A “Circle Tour” of the International Presentation Association and the United Nations

Maura McCarthy PBVM
May 2012

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”
(Is 49:15, see also 44:21)

As Margaret Scott discusses in The Eucharist and Social Justice, “... the Body of Christ ... is both troubled and mortal. It is being dismembered by over-consumption and over-competition for fossil fuel and resources. Seas rise, deserts expand, and floods and hurricanes become more frequent and more intense. Climate induced famines, drought, and conflict are threatening the goals for development for billions of the world’s poorest people.” From the hinterlands of Bolivia, to a migrant mission in Florida, to the hidden poor of Iowa, New York, Philadelphia, and other places I have only heard about, the reality must not escape from memory...

We are Presentation women who share the charism of our foundress, Nano Nagle. We reach out in faith, in a spirit of hospitality, compassion and simplicity to all of creation. The cry of those made poor and the cry of the Earth call us to continue the mission of Jesus to bring forth a sustainable society founded on respect for Earth, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace.
(From the 2003 Assembly)

Three or four times I made the famed Circle Boat Tour of New York with some of my IPA teammates. This wonderful tour is offered as a courtesy to Sisters with “Nun Tickets”. I love the narration of the various early ethnic areas, all with the struggles they represent of immigrants beginning life anew. My family’s ancestors are part of this history and well as several audacious Presentation foundresses who passed through the New York area on their way to pioneering missions. The “Circle Tour of New York” strikes me as a good analogy for my experience of the International Presentation Association and of the United Nations. The international “Presentation circle” began for me in 1970, when we spent some days in the Newburgh Presentation mission of Las Minas in Caracas, Venezuela on our way to begin a new mission in
Bolivia. Then in 1972, Therese Corkery and I met Paula Cormier in Siquani, Peru after we had bid farewell to Ileen Sweeney, who was forced to return because of illness. Paula was passing out handouts at a pastoral workshop when we recognized the Presentation ring! The Latin American Association of Presentation Sisters was for me the precursor of the International Presentation Association. We lived out this association concretely in Bolivia with the collaborative efforts of Margaret McCarthy, Laura Urbano, and Myra Remily, Presentations from the Union, New Windsor, and Aberdeen, respectively. Later, broadening our tent, we shared mission with Peggy Ryan OP from Sinsinawa WI, who also joined our Bolivian team accompanying the Indigenous Guarani. The two of us were invited to attend the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2007 by Sharon Altendorf of Fargo, the IPA coordinator at that time.

What a delight it was for me to meet for the first time Fatima Rodrigo, our IPA coordinator from India, who met me at La Guardia Airport on September 29, and accompanied me to St Anthony’s. Then Mary Ivers from Ireland and Ecuador, an old APLA friend, met me at the door that first night. From my third floor room at St Anthony’s, I could observe The Soho News, the Village Cobbler, and the Village Tailor and Cobbler on the street below.

My very first experience with other NGOs happened the next day at the UNANIMA anniversary celebration featuring Catherine Ferguson, one of the foundresses of this coalition of 18 congregations serving with ECOSOC at the United Nations. The coalition presented a special award to a Canadian woman, Jessica Ernst, who dared to confront the extractive industries in her country with the devastation they were causing by polluting the soil and water through fracking the subsoil rock to extract petroleum. The only water available for drinking became manifestly flammable! This graphic discourse caused me to study further the impacts the extractive industries!

On Monday morning October 2, Fatima accompanied me to get my UN badge and then invited me and Mary Ivers to attend a Task Force on the Eradication of Poverty slated to prepare the Civil Society Forum in preparation for the UN Commission for Social Development. Winifred Doherty and Fatima Rodrigo, co chairs the previous year, had appointed 2 new co-chairs for the forum day on January 31: Dina Marandola and Ming Chang. The Civil Society Forum preceded the Commission for Social Development slated for February 1 to 10 of this year. Mary Ivers and I followed this task force with great interest, witnessing the great dedication of the co-chairs and an immense amount of work behind the scenes by the ex-co-chairs, Fatima Rodrigo and Winifred Doherty, a Good Shepherd Sister.

Soon Elsa Muttathu arrived from India with the great experience of training leaders in her native land. Mary McFadden, so well known to the Australian Presentations, through her educational and hospital ministry, completed our office personnel. Very soon we came to observe the great devotion and executive skills of Fatima Rodrigo. Each Monday Fatima distributed to us the important meetings of the week and their locations. This scheduling, as well as the orientation sessions featuring other NGO religious men and women at the UN, was shared with other new interns in the adjoining offices.

The Civil Society Forum on January 31, was an excellent preparation for the Civil Society Commission with emphasis on the social protection floor, so essential to those made poor in
every country in the world. The forum was a large convergence of civil society, the World Bank and other UN agencies, and member states. During the forum NGO members presented the Bureau with thousands of e-mail and hand signed signatures supporting the petition for a world-wide social protection floor. This signature campaign was directed by Fatima Rodrigo.

During the Civil Society Commission the International Presentation Association participated in two side events featuring Elsa Muttatthu and Mary Ivers explaining how elements of the social protection floor were already being implemented in India and Ecuador. They added that some essential aspects still needed attention in these countries. The IPA team was very proud that these events were so well attended and certainly incited interest in the social protection floor. Fatima choreographed both events brilliantly.

Another remarkable activity at the UN was the work on international migration. This was in preparation for an high level meeting in Geneva, attended by other NGOs. Several of us from various NGOs worked with Sister Mary Jo Toll to revise international guidelines for the protection of migrants. Mary Jo had worked many years with migrants from Mexico and Central America before coming to the United Nations. We were especially distressed with the many issues regarding migration: criminalization of crossing borders without documentation, racial profiling, lack of health provisions for migrants and their children, numerous detentions, deficient education for the children of migrants, deplorable wages, unsafe working conditions, harassment and sexual abuse of women. Evidently The Convention on the Rights of Migrants is most often not supported by national laws. The Convention is dismally limited because the national sovereignty of the member states keeps it from being mandatory. Since migrants are forced to cross borders illegally, their very presence in a country means that they are deprived of political, social, and economic rights. Since they do not enjoy citizenship in their adopted country, political organization becomes impossible.

We were blessed with the presence of several Presentations participating in the 2 week session of the Fifty-Sixth Commission on the Status of Women from February 26 until March 9 2012. Among these were Marcella Cruz, our Chilean Presentation doing mission in Ecuador, Joetta Vanneman, our Dubuque Presentation doing justice ministry in Kentucky, Brid O’Brien, the niece of Cecelia O’Brien PBVM, from Ireland, Mary Niccarato, from New Windsor, and Laura Urbano, another New Windsor Presentation doing mission in Bolivia. The IPA team, with the coordination of Fatima Rodrigo, presented a side event entitled Investing in Girls: Progress Made ... Gaps Identified ... Possibilities Ahead. The event was well attended and took place in the 8th floor of the Church Center. Brid O’Brien, a young woman activist moderated the event with great dynamism, I had the honor of presenting a power point comparing the Agreed
Conclusions of the 2008 CSW, with progress made in benefit of girls in these 4 years, Maria Lopez painted the scenario of girls in Cuba, Winifred Doherty gave some fascinating highlights from the Working Group on Girls, Maria Lopez highlighted the life of girls in Cuba, and Gaynel Curry of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights presented the work of the UN in regard to girls. Brid O’Brien directed a very intriguing interactive dialogue.

This photo was taken after the event as we were packing to return to the office. Left to right: Maura McCarthy, Laura Urbano, Fatima Rodrigo, Mary Naccarato, Mary Ivers, Maria Lopez, Mary McFadden, Brid O’Brien, Winifred Doherty, and Gaynel Curry

During the course of our attending meetings together, Mary Ivers and I were able to meet several Sisters from Latin America also working with NGOs at the UN. We began getting together with them, sharing our stories and experiences in Latin America and they initiated a clear decision to link the voices of their Latin and Indigenous Sisters with the NGO advocacy negotiations at the UN. This initiative was shared at a RUN meeting (Religious at the UN). The purpose, at least in the beginning stages, was to make the concerns of the Latin Americans heard at the forthcoming summit in Rio de Janeiro. The group included Maria Antonieta from Chile, Griselda Martinez from Mexico, Yolanda Sanchez from Colombia, Zelia Cordero from Brazil, in addition to Mary Ivers from Ecuador, and I from Bolivia. The Latin American Sisters were able to meet with groups in Colombia, Mexico, Chile and Brazil to engage in the cause of the impoverished masses for the Rio+20 Summit.

One “outing” together as an IPA team was a train trip to the Atlantic coast of New Jersey to the mission of Sandy Butler PBVM from New Found land. One of the memorable incidents of this journey was to watch our Indian Sisters, Fatima and Elsa, wade into the great, cold Atlantic with such delight!

I was overjoyed to entertain Jennifer Rausch, our PBVM Dubuque IA Congregational President, for Holy Week and Easter. This was her very first trip to the city of New York. Jennifer and I experienced the stunning performance of Jesus Christ Superstar in the Broadway area. Fatima assisted Jennifer is obtaining a grounds pass to the UN; we had a grand tour, including the Security Council and the General Assembly Hall. The IPA team had scheduled a meeting to discuss the negotiations of the Outcome Document for Rio+20.
We then were able to attend a fascinating gathering on autism in which a photographer mother presented a fantastic study of her autistic daughter.

We also travelled on the Staten Island Ferry with Mary McFadden to visit the Staten Island Presentations in their new motherhouse. We visited the original graveyard of the early New York Presentations. At one point in our travels, Jennifer and I we became separated on the subway, so that Jennifer was able to testify to the friendly helpfulness of the New Yorkers!

I began to attend the meetings with the Committee on Indigenous Issues early on in my time with the IPA. At the beginning of each meeting we guarded some moments of silence in honor of the original inhabitants of this land. Somewhat by coincidence, I was invited to participate in the Indigenous caucus for the Outcome Document for Rio+20. Joji Carino, the chair of the Indigenous caucus, needed an interpreter for a side event that they were sponsoring one evening. Miguel Palacin Quispe, the coordinator of the Andean Indigenous Organizations needed someone to interpret his message from Spanish to English. Helen Ojario, a Carmelite friend from St Anthony’s, assured her that I would be willing to do this. This became a gift or me because they invited me to accompany them in their caucus.

Their key messages for Rio+20 were the integration of a fourth pillar to the social, economic, and environmental pillars. This pillar is culture. This reflects the way indigenous peoples live in harmony with nature for a good life. They also insisted that the document be based on human and Indigenous rights, self-determination and self-governance, territoriality and autonomy, traditional knowledge, food sovereignty, (including local seeds), and local economies.

_The Doctrine of Discovery_, the central theme of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, left me thunderstruck to recognize that Indigenous people live daily with the impact and repercussions of these racial and discriminating documents. All over the world Indigenous Peoples are over-represented among the excluded and disadvantaged. Huge percentages live in poverty, lacking clean water, adequate housing, education, employment. Patterns of domination and oppression continue to afflict Indigenous Peoples. Christopher Columbus and other adventurers were instructed to “discover and conquer,” “subdue” and “acquire” these distant lands, known to the Indigenous as “Abya Yala” or “a land in its full maturity”. Courts seldom rule in favor of Indigenous rights.

_The peoples of Abya Yala make their recommendation to the states of the world--_

- Revalorization of the ancestral food production, and of the woman as the principal producers of foods, responsible for the nutrition of families, food sovereignty
- The healing of Mother Earth, recuperating our soils and water sources, our land, soil, seeds, and animals
- Rejection of genetically modified seeds, nonorganic foods, and biofuels
- Respect for our territorial rights to protect the sovereignty of our lands
- Our right to financial programs for indigenous people to guarantee markets
- Avoidance of armed conflict in our lands and territories
- Juridical protection for our lands and rights
- Declaration of 2013 as the International Year of Quinoa.
My sentiment upon completing these 8 months in New York at the IPA office and the UN is profound gratitude to the International Presentation Association, to my sisters all over the world whom I have had the enormous privilege of representing. I was always so proud to introduce myself at nongovernmental meetings as a member of the International Presentation Association! I am grateful to my Dubuque congregation for sponsoring me for an additional two months, in order to participate actively in the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, solemn matters which have consumed some grand years of my life. Thank you so much!

Our extended UN/IPA Team: Maura McCarthy, Mary McFadden, Brid O’Brien, Laura Urbano, Mary Naccarato, Fatima Rodrigo, Mary Ivers, Elsa Muttathu