

*(Message of Atty. Carlos Roberto Z. Lopez at the Ateneo Junior High Closing Ceremonies on 30 March 2019)*

FR. JETT VILLARIN, SJ - PRESIDENT OF THE ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY,

FR. NEMESIO QUE, VICE PRESIDENT FOR ADMINISTRATION,

FR. ALBERTO AMPIL, SJ, ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR BASIC EDUCATION, AND DIRECTOR OF PUSH AND PREP,

MR. JONNY SALVADOR - PRINCIPAL OF THE ATENEO DE MANILA JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, AND MY OLD FRIEND,

MS. GENALYN SANVICTORES - ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS,

MR. RONAN CAPINDING - ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS AND FORMATION,

MR. ONOFRE PAGSANGHAN, MY TEACHER,

AQUI ENRIQUEZ, JOAQUIN GERMAR, KENNETH GONZALES, ALFONSO LUNASCO, ROWELL DE GUZMAN, POCHOLO DIMAANDAL, ENJO LACHICA, and ALVARO BAUTISTA, TOGETHER WITH YOUR VERY PROUD PARENTS WHOSE THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU TODAY,

**GEEGEE AND MIO, AKONG AND NENA,**

OUR DEAR AND VALUED TEACHERS AND STAFF,

DEAREST CO-PARENTS, INCLUDING THE MOMS AND DADS OF THE FATHER AND SON COMMITTEE, and of course, THE FINE YOUNG MEN OF THE ATENEO JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF 2019,

Good afternoon to all of you.

It is an honor indeed to be called back home to the Ateneo, to stand here on this day of recognition and completion, and address you, the members of Class 2019, your parents, and your teachers. I am deeply privileged and flattered that the high school administration thought I might have something worthwhile to say, and share, on this very happy occasion. But I must admit, in all candor, that just thinking about this task for the past few weeks has been anxiety-inducing, if not terrifying for me.

Terrifying because, for one thing, my old high school principal, Fr. Bert Ampil, is in the audience. Those of you who have worked and interacted with the amiable Fr. Bert these last few years may be surprised to know that back in the late 70s and early 80s, he was something of a holy terror in the Ateneo High School. To this day, my classmates and I remember many high school gatherings such as this one, where Fr. Ampil would silence the rowdy student assembly by simply stopping in mid-sentence, and remaining very quiet and still for a long time, until the entire assembly would, in fear, itself become very quiet and still. Fr. Ampil would then point to someone in the audience and say, in a low, icy tone – “*You! Yes, you in the blue shirt! See me after this assembly!*” Decades later, Fr. Bert would tell me that after those assemblies, not just one, but many blue-shirted students (most of whom he had not even been pointing to in the first place) would show up at his office and turn their guilty selves in. I will confess now that there were times I thought Fr. Ampil was pointing directly at me, and I debated whether I should turn myself in; but of course, I never did. So I’m terrified today that if I mess up this address, Fr. Ampil will remember my past sins, stand up, point at me, and order me to see him after this assembly. *Huwag naman po sana, Fr. Bert.*

I’m also terrified because Mr. Onofre Pagsanghan is in the house. Mr. Pagsi became my teacher in 1978 and I have been his grateful student ever since. He taught my 1A 1979 class English and Pilipino in the grand manner. And he invited me to join the Dulaang Sibol which he founded in the 1960s and led for over five decades. I was truly blessed to have been a Sibol member for three summers and three school years. But I’m terrified today, terrified that if I do a poor job here on this stage – if I commit the cardinal sin in theater of being *boring*, or worse, if I commit the mortal Pagsanghan sin of being *inauthentic* – Mr. Pagsi will deny that I was ever his student. *Huwag naman po sana, Mr. Pagsi.* (There is another reason Mr. Pagsi’s presence here scares me, but I will tell you about it later.)

Most of all, I am terrified because I’ve been asked to address 15- and 16-year old Ateneans, and I myself was a 15-year old Atenean back in second year high school (which is the equivalent of your Grade 10). I keenly remember that my classmates and I

expected every speaker to impress and entertain us, or else he risked ridicule. You see, in my line of work today, a criminal defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. But back in high school, every speaker was presumed *boring* until proven *interesting* beyond a shadow of a doubt. For Ateneans are notoriously hard to please and every assembly of young Ateneans was a tough and unforgiving audience. I hope the Class of 2019 will be kinder than my 15-year old self was, at least this afternoon.

You may be wondering, as I have wondered, why I was invited to speak today and what I am supposed to say. I am not a VIP or a celebrity, and I do not have the glittering resume such as would befit a speaker for a closing ceremony like this. I can tell you, with no false modesty at all, that I am not a role model. What I am though, is an *Atenean, like you*. Someone who was challenged, burdened, and formed for 12 years by the Jesuits and by the finest, most dedicated teachers one could ask for. Someone who graduated from the Ateneo High School, here, in these very same covered courts, on a Palm Sunday almost four decades ago. Someone who has struggled and tried his best – not always successfully – to be worthy of the label, *Atenista*.

I am also someone who has since come full circle and become the *father* of an Atenean, a young man who is likewise completing Junior High School today.

So here I am, the father of an Atenean, trying to remember my 15-year old Atenean self, so I can speak meaningfully to you today.

But I realize that it may not be as simple as it sounds. Because at first glance, today's 15-year old and today's Ateneo seem so different from what I can remember of myself and the old Ateneo. To begin with, the high school community of my time was much smaller. Only around 360 of us from eight (8) sections graduated from the high school in April 1982, so we were at least nodding acquaintances with most of our batch mates. Today, I am told that there are 532 of you from 15 sections. I imagine that it would be so easy to feel lost in such a large crowd.

And to state another obvious difference: my generation had no cell phones, no laptops, no desktops, no tablets, no Netflix, no Viber, no Messenger, no Facebook, no Twitter, no YouTube, no Instagram, no Wifi, no Internet. Your parents will tell you that what we had were Betamax, shared landlines or “party lines,” and five (5) TV channels, *hindi pa cable* – and that was it. Today, digital and mobile technology and the Internet are ubiquitous and unavoidable. This means that you young men have quicker and easier access to knowledge, information, and entertainment than my classmates and I ever did in our time. You can, on demand, see and hear things that we could hardly have imagined.

But still, despite the differences in our generations, I suspect that the essential questions remain the same: *How can I be happy? And what is my place in the world?* I don’t think it would be fair to expect you to know the answers to those questions now or even in Senior High School. I certainly did not know the answers when I was your age. But I do remember that High School is when these questions started to at least occur to me. *How can I be happy? And what is my place in the world?*

This is what I've learned: ***your happiness is your choice and your responsibility.*** You can be as happy as you *let* yourself be. You can be *only* as happy as ***you decide*** and ***will*** yourself to be.

And what will make you happy? More importantly, what will make you happy for the rest of your life? I don’t know. Only you can tell. Because only *you* will know where your *passion* lies. And what is your true passion? Only you can determine that too. But the choices are many and staggering, especially at this point in your life. That’s the beauty and wonder of youth – life is just beginning and everything is possible. You have not yet traveled so far down any one road that too many good destinations are already beyond the reach of your imagination, strength, and will. Be open to the possibilities put before you by the Ateneo. Embrace the opportunities to see what may lie ahead. Do not be afraid to fail. Who knows for sure unless you try? You can only imagine, pray, and try. Or more importantly, you **can** imagine, pray, and try. It is **your one life** to

imagine and figure out. From among the countless dreams available, it will be **your dreams** to choose and work for. It is **your choice**. One of these fine days, God-willing, at some point in your journey, along one of the many storied roads ahead of you, you will find and choose your passion.

*And when you do find your passion – or when you finally let your passion find you – make the most of it.* It's said that in good writing, every word should tell. So also, in a life well-lived, *every act* should *tell*, and *every day* should *count*. I've learned that the best way to ensure this, is to direct your passion towards making **others** happy as well. If you want to test this proposition, think of the happiest people you know, the people you admire the most. Think of your parents, who have loved you and sacrificed a great deal to bring you to this joyous day, and who are prepared to do much, much more, to help you continue your journey to become your very best selves. Your mothers and fathers would literally lay down their lives for you, and as Christ taught us, there is no greater love than this. **Their** passion is to make **you** happy. And that's why you are here today.

Now, I told you there was another reason that Mr. Onofre Pagsanghan's presence today makes me nervous. Let me tell you why, before I end.

In second year high school, I was what you would politely call an underachiever, which is to say that I was lazy. I was having the time of my life. I was in a wonderful class full of characters in 2A, young men who eventually became my friends for life. I was also in my first year in Dulaang Sibol where I was nurturing my love for music and gaining even more life-long friends. In comparison, my academics seemed unexciting and unimportant; and I treated them that way. I spent all day having fun with my classmates and, after that, I would be in the Sibol theater where we ended our rehearsals at night. I paid no attention at all to my studies, and I paid the price. When the first quarter grades were released, I learned that I had failed no less than three subjects, and had barely passed two others. It was a total academic disaster for me. And it did not help at all that I had failed **Religion** – what is now your CLE. (*Sorry, Fr. Jett.*)

But that's not all. The same afternoon the grades were released, I found myself in a van together with other Sibol members and with Mr. Pagsi, who I was seated next to. Mr. Pagsi was in high spirits because he was learning that every Sibol member in that van had outstanding grades, and would receive honorable mention or second honors or first honor awards. Everyone, that is, except your guest speaker here today. So finally, a beaming Mr. Pagsi turned to me and asked: "*Tito, how are **your** grades? Which honors will **you** get?*" Of course, I had to deliver the bad news and tell him that I had failed not one, not two, but three subjects, and I was just *pasang-awa* in two more. Mr. Pagsi's face fell, and I could see he was deeply disappointed. He stared at me for a moment. And then – he **kicked** me. *Sinipa po ako ni Mr. Pagsi*. Not violently (because after all, we were riding a van and he did not have a running start) but the kick was hard enough for me to feel.

In any case, ever since that sunny afternoon in that van in 1979, whenever I have to deliver bad news to Mr. Pagsi, I first make sure that I am not within kicking distance.

But that's not the end of the story. My parents were shocked and even more disappointed with my failures. My father wanted me to leave Sibol and focus on my studies. And Mr. Pagsi? Well, he suspended me from Sibol which meant I was kept away from the music I so loved. I did not like that bitter medicine at all. Because at that age, every failure and every punishment seemed final and fatal. But I learned that that wasn't true. I came to realize that that was the only way I could learn and redeem myself. So I stayed away, I studied, I recovered the next quarter, and eventually, I passed all my subjects (*including Religion, Fr. Jett*). Only then did my parents and Mr. Pagsi allow me to return to Dulaang Sibol, where I went on to experience some of the happiest days of my life.

Decades later, I can now appreciate what happened to me then. I had ignored my obligations. I had literally failed. But I was blessed to have people around me who cared enough to speak honestly to me, to hold me to account, to scold me, even kick me when

I needed kicking, so I could come to my senses, get back on my feet, move forward, and be better. For that, I am deeply grateful.

And so, my young, brother Ateneans, may I leave you with this:

1. Your happiness is *your choice* and *your responsibility*.
2. Your happiness will lie in your *passion*.
3. *Now* is the time to begin searching for your passion. Do not be afraid to explore the possibilities. Embrace your opportunities. *Do not be afraid to fail*. Failure is just the prelude to your greatest success.
4. When you find your passion, direct it in such a way that it will make *others* happy as well. *There will lie your greatest happiness*.
5. Surround yourself with people who will be honest with you, family and friends who will *love you to excellence*, people who will love you enough to kick you back to your senses when you fail, and thereby help you move on, and move up, as you do today.

I wish you the happiest, most meaningful life and times that only family, friends, true passion, and God can give you.

Congratulations, Class of 2019, and Godspeed!