



## **Diocese of Beaumont Criminal Justice Ministry Pen Pal Program**

There is a way to visit those in prison without having to go inside a prison unit. For many, the single largest barrier to having a personal encounter with someone inside the walls is that they are afraid. Prison can be a scary place. Many are afraid for their physical safety, afraid that their personal information will be accessed, and afraid that an undesirable person will one day appear on their doorstep.

The anonymous ***Pen Pal Program*** opens the door to a safe encounter without revealing your full name or address and without going inside a prison unit. We can match writers on the outside with those on the inside. You can have a sustained personal encounter without revealing your identity.

Before matching you to a pal, we provide some brief training and guidelines. As you can imagine, prisons have lots of rules. Many of their rules are not intuitive to the unfamiliar. Each state and each unit may have rules that vary from others. There are a few simple, but important, *Do's and Don't's* that you will want to know.

We can provide a sample letter to give you some sense of how to get started. It is hard for us to conceive of how valuable our letters are to those on the inside. Even through letters, we are Christ's presence to the incarcerated. What is even more difficult for most of us to conceive is that they will become Christ's presence to us.

### **Prison is a place of many things. A place of healing it is not.**

The pandemic opened our eyes to the social epidemic of isolation and loneliness. We have seen and felt the pain of separation. We long to bring healing hugs and affection to our loved ones. Those in prison are no different. If you write to someone in prison, you are part of an important healing ministry. In fact, writing the lonely may be the ultimate social distance ministry. Every letter is confirmation they are not forgotten; proof that someone cares. Many inmates will not write back to you — keep writing anyway.

### **Don't let the lack of a reply fool you into thinking your letters are without effect. Kindness is never wasted.**

On April 27, 2018, state of Texas, executed a fellow Catholic, Rosendo "Rod" Rodriguez. Before his execution Rod offered these final words, *"I had the honor and privilege to know many prison guards and staff. I want to thank all of them. I would like for everyone to write the people on death row, as they are all good men, and I am very happy I got to know them. All of their lives are worth knowing about."*

## Prison Letters

Letters from prison hold a dear place in sacred scripture. Paul, while imprisoned in Rome, wrote Letters to the Colossians, Philemon, the Ephesians, and the Philippians. His letters from prison present a composite image of Christ, the church, and Christian life itself.

We have this opportunity to bring Christ to the ends of the earth through our letters to those in prison. Here are a few excerpts from recent letters from inside the walls testifying to the impact of our letters.

From Pam to her pal, Margo: *"Today I am officially drug free. My daughter just sent me this pic. (I omitted) My heart fluttered. God is blessing me in so many ways, most of all with my family. I'm so deeply grateful that I'm not where I used to be. Thank you for all you have done. I'm also very grateful to have you as my friend."*

From Gilbert: *"I sincerely appreciate all your mail and thank you for showing me agape love. It is rare that I get mail and thank you from the bottom of my heart."* Gilbert provided a long list of prayer intentions before Lourdes and his latest letter included some additional requests. His last request was for more Catholic volunteers in the prisons.

From Ricky: *"Anyway, I am writing you to thank you very much for your thoughtfulness and brotherly love you have shown me since we met. I am so blessed to have met you, along with ALL the other Kairos brothers. I don't know if you truly understand how great it feels when mail call comes and your name is called."*

We don't write to those inside the walls solely because of the impact it makes on them we--do it for ourselves. Just as Paul's letters from prison presented a composite image of Christ, the church, and Christian life, our letters to those in prisons do the same.

**Dare to make a difference in another's life. It is the best gift you can give yourself.**



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Beaumont, TX 77704-3948

or

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Criminal Justice Director  
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Dear Prison Pen Pal Participant and those considering participation:

Thank you for your interest in our prison pen pal program. In writing, we, in a way, are visiting" someone in prison, as our Lord asked us to do in Mathew 25:36. Most of the individuals we write to are broken; may come from extremely rough backgrounds and have been involved with drugs and/or alcohol. Many are under-educated and some need mental health assistance. They are truly some of the least among us. As Pope Francis said to prisoners he visited at the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia:

"I know it is a painful time not only for you, but also for your families and for all society. Any society, any family, which cannot share or take seriously the pain of its children, and views that pain as something normal or to be expected, is a society "condemned" to remain hostage to itself and prey to the very things which cause that pain. I am here as a pastor, and above all as a brother, to share your situation and to make it my own. I have come so that we can pray together and offer our God anything that causes us pain, but also anything that gives us hope, so that we can receive from him the power of resurrection." *Pope Francis*

The Diocese of Beaumont pen pal program is one of hope. It serves several purposes: it provides information about current events and things the inmate is interested in (information one does not readily get inside the walls); it helps instill a positive attitude due to hopeful messages we send; and, most importantly it tells the inmate someone cares. This latter point cannot be stressed enough since for many inmates no one writes or visits them. Studies show that corresponding with the incarcerated reduces the recidivism rate (the tendency to reoffend), which says, we are saving some souls. Below are several excerpts from letters we have received that capture the importance of our work.

"Thank you for writing me, it means a lot to know you care about me. I haven't wrote you because a lot of things have been going on and I've been moving around to various prisons. It's been crazy period... Well, thank you again for praying and writing me it means a lot..."

"How are you doing. I received a letter back from you guys and I am very happy about that ...It would be awesome to be put on your pen pal list that would be excellent to have the opportunity to meet fellow Catholics. So I really appreciate what you guys offer and do for people behind wall thank you very much. I can't wait to hear back from you and have a wonderful day God bless."

"Thank you so much for responding to my letter so quickly. I'm in a state prison camp and we have a small group of about 15 Catholics here and basically, we have nothing as far as Catholic leadership. I am very happy to hear that you have a pen pal program. I sure could use that!

Thanks for writing me back. You really made my day today. (Smile)"

“I write you because I am attempting for the first time in my life to “let go and let God! “. All the while, hoping and praying that he (God) will not only renew my spirit but also my mind as well.”

It is important that all participants become aware of expectations in writing to an inmate. To this end, we are providing information about the program and the do's and don'ts. If you have any questions or just want to chat about your process, please do not hesitate to contact the Criminal Justice Director, Sr. Misty.

**In your introductory package, you will receive the following documents:**

#1 – **Introductory Letter** – this document

#2 – **Program Guidelines:** three page document that we ask all volunteer writers to read thoroughly. If you have questions, please contact Sr. Misty. We will then send you your new pen pal information.

#3 – **Program Process:** volunteer writes directly to the inmate at the prison/jail address. The Diocese of Beaumont address should **always** be used as the return address in all circumstances, especially on the upper left-hand portion of the front of the envelope. (Sample in document #3.) The inmate's reply is sent to the Diocese of Beaumont address. Inmate letters will be forwarded to the volunteer writer.

#4 – **Pen Pal sample letter:** Feel free to request that Sr. Misty review the first few letters that you write until you get the feel of writing on your own. Email them to [mgarriga@dioceseofbmt.org](mailto:mgarriga@dioceseofbmt.org) if you wish before we send them on.

#5 – **Diocese of Beaumont letterhead:** Participants are encouraged to print this out and use it for their correspondence. It is handy for everyone to have the address in plain sight. Other blank white paper can be used.

#6 – **“6 Ways to Up Your Pen Pal Letter Writing”**

Always feel free to contact your coordinator, if you have any questions or concerns.

We thank you for your interest in our Pen Pal Program.



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## **Program Guidelines & Acknowledgement**

The goal of writing to a person in prison is to promote a Christ centered correspondence that lets each inmate know they are not forgotten.

Pen Pal's help prisoners stay aware of the world outside of prison. Through our letters, we show compassion, caring and understanding and help improve the inmate's self-esteem. Pen Pal's commit to writing at least one letter per month for at least one year.

### **DO'S**

- Use plain white copy paper or the letterhead in this packet. No colored paper or greeting cards. No heavy paper like cardstock.
- Send your letters directly to your inmate making sure to include their prisoner ID# on the letter as well as on the envelope.
- For a return address, use only your first and last name. If you feel safer, use a last name that you have made up and the Diocese of Beaumont address –
  - P.O. Box 3948, Beaumont, TX 77704. **Never use your home address.**
- Keep letters to 1-2 pages.
- Write once a month for six months, regardless of whether you get a reply. If after six months you have not received a reply, please advise Sr. Misty.
- From the beginning, set a positive tone. State the purpose for your writing so that the prisoner can respond accordingly. Don't hesitate to establish clear boundaries so the inmate understands that your relationship is platonic, and only for the time they are in prison.
- The best way to approach your inmate is to simply accept him/her as a fellow human being whom you want to get to know.
- Begin by telling general things about yourself and things that mean something to you. Most prisoners enjoy hearing about our daily lives. It helps them stay in touch with the world on the "outside," and serves as a diversion from the grind of prison life.
- Pray for your inmate and tell them that you are doing so. Ask others to pray for them and tell them others are praying for them.

**Ask them to pray for you and for those you pray for. It is important that you give them something they can do for you.**

## DON'TS

- Never offer personal information about your family. Never provide your address or telephone number. Never provide the names of your friends or your children.
- Do not provide your work place information or even the parish you belong to. You can simply say it's a parish in the Diocese of Beaumont.
- Use your first name only, or a nickname.
- Do not promise something that you cannot deliver.
- Do not send money or gifts of any kind. This includes stamps and stationery. Anything can be used as contraband!!
- Do not send pictures of yourself, or things that reveal personal information.
- Do not continue to write if you receive inappropriate messages.

### **Contact Sr. Misty if this happens.**

- Do not say anything in your letters that might be embarrassing if it were revealed. All mail is read by prison staff before it is forwarded to your inmate.
- Do not contact the inmate's family, friends, attorney, or parole officer.
- Do not give legal advice, even if you are a lawyer.
- Do not ask about what they're in prison for, how long they have left, or what it was like to be arrested. These types of questions are not appropriate.

If you agree with these guidelines and wish to continue, please contact Sr. Misty and you will receive a name and contact information to start corresponding.

Thank you for saying "yes."

Sr. Misty Garriga

Criminal Justice Director for the Diocese of Beaumont

[mgarriga@dioceseofbmt.org](mailto:mgarriga@dioceseofbmt.org)

409-924-4385



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## The Process

1. Put the Inmate's ID Number on the envelope.
2. Use the Diocese of Beaumont address as your return address on your envelope.
3. You may use a "pen" name or your first name. A first and last name is necessary, so if you're uncomfortable using your last name, make up an anonymous last name. If you do this, please let Sr. Misty know so your mail will be forwarded to the right person! And don't forget your "new" name!
4. You may send letters directly to the Inmate but make certain to use the Diocese of Beaumont PO Box as the return address and not your personal address.
5. The inmate will send his/her reply to the Diocese of Beaumont PO Box
6. This will be forwarded to your personal address. Again, if you use a different name, please let us know!

## Sample envelope

Diocese of Beaumont Criminal Justice  
Jane Rodriguez (Your first name and made-up last name)  
PO Box 3948  
Beaumont, TX 77704-3948

Inmate name & ID #  
Facility Address – example  
John Doe # 12345678  
Stiles Unit  
3060 FM 3514  
Beaumont, TX 77705



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## **SAMPLE LETTER**

Dear ,

It is my pleasure to write to you through a new pen pal program with the Diocese of Beaumont. I have been told that you have been involved in the RCIA program with the diocese or have attended a St. Kolbe retreat at some point. I am looking forward to getting to know you in the days ahead.

This is an exciting experience for me. I have been provided with guidelines concerning my participation. I am forbidden from contacting your friends or family, your attorney, or your parole officer. Also, I am not permitted to provide money or gifts. I understand that these guidelines have also been made known to you.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I am in my 50's, have been married for many years, and have two grown children. I enjoy running. I like reading and usually read biographies, or books about history. I enjoy quotations, clever turns of phrases, and expressions of great truths in simple words.

I have been in a Bible Study group for more than 20 years. In many ways I still feel like a beginner. I guess that means there is room for me to grow. I learn more from the observations of others than from my own study. Still, I like to ponder and reflect.

I know very little about life in prison. I hope you will feel free to share with me what your daily life is like, and the things that interest or concern you.

In recent years, I have come to believe that there is great power in praying for each other. I know I will ask you to pray for me, and to pray for those who are in my prayers. I will pray for you, and for those for whom you would like me to pray.

May God Bless you and keep you safe,



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## **6 Ways to up your Pen Pal Letter Writing**

1. **Write your letters by hand if you can.** I type my letters for ease of editing and because I write several each week. I have also learned that legible, hand written letters are more personable.

2. **Ask them questions.** What is the best (or worst) job you ever had? Tell me about your family. Tell me about your best childhood friend. What is your favorite movie? Where did you grow up?

3. **Make your letters positive.** Themes of encouragement and growth are more effective than themes of forgiveness or judgment.

4. **Include Scripture passages.** Maybe you heard a good homily one Sunday. Maybe you read a certain Gospel story that was powerful for you. Share it in your letter and how it affected your day.

5. **Send birthday, Christmas, and Easter greetings.** These are more than just letters- they accompany rituals that mark being part of a community. Learn your pen pal's birthday. Texas Department of Criminal Justice does not accept any greeting cards at this time. Keep it simple!

6. **Keep the letters frequent and short.** Do not wait for a reply before you send your next letter. It is fun to get letters from your pal, but your letters have great effect even if your pal does not reply. Try to write at least once a month. It is not very hard if you include birthday greetings, Christmas greetings, or other holiday greetings. A short four-sentence note can be enough to let them know that they're not forgotten.