

To our dear law school graduates: it is done.

I know that today you feel like you have conquered a mountain. And you have. But how high is this mountain?

Believe it or not, I counted. If you studied the way we did back in the day, you must have gone through at least 6,400 Supreme Court cases and lived through 128,000 pages. If you spent three hours reading on weekdays and five hours on weekends, that would be the equivalent of thirty straight 24/7 days of studying in just one academic year.

It sounds daunting — and quite a climb. But that's just preparation, right?

Let's not forget the main event, as mentioned by future Atty. Paguia: the combined agony and excitement of facing your professors mano-a-mano in the classroom. The biggest battle in law school is not X versus Y — but YOU versus fear, nervousness, laziness, ill-preparedness, and your professor's pen writing on those tiny squares in your class card.

Congratulations. You won the battle. You've conquered a peak called the Ateneo Law School.

But wait — all that climbing wasn't even to the top.

The real championship comes in September: the Bar Examination.

It's the one that makes you a Panganiban, Puno, Sereno, Caguioa, Leonen, Bernas, Castillo, Candelaria, Villanueva, Sta. Maria, or Hofileña.

But after the bar comes the dog-eat-dog world where you must prove your mettle as a practitioner and officer of the court. People will hold you to an ideal — the all-knowing jurist who turns everything to gold. But before what you ought to be, there will always be the R-word: reality.

Goethe said: "Reality surpasses imagination." What people think you should be must always be in conversation with who you really are.

Enjoy the ride. Wallow in imperfections. Eat humble pie. Rise.

For what is reality?

For OFW Michelle de la Cruz, it was having a dream job in a car dealership in Khartoum, Sudan — until war broke out. She endured a 24-hour evacuation trip, passing militarized checkpoints and dead bodies. Then three to four days stranded at the border with barely any food, water, or shelter.

Then—Secretary Susan “Toots” Ople led the DMW mission — myself included — to set up tents and deliver assistance. A seven-bus convoy brought 300 Filipinos, including 59 children, to Cairo, where they were billeted before flying home.

What should have been the end of the story is the beginning of another.

When you take your oath as lawyers, you swear allegiance to a Republic whose power resides in the people. Our job is to serve people like Michelle — because they are in need, wanting, and helpless.

Lawyers — in private practice or government — are positioned to possess and express empathy and compassion.

In labor law, empathy and compassion find a home in the Constitution. The “afford protection to labor” clause in the 1987 Constitution traces its inspired origins to the 1935 Constitution, which was a biased imprint in favor of workers — meant to reverse the laissez-faire culture cultivated by a dreadful 1924 Supreme Court decision that outlawed the nation’s first maternity leave law. And in 1987, the Constitution declared OFWs within the mantle of the Afford Protection to Labor Clause.

One of the DMW’s most transcendent duties is handling the remains of deceased OFWs. But what the rule books don’t say is that we deal with grief, longing, anger — everything that makes sadness reveal our humanity.

In a city morgue, the teenage daughter of a deceased OFW lifted the sheet covering her mother, saw what she thought were signs of foul play, and collapsed in rage:

“Wala nang nanay ko. Bakit ninyo po pinayagan ito mangyari?”

I took a knee and held her hands for nearly an hour as she screamed, cried, and blamed. But throughout her anguish — she never let go of my hand.

Caring for clients begins with empathy and compassion. This opens doors to new mindsets: planner, innovator, tactician, designer of legal strategies and systems.

At the onset of the pandemic in February 2020, OWWA asked: how do we serve OFWs amid one of the world’s strictest lockdowns?

OWWA provided quarantine, transport, accommodation, and financial assistance to 1.5 million OFWs — an epic civilian effort by 2,100 personnel.

A flowchart was created from scratch detailing welfare, medical care, monitoring, transport, financial aid, and more — for OFWs quarantined for 7, 15, or 30 days. At its center was the quarantine stage — the beating heart.

Empathy and compassion help us locate ourselves in the global mission to make the world just and better.

I was fortunate to lead UN–ILO and ASEAN technical discussions on two major agreements on migrant workers: the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers and the ASEAN Consensus on Migrant Workers.

We also engaged host countries to secure safe and ethical recruitment for OFWs — especially domestic workers — across the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

One of the greatest battles you will face is you versus corruption.

The locksmith's doctrine says:

1% always honest,

1% always dishonest,

the rest honest unless tempted.

That middle group is gray-area thievery — where you and I could fall.

Do not be naïve. As you see it from a kilometer away, as you see it coming from up your town, your neighborhood, your street, your door — even your soul. Send it packing.

I've been offered wine, basketball tickets, plane tickets, gift certificates, even guns — all to mark me as “for sale.” The strategy is simple: say no. Shut the door at the slightest suggestion.

Integrity is the one treasure money cannot buy. It sustains your inner self — your essence. Never drain your soul.

Lao Tzu wrote:

“Wise souls don't hoard.

The more they do for others, the more they have.

The more they give, the richer they are.”

How high is the mountain? Not the one you conquered — but the one ahead.

I once climbed a small peak in Malapatan, Sarangani Province. An OFW named Jovelin, who died tragically in Saudi Arabia, had to be buried on a hill based on the Bilaan tribe's ritual.

Through this, I met her father, mother, husband, and young daughters. Driven by transcendent empathy, we scale heights to serve — surrendering ourselves to a higher calling.

So how high? As high as your humanity takes you.

To the Ateneo Law School Class of 2025, to their families — once again, congratulations.

And God bless you all.

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.