

**We are Bonds of Connection between Persons  
in the Gift and Mission that is the Ateneo**

**Response on behalf of the 25-year and Special Awardees**

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40<sup>th</sup> University Service Awards  
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Mr. Ernesto Tanmantiong, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Fr. Jose Villarin S.J., President of the University, Vice Presidents and heads of the various school units, other administrators, faculty, professionals, non-teaching staff -- all fellow workers at the Ateneo, my fellow service awardees, students, family and friends, good afternoon:

I wouldn't be completely truthful if I didn't admit that there is a part of me that has somehow dreamed of being able to speak before you on this very occasion today on behalf of the 25-year and Special University service awardees. So this is a dream come true for me. I've told friends on a number of occasions that the University service awards is my favorite school event which I try never to miss--more than the graduation exercises, the traditional University awards convocation, reading of honors for students, faculty publications awards, the most outstanding teacher awards or employee excellence awards. What is being recognized this afternoon is not academic achievement nor exemplary performance nor outstanding contribution to the University and society. At one level, it is simply length of service that we are affirming today-- the daily grind of getting up early in the morning, walking, commuting or driving to school, braving the Katipunan and campus traffic, showing up for work not just from 8 to 5 -- day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade. We are honoring the little graces and gifts of the everyday, of being able to give of ourselves at the Ateneo together with everyone else. Every member of the University community from all school units is represented here.

It was Cardinal John Henry Newman, reflecting on his own mission, who famously said that God has created us for some definite service. He has committed to us particular work that He has not given to any other. We have a mission in life, even though we may not fully know or realize it. He also said that each of us is "a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons".

So what we truly celebrate this afternoon are the close links, the deep bonds among us service awardees, and indeed among all of us fellow workers here at the Ateneo, because each one of us, in our daily contributions is part of a wider community, a bigger project, a larger mission which gives our little humble, daily gifts of ourselves fuller meaning. We may be here because of our personal love for teaching, our desire to help in the formation of the youth and the next generation of leaders. We may be here because of our individual passion

for research, creative work and innovation. Or we may have come this far simply because of our readiness to contribute in various ways as custodians, messengers, technicians, technical and facilities supervisors, administrators, professionals, assistants, secretaries, coaches and mentors. We are happy and proud and are being honored for the individual gifts we have given of ourselves over many years. But what makes them truly special and distinctive, is that these gifts have been shared and joined in the unique context of the Ateneo community. Indeed they have been made possible precisely because of the gift of the Ateneo itself. As we all proclaim to the world beyond the Ateneo whenever we sing the *Song for Mary*: "...it's the school we choose; this is the place where we belong".

When we service awardees were asked to reflect on what made us stay for 25 years or more at the Ateneo, many of us acknowledged that we are truly grateful to the Ateneo for the gift of meaningful employment, for the gift of education for our children, for the gift of healthcare and even housing for our families. We are also thankful for the gift of an environment that is conducive for personal and professional growth, including the beautiful physical space of the campus and buildings, but especially for the many opportunities and support for advanced training and continuing development in our chosen fields. But more than these material and professional benefits, what has made us stay is the gift that we are part of a caring and nurturing community that is much like home and family (in fact for some employees, literally generations of family members have worked and studied here). It is also a community filled with generous, principled, passionate and committed people. That's why we treasure the gift of close and lasting friendships with colleagues (some have even found their life partners here). We are thankful for the many challenging teaching experiences, our sometimes difficult but deeply fulfilling formative encounters with students. We cherish the privilege of having worked with and having been mentored by senior colleagues and superiors we truly respect, admire and want to emulate. It is a precious gift that we belong to an institution that upholds the holistic and interdisciplinary formation of future leaders who are globally attuned but also deeply rooted in local needs, especially of the marginalized and excluded -- graduates whom we hope will be agents of justice, healing and peace in a world with much suffering, division and violence. Most of all, we are grateful for the gift of being part of a community that is blessed by St. Ignatius' deep sense of both interiority and mission. Because of the gift of this spirituality, we are helped to discover that we are loved despite our weaknesses and failures. Despite our limitations, we are called in freedom to serve the Lord in whatever manner and capacity He asks of us at various moments of our lives, in a world that seeks this kind of witnessing of God's presence and action.

Let me end by pointing out a special significance of this year's 40<sup>th</sup> University Service Awards. The number 40 does not only mean that the Ateneo has been honoring and celebrating its employees for a long time – which of course is itself a gift for which we thank Ateneo administrators over the years, especially Fr. Ting Samson, for pioneering this priceless University tradition. But what I find to be truly a moment of *kairos*, an opportune and potentially grace-filled moment at this time, is that we are holding the 40<sup>th</sup> University Service

Awards coincidentally during the 40 days of Lent. It is a privileged time of reflection, reconciliation, reparation and preparation. In last Sunday's readings, we saw in Jesus's own experience of being led by the Spirit into 40 days in the desert, allusions to the 40 days of rains and floods in the story of Noah and to the 40 years of the Jewish people wandering in the desert after their Exodus from Egypt. It's an appropriate metaphor and significant point for reflection because in our world, our country and even our own Ateneo community today, we face a difficult time of trial and temptation, conflict and division, doubts and confusion. Our assumptions and norms about human dignity and basic respect for life and people, rule of law and accountability, truth and honesty, trust and community are being challenged and shaken. In fact, our very vision and mission are being put to the test. But just like Jesus' experience of temptation in the desert, it can be a time of strengthening, renewal and reaffirmation of our calling to make life-giving and life-affirming choices, even as it leads to the Way of the Cross—for us as individuals but especially as a community – as links in a chain, as bonds of connection between persons in the gift and mission that is the Ateneo de Manila.

Sa araw na ito ng ikaapat na pung University Service Awards sa natatanging panahon ng Kuwaresma, nawa'y patuloy tayong gabayan ni San Ignacio bilang pamayanan ng Ateneo de Manila, at samahan niya sa ating panalangin:

Pinakamamahal na Panginoon: Turuan Mo akong maging bukas-palad, sa Iyo'y maglingkod ng karapat-dapat; magbigay huwag sa gugol masindak; makibaka't huwag mag-inda ng sugat; magsikap at hindi pahinga ang hanap. Gumawa at huwag maghintay ng bayad, maliban na lamang sa gunitang hanap na kalooban Mo'y aking ginaganap.

Maraming salamat and magandang hapon po sa ating lahat.