

The Mayor of Versailles, Mr Etienne Pinte, with Lebanese visitors Marie Chaftari, Lina Charafeddine, Mohieddine Chehab and Assaad Chaftari



PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

Seeing each other in a different light

*In the thick of the turmoil gripping Lebanon, Marie Chaftari, a Christian, and Lina Charafeddine, a Muslim, are trying to get their respective communities to see each other in a different light. Frédéric and Nathalie Chavanne hear their story.**

I am living a dream. My inner candle of hope for the future of Lebanon has been rekindled.' One January evening we were in Versailles, a prestigious town near Paris famous for its royal chateau. The man making a speech was Mr Etienne Pinte, an elected representative and Mayor of Versailles. He also chairs a group of parliamentarians that promotes friendship between France and Lebanon and has been monitoring the Lebanese situation for seventeen years. He was participating in a

'I realised that, deep down, I wanted them to be more like me'

public occasion organized by IofC France on the theme 'From Beirut to the heart of French cities: the need for dialogue'. At the same time Paris was busy hosting an international conference on the economic reconstruction of Lebanon, which was once again in the throes of war last summer after deadly hostilities broke out with Israel in the southern region.

That night new meaning was brought to the word 'reconstruction' – how to renew ties between individuals and between communities. The speakers included two former Christian and Muslim militia chiefs, Assaad Chaftari and Mohieddine Chehab, who fought each other during the 1975-1990 civil war, and two women: Lina Charafeddine, a Shia Muslim whose family is well-known in the Middle East, and Marie Chaftari, a Maronite Christian and wife of Assaad.

'For many years the Muslims were my enemies,' said Marie, who even enrolled in the Lebanese Forces during the civil war. 'To me, Muslims were more Arab than Lebanese, and the only solution was for them to move to another Muslim country and leave Lebanon to us Christians. My vision of Christians was equally limited: good Christians were those who shared my ideas and political beliefs.

'The group Initiatives of Change (IofC), of which I am now a member, planted two key ideas that turned my life around: that the greatest cause one should serve is love; and that either you choose to be a victim or you take responsibility. These two ideas have enlightened my path. But how could Muslims ever become my brothers and countrymen?'

Lina told us about a suburb of Beirut where, one day, she saw people rush into cafés to watch television because something major had just happened. Everybody was looking overwhelmed. 'I drove away for five minutes, and realized that people there were going about their business, having not heard the latest news. So I wondered, how many Lebanons are there? How can people who live side by side be so far apart in terms of their concerns and preoccupations?

'I started asking myself a lot of questions. Do you have to be alike to share the same citizenship? What about me, have I made the effort to reach out to the other side, to try and understand their fears and concerns? I realized that, deep down, I wanted them →

** Translated from French by Audrey Kyler-Goujon*





Traces of Lebanon's civil war

to be more like me. I believed they had to be wrong if they were different from me. I blamed them for not knowing me even though I barely knew them myself.

‘One should recognize that religion is just one of our many differences. Why do we blame it all on religion? Why should religion be a source of conflict? Aren't we putting religion where it doesn't belong?’

It was during weekly IofC group meetings in Beirut that Lina and Marie crossed paths. Marie remembers the first time she met a Muslim Lebanese. ‘Lina was there with her heart wide open, and I took one step in her direction. She had stronger moral qualities than I, as a Christian. I felt she was as deeply Lebanese as I was. She was scared too. And yet she always welcomed my suggestions to try and deepen the dialogue between us. Later I told some of my friends about meeting her and our conversations about the headscarf, marriage in Muslim and Christian communities etc. Eventually we organized joint meetings and Lina invited her sisters-in-law. My friends were enthusiastic from the very beginning, I remember my son saying, “It's a good thing this is taking place in our house because it's helped me accept Muslim women and their headscarves.” Our friendship survived many difficulties, including political developments and opposition from our families.’

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‘We don't interact with other people, but with our idea of who they are,’ said Lina. ‘This is often a misrepresentation of the truth, that justifies our negative feelings towards others – while boosting our own ego. We end up fearing this misrepresentation that we, ourselves, originated.’

In the summer of 2005, Marie and Lina created a group called ‘Linaltaki’ (‘let us meet’), to provide a framework for meetings between women from various religious and cultural backgrounds. To try and reconcile differences, the discussions are based on the life experience of participants rather than on interfaith

dialogue. ‘We realized that we had similar goals and concerns,’ said Marie. ‘We all fear for the future of our children. It is this fear of hardships to come that has brought us together, after we admitted our own mistakes.’

‘Our affiliation with a particular religion should not stand in the way of our common societal project,’ added Lina. ‘We believe that what unites us is far greater and more sacred than what separates us. Religious diversity must be a driving force for civilization, not an obstacle. Religion should not be left in the hands of people who doctor it to suit their own agenda and turn it into something dangerous.’

‘The conflict last July was a litmus test,’ said Marie. ‘I was afraid Linaltaki would not survive. We stayed in touch daily. Whatever Lina told me I shared with my friends. Even though we did not agree with Hezbollah, we Christian women were opposed to the war. We could not sit on our hands while the Shia community was suffering, so we brought snacks for the children and cooked food for the Shia populations that had sought refuge in the Christian-inhabited areas where we lived. This was another opportunity to talk to them.’



Lina Charafeddine and Marie Chaftari in Strasbourg

‘Our project is still in its infancy,’ stressed Lina, ‘but I have learned to step into the shoes of my Christian friends, to see the beauty in things whenever they see it, to share their joy and grief, to find a spiritual connection that is based on faith. I have learned to follow my heart and common sense rather than my gut feeling. I wish to thank Marie for her boundless energy, for taking a strong stance during the war last summer, and for supporting me even though I was the cause of her hardships. She taught me to stretch myself and keep walking the path, no matter what.’

On the morning of their last day in Paris, Lina and Marie were sitting together in our living room at the IofC centre in Issy-les-Moulineaux. Hanging over their heads was a modern representation of the ‘Washing of the Feet’, the night before Christ's ‘Passion’. Both remarked on this, and Marie told how, the previous year, she had invited Lina to church for the Holy Week service where this act is remembered, and Lina had asked the priest's permission to participate in the ceremony. ‘When I took the cloth and washed somebody else's feet, I felt the presence of Jesus,’ said Lina. ‘It felt good to partake in each other's religious events.’