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Texts and Documents

THE ATENEO IS LIKE MALARIA OR INSANITY
OR ALMOST LIKE BAPTISM*

Miguel A. Bernad, S.J.

I

The Class of 1942 is unique. It is a class of retarded students who for seventeen years could not get a high school diploma. A global war had prevented their graduation, and seventeen years later, when they were already lawyers and doctors and businessmen, they gave themselves a graduation: but I have a sneaking suspicion that it was invalid. The whole thing was null and void. And that fact was symbolic: for in one sense, not only this class, but *no* class ever really graduates from the Ateneo.

The Ateneo is like malaria: once you get the germ, it remains in your blood. Like insanity, it is a recurring ailment. There are lapses of intelligence; there are lucid intervals of sanity. And then, someone sings a bar of the "Hail, Ateneo, hail" or the Blue Eagle; or someone taps his fingers rhythmically, like the Rhumba Yell; or somebody — perhaps your youngest son — shouts, "Fight!"; or you hear sounds like whack-whack or post; or you see a piece of paper on the floor and you seem to hear the voice of Father Keane, "Pick up, don't throw down, the Ateneo is your home"; or perhaps, in your sober moments (if you have any) you hear snatches of the Rosary: and then something happens to you. Reason is fled and gives way to unreason. The emotions take over. The subconscious comes up to the surface. The traumatic experiences are revived. There is a stirring of the memory, a twitching of the eye and a constriction of the heart. And perhaps without realizing it, you are back at the Ateneo. Because the signs around the trash-cans in Padre Faura were truer than you thought: Pick up; don't throw down; the Ateneo *is* your home.

No, my friends, you have not graduated. You will never graduate. You may become a renegade; a fallen-away Catholic; a public sinner; a com-

*Speech delivered at the testimonial dinner for Most Rev. Jose A. Cruz, S.J., President of the Ateneo de Manila, tendered by the High School Class of 1942, Club Filipino (Greenhills, Rizal), 17 September 1972.

munist; a fascist; a bloated capitalist; a corrupt politician; or what you will: deep within you, there is something that you cannot get rid of, something endemic, something basic, something rooted in your very being; something almost like baptism, a spiritual character so indelible that nothing could ever erase it or wash it away. I have, in my limited experience, attended at the sick-bed of old men who had been away from the sacraments for years, who would have nothing to do with a priest. We would chat about the old days at the Ateneo. And then, casually, I would say: "*He traido los óleos, quiere Vd. que le dé los óleos?*" "I have brought the oils; do you want me to give you the oils?" And then they would say quietly, "*Si, por favor.*" "Yes, please."

Rizal, in his fight against the abuses of the friars, had become a free-thinker — as they called them — and he had given up the practice of the sacraments. When he returned from Europe after writing the *Noli me tangere*, he visited the Ateneo in Intramuros. And the Jesuit lay-brother who had known him as a boy saw him and said. "Don Pepe, wait." And he went in and came back with the little statuette of the Sacred Heart that Rizal in his student days had carved with a penknife — the same tiny statue that is now in the Board Room of the Ateneo de Manila. The lay-brother showed it to Rizal. Rizal took it in his hands, looked at it, and then returned it. Then he said: "*Otros tiempos, hermano; otros tiempos que pasaron; ya no creo yo en esas cosas.*" "Those were old times, Brother; old times that are gone; I no longer believe in such things." But on his last day on earth in Fort Santiago, that tiny statue was with him. And on his way to execution, while walking between guards along the Malecón which is now Bonifacio Drive, he saw above the walls of Intramuros the old buildings that he had known so well. And he said to the Jesuit who was walking with him: "Is not that the Ateneo?"

No, my friends. You cannot get rid of the Ateneo, any more than could Rizal. You are stuck with it. And we in the Ateneo — it is our privilege to be stuck with you.

II

I remember the night before I was ordained, at Woodstock, the night of March 23rd, 1946. We were a large class of ordinandi and the Woodstock chapel was small, and we were limited in the number of guests we could invite: six or eight; no more. Moreover, although the war was over, things were not yet settled and it was difficult to get reservations for guests; the hotels were all booked up. I was in my room at ten o'clock at night, preparing to go to bed, when someone knocked at the door of my room. "A telephone call for you," he said, "from Baltimore." Baltimore was many miles away: who could be calling up at this hour of the night? I put on a bathrobe and slippers and walked along the corridor to the telephone near the stairs. "Hello, Father," said a voice. "Who is this?" "This is me." And he gave his name. "My God!" I said, "where are you calling from?" He said, "I am at the railroad station; I have just arrived; how far is it to Woodstock?" "My God!" I said (for the second time), "you can't come to

Woodstock now." Then I said, "Wait, we have to find a place for you in Baltimore tonight. Can you call me back in ten minutes." He said he would. And I went, in my bathrobe and slippers, down the stairs to the front door where the scholastics were just closing up for the night. They were the committee on arrangements for housing and transport. I explained the problem. A Filipino student, I said, studying in Massachusetts, had gone to class that morning. On his way to class he kept thinking that it was our ordination day; he did not want to miss it. So, from his classes, still with his books, he went directly to the railroad station in Boston and took the next train to Baltimore. It was a ten-hour ride: he left Boston at noon, he arrived in Baltimore at ten o'clock at night. He had not been expected, and so there had been no provision made for his hotel accommodation, or for his transport to Woodstock, or for a seat in the chapel. "But," I said, "I want this boy to be in at my ordination. Can we find him a seat in the chapel? Can we find him a room for tonight?" "Tonight?" they asked. "Yes," I said, "tonight. He is at the railroad station. He will be calling back in a few minutes."

The efficiency of those scholastics was incredible. Everything was arranged. And later, much later, long after the ordinations, the word had spread among the 300 American Jesuits at Woodstock. Some of them said: "You seem to have students who are very loyal to you. No American boy would go through all that trouble to see us ordained." Then they asked: "Are all your students like that?" Ladies and gentlemen, it made me feel extremely proud: proud of my students, proud of my friends, proud of my country, proud of the Ateneo. And I said: "Yes. Most of my students are extremely loyal."

That young man, incidentally, was Renato Grande.

III

It is a pity that professors do not have the gift of clairvoyance. They cannot foretell the future. There was a tall lanky fellow who always looked very sleepy. He had one distinctive talent: whenever Jackie Hontiveros cried "Timber!" this tall fellow would fall to the ground like a log. Who would have thought that Romie Mabanta would today be a corporation lawyer, interested in youth movements, and who — but for a few hundred votes — should have become a member of the Constitutional Convention?

There was a fellow who did so poorly in class that at my insistence he became a boarder. But instead of studying, he would come in the evenings to my room to waste his time and mine. I had a very small room; no place for an extra chair; so I sat in the chair and he sat on the desk with his feet dangling. Later in the year, at commencement time, he received a medal for oratory. His parents were not there: in their absence he asked me to pin the medal on him. It was a proud moment for me. But who would have thought that that fellow would today be a senator, head of the liberal party, and perhaps (who knows?) a future President?

Then there was a fellow who was very soldierly in his bearing, and whenever I had to leave the classroom on an errand, I would entrust the

class to him. He was a cadet officer, and in his third year of high school they promoted him to the highest rank at the head of the entire cadet corps. The next year, when he was in fourth year, he retained the same rank. (Which goes to show how low our standards were then!) But this fellow — very soldierly, very autocratic, very dictatorial — who would have thought that Tony de Joya would rise to the top of his profession as a suave and very undictatorial expert in public relations? Tony, incidentally, was the youngest alumnus to be elected president of the Ateneo Alumni Association — and one of the most successful.

There was another fellow who was very quiet: diligent, industrious, respectful, but otherwise undistinguished: who could have foretold that he would today be a bishop: the Most Reverend Bienvenido Lopez?

There were two fellows who were inseparable companions who never seemed to have left the kindergarten. Each one singly was a perfectly good fellow; but put them together and you had trouble. One was called Hontiveros, the other Millar. You had to keep them far apart in class — and even then, how often did they not have to write a composition on the subject, "The Beauty of Not Talking in Class"? But during the war, whenever anything had to be done which required efficiency; which required secrecy; or which involved risk or personal danger, there were several young men whom I would call upon. And one of them was Cesar Millar. Today I have to trust him even with my life, for he is my doctor.

One can mention many other names — but there is no time, and anyway it has been done brilliantly in that astonishing feat of memory by Renato Grande.

But I do remember being called in one day by Father Hurley. It was during the war; our gates were guarded by Japanese soldiers. Father Hurley said, "Two of your friends have applied for the Society. What do you think?" And I thought — Cipriano Unson — Jose Cruz — and I thought some more. And then I said to Father Hurley, "Well, Father, we have admitted into the Society many others much worse; why not take them in?"

That is the risk that one takes as a Jesuit: that the men whom he maltreats today as his students, may tomorrow become his superiors.

IV

Today we are honoring Father Cruz as the new president of the Ateneo de Manila. Let me conclude my remarks not by talking about Father Cruz, but by saying something briefly about the job that has been given to him, the responsibility laid by Divine Providence upon his shoulders. I say, by Divine Providence: for as Hamlet says, "There is a providence in the fall of a sparrow." Hamlet was of course only echoing what Our Lord had said: "Even the hairs of your head are numbered." (Our Lord was of course referring to genuine hair!)

Let me say what I have to say, briefly and by indirection. Many years ago — fifteen, sixteen, or perhaps more — the Ateneo was in process of

self-evaluation, prior to being accredited, and prior to receiving a university charter. Several committees were formed among the faculty. I was given the chairmanship of the committee on objectives. Our task was to define the objectives of the Ateneo de Manila. We were a heterogeneous group: a lawyer, an engineer, a businessman, several others of various professions; I was the only priest. After several discussions in which we got nowhere, they said: "Look, Father, you know the Ateneo better than we do. Why don't you write out a draft of what you think the objectives should be, and we'll discuss it." So I did. I wrote out a draft. I read it to the committee. They liked it. They approved it. They did not change a single word. Then at a plenary session of the entire college faculty, I again read it: they liked it; they approved it; they also did not change a single word. As if to say, "That's it. That's what the Ateneo is, That's what we are trying to do."

So it was officially accepted. It was incorporated word for word in the Catalogue. Every other year a new edition of the Catalogue would come out, and it would give me great pleasure to see, word for word, the formula that I had written. It did not of course bear my name: it had been accepted as the official position of the Ateneo de Manila.

Then the years passed, And slowly, gradually, I watched my formula disintegrate. First a word, then a clause, then entire paragraphs were omitted; and finally the entire formula disappeared. But even before that, while the Ateneo continued to pay lip-service to it as its acknowledged ideal, in practice we had already abandoned one or other item of it.

What was this statement of objectives that was approved in the 1950's? It was very simple: just four points. I shall give only the gist:

First, the Ateneo is *Catholic*. That should have been obvious: even our motto was Christian, taken from St. Paul: "*eratis enim aliquando tenebrae, nunc autem lux in Domino*." "For in the past you were darkness; but now, you are light in the Lord."

Second, the Ateneo is *Jesuit*. There are many Catholic institutions that are not Jesuit, many of them perhaps much better than we are. There is Notre Dame in Indiana under the Holy Cross Fathers. There is Santo Tomas, under the Dominicans. There is Letran, also Dominican. There is San Beda, Benedictine. There are the Divine Word universities. And there is La Salle, under the Christian Brothers. The Ateneo is not necessarily better; but it is different; it is Jesuit. An apple need not be better than an orange, or a guava better than an atis: it is merely another kind of fruit. So is the Ateneo: it is another kind of school. The teachers and administrators need not all be Jesuits: in fact, we may grow to a point where only one Jesuit would be left; yet the Ateneo could continue to be genuinely Jesuit, if the teachers — religious or lay — are imbued with the spirit of St. Ignatius, with the ethos of the Spiritual Exercises.

Thirdly, the Ateneo is *Filipino*. Again, the teachers and administrators need not all be Filipinos. But the orientation must be: the school exists to train Filipinos in those skills and values that are necessary to make them useful citizens of the Philippines.

And fourth, the Ateneo is *national*. In this respect it differs even from the other Jesuit schools in the country. The Ateneo de Zamboanga was

founded as a parochial school, to serve the needs of a parish. The Ateneo de San Pablo was intended to serve the needs of a limited area around San Pablo. The Ateneo de Naga is regional, to serve the Bicol Peninsula. The Ateneo de Tuguegarao was likewise regional, serving the Cagayan Valley. The Ateneo de Davao and the Ateneo de Cagayan were also regional, to serve southern and northern Mindanao.

Not so the Ateneo de Manila. It is neither local nor regional; it is national. Rizal was from Laguna, the del Pilars were from Bulacan, the Lunas from the Ilocos. The Millars were from Tayabas, the Kalaws and Katigbaks and the Roxases from Batangas; the Roxases also are from Capiz, the Ledesmas from Iloilo, the Gastons from Negros, the Cuencos and the Osmeñas from Cebu, the de Veyras from Samar, the Romualdezes from Leyte, the Pelaezes from Mindanao — to mention only a few. The Ateneo serves the entire nation, from Aparri to Jolo.

Catholic, Jesuit, Filipino, national: such is the Ateneo. Or perhaps I should say, such *was*. The first to be attacked was the third point: the Ateneo is Filipino. Before the war, La Salle was considered in the public mind an American school; Letran and San Beda were considered schools for *mestizos*. And the Ateneo — where there *were* a lot of *mestizos* and where all of the administrators and most of the teachers were Americans — was considered by its own students and by the public at large as a Filipino institution. Father Araneta says that he learned his love for Philippine culture from Father Mulry. He was not the only one. Oscar Arellano, who heads Operation Brotherhood and who is as intense a nationalist as any, attributes his love for country and for people to Father Delaney.

Look back at your war years. Who had the highest percentage of alumni in Fort Santiago? Who had the highest number of deaths? They did not die for America: they died for their own country, the Philippines.

Isn't it ironic that in the 1960's, when the Philippines was beginning its third decade as an independent republic and when most of the teachers and even some of the administrators were Filipinos, the Ateneo should be known — even to its own students and faculty — as an American institution?

The next point to be attacked was the fourth: the Ateneo is national. An attempt was made to make it regional, serving merely the Tagalog region, or merely greater Manila.

Then the second point was attacked: the Ateneo is Jesuit. And finally, in the past few years, we are no longer sure whether we are still Catholic.

That is why I am glad that now, by God's mercy, we have a president who belongs to the Class of 1942. A president who is himself cosmopolitan in his outlook, nationalist in his orientation. A man who is genuinely Catholic, genuinely priestly, genuinely Jesuit, genuinely Filipino, and genuinely Atenean. Let us hope, my friends, that Father Cruz will do something to restore the Ateneo to what it was: national, Filipino, Jesuit, and above all, Christian.