

A DAY IN THE VINEYARD*

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I thank the Ateneo de Davao University and its Board of Trustees for the singular honor they have bestowed on me today. As one of 500,000 volunteers in NAMFREL and one of seven commissioners in a collegial body, I am fortunate to have been chosen to represent them, and am deeply honored.

Today this university will test once more the reason for being an exalted institution of learning — the casting of seeds that shall help make of society a vineyard of the strong, the just, the wise, and the faithful.

This day belongs to the class of 1993, who deserve all our attention and congratulations.

But today is also a thanksgiving. For we would not be here today without the sacrifices of those whose pride in you, our graduates, surpasses all measure, those who have loved you more than their own selves — your parents. None of us had any choice of who our parents would be. They are a pure gift to us. So when all the celebration is done, you might want to spend a quiet moment with them to say "Thank You".

My dear parents, these are the children you chose to bring into this world and they are now ready to face it on their own. I can understand your pride. How did they grow up so fast and so good-looking? They are the best and the brightest our school system can produce, and they come from Mindanao where culture and languages come together but which still elude us as the land of promise.

Members of class 1993, from this day on, you are free to live as your best judgement and your values will dictate. I do not mean

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that everything you learned up to this day must remain fixed and unchanging, like dogma cast in stone. But the core values you received from home, this school, and your community, the ones that help provide what someone called the "Safety Net" of character, will always be there, so that in the relentless onslaughts of adversity, you can look into your souls and draw from a wellspring of fortitude and strength.

Life is a constant exercise of the freedom of choice. As we make our choices, increasingly without our parents or teachers by our side, and own up to the mistakes that will surely come our way, we all find, sooner or later, that it can be terribly lonely to exercise this freedom and independence.

Choice and accountability lie at the root of what Fr. Samson asked me to talk about today. He asked that I speak on the problems, challenges, and opportunities facing all of us arising from our electoral process.

I can infer from his suggestion that we all agree that the electoral process is the responsibility of everyone and that elections are not only about opportunities but about challenges and problems. In short, we cannot have freedom of choice without the responsibility of making the system work.

There is no real democracy without free elections. But making democracy work, just like elections, is a never ending process. As one cannot be a good Catholic only on Sundays, so must we contribute to the workings of democracy before, during and beyond election day.

The good citizen must look at democracy as more than the periodic selection of leaders, although such peaceful transfer of power, according to former President Aquino, is its most glorious and solemn moment. True that, on election day, our vote like a sacred blessing from heaven, must only be trusted to the most deserving. But a good citizen does not stop there. He must continually ensure that those he voted into office remain accountable at all times to the people. And if the one who won was not his choice, it is part of his responsibility to accept the verdict of the greater number as if it were his own, and to bring

himself to work with them for the good of all. It is only in our oneness that we shall prevail.

That is why we at the COMELEC always stressed in the run-up to the May 1992 elections that *all* citizens must be involved in the far-reaching, often difficult, reforms in institution-building that will make our elections and, in a wider sense, the practices of democracy more efficient and more credible.

Despite the several achievements of the May 1992 elections, we know that it had many shortcomings and that the task of institution-building is far from finished. On the part of the COMELEC, we are already working on changing our tedious manualized system that leaves too much scope for human error or fraud and expect to accomplish this in three stages — pilot testing by the March 1994 barangay elections, partial installation by 1995, and full implementation by 1998.

We have drafted a new election code that incorporates the reforms envisaged by the Constitution but which have not yet been implemented, such as absentee voting for qualified Filipinos abroad, an anti-dynasty provision, a party-list system of representation, and illiterate voting without the use of assistants. We propose to adopt a system of continuous registration and computerized voters lists, and the introduction of new forms, systems, equipment, and safeguards that will finally bring our election to the modern age, where the winners can be determined unofficially by the media in three days, and, more important, accepted graciously by the losers even before the official proclamation, as is done in other countries.

Beyond the modernization of the electoral process, the challenge to all of us is to improve not only the way we choose leaders but also how we breed future leaders, how we can ensure that the rules of the game remain fair and enforceable at all times, and how we can make our elected leaders more responsive to those they lead.

These require the lifetime dedication of many citizens. What we need are not just people willing to be martyrs, but people with

the courage to face the day-to-day challenges of making the system work.

Democracy has been criticized as not being effective enough for Filipinos because, it is said, it makes of us a nation of "talkers" and not "doers". But those of us who are old enough to remember how an entire nation was alternately beguiled and coerced to give up a democracy for over a decade understand that the problem may not be with democracy itself. Rather it is with people who strive, but often fail, to make it work. As statesman Adlai Stevenson once said, "It is only by intense thought, by great effort, by burning idealism and unlimited sacrifice, that freedom has prevailed as a system of government." There is a price to be paid for being free.

Indeed, we must learn to look at electoral heroism beyond the dramatic images of men and women clutching on to ballot boxes and teachers going sleepless for forty-eight hours to count ballots by candlelight. These individual acts of courage are forever part of our nation's history with undiminished value, yet the future of elections is in conscientious planning, organized handling of ordinary chores, the motivation of underpaid officials, and, most important, the development of a new election culture.

The irony of life, but also its redeeming virtue, is that there are many men and women who are prepared to apply themselves with dedication to these tasks, and for that matter, to the other tasks of good government, who never aspire for and are seldom rewarded with high appointment, election to public office or academic honors. But like the hundreds of thousands of small businesses that make the economy work, even in the hardest times, they are the "doers", and not the "talkers", of our democracy. As Adlai Stevenson aptly said, "**Patriotism is not the sudden and frenzied outburst of emotion but the quiet and steady dedication of a lifetime.**"

I ask of you, will you choose to be the men and women of such character who will finally bring our troubled nation to its greatness? Will you place yourselves, to paraphrase Albert Camus, at the service not of those who make history, but of those who suffer it?

My friends, two of our children are graduating this year, like yourselves, from the University of the Philippines — one in medicine and the other in economics. When Fr. Samson asked me to speak to you today, I thought to myself, what would I tell my children about choice and accountability before they face the world on their own?

There is very little I can tell you that your parents, teachers, and friends have not counselled you through the years. But allow me to summarize the personal thoughts of a parent that you might find useful. I have five, briefly

One, many of you will probably be making two important decisions soon — your first job, and your lifetime partner. No one can dictate that choice on you. But I urge you, if you decide to get married, to give this choice the importance it deserves, not only for your own sake, but for the well-being of those you will be serving in life.

There are far too many young, idealistic people, who could have done so much for their country, but instead turned to a life of indifference or irrelevance, with the lame excuse that they had to do it "**for their family**". That is the worst possible excuse anyone can give. That is why you should take deliberate care in choosing a life partner who shares the same vision and outlook in life, though you may pursue different careers.

Two, in setting your goals, remember the simplicity of Andres Bonifacio's single creed, "**Seek thy country's happiness above thine own**".

Three, when your best is not enough, and it is hard to be true to yourself, remember Mother Theresa. When asked why she was working in the dark hole of Calcutta where her life's effort would hardly amount to anything in relieving the misery of millions, she said "**We are not asked to be successful, we are only asked to be faithful**".

Four, also remember, regardless of how passionately you may feel about your mission, to avoid being self-righteous and to please learn to forgive.

Finally, when you are confused with the many dilemmas that you will face in life, pause a while and look for the answer in your hand. The five fingers of your one hand say simply these words: **"You do it to me."** for the Lord said, **"whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it to me."**

Everything you do is rendered unto your Maker. Every deed, every word, big or small, either pains or honors him and that is the opportunity and ultimate accountability of those of you in the vineyard of the Lord.

With these five thoughts and five words, I bid you godspeed, and to reach for the stars in His name.