

## **THE POWER OF HUMAN VALUES**

(Address of SENATOR LETICIA RAMOS SHAHANI before the  
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It is my honor to speak before the National Academy of Science and Technology, an organization representing the nation's outstanding scientists and thinkers. This occasion is particularly significant not only for me but for the entire nation as well because of the theme adopted by the Academy this year: "Filipino: The Key to the Solution of His Problems." Being the proponent and principal author of the Moral Recovery Program which has been adopted as a government program by the Ramos administration, I take a measure of pride in noting that the Moral Recovery Program has served as an inspiration in the 15th Annual Scientific Meeting of NAST. The recognition and realization of the importance of values formation in nation-building by such respected and learned group of people like you strengthen my conviction that the need to re-evaluate and re-cast the Filipino's moral value system is as pressing as any other issue our country faces today. The challenge now is on our part, to use all resources available so that others may benefit from the full potential and challenge offered by the program.

### **The Moral Recovery Program**

At this point, allow me to give a brief history of the modest beginnings of the Moral Recovery Program which has now gained ground to become a major facet of the Ramos administration.

In September 1987, I filed a resolution urging the Senate to undertake a study of the strengths and weaknesses of the Filipino character. My premise was to identify the positive qualities for nation building. That initiative produced a report, prepared by a distinguished group of Filipino scholars from the Ateneo and the University of the Philippines. The report recommended that in order to fully utilize the good qualities of our people, the weaknesses or negative qualities have to be removed or rectified. The good qualities can then be used for the good of our daily lives over a sustained period of time. The rest is history. The reception that the report got can very well be described by the status of the MRP as a government program today. Indeed, it is obvious that the Senate Moral Recovery Program has served to fill a hunger among our people who are anxious and worried about where we are heading and what we should do next. "Ano ba talaga ang nangyayari?" is a

common question. In other words, the individual Filipino unlike his or her counterpart during more prosperous times some 40 or 30 years ago can no longer lead a separate and protected life. The problems of society as a whole have become shared personal problems of individual members, problems such as short-sighted decisions on the debt management strategy, flash floods caused by environmental degradation, the great number of street children nationwide, brutally violent initiation rites in schools – all these affect the Filipino's daily existence and outlook in life. We, poor, middle-class, rich, all seem to be in the same sinking boat. If our economic problems are massive, so are our ethical and psychological dilemmas.

In essence, the Moral Recovery Program is a movement which aims to mobilize Filipinos for nation-building through practical exercise of human values in our daily lives as citizens, and to awaken us to the power of these values in achieving our individual and national goals. Those values are free of charge; we do not have to borrow, nor to beg regularly and constantly from the outside world to obtain them; we only have to look inward, internalize these values for our own self-transformation, then externalize them for our individual lives and for building our nation. To use current terminology, the Moral Recovery Program seeks to empower people – the poor, the middle-class and the rich – through the sustained application of human values and virtues to overcome our problems and build our country in accordance with our collective vision. We can also see the Program as an attempt to complete the complex picture of nationalism. If nation-building has its political, economic and cultural dimensions, it also has its moral and ethical imperative. This imperative is a most compelling dimension of nation-building. It goes beyond mere legislation of anti-graft measures or Congressional investigations of wrongdoing in the Government. We need to go back to the basics and ask the fundamental questions: what is our vision of ourselves and of Filipino society? how do we achieve that vision despite overwhelming odds? what key values are needed to attain our goals? I submit that this vision and the strategies and political will needed to realize it should constitute the main framework to build this nation. Nothing less will do. This combination of vision and action is the key to our national survival, rebirth and renewal. In this context, the Moral Recovery Program becomes a major ingredient of an alternative strategy for national development.

### **Ethics and Politics**

The close interrelationship between ethics and politics is obvious in our many problems – our large foreign debt; the state of permanent disrepair of our roads and public toilets; graft and corruption in Government; the perennial squabbling and intramurals between Government bodies; and bureaucratic inefficiency. Chronic problems in such vital areas as agriculture and industry, rural development and land reform could be overcome if some of the values such as love of country, discipline, honesty, accountability and teamwork were practiced on a daily basis in Government offices and political circles, as well as by the people themselves.

## **Vision**

The over-all vision I have for our country has the following essential elements: reverence for all forms of life and the primacy of human values; a priority given to cultivation of the spiritual and cultural life of the nation; the democratization of power, resources and wealth; the right combination of a free market economy and Government intervention in appropriate areas at appropriate stages to provide for the basic needs of its citizens; a Government which works for the good of the people, the development of our agricultural resources and an environmentally conscious industrialization plan; a well-implemented agrarian reform program; respect for human rights, including the rights of women; and an independent foreign policy within the framework of global cooperation. In other words, we should have a vision which represents strong combination of human dignity, sustainable development and appropriate economic growth; national interest; and global orientation. A tall order indeed, but a vision must inspire over the long-term, shed light in the midst of darkness and make possible the seemingly impossible.

## **Individual and National Transformation**

At this point, we come to the question: what is to be transformed or changed – the structures of society or the individual? In my view, both should be transformed, each dynamically affecting the other, but the starting point is always the individual, or a group of individuals within institutions. The empowerment of the poor must come from the poor themselves; the poor must help themselves; others can only help them to help themselves. There is a welcome opportunity in this country to help empower the poor, and such empowerment is vital to the creation of more just social and economic structures.

## **Human Values: Powerful Building Blocks**

It is obvious from what I have said that human values are powerful building blocks in the development of a nation. Yet the non-economic and non-budgetary dimensions of progress and growth, i.e., the moral and cultural elements, have been conveniently overlooked or disregarded by the learned technocrats and theoreticians of development perhaps to make way for smooth, non-controversial discussions of the development process. The technocratic and neutral language of development, which has evolved from the agenda of international institutions, has eclipsed the moral choices which have to be made in the development process. Terms like equity, social justice, distributive justice when repeated over and over again without any explanation of the painful ethical choices which have to be made by individuals and governments in order to achieve them cannot touch the hearts and minds of the populace – the rich, the middle-class and the poor, on whom the burden of transformation rests. Development is, after all, a grassroots-oriented process and a challenge in mass mobilization, for the people and not for political expediency.

A similar observation can be made of our country where the study of the law is the favorite road to success of the best and the brightest. By using legalisms and citing provisions of the law as solutions to issues of right and wrong, we conveniently close the door to the need for a deep reflection on the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis in human history. Reality becomes external, verbal and theoretical. No wonder many of the values to which even the most righteous among us pay lip service have no power to transform individuals, because such values are not internalized and made part of their heart and soul, nor externalized into lifestyles and professional careers.

### **The Missing Links: Values as Part of Vision and Strategy**

Where are the missing links in our value and cultural system which are partly responsible for our currently retarded position? The goal of development so far has eluded us; at present we remain the basket case among ASEAN countries. A common but embarrassing observation raised by our Asian neighbors, which has almost become a chorus in our region is: "What has gone wrong with the Philippines? Thirty years ago, your country was one of the most advanced among the Third World countries in Asia; now you have become the maids, the waiters and the illegal migrants of the world, and classified by the IMF as 'prolonged user' of its funds."

One of these missing links is love of country or nation-building. Filipinos, as pointed out in the Moral Recovery Program, take care of themselves and their families first, but allegiance to the nation and the flag is not yet characteristic of them. Compare this to the attitude of the Japanese or Koreans or Thais who have utilized their pride in their history as a people to shape their priorities and pace of development. How do we make the Filipino care for and love this country? This is an important question for this forum as it is we Filipinos, who must and should be responsible for our own destiny. As it is, so ingrained over the years is the habit of automatically asking assistance from the outside world that we have forgotten our own potential for self-empowerment and lost our national pride.

Another missing link which is so important in nation-building is the capacity to implement efficiently and decisively policies and plans. Internationally, Filipinos are recognized for their talents in conceptualizing plans and programs; for this reason, our kababayans are much in demand in international organizations. Those talents, unfortunately, are not matched by a capacity to translate visions and ideas into concrete realities. Dreams can become real only through a well implemented strategy. Is this incapacity on our part a product of our long national history, where we saw our colonial masters giving orders from on high to their brown subordinates? Whatever might be the origin of this typical characteristic, it could also be a result of our protective attitude toward our children, many of whom are brought up by yayas or relatives. It is also a stinging commentary on our colonial educational system which apes the progress of the West without being able to

match the vigor of its intellectual life and the rigor of its scientific traditions. Another missing link so important to the advancement of our collective existence is the need for coordination, consensus and integration of policies and programs. We seem to be forever beginning anew, hardly finishing anything which we can evolve into enduring traditions and institutions. Like Penelope of Greek mythology, we seem condemned to be deliberately undoing what we have accomplished in the past to start all over again. This has been variously identified as the "crab mentality," the *kanya-kanya* syndrome, the culture of *palakasan at pataasan*, and the adversarial approach which stems from an attitude of extreme personalism. No wonder our foreign friends are puzzled and ask: "What do you Filipinos really want?"

### **GAP Between Public Image and Private Conduct**

Closely related to the inability to implement policies and plans is the gap between public image and private conduct or personal lifestyle. In other words, Filipino culture inordinately tolerates contradictions between public image and private morality. In my view, individuals, particularly the leaders of the community and nation, must demonstrate in their daily lifestyle, their commitment to simplicity and accountability, in terms of the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the kind of motor vehicles they use and the family life they live.

These missing links which I have described should be restored and put in proper perspective as ethical values have a way of complementing, reinforcing and balancing one another. It seems development demands a certain amount of perfection and completeness; the piecemeal and fragmented approach cannot and does not work.

As to structures needing transformation, two sets of classification have to be examined. First, is the individual, family, organizations, community and nation; second is the elite, the middle-class and the poor. Specifically, I suggest that we examine more closely the current status of the Filipino family in the hopes of strengthening it in view of its disintegration due to poverty.

Our vision for the future cannot be complete without reference to the notion of sustainable development. As a concept, sustainable development originated in the West, but it has now become an accepted topic among developing countries. In the Philippines, non-governmental organizations have already pioneered in making us aware of sustainable development.

Why the current emphasis on sustainable development? In 1991, the gospel of economic growth for the sake of growth was no longer tenable. Conventional development in terms of constantly increasing production to satisfy unending demands of a consumer society can no longer be sustained nor maintained. The era of sustainable development in its essential meanings that I have articulated is upon us. It is now our task to relate and reconcile sustainable development with our vision of individual dignity, human values and economic growth. Lester Brown, the

well-known environmentalist, defined sustainable development as one that "satisfies its needs without jeopardizing the prospects of future generations. Inherent in this definition is the responsibility of each generation to ensure that the next one inherits an undiminished natural and economic endowment." According to Brown, a sustainable world must be achieved within the next 40 years, by the year 2030; otherwise, environmental deterioration and economic decline will pull the world into a downward spiral of social disintegration. By the year 2030 many countries will opt for solar-based systems, not one powered by coal or natural gas. The world in 2030 can achieve a more equitable and secure economy if the Third World debt is reduced to the point where the net flow of capital from industrial to developing countries is restored. Sustainability can be achieved by the year 2030 if the use of recycled materials is promoted, a shift of resources from military programs into life sustaining activities such as reforestation and soil conservation is made, and a balance between human and natural resources is reached. This movement toward a sustainable society will require a new set of individual priorities and values. Materialism, status-seeking and the amassing of personal riches and national wealth will have to be drastically eschewed. In other words, in speaking of values within the framework of sustainable development, we are not just dealing with legalistic anti-graft and anti-corruption measures; we are going more deeply, more profoundly into the relationships of values and development, where human survival, indeed, the future of the human race will depend on the kind of values people will internalize in their daily lives.

### **We Must Transform Ourselves First**

Friends, I have touched on many themes in this address but the main message of the Moral Recovery Program is that we must transform ourselves first before we can transform our nation. Let us not wait for others to begin this transformation; the margin of error is getting narrower. The time frame given us is getting shorter. For us Filipinos, the place and time is here and now. We shall not fail in this undertaking of individual and national transformation if we have faith in the power of human values to help us achieve our vision of human dignity, nation-building and sustainable development.

Finally, I would like to share with you a verse which actually served as seminal seed for the Moral Recovery Program:

*"Watch your thoughts, they become words;  
 Watch your words, they become actions;  
 Watch your actions, they become habits;  
 Watch your habits, they become character;  
 Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny!"*

Thank you and good day!