

# CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGES: PREPARING THE YOUNG FOR RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

Keynote speech by  
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**Introduction.** Thank you very much for the kind introduction. In the name of the Silliman University Board of Trustees, allow me to welcome the ACSCU Board of Trustees, the President, Vice-Presidents, staffs and accompanying persons to our campus. It is a great honor for the university to be chosen as host to this convention which is taking place during a time of crisis and challenge.

It is also a great honor to be invited as keynote speaker to introduce the theme and subthemes of the convention. As most of you know, I am winding up my duties as Chair of the Board of Trustees of Silliman University this month of May. As one who is already nearing the "Pre-departure" area of life, this pleasant task is a high point in my ten-year journey as Board Chair of the university.

I am a product of a Christian school and a great Christian university. I spent the crucial formative years of my life in the nurture and care of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. I finished my elementary studies and high school from Hibbard Institute in Guihulngan, Negros Oriental, one of the earliest schools established by the UCCP. I then went to Silliman University for my bachelor of business administration degree. Bible studies constituted a major part of my elementary, high school and college education. Among my many Bible lessons, I cannot forget the book of Matthew which was thoroughly drilled into our young heads in elementary school. I still remember our studies on the book of Judges in high school. I had a special fondness for Deborah. In Silliman, my memorable Bible studies were on the Book of Acts, the major and minor prophets, and the epistles of St. Paul.

By the time I went to the University of the Philippines at the age of nineteen years for graduate studies, my values were already firmly formed. These were based on the solid bedrock of Christian teaching which I received from the Church, my two schools and my parents. Whatever I am now I owe to the three institutions which hold our society together: the Church, the schools and the family. My lapses are entirely mine.

## **A world in the grip of multiple crises**

According to the **Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific, 2009** Asia and the Pacific, including the Philippines, is attacked by triple crises: the crisis of economic recession in developed countries which is contaminating the developing world; the food crisis and fuel price volatility; and climate change.

What are the projections about the economy? From a high of 7.2% GDP growth in 2007, growth plummeted to 4.6% in 2008. The latest projection of NEDA is 4.4% growth in 2009.

However, the projections of other institutions are much lower. The International Monetary Fund earlier projected a 2.25% growth (lower than the population growth rate); recently, it revised its projections to 0 growth! Standard and Poors' projection is quite low at 2.2%; and the World Bank at 1.9%. Another institution gave a very pessimistic .8% rate of growth. These growth projections are all lower than the population growth.

Our population growth rate shows no sign of abating. It will grow much faster than the growth of the economy. This is terrifying indeed since it can only mean that the economy cannot sustain its population.

Only a week ago, the government was projecting a deficit of P177.3 billion, three times the reported deficit of P68.1 billion in 2008. This is now projected at P199 billion!

On the second crisis, which is food and oil price volatility, there is no need to cite many figures. You all know that rice prices practically doubled last year and that oil prices continue to swing wildly. Consumers swing from hope to despair each time prices move.

As for the third crisis which is climate change, our temperature continues to be unpredictable. We had 35 degree centigrade heatwaves, sudden rains and flash floods in the middle of summer. For the first time in more than sixty years, Dumaguete was twice hit by raging floods within a four-week period last January.

Just before we left for Dumaguete this week, two storms followed in quick succession to signal the start of the raining season.

Climate change has destroyed crops, brought sickness and drastically reduced food supplies in a number of provinces, thereby affecting the financial resources of parents who send their children to our school.

## **Quadruple or even quintuple crises!**

I have often said that our country is not only affected by triple crises. We are in the grip of quadruple or even quintuple crises! We are also facing a crisis of governance and public accountability. The Philippines has been consistently tagged as the most corrupt country in Asia. Corruption from the lowest to the highest levels of government is now taken for granted. Our tragedy is that many Filipinos now accept corruption as part of governance.

People are too tired to be outraged by the latest scandals and shenanigans of public officials.

In the meantime, our legislators appear to be blissfully unaware of the multiple crises threatening the very survival of our country and people. They are too busy trying to change the constitution even as the people have expressed opposition to the proposal.

### **The spectre of unemployment**

As of January 2009, the unemployment rate rose from last year's 7.4% to 7.7%. By age group, for every 10 unemployed persons, five or one-half are in the age group of 15-24 years while three are in the age group of 25-34 years. This means that possibly one-half of the unemployed are young people!

Another worrisome indicator is that 18.3% of the unemployed are college graduates. This could possibly include the graduates of Christian schools, colleges and universities. Not all who find jobs work a full eight hours a day. The underemployment rate stands at 18.2% or 6.2 million people.

The employment market is severely affected by the crisis. The Secretary of Labor has predicted that by June, 300,000 jobs will have been lost. In the meantime, many of the 900,000 new graduates will further swell the ranks of the unemployed. Filipinos employed in other countries affected by the crisis are coming home, not with gifts and *pasalubong* but with the scars of abuse, and the trauma of job loss.

### **Rising Poverty Levels**

An ADB study released only last May 7, 2009 confirmed what all of us are aware of: poverty has been on the rise. As of 2006, the magnitude of poor population has increased from 23.8 million in 2003 to 27.6 million in 2006. Poverty incidence as a percentage of total population has risen from 30% in 2003 to 32.9% in 2006.

In terms of provinces, Tawi- Tawi had the highest poverty incidence among households in 2006. For the information of schools, colleges and universities from Mindanao, more than 20% of the top 20 poorest provinces are from Mindanao.

The poorest provinces as of 2006 are: Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga del Norte, Maguindanao, Apayao, Surigao del Norte, Lanao del Sur, Northern Samar, Masbate, Abra, Misamis Occidental, Agusan del Sur, Occidental Mindoro, Oriental Mindoro, Sulu, Kalinga, Surigao del Sur, Mt. Province, Sarangani, Lanao del Norte and my own province of Negros Oriental.

Last March 2009, the World Bank and the National Statistics Coordination Board released a very interesting study on the poorest municipalities in the Philippines as of 2003. The municipality of Siayan in Zamboanga del Norte ranks first as the poorest municipality at an astounding poverty incidence of 97.46%. Again, 80% of the 20 poorest municipalities in 2003 are located in Mindanao.

Bear in mind that these official government statistics are based on 2003 figures, at a time when the economy was supposedly growing. One dare not imagine what the poverty figures look like at this time!

The impact of the exacerbation of poverty in the Philippines on our Christian educational institutions is obvious. Parents can no longer afford to send their children to formal university education. The tendency is to shift to short courses which can help graduates land jobs. Our faculty and staff have difficulty making both ends meet because of sharp price escalations. Our institutions don't have enough resources to fund capital expenditures for buildings, libraries, and equipment.

In short, our survival as educational institutions is at risk in many ways.

### **Crisis and the Christian educational institution**

With all these challenges and grim government statistics, does it mean that we should give up or compromise our Christian faith just to stay afloat? The obvious answer is of course, a big NO! Jesus Christ himself has repeatedly told us: "Be Not Afraid." This history of our faith across the centuries has been filled with trials and tribulations. I even suspect that the Christian thrives on suffering, danger and threats. This is also true for our educational institutions.

The challenge is to recognize the threats and risks that we are now facing, and with the Grace of God, unite with each other, help and sustain each other.

### **On the sub-themes**

Your first sub-theme on re-evaluating our identity as Christian Schools is crucial at this time. One question that is raised is: do we exhibit a unique brand of educating the young? How can this unique brand of education be sustained? Balancing high standards of education with Christian values is indeed a very difficult challenge.

We should not limit ourselves to identifying the regulations of DepED, CHED, TESDA PRC. It is equally important to strategize on how we can effectively bring these advocacies to the concerned institutions.

Many young people are going into entrepreneurship as a way of creating jobs for themselves. The young have to be reminded that there are other ways of spending time while waiting for the economy to recover. Going into voluntarism is one way. Another is by joining existing cooperatives or setting up new ones.

Globalization in education cuts both ways. New knowledge spreads very quickly through technology. However such technologies may not be meaningful at all in the provinces. You ask how we can prepare the young for global citizenship? A good starting point is nationalism. Our young need to be taught that they must be good Filipino citizens first before they become global citizens.

It will probably take time to have separate and distinct curricula for peace, reconciliation and authentic community life. These can be embedded in all regular subjects.

Some schools and academics have developed ways of making the Gospel fresh and contemporary for young people. On the other hand, some traditional ways of teaching the Bible can be restored. The gospel can be taught in a way that makes it relevant to contemporary realities.

**In closing,**

It is true that the global community is facing tremendous challenges. It is likewise true that the global crisis has impacted on the local economy. It will surely impact on our schools. I hope that this conference will be an occasion to exchange notes and experiences on how you have survived earlier crisis. It's time that the bonds of cooperation and mutual help be revived.

For Christians belonging to Christian institutions, trials and tribulations are nothing new. The oldest institutions among us have suffered the horror of war, the terror of martial law, the vicissitudes of financial crises and much much more. Surely, we will overcome if we stay together. God bless.