



## **ADDRESS**

**Ateneo de Manila Law School Commencement**

**Meralco Theater**

***Fr. Bienvenido F. Nebres, SJ***

**15 July 2018**

**Dr. Antonette Angeles, VP for the Ateneo Professional Schools,  
Dean Joey Hofileña, Dean Sedfrey Candelaria,  
Dean Manolet Dayrit**

**Associate Deans Maita Chan-Gonzaga and Vanni Valiente**

**Administrators, faculty and staff of the Ateneo Law School**

**Parents, family, friends and loved ones of our graduating class**

**The Ateneo Law School Class of 2018**

**Good afternoon**

**Congratulations to our Ateneo de Manila School of Law Graduates of 2018. Congratulations to the graduates for the Masters in Law. Congratulations to the Juris Doctor graduates. After 4 long years of College and 4 longer years of Law School, here you are, proud Ateneo Lawyers – almost. Congratulations and thanks to those who made your day of triumph possible, above all, your parents and**

**your family. My thanks to the Deans, the administrators, the faculty – who may have made life difficult for you on many a day but whom I hope you will thank when you face the bar – the staff who took good care of you and, of course, your batchmates with whom you shared the joys and struggles of Law School.**

**In preparation for this Commencement Address I had the opportunity of meeting with 8 of you: Trinca, Colene, Chris, Mitch, Paula and Luisa, Marianne, and Kathleen.**

**I asked them to share of where you are and of your hopes and fears for the future. Where you are, of course, is joy and relief that Law School is over – no more feared recitations nor exams.**

**But also much anxiety – as you still have the bar in November. Our conversation kept going back and forth between your hopes and expectations – life after the bar – and anxiety over the next 5 months preparing for the bar and 6 more months of waiting for the results.**

**You are right, of course, to be anxious about the bar. I will not tell you that you are Ateneo, we have given you the best education and the bar should be a cinch. Because you know it will be a challenge. Though, of course, you told me that you believe your class can make it 100%. Right?**

**Yes, passing the bar is very important. It will open many doors for you. I too spent many years in challenging studies and very difficult examinations. Success in them has opened doors for me. Doing well in the bar will open doors too for you.**

**Many doors will open for you. You told me about law firms, about government positions, like in the Office of the Solicitor General, the road less travelled for some. You will, of course, have to ensure that you can take care of yourself and your family. Your family has many hopes and expectations for you. Each of you also has your own passion and dreams for your future.**

**We then talked about seeking to make a difference for our country.**

**You spoke of your worries and concerns for our country, of joining rallies and often feeling frustration and helplessness. You spoke of positions that may become open to you in government, where you want to make a difference. But then you see Ateneo Law alumni in these positions – and you do not see them living out the values you have learned in Law School. You wonder if you can be different.**

**I was reminded of a meeting with Ateneo graduates from CLC many years ago. One of them said that his office mates would invite him for *inuman* after work – and he always declined. One of his officemates said, "*Anak, ganyan ka kasi bata ka pa. Pero huwag kang mag-alala, hindi magtatagal maging kasing-bulok ka rin namin.*" They asked – "*paano kami hindi magiging bulok din?*"**

**You asked, "Don't they know what they need to do? Why don't they do it? Don't they see the effects of their choices on so many people?"**

**I have a Russian-American neuroscientist friend in New York city, Elkhonon Goldberg, whom I met in a conference in Sydney in 2000. We keep in touch and I discuss with him the neuroscience of our choices, what we choose to do or not do. In one conversation,**

**I shared: "We know the painful numbers:**

**--3.7 million or 30% of Filipino children 0-5 years old are stunted. The number of extremely poor and hungry is still around 26%.**

**--Indonesia has brought it down to below 10%,**

**--Vietnam even after their war, brought it to below 15%.**

**Economist Ciel Habito says that, yes, our GDP growth is among the best, but 76% of that growth has been going to the 40 richest families.**

**We know these realities. Why we do not act on them?"**

**Dr. Goldberg said, "It is not the frontal neo-cortex, the rational, the thinking brain, that moves us to action. It is the emotional, the feeling brain, the limbic system that moves us to action." And it is**

**moved, not by rational knowledge, but by meeting real people in need and caring for them. So the values you learned in Ateneo Law School are important but, in the face of pressure, they may not be enough.**

**I was Dean of Ateneo College 1973-80 and knew Fr. Jett, VP Tonette Angeles, Atty. Sedfrey Candelaria and Mel Sta. Maria as college students. I worked hard with that generation of Ateneans to engage martial law and we look back with pride to the role we played in EDSA 1986 and the restoration of democracy in our country. That was also the time when Ateneo College sought to respond to the call of the graduating class of 1968 to go "Down from the Hill," and to Fr. Arrupe's call to be "Men and Women for Others". We established the Office of Social Concern and Involvement (OSCI) and entered the lives of the urban and rural poor.**

**In the struggle to end martial law, we always kept two clear goals in mind:**

**--first, the restoration of democracy and**

**--second, social reform to improve the lives of the poor.**

**After Ninoy's assassination in 1983, businessmen and leaders from the elite finally began to engage martial law. They invited me to speak in seminars and meetings and I said we would work with them towards restoration of democracy, but asked that they then work with us on social reform on behalf of the poor. They said yes. This scenario repeated when they would get rattled during every coup attempt – which was happening every year till 1990.**

**But once the crisis passed and business became better, the concerns of the poor were forgotten. I realized then that they -- and we -- are too far above the majority of our people and so are emotionally disconnected from them. The needs of the majority**

poor do not press persistently on us. They are crowded out by the pressures of our middle class worlds.

In 1991 I was asked to offer reflections on EDSA 5 years after. I said that EDSA was a Transfiguration Experience – we sang "*Handog ng Pilipino sa Mundo*" and saw ourselves shining in light, like Jesus and the apostles on Mount Tabor. But then as in the Gospels, we had to go down the mountain and, like the apostles faced with the epileptic boy, we had to confront the realities of poverty, sickness, and corruption and like them, we failed the test.

It would not be through more Transfiguration experiences that the apostles would be transformed. It would be through Good Friday and the Cross.

#### **FIRST, WE GO DOWN FROM THE HILL**

Following my neuroscientist friend, I ask you then to first go down from the hill and encounter (a favorite word of Pope Francis) our people.

Maybe work with an NGO, but I ask you, in particular, to consider local government. Not necessarily that you will immediately make a lot of difference there. But to encounter the reality of the majority of our people. You will find that as early as 5 am *nakapila na ang mga mahihirap sa bahay ng mayor. May receta para sa maysakit na anak, humihingi ng pambayad sa libing o para sa matrikula ng anak.*

Like the apostles before the epileptic boy, you will find yourself helpless. I have felt helpless too. But their faces and stories have stayed with me and moved me to continue to find ways to help them. So too with you. When the day comes that you will be in a position to make a difference – and that day will come -- their faces and stories will remind you why you must remain true to your Ateneo Law School ideals.

I remember being asked by the principal of Payatas B Annex ES many years ago if we could donate Christmas foodpacks for the 400

poorest families in her school. We gave just a 100 peso foodpack – noodles, sardines. She said, “This will last a family of 5 three days, because they only eat once a day and not much.” I was stunned. As we were leaving, one woman approached me and said, “*Sana pagkalooban kayo ng Diyos ng mahabang buhay para marami pang inyong matutulungan.*” Her words and her face continue to haunt me till today.

Dr. Carmela Oracion and I have been working with the public schools for many decades. Like most people we began assuming that they needed teacher training, teaching materials and so forth. But as we spent more time with the teachers and asked what prevents the children from coming to school or from doing well in school, they said, “*Gutom sila.*” In one school in Parañaque, one Grade 4 boy fainted. When he revived he said, “*Ah, Huwebes pala.*” The family is so poor that they take turns not eating. Thursdays he does not eat.

## **BUT HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THE HUNGER OF SO MANY**

The apostles asked this of Jesus before he multiplied the loaves and the fishes to feed 5,000.

Is there a way, other than asking God for miracles, to address the hunger of many? Several years ago I commissioned a research study led by Dr. Bopeep Saloma of the Ateneo Sociology Department to find “What Works” in scaling up reform to address poverty and hunger. They found that it is not by introducing new structures, but in helping existing institutions to fulfill their functions and enabling different actors and groups to interact and work together in more effective ways.

Let me tell you then our experience of multiplying loaves and fishes, not through miraculous powers, but through working with different institutions and actors towards a shared goal of making a difference on hunger.

**Last June 20 the President signed into law RA 11037, a bill entitled Masustansyang Pagkain Para sa Batang Pinoy. It mandates providing a meal for 120 days for children 3-5 in daycare centers and for undernourished children in K-6. For this year there is a national budget of 3 billion for daycare and over 5 billion for K-6. Enough, if well-implemented, for the most malnourished. This is a milestone institutionalizing a program to address malnutrition for millions of Filipino children. Not yet enough to address chronic hunger nor to take care of babies in the first 1,000 days, but a major step forward. We still have to work on the IRR and maybe you can help us there.**

**This law is the culmination of a journey that actually started several years ago from the ground.**

**11 years ago, in 2007, Jollibee Foundation started Busog, Lusog, Talino (BLT) providing lunch for the 40 most malnourished children in selected public schools. Ateneo partnered with Jollibee for the public schools in our network.**

**Two years after, in 2009 Ateneo scaled up to 400 malnourished children for Bagong Silangan Elementary school. This was to respond to the persistent requests of the principal who told us that half of her 4,000 children were malnourished and regularly hungry.**

**In 2010, as a parting gift for my coming retirement, the Law School and other Professional Schools committed to raise funds to provide lunch for 4,000 children, 1,000 each in 4 Quezon city schools. This provided the opportunity for a breakthrough innovation, developed by Dr. Carmela Oracion of Ateneo Center for Educational Development (ACED). She built a Central Kitchen to prepare lunch for the 4,000 schoolchildren. It was staffed by volunteer nanays and tatays. The principal of the lead school and the QC DepEd Division readily gave their support because Ateneo had been working with them for many years.**

**In 2012 then Mayor Sherwin Gatchalian of Valenzuela City saw the QC kitchen and asked Ateneo to design and manage a Central**

**Kitchen for all the daycare centers and elementary schools of the city. He said, "I have always wanted to do this, but did not know how. How can I sleep soundly, knowing so many children in my city are hungry and malnourished." This remains our biggest central kitchen, providing meals for 16,000 to 18,000 children every schoolday.**

**Gawad Kalinga went to Leyte in 2014 after Yolanda and the people said, "Thank you for thinking of building homes for us. Pero baka pagdating ng aming bahay, patay na kami sa gutom." So GK started Kusina ng Kalinga to provide meals for several thousand children in several towns in Leyte, following the Ateneo Blueplate model.**

**After the SAF 44 tragedy in early 2015, Kusina ng Kalinga started providing lunch for children in the evacuation centers in Maguindanao and then to start schoolfeeding in Mamasapano and Rajah Buayan.**

**When the Marawi war started in May 2017, DepEd ARMM asked a GK team to build a Kusina ng Kalinga in Saguiaran, the town nearest Marawi, where most of the evacuees from Ground Zero had gone. The team was shocked to find out that Saguiaran was very near Ground Zero and they could hear, see and feel the bombings and exchange of gunfire. Concern for the safety of the kitchen team made them hesitate to go ahead with, but the young team leader, Gabie Tomboc, said: "We can hear the bombing and the gunfire. But we can also see and hear the children. We should just decide who we will listen to. I think we should listen to the children." They started providing meals as soon as Ramadan ended in June 2017.**

**Encounter and love for the children overcame all fear.**

**Today GK Kusina ng Kalinga is providing lunch for all the schoolchildren in Marawi.**

**Today in 2018, Jollibee BLT, Ateneo Blueplate and GK Kusina ng Kalinga provide lunch for over 100,000 children, with over 20,000 in ARMM, including all the schoolchildren in Marawi.**

**With LAWMAKERS at the top and Nanays on the ground**

**As we were expanding kitchens on the ground together with mayors and DepEd officials, we also worked:**

- with Senator Bam Aquino, the author of the schoolfeeding bill,**
- with Senator Chiz Escudero, Chair of the Senate Committee on Education, who shepherded the bill to final passage,**
- with Senator Grace Poe, whom I invited to visit the Valenzuela kitchen after her impassioned speech on child hunger in the Senate, and**
- with Senator Gatchalian, who championed the project as Mayor.**
- A key proponent in Congress is Ateneo de Manila Law alumnus, Congressman Raul del Mar, who joined us for an "End Hunger Summit" in Cebu.**

**But the day-to-day heroes are our kitchen managers and the nanays and tatays and other volunteers, who are up every schoolday at 3 or 4 am to cook the meals and wash the dishes after, the principals and teachers who give generously of their time to supervise the children and distribute the food.**

**Because of their volunteer work, the cost per meal in Metro Manila is only 11.50 pesos and in the provinces 15 pesos. Their generosity also allows the principals and teachers to focus on their mission of teaching. I invite these nanays and tatays to speak to a sophomore class I teach in Loyola Heights. When my students ask why they sacrifice so much without remuneration, they say, *"Iniisip namin kung hindi kami gigising, baka hindi kumain ang mga bata. Parang anak na rin namin sila."***

**TODAY the expansion of the Central Kitchen model for schoolfeeding no longer depends only on Ateneo, GK and Jollibee.**

**--Governor Uy of Compostela Valley is building in all the towns of Compostela Valley.**

**--Governor Davide of Cebu is leading the mayors of Cebu Province.**

**--The DepEd division in Nueva Ecija is doing it for the towns of Nueva Ecija.**

**--Mayor Pajarillo of Mercedes is leading mayors of Camarines Norte.**

**--DepEd ARMM got a standing ovation in one recent seminar when they showed how they had built central kitchens all over ARMM.**

**A friend in education reform told me once that successful reform is like infecting the system with a good virus. There is a slow latent period and then rapid expansion following an exponential curve.**

**We have passed the inflection point and are now on the upward curve.**

**I have told you this story at some length in the hope that you may learn that successful reform comes from bringing together many actors and institutions to work towards a shared goal.**

**If the journey seems long, it was a happy and fulfilling one. There was fulfillment in every new kitchen built, in seeing more children with happy faces, in getting to know more mayors discovering the joy of caring for and serving their people.**

**I have a favorite quote from the German political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin: "Men do not only live by fighting evils. They live by positive goals."**

**We do not move forward by bemoaning our weaknesses. We move forward by building on our strengths. My story tells you that you will find that strength on the ground: in amazing nanays and tatays, immensely dedicated mayors, governors, DepEd superintendents, supervisors, principals and teachers.**

**We do not lack good people at the ground. Just think of all our OFWs who sacrifice so much and who are actually propping up the economy from which you and I benefit. What we lack are leaders at the top who engage them with love and respect and create the linkages to bring their potential to reality.**

**Yes, I hope your batch will have the opportunity to serve in high positions, where you can make a difference. What I am asking you to consider is to move to the top through a road less travelled, beginning at the ground and getting to know and love our people. You will then have the heart to use your learning and skills to truly serve – because for you they will have faces and names and stories and you know you cannot fail them.**

**Before I end, your eight representatives reminded me to tell you that, yes, you still have to pass the bar.**

**So till November, focus on each day of your review –**

**Don't waste energy worrying about November. It will come and you will be ready if you spend your time preparing well.**

**Remember that you are not alone.**

**You have your family, your batch mates and the Ateneo community with you.**

**Keep your cool. Yes, you are stressed. No need to stress your family and friends too.**

**Be there for one another, support and encourage one another.**

**Remember to pray.**

**Be of good courage and put your trust in God who loves you.**

**I was also told to remind you that you have six months after the bar before you get the results and with God's grace take your oath to be fully lawyers.**

**I invite you to join me in getting to know our country and people better. Join me in visits to Marawi and Maguindanao and get to**

**know and become friends with mayors and leaders. I have been working with the mayors and schools since 2004 and Ateneo has a good name with them. To Regional Governor Mujiv Hataman and Marawi mayor, Majul Gandamra, I am Fr. Ben. The ARMM DepEd Secretary Rasol Mitmug is Ateneo College 2001 and Ateneo Law School 2006.**

**Watch the children playing football, volleyball, rugby – sports programs developed by Ateneo and GK. You will find children of rebels happily playing with children of soldiers.**

**Beside you watching will be families of rebels and families of soldiers.**

**You will find that there is a deep and lasting joy from coming to know our people.**

**And you will be ready to be the Ateneo Lawyer, who will lead and serve our country, keeping true to the ideals of the Ateneo Law School.**

**Congratulations again to your parents and family, to the Ateneo Law School administrators, faculty and staff and, above all, to you, the Ateneo School of Law Class of 2018.**

**May our Lord and our Lady watch over you in the coming months before the bar and in the many years of service and achievement that lie ahead of you.**

-----