

FIRST DIVISION

[G.R. No. 237412, January 06, 2020]

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES, PETITIONER, VS. REMAR A. QUIÑONEZ, RESPONDENT.

DECISION

CAGUIOA, J:

The Case

This is a Petition for Review on *Certiorari*^[1] (Petition) filed under Rule 45 of the Rules of Court against the Decision^[2] dated June 29, 2017 (assailed Decision) and Resolution^[3] dated January 31, 2018 (assailed Resolution) in CA-G.R. SP No. 07581-MIN rendered by the Court of Appeals^[4] (CA).

The assailed Decision and Resolution upheld the Judgment^[5] dated April 11, 2016 issued by the Regional Trial Court of Surigao City, Branch 32 (RTC) in Special Proceedings No. 7669, which, in turn, declared Lovelyn Uriarte Quiñonez (Lovelyn) presumptively dead under Article 41 of the Family Code.

The Facts

The facts, as narrated by the CA, are as follows:

[Petitioner Remar A. Quinonez (Remar)] and his wife Lovelyn met in [Gamaon^[6]], Mangagoy, Bislig City when Remar was in college [and] staying at his aunt's house. After eight months [of being] in a relationship, they got married on August 16, 1997 at the Saint Vincent de Paul Parish in Mangagoy, Bislig City[. The wedding was] officiated by Rev. Fr. Ivan Novo, as shown in their Marriage Certificate.

After their wedding, the couple stayed at the house of Lovelyn's parents and they begot two (2) children [namely], Emar A. Quiñonez born on January 20, 1998 and Diana Love Quiñonez born on December 15, 1999.

To support his family, Remar started working as a security guard at the National Food Authority Warehouse in October 1997, although later on, he transferred to Cebu City for an opportunity to earn a bigger salary.

Sometime in 2001, when Lovelyn's father received his retirement pay, Lovelyn asked her husband's permission to go on a three-month vacation in Manila to visit some relatives. Despite Remar's reluctance, he agreed to his wife's request.

During the first three months[,] Lovelyn constantly communicated with Remar through cell phone. It was also at this time that Remar resigned

from his work in Cebu City and transferred to Surigao City, where he worked as a security guard at the Surigao City Hall of Justice.

Remar informed Lovelyn that as soon as she arrive[d] from Manila, they would x x x be living together in Surigao City [with] their two children. Thereafter, the calls and text messages tapered off until the communication between the spouses ceased altogether.

At first, Remar thought that his wife just lost her cellphone, so he inquired about her from their relatives in Bislig City. **Someone informed him that his wife was then already cohabiting with another man and would no longer be coming back out of shame.**

On November 2003, Remar's uncle informed him that Lovelyn was in Bislig City to visit their children. Remar filed for an emergency leave of absence from his work and left for Bislig City only to be told that his wife had already left for Lingig, Surigao del Sur. He went after her in Lingig, yet upon arrival, he was told that Lovelyn stayed only for a day and returned to Bislig. He was then constrained to go back to Surigao City, without seeing his wife.

In the summer of 2004, Remar filed for a leave from work to look for his wife in Manila. [Remar also] went to Batangas along with his aunt, Evelyn Pachico[,] as well as to Cavite with Lovelyn's aunt, Leonora Aguilar, yet they were not able to find her.

On February 27, 2013, after almost ten (10) years of trying to know about the whereabouts of his wife from their relatives proved futile, x x x [Remar filed a] Petition for Declaration of Presumptive Death before the RTC. x x x^[7] (Emphasis supplied)

RTC Proceedings

After compliance with the jurisdictional requirements of publication and posting, and with no objection having been filed, the RTC issued a Judgment (RTC Judgment) in Remar's favor. The dispositive portion of said Judgment reads:

WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered declaring that **absentee spouse[, Lovelyn,] is presumptively dead pursuant to Article 41 of the Family Code of the Philippines without prejudice** to the effect of the reappearance of the said absentee spouse.

SO ORDERED.^[8]

According to the RTC, Remar was able to show that he had exerted diligent efforts to locate his wife, considering that he spent his meager resources to look for her in Surigao del Sur, Metro Manila, Batangas and Cavite — places where he was told his wife had been seen.^[9] In addition, Remar consistently communicated with Lovelyn's relatives in Bislig City to ascertain whether they had any information regarding the latter's whereabouts. In sum, the RTC found Remar's efforts sufficient for purposes of declaring Lovelyn presumptively dead.^[10]

The RTC Judgment, being rendered in summary proceedings, became immediately final and executory in accordance with Article 247, in relation to Article 238 of the

Family Code.^[11]

CA Proceedings

Subsequently, the Republic of the Philippines^[12] (Republic) filed a Petition for *Certiorari*^[13] before the CA seeking to annul the RTC Judgment for having been issued with grave abuse of discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction. Therein, the Republic argued that Remar failed to establish that he "exerted proper and honest to goodness inquiries and efforts to ascertain Lovelyn's whereabouts and whether or not she is still alive."^[14]

Citing *Republic v. Cantor*^[15] (Cantor), the Republic characterized Remar's search as passive in nature.^[16] In particular, the Republic averred that while Remar claimed to have looked for Lovelyn in several places, he failed to explain the nature and extent of his efforts and inquiries. As well, the Republic claimed that Remar failed to present proof that Lovelyn's relatives and friends had no information regarding her whereabouts. Too, the Republic questioned Remar's failure to report Lovelyn's disappearance to the authorities.^[17]

The Republic also prayed for the issuance of a Temporary Restraining Order and Writ of Preliminary Injunction to restrain the execution of the RTC Judgment.^[18]

The CA resolved to deny the Petition for *Certiorari* through the assailed Decision, the dispositive portion of which reads:

ALL TOLD, the [P]etition for *Certiorari* is DENIED. The [RTC Judgment] in Special Proceedings No. 7669 for Declaration of Presumptive Death under Article 41 of the Family Code of Lovelyn Uriarte Quiñonez is hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.^[19]

Foremost, the CA held that while the Republic resorted to the correct remedy of *certiorari* under Rule 65, its Petition for *Certiorari* warranted outright dismissal for failure to file a prior motion for reconsideration before the RTC — a prerequisite to the filing of a petition for *certiorari* with the CA.^[20]

In any case, the CA ruled that the Petition for *Certiorari* fails even on the merits, since the RTC Judgment is sufficiently supported by the evidence on record.^[21] The CA observed that what the Republic puts in issue is the RTC's appreciation of the facts and evidence which are not the proper subjects of *certiorari* under Rule 65.^[22]

The Republic filed a motion for reconsideration which the CA also denied through the assailed Resolution.^[23]

The Republic received a copy of the assailed Resolution on February 20, 2018.^[24]

On March 2, 2018, the Republic filed a Motion for Extension,^[25] praying for an additional period of thirty (30) days from March 7, 2018, or until April 6, 2018, to file a petition for review on *certiorari*.

This Petition was filed on April 5, 2018.

In compliance with the Court's June 27, 2018 Resolution,^[26] Remar filed his Comment^[27] to the Petition on September 14, 2018.

The Republic filed its Reply^[28] on April 5, 2019. Thereafter, the case was deemed submitted for resolution.

Here, the Republic insists that Remar's efforts in locating his wife Lovelyn were insufficient to give rise to a "well-founded belief" that she is dead. On this basis, the Republic maintains that Remar's petition to declare Lovelyn presumptively dead should have been dismissed.

The issue

The sole issue for the Court's resolution is whether the CA erred when it found sufficient legal basis to uphold the declaration of Lovelyn's presumptive death.

The Court's Ruling

The Petition is granted.

The Petition raises a pure question of law

Before delving into the singular substantive issue, the Court first resolves the procedural issues.

The CA held that the Republic's Petition for Certiorari was procedurally infirm for two reasons — *first*, the Petition for Certiorari was filed with the CA without a prior motion for reconsideration; and second, said petition raised questions of fact and evidence which are not cognizable under a Rule 65 petition.

The Court disagrees.

A petition for *certiorari* under Rule 65 "is a special civil action that may be resorted to only in the absence of appeal or any plain, speedy, and adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law."^[29]

As a general rule, a motion for reconsideration must first be filed with the lower court before the extraordinary remedy of *certiorari* is resorted to, since a motion for reconsideration is considered a plain, speedy and adequate remedy in the ordinary course of law. Nevertheless, this general rule admits of well-established exceptions, one of which is when the Issue raised is a pure question of law.^[30]

There is a question of law in a given case when the doubt or difference arises as to what the law is on a certain state of facts, and there is a question of fact when the doubt or difference arises as to the truth or the falsehood of alleged facts.^[31]

Here, the Republic does not dispute the truthfulness of Remar's allegations, particularly, the specific acts he claims to have done to locate Lovelyn. What the Republic does question is the sufficiency of these acts, that is, whether they are sufficient to merit a legal declaration of Lovelyn's presumptive death.

Clearly, the Republic's Petition for *Certiorari* raised a pure legal question. Hence, direct resort to the CA via Rule 65, without filing with the RTC a prior motion for reconsideration, was proper.

*The requisites for declaration
of presumptive death under
the Family Code*

Article 41 of the Family Code provides the requirements for a declaration of presumptive death, thus:

ART. 41. A marriage contracted by any person during the subsistence of a previous marriage shall be null and void, unless before the celebration of the subsequent marriage, **the prior spouse had been absent for four consecutive years and the spouse present had a well-founded belief that the absent spouse was already dead.** In case of disappearance where there is danger of death under the circumstances set forth in the provisions of Article 391 of the Civil Code, an absence of only two years shall be sufficient.

For the purpose of contracting the subsequent marriage under the preceding paragraph, the spouse present must institute a summary proceeding as provided in this Code for the declaration of presumptive death of the absentee, without prejudice to the effect of reappearance of the absent spouse. (Emphasis supplied)

Culled from this provision, the essential requisites for a declaration of presumptive death for the purpose of remarriage are:

1. That the absent spouse has been missing for four consecutive years, or two consecutive years if the disappearance occurred where there is danger of death under the circumstances laid down in Article 391, Civil Code;
- 2 That the present spouse wishes to remarry;
- 3. That the present spouse has a well-founded belief that the absentee is dead;** and
4. That the present spouse files a summary proceeding for the declaration of presumptive death of the absentee.^[32]
(Emphasis in the original)

The Petition is anchored on Remar's alleged failure to prove compliance with the third requisite. Thus, a closer examination of this requirement is necessary.

In *Cantor*, the Court *en banc* clarified the meaning of well-founded belief by comparing the language of Article 41 to its Civil Code counterpart. The Court held:

Notably, Article 41 of the Family Code, compared to the old provision of the Civil Code which it superseded, imposes a stricter standard. It requires a "well-founded belief" that the absentee is already dead before a petition for declaration of presumptive death can be granted. We have had occasion to make the same observation in *Republic v. Nolasco*, where we noted the crucial differences between Article 41 of the Family Code and Article 83 of the Civil Code, to wit: