

Clamor for Greater Excellence, Arriba Letran!*

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When Fr. Rolando De la Rosa, O.P. was elected rector of Letran Calamba after his term of office as Rector of the University of Santo Tomas, he said in jest that he felt being recycled for a young institution like Letran in Calamba, Laguna. I do not exactly feel the same thing, but like Fr. Roland, I, too, have mixed feelings over taking the helm of Colegio de San Juan de Letran after my stint as rector of the huge University of Santo Tomas.

I remember with fondness the many nostalgic memories shared with us by our elderly brethren during my younger years in the Dominican Order. One of those memories was the link that Letran had with the University of Santo Tomas. I was told that Letran used to serve as a stepping stone, a training ground for the Dominican brethren about to be assigned to the renowned Royal and Pontifical University in España, Manila. The impression that I obtained from this unwritten set-up was the UST is indeed the University to aspire for, and Letran is just one of the few old Colleges in Manila basking in the glory of the past and one of the old, surviving vanguards of NCAA. But it appears that tradition is reversing its course. While it is not yet obvious that UST serves as a stepping stone for brethren about to be assigned to Letran, there is now an emerging precedence that UST is the training ground for those who would be installed as Rector of this historically revered institution in Intramuros. So to our young Dominicans, here's perhaps a piece of advice: If you wish to become Rector of Letran, strive first to become Rector of UST. Seriously however, we, Dominicans do not really aspire for positions like these, otherwise we never attain them.

When I was elected Rector of UST, I thought I had reached the apex of my profession as a school administrator. Given the status and prominence that UST has achieved as a Catholic University, I was inclined to believe that there is nothing better than UST, and the only second option left after

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UST is retirement. Upon deeper thought, however, I realized that this is a mundane thought, a position propagated by men and women tracing their career paths, striving to climb the ladder of success. Colonel Julian Malonzo, a loyal Letran alumnus, told me that when the brilliant Fr. Angel Blas was appointed rector of Letran after his term in UST as Rector Magnificus, he was asked by a colleague if he considered this as a demotion. Accordingly, Fr. Blas was displeased by the question. I am not surprised that he was displeased because the question for us Dominicans was irrelevant.

As Dominicans, we do not regard our ministries as career paths but as opportunities to concretize the commitment we make as Dominicans, that is to bring Jesus to the world through preaching and teaching. This means that if after my tour of duty as Rector of UST, I had been assigned as administrator of our mission school in the remote island in the north of Luzon, a secondary school with almost two hundred students called Lyceum of Camiguin, that would have still made sense, certainly not in the eyes of the world, but in the context of our calling as Dominicans. It is not the position that matters, but the task we do to preach Jesus the incarnate Word that really matters, however small, lowly and simple the community to which we may be sent to serve. The good Fr. Provincial, I suppose, did not have any plan to assign me to Camiguin Island, but instead confirmed my election as Rector of Letran, which is undeniably a hundred times more privileged than the Lyceum of Camiguin. Providence, however, seemed to lead me to the island, because even before I was elected as Rector, I had been scheduled to be in Camiguin as part of my sabbatical leave. Incidentally Camiguin, an isolated island in Cagayan (not the Camiguin resort in the south) is the adopted barangay of Letran College for its community development programs. And providentially also it was in that inviting secluded island that I spent my needed retreat before coming to Letran to assume the Office of the Rector. For almost two weeks, I was there helping Fr. Mactal in his ministry, braving the rough seas and strong waves to reach its shores, sweeping and cleaning the modest parish convent and old rooms of Lyceum of Camiguin, negotiating several kilometers of walk to celebrate mass in neighboring barangays (notwithstanding the recurrence of my gouts). Why I was first led to this mission territory of Letran community before my assumption to the office of Rector, I could only speculate. Does this first hand experience of the life in the island not tell me something about the

commitment of Letran to render service to the poor communities of our politically beleaguered country? Does this not give me a clear sign that Letran should take to greater heart the challenge to reach out more to the underprivileged members of our community so that collectively we, Letranites, could really make a difference in this part of our country? Camiguin is one of the mission areas of the Dominican Province of the Philippines to which Letran is beckoned to serve. Camiguin is only one of the poor communities, which Letran serves. But it remains to be the icon of our community development endeavors. Assessing what was already done to respond to this challenge, I commend the worthwhile projects initiated by Letran in Camiguin during summer, but I still have to see a sustained program, which Letran can still do to empower the people of that poor community.

What does this challenge reflect about the thrusts of Letran as one of the very early tertiary schools in the Philippines? Service to the community is one of the three components of a university. The other two that constitute the tripod of a university is instruction and research. Perhaps we can easily make an excuse for not taking seriously community service and research and for focusing only on its academic thrusts that Letran is not a university. If this is true, then let me just stress this point. With regard to the levels of education, we speak only of three: the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Letran belongs to that level that any university belongs. Like any university, Letran is a tertiary educational institution, so I do not see any reason why Letran should not fully assume the functions of a university, or better still, why it should not aim to reach the status of a university. And I could dare to make this wish with passion because Letran is already a 387 year-old institution, one of the very early, if not pioneering tertiary schools in the country. So I boldly ask the question now: "After almost four centuries of existence, where does Letran stand now in the educational echelon of our country?"

Looking at the resources of Letran Manila now, we could perhaps say that my dream would remain just that: a dream. If we assess what Letran has now vis-à-vis the requirements laid down by the Commission of Higher Education for a tertiary school to qualify for a university status, we could not deny that Letran is has yet to go a long way. For the academic requirements alone, the research outputs, and the qualifications of the faculty, Letran would still have to do a lot of hard work. While CHED requires at least two graduate

programs leading to doctoral degrees, Letran offers only one which has yet to be strengthened further. In order for a College to qualify for a university status, CHED requires that it must have level three accreditation for at least four of its undergraduate programs and two in its graduate programs. Letran is still in the process of attaining the level three accreditation in some of the academic programs, and this, you know, may take years. With regard to faculty requirements, CHED requires that at least 20% percent of the faculty members must possess doctoral degrees, while 35% must have master's degrees. In this regard, Letran is faring well. Recent data show that while 78% of the faculty members of Letran have master's degrees, 14% of the faculty members have doctoral degrees. Given the limited resources of many tertiary schools aspiring for a university status, CHED's requirements may discourage rather than encourage these educational institutions that strive to attain their aspirations and opt for a status quo if not eventually succumb to mediocrity. I however refuse to accept that Letran would simply share the fate of these tertiary schools. If this happens, the great people, leaders, heroes and martyrs who passed through the portals of this venerable institution would be turning in their graves in silent protest. Letran in its lifetime may not obtain officially the status of a university, but it must always strive to attain and sustain the excellence of a Catholic university.

What does striving for excellence required by a university mean? It means that it must stand on the strength of the three components of an institution of a higher learning: academic excellence, research culture and a sustained service to the community. As a catholic institution these three thrusts must be animated by gospel values and Christian, Dominican and Filipino ideals so that the functions of the College would really have a formative (not only informative) orientation and so that its timeless and ever timely motto: "Deus, Patria, Letran" would find deeper expression in the task of forming young people during these present times.

Despite the financial constrains caused by the establishment of Letran Abucay, it demands as my priority to continue upgrading the academic standards of the College by meeting, if not surpassing, basic standards required of a university. This means that Letran would undergo with greater efforts and diligence the necessary accreditation process that would expectedly stir innovation and development in the academic curriculum, improve the academic profile of the faculty and thus attract more students to

the college, eventually improving the Colegio's student selectivity. To build up further the image of the College among its prospective clientele, Letran would engage in a more creative and aggressive promotion program that would emphasize the uniqueness of Letran to the populace. And what is that unique character that we can really call Letran if not its connectivity with the history and heritage of this nation, and the heroes that this College had formed? If Letran wishes to enhance a culture of research, which I resolve to do, it must be built up on these three h's, and thus Letran could really be of service to our "Patria" which it has always hailed and pledged allegiance to in its motto. In this regard, I intend to create a research center that would engage in an inquiry and research on our country's history and heritage, and the host of its alumni that had contributed significantly to the formation of this nation. And with its research outputs, Letran would come up with a credible and refereed journal that would allow the resplendence of Letran to shine forth in the greater part of this country and the world.

Actually we do not make this wish far beyond reality or as my little knowledge in Latin has prompted me, "sine fundamento in re" (without foundation in reality). Letran has already attained many things that I can boast about, thanks to my predecessors particularly my immediate predecessor, Fr. Edwin Lao, O.P.- the excellent facilities, the well-designed organizational structure, systems, and processes in the College, and its bold steps to expand its presence beyond Intramuros. Letran has already built two campuses: Letran Calamba, Laguna in the late 70's of the last century, and recently at the onset of this century, Letran Abucay, Bataan. Truly and proudly, Letran has given birth to these institutions. Letran Calamba however attained its autonomy in 1986 when I was then tasked to act as its OIC, and eventually upon the SEC's approval of its Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws, I was designated as its first Rector. Given the commitment of Letran Manila to the continuous growth of Letran Abucay, I wonder if it is still wise for each Letran institution to maintain its full autonomy. There is a strong trend now in the business world to merge corporations like banking companies to ensure their survival and growth. Why can we not consolidate the resources of these three Letran institutions? If there is a strong reason for Letran to aspire for a university status, it is, I believe, the emergence of these two Letran campuses outside Manila. Besides the mind of the last Provincial Chapter of the Philippine Dominican Province is set towards the

establishment of a system of its educational institutions. Among the schools of the Province, it is Letran Manila, that is, the Mother Letran which could now take the initiative to bring this provision to reality. If Letran as such wishes to make its presence felt in our country and make an impact in our nation's educational endeavors, Letran Manila, Letran Calamba and Letran Abucay must act as one, without necessarily comprising the diversity expected in each campus.

Letran is almost four hundred years old now and as such it enjoys the image of being part of the historical heritage of this nation. One would need to just take a glance at the historical marker at the entrance of the Colegio to remind us of this. But this image understandably seems to thrive beneath the shadow of the greater image of the University of Santo Tomas. In fact, the impression now is that many students who seek admission in this College are those who could not make it in UST. If this is true, then let it be so, and rather than perceive it as a limitation, it must be welcome as an opportunity. WE can turn this apparent weakness to strength if we can succeed in projecting that Letran is a good alternative to UST since the institutions have common roots and uphold the same Dominican ideals and values. I rather promote proudly that Letran is a sister, albeit little sister, institution of UST, rather than pretend to act that it could stand fully on its own. As a sister institution it could be a legitimate partner of UST, in offering its prospective students the education they aspire to have. Letran can even offer its facilities and other resources to students who wish to enroll in UST and yet cannot be accommodated. It is a known fact, for instance, that about eight thousands high school graduates apply for admission at the UST College of Nursing, and only about 600 are admitted. Perhaps the next 600 can be accommodated at an envisioned "UST Nursing in Letran Campus" and so with other courses that tend to overflow in UST. This is real collaboration, which Pope John Paul II stressed in his Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, "Ex Corde Ecclesiae".

I beg your indulgence if I have mentioned several times the name of UST in this address. It is not because I still cannot let go of that University which I served for many years. It is just because I believe that the Board of Trustees brought me here in Letran because of the rich experience I have in that University. Thus I could not articulate my vision and agenda for Letran without the Thomasian spirit still haunting my emerging Letran spirit. My

immediate challenge now is to let go of the “dugong Tomasino” still running in my system so that it may be infused with the “dugong Arriba” through which I experienced my baptism of fire in running a school during my short stint in Letran Calamba as Dean of Arts and Sciences, then Academic Provost and Rector. And the greater challenge I see ahead of me is to drive Letran to take a higher leap so that it could soar up to greater heights.

I therefore beseech the Letran community, the Letran alumni, the benefactors, and friends of Letran to join me in facing the challenge that is set before me. Alone, I cannot do the heavy task entrusted to me for Letran. Let us join hands and build on each other’s strength to realize the dream we have for our beloved Colegio. And join me in the clamor to steer Letran to greater excellence. Arriba Letran!