

February 1, 2015

**His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City, Italy**

Re: United States Visit 2015

Your Holiness;

I understand you may be coming to the United States in 2015. I am asking for myself and my family to have an audience with your Holiness. I realize there are hundreds of others who would like to meet you and all have very great need. But I must ask because I feel my circumstances and situation needs to be heard, not just because my family needs to heal, but also because the tragic chain of events that led to the loss of three lives, damage to other young lives and damaged faith in God is being repeated over and over within the Catholic faith. Helping my family to heal will hopefully lead to healing for many other families and the Catholic Church. It would show your healing power to the many who have suffered.

My son Daniel O'Connell and our friend James Ellison were murdered by their own parish priest, Father Ryan Erickson, in 2002, three years later, as the authorities gathered evidence to convict Father Ryan of this crime, Father Ryan died by committing suicide. Father Ryan committed these murders to hide his sexual abuse of young boys in the community. I believe this is the first time a pedophile priest has committed the murder. The complete story is in the copies of magazine and newspaper articles I've included with this letter.

This tragic and awful chain of events has damaged my family and the Diocese. We are an old Irish Catholic family with a faith as deep and strong as our heritage. Our faith has been our core that carries us through the positives and negatives of life and guides us as we work and help others. We own and operate O'Connell family funeral homes, a small family run business. Every day we care for people and their lost loved ones. We deal with sorrow, sadness, loss, pain, anger, guilt and grief with every family we help. We try to be as compassionate, caring and kind as we possibly can as families say goodbye. During the past 12 years we have mourned and grieved for Daniel and James, we've built a memorial garden, created scholarships, and honored others whose lives represent service such as our son and friend's did. We have rebuilt our lives but we don't try to forget because Daniel and James' memories give us the compassion and understanding to help others. But many of my family members still suffer and struggle to maintain their faith in God and the Catholic Church. It is not what, but why.

We have asked and asked how this tragedy happened, the answers we receive make it harder to bear not easier because there were so many, many hints and indications that Father Ryan had a serious pedophile problem, was mentally unstable, and should not have been allowed to become a priest. We have heard from nuns, housekeepers, children, parishioners and other priests but no one took it seriously enough to stop him

from becoming a priest or remove him and get him help. This is the second part of our story that needs to be shared.

We struggle to understand and reconcile the horror of murder and the betrayal of our Catholic faith by a parish priest; someone we are taught to turn to for spiritual and emotional guidance and support. It is worse to know that Father Ryan was there by our side shortly after the murders, offering support through faith in God. It is terribly hard to forgive his hypocrisy and that of the other parish priests and diocese leaders who turned a blind eye to Father Ryan's problems.

We can't bring Daniel or James back, our grieving will never end. But maybe their deaths, their sacrifice will make a difference for others. Three young lives were lost because a bishop ignored the warnings and objections from his advisors and ordained Ryan Erickson as a Catholic priest. I believe if we share our story with you, who can effect change, we can prevent deaths and child abuse and change the system that allows those who are unfit, violent, abusive and unstable to become Catholic priests. I follow your travels to bring a message of peace to troubled parts of the world with great hope. I admire your strong leadership and practical approach to issues and I support the positive changes you are bringing to the Catholic faith. We know God will judge us all, but you are God's voice on earth, please listen to us, acknowledge us and use our sad story to protect innocent children.

Please know that I have tried to share this story with Church leadership in Chicago but was threatened with arrest if I continued to seek a meeting. Many attorneys have asked me to sue the Catholic Church, but I won't; Dan's life cannot be valued in money. About 6 years ago, our new Bishop Peter Christenson came to see us; he was the first representative of the Catholic Church to offer his condolences and guidance in dealing with the murders. This meant a great deal to me and my family and Bishop Peter has become a friend.

I am asking for strength, advice, understanding and a personal blessing from you because you are our Pope. You can change the problems, you can lead others to change and your guidance can help me help my family and the Diocese. That is my mission to ask for acknowledgement that there needs to be change to prevent more tragedies and damaged lives, for advice and strength to continue to share our story and for guidance, prayers and your blessing to help me repair the broken links in my family's faith and the faith of others in God. Thank you for listening.

Very Respectfully,


Tom O'Connell and family


St. Patrick's Parish, Diocese of Superior, Wisconsin