

LEAGUE ASSISTS CALIFORNIA INMATES

Several months ago, the Catholic League received a letter from an inmate at the Chuckawalla Valley State Prison (CVSP) in Blythe, California which indicated that Catholic prisoners were not being allowed to freely practice their religion. The inmate charged that for over a year there had been no full-time Catholic chaplain, and that when interim priests were available, the inmates were not always allowed to attend Mass. He also said that the Catholic inmates did not have access to Catholic reading material. In addition, he pointed out that Protestant inmates had both a full-time chaplain and reading material.

The league immediately wrote to the acting director of the California Department of Corrections and stated that if the charges were true, then "the situation at CVSP is extremely disturbing and arguably, unconstitutional. The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion to all Americans, even those who are incarcerated."

Before the league received a response to the letter regarding the problems at CVSP, complaints were sent to the league from two inmates at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego, California. They charged that Catholic inmates were being denied access to Mass (with preferential treatment being given to Protestant services) and that their rosaries and religious pictures were often desecrated and destroyed by prison officers. Also, non-meat meals were not available during the Lenten season.

Following notification about these charges, the league wrote to an official in the Office of Community Resources of the California Department of Corrections about both cases.

The league was informed by an official of CVSP that the facility now has a Catholic chaplain who will arrange for priests to say Mass and who will lead Bible studies, among other things . In addition, the league was told that Catholic reading material is now available to the Catholic inmates. In reference to the situation at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility, because of the league's intervention, the two inmates who made the charges have had a meeting with an official of the prison regarding their complaints; they are awaiting word on what will be done.