

Sr. Joan Kirby: A Memorial Presentation
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It is my great honor to give this memorial address to highlight the UN work of Sr. Joan Kirby, whose tenure as an NGO for the Temple of Understanding spanned 14 years. Originally Sr. Kirby was a cloistered nun, focusing mainly on the educational mission of her order, The Religious of the Sacred Heart. In 1963, Sr. Kirby began a career as a Headmistress for private catholic schools in Princeton, New Jersey and New York City. She maintained this passion for teaching young people throughout her life, as you will see in the video I am going to show you.

While I want to give you a factual account of Sr. Kirby's contribution to the NGO community, I also want to convey the kind of dynamic energy that embodied this unstoppable nun. Her determination to fulfil what she saw as her interfaith mission never wavered, in spite of the criticism and sometimes real opposition she received from some of her more conservative colleagues and the UN's historical 'wariness' of religion's contribution in particular.

In 1980 Sr. Kirby gave up her 10 year position as headmistress of the Convent of the Sacred Heart School and turned her attention to the problems facing New York City. First working at Catholic Charities in the office of Neighborhood Preservation for low income housing, she also joined the Boards of no less than 9 prominent organizations and received 5 awards for her work. In 1987 she became President and later the first Executive Director of Homes For the Homeless, a position she held for 2 years.

When Sr. Kirby was asked to become the Executive Director of the Temple of Understanding in 1994, she took on the challenge of teaching adult courses on interfaith dialogue which eventually culminated in a year-long certificate program with Auburn Seminary and New York Seminary called "Spiritual Journeys, Interfaith Perspectives". Sr. Joan's growing conviction that peace would only come through dialogue between different religious institutions and individuals flourished and deepened during those years. In April of 2000, the Board decided

that Sr. Kirby should take over as the main Representative to the UN to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue and peace. About the same time, I took over as Executive Director of the Temple of Understanding. I used to kid her that I would manage the 'store' while she could 'have fun' at the UN. Sometimes she laughed and sometimes she genuinely got mad. Oh yes, she did have a temper.

Many of you are familiar with the positions Sr. Kirby held as an NGO: She served as Secretary of the NGO Committee on the Human Rights Conference, was Chairperson of the 2004 NGO/DPI Conference "The Millennium Development Goals: Civil Society Takes Action" ; and in 2005 she was elected as the Chair of the DPI/Executive Committee. She later chaired the Outreach Committee for the 2008 NGO/DPI Conference on the International Declaration of Human rights held in Paris, France.

One of the most interesting turn of events that Sr. Kirby was involved in was the Tripartite Forum and Troika, officially adopted by the General Assembly in a precedent –setting Philippine –initiated resolution entitled, "Promoting of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace". This resolution was ratified by 23 countries in 2004; 40 countries in 2005 and in 2006 by 50 countries, including Russia and China- two permanent members of the Security Council.

Sr. Kirby took over the Presidency of the Bureau of the Committee of Religious NGO's from Hiro Sakuri in 2007, just as the planning of the High-Level Dialogue in Interreligious Cooperation for Peace was unfolding. She considered this effort a culmination of her work for interfaith cooperation for peace at the UN and she worked tirelessly for the Tripartite Forum. In the video I am about to show you, she talks about her belief that this work fulfilled the dream of our Founder, Juliet Hollister. Terms of the Tripartite agreement were of special importance to the Committee Members of the Religious NGO's because it was the first time that "Governments, UN agencies, and NGO's duly accredited with the UN", (the Committee of Religious NGO's that is), joined as new partners and observers". In a quote from Sr. Kirby's official papers, it is stated that, " The Tripartite Forum was not considered to be an official UN body, rather a "safe place" where deep differences have a space to be heard, discussed and perhaps resolved." Because

this General Assembly resolution was the result of the decision of the Philippines and Pakistan to merge their inter-related resolutions on interfaith (Philippines) and intercultural (Pakistan) cooperation for peace, it was subject to intense negotiations, something Sr. Kirby embraced with all of her professional skill. A number of conferences were held, including two at UNESCO in 2008 and 2009. A great deal of progress was made. Unfortunately, the momentum of all this effort was interrupted by a new government in the Philippines that was not in favor of continuing the work of the Tripartite Forum. Sr. Kirby took all this in stride and enthusiastically supported the next evolution of interfaith cooperation, World Interfaith Harmony Week, sponsored by King Abdullah of Jordan and passed by the GA in 2010.

Sr. Kirby was amazingly flexible and very in tune with what she perceived as the next direction for her work at the UN. For instance, after the 1995 Copenhagen UN World Summit, she wrote in our newsletter, “By the end of the conference, I was convinced that a new and powerful force has entered the world scene. The women and children of the third world cannot be forgotten. Perhaps their interventions will be more effective in raising questions about the economic growth model that drives the world economy”. Thus, during the period of the Millennium Development Goals, Sr. Kirby began to shift her focus from dialogue to action. For the 2009 CSW, she hosted the first Temple of Understanding’s side event on climate change, which in her mind, established what she believed to be the next major issue facing humanity, namely MDG goal number 8. Environmental Sustainability. There was some opposition to this shift from our Board and other colleagues in the Interfaith Movement who could not connect the dots between religious dialogue as ‘The Mission’ and action on poverty, women, human rights and climate change. But Sr. Kirby had already made the leap. Always ahead of the curve, she saw the environment as the ground upon which everything else hinged. She set the goal of bringing what she called “the moral voice of all the religions” to bear on this issue by hosting numerous small gatherings and future CSW side events on this and related topics. Being informed was one of her major personal life ambitions and she enthusiastically set about doing just that by

attending every possible UN Climate Change conference, which taxed our budget to the max.

As if all this is not enough for one person to have accomplished, during the summer months when UN work slows down, Sr. Kirby fulfilled her passion to teach the next generation by creating 'The UN Summer Internship Program' for her high school students. She began in 2005, with her Sacred Heart "girls" as she called them, who went to the UN for 5 weeks, attending committee meetings, briefings, and high level events when possible. Since Sr. Kirby had universal respect from so many colleagues, she used those connections to garner speakers from other NGO's, Missions, Agencies and even the Secretariat. She also shamelessly strong armed some of you for those UN passes for her students, I might add. Each student was asked to choose a topic which they reported on at the end of the program. Our website is full of testimonials about their experience as nothing less than life changing. As with everything she did, Sr. Kirby kept this program quiet, humbly doing her thing with her students. Now in its 11th year, this program had 158 applicants and this summer will include 21 students from all over the world.

Sr. Kirby lived a life of devotion, compassion and service. This quality made her a kind of "beacon of light" for those who needed solace and comfort. I know catholic followers are supposed to go to a priest for direction but I personally watched Sr. Kirby "minister" to many, many people both from within her faith and from other faiths as well. She was always helping someone, always concerned with the latest world crisis and always ready to take action for the disenfranchised. She radiated a kind of centered wisdom, a personal achievement and quality that can only be found through a deep and abiding faith. I think this is what was most impressive about her life. Please join me in honoring the legacy of this very special nun, Sr. Joan Kirby. May I have the video please?