of a Franciscan Clarist nun 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 2002 visit 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 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 her brother's wrist symbolizing protective relationship between men and women, 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 54 times in front of more than 50 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 organising 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 Queen 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 of Mary, she said.

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

Sister Selmy told CNS at the Clarist convent at Udainagar that it was Fr Swami Sadanand, a member of the Carmelite of Mary Immaculate order, 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.

When Sister Selmy was preparing to return home to southern Kerala state in January 2007 to visit her ailing 82-year-old father Paul Vattalil, Singh expressed a desire to meet her parents and apologize to them and he accompanied the nun.

In early 2014, Singh was asked to obtain a passport so he could accompany Sister Selmy and Father Sadanand to Rome for the March debut of a 56-minute documentary film, Heart of a Murderer, produced by Catherine McGilvray. It tells the story of the death of Sister Rani Maria and Singh's conversion.

He has been unable to gain the proper documents to secure a passport, however.

The documentary was shot in the original locales, including the spot where Sister Rani

Maria was stabbed, Indore jail and the nun's home.

Stories of Singh embracing Christianity and the power of forgiveness have not been met kindly by Hindu fundamentalists who accuse him of betraying the religion.

"It has put my life in danger," he said, adding, however, that he did not want to hurt the "bond" with Sister Selmy, whom he calls "didi", or elder sister.

"This is not a question of religion but of love bond," he added. "So, I did not want to hurt her and never informed her about this."

Since being released from prison, Singh has been attending event marking the anniversary of the nun's martyrdom at her tomb in Udainagar and visiting the nearby convent every Rakhi day to visit Sister Selmy.

"This August, too, he came for the Rakhi. He also brought sweets for all the 80 girls in our hostel [attached to the convent]," Sister Selmy said.

At least one Church official finds Singh's conversion story displeasing.

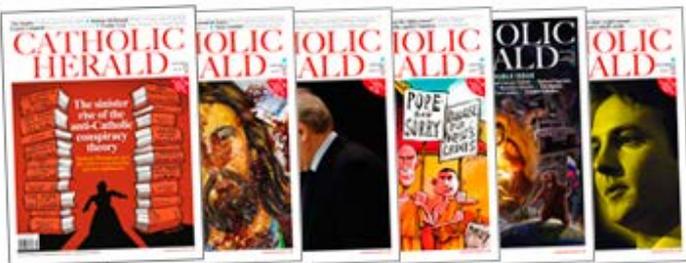
Bishop Chacko Thottumarickal of Indore told CNS that "it is a matter of serious concern that the fake story of Singh's 'conversion' has been spread through the Catholic media."

"Whoever responsible for spreading this false information has done a disservice to Singh and the Church," he continued. "Such news should have never gone out in responsible media."

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