OFFICE OF THE COURT ADMINISTRATOR, COMPLAINANT, VS. JUDGE SILVERIO Q. CASTILLO, RTC, BR. 43, DAGUPAN CITY, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. RTJ-01-1634 (Related to A.M. No. 96-12-426-RTC). October 25, 2001

Ponente: PUNO, J.

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PUNO, J.:

The instant administrative matter arose from the judicial audit and physical inventory of records conducted by the complainant Office of the Court Administrator during the period September 16 to 20, 1996 in all the branches of the Regional Trial Court of Dagupan City. The respondent Hon. Silverio Q. Castillo is the presiding judge of the court's Branch 43.

Based on the written report[1] submitted by Senior Deputy Court Administrator Reynaldo R. Suarez to then Chief Justice Andres R. Narvasa, it appears that the respondent failed to decide LRC Case No. D-2050 entitled "Registration of Title - National Land Titles, SGMC, Applicant" within the 90-day reglementary period.[2] Consequently, on January 21, 1997, we issued a resolution directing the respondent, within five days from notice, to: "(a) render the decision in LRC Case No. D-2050 which is already beyond the 90-day reglementary period and to submit proof of such disposal and (b) explain in writing, also within the same period, why no disciplinary action should be taken against him for his failure to decide the aforesaid case within the prescribed period."[3]

In compliance with our January 21 Resolution, the respondent offered the following explanation:

> "a. On 23 July 1998, this Honorable Court has decided LRC Case No. D-2050; (See Annex A-1)
>
> b. On 07 September 1998, said case was appealed to the Court of Appeals; (See Annex A-1)
>
> c. On same date, the then Clerk of Court V, Atty. Rafael T. Martinez forwarded to the Court of Appeals the entire records of the above-entitled case. (See Annex B)"[4]

The Office of the Court Administrator, however, found the aforestated explanation as insufficient compliance. It noted, in a memorandum dated May 22, 2001 for Chief Justice Hilario G. Davide, Jr., that while the respondent asserted that a decision has already been rendered in the case, he failed to account for the delay in its rendition, thus:

> " x x x. Although LRC Case No. D-2050 was decided on 23 July 1998, such decision was rendered way beyond the 90-day reglementary period. The report of the audit team stated that this case was submitted for decision on 12 December 1995. The 90-day period to decide the case lapsed on 12 March 1996. It is obvious that, there was a delay of 2 years and 4 months in deciding the subject case. Judge Castillo did not state in his report the reason or justification for the said delay.
>
> Clearly, Judge Castillo's failure to decide the subject case without stating any reason or justification is an act amounting to a neglect of duty or inefficiency. x x x"[5]

It thereafter recommended that an appropriate administrative sanction be imposed against him.

Acting on the said recommendation, we resolved, on July 10, 2001, to "RE-DOCKET the failure of Judge Silverio Q. Castillo, RTC, Branch 43, Dagupan City, to decide LRC Case No. D-2050 as A.M. No. RTJ-01-1634 (Office of the Court Administrator vs. Judge Silverio Q. Castillo, RTC, Branch 43, Dagupan City)."[6] In addition, we resolved further to "REFER A.M. No. RTJ-01-1634 to Associate Justice Presbitero Velasco, Court of Appeals, for investigation, report and recommendation thereon within sixty (60) days from receipt of the records thereof."[7]

On September 24, 2001, the OCA, through Attys. Vener B. Pimentel and Amelito O. Bugtas, filed a "Manifestation/Motion"[8] praying for the dismissal of the case. The two lawyers found after a careful study that the land registration case was actually submitted for decision only on June 24, 1998 after the completion of the ex-parte hearings. The decision was handed down on July 23, 1998 or within the prescribed term.

The very next day, on September 25, 2001, Investigating Justice Hon. Martin S. Villarama Jr. of the Court of Appeals, who took over the investigation of the case from Justice Velasco in view of the latter's appointment as the new Court Administrator, granted the said "Manifestation/Motion" and accordingly recommended that the present administrative case against the respondent be dismissed, for lack of merit.[9]

We agree with, and hereby adopt, the recommendation.

Article VIII, Section 15 (1) of the Constitution[10] requires judges of lower courts to decide cases or resolve matters within three months from the date of their submission for resolution.[11] Canon 3, Rule 3.05 of the Code of Judicial Conduct[12] similarly enjoins judges to dispose of their business and decide cases within the required period.[13] Failure to do so promptly and expeditiously constitutes gross inefficiency and warrants the imposition of administrative sanctions on them.[14]

There is no gainsaying, however, that the ninety-day period applies only after the case is submitted for decision, not from the start of the trial.[15] A case or matter shall be deemed submitted for decision or resolution upon the filing of the last pleading, brief or memorandum required by the Rules of Court or by the court itself.[16]

In the administrative matter before us, based on OCA's own findings, LRC Case No. D-2050 was considered submitted for decision only on June 24, 1998 after the completion of the ex-parte hearings conducted on April 17 and June 24, 1998. During those hearings, the applicant presented its evidence. By July 23, 1998, the respondent rendered his Decision on the case "ordering and decreeing the registration and confirmation of the parcel of land to the applicant." To be sure, no delay can be imputed against him as he was in fact able to dispose of the pending case in just twenty-nine (29) days (or less than a month), way ahead of the ninety-day period mandated by law.

Again, we take this occasion to remind judges that the public trust character of their office imposes upon them the highest degree of duty and responsibility.[17] They should always be imbued with a high sense of duty and responsibility in the discharge of their obligation to promptly administer justice.[18] The trial court judge, being the paradigm of justice in the first instance, is exhorted to dispose of the court's business within the required periods. Delay results in undermining the people's faith in the judiciary from whom the prompt hearing of their supplications is anticipated and expected, and reinforces in the mind of litigants that the wheels of justice grind ever so slowly.[19]

IN VIEW WHEREOF, the present administrative case is hereby DISMISSED for lack of merit.

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SO ORDERED.

Davide, Jr., C.J., Bellosillo, Melo, Kapunan, Mendoza, Panganiban, Quisumbing, Pardo, Buena, Ynares-Santiago, De Leon, Jr., and Sandoval-Gutierrez, JJ., concur.
Vitug, J., on official leave.

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[1] Report on the Judicial Audit Conducted in all the Branches of the RTC of Dagupan City; Rollo, pp. 1-19.

[2] Report, p. 6; Rollo, p. 6.

[3] Resolution, A. M. No. 96-12-426-RTC, January 21, 1997; Rollo, pp. 20-23.

[4] Compliance; Rollo, pp. 33-34.

[5] Memorandum, Re: A.M. No. 96-12-426-RTC, Office of the Court Administrator; Rollo, pp. 39-44.

[6] Resolution, July 10, 2001; Rollo p. 45.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Manifestation/Motion; Rollo, p. 55.

[9] Report and Recommendation; Rollo, p. 61.

[10] Section 15. (1) All cases or matters filed after the effectivity of this Constitution must be decided or resolved within twenty-four months from date of submission for the Supreme Court, and, unless reduced by the Supreme Court, twelve months for all lower collegiate courts, and three months for all other lower courts.

[11] Adao v. Lorenzo, 316 SCRA 570 (1999).

[12] Rule 3.05. A judge shall dispose of the court's business promptly and decide cases within the required periods.

[13] Report on the Judicial Audit Conducted in RTC, Brs. 29, 56, and 57, Libanan, Camarines Sur, 316 SCRA 272 (1999).

[14] Office of the Court Administrator v. Quinanola, 317 SCRA 37 (1999).

[15] People v. Sesbreño, 314 SCRA 87 (1999).

[16] Article VIII, Section 15(2), 1987 Constitution.

[17] Re: Inventory of Cases in the RTC, Branch 11, Balayan, Batangas, 234 SCRA 502 (1994).

[18] Office of the Court Administrator v. Benedicto, 296 SCRA 62 (1998).

[19] Casia v. Gestopa, Jr., 312 SCRA 204 (1999).

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