

'Tita Cory is still with us'—former aide

False news of death sends people crying

by TINA SANTOS AND ALLISON LOPEZ
Inquirer.net

MANILA – Yellow ribbons to honor the cancer-stricken Corazon Aquino were seen Friday in various parts of the country, but the public was jarred by false text messages saying she had passed on.

The healing Mass offered at noon for the former President at the Manila City Hall – the last of five organized by the city government – was interrupted by a somber announcement made by retired Supreme Court Associate Justice Adolf Azcuna.

"We just received news that Tita Cory has passed away," Azcuna, who served as Aquino's chief legal adviser during her term in 1986-92, told the crowd that packed Bulwagang Antonio Villegas shortly before the Mass ended.

His announcement, which was followed by "The Prayer of Entrustment of the Dead to God" by Fr. Mark Munda, the Mass celebrant, caused those present to break into tears.

But another announcement was subsequently made, this time by Aquino's former appointments secretary Margie Juico.

"It's not true. Tita Cory is still very much alive, so please stop circulating rumors like that," a tearful Juico said, eliciting applause and sighs of relief from the crowd.

Juico said she had just arrived from the Makati Medical Center, where Aquino, 76, has been confined for a month now, when Azcuna made the announcement. She said she was surprised to hear the news, and that she immediately phoned one of Aquino's daughters, Pinky Abellada, who told her it was not true.

Just sleeping

Later, Juico told reporters: "I just came from the hospital [where] we prayed the rosary. Tita Cory is still very much with us; she's just in a deep sleep."

"I hope you will stop speculating and just wait for news from the family. Nothing can be more credible than words coming from the family. Let's just respect that and continue praying for her."

Azcuna's spokesperson Deedee Siytangco also said the text messages were not true.

Siytangco said she was in constant touch with the Aquino children, and that she last spoke with Pinky Abellada at noon Friday.

"I told her I was going out for the weekend, and Pinky said I should get a break, that there's nothing to worry about," Siytangco said.

A flurry of visitors flocked to the Makati Medical Center amid the wild rumors that Aquino had died.

Manila Mayor Alfredo Lim was the first to arrive at 1:30pm since the text messages made the rounds. Before leaving at around 2:10pm, he said

Aquino was "okay and only sleeping."

Family statement

Tighter security was imposed and identified members of the media were barred from entering the hospital.

All throughout the afternoon, a steady stream of visitors, including Quezon City Mayor Sonny Belmonte, Optical Media Board chair Edu Manzano and Bishop Soc Villegas, were seen going inside.

It was the first time the Aquinos entertained visitors other than family members.

At around 4pm, Dr. Eric Nubla, chief of the patient relations department, read a statement from the family:

"[We] appreciate expressions of support from the public, but would like to request that only announcements from the five children and the grandsons be given credence by the public and the media."

Lim asked for prayers from the public, saying these were "needed more right now."

At around 5:30pm, the Inquirer saw five uniformed policemen outside the lobby – an unusual sight because only security guards had heretofore been posted at the hospital's perimeter.

It was quiet on the ninth floor where, observing from a distance, the Inquirer saw Siytangco, Juico and Aquino nephew Rafael Lopa as they came and went.

Lopa seemed composed, but a woman who hugged him looked like she had been crying.

Baby James Yap, Aquino's grandson by youngest daughter Kris, romped in the corridor with his nanny, oblivious to what was happening around him.

Hospital security guards and the family's personal bodyguards closely monitored the ninth floor to ensure privacy for the Aquinos.

Mayor Jejomar Binay, who was installed as Makati chief during Aquino's term, Friday announced that nine-day healing Masses would be celebrated next week.

The noon Masses are to be held starting on Tuesday.

Apology

At the Manila City Hall, Azcuna apologized for the false alarm. He said he had been "hesitant to make the announcement but was urged to do so by Aquino's close friends who had received 'Cory is dead' text messages."

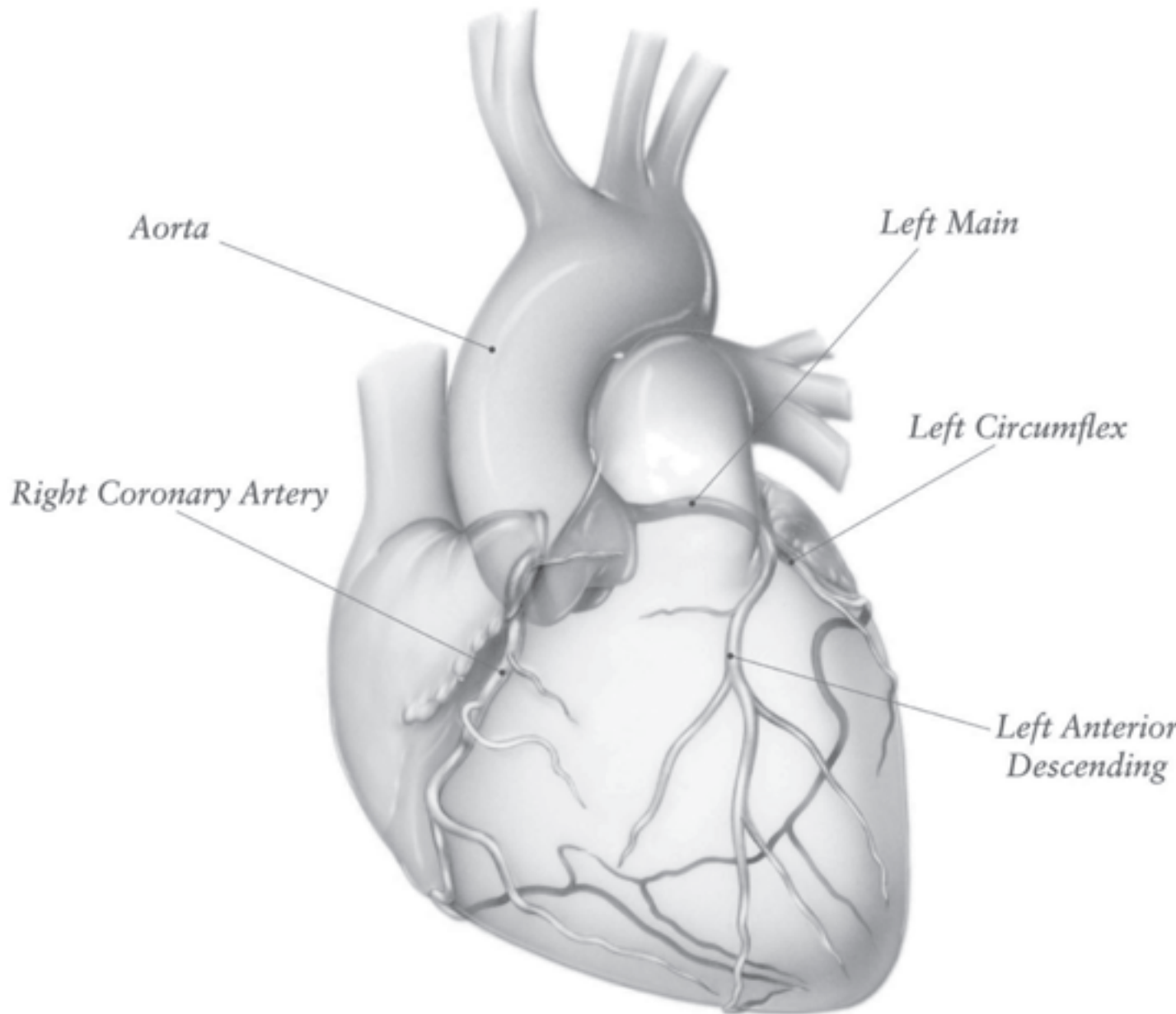
"The first news was received through text messages by almost everybody here. They just asked me to announce it because neither the family nor Mayor Lim is here," Azcuna said.

Azcuna referred reporters to Tina Sarino, the wife of Aquino's former interior secretary Cesar Sarino, who, he said, "let me read the text message about Tita Cory and asked me to announce

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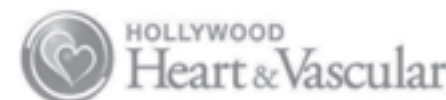
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