A Reflection on Pelican Bay Family Visits
By Chaplain Sam Smolinisky

It was a long 16-hour drive from Los Angeles to Crescent City when I came to work at Pelican Bay State Prison three long years ago. I thought the road would never end, but it was scenic and eventful drive for me. The view of the forest and ocean reminded me of the enormous love God has for me, and all of us. The more I drove, the more I realized how His creation is something to admire and worship. Sixteen hours talking to God but also allowing Him to say “I love you” was a great time for bonding. It was personal experience with God I will never forget. I told myself, “No one will understand what I went through to just get here to work as the Catholic Chaplain at Pelican Bay.” Time proved different.

A few weeks into my work at Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP), Families of the Incarcerated, an organization within Restorative Justice in LA got a hold of me informing me of their visit here to PBSP. I interacted and chatted with mothers and wives and sisters and brothers and children and grandmothers of those behind bars at this home away from home. Nice people, families — imperfect just like the next ones, wanting to see their loved ones. It’s a huge part of Restoring Justice to those that have been wronged and those that have done wrong. Reunification, reconciliation, healing is our mission, I remind myself often. Bringing wives, children, mothers, grandmothers, fathers, nieces and nephews to see their loved ones still alive helps in the healing process Jesus died for.

Before the first time I saw families of the incarcerated, I had preconceived notions of dysfunctional families. When I started interacting with them at dinners provided by the community churches close to Pelican Bay State Prison, I witnessed a miracle. Jesus comes to Earth to heal. Families in the community, mostly of one race and status, were serving food to families of others. Healing took place before my eyes. The blind, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, the dead, were healing all at one time at the dinner Star of The Sea Church in Brookings, Oregon, held for the families of the incarcerated. Volunteer members of the church not knowing what to expect of families members of the incarcerated coming to a table to be served and to eat together, as Jesus taught us.

Healing, gathering around a table, sharing, crying, laughing, being human, and allowing God to love us all despite our differences occurred in a small Catholic church that evening, and each time the bus brings families of the incarcerated. Northern Californians, Oregonians, families of humans who made mistakes, people from the North with people from the South coming to a table to eat and drink.