



Tony Cárdenas
Congress of the United States
29th District, California

September 11, 2015

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
001200 Vatican City

Your Holiness:

Almost two and a half years ago, a group of young people that I represent in Congress wrote you letters asking for a second chance. These young people all had something in common: they were serving time in juvenile detention for mistakes they made as children. Another thing that they all had in common: they are striving to be better people. The Sylmar Juvenile Hall in the San Fernando Valley is near where I grew up. Those young people's stories are very similar to the stories of children that I grew up with, their children and thousands more young people all over the country that are caught in our nation's juvenile justice system.

I was heartened and encouraged to hear you take on this worldwide challenge, washing the feet of young people who were detained and answering the letters of so many American children who wrote to you asking for forgiveness and a second chance. I am encouraged that in the United States we are beginning to witness positive changes in how our communities view and address criminal justice reform and especially juvenile justice reform. I believe our nation is in need of that change.

Growing up, I witnessed the effects of violence on our community, and I have held that image close throughout my career as a public servant, so that I never forget the people I am working for. That is why one of my priorities has always been reducing crime through intervention and prevention efforts and reforming our juvenile justice system.

During your visit to the United States Congress on September 24, I hope that you will continue to talk about the young people in our society who are asking us for a second chance, eager to build their lives as productive and happy citizens. I hope that your words to our nation's leaders will inspire them to realize they have the ability to enact a thorough reform of our juvenile justice laws that includes robust intervention prevention programs, to help these children get right with the law and escape the cycle of criminalization.

The United States is the only nation in the world that sentences children to life without the possibility of parole, a sentence you referred to as "a hidden death penalty." We must reexamine the hardened practices of our criminal justice system, and we must not forget, they are children.

I thank you for your continuing attention to the youth of the world, and I look forward to your visit to Congress.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tony Cardenas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

TONY CARDENAS
Member of Congress

Cc: Apostolic Nunciature to the United States
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