

Theme: Interfaith Harmony

This story is about a girl who learned the true importance of harmony from a Christian nun at Convent of Jesus and Mary School, Toba Tek Singh

It was one of those unsympathetically cold, harsh and foggy winter days in Toba Tek Singh, when ten years old Rooshan left for school in the morning. On her way, she wondered about the life of her school principal, who lived in the school premises and was always kind to her. She had observed how the principal dressed differently from her mother and even her teachers, always clad in a modest white gown with unadorned black shoes, yet looked elegant in her austere simplicity. "White must be sister Maryam's favorite color", she thought. It was only the second lesson when students were called in the big hall for an important announcement. All students happily marched from their classes and gathered in the hall. "What's happening?", Rooshan hesitantly asked the only friend she had made at this new school. Everyone looked excited as if they already knew what the announcement was about. "Shh, you're about to find out", Hamda responded.

After a while, Sister Maryam made the announcement and asked the students to donate their old winter clothes to the school. She said, "dear students, I hope you remember how we all worked together and bought gifts for everyone on Eid-ul-Fitr this year, now it's time to do that again since Christmas is just around the corner. We are brothers and sisters and we must not forget that all humans need care, love and respect." The students cheered, applauded and briskly walked back to their classes. Hamda tapped on Rooshan's shoulder and exclaimed, "it's going to be fun! you can team up with me and together we will pack gifts for the kids who can't buy new clothes for Christmas". In the last lesson the two of them made a list of things they needed to pack the best gifts ever. They say, "Every child is a source of light, hope, and a new beginning". It is true that children are adoptive, pure and indeed great learners, born with blank slates, they learn from what they see their parents, elders and teachers doing. A few days passed in enthusiastically collecting donations, arranging and packing gifts.

Tuesday was just another day at school, kids were carefreely roaming around the cold corridors, laughing about things that only made sense to them, some playing on the swings, when a group of angry protestants started thrashing on the main gates. Sister Maryam and teachers immediately gathered the students inside the halls. A wave of terror, anger and fright overshadowed the ongoing exhilaration. Investigations revealed that the protestants were students of a local Madrasa, who did not hesitate to attack the school as an expression of rage against the French magazine for publishing a caricature of prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). Soon after the incident, heated arguments replaced the main ingredients of every meal in the city. The kids, who did not care whether they were sitting with a Christian or a Muslim, showed a strange hesitation while sharing school supplies during the lessons. They were listening to all kinds of arguments at homes after all, how could they not get affected?

For the first time an ugly divide developed between Christian and Muslim students. The Christian students muttered comments and observations to one another. It didn't take long for the negativity to envelop the surroundings. It was the same place where a few days ago these very children enthusiastically raised donations for Christmas, but now, with the new social learning, they chose to ignore the existence of the 'others'.

A few days went by like that, but then the teachers decided to talk to the students. In the Character-Building lesson Sister Maryam visited each class and told the students that a bunch of people do not

represent any religion. She explained that every religion preaches love, harmony and respect but not all people are able to follow these notions.

The students listened quietly because she had made them love her dearly with her kind-heartedness and compassion towards them. She knew each one of them by their names and habits yet loved them equally, without any distinction of faith, race or nationality. Muslim and Christian teachers joined the cause and made sure that their students realized the importance of love, friendship, humanity and harmony, and that these hands would stay joined for long, not rifted apart by any evil that tries to dissociate them. Humanity knows no borders, it is above religion, nationality, gender and belief.

That day, the little girl and her friends understood that the white in Pakistan's flag signifies the coexistence of different belief systems in their country.

*This story is based on real life events and characters. The students of the school grew up and went to study in different cities, but are still in touch and they don't forget to wish one another on Eids and Christmas