



ACCSS Associated Chaplains in California State Service

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ACCSS Newsletter

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Chaplain Sam Smolinisky is the Catholic Chaplain Pelican Bay State Prison. For Catholics, we are currently in the time of Lent, a communitarian journey of conversion towards Holy Week and Easter. Chaplain Sam reflects on that journey, the challenges of starting his ministry at the time of the Inmate Hunger Strike, and on being faithful to all those he felt called to serve.

Dear Fellow Chaplains,

In the highest security prison in the State of California, I reflect on many accomplishments and shortcomings of ministry in prison that mostly collide like two meteors in the galaxy. The presence of Christ is always amazing but His presence in Pelican Bay State Prison is like a laser beam shooting through the night's sky. I am full of hope for the future and yet hold firm to some of my failures, I must confess.

It was May of 2013 when I was assigned to Pelican Bay and after one month of training I was released into a messy and challenging place of incarceration. The inmates here were embarking on another hunger strike, seeking attention over the conditions for humans in SHU (Security Housing Unit) and solitary confinement, a noble cause in most of the Church's eyes. I thought I held enough experience and knowledge because of my experience in Los Angeles County Juvenile Detention Centers. I knew nothing! What I did hold within was a longing for justice and the willingness to listen. So I asked, "where are the hunger strikers?" I wanted to hear them out. I had heard from afar what they desired and some of the demands were obscure and irrelevant, I thought. But other demands were justifiable. I agreed with ending long term, or indefinite, solitary confinement because I was convinced it was hurting their mental health. I was seeking a peaceful end to two polar arguments for and against the current use of the SHU, but had no clue how this could be possible.

My local Bishop and my Director from the California Bishop's Conference called me one night, after I had walked the rows in Ad-Seg, and asked me for a statement regarding the hunger strike and conditions of the SHU. I felt honored but not yet qualified. Nonetheless my duty to speak up overcame my silence. I shared with them what inmate Rodriguez told me as I walked where I could see and smell the death in the

air in those solitary places. These places had been described and explained. I had that image, but no idea of the humans housed in these places. Men lifted their shirts to show me their ribs. Other's eyes were darkened in the cornea and with circles under them from the lack of nourishment. I could smell the vile in the breath of so many men who were extremely hungry, a stench that consumed the whole building. It was evil, but I reminded myself not to be afraid so many times. "Jesus is with me", I had to repeat in my mind. Rodriguez said "I have never seen a chaplain back here in SHU or Ad Seg, and if you're the chaplain, if you're the Catholic Chaplain, I want you to tell the Bishops and the Pope, that we are going out in a box." I understood his message exactly.

A few days later I walked the same rows and tiers, although I did not recognize the maze. Inmate Rodriguez was much calmer. He saw me and smiled. "You really are the Chaplain" he said. "You really did talk to the Pope and the Bishops because I heard it on the radio yesterday. They asked the State of California and the inmates to come to a peaceful end to the hunger strike." Rodriguez feelings were legitimized because I listened and relayed his message. The California Bishops had delivered a Statement asking the governor to address the overuse of Solitary Confinement, which it considered inhumane with no restorative and rehabilitative purposes. And that's what happened after negotiating an end to so many men being housed in C and D SHU at PBSP. I was a witness to a historical moment when the CDCR and 110,000 inmates who were on hunger strike, about the SHU at Pelican Bay, came to an end.

It's been 6 years since the last major hunger strike here at the prison. I remember going into Ad Seg in June of 2013 and being challenged by a female officer. "Tell them to end their strike and start eating", she said. It was 9 PM when I was told that I had to leave the building and this officer asked me what I said to the men. I told her respectfully, "Jesus Christ went on a hunger strike for forty days and forty nights... that was before He was put to death." The message did not go over well but it was needed. Jesus fasting was eventually followed by a terrible death. But then came the hope and glory of the resurrection.

Today, C SHU has not nearly as many men and they take inmates out of their cells to do religious programs every Tuesday. The D SHU was converted to a lessor security housing for Level 2 inmates who came from all over the State. Positive programing is part of the way things changed after the end of the hunger strikes in 2013! It was a historical flashpoint in time for Pelican Bay State Prison. The presence of Christ penetrated a darkened place like this instantaneously. Sometimes I walk in D Yard and have flashbacks of what once was and what is today. Jesus needed to die in order to resurrect. The pain was necessary for this story to end like this. Likewise the hunger pains as we experience in Lent can help us to better focus on and understand the divine presence and spiritual realities, and to maintain hope and purpose, rather than give in to the darkness and pain of mere physical realities.

Chaplain Sam Smolinisky