



DIOCESE OF KANSAS CITY– ST. JOSEPH

Human Rights Office

Prison Ministry Pen Pals/Letter Writing Ministry

Scope

This ministry is to provide encouragement and good-will towards those individuals in local correctional institutions by developing a friendly relationship through routine letter correspondence. We are trying to live up to Jesus' message in Matthew 25: "When I was in prison, you came to visit me..."

A Brief Overview

In prison, the inmate is stripped of their freedoms and most of their dignity. They become institutionalized, meaning that someone else is making all their life decision for them. Some of these people will be in prison the rest of their lives and some are sitting on death row, awaiting execution. We have an opportunity to make a difference to them. We can be a small light in a very dark world. By providing a sympathetic ear, we can show them that someone cares about them.

The goal of writing to a person in prison is to promote exchange of friendly letters and not to provide financial assistance or romantic involvement.

Pen Pals help prisoners stay aware of the world outside of prison, particularly the area where they resided.

Through your letters, show compassion, caring, and understanding. Help improve the offender's self-esteem.

Remember that your prison pen pal may be very vulnerable and life may seem relatively hopeless. A primary thought your pen pal may have is about *being free and how to attain freedom*. This can lead to manipulation.

A prisoner's mood may change daily. Life in prison is a complex system that those of us on the "outside" have no way of understanding.

Expectations

If you start this ministry, you will be assigned an inmate at a local correctional institution to correspond at least one time per month. There is no set length to the relationship, but we hope that you'd give it one year, longer is better. Your expenses would be that of the stamps and paper and envelopes. There are some do's and don'ts listed below.

Please contact the Human Rights Office (816)714-2364 for further guidance on starting this ministry at your parish or to be linked to a parish already doing this ministry for letter writing.

THE CATHOLIC CENTER

Post Office Box 419037 . Kansas City, Missouri . 64141-6037
20 West Ninth Street . Kansas City, Missouri 64105



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Do's and Don'ts

Most people are nervous in dealing with those who are incarcerated. If you follow the guidelines given below, that should assuage some of your apprehensions and help you to establish a friendship with your assigned inmate.

1. Do send your letters directly to your pen pal. On your letterhead & return address section, use the address for the Pen Pal Ministry at The Catholic Center:
Pen Pal Program – Human Rights Office
Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph
20 West 9th Street
Kansas City, MO 64105
2. Do treat your pen-pal with dignity. Everyone is a child of God and we need to recognize this in everyone.
3. Do listen and be sympathetic.
4. Do talk about your life in generalities; talk about hobbies, sports, your family, where you're from, etc. Share experiences with your pen-pal and make sure to listen to theirs.
5. Do pray for them; they need it.
6. Do use their ID number. They are assigned a prison ID number; **always** use it on all your correspondence. If you send a letter to an offender without the assigned ID number. Your letter will be automatically returned.
7. Do use prudence in your letters to your pen-pal. You are being a Christ to them by this ministry, never say anything that could reflect badly on you. Use only your first name and have mail directed to the Parish office.
8. Do keep your letters to 1-2 pages.
9. Do not be preachy, judgmental, or condescending towards your pen-pal.
10. Do not get too deeply involved in their crime, their trial, or any appeals. They will naturally want to talk about these issues, and that is ok, but don't dwell on them. Remember you're not their lawyer; you're just trying to be a friend. Do not promise something that you cannot deliver. Even if you are a lawyer, do not give legal advice.
11. Don't agree to do any errands or favors for them on the outside. Doing such things will often get them (and us) in trouble.
12. Do not send pictures of yourself or give detailed personal information out to your pen-pal, like your address, where you work, etc. Use only your first name or your pen name.
13. Do not send money or gifts or anything like stamps, religious metals, money. The guards will confiscate them and the prisoner will lose their writing privileges. A small prayer card or poem is allowed, but *not one that is laminated or sealed in plastic*.
14. Do not contact the offender's family, friends, attorney or parole officer.
15. Something to remember about the incarcerated writing to others: One letter may cost them as much as \$0.55 to \$0.60 for postage, envelope & paper. Double that if the offender is writing to two pen-pals. It may not be an issue for the offender if he/she is working or has support from family and friends. If not, he/she may be living on as little as \$7.50 per month of which he/she has to buy all personal care items and toilet paper.