

## MESSAGE<sup>1</sup>

Chief Justice Reynato S. Puno

We congratulate the officers and members of the Founding Congress of the *National Union of People's Lawyers* (NUPL). You have chosen an advocacy that transcends life's superficiality. You have chosen to live out what is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that there is an "inherent dignity" in the human being and there are "equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." And that these human rights form the "foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

It is unfortunate that our country has gained a bad reputation for violation of human rights. There is a looming darkness that envelops all forms of human rights, whether they be political rights or socio-economic rights. But there is no human right as important as the right to life—for such is the fountain source from where all other human rights flow. The Supreme Court called for a National Consultative Summit to address the problem of *extralegal killings* and *enforced disappearances* last July 2007. The SC Committee on Revision of the Rules is drafting the first ever rule that will implement the *writ of amparo* in our country. This prerogative writ will protect and enforce the right to life, liberty and security of the person as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and allied international and domestic laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Message of the Honorable Reynato S. Puno to the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL), read by Atty. Jose Midas P. Marquez, during the Founding Congress of the National Union of People's Lawyers, September 16, 2007, the Golden Prince Hotel, Cebu City.

The Judiciary is tasked with the protection of these human rights. In the words of U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Davis in the case of *Ex Parte Milligan*, involving a petition for *habeas corpus* of several civilians to be hanged by military tribunals,: “By the protection of the law, human rights are secured; withdraw that protection and they are at the mercy of wicked rulers or the clamor of an excited people.”<sup>2</sup>

As officers of the court, lawyers are frontliners in the fight for human rights. We are sworn to uphold the rule of law as our shield and armor in this fight for human dignity and freedom. To be sure, this is often a fight waged for the benefit of the poorest and the most vulnerable—those who have nowhere else to go to and no money nor resources to protect themselves with.

By calling yourselves the “people’s lawyer,” you have made a remarkable choice. You decided not to remain in the sidelines. Where human rights are assaulted, you have chosen to sacrifice the comfort of the fence for the dangers of the battlefield. But only those who choose to fight on the battlefield live beyond irrelevance.

The lawyer is the foremost educator of rights and responsibilities. So let us teach and more importantly, let us practice what we preach. Let us set the bar for human rights and responsibilities high. Let our sharp thoughts and our ironclad will bring forth justice to the villages all over the country, so that we may find some sense of meaning—a sense of justice in our lives. Let us infuse the system of societies, of which every man is a part, with the system of justice that tends to be self-balancing, self-adjusting, self-

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<sup>2</sup> *Ex parte Milligan*, 71 U.S. 2 (1866).

cleansing. Let us remember that as lawyers, as *peoples'* lawyers, we advocate the greater good.

When Mahatma Gandhi said, "*You must be the change you wish to see in the world,*" he might as well be referring to lawyers in terms of grounding in human rights law. It may be that popularization and the judicialization of human rights in Asian regions remain a chafing prospect.

But it is well worth remembering that great men, stood for the rights of human beings to remain human and be treated with dignity. You, who chose to stand up for human rights, should be commended. But bear in mind that to be celebrated is not your end. The Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal, once wrote: "It is a useless life that is not consecrated to a great ideal. It is like a stone wasted on the field without becoming a part of any edifice."

It may be said of you all, by devoting your lives to the cause of the people—you have become precious stones and mortar that edifies the great temple of humanity.

I offer my congratulations to this founding congress of the *National Union of People's Lawyers* (NUPL).

*Mabuhay po kayo!*