

Contrition's test: An imprisoned drug lord's moment of truth

by Robert_J_Caldwell

SAN DIEGO - Contrition, if sincere, can be a moment of grace, even after a lifetime of the most egregious crimes. Rarely will the test of sincerity merit a more arduous standard than for Francisco Javier Arellano Felix, former boss of the Tijuana drug cartel, who was sentenced to life in prison last week in U.S. District Court in San Diego.

Before the sentence he had already agreed to in pleading guilty last September was formally imposed, Arellano Felix submitted a brief letter to the court. In a spare 10 sentences read aloud by his lawyer, he expressed remorse and asked for forgiveness, from his family and from "all of those people, on both sides of the border, who I have affected by my wrongful decisions and criminal conduct."

Forgiveness from the latter will be a tall order.

Mexico's murderous drug cartels are tearing that country apart. Thousands are dying each year in the steadily escalating brutality that marks Mexico's drug wars. The cartels' commonplace murders of past years are being surpassed by new levels of barbarity, beheadings being the latest of these ghastly horrors.

The victims on the U.S. side of the border are legion, too; among them an estimated 20 million cocaine users, for example, of whom perhaps 6 million are hard-core addicts. The wretched, lethal trade in illicit narcotics regularly wrecks countless lives, destroying families and reducing cocaine, methamphetamine and heroin addicts to an utterly debased existence. Anyone who imagines that drug use and addiction are merely "lifestyle choices" should spend a day or an hour talking to addicts and those who treat them.

The Tijuana-based Arellano Felix Organization drug cartel has plied its blood-soaked trafficking in human degradation for at least 20 years now. For four of those years, 2002-2006, Javier Arellano Felix was his family run cartel's undisputed boss. The plea agreement he signed stipulates that he was a leadership member of the AFO from at least 1991 until his arrest by the U.S. Coast Guard in August 2006.

The plea agreement also includes this:

"Defendant murdered, participated in the murders of, and directed the murders of numerous persons in furtherance of the AFO's activities. On numerous occasions, defendant sanctioned and directed the use of violence against others ... murdering informants or potential witnesses, and murdering law enforcement personnel."

Ten sentences in a letter of contrition cannot begin to expunge Javier Arellano Felix's adult lifetime of guilt for the AFO's decades-long crime wave. Ditto for spending the remainder of his natural life in federal prison. Even the death sentence he avoided - by former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales' decision and Arellano Felix's negotiated guilty plea - would only have imposed a token of justice.

So, is there nothing that this man could do now to atone, however partially, for the immense suffering and death he imposed for so many years on so many people in Mexico and the United States?

There is one thing. It would be the litmus test by which we could judge the true sincerity of his professed remorse and contrition. It would be the one thing he could do now that would alter his life from drug lord and killer to an instrument of belated justice.

Javier Arellano Felix could decide to cooperate with U.S. prosecutors and law enforcement. He could assist them in their continuing campaign to dismantle the Arellano Felix Organization and choke off the tons of narcotics the AFO still smuggles across the U.S.-Mexico border.

He could tell Justice Department prosecutors and the Drug Enforcement Administration who assassinated Tijuana journalist Francisco Ortiz Franco in June 2004. A masked assassin pumped four bullets into Ortiz's head and neck as he sat in his car on a Tijuana street with his two young sons, ages 10 and 8, sitting in the back seat. U.S. and Mexican law enforcement are certain that Ortiz was murdered by the AFO.

Javier Arellano Felix could reveal the identities of the AFO enforcers who murdered and beheaded three Rosarito Beach police officers and one civilian who stumbled into an AFO convoy in 2006.

He could give authorities chapter and verse on the Mexican police, prosecutors and government officials receiving regular payoffs from the cartel. He could disclose details of the cartel's recent drug-smuggling operations, money laundering and kidnapping-for-ransom racket.

In short, he could repudiate his past by becoming an instrument of justice.

In his letter of contrition, Javier Arellano Felix declared that, "If I had the power to change, and undo the things I have done, I would."

If he meant that, this is his chance.

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