

KEYNOTE SPEECH ON THE 27TH CORDILLERA DAY
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APRIL 26, 2011
Barangay Buneg, Lacub, Abra Province

Before anything else, I would like to take the opportunity to warmly congratulate the leadership and membership of the regional and local organizations for ably preparing this 27th year of the original and true Cordillera Day. Mabuhay kayo! Thank you for inviting me as your keynote speaker to this wonderful day! It is both a great honor and a privilege.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of some of the members of the Peace Panel in the on-going peace talk between the Philippine government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP); (bishops / priests; government officials; delegates; friends; etc).

Let me begin by quoting from the immortal words of the brave Kalinga warrior, Macliing Dulag:
“Life! If life is threatened, what should we do? Resist! This we must do, otherwise, we are dishonored and that is worse than death! If we do not fight, we die anyway. If we fight, we die honorably...and our children may win and keep this land. And the land shall become even more precious when nourished by our sweat and blood.”

His words, more or less, summarize the core meaning and message of this yearly celebration and gathering.

The first Catholic social encyclical **Rerum Novarum** and other subsequent Catholic encyclicals correctly observed that in many parts of the world today, the wealth of society is monopolized by a few, while the majority of the people wallow in poverty and hopelessness. In the Philippine context, this is expressed in “kahirapan” and “walang kaayusan” politically, economically and culturally (2nd Plenary Council of the Philippines).

This great imbalance or inequality between the rich and the poor, imbedded in an unjust political, economic and cultural system, where wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of a few, is called social injustice.

The greatest contributory factor if not the root-cause to the social injustice here and in other 3rd world countries is imperialism, the highest form of capitalism, now disguised as globalization. Imperialism breeds greed and the search for endless profits and leaves millions of people and many countries, poor and underdeveloped in its wake. Imperialism makes use of economic, financial and social “mechanisms” to achieve its objectives.

The social encyclical **Sollicitudo Rei Socialis** of Pope John Paul II correctly exposes this reality when it says: “One must denounce the existence of economic, financial and social *mechanisms* which, although they are manipulated by people, often function almost automatically, thus accentuating the situation the *wealth for some* and *poverty for the rest*. These mechanisms, which are maneuvered directly or indirectly by the more developed countries, by their very functioning favor the interests of the people manipulating them.” (#16).

Sara Soliven de Guzman described the local picture of this situation very well in her column (Philippine Star, September 29, 2008): “In this country (Philippines), we have a strong case of the powerful trampling the weak, the rich versus the poor. We have people being tortured, slaughtered on our streets, civilians being ‘kidnapped’ and ‘salvaged,’ or snatched and never heard from again but what does our watchmen fight about – nothing but themselves. We have arrogant public officials everywhere, the rich or poor, mayors or city officials including the cops on the block...”

What could be our response to this widespread injustice and poverty? The modern martyr for justice, the late Bishop Romero of El Salvador, can be our source of inspiration. He said, “Many would like the poor to keep on saying that it is God's will for them to live that way. But it is not God's will for some to have everything and others to have nothing. That cannot be of God. God's will is that all his children be happy...The great need today is for Christians who are active and

critical, who don't accept situations without analyzing them inwardly and deeply. We no longer want masses of people like those who have been trifled with for so long. We want persons like fruitful fig trees, who can say *yes to justice* and *no to injustice* and can make use of the precious gift of life, regardless of the circumstances.”

More than two decades later, I am happy to note that the (indigenous) people's solidarity movement continues to progress by leaps and bounds, although there are still many things to be done. And we have to remain strong and vigilant because the forces of exploitation and oppression, in the guise of bringing in development and peace, are prepared to tear apart our lands, mountains and forests for their greedy and selfish interests.

How do we strengthen the people's solidarity movement and protect our life, land, rights and resources? To find an answer to this, we need to go back to the words of Macliing Dulag: “Resist!... If we fight, we die honorably...and our children may win and keep this land...!”

When there is oppression, there is resistance. Our resistance must be a collective fight for life, rights and resources because the forces of evil and oppression are also organized. Let us not fool ourselves that things happen by accident. They are consciously planned by evil people and groups. That's why working for justice and freedom is never easy.

The grizzled national and social liberation fighter, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, can offer us a wise insight on what the struggle entails. He said: “There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires... For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

More than a quarter of a century or so, either as an organization or as individuals, we have had many victories to savor and celebrate. Foremost among these are the Igorot people's struggle against the Chico Dam and the Tingguians' fight against Cellophil Resources Corporation or CRC projects. These victories did not come in silver platters. These were earned by our sweat and tears, even to the extent of sacrificing our lives. We have to walk “the valley of the show of death again and again” before we can reach the mountaintops of our hopes, our desires and dreams.

What are those dreams? “A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality.” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

These victories were possible because of the solidarity we have shown in the struggle for freedom and a better life. These are the great reasons why we are gathered here today (tonight). We are here today (tonight) to celebrate and strengthen that unity.

“When we are in partnership..., when we have stopped enslaving each other, we will stand together, hands clasped, and be friends. We will be comrades, we will be brothers,(and sisters), and we will begin the march to the grandest civilization the human race has ever known.” (Eugene V. Debs - political activist and union leader).

Indeed, a people united for a just cause will never be defeated!

Long live the struggle for justice, freedom and democracy! Long live the struggle for a prosperous and better life, now and in the future! #