

Greater-than

I once posed this hypothetical to our medical students and faculty: You are sick, you're in hospital and there are doctors looking after you. Would you prefer an Ateneo doctor or would any doctor do? Is there a difference? Should there be a difference?

I pose this now to you my dear graduates of the Ateneo Law School: You have a lawsuit. You have a choice of lawyers. Would any lawyer do? Of course, you'd go for the competent one, the one who knows their way in the legal jungle. Would you choose an Ateneo lawyer? Would an Ateneo lawyer have a particular way of dealing with your case? Should there be a difference?

The short answer is yes. If no, no difference, then there is no point in Ateneo running a law school.

Where lies the difference then? The difference is in a symbol, the greater-than symbol (>), which resembles the letter V for victory that has grown weary of standing upright and is now reclining on its side.

The difference lies in this truth which we try to teach, a liberating conviction which we hope you will take to heart all your lives. The truth is this: You are greater than your job or legal profession. You are more than just a lawyer. You are a human being first before you are a lawyer.

As I tell our student doctors, so I tell you now. Brilliant is good. Excellence in your profession is good. But not good enough. *Magpakatao bago magpaka abogado.*

Our medical students know my refrain: the human body is more than just a biochemical engine that needs an oil change or tune up every so often. You are not treating a lab specimen and you are more than just adept mechanics trained to repair broken valves. Expert technicians we can train all the time and anywhere.

As I tell them, so I tell you now. You are more than just expert technicians of the law, winning whatever argument or case is thrown at you. Eloquence and mastery of the law will make you go places. Technical expertise can win you trophies; it can bring you to the podium where you can flash that upright V for victory. Excellence you can do, excellence you can work for all your lives. But in the Ateneo, excellence is never enough. *Magpakatao habang nagpapakatao abogado.*

You are greater than your profession. You are a human person first who happens to be a lawyer, not a lawyer who just happens to be a person.

If you do not know what becoming human or *pagpapakatao* is all about, you only have to go to those places bereft of humanity. There are many such wastelands online and elsewhere. Go to places frequented by trolls. Trolls are not human. They are robots and machines. And even if they are human, they are faceless. *Walang mukhang ihaharap sa tao.* If they have hearts at all, their hearts have grown cold. They are just machines, oiled by money or power or some perverted sense of right. *Walang loob. Lahat palabas. Walang lalim. Pawang kababawan. Walang puso. Walang katao-tao.*

This pandemic has shown us many things about the legal profession. It has shown us the dark side, how leaders (and many of them are lawyers) can just discard their humanity and become trolls. With diabolical deftness they have weaponized the law, weakened our democratic institutions, auctioned the economy, sold our sovereignty for selfish and partisan ends. And they boast to have done all this by brilliant lawyering and expert sophistry, without even trespassing the legal borders of their profession.

Walang loob. Walang puso, walang katao-tao sa loob, walang totoo. Walang pagmumukha. Dalubhasang pag-aabogado. Walang pagpapakatao.

Against the darkness however, this pandemic has also shown us some light streaming through the legal profession. You see this light in those who stand against the subtle march of authoritarianism and the erosion of the rule of law in the country today. You see the light of humanity in those who continue to defend the dignity of those who are deemed peripheral and even dangerous by the holders of power these days. They do not have the numbers, yet they are luminous in their boldness, in their “rage against the dying of the light” (Dylan Thomas). They may be few who reverence their humanity first over their legal and professional loyalties, but their light is brighter in the darker night.

In truth, if you study law at the Ateneo, there are only two laws that you need to bear in mind and heart. The rest are implementing rules and regulations. The first law is this: love God with everything you’ve got. The second law: love your neighbor as yourself. Forget these two laws and you’ll just become a lawyer. Study these two laws, follow these in your life and you’ll recover your humanity. To love God is only possible if you believe you have been loved by God first, as God’s very own. To love your neighbor as yourself is to value the other person as you value your very own. In other words, these two laws celebrate and protect human dignity, our shared humanity.

My dear graduates, you are greater than your profession. Your humanity is of greater value than your legal prowess and superiority. Most lawyers busy themselves with equal signs, with equity and reciprocity and *quid pro quo*. You, we hope, will take to heart the greater-than symbol, the greater-than choices in life, the bias of *magis* in all things. The choice of the Ateneo lawyer is not between bad and good, but between good and better. All things being equal, all things being legal, I hope we have taught you well enough to choose the better option, to make the more loving decision, to take the path (legal or beyond legal) that brings you closer to your true humanity. It is this bias of *magis*, this bias of the greater love that emboldens you to see yourselves, with Thomas More, as the king’s good servant, but God’s first.

The greater-than sign is Ateneo’s only point in running a school for lawyers, in running any school for that matter.

If I had a lawsuit, and I had a choice of lawyers to defend my case, I would choose the brilliant lawyer who believes he is more than just a lawyer, the Ateneo lawyer who knows she is larger than her profession, the king’s good servant, yes, but better than that and more than anything else, God’s first.

You are God’s first. Congratulations.

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