

It is an honor to be with all of you today at the 76th Annual Commencement Exercises of the Ateneo School of Law. This would have been a happy occasion, except that I know the unfortunate incident last July 24 cannot so easily be erased from our memory — especially since today we are celebrating the same occasion.

It would not be easy for you to forget what transpired that day. For those of you who knew the victims, and most especially for your classmate, Hannah Furigay, I am sure that the memory of that day will not be lost. Our prayers go to the families of all the victims.

And if you will allow me to say this: please value your parents, your family, friends, and loved ones — for seeing them and being with them in one moment is no assurance that they will be here in the next.

With that, let me say that it is always good to be back home. For me, what makes this event even more meaningful is the fact that, for the first time since the pandemic struck, we are able to hold this ceremony and celebrate this milestone while being physically present together here on the Ateneo campus.

For a batch that had to complete their legal education during a pandemic — with lockdowns, the challenges of remote learning, fear and uncertainty, and perhaps illness or the death of those you hold dear — simply being able to gather here today feels like a victory in itself. It is a fitting end to an exceptional and exceptionally challenging education in law.

So to Batch 2022 of the Ateneo Law School: congratulations — you made it. Congratulations as well to your parents, your loved ones, and your families. You made it too.

This is, above all, a day of gratitude — so make sure to make time today to thank them and everyone else who helped you reach where you are now. For those who are working, thank your bosses for giving you the time to study and the space to pursue your dreams. If they did not, then thank them all the same — because of them you gained more patience and mastered how to manage limited time.

Thank your professors for passing you, even if you do not deserve it. Thank your fellow graduates for helping you through your classes and through life. And above all, thank God for sustaining you for four years or more in law school.

Today you celebrate a milestone like no other. Ateneo Law is among the best, oldest, and most prestigious institutions of learning in the country. You will enter your field as the best of the best, the cream of the newest crop of soon-to-be lawyers in the country.

It has been almost four decades since I sat where you are now, but I still remember how rigorous legal education at Ateneo is. Our law school accepts and graduates only the best, the brightest, and the hardest working. On top of that, having learned and trained under a pandemic, you have already been tested by fire.

By this time, you will have taken your Bar examinations, chaired this year by a fellow Atenean Supreme Court Justice Alfredo Benjamin Caguioa. After you hurdle the Bar, you will be among the most sought-after in the country as a new batch of lawyers. Many will look up to you; your families and even your barangays may put up banners announcing your triumph. In your hometowns, people you pass by on the street will congratulate you for being an attorney and will, half-jokingly, enlist you as their lawyer in case of some legal trouble in the future.

Dear graduates, the world will be at your feet. But in that moment, bear in mind that an education in law is a privilege. A legal education in the Ateneo way — even more so. And it is a privilege that comes with responsibility.

On occasions like this, I usually give graduating law students a glimpse into the life that awaits them and the values they will need to succeed: be grateful, be humble, be diligent, be respectful, be honest, be trustworthy, be kind, be patient, be persevering. But I know you already know these values by heart.

So instead, today, I would like to emphasize the unique responsibility that you will carry as lawyers trained by this institution. Being an Atenean lawyer comes with prestige — but it also comes with responsibility, with comfort, and with success.

At its core, to be an Atenean lawyer is to be a lawyer for others, just as we are taught in the Ateneo to be first and foremost men and women for others. You will not be simply lawyers. You will be lawyers trained in the Ignatian tradition of magis — of serving the greater good, aspiring to do greater things, and being more for others.

Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, the late Superior General of the Society of Jesus, said that Jesuit education is not about training the best in the world, but about training the best for the world. The excellence of a professional is measured first and foremost by the parameter of greatest service to the human family.

Having studied in an institution with excellent facilities, professors, and learning environments, you can easily get lost in the comfort of everything that surrounds you. As the Ateneo alma mater song flows, “We stand on a hill between the earth and sky.” But lest you forget: while these may be the familiar trappings of an Atenean education, they are not its hallmark.

Because the hallmark of an Ateneo education is service to others. It is using what you have learned for the service of others. Around you lies the real world — poverty, injustice, hunger, inequality. And as the alma mater song continues: “Down from the hill, down to the world I go.”

Truly, your Ateneo education did not mean to insulate you from all this. On the contrary, it meant to immerse you deep into it — to be affected by it. An Ateneo education has equipped you the best way it can so that you may confront the frontiers, discover truth,

allow yourselves to be transformed, and then use everything you have learned toward the advancement of justice and equality in this world.

True to the character of St. Ignatius, the Jesuits have instilled in all of us a revolutionary spirit — a soul not to accept the status quo, but to change how things are; to be challenged on how to make the world a better place.

A Jesuit priest, Fr. Luis Ugalde, affirmed this when he said, “We do not want successful professionals in a failed society.” Indeed, what good is your success if you have failed your neighbor? What good is your success if conditions around you remain the same as when you left the Ateneo? What good is your success if it has benefited only you?

The Supreme Court counts among its roster seven justices, including myself, who were trained in the same tradition of Jesuit education. I mention this not to boast, but in recognition of the deep responsibility of the Court and its members to live up to this tradition and be exemplars of magis in our work and lives.

This, in fact, is what I continue to strive toward in my leadership of the Court, with the support of my fellow justices — whether that is ensuring that our courts continue to dispense justice amid the pandemic through the use of technology; or revising various rules to ensure the just, speedy, and inexpensive disposition of cases; or our efforts to strengthen legal aid for those on the margins through the Clinical Legal Education Program and a revitalized IBP legal aid program; or the strategic reforms we have laid out to transform our efforts into consistently efficient and accountable systems for the disadvantaged, the wronged, and the injured.

As we navigate the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the judiciary faces its toughest challenge yet. You know the problems that have long plagued the judiciary — docket congestion, case delays, insufficient budgets, inefficient administrative systems, and deficient technologies. Now, heightened health policies and more stringent safety protocols threaten to hamper our justice delivery services even more.

Facing the situation squarely, the Supreme Court en banc conceived and approved Justice Real Time, a strategic plan for judicial innovations, 2022–2027 — a child of necessity and practicality.

We have all been witnesses — and perhaps even participants — in a steady succession of judicial reform projects aimed at addressing our perennial problems. But while well-intentioned, these reforms have often been piecemeal, disaggregated, and disconnected, following no central plan or direction.

What we are attempting with the Strategic Plan for Judicial Innovations (SPJI) is nothing of the sort. It is outcome-based and measurable. It is straightforward and targets attainable goals. It is no mere wishlist. It is our blueprint for action for the next five years — even beyond the pandemic.

All these plans, activities, and programs are geared toward achieving three outcomes: efficiency, innovation, and access — which will, in turn, usher in a new standard of justice delivery — real-time.

I mention all these, dear graduates, not just to acquaint you with how the Court is looking to change the terrain of our profession through much-needed judicial reforms. I mention them to remind you of the work ahead of you as Atenean lawyers.

As I said, a life in the law is, above all, a life of service. It is a life dedicated not to the pursuit of personal success, but to providing support to those who need it most. And as lawyers trained the Ateneo way, you are called to go even further.

Which is why, as an aside, I enjoin you all to be part of the concerted efforts at reform being led by the Supreme Court — in fulfillment of our shared oath to serve our nation and our people to the best of our ability, and in the pursuit of our collective aspiration to fortify the stronghold of the rule of law for the next generation.

This work will not be easy. In doing it, you will come face to face with the reality that the system is imperfect — built and run by imperfect human beings. Our systems, our structures, sometimes even our laws, will fall short of the highest ideals and aspirations.

But the good news is: no matter how difficult this work may be, there are paragons whose lives and work we can emulate — whose footsteps we can follow for guidance. And for this, we need not look further than our home, the Ateneo Law School.

One of the best to ever graced its halls both as a student and as a professor was Father Joaquin Bernas. Father Bernas was among the most renowned Jesuits in the country — a legal luminary, a sharp socio-political thinker, a staunch champion of democracy and justice.

Incidentally, I would like to congratulate and thank the Ateneo Law Journal Editorial Board and staff for crafting the special issue released just earlier this month, on the anniversary of his birth, commemorating the life and legacy of Father Bernas.

His death last year was a great loss — not just to Ateneo and to the Jesuit order, but to the legal profession and to the country as well.

Much like St. Thomas More, whose path he followed as a man of justice and a man of God, Father Bernas was indeed a man for all seasons. You may know him best as one of the key framers of our Constitution and one of its leading authorities.

Indeed, he played no small part in shaping our Constitution — which, in the words of Chief Justice Hilario Davide Jr., is the only Constitution in the world that is at once: pro-God, pro-life, pro-Filipino, pro-people, pro-poor, pro-labor, pro-family, pro-social justice and human rights, pro-youth, pro-women, and pro-environment.

Father Bernas was also a beloved educator and a leader in the academe — a brilliant writer and commentator, a leading legal scholar, a true *amicus curiae* to the Supreme Court, a patriot who fought and worked for democracy, the defense of our rights and liberties, and the advancement of social justice for all.

I talk about Father Bernas at length today because his life's work points to the lesson I would like to emphasize before you leave the Ateneo Law School: that lawyering is a vocation.

This might sound like a strange word to associate with a life in law, but in one of his homilies, Father Bernas reminded us: "Vocation is a word we sometimes reserve for religious or convent life. It is not that way at all. Vocation is for all — yes, even for the rascals. God singles out each one of us for a task."

What, then, as Atenean lawyers, is the task you have been given? Who are you called to be?

Dean Ceasar Villanueva's contribution to the Ateneo Law Journal's special issue — where he gives glimpses of the impact Father Bernas made within and beyond the Ateneo community — offers us a helpful place to start. In it, Dean Villanueva, then serving as Dean himself, talks about how Father Bernas retooled the mission of the Ateneo Law School.

What emerged from that re-articulation is a timely and timeless reminder of your calling as Atenean lawyers. In it, Father Bernas emphasized that the mission of the Ateneo Law School is "to form men and women not only skilled in the science and art of the law, but also imbued with a burning passion for justice and a fervent desire to serve others."

Father Bernas added that, as a school in the service of the legal profession, the Ateneo Law School insists on intellectual rigor — rigor in the tradition of Jesuit education, which demands, among others, a thorough grasp of the nature and ends of law; the ability to express legal conviction; forceful oral and written communication; and sensitivity to the role of the law as an instrument of service to individuals and of social engineering.

As a Catholic and Jesuit institution, on the other hand, the Ateneo Law School also integrates into its program opportunities for deepening and maturing one's Christian commitment, and for participating in social mobilization toward the creation of a more just social order.

Father Bernas, in his life, his work, and his teachings, always emphasized and exemplified the very first and most important lesson of all — that lawyering is a service. It is a service to others in need of justice. It is a service to others in search of truth.

While lawyering will certainly not leave you penniless, money is not its end. Its goal has always been and will always be public service and the administration of justice.

It is a service that, as Father Bernas showed us, would do so much more than adjudicative dispute. It is a vocation that could paint a better social order — one that is more just, more compassionate, more humane — and chart a path towards its realization. This is the same lesson I always emphasize to young law graduates like you, so that for both your first and your last lesson in law, you may be reminded that lawyering does not give you entitlement.

It is not a license to feel superior. Your degree and your title do not make you know better than everyone else. It should not make you think you are always right.

Lawyering does not exploit a person's ignorance. Instead, it flourishes in keeping people informed and aware of their rights. Lawyering thrives in seeking truth, not lies. A lawyer masters procedure not to obstruct and delay, but to draw out the truth so that justice may be served.

Lawyering is not a license to relax and be passive. Instead, it is a license to take a stand, to be an agent of change in society. It is a license to do more — to help more people, to aspire for greatness.

As lawyers, always remember that the law is not a tool for vengeance and oppression, nor for tyranny or oppression. It is a tool for justice. It is an instrument for peace, order, unity, and equality. The law is the last breathe of hope for the poor, the last face of respite for the oppressed, and the last ounce of strength for the injured.

I hope you take to heart the reminder of the Supreme Court that the practice of law is imbued with public interest — and that a lawyer owes substantial duties not only to his client, but also to his brethren in the profession, to the courts, to the nation, and takes part in the administration of justice — one of the most important functions of the State.

Accordingly, lawyers, as officers of the court, are bound to maintain not only high standards of legal professional proficiency, but also morality, honesty, integrity, and fair dealing.

Before I close, let me congratulate Ateneo Law School Dean Cynthia Roxas-Del Castillo on her induction into the Hall of Fame. Truly she is deserving of such honor.

Also, my sincere thanks to her for inviting me to join the Ateneo Law School Faculty decades ago.

To our graduates, I have no doubt that you will all be excellent lawyers. But my hope is that you will continue to strive for more — that you continue to aspire for greater and greater things.

Be lawyers with the highest standards of legal proficiency, morality, honesty, integrity, and fair dealing. Be lawyers with a burning passion for justice and a fervent desire to serve. Be, above all, lawyers for others.

Again, congratulations to all, and Godspeed.

This transcript was prepared from a video recording of the ceremony. It may not reflect the verbatim delivery of the speaker. For official quotations, please refer to the video recording.