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COVID-19 and Climate Change: Signing Up for Our Impossible Dream

*To dream the impossible dream, To fight the unbeatable foe
To bear with unbearable sorrow, To run where the brave dare not go*

*To right the unrightable wrong, To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary, To reach the unreachable star*

— Mitch Leigh and Joe Darion, *The Impossible Dream*¹

The brewing storm clouds of prevailing local and global situations are swirling ominously about, threatening to blanket us in a darkness so dismal that no light can dispel it. In the words of the collective expression of indignation and call to action from the members of the medical profession and the health sector, “no other phenomenon in history than this COVID-19 global pandemic has ... left free and unrestrained politicians and people with absolutely no competence in running the country, much less this catastrophic health debacle, to abuse power with impunity, misuse and steal taxpayers’ money and insult their intelligence, feed on the Filipinos’ desperation and helplessness at the time when their plea for true leadership is loudest but has remained unheeded.”²

This document, signed by over 300 leaders of medical societies including five former health secretaries, echoed the earlier Expression of Outrage and Call to Action on Alleged Corruption Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic “over alleged corruption related to the purchase of personal protective equipment (PPE)... and attempts to cover-up what really happened” that was signed by 45 health professional organizations, including the Philippine Association of Medical Journal Editors (PAMJE).³ This initial multi-organizational “call for transparency, exigency and accountability” on “the President, ALL government officials, the Senate, the Department of Justice, the Ombudsman, and all Filipinos” respectively, in turn... “NOT to obstruct the testimony of material witnesses to any investigation;” ... “to support the call for truth, ensure that the wheels of justice grind swiftly and surely, and provide testimony when sought;” ... “to complete the inquiry swiftly and with utmost diligence, to get to the truth behind the alleged corruption, then file a case before the department of justice or ombudsman at the soonest possible time;” ... “to conduct an immediate impartial and thorough investigation of the case;” ... “to file the appropriate cases against all those responsible for any corruption” and “to join hands and support the search for the truth.”³

This call was accompanied by the collective expression of indignation and call to action signed by hundreds of individual members of the medical profession and health sector, myself included.² We expressed indignation over “our precarious situation” and the “folly of passivity” in its face; where our battered and “broken health systems” suffer from the “incompetence, insensitivity and corruption” and “shameless greed” of “no less than those who are supposed

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to lead;" but do so with no "shame - brazen, avaricious, *sugapa*, with no regard for how the nation would survive;" as "impunity has become the norm." Thus, we affixed our signatures to "shout out our indignation and intolerance," declaring that "we will no longer compromise the truth for what we have been conditioned to believe to be true but clearly isn't, we shall not go down the slippery slope of decay as a nation."² But there were those who did not sign; nay, who absolutely refused to sign, hiding behind the cloak of neutrality.⁴ In response, I quote the South African Anglican Archbishop and 1984 Nobel Peace Laureate Desmond Tutu, who is attributed with saying "if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."⁵

The act of signing such a document under the current circumstances, may seem quixotic; even foolhardy. Etymologically, the verb "sign" circa 1300 (as "to make the sign of the cross") comes from the Old French *signier*, "to make a sign; to mark," from the Latin *signare* "to set a mark upon, mark out, designate; mark with a stamp; distinguish, adorn," figuratively "to point out, signify, indicate," from *signum* "identifying mark, sign."⁶ For us physicians, writing a prescription ends with the subscription *Signa* (abbreviated *Sig.*), which contains our specific directions to the patient, followed by our signature. Instructing the patient how much drug to take, how to take it, how often to take it, and for how long, are very specific signs of our belief in the effectivity of our prescription - and we seal it with our signature. For Christians, it is interesting that the sign of the cross is a *signum fidei*, a "sign of faith." Indeed, affixing one's name or putting one's mark or stamp on such a document as this is a *saltus*, a leap of faith that smacks of an impossible dream or quest.

Our impossible dream, our quest, may not be so farfetched. Our October 6 call to action was followed by two very significant events: Vice President Leni Robredo's filing her certificate of candidacy for President on October 7,⁷ and Maria Ressa's and Dmitry Muratov's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on October 8 "for their efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace."⁸ For Catholics, October 7 and 8 are the Feasts of Our Lady of the Rosary and Our Lady of Good Remedy,

respectively. Seen through the eyes of faith, Leni's commitment to respond to public clamor and Maria's laurels for her persistence in the face of persecution occurring on these Feasts of our Lady are no coincidence. That two ladies who embody our collective call for justice in the face of tyranny and oppression mark these days under the signs of our Lady may yet be the portent of things to come, of hope that darkness and despair will not prevail. Radical love will bloom as surely as the pink revolution will triumph.

As though the alleged corruption concerning pandemic funds were not enough, even bigger allegations surrounding the Palawan natural gas fields have come to light. While both these issues have devastating effects on our economy and our people, they also have even more far-reaching effects on our environment and health. They respectively represent the massive mismanagement of COVID-19 funds and pollution from COVID-19 related disposables, and the wanton exploitation of our natural resources and potential misuse and gross mismanagement of fossil fuels.

These take place locally just as world leaders meeting for historic climate talks in Glasgow continue their empty pledges without real action. Our governments' failure to cut carbon emissions draws us further away from the crucial 2015 Paris Agreement target of limiting average global temperature rise to 1.5°C, halving global emissions by 2030, and millions will die as our planet is devastated unless we address the climate crisis effectively and avert the "biggest health threat facing humanity."⁹ Poor countries are holding out, while the rich countries hedge. How can poor countries hard hit by climate disasters expect the money and support promised (but not delivered) by industrialized nations that fueled the crisis, when these rich nations have not done their part in helping poor countries survive the current pandemic and prevent future ones?¹⁰ Perhaps like perennial climate talks before it, COP26 will fail. But we nevertheless affixed our signatures to the open letter,⁹ hoping against hope that world leaders will come to their senses and act - before it is too late. On the global stage as in the national arena, we dream the impossible dream.

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