

Building Fires and Digging Wells for
those Coming After Me
Vespers, 6th St. Mary's School
Association Grand Reunion
10 April 2003
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It is good to be here for this reunion. At the risk of sounding melodramatic, my wife and I considered not coming to this event. For as many of you know, I haven't been in top physical shape for quite sometime now. Just recently, my lab test say that my PSA is quite elevated, prompting some of my loved ones to suggest that it might not be a wise idea to come up for this reunion and shouldn't I instead advance my scheduled trip to Germany for treatment. But God is all merciful and with my faith that He will see me through, I decided to come. I guess sometimes we have to forego personal concerns to get things done. There is so much to share among ourselves, so being elsewhere at this time would have caused me great personal anguish. I believe that through sharing personal experiences and insights, we can arrive at creative responses to the concerns of the school.

As we look around, we see former classmates, former sweethearts, former rivals and present spouses. We see the boy or girl who broke our heart or whose heart we broke. Broken hearts notwithstanding, this is a great day for reminiscing and for celebrating. No doubt we miss some faces; friends who we hope should be here but are not here for one reason or another. There is a war raging in Iraq, (there are in fact text messages saying that Dagdag has been surrounded and is under siege and that Masla has fallen), the SARS virus is spreading especially among South-East Asian countries, somebody has to watch the house, feed the pigs, take

care of the chickens, etc... The reasons for not coming are legion. Others have gone beyond the sunset so you do not physically see their faces today. Yet, Easter reassures us that, in fact they are all here with us.

But more than an occasion for reuniting with friends, former classmates and former teachers, our coming together today is an act of thanksgiving for the gift of having studied in St. Mary's School, for the foundation on which our life successes are based. We walk the world more confidently because of the opportunity to have passed through the corridors of our alma mater under the training and discipline of dedicated, committed and competent ministers, administrators and teachers, many of whom, to quote the late Dr. Scott in his many fits, "crossed the Pacific Ocean to teach and not just watch bumps sitting on a log." Despite the problems confronting our school, let us then beat the gongs and sing and shout our thanksgiving from the rooftops. Let us proclaim our gratitude, for the firm grounding that we received from the school.

Because of the enormity of the problems confronting the school now, it is understandable that we should sometimes feel sad and pessimistic about its future. But as the author and evangelist Bruce Larson said: "Grimness is not a Christian virtue". Larson reminds us that the early Christians remained confident and happy in the face of tremendous difficulties. Acts 2:46 describes their behavior as follows: "...They continued daily in the temple with one accord... breaking their bread and eating their meat with gladness and singleness of heart." Let us do likewise and let each and every former student of St. Mary's School make a personal commitment towards the nurture of the school. It must be something you can uphold

even if a world war breaks out, somebody grabs your land, or your spouse runs away with another. Give more when you receive a windfall, or when you feel a bit more generous, but pledge something you can sustain at any cost, and under any circumstance. Let us listen to St. Paul in his 2nd epistle to the Corinthians (:7-8:

Each one must do as he has made up his mind, Not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God Loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide an abundance for every good work.”

No effort is too small. As in our traditional “Ob-obbo”, communal labor brings about a synergy far more powerful than the sum total of individual efforts. As in basketball, every point counts. It remains that the main task of the SMSA is to generate material and fund support for the school. St. Mary’s School needs our support and it needs it NOW!

Great causes are won by ordinary people pooling their talents and their resources. And yet you are not just ordinary people. The key is to get us all motivated and get our acts together. What greater motivation can there be than the thought that had it not been for the unselfish and charity of others, most of us would not be where we are today.

It is urgent that we define in concrete terms what we can do for the school as individuals and as an association. We are not being asked to do a great personal sacrifice or do something that will impoverish us or deprive us of the right to lead normal lives. Our generosity will not nail us to the

cross. It may mean though that we shall have to forego inconsequential, if not harmful or even downright sinful, cravings or habits so we can set aside a little for the school. That way, we promote a healthier lifestyle and at the same time exercise our magnanimity. You get that good feeling when you know you are involved in something bigger than yourself and when you know that what you are doing is an act of thanksgiving. A charitable act sets in motion a train of positive events that goes much farther than the very act itself. The motto of the school “Adi Tako Bokodan Di Gawis”, (which, incidentally is a quote from a pagan prayer), reflected in the philosophy that “what goes around comes around”, triggers off positive vibrations. Eastern philosophy talks about good karma, affirming the ancient wisdom that people are enriched by the very act of giving especially if it is propelled by a deep sense of gratitude. The pebble you throw into the lake, like the little gift you offer from honest toil, causes ripples that are transformed into cosmic waves. Momentous events do start from small beginnings.

Giving is the yardstick of kindness and compassion. It sublimates the soul. True giving is effortless. It does not seek to control or manipulate but to set free and liberate. As we celebrate Lent, we remember how the Lord Jesus Christ freely gave himself so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Too often we cling too much to our material possessions and are often tempted to say that we should keep them at whatever cost because they are the product of the sweat of our brow. But that is not the way of the pilgrim. The pilgrim has a higher purpose in life and is not overburdened by earthly baggage. He travels light. He shares his tent, his food and his drink for he knows that he is just a steward of the bounty that

God has given him. It is in giving that he fulfills himself. This brings to mind an anecdote about Gandhi, who, on boarding a moving train lost one of his sandals. His spontaneous reaction was to unlace the other sandal and toss it at the sandal that earlier fell beside the tracks. He knew that whoever would come across a single sandal would have no use for it; nor would he have further use for the one sandal that remained on his foot. How often do we selfishly cling on to things that we actually do not need.

Giving goes beyond the material as learn from Chapter 4 of the Book of Acts. The last few verses describe how the believers donated generously to the Church, and singled out the wealthy Barnabas for selling all his possessions and giving all the proceeds to the Church. In the early verses, however, the book also speaks of another type of giving and that is the GIVING OF SELF as illustrated by Peter's reaction to the lame beggar asking for alms. Peter said: "Silver and gold have I none but such as I have, I give thee..." suggesting that money and material donations cannot substitute for PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT. We must be personally involved.

As the Rev. Peter J Gomes, one time head minister of the Harvard Memorial Church, said in his sermon on the Bible and Wealth, philanthropy (or its sister, charity) is not limited to the wealthy. It means "love of mankind" and "proceeds not from necessity but from love." Gomes reminds us that in the parable of the widow's mites, God blesses the large and small donors equally. For charity he says "does not proceed from abundance or surplus giving but rather from one's proportionate ability to respond to the need."

No deed is too small if done out of selflessness. You

plant a pine tree not so much for yourself but for your children. The faith that moves mountains starts with the grain of mustard seed. Great oak trees grow from small acorns. Oh, the world is full of such parables! The first students of St. Mary's School had a goat shed for a school and I don't have to tell you where its former students are now. This is payback time! But we are not just paying for past debts but doing what we should do now for the present and the future. We are the fruits of seeds planted before us by people we have never known or seen. From ourselves, let us plant new seeds for those coming after us, as those who preceded us have done for us. Let it not be said that St. Mary's School closed because those who benefit from it have not been grateful enough to sustain it. It should never be said that "ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a great school called St. Mary's School."

Before I conclude, experts have given depressing assessments about the global downtrend in the educational system. Teachers and students are not as sharp as they used to. Modern technology seems to have blunted the minds of those in the academe. St. Mary's perhaps has not escaped that indictment and yet the acceptance of a reality should not lead us to stupor or inaction. On the contrary, let us see how we can straighten out our own backyard given the general environment schools find themselves in. Trends can be reversed from the local levels. Great movements have started from small countryside villages or provinces like Nazareth, Urvela and Yen-an. This is an opportunity for St. Mary's School to shine as a beacon. But we need dedicated men and women, disciples so to speak, to spark the flame and keep the fire going. "DINMENAT NAN TAGOWAN" We need to stoke the hearth because its flame is as strong as we make it

strong.

Let not our enthusiasm be dampened by circumstances no matter how distressing. We have to face problems squarely and work together to get rid of the road blocks. We have to be scientific in our approach and not allow ourselves to be bogged down with trivial matters or on the other hand brush off conditions that need surgical execution, while respecting the integrity of the school. Alumni and former students, individually and as associations, are known to be very good at giving unsolicited advice to their alma maters, sometimes giving the impression of an adversarial relationship. SMS alumni have not been totally spared from this temptation but I am glad to say that generally we have encouraged and maintained an honest-to-goodness healthy interaction with the school.

Finally, let me share to you the wisdom of a dear friend who, two reunions ago said: "I warmed myself with fires built by other people I have never seen, and drank from wells they dug. I therefore should do likewise for those coming after me." That is from Maximo Batong of Class 1956. It does not matter if his was an original quote or he was simply paraphrasing somebody. What matters is that, I am quite sure he would not have come up with that gem if he did not study at SMS.

That would make a nice pledge preamble for all of us, I would say. "I warmed myself with fires built by other people I have never seen and drank from wells they dug. I THEREFORE SHOULD DO LIKEWISE FOR THOSE COMING AFTER ME." As Sagada elders are wont to say "ta waday sa das-an di ongong-a"

God Bless St. Mary's School, its faculty and students, and above all, God Bless its former students!

Siya di et awni kasin. To all those who were not able to come, we missed you but hope to see you on the next homecoming in 2006! Matagotago tako am-in! Matagotago nan oskilaan tako ay Santa Marya! Dat was-in di menlamlamnin ay kanan di Isagada!