

## **“The Eagle Will Not Fly Without the Poor”**

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I asked some members of the senior class last week why they chose me as their commencement speaker. I have no business empire. I hold no political power. And I am no academic genius. I am just an ordinary Filipino, a graduate of the Ateneo, who did not even excel as a student... just an ordinary man who loves to tell stories about the extraordinary things that people are doing for our country today.

And they told me--- because I represent a movement that presents hope at this time when many in our country are in despair. You are looking for hope in me, but I am here to tell you that this school and the other members of this university have been a source of hope and inspiration for me in the last three years.

When Father Ben Nebres and the Ateneo Board of Trustees bestowed the Ozanam Award on Gawad Kalinga through me on July 23, 2003, they triggered A REVOLUTION OF HOPE in the Ateneo...sweeping the Ateneo from grade school, high school, college, to the Alumni... then leading the way for other universities, corporations, government institutions and Filipino organizations abroad to follow their example and joining the bandwagon for nation building. The Ateneo is showing the world that “The eagle will not fly without the poor”.

Thank you Father Ben for your great love for our country and for inspiring the young to make a difference in the lives of our people.

Caring for the poor and restoring the dignity of the Filipino in his own country have now become an urgent mission for Filipinos here and abroad. This is not just healing for our country’s poor and neglected but it is healing for me and many like me as well.

Unknown to most of you, for 32 years it wasn’t easy for me to return to Ateneo. I didn’t come to the reunions and homecomings, simply because of a sense of guilt of a person who grew up with the suffering poor but later forgot them after I got an Ateneo education. I was so focused on repackaging, and building up myself that I forgot the accompanying responsibility that came with the privilege of an Ateneo scholarship. I forgot the poor... I left them behind. I left them like so many others before me.

There are many who blame the rich and powerful for the plight of the poor. I know there is basis for the accusations but I cannot bring myself to blame them. How could I expect them to love the poor whom they do not know when I grew up poor and yet forgot to help them, too.

I realized my great shortcoming as a Filipino in 1985 when I joined Couples for Christ. It was then that I found my faith and grew a conscience and decided to live a righteous life... to correct the mistakes and the injustice committed to our country and to our people by people like me. Couples for Christ taught me to repent for my sins and to be genuinely sorry for the things I failed to do for my country and for my people. I am really sorry for the state of things, because of my failure to do something about it. And many are now sorry, just like myself because of this state of degradation... But feeling sorry is not enough. Sorry does not restore beauty, sorry does not restore dignity, sorry does not restore the plan of God for man. Sorry begins it, but sorry is not enough.

What needs to be done is to bring sorry to action, to convert regret to reform, to lift apathy to compassion and development. We who have not done well by the talents and treasures we have been gifted with, we who have abdicated our responsibility of shepherding the poor and the young to their birthright of enjoying the treasures of a beautiful and abundant country, we who have seen the errors of our ways and are sorry --- we must now restore what we destroyed... or allowed to be destroyed.

Because the Ateneo is a Christian university which believes in the mission of forming students to become persons for others, the principle of good over evil goes beyond the fundamental understanding of right and

wrong. It is not enough not to do wrong. To battle evil, we must do good. The path of reform and transformation for Ateneans... for Christians, must be one of peace. It must believe that good is more powerful than evil, and only in the exercise of good can evil be eliminated. Thus, the path of reform and transformation, personal and social, must be a path of good works.

Build homes. Build communities. Build capacities. Restore dignity. Restore abundance. Restore beauty. Restore peace. Build and restore, build and restore.

And you did! The eagle has landed in Payatas. Because you could not bring the poor of Payatas to Ateneo, you brought Ateneo to the poor of Payatas. In this once desolate place, you restored dignity, you have brought back hope!

The former squatters now have security in their land. You transformed 200 shanties -- the slum and the garbage have now become a beautiful middle class community. Crime has virtually disappeared. Former streetchildren are now in school. The idle have been motivated to find employment and are now living productive lives. *Nawala ang sindikato sa lupa, sa tubig, at sa ilaw.* You have transformed hell into a piece of heaven... all because you cared, you shared and you learned to work together. The grade school worked with their parents, the high school students gave up their parties... the college students gave up their weekends. And the Alumni from all over the world also helped.

I salute and honor the eagles of Payatas, especially Steph Limuaco, former President of the Ateneo Student Council and now full-time worker of Ateneo for Gawad Kalinga, students, parents, the caretaker team from CFC and Mayor Sonny Belmonte who not only paved the way for the poor to own the land in Payatas but also paved the roads.

Again you performed the same miracle in Gabaldon!

The surviving flood victims who were once squatters living in dangerous areas now have their own land in sites that have been cleared as environmentally safe and their own sturdy homes. Now the people are growing their own food and planting trees. Land for the landless, homes for the homeless, food for the hungry... For this I honor Mark Lawrence Cruz, the 300-strong Team Gabaldon and Mayor Mandia. You washed away the mud of despair and brought out the gold in the poor of Gabaldon.

Gabaldon is part of a massive rehabilitation and reconstruction effort called Kalinga Luzon that goes beyond the usual relief operations after the calamity. *Malaki ang tulong dito ng 3 Atenista* in helping 40,000 survivor families of the Luzon typhoons and floods... Secretary of National Defense and NDCC Chairman Avelino “Nonong” Cruz , Smart-PLDT Chairman Manny Pangilinan and former Agriculture Secretary Cito Lorenzo.

This afternoon I invited the proud leaders of Payatas and Gabaldon, together with the mayors of Cabiao, San Isidro, and Gen. Tinio, Nueva Ecija who have also benefited from the help of Ateneo. They are here to witness the graduation of a new breed of Ateneans and Filipinos who not only have the brains but also the heart for our country and our people.

The journey to rebuild our country is just beginning and moving towards massive upscaling with the entry of corporations, national government agencies, LGU’s and Filipino organizations abroad.

Corporations too are searching for a deeper and better \_expression of corporate social responsibility. Rival corporations are rising above business competition to help. P&G and Unilever, Jollibee and McDonalds, Shell and Petron, Pfizer and Wyeth and Smart-PLDT... and over a hundred others. Sabi ng Shell “*Kung may layunin, malayo ang inyong mararating*”. Sabi ng Smart “*We’re not just building homes, we’re building a nation*”. Both campaigns are inspired by the spirit of Gawad Kalinga, the spirit of being a person for others – going beyond conventional charity towards helping the poor become better stewards of their families and their communities. Converting our human resource from liability to asset, expanding the market base by empowering the poor make good business sense!

This afternoon we have with us the country chairman of Shell Philippines, Mr. Ed Chua, who is from La Salle and the president of Pfizer, Mr. Gerry Bacarro, who is from Ateneo. Both are firm believers of corporate social responsibility geared towards nation-building. It is our hope that the stiff rivalry between Ateneo and La Salle in basketball will be elevated to a higher level of nobility of building the most number of houses and communities and educating the most number of poor children.

My fellow Ateneans, when you leave this campus, many of you will join these corporations and will be happy to note that they have a keener sense of social responsibility and a work environment that will nurture your idealism.

In the field of governance, more than 300 mayors and governors have chosen the same path of nation-building. Hundreds more will join this year and members of Congress are being inspired to do the same. Many of you will be the future mayors, governors and members of congress... and again will be happy to note that your predecessors have begun the path of building and restoring our country.

Even Filipinos abroad have found a reason to hope and a way to concretize their love for the motherland. Many have gone beyond sending resources... they themselves are coming home to help build the nation of their dreams... Bicolanos helping Bicol... The Ilonggos helping Negros and Panay... the Cebuanos helping Cebu... And the Fil-Am doctors are going beyond the usual medical mission and are building healthy communities as a way of giving back to a country that they have never stopped loving.

When you care for others, especially the weak and the powerless, you will be amazed at how God will take care of you and the people you love. Today I thank God for my wife and my five children who have joined me in this mission to help restore this beautiful land. This is the best legacy I can give them. I honor my son Jay, who at 22, left his job and an exciting life of fast cars and beautiful girls in L.A. to help the typhoon victims of Bicol... and my son-in-law Dylan Wilk who left his country England, his family and friends, his extravagant lifestyle - his Ferrari, his Porsche and BMW... in exchange for the poor families in this country that he has learned to love and care for.

And of course, the nameless and unrecognized workers and heroes of other Ateneo initiatives like Pathways, Tulong Dunong, Jesuit Volunteers of the Philippines, Leaders for Health and other NGOs and cause-oriented groups who love this county... Today there are tens of thousands of them... tomorrow there will be millions. Together we will build a slum-free, squatter-free, crime-free Philippines.

And so in the same spirit of heroism, I urge you young Ateneans to do the same. After you leave this campus, there is no doubt that you will soar to great heights but it will all be meaningless if you fly alone. The poor do not have strong wings like you do and they need you to carry them, inspire them to discover their own strength and greatness. *Sana eto ang walang iwanan.*

For the parents, as you have invested in the future of your children by giving them the best education possible... support also your children's desire to invest in the future of this country. They will honor you even more if you value their aspirations for nobility and their dreams for a better country that will be a source of pride for them and their children.

As we go through this defining moment of Philippine history, let us strive never to forget four things:

- (1) Never stop hoping for our country.
- (2) Don't stop caring for our people.
- (3) Demand greatness of yourself as a Filipino.
- (4) Inspire greatness in other Filipinos.

As you leave the campus to join the real world, let your vision and the power that you have discovered to change the world, define what is real to you.

Make your love for this country and our people, especially the poor, your reality and your priority. Make it the foundation of your career plans, your dreams and ambitions for your children and the goal of any political or economic power that you have the privilege to wield.

Wherever you are in the world, excel and prosper but remain connected to the motherland and dedicate your success to the fulfillment not just of your dreams but to the many in your country who have lost their capacity to dream.

Do not be content in finding artificial security in gated subdivisions when you can provide yourself a buffer of peace by caring for the needy around you. Nor be content with living in first world luxury in a third world environment and contributing to the discontent and the growing threats around the security of your own family.

Give value to the land of your birth by sharing with those who for generations have been deprived of its use and abundance. Be a blessing to your children's future by making it your responsibility to be father or mother to the abandoned and neglected.

Be the healing of the soul of this nation and the fulfillment of the dream that we have forgotten.

Be the proud Filipino that we are not yet, but soon will be.

Be the hero who finds courage and the conviction that this country is worth saving, because it is a gift from God and that your life is meaningless if it is not dedicated to the fulfillment of a divine destiny to be a great people.

Let me end this speech and send you off with a prayer.

Dear God, pour out your blessing upon our new graduates. Guide them in their journey to greatness. Show your power and majesty to this troubled and sinful nation through these young Filipinos who will strive to live lives of righteousness and excellence. Make them healers of our wounded people and restorers of our broken land. Anoint them as the new generation of living heroes who will bring this country to our destiny of greatness.

***Mabuhay kayong mga bagong bayani ng bayan! Kayo ang bagong lakas ng pagbabago! Kayo ang magandang mukha ng kinabukasan!***