

I would like to begin my address with gratitude. Thank you, Father Yap and Dean Joey, for the kind invitation to speak before you all, and for thoughtfully allowing me to take part in today's Law School graduation ceremonies.

I suspect, though, that Father Bobby and Dean Joey thought of inviting me today to speak before you to escalate the tension and pressure for the Bar.

One of the highlights of my teaching career was when I joined the Faculty of Law in Ateneo in 2015 upon the kind invitation of Dean Sedfrey Candelaria. My years of teaching in Ateneo Law were, I dare say, some of my most fruitful years as a professor of law—until they were interrupted, unfortunately, by my appointment to the Supreme Court in 2018.

The Ateneo Law School was, in fact, my last stop in the academe before I was forced to immerse my full efforts in the judiciary as a magistrate in the Highest Court.

In my years in your esteemed faculty, I had the fortunate privilege to mentor a considerable number of Ateneo alumni, and now a good two handfuls of them inhabit my legal staff in the Supreme Court. I am proud to declare that Atenean minds are some of my most indispensable assets in my work as a jurist. They run my office very smoothly through the rough roads in this journey in law, at ten-speed gears, and certainly in excess of my expectations.

Whether you already realize it or not, you are now Ateneo alumni yourselves. You are not just a law graduate of any law school, but an Ateneo Law School graduate. May I therefore ask from you a round of applause for your school, as a way of thanking your professors here, who, throughout your stay in law school, have served as your fundamental guideposts in your understanding of the law.

I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the presence and pride of all chosen guests and loved ones of our graduates, as well as the unintentional absence of those who would have most wanted to be with them today. We celebrate them as your most loyal supporters—the people who have never doubted your success even despite your occasional personal misgivings—the very special persons who have inspired you to reach this point in your lives.

May I therefore likewise request for you to applaud them with the best and most heartfelt cheers that you can muster.

And as a last point of gratitude, thank yourselves for being here.

Good things come not to those who just wait but to those who persevere—just like you. That diploma that you have earned is not a product of docile passiveness. Wins can be big or small in scale, but they are achieved due to a conscious effort to win.

You may have been graced with a light stroke of luck in your stay in law school, but there are no accidents in true success. You are here not because you have just been lucky. You are here because you held on—sleeplessly, persistently, and faithfully. And so, give yourselves a meaningful pat on the heart and a well-deserved round of applause for a job superbly done.

Barely two months remain in your Bar review. I am sure that you have your codals copiously lined and annotated with various kinds of writing instruments, and its originally monochromatic pages are now so vibrantly colored with highlighters. I'm also guessing that your usual coffee intake of one cup a day has already increased to a cup per hour.

Your years of stay in Ateneo alone should be sufficient to power you through the 2023 Bar Examinations. But I know that you will still do all you can to drill into your minds all the laws and provisions that you can memorize and understand.

But what are you studying and preparing for, really? And that is the question.

Our primal answer to “What is law?” would be a bunch of words formulated by somebody in authority, dictating some sort of order, the compliance with or violation of which would lead to binding consequences. A litany of rights, a list of obligations, and a slew of criminal penalties would automatically come to mind when you hear the word “law.”

The Spanish civilist Sanchez Roman formally defined law as “a rule of conduct, just and obligatory, promulgated by legitimate authority for the common observance and benefit.” It sounds forceful, stoic, and harsh—as if the law is something we must fear and even technical to the non-lawyer.

There is, however, more to the law than cold, robotic words, unquestioning obedience, and rigid technicalities.

Dean Roscoe Pound of the Harvard Law School said this in his brilliant but short written discourse *What Is Law?*:

“Law is more than an aggregate of laws. It is what makes laws living instruments of justice. It is what enables courts to administer justice by means of laws—to restrict them to their reason where the lawmaker exceeds his reason, and to develop them to the full scope of the reason where the lawmaker falls short of it.”

Dean Pound believed that law must be viewed in all its senses and that the social purposes of law must be stressed more than its sanctions.

I view these social purposes of the law as the heart of the law. One cannot really separate the law from the human element. Unfortunately, the human element is what is usually discarded in the practical application of the law.

Perhaps we should look more deeply at the *whereas* clauses of statutes, the declarations of policy sections, the wisdom of the law as reflected in the deliberations of Congress, the pieces of jurisprudence applying the rule of equity, and—even if we were to look at our 1987 Constitution—where purely human concepts and virtues such as truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace have been mentioned to ordain and promulgate the Constitution.

While it is established that equity follows the law, in that equity will not be applied when there is a remedy in law, equity is the ink that writes the law and not what it serves.

Our civilists even took the purposeful effort and fleshed into the Civil Code unwritten equity considerations into a set of legal provisions called natural obligations. You will, of course, find that in Article 1423 of the Civil Code.

In labor law, some would comment how labor jurisprudence would seem to flip-flop the law all the time. It is not that the Court changes its mind. It is just that a single Labor Code provision would govern a number of labor cases with such hairline distinctions that the most microscopic detail in the facts would lead the Court to a different judgment so as not to frustrate justice.

This is the reason why technical rules of procedure are not binding in labor cases. In short, justice always trumps technicalities.

The law has a heart—and its heart is justice.

Social failures would unavoidably ensue if it were otherwise—that is, if we were to look at the law in all its abstract features.

At this moment, I hope to urge you not just to wholeheartedly push yourselves successfully through the Bar Examinations but to prepare yourselves for what is inevitably ahead, which is your life role as lawyers:

To live justice.

To breathe justice.

To do justice.

And to inspire justice at all times.

At bottom, lawyering is a profession of compassion. When the written law falls short of compassion, you, as soon-to-be members of the Bar, shall fill that void in the law with overt acts of compassion in whatever capacity you will find yourselves—in the public or private sector.

After all, compassion establishes trust.

Understand that wherever you may end up in this profession you have chosen, you will have to meet people of different standings in life, grips on power, levels of principle, and sides of the coin. Approach them without prejudice.

Just as courts of law are also courts of equity, you must strive to be lawyers of equity. And you must go further—be lawyers with empathy.

Indeed, you may have a great level of legal knowledge, but without a greater level of emotional intelligence, you will never be able to forge that trust with the people that you will serve.

Do not stop at the logical bounds of the statute, especially when the prevailing realities are obviously and unreasonably unfair.

Do not falter in choosing to do the right thing, even if you are alone in doing so.

Remember that silence and inaction in the face of unfairness make you complicit and accessory to such unfairness.

If someday, somehow, you get lost, confused, or tempted, please allow yourselves to be guided by your moral compass.

I would like to mention a Jesuit principle that is both beautiful and instructive in this regard. It says:

“Go where there is a greater need.”

The greater need pointed out in the principle will most probably demand from you the exercise of self-sacrifice and the skill to put yourselves and walk in the shoes of other people.

It should not be enough that we are able simply to understand and commiserate with a person’s suffering. Our aim is to know their pain and find practical ways to relieve them of their pain.

With life becoming harder by the year in this immensely competitive world, we tend to focus too much on ourselves. This is not to shine a bad light on the usual pursuit of self-improvement—far from it. All of us can always choose to do more, not just for ourselves but for other people.

Know that a lawyer, which you will soon become, will always be exposed to opportunities to do more for other people, even at the expense of your own preference. Take those opportunities whenever they present themselves. Go beyond the bounds of your personal convenience.

After all, true freedom, according to Saint Ignatius, is about being free of the self—about not putting yourself at the center.

Bear in mind that the tiniest voices are usually the ones who must be heard. So listen to them. Engage them in conversation. Be genuinely interested in what they have to say.

You may not be aware of it, but you are living in the world through the screens of your phones and social media. Every once in a while, I ask you to just look up and see, hear, and feel what is truly happening around you—and then reflect, evaluate, and act if you must—all within the context of Jesuit educational values and best traditions.

Beyond these, there is a treasure of insight to be gained when you immerse yourselves in the world’s realities.

Be wary that success, titles, and fame may change you. In what way or direction—it is entirely up to your discretion. But I do believe with all my heart that you will always discern and make the moral, authentic, and just choices.

As a last note: continue believing in yourselves.

For manifesting purposes—as you youthful aspirants to the Bar call it these days—memorize the new version of the Lawyers’ Oath and claim the title of Attorney as early as now.

As Taylor Swift would sing in her song *Change*:

*Tonight we'll stand, get off our knees,
Fight for what we've worked for all these years.
And the battle was long
It's the fight of our lives
But we'll stand up as Champions tonight*

And indeed, you stand here today as the champions that you truly are.

One that can conquer that one big fight in September. Hold on to your faith, and I will see you all as champions of the 2023 Bar Examinations on December 22, 2023, which is the date of the oath-taking for this year’s Bar passers.

Above all, I maintain my ultimate challenge to each one of you, and that is for all of you to be champions of social justice, unshackled truth, absolute freedoms, unconditional love, and unthreatened peace — equality to all and inequity to none.

Again, my heartfelt congratulations, and please do enjoy the rest of this wonderful day.

Thank you.

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.