

(Commencement Speech of Ms. Devi Benedicte Paez at the Ateneo Senior High Graduation, March 31, 2019)

Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin, of the Society of Jesus and President of the Ateneo de Manila University, Mrs. Ma. Victoria Panlilio-Dimalanta, Principal of the Ateneo Senior High School, Ms. Jennifer Concepcion, Associate Principal for Academic Affairs, Mr. Noel Miranda, Associate Principal for Student Affairs and Formation, Faculty and Members of the Ateneo Senior High School Community, dear parents, special guests, and beloved graduates--

In 2001, when many of you were born, the world witnessed the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. I remember my 4 1/2-month old infant asleep in his crib while I watched the news report on TV. I remember wondering in horror: In what kind of world am I bringing up this child? What kind of world will this child know? How will I protect this life I am responsible for? I stand here before you as a Mother, *isang Nanay na tulad ng napakaraming Nanay at Tatay na nandito ngayon na sumubaybay sa inyong mga pinangambahan, iniyakan, pinaghirapan, at ikinalagak*. As I witness this milestone of a day with the many mothers and fathers, *ang mga lolo at lola sa paligid*, I cannot help but remember my feelings of fear and anxiety in figuring out how best to raise a child in this messy, noisy world. As we prepared for today's events, perhaps many of your parents were caught up with such bittersweet memories of you—of watching you sleep as a baby, surviving the first time you got terribly sick, witnessing the first time you fell and stood up on your own, seeing you off for your first day in school, the first time you cried because a classmate had laughed at your drawing, *ang unang beses na sumuway ka sa utos na*

umuwi nang maaga, tumakas, ngunit buti na lang nakauwi nang maayos—through all these moments, the question-- how do I protect you? It was probably what kept many of us awake at night. Maybe it still does. But we have, indeed, navigated this world together, all of you seated here in front of us wearing your togas today, anticipating that diploma in your hands; together, we trusted and moved with the world against many odds. I see you before me today, with your bright and earnest eyes—you are no longer the little boys and girls whose hands we held so tight for fear that you might fall or lose your way. How do I begin to tell you, in behalf of all gathered here, how proud we are of you today? *Paano uumpisahang sabihin na kayo ay pinakamamahal?* You were protected by our love and our faith in the world and in the Lord. You were protected by the love and the faith of the Lord in you.

Indeed, watching you grow has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of all. You have grown up in a world that knows strife and conflict all too well. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the 2018 Word of the Year is *toxic*, “*from the medieval Latin term, toxicus, meaning ‘poisonous’ or imbued with poison’*. We know what we mean when we refer to toxic waste, a toxic environment, or even a toxic relationship. Yet, it is during your time that respect for diversity and demand for equality are most pronounced. I am all too glad that the young women in this graduating class have raised the bar high and have inspired our young men to leave their comfort zones to stand equal to the many tests and challenges that each day brought in and out of the classroom. *Maraming nagsipag dahil sa halimbawa ng mga tunay na masipag. “Nanay, ang gagaling ng mga kaklase kong babae!”*

was an observation that I would often hear from my son. What a wonderful world to live in where women are acknowledged and respected rightfully for being smart, creative, and strong. What a wonderful world to live in where there are more young men who see no big issue in women forging ahead. How gratifying it is to know that you value a person's worth not by one's gender or one's province or hometown, but by the way one leads and inspires, or the way one is "the light of the class", or by the way one shows kindness and extends friendship. Indeed, you the young, teach us well about respect and acceptance. We thank you for that.

Do you see then how smart and capable you truly are? We have marveled at how confident and level-headed you have become. And with these qualities, I hope you see and explore a bigger world. A world that will challenge your principles, where not everybody will agree with you, where you will have to stand taller for what you believe in, or perhaps even question what you thought was true. Why do I wish this for you? Because it is only in finding yourself in different environments and different challenges that you will discover the mettle that you are truly made of. That big, uncharted world that is university, and, eventually, professional life, will perhaps drive you to look for your familiar comforts and routine habits. I hope not. I have seen it all too often, the big boisterous *barkada* during Orientation Week, walking along the hallways on the first weeks of class, staying close together as they did when they were in high school, appearing confident in their packs, probably feeling so relieved that they do not look like lonely outcasts. But the outcast is the one who develops resilience and fortitude. It is the outcast who is more open to reflect and

wonder—what else is there in this world? If in senior high school, you developed a tight and safety net of friends and habits, in college it is time to explore the world and re-define who you are and what you can be. Keep the friends who allow you to grow—no, let me restate that, friends should not allow you to grow—good friends know that they will grow and change with you. They will not scoff at your seemingly sudden interest to join the theater company or run for Student Council. Good friends will not laugh at nor distract you from your goal of getting an A, of being the nerd that you never were, while still looking so fly, having read the assigned text in World History not once but three times. But if your friends do laugh—*wehh, di ka naman ganyan eh, niloloko mo lang sarili mo, cut ka na lang-* and you think they are holding you down, you can walk away. Thank them for the time you shared, and walk away—not all at once, but discretely, slowly, with your chin up and shoulders down. You'll be all right. Go with the friends who make you feel good about yourself. Be with the friends who encourage you to keep going for the positive change that you so ache for. Life is too short for friends who hold you down. Be the friend who brings out the best in others.

Indeed, life is too short to stay in your comfort zones. In college, and when you embark on your professional life, look for teachers and mentors who will challenge you. We stand on the shoulders of giants in this community. Look for them, those who inspire diligence, creativity, and love for country. How will you ever know what extraordinary stuff you can do when you always stay with what is familiar and easy? The feeling of

achievement is always much sweeter and more enduring when you know that you truly worked hard for it.

Life is also too short for keeping your eyes trained to your smartphones, that foreboding fear of missing out always keeping you captive in a digital world that can only offer virtual company and sympathy. Life is too short for only collecting hearts on your IG account, whether in the one that your parents know about, or your dump account. Instead, collect experiences where you have put in all your heart. In the five months between now and when you begin your first day in college, what will you DO? What is it to live each day, when you are young and have this stretch of time? To quote the poet Mary Oliver, “What will you do with your one, wild precious life”? You are 17, maybe 18 now—and you blink, *at sa isang kisapmata*, you are suddenly 48, the age of your parents today perhaps. What will you have become on this date, 30 years from now in 2049? When my son turns 48, I will be 78. What would you have changed in this world? How much better will you be than we, your parents and mentors? What good would you have done by then? Who will you have protected?

Start today, oh dearest ones. Be more mindful of what you choose to do each day when you wake up, the first day of the rest of your lives. Choose to be kind and compassionate. It is cool to be kind. The world needs more kindness even in the simplest of things: choose to play basketball or go for a walk with your sister or brother, take time to listen to the stories of your Lolo or Lola who witnessed WWII firsthand, volunteer to prepare dinner for the family—*“Tulungan ko na po kayo; ako na po ang gagawa”*-- what

lovely words to hear. These small gestures certainly go a long way. And yes, the acts of kindness that require more effort and more time also go a long way: gathering books for a children's mobile library in Marawi, volunteering for the local elections, initiating a composting area in your neighborhood, or acting on your integrated projects for the communities in *Barangay Banaba sa San Mateo, Rizal*. *Ang daming maaring mabuting gawin upang madama mo at ng iba na magkabahagi tayo sa iisang mundo na ipinagkaloob sa atin ng Diyos*. Of course, being kind may not be always easy. But the rewards of being kind are always shared; kindness can never be contained. Keep standing up for more kindness and more compassion in the world even as you find it difficult and, perhaps, lonely and exhausting at times.

Ika nga sa pelikulang "Goyo", kung saan kinanta ng Ben&Ben ang mga linyang ito:

*Ilang beses man madapa't sumubsob/
Kailanma'y gawing matatag ang iyong loob
Mga batikos huwag nang diringgin/
Pakawalan lang yan sa hangin/
Bukas ay malapit na ring dumating/
Lumaban ka pa rin...*

(*Cue Ben&Ben's "Susi" from the movie, "Goyo"*) *Ito na lang para lalo ninyong madama; pakinggan natin:* (Play the refrain)

*Balikan kung bakit ba nagsimula/
Bago mo sabihin na ayaw mo na/
Huwag mong sosolohin/
Di ka mag-isa/
Ikaw pa rin ang susi sa pinto ng iyong tadhana...*

Remember, above all, that you do not have to do things on your own all the time. We are with you always, for always. You belong to a family, a community of friends, and kindred spirits who have shown you kindness. *Hindi ka mag-isa*. You are loved and

have been protected by love. You have been blessed by God and this good Earth. Now what do you do in the service of love and for the Lord? What will you do with your "one, wild precious life"? *Ikaw pa rin ang susi sa pinto ng iyong tadhana.* Dare to go where you can be the kindness this world so needs. God bless us all gathered here in love and for love today.

Congratulations, Senior High School Class of 2019! *Mahal na mahal namin kayo!*