

Towards Reconciliation with Nature, Human Society and God

University Awards Convocation, Gymnasium, Ateneo de Naga University, 17 August 2018

Fr. Joel Tabora, S.J.

Fr. Robert Rivera, President of the ADNU, Atty Avelino Sales, President of the ADNU Board of Trustees, the administrators, faculty and staff of the ADNU, distinguished guests from government and the academe, and most especially our honorees, Most Rev. Joel Baylon, Bishop of Legazpi, and the representatives of the Consulelo “Chito” Madrigal Foundation, Ms. Susanna “Chuchu” Madrigal and Fr. Wilmer Tria:

Let me express how happy I am to come home to Ateneo de Naga University. It is here where after Fr. Raul Bonoan SJ had led the Ateneo to university status then suddenly died without permission, that I spent twelve years of my life in your service as University President. It was during this tenure that I was privileged to meet both Doña Consuelo “Chito” Madrigal-Collantes and Bishop Joel Baylon, my episcopal *tukayo*. On today’s happy occasion, we commend the organization named after Doña Chito. For years it has practiced admirable compassion, generosity, and liberating support for our less-privileged brothers and sisters as they lifted up their lives through scholarships, gainful work opportunities, affordable housing, and capacity building projects. We also commend a perpetually youthful but now revered bishop whose courageous voice helped keep forces of avarice and greed from destroying our environment, our common home, and helped shield the victims of drug trafficking from the inordinate violence of the State wielded in a war on drugs. Both are yet works in progress; but both already deserve the honor that we are honored to accord them.

With great joy, I congratulate the Doña Consuelo “Chito” Madrigal Foundation – Bikol (CCMF – Bikol) for receiving the Ateneo de Naga University’s *Bulawang Bikolnon Service to Bikol Award*. Likewise, I

congratulate Bishop Joel Z. Baylon, D.D. as recipient of the University's *Bishop Jorge Barlin Service to the Church Award*.

The description of the Bulawang Bikolnon Award says that “the awardee must be one who has contributed greatly to Bikol culture and development; one who has distinguished himself or herself in his or her field in service to Bikol.” Being a lady of outstanding education, culture and wealth, Doña Chito was bothered by the predominant culture of poverty in the Bikol of her origins. She was bothered by pervasive poverty throughout the land. She wanted to help the poor. In 2004, she wanted to help the poor big time – with 200 million pesos! But she had a little problem. She didn't quite seem to know how to spend it. It was providential that I learned about her problem through her niece, Susanna “Chu-Chu” Madrigal-Eduque, at whose wedding to my cousin Mandy, I had officiated. Being good at spending money, I gamely told Doña Chito I could use 200 million for the poor of Bikol. Having had worked with the urban poor of San Pedro Resettlement and Commonwealth for many years, I had many ideas about how money could be spent for the poor. Happily, Doña Chito believed me, presumably with a little coaching from Chu-Chu. I submitted a concept paper to her. Out of that eventually emerged the Consuelo “Chito” Madrigal Foundation or “CCMF.”

Doña Chito was a deeply religious person. She named Most Rev. Leonardo Z. Legaspi, a Dominican, and myself, a Jesuit, as co-directors of the CCMF. Presumably, the Dominican-Jesuit combination would cover all the bases in necessary sanctity and worldly cunning. With her initial funding the Foundation took root in Bikol. The four-story CCMF Center for Social Entrepreneurship was built on the site of the old Jesuit Residence in the ADNU campus. From the viewpoint of ADNU, the Center was a vehicle of the ADNU's self-understanding and self-realization of itself as a Filipino, Catholic and Jesuit university in Bikol. Its entrepreneurial scholars were part of that university's instruction and outreach functions, but also a strategic part of the Foundation's war on poverty. It was home for the CCMF scholars. But with Fr. Wilmer Tria as its Executive Director, it was also the Foundation's war room against poverty. From here the CCMF projects were planned, implemented and monitored, the most important being scholarships, housing for the poor and micro-finance. Because of its

demonstrated vibrancy and strength, CCMF-Bikol was separately incorporated in 2009.

Doña Chito believed the CCMF's programs were "strategic interventions for the poor." She believed that providing the poor with material agency to lift themselves out of poverty was better than easy hand-outs. Through these interventions, they would learn to depend on their skills instead of the sympathy of donors. The varied projects pursued by the CCMF-Bikol over fourteen years have since helped thousands of Bikolanos break away from their culture of passivity, helplessness and dependency to develop a culture of self-improvement, financial discipline, entrepreneurship, and of human flourishing.

We are reminded of the statement of the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus that "the poor challenge us to return constantly to what is essential to the Gospel, to what really gives life, and to recognize that which merely burdens us." Central to the Gospel is Jesus Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6), who comes "to bring life, life to the full" (Jn 10:10).

Through its service to the poor in our society, the Foundation labors with Christ as part of the Church and part of the University to bring the fullness of life to "the least" of the Lord's sisters and brothers; it serves as an arm of Christ resurrected yet still carrying his Cross in our world, reminding us that our mission is to transform a pervading culture of suffering and alienation into a culture of greater humanity.

In this context, we laud the CCMF-Bikol for its labors to empower the poor of Bikol through education, microfinance and microfinanced entrepreneurship. Since its foundation, 140 students have graduated from college through the support of CCMF-Bikol. Today, some 12,000 microfinanced entrepreneurs are supported through ten different centers in Bikol all benefitting from a loan-portfolio of 45 million pesos. Affordable housing is offered to the homeless of Bikol through its signature housing program: the Christian-Housing-Integrating-Trade-and-Ownership Program or the "CHITO-Program" which powerfully combines meeting housing demands of the poor with the challenge to the beneficiaries to pay

for the housing through CCMF micro-financed entrepreneurship. Since its initial project, which Fr. Wilmer and I blessed, the community has expanded into three subdivisions. We have two of them—Vicente Heights and Consuelo Heights—in Pacol, Naga City. The third one is in Vinzons, Camarines Sur.

Doña Chito would cringe, I think, were the impression to be given today that we honor only her. We honor the CCMF-Bikol **as a community**, not only its Founder and inspiration, but all who in the name of the Church and the University have involved themselves in its work, most remarkably its Executive Director, Fr. Wilmer Tria, who beyond his involvement in philosophy, seminary formation, the advancement of Bikol culture, ADNU's Publications Office as its director, and now the parish of St. Jude Thaddeus as its parish priest, continues to guide CCMF-Bikol according to the mind of the Church and the inspiration of Doña Chito. We also honor the thousands of beneficiaries of CCMF-Bikol who in poverty have not capitulated to penury and indignity, but have taken steps through the assistance of CCMF-Bikol themselves to improve their lives and become assets to society.

Meanwhile, in his dialogue with the Jesuits gathered at their 36th General Congregation (GC 36), His Holiness Pope Francis said that the world asks of us today a “prophetic audacity,” the “prophetic audacity of having no fear,” which he also says is an “attitude born of the magis...founded on God who is always [magis, always **more**, always] greater.” We reflect on the ever-greater God and we “discern where the magis must be directed,” and we find it in our mission to the poor, and in the mind of the Trinity gazing on the world to transform it.

In this context, Bishop Joel Zamudio Baylon, D.D. showed himself to be a paragon of prophetic audacity in speaking out against the environmental destruction of the Rapu Rapu Mining Project in Albay, as well as against the disregard for human life in the current administration's war on drugs.

It was the Dominican, Fr. Bruno Cadore, O.P., who in his homily to the Jesuits at the GC 36 challenged us to exercise this “**audacity of the improbable**” in our apostolate, to enable ourselves to face a world

“disfigured by those who accumulate what is not theirs, who pursue first their own interests, who build a world on the blood of a multitude of forgotten and manipulated people, who continuously build new idols.” The world as it is today provokes us to try actually to change it, to “reverse, with our human hearts and within the limits of minds” the malignant course of things, to actually strive with all of our capacities to “reset the world.”

In his apostolic exhortation *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis also reminded us that the social crises engulfing our world today are inextricably intertwined with the environmental threats looming over us, forming one complex crisis that requires the “**audacity of the improbable**” to combat. This one crisis “arises from the way in which human beings use—and abuse—the peoples and goods of the earth.” Unbridled human consumption requires the gargantuan global production machinery which abuses the forests, the fresh water resources, the minerals, the oceans, and the air to feed the insatiable hunger of the haves but increasingly to starve the have-nots. Today we are part of a world that is warming inexorably because of the carbon emissions of our globe.

In leading his flock to testify fearlessly about the destructive effects of mining on their physical and mental health, in holding education campaigns and public hearings to explain the threat of foreign mining operations to Rapu Rapu island and its people, in serving as a voice of the victims of toxic waste and mining pollution, Bishop Baylon exemplified the “audacity of the improbable.”

He showed us what can be done to “reset the world.” His stature and style of leadership have enabled his flock to share in his “audacity of the improbable” and use their collective voice to “speak with courage and boldness...and proclaim what is just in the eyes of the Lord.” His presence also inspired the scientists of the area to persevere in their efforts to collect evidence on the ecological destruction wrought by the mining operations, shielding them as well from the harassment and threats of the armed men guarding the sites. Among these scientists were Dr. Lina Regis and her researchers at the Ateneo Institute for Research and Environmental Research (INECAR). I recall how they risked their lives to get the data that

scientifically proved the connection between the massive fishkills then to the operation of the Rapu Rapu Mines. In time, the operations of the Rapu-Rapu mines were shut down.

Bishop Baylon, in the words of Fr. Cadore, “dares to seek how to mend what is torn.” He voices the “real audacity of the improbable”: “to make heard the voice of the One who against all odds, led his people and gave them the strength to live by his faithfulness.”

Also, “violence disfigures the face of the human in individuals, in societies, and in peoples,” says Fr. Cadore. In this case we speak not of personal violence but of **state violence**. In the novel 1984, George Orwell famously says, “If you want a picture of the future, picture a boot on the human face—forever.” For some of our countrymen, this future is already painfully present: lifeless faces of the poor gunned down on the street for their suspected involvement in the drug trade and their alleged resistance to law enforcement. The image of the 17-year-old Grade 11 student, Kian Loyd de los Santos, murdered in a dark alley by operatives of the State weighs heavy on our conscience to this day.

We recognize the evil of the drug industry controlled by powerful international cartels burning out the brains, wasting the lives, squandering the futures, destroying the families of their victims in the Philippines. We recognize that the President made it a central commitment of his electoral campaign to wage a bloody war against drugs in the Philippines, no matter the cost. We recognize the intention of the President to save this country from deteriorating into a narco-state led by narco-politicians manipulated by international drug lords. We recognize his dismay at the extent to which drugs run the lives of government officials, including governors, mayors, barangay officials, policemen and soldiers, and his frustration with the justice system which fails to deliver justice. We recognize that our jails are overfilled to four times their capacity. We also recognize that as dirty and as costly in lives this war on drugs has been, if the surveys are to be believed, it carries the support and approval of the majority of the Filipino people.

In his last SONA, the President has stated that he stood for **human lives** not for **human rights**, and that this war on drugs will continue with undiminished intensity.

It is in this context that the prophetic audacity of Bishop Baylon has appeared now no longer in mere defense of the **natural** environment, but in defense of the **human** environment – where the defense of human lives victimized by the pernicious interests of local and international drug traders cannot be separated from the defense of human lives victimized by the intemperate, misguided and illegal use of State force. In the campaign of the State to rid the people of a life-killing menace of the drug trade, the State itself has become a life-killing menace. Agents of the State, encouraged by vague directives and loose rhetoric of superiors, disregarded due process, and preferred the quick solution of killing on the streets to the painful, cumbersome and costly solution of rehabilitating the victims of the drug cartels. Here, we must recall that our Constitution's Bill of Rights is issued precisely to guarantee its citizens that that the awesome powers of the State would not be used against them. The first of these rights, of course, is: "No person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor shall any person be denied the equal protection of law." In a country which in the Preamble of its Constitution calls on God to aid it in building a just and humane society, those in the State may be reminded of God's command: "Thou shalt not kill." The declaration of Jesus may also be recalled, "I have come to bring life, life to the full" (Jn 10:10). Very recently, in recognition of the sanctity of human life itself, Pope Francis declared it now a teaching of the Catholic Church that capital punishment condoned in law is incompatible with our faith. All the more so must the State's killing in the streets weigh heavy on our conscience.

At a time when it was not yet fashionable to criticize the manner in which the State was pursuing its war on drugs because of the wide popularity of the President and because of the gratitude of many in communities of the poor that their barangays had been freed of drug addicts on their streets, Bishop Baylon wrote and signed an open letter to the President that condemned the killings; he issued circulars supporting actions of church goers and citizens to protest these killings; he declared a continuous ringing of bells in his diocese for forty days at 9:00 pm to make the protests

resonate in the hearts of his people. While many were cowed by the pro-administration minions or paralyzed by their inner confusion, we appreciate the moral clarity and strength Bishop Baylon displayed protesting the blatant injustice: “We don’t have the right to take the precious lives of the people,” he declared. He echoed the earlier cry of the CBCP: “It is a sin that cries to heaven for vengeance.”

Yet what was said with words was complemented by action. He did not just protest the taking of life, he labored to resurrect life. He initiated in his Diocese of Legaspi the Harong Paglaom (House of Hope). Through these centers established in parishes of his diocese people who had lost hope due to the evil of drugs could find hope in the care of people who recognized them not only as human beings but as brothers and sisters in the Lord. “Whatever you have done or not done for one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters,” Jesus said, “that you have done or not done for me” (Mt. 25: 40.45.)

The last General Congregation 36 rearticulated the Mission of the Society of Jesus in terms of working for reconciliation with nature, with human society, and with God. In protesting the irreparable destruction brought on our archipelagic environment wrought by the mines, **a step was taken towards reconciliation with nature.** Even as it is acknowledged that the State must act against the destruction brought on human lives through the drug cartels, in opposing the inordinate violence of the State against the lives of its citizens, especially its poor, **a step was taken towards reconciliation with human society.** In opposing the passivity and helplessness of the poor by empowering them to help themselves and others through education, capacity building, housing acquired through work and entrepreneurship, **another step was taken towards reconciliation with human society.** In resolving to care for our common home, which God entrusts to us, and to protect and treasure human life, with which God blesses us, and to advance our human dignity and human communities through our creativity, labor and generosity, with which God empowers us, **a step was taken towards reconciliation with God.** It is in this context that I am honored to congratulate the Consuelo “Chito” Madrigal Foundation-Bikol and Bishop Joel Baylon in their being honored by ADNU today unto the greater glory of God.