

FORTY WEEKS ~ LETTERS FROM PRISON

PEN PAL SUGGESTIONS/GUIDELINES

What is the profile of an ideal pen pal candidate?

1. Someone who is stable, emotionally and spiritually. The volatile environment of prisons means that prisoners often have roller-coaster emotions and experiences. The pen pal needs to be able to rise above the volatility and stick to the original purpose of spiritual encouragement.
2. A pen pal must be motivated for ministry. There is little public glory attached to this ministry, but there can be great personal reward and treasures in heaven: *“when I was in prison, you visited me.”* *“Doing unto the least of these”* has its own particular brand of encouragement and satisfaction that comes only from being obedient to God and His Word.
3. It is important to commit. Follow-through is vital. It can be emotionally devastating for a prisoner to take the risk of writing and then not to hear back, or to be rejected without good reason. Some pen-pal relationships continue for a decade or more, and some volunteers write to many prisoners simultaneously. This is a long-term friendship and discipleship ministry, not a short-range or “one-time” ministry.
4. Buoyancy is required. The pen pal must not easily be discouraged. There may be weeks or months when the prisoner doesn’t respond. You may be disappointed – prisoners often relapse or tire if their personal agenda isn’t being filled. You may work with to 2 or 3 prisoners before finding one who stays committed to the process of *Forty Weeks* and builds a solid relationship with you. Stay at it. **Do not be discouraged!**

Now that you are motivated to minister and understand the commitment necessary, it’s time to look at how to get started.

Join Sacred Story Institute’s Facebook Group

Forty Weeks ~ Prison Ministry Network

To share ideas and connect with others who are using
Letters from Prison for prison ministry

Getting Started with Your First *FORTY WEEKS* Pen-Pal

1. Work with your parish, local prison ministry or the chaplaincy at your local jail or penitentiary to identify those incarcerated who might be interested in doing the *Forty Weeks ~ Letters from Prison* program.
2. Acquire the name and address of the person(s) interested in *Forty Weeks*.
3. Get a book to the person(s) who are interested in doing the program.
4. If you choose to remain anonymous to the prisoner, ALWAYS use a safe address. Let that address be through the parish or local prison ministry you are coordinating with or the on-site chaplain in the jail or penitentiary.
5. When addressing your envelope, always include your pen pal's name and his/her Department of Corrections ID # number. Be careful to be accurate, or your letter will be returned.
6. Use blank or lined paper, stationary, note cards, or greeting cards. DO NOT tape, paste or stick anything to the paper, nor can you use cards with layers of paper or glued-in attachments.
7. We think it is best to type your letter so that it can be more easily read by your pen pal.
8. When you receive a letter from your Prison Pen Pal, please try to respond within a week as stamps and stationary are quite "valuable" to our Pen Pals. please understand that this is a commitment on your part to establish and maintain long-term contact with a prisoner. It can be devastating for a prisoner to begin a relationship with someone on the outside and then have that relationship terminated prematurely because the person on the outside has lost interest or gets too busy to stay in touch.
9. Be aware that your letters and your pen pal's letters will be opened and possibly read by the prison. Be careful not to say anything that might bring about negative repercussions for the prisoners (such as making disparaging remarks about the prison or the prison staff).
10. Overtly political content can also be rejected and your letter returned to you.
11. There is a chance that your pen pal has been released or transferred since he/she requested someone to write him/her, so you might not hear back. That is life.
12. Remember that you are not doing this to receive mail; you are doing this because God has called you to serve as a spiritual mentor to a man/woman who desperately needs the love of Christ in his/her life.

Your First Letter

1. **YOUR FIRST LETTER:** Before writing, begin with a prayer to Jesus for the prisoner and yourself. Ask the Lord that he would give to you and the prisoner His Holy Spirit and that He bless and guide the process.
2. **YOUR FIRST LETTER:** Give them your name and that you are looking forward to walking with them on the journey of *Forty Weeks* and that you are praying for them. Ask the prisoner to pray for you, too. You can also say that you are on the journey of life through *Forty Weeks* just like them and emphasize that the two of you will walk with the Lord together on this journey.
3. **IN YOUR FIRST LETTER:**
 - a. Let them know you would like them to write to you monthly.
 - b. Ask them that their first letter start with the reason for why they want to “commit” to the *Forty Weeks* Program and what they hope it does for them.
 - c. Ask them in each monthly letter to give separate reflections/questions they might have on each of the four weeks of exercises they did that month Like Ritchie did for Fr. Bill. (Some months might have five weeks).
 - d. Let them know you will write back your own reflections on what they wrote and offer the best guidance and spiritual advice you can, like Fr. Bill did with Ritchie.
 - e. Make sure they read Ritchie’s and Fr. Bill’s reflections for each week and include any reflections on the week’s exercises along with reflections on the correspondence in the “letters.”
 - f. Try very hard to get your response letter back to them the week you receive their letter. This will keep them motivated and let them know you care.
 - g. Tell him/her that you will pray for him/her regularly and ask him/her to let you know if he/she has a prayer request.
 - h. Share one of your favorite scriptures with him/her.
 - i. Remind him/her that God loves him/her.

The DO NOTS

1. **CHECK** the Bureau of Prison BOP website for what can and cannot be sent to inmates in your state or municipality. It varies widely.
2. **DO NOT** send money, no matter how reasonable the request may sound. If an inmate has less than \$5.00 on her prison account, he/she will be classified as “*indigent*” and can request up to five stamps per week.
3. **DO NOT** use staples or paper clips. These are considered “*contraband*” by DCP because they can be used as weapons.
4. **DO NOT** probe into your pen pal’s personal life. If he/she chooses to share personal details with you, that is fine.
5. **DO NOT** try to fix your pen pal’s problems – you are not his/her counselor! Your job is to encourage him/her spiritual growth, to walk the path of Forty Weeks with them, and to pray for him/her. Offer Scripture references to make many of the most important points. We want them to know we care about them but we are really interested in them connecting personally with Jesus Christ.
6. **DO NOT** share information about yourself- where you live or work. If you believe a circumstance or happening in your life can be used as part of your testimony or ministry and the pen pal may benefit from knowing this, ask God’s direction in sharing.
7. **DO NOT** ask what you can do for your pen pal. Instead, ask what you can pray for him/her?
8. **DO NOT** offer any legal assistance or advice.
9. **DO NOT** share confidential details with others about your pen pal. Respect his/her privacy and do not gossip.
10. **DO NOT** promise help with employment, housing, etc., after release from prison. Any request for social services should be channeled to appropriate agencies.

DO NOT send personal photo of self or family to Pen Pal!

Generic pictures or prayer card is fine!