

Ateneo de Manila  
Commencement Exercises  
March 29, 2003

**FOLLOW YOUR HEART; PURSUE YOUR DREAM**  
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Reverend Fr. Ben Nebres,  
Distinguished Members of the Board of Trustees,  
Reverend Fathers of the Society of Jesus,  
My Dear Graduates, My Dear Parents,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Good Afternoon

I am deeply honored to be your Commencement Speaker today.

I must confess though, that I do not consider myself prominent enough to merit the invitation. More so, because I come from that other equally distinguished school along Taft Avenue. Nevertheless, like I always do when called upon, I will give it my best shot.

Humbly I stand before you today. Humbly I relish the thought that perhaps one of the reasons why you have chosen me as your Commencement Speaker is that you want me to share with you our experiences in Naga City and the lessons we have learned.

You, my dear graduates, might wonder why after six years in the comfort of the private sector, I decided to involve myself in the murky world of local politics.

It is not common that we find young men and women, at their early stage, stake their future in politics. The old fashioned way is for older or more seasoned men, especially those who have been successful in their profession, to indulge in politics as a rewarding refuge. In my case, I simply wanted to go home and see what I can share to the city of my birth.

**A STRONG HEART**

Fifteen years ago, a politician relative of mine asked me to run for mayor in Naga City. I was barely 29 years old then, a virtual unknown in the political arena. It was a difficult time to survive for anybody with Marcos connection. It was an easy time to thrive for anyone with the spirit of EDSA. Thus, even if I was able to garner only 24% of the votes, I nonetheless made it to City Hall.

What I got into was a city in shambles. The city government had a huge budgetary deficit; City Hall employees were underpaid, their morale was low; the local economy was sluggish; and the central business district was a classic example of disorder and congestion.

I had a weak mandate, made even weaker by a system of political patronage. But I did not have an equally weak heart. I knew in my mind the kind of governance we would pursue. The options were clear. We either provide a leadership that was exclusive and authoritarian or a leadership that was inclusive and consultative ----- a leadership that imposes its will on its constituency or a leadership that encourages people participation and engagement.

We understood that we did not have the monopoly of wisdom. We felt that we should know when to lead and when to be led.

We chose to take the side of our constituency. We fully wagered our political future on their response. To secure their confidence, we tackled long-standing problems that beset the city --- vice, urban blight, red tape, graft and corruption, and poor tax collection. We organized and reached out to all the sectors of the city --- the sidewalk vendors, drivers, urban poor, farmers, labor groups, professional circles, business federations, non-government organizations and even religious associations.

## **PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE**

We viewed the poor, of which Naga had plenty, as our partners and assets. We launched Kaantabay sa Kauswagan (Partners in Deveopment) Program, a program that has so far provided security of tenure to 5,000 squatter families. Today, they are proud owners of homelots in neighborhoods that speak of their dignity as empowered citizens of the city. Working with the poor, we resolved long-standing land tenure problems dating back to the 1950s. Such was our success that no less than the United Nations Center for Human Settlements made our program a model in the 1996 Habitat II Conference in Turkey.

We viewed our constituency, regardless of their political affiliations, as our partners and assets. We enacted a People Empowerment Ordinance, the first of its kind in the country, which instituted the Naga City People's Council. This Council, a federation of over a hundred non-government and people's organizations, has representatives who are empowered to propose legislations and vote at the committee level of the city council.

Today we engage ourselves in a program that looks at every Nagueno as the focal point of what government enterprise is all about. We call it the *i*-Governance Program. It not only recognizes the citizen's right to know but also encourages them to engage their government by freely providing them with information on what their elected leaders are accountable for. It has two basic tools: the Naga City Citizen's Charter, the first of its kind in the country and the *<naga.gov.ph website>*. These tools are both designed to empower the citizen by promoting transparency and accountability. It makes accessible to

every citizen the services of the city by detailing step-by-step procedure to avail each of the services, the standard response time for the delivery of the service and the city official responsible for its delivery. It also features the city's budget and procurements, bidding notices and other finances so that the people would know where their taxes are being spent. Because of transparent governance and accessibility of information, construction of roads and purchases of supplies and medicines cost much less in Naga City than government standards.

## **DRAMATIC REBOUND**

The People Empowerment Ordinance has resulted in a dramatic rebound for the City of Naga. By the end of my third term as city mayor in 1998, we have regained our stature as the premier city of the Bicol Region. Quantitatively this meant that Naga City posted one of the highest growth rates in the country at 6.5% per year from 1995 to 1998 ---- one of the lowest rate of poverty incidence at 29%, compared to the region's 50%. Also, Naga City's average household income is 42% higher than the national average and 126% higher than the regional average.

The rebound was described by Asiaweek Magazine as "more institutional than physical" even as it acclaimed Naga City as one of the 4 Most Improved Cities in Asia in 1999. For similar reasons, Naga City was presented the Dubai-UNCHS International Award for the 10 World's Best Practices in Urban Governance and for its Participatory Planning Initiatives in 1998.

## **CHANGING PARADIGMS**

Why am I relating to you all these, my dear graduates?

It is because in some Asian countries and even in our beloved country, people say that democratic principles cannot work, and that the Oriental model of "ruling with a hard hand" is the call of the hour.

We disagree. At least at the local level – in Naga City – people's participation in governance works. Our experience in Naga is our best argument against the traditional and authoritarian ways in managing people and government.

The quality of life in Naga City may not be at par with those of the developed countries but what Naga City lacked in material wealth is compensated by its sense of community – how its citizens interact with their fellowmen – with how its scarce resources are shared – with how misfortunes and natural calamities are met with resilience.

I do believe that the goal of government is not simply to put as much food on the table for as many people as possible. Government must engage the hearts and minds of people to make these efforts sustainable. Government must make people experience that people in government are not masters but servants.

Our experience has shown that our people are our best resource and our best hope. Our experience, and that of many others, has shown that if we cannot do it at the national level, we can begin at the local level. Collectively, successful local governments, driven by constituencies who are well informed, constructively engaged, and willing to share the burden of community building, can build our country.

Despite all our problems, I know we shall overcome. It just might be a matter of changing course. It just might be a matter of leading from the bottom rather than being herded by the top.

Again, why am I relating to you all these, my dear graduates?

It is because I am certain that many of you will be leaders of our country someday. When I met with some of you a few weeks ago, someone said that at least four of you wanted to become President of the country. But is it not ironic that while many of our leaders have succeeded in achieving their personal goals, the country has lagged behind? Maybe, it is because they have failed to make heroes out of the ordinary Filipino. Maybe it is because they have relied solely on their own capacities, rather than on the contributions of the ordinary people they are responsible for.

## **MAKING HEROES OUT OF THE ORDINARY**

Not all of you will graduate with honors or with distinctions. Only a few will be privileged to receive medals and honors. But all of you tonight will come up this stage and be honored with an Ateneo diploma.

Not that I am giving less importance to the honor graduates. We know that they have significant roles to play. But I would like to focus more on the majority of the graduates this year. I was just like one of you when I graduated from college in 1980. To you, I address my experience in Naga City --- for it is our kind, the ordinary, regular kid on the bloc, who made the City of Naga rise over its difficulties.

Our political history has shown that we have put the burden of running this country on our “best” people for too long. And yet the gap between the rich and the poor has grown wider. For this country to succeed, we need to make heroes of the ordinary Filipino. We need to make heroes of ourselves.

I must say that the ordinary employees --- the revenue collector, the maintenance worker and the street sweeper --- have made the success of Naga possible. In Naga City, we have a woman street sweeper, who held on to her broom for twenty years. Literally, she had swept every square inch of the city’s business district. But through sheer determination, she was able to finish her secondary studies in a night school and graduated, at 54, with a bachelor’s degree. This was some 8 years after her daughters had theirs. To her the City of Naga conferred the Mayoral Award for becoming an inspiration to ordinary citizens, one who despite overwhelming odds, has risen above them. Today her broom has

become a diploma. The woman was not an honor graduate --- but an ordinary citizen, struggling to make life better for her family.

Why am I relating this to you, my dear graduates, and my dear ladies and gentlemen?

It is because the world today lacks the values that used to mould the disposition and the character of the ordinary citizen.

The world today has so developed that layers upon layers of behavioral patterns and lifestyles have virtually hidden what is basic and essential in life. As one tired and retired government employee remarked, "One learns many things when one gets to be my age. But one has to unlearn many more things that one has gathered with age."

The world today, despite the advances in science and technology, has yet to learn about how to live, what to do, and how to be.

In pre-school, as bestseller writer Robert Fulghum observed, we used to be taught these: "Share everything. Play fair. Do not cheat. Put things back where you find them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. When you go out into the world, hold hands and stick together."

How sad ---after ten years in basic education and four years in higher education -- we seem to have forgotten the basic tenets learned in pre-school.

When graduates go out into the world of business or politics or entertainment or government service, will they still "share everything", "play fair", "put things back where they find them" and "clean their own mess"?

When graduates go out into the world, will they not cheat, will they not take things that aren't theirs, will they hold hands and stick together?

Our experience in Naga City is nothing but our personal encounter with the necessity of returning to the basics of governance --- a return to the essential meaning of service --- a return to what is simple and practical --- a return to that state when ordinary people actively participate in the affairs of the government --- a return to the values that our forefathers taught us: the value of honesty, hard work, of fairness and most all the holy fear of a just God.

### **SMALL FISH IN A BIG POND**

This Address will not be complete without venturing to answer the question as to where will you go from here.

Should you choose to be a big fish in a small pond, or a small fish in a big pond? Whatever your doubts are, follow your heart. When I left San Miguel Corporation, in 1986, to serve the government, many well-meaning friends advised me not to. But I

knew that serving home was where my heart was. I must say that desire and commitment far outweigh knowledge and skill. The latter can be learned. Without the former, your life's work will be a profession and not a vocation. Find your own niche. Chance careers if you must. But make sure you succeed. You must always remember that you cannot give what you do not have. Measure success in terms of how pleased you are with what you have done and not as to how other people define it, with its attendant perks.

Choose the path where you can make the most out of yourselves, while at the same time helping others make the most out of themselves. Later on in life, you will realize that it is neither your successes nor your conquests that will give you satisfaction. It is your contribution that really matters – paying back what you owe the community that nurtured you.

### **THE CHILD IN US**

Let me end by narrating to you the conversations I had with Grade 6 pupils of a public school in Panicuason, a mountain barangay in Naga City, and some four years ago.

Some of these children had to walk 3 to 4 kilometers daily just to attend school. Among the things I asked them was what their ambitions in life were? A boy said he wanted to be a doctor someday. I asked him why. He said he wanted to be a doctor because there was no doctor in the barangay. When somebody gets sick, the patient has to be transported to downtown Naga, 16 kilometers away, to get medical attention. A girl said he wanted to be a teacher so that she would make sure that all the children in her barangay would go to school. She was saddened because some children were asked to tend the farm even on schooldays. Another boy said he wanted to be an engineer so he would improve the roads and provide irrigation systems for the farmers.

Like all of us, all of them wanted to be somebody someday. But despite their deprivations and difficulties, they were all for a noble purpose – to be of service to others. Not one of them said that it was for fame, money or power. They were so young, yet they know what was good for their community and for others.

As you leave your beloved Alma Mater and pursue your own dreams, do not forget the child in you. Keep in your hearts always the Ateneo idealism of being men and women for others. Hold on to it because I am sure you will do no wrong if you keep that idealism as your guiding light.

Congratulations. Good evening.