

Acceptance speech of Mr. Francisco Legaz Cervantes, being awarded the Distinguished Cross 2nd Class of the Order of San Raimundo de Peñafort on February 20, 2014.

Your excellency Mr. Eduardo Torres-Dulce,
Your excellency Mr. Antonio Narváez,
Your excellency Ms. Consuelo Madrigal,
Your excellency Mr. Manuel Dolz,
Esteemed authorities.
Ladies, gentlemen and friends.

Good morning,

First of all I would like to express my gratitude to his Excellency, the Director of Public Prosecutions for having the kindness to personally bestow this distinction upon me, which constitutes a great honour and joy for me, and also to the Ministry of Justice for granting it, and to its head Mr. Alberto Ruiz Gallardón.

Without a doubt, to receive the Cross of the Order of San Raimundo de Peñafort at the headquarters of the institution appointed to promote Justice in Spain, defending the Law and citizens' rights, makes this moment even more moving.

It has been an extraordinary surprise to me and a true honour, to be both considered as worthy of this distinction, as well as feeling the support of so many professionals in the judicial field that have, in one way or another, contributed to it. It is especially rewarding to know that it was Mr. Manuel Dolz who presented the proposal that would be taken to the Ministry and which had the support of Ms. Consuelo Madrigal. The drive of these two great professionals, for which I am deeply thankful, has been invaluable.

I would also like to thank Mr. Daniel Navalón, Director of the Socio-educational Area of Fundación Diagrama, who promoted this nomination. Feeling the appreciation and the support of all these people has been very important to me both professionally and personally.

Amongst these words of gratitude, that I also extend to all here present, I would like to pause for a moment to remember my mother and father, because this moment and this distinction are also for them. My parents educated me on the basis of three great values: kindness, truth and justice. I must admit that sometimes these were hard lessons that had to be learnt and I continue to learn to be consistent with these principles, but I feel that these are the pillars that

sustain each one of my steps and make me happy to work for the people's wellbeing.

I believe in Justice. I believe in people. And I believe that working for their rights, their freedom, their future, their development and their dignity, has marked my life. And with more or less success, I give myself each day to this work with full commitment and the absolute will to do it well.

When I started thinking about what to say in this brief speech, I realized that in 2014 it has already been more than 30 years since I started working directly with vulnerable people, who were living in serious situations of exclusion and were in need of much help.

I remember my years as a volunteer at the youth prison of Carabanchel, and at the women's prison of Yeserías, my collaboration in the neighbourhoods of Entrevías and Vallecas, and the experience of hosting many of these young people that were coming out of prison in my own home. Also, later, on my return to Murcia, my collaboration with the penitentiary of this city, welcoming into my home other young people that were coming out of prison as well; and above all, I remember the good luck of being able to open in Murcia the first house to accommodate these young people back in 1988. I remember all of them, and especially those that are no longer with us due to drug addiction or illnesses like AIDS.

It was these young people in conflict with the Law and with drug addiction who strengthened my vocation for working for Justice, which meant working to help them, not leaving them behind, fighting for them, and with them.

On Justice, there is little or nothing that I could say which hasn't been said before by others much more expert than me on the subject. Nevertheless, allow me to tell you about Justice as I feel and live it, because the search for Justice, especially for those least privileged, has been, and still is, in essence, my guiding light.

I have always thought of Justice as kindness, equity, honesty, respect, responsibility and commitment; and there is no excuse to not fight for it when it is absent.

This Justice, in front of which we are all equal and which protects and guarantees the rights of people and nations, is the one that I've been trying to serve all my life, as best I can.. I believe that it is vital to contribute to making a real and effective kind of social justice, where equality is never limited by

gender, age, race, ethnic group, religion, culture or condition. It's a fundamental value in the balance of human relationships, and therefore essential when talking about coexistence, respect, freedom and society.

After these experiences that began in 1984, 1989 and the years which followed, were marked by my work as a public psychologist working for the Regional Health and Social Issues Ministry of Murcia.

Since that year I began to combine my work as a public servant with my personal and voluntary dedication to the Murcia prison, organizing support groups for young inmates.

Those moments of transition from the former Law of the Juvenile Courts of 1948, to the law which became the first penal law for minors in democratic times, the Organic Law 4/92, were difficult moments for many young people, who, starting from the age of 16, were subjected to the Penal Code and had no other choice than to do their time in prison, in many cases, stringing sentences together, which were really felt when they were still in prison at 20 years of age.

These young people had committed crimes, some more serious than others; some consumed drugs, others didn't; for the most part, they came from broken homes, or didn't have a family... But they all had something in common; they had very few options for rebuilding their lives; they lacked tools, paths, ways... Integration was something far removed from them. Many had even resigned themselves to never becoming part of society, and I think that, in some way, society had also abandoned them. Giving them back the feeling of being citizens was without a doubt doing Justice.

And that was, and still is, my work with minors and young people in conflict with the Law: searching for a way for these young people to have the opportunity of being free, knowing what is to live in freedom, contributing to build a more just and more caring society, where they can see themselves as people with a purpose, a life with dignity.

With this objective, in 1991 I created Fundación Diagrama, and thanks to the trust that different public administrative bodies of the state and its regions have placed in us, and to the legal framework that allows us to carry out our vocation of service to society, we have been able to help more than 200,000 people during these years, especially young people in conflict with the Law, young people in vulnerable situations, their families, prisoners and women victims of domestic abuse.

In 1992 we opened the first private centre in Spain for the care of young offenders subject to judicial measures, in Murcia. Facing the big gaps that existed in the regulation back then, we started the task of creating the first internal regulation for the management of these centres, gathering principles derived from the Organic Law 4/92, as well as from other national and international texts dealing with Human Rights and childhood protection, always using the defence of the minor's superior interest as a reference. This internal regulation, allowed us to carry out socio-educational intervention so that the rights of minors are carried out always, was agreed and ratified by the Directorates-General of each Autonomous Region, and accepted by the Juvenile Courts.

The change of millennium coincided with the new Organic Law 5/2000, whose development process we were able to participate in with various contributions. We also had the chance to participate later on in its Regulation, in 2004, and two years later in what has been the most profound reform of such law, that of 2006, being able to offer our insights and experience, acquired in the material execution of the judicial measures.

I would also like to take advantage of this moment to pay tribute and offer our gratitude to the much-missed Professor Mr. Francisco Bueno Arús, spiritual father of the current Criminal Law of the Minor, who so often welcomed us to this office in the Technical General Secretariat of the Ministry of Justice to hear our proposals and contributions for new laws being developed.

Years later, we had the honour of working with him on the book that Fundación Diagrama promoted: *Comments on the Regulation of the Organic Law 5/200*, a pioneering text in Spain and the only one to this date that addresses in depth, the study of the regulatory norm, which we studied with the aim of understanding it in depth and being able to use it in the service of children's rights.

To paraphrase Francisco Bueno, "nothing can be achieved without being motivated by love and faith in mankind, as faith is what moves mountains in the world of Law and Justice".

I also remember, with difficulty, the year 2001, when with a few months left to go before the opening of a centre in the Basque Country, and already in the process of hiring new staff, the centre was demolished by an attack by ETA. That same day in the early morning we received a message telling us never to come back to the Basque Country.

It's been many years and many experiences. And we always keep in mind that this vocation of serving Justice involves working for people and with people, always in collaboration, because there are many of us committed to this cause. Every day we witness the great professionalism and dedication of Judges, Public Prosecutors, Technical Teams, the Police, the Civil Guard, National and Regional Administrations, NGOs and many others, which, from our different spheres of activity, work to serve Justice and more particularly, Juvenile Justice.

To all of them, and especially to the young people we assist and help, I dedicate this award with the utmost respect and admiration.

Maybe someone may think that when we start counting people by the thousands, and years by decades, everything becomes relative, that ideals weaken or that the routine numbs the feeling. But the truth is no, the opposite happens.

Each morning I wake up with the same enthusiasm for working as the very first day and with the same faith in people and their capacity to overcome obstacles.

In this regard, allow me to take the opportunity to express my desire for a new regulatory framework to offer greater legal security to the group of minors that we have labelled as "minors with behavioural problems", on which the Ministry of Justice has already developed and agreed upon a text, and in whose preparatory works we have had the opportunity of collaborating.

Finally, on a day like today, February 20, World Day of Social Justice, I would like to express my firm conviction that working for, and in the service of Justice, we are building together a world of citizens with equal rights and opportunities, and therefore, a future with more dignity.

My heartfelt thanks to all of you.

Francisco Legaz Cervantes
Chairman of the International Juvenile Justice Observatory