

Rev. Fr. Roberto Rivera, SJ, President of Ateneo de Naga University, Members of the Board of Trustees, my Fellow Awardees, Fr. Joel Tabora, Dear Friends in the Lord:

I have to be honest with you. When I got word that I have been chosen to receive an award, the first thing that came to my mind was: why on earth am I getting an award? I must admit I could not come up with an answer. That is why I'm finding it hard to decide what to say before you today. As I tried to make sense out of it all, a song from the movie *Sound of Music* came to mind: "... *Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good*"....

Let me tell you something about my youth. When I was about 16 years old, and a 2nd year philosophy seminarian, I made a life-changing decision. Confronted with the social inequalities and political unrest of that time, and fired by youthful idealism, I decided to leave the seminary. Without informing my formators nor my parents, I opted to leave my formation in order to dedicate my life – and it was very clear to me then – in order to help change society and rid it of its ills. This was in 1970, the days of what is now known as the First Quarter Storm, about two years before Martial Law was declared.

At this time I was already involved with a group of farmers who were fighting to keep their land. I saw first-hand the struggles and the suffering that they endured, and the seeming hopelessness that awaited their cause. In the meantime, the national youth organization that I belonged to had at this time just embraced armed revolution as the only solution to change Philippine society. And I committed myself to it. Like many young people who had found themselves in this youthful activism at that time, for the cause of freedom and equality, for the sake of the farmers and for my country, I opted to offer my life. And for me it meant I was ready to take up arms, if need be, to kill or be killed. Or so I thought. (So you see, somewhere in my youth I was not the peace-loving person that I have just been described today.)

As fate would have it though, I never got to hold a gun. Thanks be to God! Instead I found myself working for a farmers' cooperative helping them get organized and augment their financial capabilities by collecting and selling the milk of their farm animals (cows, carabaos, goats). I was doing this until Martial Law was declared.

Martial Law. 1972. Some of you present here would still remember how it was especially during the first days and months of that dark moment in our history. For me, suddenly afraid of being caught and put into prison (because I had heard of people being arrested and imprisoned), or worse, get salvaged (because people were also disappearing), for me there was nowhere else to go but back in the

seminary. How I was accepted back is another story to tell. But back I was in the journey of priestly formation. The “armed rebel” was gone, only a soul searching for home.

For the next six years or so, in the seminary, until I got ordained a priest in 1978, I tried to make sense of those more or less two years outside – my idealistic stance, my dreams of a better society, even my decision to take up arms – and found answers along the journey to the priesthood that the Lord Jesus was offering me. For one thing I realized changing societies is never easy – it was never up to me; and violence would never help solve its ills. I found out that my idealism was not necessarily a bad thing, because it made me discover the path of true service and love for people, especially the poor. But above all, I encountered the God who called me to life and gave me gifts to use, not so much to bring my own plans and dreams to fulfillment, but to put myself at His service as a servant of His Church and His people.

In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis quotes St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (the former Edith Stein) who said that, “*the greatest figures of prophecy and sanctity step forth out of the darkest night. But for the most part, the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Certainly the most decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions...*” (GE,8)

My friends, I’m sure you’d agree with me that sometimes in our lives, in our work, in our service, we feel we’re going through the darkest night. Despite our most honest efforts nothing worthwhile seems to come out. People don’t trust us, and we feel betrayed even by those we trust. There is so much violence around, unabated corruption and impunity, the young are either being waylaid or killing themselves. But when we hold on to the hand of God to touch His wounds, and listen to His voice in the cry of the poor; when we see Him in the faces of those we serve; when we build communities of faith and mutual service; when we speak out the truth with the voice of love and compassion; when we try to let God be found in us,... then we can feel that decisive turning points are being made and the Church continues to shine brightly like a lamp until the dawn from on high breaks upon us.

Thank you very much for this kind and generous gesture, which I humbly accept on behalf of all my collaborators and fellow servant-leaders in our Diocese, clergy, religious and lay people. For without them I can do nothing. Despite our frailties, foibles and failures, may we continue to be at the service of the Church we love and be blessed immensely by the God who calls us.

Dios marhay na hapon po!