

Chaplain Stories & News

Building Bridges—Parishes, Pastors, Prisons



January 12, 2017 — Bishop Myron Cotta, Diocese of Sacramento, (at right in photo) took another important step to building a more effective and robust ministry to the incarcerated on Thursday, January 12. He had invited the seven State Prison Chaplains to meet with the pastors and key lay men and women from the parishes closest to the prisons.

The meeting was facilitated by Deacon Clyde Davis, a former Prison Chaplain. Clyde has been hired by the California Bishops' Conference to provide a range of supports for Catholic Chaplains throughout the state. During the meeting, Deacon Clyde said that one of the major problems faced by Prison Chaplains is a sense of isolation and a lack of support from the local parishes.

The Sacramento Diocese and Bishop Cotta is seeking to build bridges from local parishes to the Chaplains and the prisons. He asked that each parish assign a "Prison Champion" to serve as a consistent connecting point between the parish and the chaplain. Many creative ideas were shared about how the parishes and the nearby prisons would both benefit from a closer relationship.

Chaplin Smolinisky Reflects on a Tamale Christmas at Pelican Bay

December 2016 — The first time I did a Christmas celebration with tamales and champurrado in jail or a prison setting, I was a volunteer at Mira Loma, an immigration detention center for Homeland Security. Imelda, another volunteer, brought tamales and champurrado. I thought this was a crazy idea at first, and I saw the hesitation of the Sheriff. When I came to Pelican Bay State Prison, I remember the interview question from the panel, "What makes men attracted to come to your services?" I responded, "Food! Jesus Christ teaches us to gather and eat and drink and when you do this, He is there."

"I haven't had a homemade tamale in 25 years," said Jose who had been in the SHU, or isolation unit, for almost two decades. I looked deep into his eyes as he fought to not to show his emotions. Emotion is not allowed among inmates in tense places like a level-4 facility. Jose told me about his grandmother who raised him when his mother couldn't. "She gave us what she could," he said, "and now I realize even though tamales are cheap to make, they are so good to my stomach." As Jose remembered his mother who failed him, and a granny who loved him and fed him, Christmas was taking place before my eyes.

"Healing happens to all of us," I thought, "we just have to let it happen." Healing is what Christ comes to earth to offer us. It's through love, and our grandmothers, and through warm food. Healing happens if humans take the medicine the doctor prescribes. Christ gives us the prescription to adhere to but it's hard to get to church or the doctor's office.

Christmas was celebrated at Pelican Bay State Prison in five different services, broken up for security purposes. Three different yards, and two services in the bigger yards to accommodate over 200 men who came to chapel to remember the birth. Chapels were overflowing those days because of the tamales. I defended inmates time and time again this Christmas when staff said, "All they want is a tamale."

"The same thing happens on the streets," I said. Churches are overflowing with people who only come once or twice a year. I can only imagine God is happy whenever people pack churches up, in the free world or in prison, to celebrate his son's birthday. A tamale might get you there. Your children will be grateful.

Deacon Karl Brings Christmas Care to Sierra Conservation Center



December 2016 — Christmas time behind bars can be a hopeless place. That's why Deacon Karl Welsbacher at Sierra Conservation Center makes sure the men serving time there have an opportunity to practice their faith. About 100 inmates came to a Penance Service and Mass on December 23. Two Priests joined Deacon Karl to hear confessions before they celebrated a beautiful Christmas Mass for the Christmas Vigil. Several of the men told Deacon Karl how much they appreciated his effort.

On Christmas Day, Deacon Karl returned to offer Christmas Communion Services on the other side of the prison and at the Fire Station where Catholic inmates are present. More opportunities to attend Mass are scheduled for New Years Eve, and he takes Holy Communion to Catholics who are "in the hole" once a week as well.

Our thanks to Deacon Karl and all the other chaplains in California's jails and prisons who make sure that no one is forgotten, especially in this Holy Season.

CA Catholic Conference & Restorative Justice Committee Host Reception for Chaplains

August 25, 2016 – On September 27th, the California Catholic Conference will host a special evening for chaplains to build relationships and strengthen their network of support. The reception coincides with [ACCSS](#) (Associated Chaplains in California State Service) training at the same location. [More information >>](#)

Detention Ministry Is Growing in the Diocese of Sacramento

August 16, 2016 – Bishop Myron Cotta is taking an active role in the Diocese of Sacramento's efforts to improve its ministry to incarcerated men and women.

County Jails

In the four most populous counties (Solano, Yolo, Sacramento, and Placer) the diocese has begun to create jail ministry teams for each of county jail. Lay team captains have been identified and recruited for each county. The team is made up of up to five priests and five or more deacons and lay volunteers.

In February Bishop Cotta invited the volunteers for the jail ministry to a first training session at the Pastoral Center. More than 100 leaders participated. Father George Horan was the presenter. Twenty-two priests were present for that session.

Bishop Cotta is meeting with the county team captains on a quarterly basis to provide on-going support and encouragement and to deal with any problems that may be appearing.

State Prisons

Bishop Cotta has invited the diocese's seven State Prison Chaplains to meet with him semi-annually. These gatherings are an opportunity to discuss problems and build a stronger relationship between the diocese and the chaplaincy.

The Bishop also is meeting with the wardens in each of the prisons located within the diocese. In November 2016, he will be inviting the pastors of the parishes closest to the state prisons to a gathering with the Chaplains to share ideas about how to deepen the relationship between the state prisons and the local parishes.

Chaplain Sam Smolinisky Reflects on Pelican Bay Family Visits



August 15, 2016 – Early in his prison ministry, Chaplain Sam Smolinisky was informed that a busload of family members would be coming to Pelican Bay State Prison for family visits. His expectations were low. Probably a lot of dysfunction. What good could these visits do?

The trip was coordinated by Families of the Incarcerated, a restorative justice organization in Los Angeles. He met the families for dinner at the end of their long trip north. The dinner was hosted by Star of the Sea Church in Brookings, Oregon. There Chaplain Sam began to see a miracle in the making. As parish volunteers and prisoner families

gathered to eat a common meal, they experienced healing, sharing, crying, laughing and being one human family. These visits were bringing down more than the divisions created by prison walls.

Chaplain Sam says, "Bringing wives, children, mothers, grandmothers, fathers, nieces and nephews to see their loved ones still alive helps in the healing process Jesus died for."

[Read Chaplain Sam's reflection >>](#)

Fairview Developmental Center Honors Catholic Chaplain as Employee of the Month



August 1, 2016 – Jerry Fay has been a chaplain at Fairview Developmental Center (FDC) in Orange County for just a short time, but his presence has made a big impact. He began volunteering at FDC years ago with a local Catholic Church group and assisted clients in getting to Mass on Sundays. In honoring his work, the Center newsletter says, "His [Jerry's] spiritual support and guidance is incredible. His calm, positive and caring demeanor is greatly appreciated. ...Jerry has gone above and beyond in providing spiritual support to those Catholic residents who have been at the end-of-life. Many times calls are made to Chaplain Jerry to come see a client, sometimes late at night, sometimes at the Community Hospital. The answer is always 'yes,' and Chaplain Jerry is there. He has comforted and prayed hours on end with residents and their family members during these very difficult times."

FDC is one of four State-operated facilities within the Department of Developmental Services and is a multi-disciplinary, service-oriented residential facility licensed by the California Department of Public Health. FDC provides general acute care, skilled nursing care, intermediate care, and acute crises services to individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

Catholic Chaplains Gather for Training and Prayer



May 27, 2016 – California Catholic Chaplains working in state service gathered for a first-time retreat this week at St. Anthony Retreat Center/Three Rivers, near Sequoia National Park. In this serene and beautiful environment they were able to connect with each other, build community, and engage in conversation and discussion. Fr

Richard Benson facilitated the retreat. "It was a first for us Catholic Chaplains," commented one participant.

"Fr Benson was excellent. He kept our attention and gave us substance and motivated us to realize that we are specially chosen to serve and announce, that our mission is to make our clients know that they too are chosen. That we are never alone in our mission, that the Spirit is always directing us as Jesus promised."

The consistent recommendation and request from the chaplains was that they want to gather more frequently!

Deacon Clyde Davis Launches Program of Support for Chaplains



March 14, 2016 – Deacon Clyde Davis has stepped into the role of Chaplain Specialist for the Catholic chaplains working in California state prisons. The California Catholic Conference received a grant in late 2015 to develop a statewide program that would build a stronger network of support for current chaplains and recruit new people to the ministry. Deacon Davis knows what it's like to be a chaplain. He volunteered for many years in Orange County jails while running his aerospace manufacturing company. The experience led him to sell the business to his employees and become a chaplain at the California Correctional Institute in Tehachapi where he served for more than 12 years.

"Being a chaplain is lonely," Deacon Davis reflects, "You are far from colleagues, sometimes seen as competition by chaplains of other faiths who are in the facility, and often separated from the staff of the prison." He plans to change that reality.

In his new effort, Deacon Davis sees himself as a chaplain advocate and "seeker of chaplains." He has already conducted a survey to assess existing programs, hear chaplains' needs and determine the kind of support that will make a difference. In late February he joined Debbie McDermott and other Conference staff to host a first-ever chaplaincy recruitment booth at the Religious Education Congress in Los Angeles.

Next is a three-day training and networking event in May for all state-employed Catholic chaplains. The event will offer more opportunities to share common needs and explore possible solutions. After the retreat, Deacon Davis plans to make good use of his pilot's license. He will be doing follow-up visits with Catholic chaplains all over the state to keep the momentum going and see their work firsthand. Welcome, Deacon Davis!

Jail and Prison Ministry Chaplains, Volunteers Gather in Sacramento

February 18, 2016 – Some 100 volunteers and chaplains from Sacramento, Placer, Yolo and Solano counties, as well as state prison chaplains and volunteers, participated in a training workshop last week. The event provided an opportunity to affirm an overall vision for the ministry and also to spend time in county break-out sessions sharing ideas and challenges.

Father George Horan, longtime director of the Office of Restorative Justice for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, gave participants an informative presentation on restorative justice and the spirituality and qualities needed to be an effective jail or prison ministry volunteer.

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