

LETTER TO REP. BOEHNER FROM THE FR. THOMAS SMOLICH, S.J.



July 29, 2014

Speaker John Boehner
1011 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Boehner,

I write to you as President of the Jesuit Conference of the United States, the organization that represents the Society of Jesus in the U.S., and I echo the message of our bishops and our Holy Father. I urge you to remember that amid the complications of policy and politics, we must be steadfast in our commitment to uphold the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of human life when considering policy solutions to address the increasing numbers of children fleeing harm in Central America.

Well before the 1989 assassination of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by U.S.-trained Salvadoran military forces, the Jesuits in the United States were partnering with Jesuits and colleagues in Central America. Since that time, Jesuits in the U.S. have been committed to ensuring that U.S. policy does not exacerbate difficult realities facing poor, marginalized communities. Over the last several years, our office and Jesuit Refugee Service/USA have tracked with growing alarm the increase in forced displacement and targeted violence—perpetrated by gangs, organized crime and state actors—in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

This is not a new crisis, nor is it primarily at our border. Rather, it has been escalating over the last decade in the Northern Triangle. For example, 90 children are murdered or disappeared in Honduras every month; this is the equivalent of eight children being executed in your Congressional district every thirty days.

The impact of this crisis has fallen most heavily on women and girls. From 2005 to 2012 there was a 346% increase in murders of women and girls in Honduras. Meanwhile El Salvador has the highest rate of homicides against women and girls in the world, and Guatemala ranks third on the same chart. Is it any wonder that young girls are leaving the region in record numbers, with a 140% increase in girls 12 and younger arriving unaccompanied at our border from the Northern Triangle this fiscal year?

The Jesuits of Central America see this reality daily: the elementary school teacher murdered when he tried to prevent gangs from forcibly recruiting his students; the young girl pulled from her home, offered as a birthday present to a gang leader and then raped by 16 men; lay colleagues of Jesuits assassinated and harassed by the police. Further, these three countries have little infrastructure and few services to care for women and girls victimized by violence or sexual exploitation; less than 5% of female homicides end in a conviction. The collapse of civil society is evident in besieged schools, hollowed-out neighborhoods, and tortured, often dismembered bodies of children as young as two displayed in streets and ditches.

In this sobering context, I am reminded of Psalm 82, in which God asks the magistrates of the day “how long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” God then exhorts these political leaders to “give justice to the weak and fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82: 3-4).

While this message needs to be heard among leaders in the Northern Triangle, it also calls out to be heard by U.S. leaders dealing with this humanitarian crisis. In particular, I ask for your full and dedicated commitment to the following three policy issues:

TVPRA: A change to the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA), which would result in children having a one-shot chance to disclose their persecution to a Customs and Border Protection agent or officer, especially when some of them have been victimized by armed men in uniform, is inhumane and an insult to American values. Mr. Speaker, I am appalled by the suggestion that the U.S. should respond by cutting off access to safety for these children.

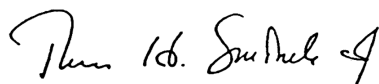
Due process: To meet Psalm 82’s standard, I ask you to protect the due process rights of these vulnerable children. Rather than rolling back the TVPRA, we should continue to ensure that traumatized and terrorized children have the time and opportunity they need to feel safe enough to share their experience. To echo the analysis of the National Association of Immigration Judges, this process must proceed at the speed of a child’s trust, not at the speed of political convenience. These children deserve an individualized process, a child welfare expert to evaluate their claim, and a legal advocate to help them navigate our complex judicial system.

Root causes: We cannot simply ignore this aspect of the problem. In order to address this crisis at its source, the United States must listen to people, among them the Jesuits in Central America, who intimately understand how we arrived at this tragic juncture. They, along with many others, have been calling on their governments to address impunity and corruption, improve judicial systems, expand educational access, strengthen—and in some cases build from scratch—child welfare services in the region, and support adequate return and reintegration programs to ensure that children who can safely remain in their home countries are able to do so. Our investments need to go here, not to corrupt or abusive security forces who themselves are often criminal.

I ask you, as a leader, a parent, and a Catholic, to uphold an American tradition of which we are all proud. We must welcome the refugee, the victim of trafficking, the child who has been abused or abandoned. Let us follow in the footsteps of Jesus when he said “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14).

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Very Reverend Thomas H. Smolich, S.J.

President, Jesuit Conference USA