

Title: Berzola vs. Atty. Marlon O. Baldovino: A Milestone in Legal Ethics and Professional Responsibility

Facts:

This case began with the marriage of Edralyn Berzola (Edralyn) and Lawrence Antonio (Lawrence) on January 28, 2002. The marriage was later sought to be nullified by Lawrence, resulting in a void decree by the Regional Trial Court (RTC) of Paniqui, Tarlac on December 9, 2009. Edralyn discovered multiple irregularities regarding the proceedings, including Lawrence's absence from the country during the filing and hearings, and her forged signature on the summons receipt.

Lawrence had been working undocumented in Italy from August 7, 2007, until his return to the Philippines on March 14, 2011. Despite this, Atty. Marlon Baldovino represented Lawrence in the nullity case, claiming Lawrence underwent a psychological examination and was present for the legal proceedings. It was later discovered that the psychologist was unlicensed, and Lawrence's identity and residence were falsely represented.

Edralyn filed a complaint for falsification against Lawrence and Atty. Baldovino before the office of the public prosecutor and subsequently a disbarment complaint against Atty. Baldovino to the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP), presenting evidence of the fraudulent representations.

Atty. Baldovino countered, insisting that a man who identified himself as Lawrence approached him for legal services. The IBP, upon review, recommended Atty. Baldovino's disbarment for his deceitful conduct and unethical practices. This recommendation was later changed by the IBP to a two-year suspension upon Baldovino's motion for reconsideration.

Issues:

1. **Did Atty. Baldovino engage in deceitful conduct in representing Lawrence in the nullity of marriage case?**
2. **Was Atty. Baldovino negligent in verifying the identity of his client and the truthfulness of the statements presented to the court?**
3. **Did the actions of Atty. Baldovino violate the Code of Professional Responsibility and the 2004 Rules on Notarial Practice?**

Court's Decision:

The Supreme Court disbarred Atty. Baldovino, identifying that his actions deliberately obstructed the administration of justice. Key findings include:

1. **Representation of Lawrence**: It was established beyond doubt that Lawrence was not in the Philippines during the filing and decision of the case, making it impossible for the supposed legal proceedings involving him to be legitimate.
2. **Deceitful Conduct**: The court determined that Atty. Baldovino knowingly presented an impostor as Lawrence and a non-registered psychologist as an expert witness, actions that amount to deceitful conduct meriting disbarment.
3. **Code of Professional Responsibility**: Atty. Baldovino's actions breached several canons of the Code, especially those requiring fidelity to the law and upholding the integrity of the profession.
4. **2004 Rules on Notarial Practice**: By notarizing documents without Lawrence's presence, Atty. Baldovino contravened the rules requiring a notary to verify the identity and presence of persons signing documents.

Doctrine:

The Supreme Court reiterated that a lawyer must not engage in unlawful, dishonest, immoral, or deceitful conduct and must uphold the dignity and integrity of the legal profession at all times. Specifically, a lawyer shall not knowingly assist a witness to misrepresent himself or impersonate another.

Class Notes:

- **Legal Representation**: Requires verification of a client's identity and authenticity of statements.
- **Professional Ethics**: Lawyers must adhere strictly to the ethical standards set forth in the Code of Professional Responsibility and the Rules on Notarial Practice.
- **Penalty for Misconduct**: Depending on the gravity of unethical or deceitful conduct, a lawyer may face disbarment, suspension, or other disciplinary actions to protect the integrity of the legal profession and the administration of justice.

Historical Background:

This case highlights the issues of fraudulent legal practices concerning marriage nullification in the Philippines. It underscores the critical role of the legal profession's ethical standards in ensuring justice and maintaining public trust in the legal system.