

RIZAL AND THE ATENEO

*Sermon delivered by the Rev. H. de la Costa, S.J., at the Ateneo Alumni Mass on Rizal's Birthday, June 19, 1952.*

Alumnus José Rizal kept in touch with the Ateneo mainly through four men. There was Father Faura, who prophesied that he would end up on a scaffold. There was Father Pastells, who sought to restore his Catholic Faith by patient argument. There was Father Balaguer, who reconciled him to the Church before he died. And there was Father Sanchez, who was his friend.

I think it can be said that these four men, each in his own fashion, express what the Ateneo should mean, and would like to mean, to all its alumni. The Ateneo is a school; first and foremost, it is a body of teachers; and the essential duty of a teacher is to speak the truth. The truth is often unpleasant, often unpopular; but the teacher, if he wishes to be faithful to his profession, cannot afford to dilute or debase it. He must speak the truth as he sees it, no matter how much it hurts.

Rizal had worked out during his sojourn in Spain a thoroughgoing plan of colonial reform. Whatever Father Faura thought of that plan, he saw at least one thing clearly—that the Spanish government would never stand for it. Sooner or later it would try to crash both the plan and its author. That was what he meant when he said that Rizal would end up on a scaffold.

We could wish that Father Faura could have put

a little less bluntly, a little more diplomatically. He might have spared Rizal's feelings. But there are times when to spare a man's feelings is to betray his friendship. What Father Faura said was shocking; he meant to be. He wanted to shock Rizal into seeing that he was faced with a choice, and that his very life depended upon what he chose. He did not tell him what to choose; Rizal was not a boy any longer but a man, and it was a man's privilege to choose; but it was also a man's privilege to be told the consequences of his choice.

Rizal saw and chose; and the fact that he chose with his eyes open, with the scaffold at the end of the road having been pointed out to him, is his claim to be our greatest alumnus.

All of us, at some time or other in our lives, will be faced with the necessity of making a similar decision. Beset by fears and forebodings, we shall go to seek strength and comfort from those we trust. I do not think we shall ever lack friends who will try to soothe us with ambiguities; who will blur alternative, dull the horns of a dilemma, on the mistaken principle that what we don't know won't hurt us, on the childish principle that medicine doesn't taste half as bad if taken with the eyes shut.

But rare indeed is the friend who will tell us the truth; who will pay us the supreme compliment of assuming that we are not afraid to act on our principles. It is our hope as alumni that we shall always find such a friend where Rizal found him—at the Ateneo.

However, it is equally important to remember that respect for the truth must go hand in hand with respect for the individual conscience. To force the truth on people's minds, to ram the truth down people's throats, is not only unjust, it is unwise. Nothing breeds error so quickly as truth accepted under constraint. It was to be regretted that Rizal lost the priceless heritage of the Faith; but granted the fact that he lost it, there was only one way of restoring it to him: by convincing him, by convincing his mind, that he had erred. There were easier ways; threats, cajolery, flattery, the emotional ar-

gument; but Father Pastells used none of these. He chose the hard way; he appealed to that in Rizal which was the hardest, diamond-hard, his mind. For he knew that faith based on anything else but conviction would be of no use to this man who lived solely by his convictions and who would not hesitate to die for them.

Jesuits believe that their system of education is fashioned to produce men of this calibre, rational men whose faith, while fully supernatural, is based on reason. Whether that system actually does so or not, is not for them to say. But this certainly can be said: that if the schools of the free world do not produce such men in greater numbers than hitherto, that world is doomed.

We must have men of conviction, but they must also be men of faith. Reason can go far, but there is a point beyond which it cannot go; the deepest questions that reason can ask only faith can answer. It was Father Pastells who raised these questions in the mind of Rizal, but it was Father Balaguer who answered them. To the death cell in Fort Santiago came this simple man, not with subtle argument, not with the persuasive words of human wisdom, but with the word of God sharp as a drawn sword, cutting deep, even to the marrow of the spirit, cutting and healing, slaying and giving life. And the work that the learned Father Pastells began this simple priest finished. Yet not he, for what are these but men? Poor, brittle instruments, of what avail are they, of themselves, in the titanic struggle of good and evil for the immortal soul? No, not they, but God; in that lonely hour between dark and dawn, between life and death, when Rizal sank to his knees at last with a strong cry and tears, in that lonely hour he was alone with the Alone, the man about to die with the God who died, and lives.

What folly even to think that such a man, at such an hour, could have been tricked into repentance! If there was trickery in the business, God was the tricker; let them complain to God. If there was trickery in the business, it was prayer that did the trick.

There was one man at least whose prayers were with Rizal continually, through all the years of doubt, all the years of agony, all the years of exile; that man was Father Sanchez. Perhaps *he* was to blame for Rizal's conversion. At any rate, he was the most subtle Jesuit of them all, for he used against Rizal's infidelity the one irresistible weapon; the power against which nothing is proof; the power of prayer.

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of;" and we like to think that among these good things is that fellowship of Ateneans with the Ateneo, and of Ateneans among themselves, which not even death can break. For even in maturity, even when we are old, the mother of our youth yet has something to offer us; yes, four things, to all her alumni as to her greatest alumnus: the plain truth, the path of reason, the light of faith, the love of friends.