

*Committed to Serve with  
Humility and Excellence*

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Philippine College of Dentists Philippines Section, Inc.'s  
49<sup>th</sup> Annual Convocation and Banquet

Monet-1 Ballroom, Novotel-Manila  
Araneta Center, Cubao, Quezon City

January 31, 2016 (Sunday), 5:00 p.m.

To the incoming set of officers of the International College of Dentists Philippines Section Inc. (ICD-PSI), headed by their President-Elect, Dr. Vivian Gabaldon; outgoing officers headed by their President, Dr. Elaine P. Del Rosario; Master Councilor Hermogenes P. Villareal; ICD-PSI's new fellow, Dr. Elmer Jesus Escoto; honorary fellow, Mr. Anthony Alexander S. Chua; Distinguished Emeritus Awardee, Dr. Primo E. Gonzales; Life Fellowship Awardee, Dr. Rosita S. Tan; fellow speakers; honoured guests; ladies and gentlemen, a pleasant afternoon to all of you.

I am delighted to meet the dental care professionals who enable us to flash our sweet, warm, and welcoming smiles. **Service with a smile** – this is the kind of assistance that we public servants are called to give to our clients. *Ang ngiti ay nakabubuhay ng pag-asa. Ito ang sinasabi ko sa aming mga abogado at staff sa Public Attorney's Office o PAO. Ang karamihan sa aming mga kliyente ay salat sa buhay – kapos sa maraming bagay. Pati ba naman sa ngiti ay titipirin o pagdadamutan pa rin sila? Ang gusto siyempre namin ay umuwi silang masaya at may pag-asa.* You, our friends, who attend to our dental concerns, help us present this amiable countenance to our clients, with our smiles. *Maraming salamat po sa inyo.*

But for the Filipino masses, how many dentists are there who could attend to their dental problems? Apparently, there is a shortage...

In an interview with *Rappler* reporter, Mara Cepeda, Senator Ralph Recto said sometime last year that:

*“Nationally, there are 18 government dentists per one million Filipinos. In contrast, there are 3,556 elected public officials per one million families,” said the senator.*

*He asked, “If every 1,000 days we hire through costly elections 81 governors, 143 city mayors, 1,491 town mayors, 11,932 town councilors, so why can't we hire more dentists?”*

Senator Recto raised a good point there, right? These were among the statistical data which moved him to suggest that part of the 2016 national budget should be allotted for oral health care.

Last year, Roma Gonzales of *Panay News*, reported that there were many unfilled slots for licensed dentists in Western Mindanao, under the Dentistry Deployment Program (DDP) of the Department of Health (DOH)-Region 6. The lack of applicants could be attributed to the required 8 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work schedule with a salary that is lower than that which is being received by those who are engaged in private practice. You may ask: How much is being offered per applicant? Twenty-three thousand forty-four pesos (P23,044.00) a month for a Salary Grade 14-position, according to Gonzales.

Evidently, there is a great need for dental care practitioners in our country. At the Public Attorney's Office (PAO), dentists join us in our PAO-Central Office Legal, Medical, Dental and Optical Jail Visitation and Decongestion Program. **Ten thousand two hundred seventy-two inmates (10, 272)** were the beneficiaries of this outreach program of our Office last year. Out of these, **four thousand and seven hundred ninety-one (4,791)** inmates were freed from various jails in and outside of Metro Manila. They are a valued part of the **thirteen thousand two hundred and twenty-one (13,221)** accused in criminal cases nationwide who were acquitted by various courts through the dedicated legal representation of our PAO lawyers. Needless to say, the dentists who work with us and support us in our advocacy, are part of this achievement that we obtained as we successfully sought for justice and liberty of our once-incarcerated clients. *Bukod po sa oral health care, ang kontribusyon ng mga dentistang aming kasama, ay ang pagbibigay ng pagpapahalaga sa pagkatao at dignidad ng mga kababayan nating nasa kulungan. Ang pagkalinga pong ito sa kanila ay nakapagbibigay rin sa sarili nila ng kumpiyansa o self-esteem.*

Our dentist-friends are our fellow restorative justice advocates. We believe that inmates are only deprived of liberty, but not their rights to live decently and be treated humanely. We support their rehabilitation while in detention or incarceration, and their right to be given a chance to be reintegrated in the community where they once belonged. Aside from jail visitation, dentists help us in some of our cases. One of them, a trained forensic dentist or odontologist, has been most helpful to us. He is Dr. Anastacio Rosete, Jr. of the local government unit (LGU) of Quezon City. He zealously assisted Atty. Erwin P. Erfe, M.D., the Director of the PAO Forensic Laboratory in the identification of unknown human remains, in connection with the cases of the relatives of the *M/V Princess of the Stars* maritime tragedy. We have been handling their cases since 2008. Our battle against Sulpicio Lines, Inc. (SLI), the owner of the *M/V Princess of the Stars*, which is considered as a giant in the maritime industry, tipped in our favor recently. On September 18, 2015, through the *persistence* and *effective* legal representation of the PAO in the civil cases of SLI, the relatives of the victims of the *M/V Princess of the Stars* maritime tragedy were able to obtain favorable judgments from the courts, especially Regional Trial Court-Branch 49, Manila which ordered the SLI to pay the

heirs of the said victims, about two hundred seven million six hundred forty-one thousand two hundred fifty-six pesos and thirty-four centavos (**Php 207,641,256.34**).

The theme of your gathering today is: **“Committed to Service with Humility and Excellence.”** What the judge did in the *M/V Princess of the Stars* cases that I just mentioned is truly *excellent*, as defined in the wise words of Aristotle who said: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

This is the kind of habit or service that we want to see in the women and men in robes in our country – fair in rendering judgments, and like Lady Justice, their scales do not automatically tip toward the rich and the mighty. This is the highest standard or quality of justice which our people deserve.

In accordance with this yardstick of excellence is what you practice in your organization, the International College of Dentists Philippines Section, Inc. You have an excellent choice of projects for they benefit the less fortunate among our *kabayans*. Two (2) of these are the ICD-Gawad Kalinga Village which recently constructed and turned over the first ten (10) houses in Bagac, Bataan, and your scholarship program. These programs have touched some personal and familiar chords within me.

*Ang inyong lingkod po kasi, bagama’t hindi taga Bagac, ay taga Bataan din. Tubong Cabcaben, Mariveles, Bataan po ako.* As a six-year-old child, I peddled bananas and *kamote* tops inside a *bilao* under the scorching heat of the sun on the streets of Cabcaben. Thank you so much, our dentist-friends here at ICD-PSI, for the decent roofs and sturdy walls that you have given to what my provincemates are now considering as their very own homes.

Like the recipients of the said ICD-Gawad Kalinga houses, I, too, come from a family of modest means. I relied on scholarships from college to law school. My scholarships in two (2) law schools (the University of the East and Ateneo de Manila University) even served as divine promptings on my destiny. You see, I initially wanted to become a physician, but a legal problem concerning my parents led me to my true calling.

Sometime in 1979, my parents were sued by some fraudulent realty agents. I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year pre-med student then, taking up Bachelor of Science, General. This caused strains in our finances; hence, even as I finished the said course and graduated Cum Laude, I decided to forego my medical ambition and pursue law, which would entail lesser expenses and had already made an impact on me. This was courtesy of the public attorney who assisted my parents then in their legal battle. Hence, when I passed and placed fourth in the Bar Examinations in 1989, I decided to work as a public attorney. I politely turned down the offers to work in top private law firms and multinational companies. I considered my being a lawyer and Bar placer as an opportunity for me to pay forward to the needy, the opportunities and new chances for a better life which had been afforded to me then by my benefactors.

Unlike you, I have not become a health care practitioner. But the Lord has given me an opportunity to earn the title of *Doctor* before my name. This was courtesy of my being a recipient, of the *Lingkod Bayad* Award, the highest Presidential Award in Public Service, which conferred me a scholarship. This was awarded to me by the Civil Service Commission (CSC) in 2004. My journey

toward my doctorate degree ended beautifully and successfully. With God's grace, I finished my Doctor of Social Development course from the College of Social Work and Community Development (CSWCD) of the University of the Philippines (UP)-Diliman on June 28 of last year.

Looking back at the fork on the road that I had to take then as I tread on in my professional journey that was so intertwined with the personal circumstances in my life, I realized that had I not relented humbly to the Lord's plan for me, I would have missed the honor of serving, together with my fellow PAO public servants, the **seven million seven hundred forty-seven thousand and seven hundred thirty-five clients (7,747,735)** we had last year, and all our clients during the previous years. Maybe, I won't even have this golden opportunity of meeting all of you and sharing my thoughts with you.

With deep gratitude, I appreciate both the humbling and excellent times in my life, for they have taught me to value humility and excellence. Humility and excellence are the twin virtues in public service. I never get tired in conveying to the whole workforce of the PAO, through words but most especially by deeds, that public servants are nothing but shadows when our actions are devoid of excellence. For me, excellence is concretely seen through competent, dedicated, swift but precise, and honorable work at all times. On the other hand, shadows are characterized by shallowness and even emptiness – all of these make up a meaningless life.

Nonetheless, excellence could never be attained without humility. It is impossible to have an excellent deed when one's thought is incapable of going beyond one's ego – the thought of oneself or one's own interest.

I am glad that all of you at the ICD and ICD-Philippines are ***committed to service with humility and excellence*** as you fulfill your calling in bringing the smiles on the lips of people, maintaining their healthy psychological make-up (which may start from gaining a boost in one's self-confidence for having a great oral hygiene), ensuring good health and well-being, and reaching out to the toothless and powerless members of our *kababayans*, who are usually the poor and marginalized Filipinos.

In your 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Convocation today, I wish that even if you are still at the threshold of your 50<sup>th</sup> year, may you have the golden opportunities to fortify your group even more, and make it forever relevant in the eyes and hearts of our country and people.

Thank you very much for inviting me to be a part of your momentous occasion today. It is also important to me, for I believe that there is no such thing as chance encounters in life. I know, we will meet again, in another place and another time, but in an equally significant event for all of us.

*Maraming salamat pong muli. Mabuhay po ang ICD-PSI!*

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