**Acceptance Speech for**

**Honorary Degree from University of Roehampton**

**16 March 2016**

A big *Thank You* to you, Jackie, for this beautiful citation which humbles me deeply because it makes me once again aware of the many wonderful opportunities I have had in my life to work for justice. God has indeed been very good to me.

Will you believe it that today is the first time in my life that I wear cap and gown? Graduations in my home country The Netherlands are not a big deal and I missed my LL.M. graduation in Washington DC. But here I am, dressed in a robe. Thank you.

Sophie Barat, foundress of the Society of the Sacred Heart, was a woman who could read the signs of the times. Home-schooled by her brother, she knew from experience the value of a solid education and she now wanted to make that treasure available to other young women, both the privileged and the disadvantaged. It was right after the French Revolution, France was in ruins. Sophie chose education as our service in the church because she knew that educating girls in fact means educating families, communities, even entire nations. Today we would probably call her an advocate for women’s education, and in that Sophie was visionary, determined, willing to suffer and acting upon the Spirit’s promptings.

But as time went on new needs arose, esp. after the first education laws had been enacted - requiring an increasing number of professionally trained teachers, people who were steeped in sound pedagogy. And thus were born the Society’s teacher training colleges. Several opened in the 1870's in Chile, Peru and yes, in Roehampton in 1874, which soon relocated to Wandworth and was known as Wandsworth College. Again, it was a matter of reading the signs of the times or, as Sophie would say, “the times change and we, too, must modify our ways.”

Fast forward now to the year 2000, when the RSCJ Chapter gave the green light to go forward with NGO status at the United Nations. As educators for transformation in a time when almost everything seems to be globalized, the Society of the Sacred Heart was decisive in wanting to engage with the world in a new way. We were not the first congregation of women religious to do so, nor will we be the last because speaking out for the vulnerable - people-centered advocacy - is one of the current signs of the times.

After nearly 13 years at the United Nations, I can say that representing an NGO there is nothing short of working for JPIC – Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation. Within the community of faith-based NGOs, the work is highly collaborative, inter-congregational, and often inter-religious as well – a perfect example of how the whole is much more than the sum of its parts.

I will not bore you with the technicalities of what status an NGO can have – suffice it to say that for most of my tenure we have focused on awareness raising about global justice issues. Our members on the ground know of course from experience the concrete faces of inequality and injustice. But what might have been unclear to them is that what they witness close by is also a global phenomenon.

Certain problems are systemic and require systemic change. Hunger, poverty, women’s rights, illegal trade in drugs, weapons or persons, quality education – yes, it is still an advocacy issue – environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption patterns and behavior, peaceful societies and the rule of law – those are just some of the issues the UN deals with. Those are also the issues Pope Francis addresses in his encyclical *Laudato Si’*. And throughout the past 13 years, the NGO Office has communicated, through its website, on a range of social and environmental systemic ills, raising awareness about the global scale of problems because they require global solutions which, in order to work, must be informed by the lived experience of people on the ground.

It goes without saying that initiating young people into the world of global justice at the UN is critical for us, and we do this by giving presentations at schools here in the US and abroad, offering internships or hosting students for an immersion experience. Many of you have heard me speak of the Japanese students who came again this year to learn about “peaceful coexistence” - they are so aware that the Japanese mono-culture of today might not last in our globalized world, so what needs to change and how?

As I matured in my own role as NGO Representative, I was able to put the Society’s incarnational spirituality and JPIC together in a new way. The Indwelling Presence of God in our world has taken hold of me, and it is indeed difficult not to recognize Christ all around me. I elaborated on this theme in my lecture at Roehampton last year.

When I received the Vice-Chancellor’s invitation to accept an honorary degree from the University of Roehampton I was stunned, but upon reflection realized that I indeed could accept this great honor because of the fantastic work of my sisters in 41 countries. With our new consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, we can bring their experience, reflection, analysis and informed recommendations to the table at the UN.

We did this last month at our side event during the annual Social Development meetings. Three women, of whom two youth, from a community-based project on the Texas-Mexico border spoke about empowerment in their colonia. Together with Sisters Imma De Stefanis and Reyna Gonzalez (here present), they presented the practice and theory of the Popular Education methodology, which has been so successful in Latin America, to UN staff, NGO colleagues and indeed some governments.

This is the new road that has opened to the Society at the UN: contributing from our life and mission as RSCJ to the benefit of the world, the common good. With the Society’s long history in education, we have only scratched the surface when it comes to what we, collectively as Sacred Heart family, have to offer to the world at the United Nations.

In Sophie’s time, education of women was the most needed. In our time, global citizenship education is urgent – linking local realities with the global policy level and vice-versa. It is all about ‘just relationships’ and the awesome recognition that God lives at the core of all people, of all creation.

I would like to conclude by thanking you, Vice Chancellor, and the members of the University Senate and the University Council for this award. It is indeed a tremendous honor.

Thank you.

*Cecile Meijer, rscj*