

MARISSA L. MACARILAY, COMPLAINANT, VS. FELIX B. SERIÑA, RESPONDENT.

A.C. NO. 6591. May 04, 2005

Ponente: PANGANIBAN, J.

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PANGANIBAN, J.:

Failure to render the legal services agreed upon, despite the undisputed receipt of an acceptance fee, is a clear violation of the Code of Professional Responsibility. Negligence in attending to the needs of a client and a deceitful cover-up of such carelessness likewise constitute major breaches of the lawyer's oath.

The Case

Before us is a verified Complaint[1] for "malpractice and/or gross misconduct" against Atty. Felix B. Seriña, filed by Marissa L. Macarilay with the Integrated Bar of the Philippines Commission on Bar Discipline (IBP-CBD) on September 22, 2003.

The IBP-CBD, through Director Rogelio A. Vinluan, required respondent to answer the charges.[2] It thereafter held a mandatory conference/hearing on January 13, 2004, during which the parties were able to enter into a stipulation of facts as well as to present and mark their documentary evidence.[3] After they submitted their respective Position Papers,[4] the case was deemed submitted for resolution.

The investigator of the case, Commissioner Leland R. Villadolid Jr., summarized the antecedents thus:

"Complainant's version of the facts pertinent to this case is as follows:

"Sometime in year 2000, Complainant and one Jenelyn Balaoro ('Balaoro') bought a lot from one Albaria Mohammad ('Mohammad'). Complainant and Balaoro, however, could not register the sale with the Register of Deeds and cause the transfer of the title in their names because Mohammad failed to surrender the owner's duplicate certificate of title for said lot. Subsequently, Complainant learned from one Reina Ong ('Ong') that Mohammad had mortgaged the said lot to a third party. Ong advised Complainant to get a copy of the mortgage contract and to do this the latter needs to have a contact in the Register of Deeds. Sometime in January or February 2002, Ong introduced Complainant to one Vic Paule ('Paule'), an employee of the Register of Deeds of Quezon City, who advised Complainant to get a lawyer to handle the case. Complainant allegedly gave Paule P8,000.00 for the help the latter will give her in securing a copy of the mortgage contract concerned. On March 18, 2002, Complainant, Balaoro and Ong met with Paule at the Star Mall in Mandaluyong and proceeded to the office of Respondent, the lawyer recommended by Paule. During said meeting, Complainant consulted Respondent about the problem concerning the transfer of the subject lot title in her and Balaoro's names and the latter advised that the first thing [they have to do], is to file an adverse claim with the Register of Deeds. Respondent, however, required an acceptance fee of P20,000.00 before he could act on the matter. Thus, on the same day, Complainant issued a check to Respondent for P20,000.00 as payment of the acceptance fee. Subsequently, Respondent asked Complainant for P3,000.00 as notarization fee and P5,000.00 as filing fee for the adverse claim. On April 5, 2002, Complainant and Balaoro went to Respondent's office and paid said amounts. On the same day, Respondent himself typed the affidavit of

adverse claim in the presence of Complainant and Balaoro and the latter subsequently signed the same. On May 16, 2002, upon Respondent's advice, Complainant gave Respondent another P20,000.00 in check as filing fee for the suits to be filed against Mohammad.

"Towards the middle part of the year, Complainant inquired from Respondent about the status of the case(s) against Mohammad but the latter could not give any further developments other than that the affidavit of adverse claim had already been filed with the Register of Deeds. It appears that Respondent was having problems about the fact that Mohammad's whereabouts are unknown and Respondent was not sure what to do about it. Subsequently, Complainant received assurance from Respondent that the case against Mohammad was already filed in court although Respondent could not identify the particular court except that it was pending in the sala of one Judge Regala. Upon verification with the courts and the fiscal's office [at] Quezon City, Complainant learned that no case, whether criminal or civil, was ever filed by Respondent against Mohammad. Complainant then called Respondent regarding her findings and even suggested service of summons by publication upon Mohammad, having receiv[ed] advice from one Atty. Noel Sorreda ("Atty. Sorreda") that such manner of service is appropriate in view of the lack of information regarding Mohammad's whereabouts. Respondent, however, immediately got angry so Complainant did not insist on her inquiries and suggestions.

"On March 24, 2003, upon Complainant's request, Atty. Sorreda called Respondent to inquire about the specific branch where the case against Mohammad was supposedly pending. Respondent got angry and hung up the phone. Upon learning this, Complainant authorized Atty. Sorreda to terminate the services of Respondent on her behalf. Atty. Sorreda called Respondent a second time but was able to talk only with presumably Respondent's lady-receptionist or secretary whom Atty. Sorreda requested to just relay to Respondent his message regarding the termination of Respondent's services. On March 26, 2003, Atty. Sorreda, upon Complainant's request, sent a letter to Respondent confirming the verbal termination of services, and also asking for the turnover of the pertinent documents that were with Respondent. Subsequently, Complainant herself wrote Respondent a letter affirming the contents of the earlier letter of Atty. Sorreda. In a letter dated April 4, 2003, Respondent denied the fact of his termination by Atty. Sorreda and invited Complainant to his office to talk things over. Complainant responded through Atty. Sorreda in a letter dated May 16, 2003 by reiterating the termination of Respondent's services and the request for the turnover of documents. In a letter dated May 23, 2003, Respondent enclosed the documents requested. Since it appears from the documents turned over that Respondent never filed a suit against Mohammad, Complainant wrote Respondent demanding the return of the money she paid for the anticipated legal services Respondent was supposed to render but which were not actually rendered. Respondent's failure to respond to said letter prompted Complainant [to] send a follow-up letter dated July 16, 2003. Instead of returning the money, Respondent wrote Complainant a letter dated July 14, 2003 denying receipt of any amount from Complainant other than the P20,000.00 acceptance fee and demanding payment of alleged unpaid attorney's fee of P40,000 and fees for notarial services of P3,000.00 which Respondent allegedly advanced for Complainant. Thus, Complainant filed the present administrative case for disciplinary action, likewise praying for the return of the money she paid for the anticipated legal services Respondent was supposed to render but which were not actually rendered.

"On the other hand, Respondent's version of the facts pertinent to this case is as follows:

"On March 16, 2002, Complainant, Balaoro and Ong went to Respondent's office during which Complainant related to Respondent her various problems and cases. Respondent advised Complainant that the solutions to her problem regarding Mohammad consist of two (2) phases. The first phase consists of: (1) having the notary public of the deed covering the sale of the subject property sign the acknowledgment page (since although the said deed contained the notarial seal of said notary, the latter did not sign the same); (2) preparing a complaint in court to compel Mohammad to surrender the owner's certificate of title; and (3) executing an affidavit of adverse claim to cause its inscription on the copy of the said title in the Registry of Deeds to protect their

interest. The second [phase] consists of: (1) filing the complaint in court to compel Mohammad to surrender the owner's duplicate certificate of title, to cause the cancellation of said title and the issuance of another title in the names of Complainant and Balaoro, and to cause the removal from said title of the mortgage lien thereon in favor of Hernando and Nenita Rosario; and (2) filing of a criminal complaint for estafa against Mohammad. On the same day, Complainant engaged Respondent to provide the legal services to pursue the foregoing remedies. The parties' verbal agreement with respect to Respondent's fees is as follows: (1) payment of acceptance fee of P20,000.00; (2) payment of attorney's fees of P15,000 after Respondent has accomplished the first [phase] of the remedies; (3) payment of attorney's fees of P15,000 after Respondent has accomplished the second [phase] of the remedies; and (4) for hearings/follow-ups, payment of per appearance fee of P3,000.00. Complainant paid the acceptance fee by issuing Respondent a check dated March 18, 2002 covering P20,000.00.

"Thereafter, Respondent caused the notary public whose seal appeared on the deed covering the sale of the subject property to sign the acknowledgment page thereof, advancing the notarial fee of P3,000.00 which Complainant failed to pay for which reason said notary did not sign said deed. On April 5, 2002, Complainant and Balaoro went to his office and signed the affidavit of adverse claim, which Respondent prepared. On the same date, Respondent requested Complainant and Balaoro to sign the civil complaint and criminal complaint against Mohammad which Respondent prepared but Complainant and Balaoro refused to sign because according to the latter two the residence of Mohammad in said complaints is already wrong since Mohammad's whereabouts are already unknown. Complainant and Balaoro promised to locate Mohammad's whereabouts and asked Respondent to wait for such data. Thereafter, Respondent even advised Complainant and Balaoro to locate Mohammad because resorting to the remedy of complaint and summons by publication is very expensive and should be resorted to only as a last recourse. Respondent adds that even as late as January 8, 2003, the civil and criminal complaints could not be filed because Complainant herself wanted Respondent to amend the pleadings by including an additional defendant or respondent and increasing the claim, for damages.

"Respondent further claims that he also extensively gave legal advise to Complainant with respect to the following matters: (1) Complainant's litigation against spouses Casido to recover her 10% retention in architect's fee; (2) collection of P800,000.00 indebtedness of one Mrs. Dizon; and (3) recovery of Complainant's investments in her 2001 and 2002 car transactions.

"Claiming that Complainant did not pay him any amount other than the P20,000.00 acceptance fee, Respondent argues that Complainant still owes him the following amounts: (1) the P3,000.00 he paid to the notary public to sign the acknowledgment page of the deed covering the sale of the subject property; (2) the P200 he spent in the notarization, registration and inscription of the affidavit of adverse claim; (3) the P15,000.00 attorney's fees agreed upon for accomplishing the first [phase] of Complainant's remedies relative to her problem with Mohammad; and (4) an additional P40,000.00 for the legal services he rendered with respect to Complainant's other problems. Respondent further claims that Complainant should pay him the costs relative to the filing of this administrative case."^[5]

Report of the Investigating Commissioner

In the investigating commissioner's opinion, respondent had been remiss in attending to the cause of his client, in violation of Rules 18.03 and 18.04 of the Code of Professional Responsibility. Regarded as a mere afterthought was his defense that his failure to file the civil and the criminal complaints was the fault of complainant. It was noted that if she was indeed responsible for the non-filing of the complaints, he should have pointed out this fault at the earliest opportunity, which was in his April 4, 2003 letter. The commissioner further opined that this defense had been invoked only in respondent's letter dated July 14, 2003, after complainant demanded the return of the amounts she had paid.

While likewise rejecting respondent's claim for unpaid legal fees amounting to P15,000, the commissioner upheld

Balaoro's sworn testimony. It corroborated that of complainant, who had said that the only agreement between her and respondent was the acceptance fee of P20,000. His claim of P40,000 as consultation fee for the advice he had allegedly given her concerning other legal problems was also rejected for lack of evidence.

Commissioner Villadolid then wrote the following recommendation:

"x x x [T]his Commissioner finds that Respondent violated Canons 17 and 18 of the CPR and recommends a penalty of reprimand or suspension subject to the discretion of the Commission.

Further, considering that it is established from the records that Respondent received a total of P48,000.00 from Complainant and that the only legal service rendered by Respondent consists of the notarization of the deed of sale covering the subject property and the filing of the adverse claim, this Commissioner believes that P8,000.00 is sufficient compensation for the services actually rendered and thus recommends that Respondent be ordered to pay Complainant P40,000.00 by way of restitution to Complainant."[6]

Acting on the above recommendation, the IBP board of governors approved on July 30, 2004, the following Resolution:

"RESOLUTION NO. XVI-2004-386

CBD Case No. 03-1141

Marissa L. Macarilay vs.

Atty. Felix B. Serina

RESOLVED to ADOPT and APPROVE, as it is hereby ADOPTED and APPROVED, with modification, the Report and Recommendation of the Investigating Commissioner of the above-entitled case, herein made part of this Resolution as Annex "A"; and, finding the recommendation fully supported by the evidence on record and the applicable laws and rules, and for respondent's violation of Canons 17 and 18 of the Code of Professional Responsibility by his failure to exercise due diligence in protecting and attending to the interest of complainant after receiving payment for the legal services he was supposed to render, Atty. Felix B. Serina is hereby SUSPENDED from the practice of law for six (6) months and Ordered to Pay complainant P40,000.00 by way of Restitution."[7]

The Court's Ruling

We agree with the foregoing Resolution of the IBP board of governors.

Administrative Liability

A lawyer-client relationship is highly fiduciary in nature;[8] it is delicate, exacting and confidential.[9] It requires a high standard of conduct and demands utmost fidelity, candor, fairness, and good faith.[10] The legal profession demands vigilance and attention expected of a "good father of a family." [11] Lawyers should adopt the norm expected of people of good intentions. In brief, they must always be protective of the interests of their clients as good parents would be protective of their own families.[12]

Indeed, under their sacred oath, lawyers pledge not to delay any person for money or malice. They are bound to conduct themselves according to the best of their knowledge and discretion, with all good fidelity to their clients.[13]

These duties are further stressed in the Code of Professional Responsibility, specifically in the following pertinent provisions:

"CANON 15 – A lawyer shall observe candor, fairness and loyalty in all his dealings and transactions with his clients.

"CANON 16 – A lawyer shall hold in trust all moneys and properties of his client that may come into his possession.

x x x x x x x x

"Rule 16.03 – A lawyer shall deliver the funds and property of his client when due or upon demand. x x x.

"CANON 17 – A lawyer owes fidelity to the cause of his client and he shall be mindful of the trust and confidence reposed in him.

"CANON 18 – A lawyer shall serve his client with competence and diligence.

x x x x x x x x

"Rule 18.03 – A lawyer shall not neglect a legal matter entrusted to him and his negligence in connection therewith shall render him liable.

"Rule 18.04 – A lawyer shall keep the client informed of the status of his case and shall respond within a reasonable time to the client's request for information."

Admittedly, respondent received the amount of P20,000 as acceptance fee for the cases he had agreed to file on behalf of complainant. Plainly, he was less than candid in his dealings with his client; he displayed lack of honesty and fidelity to her cause. Sufficiently established were the following acts: (1) despite his receipt on May 16, 2002, of P20,000 for filing fees, he did not file the cases he had agreed to handle; (2) he deceived complainant when he lied by saying that a civil complaint had been filed in the sala of one "Judge Regala" of the Regional Trial Court of Quezon City; (3) respondent refused to return the money he had received for the filing fees. These misrepresentations, lies and lapses constituted a breach of his sworn duty as a lawyer and of the ethical standards he was required to honor and observe.

Lawyers owe full devotion to the protection of the interests of their clients, as well as warmth and zeal in the defense of the latter's rights.[14] Once they agree to handle a case, lawyers are bound to give to it their utmost attention, skill and competence, regardless of its significance.[15] Public interest requires that they exert their best efforts and use all their learning and ability in the speedy prosecution or defense of the client's cause.[16] Those who perform that duty with diligence and candor not only safeguard the interests of the client, but also serve the ends of justice.[17] They do honor to the bar and help maintain the community's respect for the legal profession.[18]

Moreover, the lawyer-client relationship, being one of confidence, requires lawyers to give the client timely, adequate and truthful updates on the developments of the case.[19] In this manner, the trust and faith of clients in their counsel would remain unimpaired.

Indeed, respondent neglected a legal matter entrusted to him by failing to file the complaints as he was supposed to. Unbelievable is his claim that the complaints were ready as early as April 5, 2002, but that these were not filed anyway because complainant had refused to sign them, absent the correct address of the defendant (Albaria Mohammad).

First, evidence abound that it was complainant who was insistent that the cases be filed. She repeatedly inquired about the case, but respondent would not give her any clear answer. Later on, he lied to her by saying that the complaint was pending in the sala of one Judge Regala. His deception on top of his failure to file the cases were raised in the letter dated March 26, 2003,[20] written by Atty. Noel Sorreda, her new counsel. In his April 4, 2003 reply,[21] respondent did not mention anything about the complaints that had allegedly been prepared as early as April 5, 2002. Commissioner Villadolid aptly observed in his Report:

"x x x The fact that respondent's 4 April 2003 letter-response to said letter, as well as respondent's subsequent letter dated 23 May 2003, did not contain either gives further credence to complainant's version of the facts. Notably, it was only in respondent's letter dated 14 July 2003 that respondent raised such defenses for the first time. Considering that said 14 July 2003 letter was in response to complainant's 28 June 2003 letter demanding the return of certain amounts for legal services which complainant believed respondent did not render, this Commissioner is inclined to believe that such defenses are mere afterthought to defeat complainant's claim for the return of said amounts."

Were it not for the vigilance of complainant in inquiring about the status of her cases, she would not have known that the complaints had not been filed at all. Respondent deliberately withheld informing her of his inaction, notwithstanding her repeated follow-ups. Thus, he is deemed to have wronged her and effectively betrayed the trust she had placed in him.

Second, his alleged lack of knowledge of the correct address of the defendant is not a hindrance to the filing of a complaint. Indeed, such address is material to the service of summons[22] which, however, presupposes that a complaint has been properly filed in court. Furthermore, Section 14 of Rule 14 of the Rules of Court[23] provides for remedies when the defendant's address is unknown. Thus, respondent should have nevertheless filed the complaint, especially because complainant had already given him payment for the filing fees. His attempt to cover up his negligence by wrongfully shifting the blame to her cannot be countenanced by this Court.

Finally, respondent should have returned the money to complainant following his failure to file the cases.[24] Where the client gives money to the lawyer for a specific purpose -- such as to file an action or to appeal an adverse judgment -- the latter should, upon failure to do so, immediately return it to the former.[25] The unjustified withholding of funds belonging to the client warrants the imposition of disciplinary action against the lawyer.[26]

It was sufficiently proven that, all in all, complainant had paid respondent P48,000:

"Similarly, a review of the records reveals that contrary to Respondent's claim, in addition to the P20,000.00 covered by the check dated 18 March 2002 which complainant paid during the parties' initial meeting, complainant made subsequent payments to respondent. Balaoro confirms that when she and complainant went back to respondent's office on 5 April 2002, complainant paid respondent P3,000.00 and P5,000.00 in cash. Another P20,000.00 was likewise paid to respondent as evidenced by the RCBC check dated 16 May 2002 issued by complainant to respondent." [27]

Likewise established was the obvious fact that the only legal service rendered by respondent consisted of the notarization of the Deed of Sale covering the property purchased by complainant and the filing of the adverse claim. We agree with Commissioner Villadolid that P8,000 was sufficient compensation for the services actually rendered. Hence, respondent must return to complainant the balance of P40,000 plus legal interest.

The failure of respondent to discharge his duty properly constitutes an infringement of ethical standards and of his oath. Such failure makes him answerable not just to his client, but also to this Court, to the legal profession, and to the general public.[28] The recommended penalty of suspension from the practice of law for six months is in accordance with jurisprudence.[29]

WHEREFORE, Atty. Felix B. Serina is found GUILTY of violating Canons 15, 16, 17 and 18 of the Code of Professional Responsibility and is hereby SUSPENDED from the practice of law for a period of six (6) months, effective upon his receipt of this Decision. He is further ORDERED to return to Marissa L. Macarilay, within thirty (30) days from notice, the amount of P40,000, with interest at 6 percent per annum from May 16, 2002, until full payment. Let copies of this Decision be furnished all courts as well as the Office of the Bar Confidant,

which is instructed to include a copy in respondent's personal file.

SO ORDERED.

Sandoval-Gutierrez, Corona, Carpio-Morales, and Garcia, JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 1-5.

[2] See Order dated September 22, 2003; *id.*, p. 21.

[3] See Order dated January 15, 2004; *id.*, pp. 53-54.

[4] The parties' respective Position Papers were filed on February 9, 2004. Complainant's Position Paper; *id.*, pp. 57-73. Respondent's Position Paper; *id.*, pp. 81-94.

[5] Report dated April 13, 2004, pp. 1-7.

[6] Report of Commissioner Leland R. Villadolid Jr., pp. 13-14.

[7] Notice of Resolution. Original in italics.

[8] *Igual v. Javier*, 254 SCRA 416, March 7, 1996.

[9] *Barnachea v. Quiocho*, 399 SCRA 1, March 11, 2003.

[10] *Igual v. Javier*, *supra*.

[11] *Pariñas v. Paguinto*, 434 SCRA 179, July 13, 2004.

[12] *Gonzales v. Court of Appeals*, 402 SCRA 247, April 30, 2003.

[13] *De Guzman v. Basa*, 433 SCRA 1, June 29, 2004; *Ong v. Grijaldo*, 402 SCRA 1, April 30, 2003.

[14] *Cheng v. Agravante*, 426 SCRA 42, March 23, 2004; *Emiliano Court Townhouses Homeowners Association v. Dioneda*, 399 SCRA 296, March 20, 2003; *Perea v. Almadro*, 399 SCRA 322, March 20, 2003; *Reontoy v. Atty. Ibadlit*, 349 Phil. 1, January 28, 1998.

[15] *Barbuco v. Beltran*, 436 SCRA 57, August 11, 2004; *Cuizon v. Macalino*, 433 SCRA 479, July 7, 2004; *De Guzman v. Basa*, *supra*; *Jardin v. Villar Jr.*, 410 SCRA 1, August 28, 2003; *Sencio v. Calvadores*, 395 SCRA 393, January 20, 2003; *In re: Atty. David Briones*, 415 Phil. 203, August 15, 2001.

[16] *Pariñas v. Paguinto*, 434 SCRA 179, July 13, 2004.

[17] *Endaya v. Oca*, 410 SCRA 244, September 3, 2003; *Burbe v. Magulta*, 383 SCRA 276, June 10, 2002.

[18] *Ibid*; *ibid*.

[19] *Fajardo v. De la Torre*, 427 SCRA 125, April 14, 2004 (citing *Garcia v. Manuel*, 395 SCRA 386, January 20, 2003; *Mejares v. Romana*, 425 SCRA 577, March 17, 2004; *Atty. Navarro v. Atty. Meneses III*, 349 Phil. 520, January 30, 1998).

[20] Rollo, p. 7.

[21] *Id.*, p. 9.

[22] §1, Rule 14 of the Rules of Court, provides that "upon the filing of the complaint and the payment of the

requisite legal fees, the clerk of court shall forthwith issue the corresponding summons to the defendants."

[23] "Sec. 14 [of Rule 14]. Service upon defendant whose identity or whereabouts are unknown. – In any action where the defendant is designated as an unknown owner, or the like, or whenever his whereabouts are unknown and cannot be ascertained by diligent inquiry, service may, by leave of court, be effected upon him by publication in a newspaper of general circulation and in such places and for such time as the court may order."

[24] Sencio v. Calvadores, *supra*.

[25] Pariñas v. Paguinto, *supra*; De Guzman v. Basa, *supra* (citing Lothar Schulz v. Atty. Marcelo G. Flores, 417 SCRA 159, December 8, 2003; Tan v. Lapak, 350 SCRA 74, January 23, 2001). See also Barnachea v. Quiocho, *supra*, wherein the Court ruled that money entrusted to the lawyer for the registration of a Deed with the Register of Deeds and for expenses and fees for the transfer of title to real property under the name of the client, if not utilized, must be returned immediately to his client upon demand.

[26] De Guzman v. Basa, *supra*; Sencio v. Calvadores, *supra*.

[27] Report of Commissioner Leland R. Villadolid Jr., p. 10.

[28] Emiliano Court Townhouses Homeowners Association v. Dioneda, *supra*.

[29] Pariñas v. Paguinto, *supra*; Mejares v. Romana, *supra*; Emiliano Court Townhouses Homeowners Association v. Dioneda, *supra*; Sencio v. Calvadores, *supra*; Garcia v. Manuel, *supra*; Pilapil v. Carillo, 395 SCRA 152, January 14, 2003; Rabanal v. Tugade, 383 SCRA 484, June 20, 2002.

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