OFFICE OF THE COURT ADMINISTRATOR, COMPLAINANT, VS. HON. LEODEGARIO C. QUILATAN, FORMER JUDGE, METROPOLITAN TRIAL COURT, BRANCH 57, SAN JUAN CITY, RESPONDENT.

A.M. No. MTJ-09-1745. September 27, 2010

Ponente: VELASCO JR., J.

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VELASCO JR., J.:

This refers to the Memorandum Report dated September 22, 2009 of the Office of the Court Administrator (OCA) in connection with the request of former Judge Leodegario C. Quilatan, Metropolitan Trial Court (MeTC), Branch 57, San Juan City, Metro Manila, for certificate of clearance in support of his application for compulsory retirement benefits under Republic Act No. 910,[1] as amended, effective July 21, 2003.[2]

Based on the monthly report of cases for May 2009, Judge Quilatan had left forty-eight (48) cases (all criminal) submitted for decision at the time of his retirement. Of the said number, thirty-four (34) cases were already beyond the reglementary period to decide and no reason or explanation is indicated in the monthly report for this occurrence.[3]

Upon evaluation, the OCA found Judge Quilatan liable for gross inefficiency for failure to decide the 34 cases submitted for decision within the required period. The OCA recommended that the case be re-docketed as a regular administrative matter and that the erring judge be fined fifty thousand pesos (PhP 50,000).[4]

Acting on the said recommendation, the Court, in a Resolution dated October 6, 2009, re-docketed the case as a regular administrative matter and required Judge Quilatan to manifest whether he would submit the case for resolution based on the pleadings filed.[5] Judge Quilatan failed to file a manifestation; thus, he is deemed to have waived the filing of his manifestation.

We adopt the findings and recommendation of the OCA.

No less than the 1987 Constitution, specifically Section 15(1), Article VIII, mandates lower courts to decide or resolve all cases or matters within three (3) months from their date of submission. In relation to this mandate, the Code of Judicial Conduct directs judges to dispose of their business promptly and decide cases within the required period. The Court, in Administrative Circular No. 3-99 dated January 15, 1999, likewise requires judges to scrupulously observe the periods provided in the Constitution.[6] Failure to decide cases within the reglementary period, without strong and justifiable reason, constitutes gross inefficiency warranting the imposition of an administrative sanction on the defaulting judge.[7]

We have repeatedly emphasized the need for judges to resolve their cases with dispatch.[8] Delay does not only constitute a serious violation of the parties' constitutional right to speedy disposition of cases,[9] it also erodes the faith and confidence of the people in the judiciary, lowers its standards, and brings it into disrepute.[10]

Without doubt, Judge Quilatan violated his mandate when he failed to decide 34 cases within three (3) months from their submission, for which he should be administratively sanctioned.

Under the Revised Rules of Court, undue delay in rendering a decision is a less serious offense punishable by suspension from office without salary and other benefits for not less than one (1) month nor more than three (3) months, or a fine of more than PhP 10,000 but not exceeding PhP 20,000.[11]

There were cases, however, in which the Court did not strictly apply the Rules, imposing fines below or more than the maximum amount allowed, [12] thus:

> In two cases, we imposed a fine of five thousand pesos (P5,000) on a judge who was suffering from cancer, for failing to decide five (5) cases within the reglementary period and failing to decide pending incidents in nine (9) cases; and on a judge who suffered from a serious illness diagnosed as "end stage renal disease secondary to nephrosclerosis," who in fact died barely a year after his retirement, for his failure to decide several criminal and civil cases submitted for decision or resolution and to act upon over a hundred criminal and civil cases assigned to the two branches in which he was presiding. In other cases, the fines were variably set at more than the maximum amount when the undue delay was coupled with other offenses. In one case, the judge was fined twenty-five thousand pesos (P25,000) for undue delay in rendering a ruling and for making a grossly and patently erroneous decision. In another case, the judge was fined forty thousand pesos (P40,000) for deciding a case only after an undue delay of one (1) year and six (6) months and for simple misconduct and gross ignorance of the law, considering also that said undue delay was his second offense. Finally, the fine of forty thousand pesos (P40,000) was also imposed in a case for the judge's failure to resolve one (1) motion, considering that he was already previously penalized in two cases for violating the Code of Judicial Conduct and for Gross Ignorance of Procedural Law and Unreasonable Delay. (citations omitted)

In this case, the OCA called our attention to the Resolution dated April 28, 2009 in A.M. No. 09-4-175-RTC (Re: Cases Submitted for Decision Before Hon. Bayani Isamu Y. Ilano, Former Judge, Regional Trial Court, Branch 71, Antipolo City), wherein we imposed a fine of PhP 50,000 for Judge Ilano's failure to decide within the reglementary period 34 cases submitted for decision prior to his date of retirement. We imposed the same penalty in another case for the judge's failure to decide 43 unexplained cases submitted for decision within the reglementary period.[13] Since Judge Quilatan failed to decide 34 cases, a fine of PhP 50,000 is proper in line with prevailing jurisprudence.

WHEREFORE, the Court adjudges Judge Leodegario C. Quilatan, MeTC, Branch 57, San Juan City, Metro Manila, GUILTY of gross inefficiency. He is hereby meted the penalty of FINE in the amount of PhP 50,000 to be deducted from his retirement/gratuity benefits.

SO ORDERED.

Corona, C.J., Carpio, Carpio Morales, Velasco, Jr., Nachura, Leonardo-De Castro, Brion, Peralta, Bersamin, Del Castillo, Abad, Villarama, Jr., Perez,* Mendoza, and Sereno, JJ.

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* No part.

[1] Providing for the Retirement of Justices and All Judges in the Judiciary.

[2] In the attached Certification dated May 10, 2007, Eleanor A. Sorio, Clerk of Court of Branch 57, MeTC San Juan, certified that Judge Quilatan's last day in office was July 13, 2001 as he suffered a stroke on July 15, 2001 incapacitating him to resume office.

[3] Rollo, p. 2

[4] Id. at 3.

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[5] Id. at 8.

[6] Re: Cases Submitted for Decision Before Hon. Meliton G. Emuslan, Former Judge, Regional Trial Court, Branch 47, Urdaneta City, Pangasinan, A.M. No. RTJ-10-2226 (Formerly A.M. No. 10-1-24-RTC), March 22, 2010.

[7] Re: Judicial Audit Conducted in the Regional Trial Court, Branch 6, Tacloban City, A.M. No. RTJ-09-2171 (Formerly A.M. No. 09-94-RTC), March 17, 2009, 581 SCRA 585, 592; citation omitted.

[8] Report on the Judicial Audit Conducted in the RTC, Branch 22, Kabacan, North Cotabato, A.M. No. 02-8-441-RTC, March 3, 2004, 424 SCRA 206.

[9] Re: Judicial Audit Conducted in the Regional Trial Court, Branch 6, Tacloban City, supra note 8.

[10] Report on the Judicial Audit Conducted in the RTC, Branch 22, Kabacan, North Cotabato, supra note 9.

[11] RULES OF COURT, Rule 140, Secs. 9(1) & 11(B), as amended by A.M. No. 01-8-10-SC, effective October 1, 2001.

[12] Office of the Court Administrator v. Judge Aniceto L. Madronio Sr., Former Acting Presiding Judge, MCTC, San Fabian-San Jacinto, Pangasinan, A.M. No. MTJ-04-1571 (Formerly A.M. No. 03-9-209-MCTC), February 14, 2005, 451 SCRA 207, 213-215.

[13] Re: Cases Submitted for Decision Before Hon. Meliton G. Emuslan, Former Judge, Regional Trial Court, Branch 47, Urdaneta City, Pangasinan, supra note 6.

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