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Bridges over troubled water

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TWO of her best friends were murdered on her wedding day. Her father lost his business, the family lost their home and her deaf brother was badly beaten. She should be bitter from the horrors of sectarian violence. Amazingly, she's not.

Instead, Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, devotes her considerable energy and imagination to creating bonds between communities.

"I've grown up in an environment where the need to build bridges was very evident. (This is) the human bridge - of knowledge, and of friendship, of partnership and of common purpose," said McAleese in an exclusive interview with the New Straits Times.

"Building Bridges" is in fact the theme of her presidency, her most recent construction being her visit here: she is the first Irish president ever to visit Malaysia.

In the long shadow of Sept 11, such visits take on deeper resonances than they ordinarily would.

"I think being here, in an Islamic country - at this time - is an important statement - not just to the world I come from, but also to the world of Islam - that the Christian West is not a cold place for those of the Islamic faith," she said.

"There are many friends, many admirers and many would-be-partners who would feel a particular urgency to engage in dialogue at the moment, who would want to reassure those who are nervous, who are frightened, that the doors are open to partnership.

"So, actually being here just at this moment strikes me as quite an important part of that mission of building bridges."

These are not the sugar-spun words of a schmoozing politician. She is the official head of state but holds no executive powers. The President of Ireland is elected by Dail Eireann or the Irish parliament.

McAleese, who was elected in 1997 to the seven-year term, ran against four other candidates. Her victory was exceptional because Ireland is not her country of birth. The 51-year-old McAleese was actually born and brought up in Belfast in Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom.

Living in one of the most relentlessly violent areas of the world, McAleese saw human beings - all Christian - tear each other apart.

"(Building bridges) is the best antidote to the kind of ignorance and fear that human beings are remarkably capable of - even when they live next door to one another and sometimes, particularly because they live next door to one another," said McAleese who plays an active role in the reconciliation process in Northern Ireland.

Religion can make for precarious politics, as is lamentably demonstrated time and again. McAleese is thus particularly keen on promoting interfaith dialogue. "I started from the microcosm of my own street. Move that into the macro-scale and you see what happens when the peoples of religious denominations and different cultures live in ignorance and fear of one another.

"Bitterness and vengeance find it very easy to fester in that environment. It does not conduce to world stability - it conduces to conflict that makes people's lives miserable and full of suffering.

"(Interfaith dialogue) is one of the areas where I think we have to do the most work. I look at the great gift of the religions of the world -

and one of the things which I think shames us is the ignorance we have of one another."

"I was a good age before I discovered - through my own reading - Islam and Judaism. I was even, God help me, deeply in ignorance of other Christian denominations," said the Roman Catholic McAleese.

"There were those who thought that the best way of protecting your own religious faith was never to expose it to knowledge of other faiths.

"Frankly, I think that's quite insulting. Any faith that can't withstand exposure to simple dialogue, understanding or curiosity about other faiths must have a very fragile foundation."

One of the items on her packed Kuala Lumpur agenda was a visit to the Islamic Arts Museum where she later held a closed-door discussion on Islam with museum officials, government officials and members of local think tanks.

Later, at another function, she proudly spoke of the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin which houses an internationally-renowned collection of Islamic manuscripts.

One of her first acts as President was to attend services of other Christian denominations, receiving communion - one of the Christianity's most sacred symbols - at a Protestant church. She also went to a mosque and Jewish and Quaker services.

It's evident that McAleese's personal policy has always been "never say never", a notion robustly put forth by her parents.

When at a young age she announced that she wanted to be a lawyer, her local priest casually dismissed the idea on grounds that she was a girl. It was a statement he would live to regret bitterly.

Outraged, McAleese's mother literally flung him out of his chair - and her home - and roared at her daughter to pay no heed.

She needn't have worried. McAleese went on to become a lawyer, professor of Law at Trinity College, Dublin, and the first female pro vice chancellor of the Queen's University of Belfast.

Her mother's reaction to the priest hint at an upbringing where common sense overrode everything else - including convention.

"Like many people who lived in Northern Ireland, we had our own problems and troubles, any one of which could make you bitter and angry," said McAleese.

"My parents, thankfully, never encouraged us in bitterness - quite the opposite. They realised that if you do that, all you do is poison tomorrow with the very toxins that have just ruined today and yesterday.

"So, if you want tomorrow to be different, somebody has to make the decision."

In public as well as in private, she conducts herself with brilliant wit, flair and warm humour. One might - in an uncharitable moment - mistake some of these for glibness.

But the truth, as she freely admits, is that she has felt the anger: "I know what it's like to be angry - I don't like what I'm capable of when I'm angry."

Her grace, then, emerges from applying careful thought to this bundle of strong but inchoate feelings. Hers are experiences profoundly lived, felt and unforgotten - but distilled with thoughtfulness and humanity.

So well-known is she in the arena of peacemaking that one Malaysian, upon reading of her impending visit, was surprised to find that she was President of Ireland. The Malaysian, a social worker, had known her only as the author of a book from which she often quoted, *Reconciled Being: Love in Chaos*.

The visit to Malaysia was highly instructive, said the President, especially in terms of ethnic and religious relations.

"One of the things that I respect very profoundly is the way in which Malaysia, living with very significant ethnic and religious differences, has applied itself to peaceably managing those differences.

"I was very taken with something Prime Minister Mahathir said when I was talking to him. He said 'Tolerance is a discipline' - and, you know, he's absolutely right.

"It's not just a nice kind of feeling. It's a discipline that you practise day in and day out. And on the days when you don't feel like practising it, that's the very day you must practise it doubly."

Like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir's, McAleese's words speak of a conscious choice towards understanding which must be made if the grip of fundamentalism is to be loosened.

"My own direct experience is that religious intolerance and bigotry starts from the home," she said.

"It starts in loving homes, where good mothers and good fathers - unfortunately - recruit their children to a worldview which is deeply, deeply poisoned.

"I don't think that mothers and fathers sit their children down and say 'Niall, I'm going to turn you into a fundamentalist bigot'.

"But I think children listen very carefully to parents - they hear how parents react to a news item and what kinds of things make their parents passionate and angry. And they want to be like their parents. The home is probably - across the world - the biggest recruiting-ground we have for extremism and bigotry."

Gaps yawn everywhere. There are millions more bridges to be built and Mary McAleese has only two more years to the end of her term. So others must pick up where she leaves off because, in her own words, "it's actually the most important work that any of us does in this world."