

The Generous Excellence of the Ateneo Lawyer

Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Antonio T. Carpio, Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin of the Society of Jesus, President of the Ateneo de Manila University, Dr. Maria Luz C. Vilches, Vice-President for the Loyola Schools, Dean Cenon R. Alfonso of the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health, the representative of Dr. John Paul C. Vergara, Vice-President for the Professional Schools, Dean Jose Maria G. Hofileña of the Ateneo Law School, Associate Dean Ma. Ngina Teresa V. Chan-Gonzaga, Associate Dean Giovanni F. Vallente, distinguished members of the administration, faculty, and staff of the Ateneo Law School, family, friends, benefactors, and my fellow graduates, a pleasant afternoon to you all.

To be honest, I had always imagined that ending my stay in law school would be like waking up from a very bad dream. What had once been just a pipe dream of being admitted into the Ateneo Law School had transformed into a veritable nightmare of sleepless nights, endless recitations, anxiety during examinations, and defending our theses. But now that the coursework is over, and now that we are finally graduating, I realize that it is not *in spite of*, but *because of* the difficulties of law school, that we can be proud to be here today. That we are to be conferred our much-coveted Juris Doctor and Master of Laws degrees is proof that our good experiences outweigh the bad. Ateneo Law School has not been a nightmare, but a dream come true.

Today, I am charged with the solemn privilege of addressing you in the hope of raising our spirits one more time before we return to the rigors of bar review. But four years ago, it was difficult for me to imagine that I would be put in this situation, because the first time I stood in front of the batch was for recitation in Introduction to Law. As some of you might recall, it did not go well. To this day, I remember the question very clearly: "Mr. Abot, what is the difference between *pacta sunt servanda* and *clausula rebus sic stantibus*?" Because Fortune often works against rather than in favor of law students, the answer was found in the one and only page I had not read for the day's assignment. I panicked for a while, then I sheepishly admitted: "Sir, I don't know." Then off I went, ignominiously back to my seat. My first recit was a bad recit in front of the whole batch. It would not be the last bad recit, but it would set the tone for the hard work I would do for the coming years. From that experience I learned that law school would be a different ball game, and it brought out in me the strength I never knew I had. And today, I am very, very thankful for that experience.

Gratitude is what lends meaning to this momentous occasion. To that end, I would like to say thank you to all those who have made our coming together here possible.

Firstly, I would like to thank Almighty God and the entire heavenly court of angels and saints. It is only through God's grace that we have arrived where we are now, and it is a loving trust in His providence that will get us through in the coming months.

Of course, pride of honor must go to our parents. To our dear parents here, thank you for supporting us throughout our law school stay. For all the sacrifices you made for us, and for all the times we've been missing-in-action from important family occasions, this graduation is for you. I would like to thank my mother, for her constant and steady support, for teaching me to not stay down for too long and to get back up after every setback, and for never pressuring me, for never having to make me feel that I had to earn your love. Your sure guidance has always been my source of comfort and strength, especially since I am prone to worry, and judging myself in comparison with others. But I also learned that if I had to compare myself with someone else, I would compare myself with Leo Abot. And by Leo Abot, I mean the original Leo Abot, my father, of whom I am but a pale imitation. Thank you, dad, for instilling in me the values of strength, discipline, courage, and integrity. I know you are a frustrated lawyer, but you never forced me to go to law school. I got myself into this out of my own volition. Dad, you are the original, and I am just a digest, and I could not hope to equal you in a thousand years. To my parents, for all the times I have been unsure of what my path would be, of what God wanted me to do with my life, of whether law school really was for me, of this I have always been certain: that the meaning and purpose of my young life so far was, and always has been, to make you proud and happy.

I would also like to thank our second parents, our beloved law professors, who have, in various capacities, served as our teachers, thesis advisers, role models, classroom adversaries, and official torturers. Thank you very much: you have been our mentors and tormentors alike. Indeed, it has been a privilege and an honor learning the rudiments of the law from the esteemed faculty of the Ateneo Law School. You have been not only our daily dose of pain, but of utter brilliance. When we entered law school, we knew nothing. Now, because of your efforts, we know something about the law, not only what the law says, but why it is there, how to apply it, where it is weak, and which parts have to go. Truly, in the middle of all the classroom recitations of codal provisions and case doctrines, I would look forward to

those rare but precious moments when the professor would pause for a while, and tell us forthrightly the familiar dicta that not everything legal is moral, that not everything written in the law is correct. It is *then* that I would know that I am in the presence of an Ateneo lawyer, one worthy of imitation. Dear professors, your passion for the rule of law and justice is contagious. We hope to make you proud.

Finally, my fellow graduates, we have each other as friends to be thankful for. Our batch would not have survived to today were it not for our camaraderie and solidarity. Our friends, blockmates, and orgmates have been there for us through our various ups and downs. I would never forget what we were taught in OrSem: that in the Ateneo Law School, the way to succeed is not to compete but to cooperate, not to be selfish but to share, not to pull each other down but to lift each other up. It is through our various groups – our blocks, orgs, study groups, digest groups, moot court and debate teams, music and arts groups, literary groups, sports groups, advocacy groups, prayer groups, and even K-drama groups – that we learned that the Ateneo Way was not only excellence but generosity. Our excellence must be a **GENEROUS EXCELLENCE**. And our personal struggles have required the generous excellence of our friends. Some of us have had to suffer the loss of a loved one, or battle both physical and mental illness, or undergo a medical procedure, or juggle academics with part-time or full-time work, or face some other struggle that no one could understand and no social media post could ever capture, all of this on top of the exacting demands of law school. For those of us who have had to struggle silently, in one way or another, yet managed to make it here today, I salute you! Your victory is our victory, for it is the generous excellence of our friends that got us through.

But what is our excellence for? The building we are in right now is named the Areté. It is Greek (ἀρετή) for “excellence.” What does the Ateneo hope to achieve by this gentle reminder that mediocrity is not an option for us, that nothing is expected of us but our very best? Surely, it is success. But success can mean different things to different people. We all have our own hopes and dreams. Some of us want to enter public service and become government lawyers, like enter the judiciary. Some of us would want to become top litigators or top corporate lawyers. To be sure, these are all valid and necessary aspirations. But what ties them all together? The great Jesuit historian Horacio de la Costa provides us with a definition of success, and I quote: “But just what *is* success, for the college graduate and the professional? Surely it is not simply getting rich; joining the affluent establishment; a bungalow in Makati, a Mustang Fastback, and Paris in the spring. Surely it is service.”¹ Service. That definition of success by Fr. de la Costa was true then, and it is true today. Lawyers

are meant for service above all else. We are to be part of a noble profession, a glorious profession, but it is noble and glorious if and only if we serve others.

My fellow graduates, the time to be true Ateneo lawyers in the service of others, is *now*. What a time to be alive! Our country is changing, and our world is changing. We live in interesting times, thought-provoking times, when the rules are being re-written in many ways which are contrary to our values, the values taught to us by the Ateneo. We live in a time when the very idea of human rights is being questioned, when fake news continues to undermine our fragile democracy, and when our very memory as a nation is being uprooted by historical revisionism. Our batch, our generation has to grapple with history changing course in alarming directions. I do not know what the future holds, but I do know what is demanded of us: *veritas*, *integritas*, and *justitia*. These Latin words are not merely the names of rooms found on the fourth floor of the APS building; they constitute the very essence of what we learned in the classrooms of Ateneo Law, and are the definitive standards by which we will be measured as Ateneo lawyers. Therefore, against all the disturbing developments of our times, let us be beacons of truth, icons of integrity, and harbingers of justice. It is my earnest hope that among our ranks will emerge a new Chief Justice Claudio Teehankee, a new Evelio Javier, a new Bobby Gana. Let us be known to the country not as the Ateneo of privilege, but as the Ateneo of heroes. Let us be like our patron, St. Thomas More, who was the King's good servant, but God's first.

My friends, the bar exams loom ever so closer. Let us be confident on our way. We were born for this. We were made for this. The Ateneo has prepared us for this decisive moment. And soon, very soon, we will be rewarded with the duty and the honor, the challenge and the privilege, the burden and the promise, of being Ateneo lawyers.

Thank you. *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.*

¹ Horacio de la Costa, S.J., *Liberation*, in *SELECTED ESSAYS ON THE FILIPINO AND HIS PROBLEMS TODAY* 210-211 (Roberto M. Paterno, ed., 2002).