

**PRESENTATION ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND INTERRELIGIOUS
DIALOGUE – 18 SEPT.2008 By Conchita Poncini (IFUW), President NGO Colmmittee
on the Status of Women**

I have often heard said in social gatherings that there are 2 subjects which have to be avoided – religion and politics. I think this is because minds and convictions are so set in a tunnel vision that except for the light one sees ahead, everything else is dark. In my own perception, freedom of expression does not mean precisely a tunnel vision that only sees one right. My way is not to avoid the subject of whose religion is the right one to reach that elusive goal of eternal happiness, I use the metaphore of mountain trekkers to Mount Everest or any acme. There are many paths one could take but they lead to the same summit.

What counts is the understanding and appreciation of the diversity of faith and cultural specificities of each community that facilitates the climb – for example common language, common quest for spiritual and material well-being, common cultures, common virtues that create values of friendship and peaceful co-existence.

Education and human rights education are essential entry points in this interreligious and intercultural dialogue because it is in the knowledge of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that one can find ways of protecting and promoting the enjoyment of rights as well as use legal remedies when necessary. But what I would like to stress is that law and justice must have a human face and a gender equality lens.

I want to deviate from our UN language to give an illustration of our topic of freedom of expression and interreligious dialogue and how one can open horizons and reach harmony. I want to tell you the story of a film I saw 3 times – a lesson of how difficulties could be hurdled through the values of human dignity and respect. It is a light but touching comedy - entitled SAINT JACQUES LA MEQUE.

It begins with several groups with very divergent background coming together for a journey to a holy place – a pilgrimage: 3 siblings that have not spoken with each other for years have to join together on a pilgrimage to Saint Jean de Compostello in Spain to have the right to the inheritance left by their defunct mother; A business executive who brought all his latest technology equipment to prove he can do both business and practice spirituality, and a muslim young man in love who wanted to accompany his Catholic girlfriend but also was charged with taking care of an illiterate teen-age Muslim cousin, so he pretended to the cousin that the pilgrimage was to Mecca. The trip started with arguments, complaints, bickering. As the journey got longer and harder, the technology expert got rid of his heavy gear, the girlfriend left her cosmetics on

the road while the young illiterate cousin learned to read and write from a woman professor who taught him in secret in order not to embarrass him. When the boy finally learned to read street signs, he discovered he was actually not going to the Mecca but to Saint Jacques. He however kept pretending ignorance vis-a-vis his cousin to save face.

To overcome obstacles on the way, everyone was forced at the beginning to tolerate each other and cooperate in doing chores. But in the end, there was genuine bonding and fun together in the face of adversities. The siblings learned to be generous to each other, the professor adopted the muslim boy whose mother died during this pilgrimage. Finally the real destination became secondary to the actual friendship and love that had built up among themselves.

This beautiful lesson of tolerance, respect, solidarity and the value of friendship is what we NGOs should transmit in our advocacy work on freedom of expression. In her address to the meeting organized by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, Ambassador Erlinda Basilio on Gender Equality, Gender Justice and Women's Rights, she saw "abundant opportunities for increasing international cooperation and dialogue on gender issues and women's rights. Such cooperation need not only be between states but states and civil society and may I add between women and men. And it need not be controversial or adversarial she said. There are many lessons we can learn from each other's experiences. What is important is how we frame and approach the issue.

At the "Geneva Conference on Interfaith Cooperation and the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity" that took place on September 1 & 2 in Geneva, the remarkable message that rang throughout the conference was the depth of commitment to nothing less than interfaith *cooperation* and the change of mindset and lifestyle that accompanied it. A proposal was made for interreligious youth councils that involve practical learning by experience about the others faiths and building deep and trusting familial bonds between religions engaged to reinforce understanding and appreciation of the diversity among communities of faiths and cultures through educational and training programs including cultural communities. . . .

Finally, I want to cite a quotation from Jerry Wohlberg (1939-1973) taken from a book called "How to Live with Another Person" by David Viscott, M.D. "Until the nations and peoples of this world come to understand that nothing is more important than a human life and that all laws and governments should have as their goal the safety of the people and the prevention of the taking of the lives of innocents, we shall be forced to mourn the needless loss of our best, people who exemplify the noblest and highest aspirations of the human spirit itself."
