

**MINDANAO AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM:
FULFILLMENT IN PROGRESS***

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Introduction

When Fr. Martinez first called to inform me that I was selected to be the recipient of the Honorary Doctoral Degree in the Humanities, from the Ateneo, I was both thrilled and saddened. Thrilled because it is certainly a great honor to be conferred this recognition by such a prestigious University as the Ateneo de Davao. I was a bit sad, however, for a number of reasons. First of all I realized that while it took you only 4 years to 5 years to attain your degrees, it took me over 30 years to get mine. Yes, I am proud to have been associated with the Ateneo de Davao for more time than I have been married to my lovely wife, Ball. Incidentally we are celebrating our 30th wedding anniversary on the 15th of April. So after 30 years, she can finally tell her mother that she is married to a Doctor.

Yes, I have been happily associated with the Ateneo de Davao for 32 years: 6 years in the Grade School, 4 years in High School and 22 years on the Board of Trustees. I can spend the better part of the day reminiscing about how the Ateneo has developed since 1951 when I entered first grade, but let me spare you that.

* Speech delivered at the commencement Exercises of the Ateneo de Davao University on 23 March 1997.

I was saddened also by the thought that many of those who helped me in my formative years are no longer with us. My grandparents, my father, Charlie, my uncle, Armando, and many more are now gone. I would like very much to share this honor with them and with the men and women who have devoted their lives to the Ateneo, and who have touched my life. Their names will probably be unfamiliar to you but I cherish their memories: Fr. Mark Falvey, Mr. Filemon Ringor, Ms. Corcuera, Mr. Alconera, Mr. Nacionales, Ms. Ebro, Mr. Izonza, to name a few from my grade school days. From my time in high school: Fr. Edgardo Reyes, Fr. Freddie Balinong, Fr. Neil Mahoney, Fr. Dick Leonard, Fr. Hudson Mitchell, Mr. Alpaz, Mr. Enriquez, Mr. Nidea, Mr. Estrada, Fr. Mario Alinea, Fr. Ryan, Fr. Tom Murphy, Fr. Miguel Varela, Mr. Barcelan and of course the indestructible Fr. Paul Finster. These are the men and women who worked to create this school and who have helped make me what I have become. To all of these outstanding men and women I dedicate this award.

Just as these men and women have helped mold students in this school, many historical forces have molded Mindanao in into what is now. As graduates planning on where to make your mark --- here in Mindanao or elsewhere; it is important that you examine the historical roots of Mindanao in order to be able to discern its future, and what the future holds in store for you.

Examining The Past

Mindanao's past, as recent as five years ago, starkly reminds us that the only way for us to surmount the problems of development is to bind ourselves together in the spirit of helping one another. Our past was dominated with the

perception of a backward economy despite possession of vast natural resources. The description was correct but unfortunately it did not enlighten us as to why this ironic situation persisted. Our effort to understand Mindanao's past yielded some valuable insights that may guide you in charting your future.

The undeveloped character of Mindanao's economy in the past can be attributed to four factors. First, our island was consigned the role of being the supplier of the food and raw material needs of Metro Manila and Cebu. Consequently, all roads from the hinterland led to the coasts where ships transported goods to the country's prime cities. In other words, it was a classic colonial economy. Thus, there was no need to link the various regions in the island because there was minimal inter-Regional trade to speak of.

Second was the existence of plantation enclaves and extractive industries in the island which did not have any linkages with the domestic economy. This again was the by-product of the colonial mode of development.

Third was the administrative division of the island into regions based on the dubious political considerations of control by the authoritarian regime, rather than an administrative organization aimed at Mindanao's wholistic development.

Finally, the continuing armed conflict discouraged investors from locating their operations in Mindanao due to the perception of an absence of peace and order.

Given this situation, the way is clear to address the colonial and fragmented nature of Mindanao's development.

The objective is to promote regional trade within Mindanao and to diversify the island's markets for its products. This objective could be achieved by integrating the island's economy in two senses: one by providing the physical infrastructure (roads, bridges, transport, sea and air ports, and telecommunications) to link the entire island as one economy; and two, to encourage its participation in the global economy through trade.

As for the peace and order problem, the solution was to pursue negotiations with the various armed groups, to achieve a just and lasting peace in the island.

Winds Of Change

The administration of President Corazon Aquino began the process of addressing Mindanao's problems. The Ramos administration should be commended for continuing the process and opening the windows of opportunities for Mindanao by consciously including the island in the national agenda for development. Among the programs that induced the accelerated growth of Mindanao are the following:

1. The flagship projects which prioritized the infrastructure requirements of Mindanao resulting in the integration of its various regions;
2. The creation of the BIMP-EAGA, which encouraged Mindanao to trade with neighboring East Asian countries, thereby diversifying markets for its products. It also enabled Mindanao to cast aside its unenviable reputation of being the country's "backdoor" to being the nation's "frontdoor" to ASEAN.

3. The renewed emphasis of the government on food security. As Mindanao's agriculture represents almost forty percent of Philippine agriculture, the development of Mindanao's countryside logically became a critical component of attaining the goal of food security; and finally,

4. The peace negotiations with various armed groups which achieved a breakthrough with the signing of a peace accord between the government and the MNLF. The peace agreement brought to the national attention the need to uplift the living conditions of the depressed areas in Mindanao.

I will not be doing justice to the efforts of the past two administrations to foster the development of our island if I do not mention here the personal attention accorded by President Aquino and President Ramos to Mindanao's needs. You can see the importance that the past two administrations attached to the development of Mindanao by the numerous visits both former President Aquino and President Ramos have made to Mindanao.

Living Up To The Challenge

The economic performance of Mindanao during the last four years has proven that we have lived up to the challenge of development. During this period, our gross regional domestic product averaged a growth of more than 4 percent in marked contrast to the mere half a percent attained in 1992. Exports rose from 18 percent in 1992 to 26 percent in 1995.

Economic growth is a function of investments and investments in Mindanao have registered dramatic growth. Bank deposits rose from 1992 to 1995 while the loan portfolio

increased at an average annual growth of 40 percent during the same period.

A noticeable offshoot of these are the rapid changes in the physical makeup of the island. A construction boom is occurring as reflected in the yearly increase in building permits issued. The number of available telephone lines rose sharply from 63,000 lines in 1992 to 148,000 in 1995. And with the recent entry of telephone companies specializing on mobile or cellular phones, which have become ubiquitous in our cities, the growth in terms of new lines installed must have been more explosive last year.

Mindanao's robust economic growth was clearly reflected in energy consumption which rose at an average rate of 19 percent during the 1992-1995 period. But what is more astounding is that our energy supply has become more reliable than four years ago when we were struck by the most crippling outrages that this country has ever experienced.

I am sure that you will agree with me that economic growth is devoid of meaning if its blessings are not shared by those who need them most. It is heartening to note that this has been the case for Mindanao. The available data on family income and expenditure survey, a survey conducted every three years, revealed that family income in Mindanao grew at a yearly rate of 10 percent from 1988 to 1994. We anticipate that the results of the next survey will show even more dramatic results.

Not Enough

Although we have accomplished much in the last five years, the results are far from satisfactory. Our growth rate is

not at pace with the national average. The 1997 budgetary allocation for infrastructure gave Mindanao only a 24 percent share while our land area represents a third of the country and our population more than a fourth of it.

More worrying is the fact that the poverty incidence in Mindanao is the highest in the country; not surprisingly, 14 of the 20 poorest provinces in the Philippines are found in Mindanao.

In the field of education, it is sad to note that the average years of schooling in Mindanao is only six years while Luzon is nearly 8 years. Teacher competency leaves much to be desired as the passing percentage of those who took the teachers exam is only 11.5 percent here compared to Luzon's 18.5 percent. As such, our literacy rate is significantly lower than in Luzon.

The woeful state of the delivery of social services in Mindanao undeniably contributed to the existence of a sizeable armed group here. Also without doubt, is the direct correlation between widespread poverty and the presence of armed combatants; our most depressed provinces serve as a haven to rebel forces.

Relevant Agenda

Peace and development definitely will remain the key elements for Mindanao's agenda in the years ahead. During the last five years, we have achieved partial fulfillment of the promise of progress through the active support of the Ramos administration. We have to make sure that this support continues beyond the expiration of the incumbent president's

term in 1998. We can no longer afford the previous situation where past and successive political administrations paid only lip service to the development of Mindanao. We have already witnessed the devastating effect of such neglect on our population.

All indications point out that Mindanao is on the verge of a takeoff. We have to consolidate our gains and to maintain the momentum we have achieved in recent years. But much will depend on the choices that we will make, both in our careers and in our political involvement.

We can make the development of our island not a political accident but a primordial concern of the government. We can do this by choosing political leaders who openly sympathize with us and who commit themselves to fully support Mindanao's development. We have the responsibility of ensuring that we no longer suffer the humiliation of being neglected but receive the priority we deserve.

The shared experience of underdevelopment has finally taught us that without binding ourselves together, without uniting to attain our common goal of prosperity for Mindanao, and without struggling for what we rightfully deserve, we will never be able to liberate ourselves from the yoke of backwardness. We cannot depend on others to wage our battles. If we cannot collectively commit ourselves to this cause, then nobody will.

Drawing Strength From Our Reserve

The history of Mindanao is replete with examples of individuals who shaped their destiny by their own hands. The determined struggle of our Islamic brothers against successive

colonial powers in order to preserve their freedom, and the pioneering spirit of early settlers who braved the uncertainties of the future to give a better life for their children are some of these shining examples.

All of us here today have this pioneering tradition in our blood. I remember that two years after I graduated from the Ateneo de Manila, I chose to return to Mindanao. Back then, it was difficult to detect whether our historians did not make a mistake when they referred to the place as the "The Land of Promise". The peace and order problem was serious, due to massive unrest among the populace; investors were coming in trickles and not in droves; and there was a pervasive feeling of pessimism among the people with regards to the future of the island.

Indeed, the prevailing situation is much different now. Most of our cities and countryside are no longer hounded by peace and order problems, our growth centers project an image of optimism attributable to a dynamic economic performance; and there is a widespread feeling of confidence about the future of the island. These factors together with the fact that we are at the early stage of our development, make the rewards for entrepreneurial activities in Mindanao higher than those obtaining in the other parts of the country. Jobs are much easier to find now, thanks to the continuous flow of investments here.

You are fortunate to be present at the dawning of a new day in Mindanao.

You are the cream of the crop of this island.

You have the training to work the fields of plenty and opportunities that have opened up.

But this privilege you now enjoy should be tempered by responsibility. Responsibility to work not only for your own private benefit, but, more important, for the development of the Mindanao community that nurtured you - the responsibility to be men and women for others. You have the obligation of ensuring that, in the new millennium, the promise of Mindanao is finally fulfilled.

Thank you and good day to you all!