

Recent Speeches

My Jesus, My Life

June 15, 2013

My wife, Leni, and I just arrived the other day from Europe where I attended a board meeting of a corporation where I am an independent director. But the highlight of our trip was the private Mass for our group of 20 Filipinos held at the Shrine of the Miraculous Lady of Jasna Gora, also known as the Black Madonna, in Czestochowa, Poland. The Mass was solemn and soul-uplifting.

During his homily, Fr. Simon (that's how he, a Polish priest, introduced himself, without any surname) said he was fortunate to have met our dear Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle when he was still the Bishop of Imus. He recalled him as humble, eloquent and intelligent. May I quote his exact words, "Cardinal Tagle is the Karol Wojtyla of Asia." All of us in the Mass clapped our hands in full concurrence!

Of his legendary humility, let me say that on one occasion, he arrived in a tricycle at a town fiesta in Cavite. His hosts were aghast; a bishop riding a tricycle! But he had no pretenses. He matter-of-factly and humbly explained, "*Mas praktikal po ang sumakay sa tricycle. Mas madaling makalusot sa traffic.*"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, *huwag po ninyong bibiruin si Cardinal Tagle, sapagkat tinututuo niya, maski ang biro.* Example. During my 75th birthday celebrations at the Meralco Theater in December, 2011, I requested him to deliver the Invocation. But prior to his delivery and while we were seated waiting for the program to begin, I kidded him, "*Sayang po namamaus kayo. Sana hihilingin kong kumanta kayo.* And you know what? Even if his voice was hoarse, he sang his Invocation! Mabuhay po kayo Cardinal Tagle.

Mayroon din po akong anecdote sa ating bagong Papa, si Pope Francis. Ilang araw matapos siyang mahalal na Papa, niyaya niya ang kanyang tsuper mamasyal sa Roma. He told his driver, "Pietro, I am just a poor Jesuit in my home country of Argentina where, even as an Archbishop, I drove my own car. So, please, move to the back seat, and I will do the driving as I have always done. Of course, Pietro remonstrated but could do nothing except to follow His Holiness.

So, Pope Francis took the wheels, pressed the gas pedal and the zoomed the car to 150 kilometers per hour. A policeman, sirens ablaze, chased and stopped the car. When he saw the driver, he was aghast and called his chief of police. "Sir, what will I do after chasing this speeding car?" "Why do you have to ask me? Your duty is to arrest the driver and censure the owner seated at the back." the chief replied.

“But sir, he is a very, very high official.” “Who is he? Is he, the mayor?” demanded the boss. “No, sir, someone higher.” “Who, the prime minister?” “No sir, someone higher?” “The President?”

“No sir, the passenger is God.” How do you know he is God?” “Because his driver is the Pope.”

Levity aside, we – the Catholics of this generation – are lucky and happy to have two humble and caring pastors, Cardinal Tagle and Pope Francis, who by their example of enduring servant leadership, are transforming the Church to what it was really when it was founded 2,000 years ago, a Church of, by and for the poor. *Palakpakan po natin sina Cardinal Tagle at Pope Francis.*

. Ladies and gentlemen, I thank Rev. Fr. Anton C. T. Pascual, Brother Ding T. Sanchez and Sister Lulu E. Carrasco for inviting me to speak today. Having already retired from active public life, I have made it a personal policy to refrain from delivering speeches, especially on difficult topics like the one assigned to me and before a huge audience in a cavernous hall like the SMX. So, I decided not to answer in the hope that they would soon forget it.

. But alas, my strategy of silence did not work. They used their secret weapon. One day last February, Bai de los Reyes called my wife Leni, who in turn handed me the phone. Bai promptly directed me to accept the invitation to speak here.

. Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that Bai and her late husband Sonny were our shepherds when we entered the Bukas Loob sa Diyos Covenant Community in 1986. They were the Lord’s instruments in bringing me back to Christ. So, what could I have answered her? Nothing at all, except to say “Amen.” Of all the people on earth, only Bai has the power to order a chief justice what to do.

Now that I have been sufficiently intimidated to appear before you, let me share two stories. The first is fictional, but the second is real and true.

Good News, Bad News

. First, the fiction. Long ago in the Middle Ages, there lived in a small European village a farmer, his wife and their 20-year-old son. Using their horse, the farmer and his son tilled the fields.

. One day, the horse ran away to the mountains. The villagers went to the farmer and said, “Bad news for you. Your only means of livelihood is gone. You have no more horse to help you till your field.” The farmer answered, “Good news, bad news, who knows? I will just keep trying my best and God will do the rest.”

. A few days later, the horse came back with ten other wild horses. The villagers again visited the farmer and exclaimed, “Good news for you; now you have 11 horses, the most number in our village.” The farmer responded, “Good news, bad news, who knows? I will just keep on doing my best and God will do the rest.”

. Three days later, the farmer’s son mounted one of the wild horses to tame it. Unfortunately, he was thrown off and he broke his left leg. Again, the villagers went to the farmer saying, “Bad news for you, your only son is now lame; he cannot help you in your farm.” Again, the farmer replied, “Good news, bad news, who knows? I will just keep on doing my best and God will do the rest.”

. Then, the kingdom went to war. The King conscripted all the able-bodied men in the village, except of course the disabled son of our farmer. Unfortunately, the Kingdom lost the war and all the young men in the village were killed. The villagers went again to our hero. “Good news for you; you’re the only one in the village with a son to succeed you. Bad news for all of us; we do not have any successors for our farms.” The farmer again responded, “Good news, bad news, who knows? I will just keep on trying my best and God will do the rest.”

Do Your Best and God Will Do the Rest

. As I told you, this first story is fictional, spun by a fertile imagination that sought to explain the mysteries of life and the vagaries of the future. Like the poor farmer and like many of you in the audience, I too have had my share of bad news and good news. Like our poor farmer, I have also done my best and let God do the rest. But unlike the farmer’s story, mine is true and real.

. I was born poor. My father was a mere high school graduate, while my mother made it only through primary school. I was the youngest of four children. Aside from his four children, my father had to support his seven siblings, two brothers and five sisters. My grandfather (my father’s father) died when they were all very young. In order to support all of us — his seven siblings and his four children — my father did not finish his schooling. He ended up working as a rank-and-file government employee.

. In those days, right after World War II, times were tough. I had to hawk newspapers, sell cigarettes, and shine shoes on the streets of Sampaloc, Manila. In the evening, I would sleep on the sidewalks, where I waited for the early morning hour when the newspapers of the day would come in for delivery.

. Many times, as I lay awake on the cold pavement waiting for the break of dawn, I had to fight back tears of self-pity. I would think of my schoolmates as they slept on their beds, simply resting and letting the hours pass until it was time to wake up for school. But I had to work at an early age to be able to go to school.

Purely Secular Education

During those times, there was no faith to comfort me, no prayer to uplift me. Although born a Catholic, I did not know my religion. My parents were not steeped in their faith, so they could not teach me much. I did not have the opportunity to attend catechism classes either: I enrolled in public elementary and high schools. In short, I had a purely secular education.

. After high school, I wanted to take up chemical engineering. In fact, my high school yearbook stated that my ambition was “to be a chemical engineer.” But my father insisted that I became a lawyer. “_Pilosopo ka kasi. Matigas ang ulo_,” he was wont to say. During our time, our father’s word was law and could not be broken. So, to a law career I reluctantly veered my sight.

. My high school classmates and I used to go to the University of the Philippines campus in Diliman, Quezon City. Before the UP Oblation, we promised one another that we would study diligently so we would be accepted at UP. As an honor student in a class of over 1,000 graduates of Mapa High School, I was given a scholarship for my pre-law at UP. My father, however, could not afford the then 15-centavo bus fare to Diliman, Quezon City. He advised me to enroll either at the University of Santo Tomas or at the Far Eastern University, both of which were walking distance from our small rented apartment in Cataluña Street, Sampaloc, Manila.

. I applied first at UST. There, an old Dominican priest posed three questions to me as a prerequisite to an entrance scholarship. “How many Gods are there?” he asked. “One,” I readily replied. “How many persons are there in one God?” He followed up. “Three,” I answered. Then, came the final question, “Name them.” Believe it or not, brothers and sisters, I did not know the correct answer. So, I sheepishly whispered, “Jesus, Mary, Joseph.” Yes, I failed the test miserably. Disheartened, I enrolled at FEU. No questions were asked. But I studied diligently and supported my pre-law and law studies by peddling textbooks to my classmates and selling bibles to my professors.

After passing the bar examinations and upon the recommendation of my dean, Dr. Jovito R. Salonga, I was given a scholarship for a master’s degree in law at Yale University. But I could not afford the plane fare to the United States. I applied for a Smith Mundt travel grant at the U.S. Embassy, but was turned down. Without money to finance my trip, I had to forego graduate education at Yale. At the time, I felt the world closing in on me. I felt frustrated and defeated.

Poverty and Hard Work

. My initial frustrations and difficulties in life turned out, though, to be blessings in disguise. Now I realize that my series of bad news eventually turned out to be good news, after all.

. *First*, having been poor made me realize the value of hard work and the importance of a good college education. By persevering in my studies in high school, I was able to get scholarships for college. And in college, I prioritized my studies despite my numerous extracurricular activities. Thus, I finished my Bachelor of Laws *cum laude* and passed the bar examinations in 1960, placing number 6, despite being sick and hospitalized during the first week of the tests.

. *Second*, I learned to dream big. Right through the times when I was selling newspapers, I told myself that one day, I would become the president of the *Manila Times*, the most popular newspaper at that time. As fate would have it, some decades later, I became president of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* — the most widely circulated broadsheet in our country today.

. *Third*, my inability to travel to Yale inspired me to put up my very own travel agency. Since organizing Baron Travel Corporation in 1967, traveling had never been a problem again for my wife, my children, or me.

. My dream of obtaining a master's degree in an Ivy League university has also been realized through, and by, my five children. Permit me to say that all of them have finished graduate studies in pedigreed U.S. universities — their schools of choice – including Harvard, Stanford, University of California, University of Chicago, University of Michigan and Boston University.

A Turning Point

. *Fourth*, going to FEU proved to be one of the best turns of my entire life. There, I learned the value of academic excellence, earned a well-rounded education, acquired leadership skills, and had my first encounters with God.

During my law course, I was blessed with professors who were very strict and demanding. At the top of the list was Dean Jovito R. Salonga, who – despite being a non-Catholic – became my role model in my chosen career. Through my esteemed guru, I had the privilege to receive not only UP-style education, but Harvard and Yale techniques as well. He shared with me what he learned in those three schools where he had finished his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees

Search for God

Above the core values of truth, integrity, excellence and courage that I imbibed, the final and most important matter I learned was my Catholic faith. While FEU prides itself in being nonsectarian, it was during my FEU days when I met persons who initiated my search of faith and of God.

Fr. Michael Nolan, the FEU chaplain then, under whose watch the FEU chapel was built, took a personal interest in me and recruited me into the FEU Student Catholic Action and taught me the rudiments of Catholicism. Fr. James Sheehy, another Columban priest, insisted that a good Catholic must not only be personally pure, but also lead others to purity; in short, be a Christ to others.

Later on, particularly in the mid-1980's, I became a renewed Catholic when Leni and I joined Bukas Loob sa Diyos (BLD). Some of our most memorable days as husband and wife were spent with this charismatic community — particularly when, we shared our married life during our marriage encounters, and made attempts at spirituality as speakers during *Life in the Spirit Seminars*. I read over a hundred books and commentaries on the Bible and on Catholicism, and heard private tutors on religion.

Even if I did not know my Catholic faith completely, God has been kind to me. He has enabled me to meet great Catholic lay leaders, especially Sonny and Bai and Tita de Villa, and outstanding men of the cloth, especially the late Father Pascual Adorable and Monsignor Gerardo Santos. All of them led me to Catholic lay leadership. Leni and I joined the BLD Council of Servant Leaders. I was invited to be a delegate to the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991. Though unworthy, I was later appointed by Pope John Paul II as the only Filipino member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity for the 1996–2000 term based in the Vatican.

Finding My Partner in Life

The environment in FEU also inculcated in me a hunger for leadership. Hence, it came as a surprise to my high school classmates that I metamorphosed from an introverted, shy and timid lad, to be youngest president of the FEUCentral Student Organization during my sophomore year, and later to become co-founder and president of the National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP), the largest student movement in our country.

Through the NUSP, I was able to interact with convent-bred students of elitist schools. St. Scholastica's College was represented in the NUSP by a lovely, sweet, thoughtful and intelligent lady, Ms Elenita A. Carpio, who after a fabled courtship agreed to be my wife and lifelong partner. But that's another story worthy of another full sharing by itself.

Supreme Court Dream

The good-news-bad-news twists and turns of my life are evident not only in my struggles against deprivations, my secular education, my marriage and my search for faith, but also in my journey to the Supreme Court.

I had offers to join the government early in my career. I declined those invitations because the compensation of public officials was (and is still) not enough to see my family through. I wanted my children to finish their studies without the financial woes of my own youth.

But many years later when all of my children had received their graduate degrees in the 1990s, I became available for public service. And just as soon, Providence opened a window for me.

Meeting with President Ramos

On June 17, 1992, a month after the presidential elections, President Fidel V. Ramos invited me to a meeting in his private office in Pasay Road, Makati. For over an hour, we discussed, one-on-one, the efficacy of the rule of law in our society and the expectations of the people from their newly elected president. Finally, he offered me a seat in his Cabinet as justice secretary.

I immediately declined his invitation, saying that I had not supported his candidacy. He replied, "I know you did not campaign for me. You did not even vote for me. You voted for your mentor, Jovy Salonga." Yes, he was insistent. He wanted a Cabinet that was representative of the entire population, not just of those who voted for him.

Because I had reservations about accepting a political position, President Ramos instead offered me a seat in the Supreme Court. That alternative I readily accepted because it was not political. But it took three more harrowing years before I became a member of the highest court of the land. Let me share these harrowing years with you.

From 1992 to 1994, seven vacancies occurred in the Supreme Court due to the retirement of the incumbents. In each of these vacancies, my name was submitted to the Judicial and Bar Council for screening. The JBC is the government agency tasked by our Constitution to screen and recommend judicial appointments to the President.

JBC Frustrations

But in all seven times, I failed the screening. Many objections were raised against me, like the alleged insufficiency of my professional competence and my alleged sins and wrongdoings. At one time, a former client suddenly surfaced at the JBC to complain about my supposed mishandling of a case that happened 25 years ago. And after I was able to explain the charges against me, I was bypassed anyway, because appellate justices were given priority over practising lawyers. I might have been qualified, but there were others more qualified than me.

In other words, those past three years of screening were one long story of frustrations and defeats. Many times, I would sob and ask the Lord: "How long oh God, must I bear these

frustrations and embarrassment of being rejected? Why must I suffer for charges and accusations that are absolutely baseless? I have repented my sins and reformed my life; why do You still allow me to be chastised?"

In all these frustrations and in spite of the hard questions I hounded the Lord with, I never lost faith in His wisdom and providence. I always took comfort in Romans 8:28:

"God makes all things work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose."

In January 1995, after having been bypassed seven times and convinced that our God did not want me to be in the Supreme Court, I humbled myself and bowed to what I thought was God's will for me. My spirit was shattered, but I uplifted my ambition to the Lord with a solemn prayer:

*"Take oh Lord, all that I am, all that I will ever be.
Take my personal ambition, my liberty, and my career.
Do what You will with them and I will follow whatever
You want me to do."*

In July of the same year, another vacancy in the Court occurred. A close friend who was then a member of the high court asked me, "Why don't you try again? Don't pass up the opportunity, because the next vacancy will be in late 1997 already." At first, I did not take my friend's suggestion seriously because I had already given up on my ambition.

However, about 1:00 a.m. of Saturday, July 29, 1995, I woke up and could not sleep. My friend's words kept bothering me, kept reverberating in my ears. So, I decided to pray for over two hours. I told the Lord that I had already surrendered my quest to Him, that I had already given up. Why was I still bothered? I fell asleep about 4:00 a.m., waiting for a sign from the Lord. None came that night.

But the following morning, He spoke loud and clear to me. Let me explain.

Discerning the Lord's Will

Brothers and sisters, it is my faith that God speaks to us through the Bible. Though written some two thousand years ago, the Scriptures are still sources of God's personal messages. For Jesus Christ is the same today, yesterday and forever. I believe that if we listen intently and prayerfully, in full faith and confidence, God will speak to us personally as we are struck by a verse or a chapter in the Good Book that comes alive and answers our questions.

The following morning, Sunday, July 30, 1995, I served as a Special Minister of Holy Communion in our parish. As was my habit, with my eyes closed and with the ascending Jesus

in my mental vision, I intently listened to our parish priest as he read the Gospel for the day. I was struck by the following verses that he read from Luke 11:1-11:

“Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you. For whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks is admitted.”

I had cold perspiration and goose pimples as I gasped, “My Lord, are you asking me to persist in my quest?” But I was not satisfied. I said to God in my prayer, “Lord, I may just be deluding myself, hearing things I want to hear. Please give me another sign to confirm this message.”

The Lord’s confirmation came after one week in the same church as the same priest was reciting the Gospel reading. That Sunday, August 6, the reading was on the transfiguration of our Lord Jesus. It states that as our Lord was transfigured,

“a cloud came and overshadowed them and the disciples grew fearful... Then from the clouds came a voice which said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to Him.’”

Listen to him. These three words struck me. And once again my heart pounded madly as cold sweat oozed out all over my body. I became sure of what the Lord wanted me to do. After all, was it not the Lord Jesus who said the week before, “Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened to you?” And now our Heavenly Father commanded me, “Listen to Him.” So, I followed Him and submitted my name once again for screening.

I felt so sure of the Lord’s two messages that I shared them with my family and close friends. On August 9, Wednesday, Leni and I were prayer leaders during a prayer meeting of Bukas Loob sa Diyos, held at the St. James School in Paranaque. During that solemn occasion, I spoke boldly of God’s two messages for me, disregarding the risk of being ridiculed should my discernment turn out to be false. I proclaimed my determination to pursue God’s will by quoting a favorite Jesuit saying:

“I will work as if everything depended on me. and I will pray as if everything depended on God.”

This did not mean though that my trials were over. I had to undergo more of them. But I clung to God’s word and never lost faith in His promise. Let me continue my story.

Victory at Last

During the meeting of the JBC on September 13, 1995, there was a serious attempt to vote me out from the list. I would have been excluded right then, had it not been for one member who pleaded, "I think we should let Panganiban's name stay in the list in the meantime. Anyway, we are meeting next week, and if you still insist on deleting it, so be it."

This member told me two days later on, that unless a miracle happened, I would surely be eliminated from the list. So I prayed again, and exclaimed that human forces however exalted and powerful could not prevail against the Lord's will.

And true enough, during the JBC meeting one week thereafter, no one, by some mysterious reason, objected to my inclusion in the recommended list. For the first time in three years, I miraculously passed the screening.

After being informed that I was finally in the JBC list, President Ramos called and asked me pointblank, "How did you do it?" "Do what sir," I asked back. "How did you get the JBC to nominate you? How did you do it?" he repeated.

"Well, sir. I did not do it. The Lord did it. Hallelujah!" I exultantly replied.

The President made good his promise to me. And my career in the highest court of the land began, after I had given up on it.

It is my faith that it was God who made my appointment possible. In my book **Justice and Faith** published in 1997, I wrote that because I owed my office only to Him,

*"all my actions and all my decisions will
all be in accordance with His commandments
and His Gospel. I hold office by God's grace
and I pledge to serve Him and our people with
fortitude, integrity, competence and prudence."*

The Chief Justiceship

God's blessing, however, did not end there. As one of the senior members of the Court, I was included in the JBC's short list to succeed Chief Justice Hilario G. Davide Jr. After one month of prayer, I was chosen by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to be the 21st Chief Justice of the Philippines.

Many people have asked me how I found the courage to lead our Supreme Court in deciding landmark decisions, such as those that struck down several issuances of the President who appointed me and, most especially the people's initiative to amend the Constitution and to

change our presidential system of government to parliamentary. My answer was the same since I started as a member of the Court in 1995: I hold my office by God's grace; I act only in accordance with the Lord's will; I make my decisions only after much reflection, discernment and prayer.

New Career in the Business Community

After retiring from the Supreme Court, I thought that my career was over. However, soon after my retirement on December 7, 2006, I received one offer after another to sit as an independent member or adviser in the board of directors of some of the biggest and finest corporations listed in the Philippine stock exchange. The offers came mostly from people whom I have not met before, but who appreciated my work in the judiciary. I cherish these offers, because as an independent director, I do not represent any shareholder or vested interest in the boards I sit on.

Under the law, my job is to help the companies observe the canons of good corporate governance. In this sense, I act as a check on management. I enjoy my work because it is a continuation of the environment of independence, integrity, probity and competence I was used to in the Supreme Court.

In sum, at present, I sit in the boards of a dozen blue chip companies including Meralco, PLDT, Bank of PI, Metrobank, Petron, GMA Network, First Philippine Holdings, Jollibee, Metro Pacific Investments, Metro Pacific Tollways, Robinsons Land and Asian Terminals, and write a column in the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

So, even in my retirement, the succession of good news and bad news still pervades my life, as I am sure it also pervades yours in many inspiring and glorious ways.

To God Be the Glory

As I end my life story, let the choicest gratitude and praise be unto God Almighty who, despite my occasional shortcomings and failures, has been ever faithful to me in all my 76 years of temporary sojourn on earth. He has never failed to grant me all that is good and beautiful – in His own way, in His own time.

When I was new in the Supreme Court in 1995, I composed a prayer that I would like to recite here:

“The Lord is my Shepherd. There is nothing I shall want. He has given me more than I deserve — a happy home, a healthy body, accomplished children over whom I no longer worry, a stable career, a chance to serve our people, an opportunity to be remembered longer than my own life. Other than fulfilling my role in the Court, I have no more earth-bound ambition. I live my

life with only one consuming passion: on that inevitable day when I will finally knock at the pearly gates, my Lord and Master will open the door, spread his arms and say: 'Well done on your earthly sojourn. You have passed the test. Welcome home to my everlasting Kingdom!'"

From the time I composed that prayer in 1995 up to the present, I look back poignantly at my trials and triumphs, victories and defeats, frustrations and exaltations; and, in all of them, I always find my faithful God.

Indeed, I have journeyed from being a poor newsboy in the backstreets of Sampaloc to being president of the most widely read newspaper in our country; from an ignorant Catholic to a member of the highest lay council of the Catholic Church in the Vatican; from a frustrated applicant for graduate studies to father of five wonderful children who each achieved my impossible dream of graduating from a pedigreed US university; from a fumbling shoeshine boy to the board rooms of the best corporate giants in our country; from an aspiring chemical engineer to a reluctant lawyer and, finally, to the highest magistrate of our country.

As I contemplate my life and move toward its sunset, I know that God has woven my many pains and gains into a magnificent tapestry showing His mystical presence. Truly, there is one constancy in my life: the presence, care and providence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

To Him, I dedicate all that I have been, all that I am, and all that I will ever be. To God be the glory.