



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Gonzalo Himiob Santomé

2019

Dear Mr. John Train and members of the Board and Trustees of the Train Foundation.
Distinguished guests and people present.

It is an honor to be here with you all receiving this very important award that has a great meaning not only to me, but also to all my Foro Penal colleagues, who share with me each day the sorrows and joys that brings fighting for Human Rights in my country, Venezuela.

This award is very important for us for several reasons:

First, because the Civil Courage Prize highlights and celebrates civil courage, that of those of us who do not carry guns, uniforms, or badges. That of those of us who do not know other weapons to fight for our dreams but those provided by the laws and the rule of law. In our particular case, the only sword we use to reach freedom is the sword of justice. The Civil Courage Prize acknowledges – and this is highly important -- that not only during war times, at a battlefield, with a gun in your hand, can true courage be demonstrated. Sometimes, uninterested, perseverant, and daily actions by civilians set the boundaries on the constant lurking darkness with greater strength.

Second, because the Civil Courage Prize reminds us that anyone who truly wishes to, can make a difference, and in order to do so, nothing more is needed than to do your job, and not expect anything in return.

In my almost 20-year fight for Human Rights, I have learned that there is nothing more powerful than a common person, a normal citizen, determined to protect his home and his relatives, willing to fight, regardless of his occupation or area of knowledge.

We live in very difficult times in my country. Since 2014 we have more than 15.000 political detentions, over 240 people killed by repression in peaceful demonstrations, more than 6000 extrajudicial executions, hundreds of victims of torture and, today, more than 400 political prisoners and over 9000 people on criminal trial and on conditional release, also for political reasons. The evil, turned into power, violence, persecution, and death, has invaded almost each aspect of our lives. Its first victory over us has been to make many people believe that before such ominous darkness there is nothing that can be done. This has also led others think that the

lines drawn between what is correct and incorrect, what is right and wrong, are vague and even nonexistent.

Evil in my country has shown many sides. I have seen it in police officers, judges, and prosecutors who, even when aware of the innocence of those brought before them, keep them in jail just because they have been so instructed “from above” and only because it allows them to justify any abuse of power committed. I have seen it in the maneuvers conducted by those who use other people’s tragedy to make profit of it or obtain advantages or political benefits, and then conveniently forget about those who have trusted them or, even worse, to use them as dispensable pieces they can make use of whenever they please to, only thinking about their own benefit.

I have seen it in the fear of a mother or father to whom I have had to explain that, even with no legal basis, their son or daughter shall not be able to go back home that day because the opprobrium has labeled them as an “enemy”, and decided they must remain wrongfully jailed.

I have seen it in the tears of women from whom bullets have taken away their father, brothers, husband, or son. I have seen it in the injuries and bruises of the inmates, many of them who have appeared tortured and harmed at the hearings we attend, to keep them silent because silence is one of the terrible weapons of evil when it becomes power.

This leads to my third reason why this award is so important for us. Seeing and knowing the evil has also allowed me to meet goodness and realize that the line between correct and incorrect, between right and wrong, is not vague or nonexistent; and this is how I have been able to corroborate that victories of the evil over us are only temporary.

I see goodness every day in the tired eyes of our lawyers and volunteers who leave their skin in each case and do not give up until freedom is granted to the person wrongfully jailed who has trusted us with his defense. I see it in the tireless and brave voice of the mothers who do not stop giving their statements in spite of the threats they are subjected to after their children’s assassination. Their fight for justice carried on top of the pain of their losses is always an example to follow.

I see it in the support we receive sometimes from strangers, disguised with a simple unexpected word of encouragement, or a very opportune glass of water that quenches the thirst. Specially, I see it in the “embrace of freedom” –that is what we call it- we are given and are given to those who are released from jail in which they have been arbitrarily remained – some even for years.

I even see it in the fleeting gesture of an officer who, aware that he is being used by the evil, whenever he can and as he can, helps you out, assuming in silence the risks at stake.

It all reminds you that our defeats, in the end, are not as such, and everything you do for the freedom and justice is seen through and reaches where it has to reach.

I confirm that good actions are not forgotten. The Civil Courage Prize shows it and, more importantly, links us with other good people that, in other contexts and circumstances, have had to see the evil up front to tell him that before the abuses, violence, and death, fear is not an option.

The Civil Courage Prize protects us. It shows to the world that freedom and justice have champions and defenders all over the planet, but more importantly, it teaches us that they are recognized and supported.

One's fight, when it is a just cause, is everyone's fight.

I also confirm a very important truth: The fight for justice and freedom is never the fight of one single man. This acknowledgement reaches me, but it is also deserved by my wife, Wendolline, and my children, Luis Gonzalo and Sofia, who every day give me the reasons I need to move forward. My family also deserves it: My father, Gonzalo; my "mothers," Ofelia and Susana, and my siblings, because it was at my home, where I learned the difference between right and wrong, and not to keep myself quiet before abuses.

More especially, my brothers from Foro Penal also deserve it and receive it. I share this honor with Alfredo Romero, who I have the honor to call my friend; with Mariela, Robiro, and the "grandpa" (el abuelo). Even when I cannot mention them all, I share this prize with all the lawyers and volunteers from our organization who, even risking their own lives, and reaching the most isolated areas of Venezuela, have never stopped believing in the values inspiring our fight.

With perseverance, commitment, belief and heart, in each argument, in each gesture and in each action of their lives, they show us daily that when it comes to defend ourselves against the evil and darkness, each step, even if it is very small, is a good step towards the light of freedom, justice, and peace.

May God bless you all. Thank you very much.