



St. Silas Orthodox Christian Prison Fellowship
Pen Pal Handbook

INTRODUCTION

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”
Matthew 9:37-38

Welcome to the Pen Pal program of St. Silas Orthodox Christian Prison Fellowship!

As a candidate for the Pen Pal volunteer program, you have stepped forward to answer the Lord’s call to be sent into His harvest. It is our prayer that the work of your hands in this ministry will always be blessed.

We are deeply grateful for your desire to join us in obeying the Lord’s words: **“I was in prison and you came to visit me”** (Matthew 25:36).

Through this program, you have the opportunity to visit men and women in prison through your letters. When you write to them, you are writing to Christ in prison.

This handbook is designed to help you understand the program, provide initial training, and help you discern whether this ministry is right for you.

GETTING STARTED

As you discern whether to answer the Lord’s call to visit Him in prison through letter writing, the first and most important aspect of participating in the correspondence ministry is prayer. We believe that your letter writing is far more than simply jotting down a note. It is a spiritual ministry to people in prison and, as such, has the attention of our Lord, His Saints, and the Holy Angels. Should you take on this ministry, we pray that God will guide your thoughts as you respond to the questions and concerns of the men and women you may be writing to.

Consider for a moment the following story of what took place when St. John Chrysostom sat down to write about the letters of St. Paul—he had some incredible help. While we may not be St. John Chrysostom, our Lord and His Saints remain the same today and will be there to assist us in this sacred ministry.

When St. Proclus was a novice under Chrysostom, during the time that he was patriarch, it was his duty to announce visitors. A certain nobleman was slandered before Emperor Arcadius and

the emperor had expelled him from the court. This nobleman came to implore Chrysostom to intercede with the emperor on his behalf.

Proclus went to announce him to the patriarch but, looking through the partly opened door, saw a man bent over the patriarch, whispering something in his ear while the patriarch wrote. This continued until dawn. Meanwhile, Proclus told the nobleman to come back the next evening, while he himself remained in amazement, wondering who the man with the patriarch was, and how he managed to enter the patriarch's chamber unannounced. The second night the same thing happened again, and Proclus was in still greater amazement. The third night the same thing happened again, and Proclus was in the greatest amazement.

When Chrysostom asked him if the nobleman had come by, he replied that he had already been waiting for three nights, but that he couldn't announce him because of the elderly, balding stranger who had been whispering in the patriarch's ear for three nights. The astonished Chrysostom said that he did not remember anyone entering to see him during the previous three nights. He asked his novice what the stranger looked like, and Proclus pointed to the icon of the Holy Apostle Paul, saying that the man was like him. Therefore, it was the Apostle Paul himself who was directing the mind and pen of his greatest interpreter.

The holy icon depicting this event is featured on the cover of this training manual. We hope it serves as a reminder that you are never alone as you write to the precious souls in prison. The Lord loves them more than we ever could, and He desires to transmit that love through your letters. May the Lord bless the work of your hands.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

1. **Read through this manual thoroughly.** There's no rush—take your time. You may even want to read through it more than once.
2. **After reviewing the information and training provided, pray for discernment** to determine whether this ministry is right for you.
3. **Speak with your priest or spiritual father** to ask for guidance on whether this is a good ministry for you.
4. **When you are ready to commit, and with your priest's blessing,** complete the *Pen Pal Volunteer Agreement Form* linked in this booklet
5. **St. Silas Director, Fr. Richard, will reach out to you** for an introductory call and to schedule your virtual Pen Pal Volunteer orientation.
6. **Once you have completed the orientation,** St. Silas will provide you with the name and background information of the incarcerated individual you will be corresponding with.

THE QUALITIES OF A GOOD PEN PAL

Every situation and person is unique. However, there are certain qualities that St. Silas looks for in a good volunteer candidate:

- **Consistency and Commitment:** Many people in prison have experienced abandonment. As a volunteer, you must be willing to write consistently and commit to letter writing in the long term. This is the most important quality we look for in a Pen Pal volunteer and should be taken very seriously. Letter writing can be once a month, the important thing is that it is regular. If you are currently in a transitional phase of life, please consider other ways you might serve until you can make a long-term commitment.
- **An Orthodox Christian:** The individuals who write to St. Silas do so specifically because they wish to correspond with an Orthodox Christian. You should be an Orthodox Christian in good standing—actively involved in a church community, regularly attending services, participating in the Holy Sacraments, and under the guidance of a priest and/or spiritual father.
- **Spiritually and Emotionally Prepared:** If you are currently experiencing spiritual turmoil or a period of questioning, this ministry is not the appropriate place to work through those challenges. Likewise, this ministry is not suited for those who are emotionally vulnerable. Prisons are serious places filled with both great darkness and great light—they are spiritual battlefields. This reality may or may not be reflected in your correspondence. Please talk and discern with your priest to ensure you are spiritually

equipped for this ministry.

- **19 Years of Age:** Pen Pals must be adults. This is a serious ministry, and very serious subjects may arise. Volunteers should be adults not only in age but also in maturity.

THE PEOPLE TO WHOM YOU WILL BE WRITING

The men and women St. Silas connects you with have already been in contact with St. Silas Prison Ministry — either through correspondence or visits. These individuals have expressed a desire to have an Orthodox Pen Pal to write to and keep them company, beyond the care they are already receiving from a St. Silas volunteer or the visitation of a priest. However, the person you correspond with may or **may not** be an Orthodox Christian.

CORRESPONDENCE TRAINING

Basic Information - Adherence to Rules, Regulations, and Policies

It is our firm belief that your success in this ministry is directly linked to your ability to abide by all the rules, regulations, and policies expected of you as a volunteer. At times, it may seem like there are countless “do’s” and “don’ts” involved in this ministry. Some of these rules may make no sense to you, and you might find yourself questioning their purpose. It is easy to start justifying in your mind why a certain rule does not apply to you or the person you are writing to. Please understand: every rule does—and always will—apply to you unless you have explicit written permission from the correctional facility to do otherwise.

The rules, regulations, and policies of each correctional institution are not arbitrarily created. They are the result of specific laws and many years of correctional management experience. They are in place to protect you, the staff, and the people living in the facility. These rules are not “suggestions” that you may choose to follow or ignore.

At some point, the person with whom you are corresponding may subtly ask you to break a rule—something that might seem reasonable in the moment. You must know the rules thoroughly and remain fully committed to obeying them at all times.

Over time, you may encounter real needs that tug at your heartstrings. You may feel compelled to do something that seems right but would actually violate a rule. Remember, you are not above the rules—no matter how righteous your intentions may seem. Jesus told His followers to be “as wise as serpents” and “as gentle as doves” (Matthew 10:16). This wisdom is crucial to keep in mind always.

The consequences of disobeying the rules are straightforward: you may be asked to cease writing to that person, or your mail may be blocked altogether. This outcome would be embarrassing for both the Orthodox volunteer program and for you personally. More importantly, you would lose the opportunity to positively impact the lives of people in prison.

In some cases, infractions of the rules can be very serious. In worst-case scenarios, some volunteers have ended up in prison themselves—not only because they broke the rules, but because they committed a felony in the process. God forbid such a thing ever happen to any volunteer!

General Rules

1. **Do not use your home address or any other personal identification information.** It is a strict rule of the St. Silas pen pal ministry that volunteers do not share any detailed personal identification information with their correspondents aside from their name. You may write under your own given name, but some volunteers prefer to write under a baptismal name. Whether you choose to write under your given name or baptismal name is your own personal choice. However, you should never share your home address, email address, phone number, or other ID information such as Social Insurance numbers or Driver's License info.
2. **All letters must be sent to the St. Silas PO Box or email address,** penpal@orthodoxprisonministry.ca. Do not write to your correspondent directly.
3. **Volunteers are not allowed to do any "favours" for their correspondents.** Some may ask for money to buy toiletries, stamps to continue correspondence, or other financial assistance. Others may request that you contact someone on their behalf. The answer to all such requests should be: *"St. Silas Prison Ministry has very strict rules for correspondence, which do not allow me to do anything but write to you."* Sometimes, a seemingly insignificant request is just a test. For example, a prisoner once asked a volunteer to call his mother to let her know he was okay. It turned out to be code for "The escape is set for Tuesday. Have the getaway car ready."

These precautions provide a necessary shield between you and your pen pal. Manipulation is common in prison. Be wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove (cf. Matthew 10:16). By following these precautions, you can have a very fruitful correspondence with men and women interested in the Orthodox Faith. You will find yourself edified and uplifted by the transforming grace of God at work in their lives.

Keep in mind: Correspondence with people in prison tends to be sporadic for various reasons. If you don't hear from your correspondent for a while, or if correspondence stops entirely, don't get discouraged! Contact the St. Silas Director and/or Pen Pal Coordinator if you have not received a response after several months.

Our Process

Once you've decided to join St. Silas as a pen pal and have spoken with your priest, please complete the [Pen Pal Agreement form](#). This form provides us with your contact information as well as your priest's. After receiving it, St. Silas will contact your priest to verify your standing in the Church. We will then reach out to you to arrange a virtual orientation.

To begin corresponding, we ask that you write a general introductory letter. We will send this letter, along with a cover note, to inmates, inviting anyone who is interested in regular correspondence to reply.

All of your letters should be emailed to **penpal@orthodoxprisonministry.ca**. We will forward them to the appropriate prison. Inmates' replies are sent to our P.O. Box. For everyone's safety, all correspondence is reviewed by the Pen Pal Coordinator before being forwarded.

VOLUNTEER CONDUCT

Personal Behavior

As a Pen Pal volunteer, you are entrusted with a great responsibility. Every time you send a letter to an institution, you represent God, His Church, and the Holy Orthodox Faith. Your words may be read by many more people than the person you are writing to. Letters are often shared with others incarcerated at the facility, and your letter may also be read by staff who screen incoming mail. For some, the only knowledge they have of Orthodoxy may come from what they read in your letters. That is indeed a great responsibility.

“My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things.”

This is not meant to discourage you from volunteering, but to encourage you to take seriously the ministry to which you have been called. Always keep your word. Do not promise things you cannot do. If you tell someone you will do something, then follow through. If you find that you cannot, explain to the person why you are unable to fulfill that promise. Keeping your word is of tremendous importance in this environment.

Do not enter into an “us versus them” mindset between staff and incarcerated individuals. You may hear negative things about certain staff members, but you must remain neutral. Taking sides against staff will likely result in losing your privilege to write to that person.

Be mindful of your language in your letters. The men and women writing to you live in an environment filled with cursing and anger. They write to you seeking an escape from that. Let your letters be filled with words of blessing, not curses. Never talk down to the person you are writing to. Avoid bringing your political views into your letters, as this can lead to problems.

The Background of Your Pen Pal

Remember that the person or persons you are writing to are human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Never ask anyone what crime they committed. If you do learn the nature of their crime, do not judge them. You may strongly dislike the crime, but you are in this ministry to share the love of Christ with them. They have already been judged by a court of law and found guilty. Your role is to help them commit their whole lives to the Lord and learn to live a life of repentance. If you judge them in your heart, they will sense it, and your ministry will be less effective.

If you struggle with judgment or have difficulty accepting the person you are writing to, please

Speak with the St. Silas Director or Pen Pal Coordinator.

Your Involvement With The Men or Women You Will Be Writing

Your contact with the men or women you correspond with should always be limited to your letters. You should never be placed on their calling list to receive phone calls at your home. You should never give your home mailing address or be placed on any mailing list to receive letters at home. Do not become involved with these individuals outside of your correspondence.

Do not become involved in any legal matters related to the men or women you write to. You are not there to provide legal counsel or take up their cause. This includes legal work related to their original conviction as well as any legal actions they might be pursuing against the facility where they live. Do not get involved; that is not the purpose of your ministry.

Family Members of Those You Write

You should never accept gifts from any family member of the men or women to whom you correspond. No matter how innocent or trivial the gift may seem, do not accept it.

Never pass on messages to or from family members, whether verbal or written. Do not waive on this rule, regardless of any emotional appeals.

Privacy Concerns

You must also be very cautious about what you share in public forums, including within the Church. There is no need to use a person's full name when sharing a spiritual event or story—you can usually tell the story without using any names at all. If a more personal communication is necessary, such as a prayer request, you can refer to the person by their baptismal name only (without a last name), as long as this does not specifically identify them.

This is especially important when writing about a high-profile individual who has made the news. It can be tempting to share specifics, but please refrain from doing so.

Confidentiality Regarding St. Silas Orthodox Prison Fellowship Members

In addition to protecting the privacy of those incarcerated, you are also asked to keep confidential any personal information you may have access to regarding **St. Silas Members and**

Volunteers. This may include personal addresses, emails, and phone numbers.

This information should **never** be shared with anyone in prison. Although someone in your Church might have a loved one or friend in prison who wants to connect with St. Silas—and this is exactly why we exist—please understand that any information given to one person may quickly spread to many others. Even if the loved one or friend is trustworthy, others who receive that information might not be.

Contacting St. Silas Orthodox Prison Fellowship

When inviting someone in prison to contact St. Silas or join the correspondence program, please use **only our official mailing addresses and public contact information**. Allow St. Silas to decide what additional information is appropriate when we respond.

PO Box 21048 Southgate
Chilliwack, BC V2P 8A9

778-600-1223

director@orthodoxprisonministry.ca

penpal@orthodoxprisonministry.ca

EXAMPLE OF A FIRST LETTER

Dear John,

I am an Orthodox Christian living in Alberta, where I attend All Saints Church with my family.

I work in the HR Department at a local hospital. It's not the most exciting job, but I enjoy the people I work with, and it's rewarding to know we help a lot of people.

I recently volunteered with St. Silas to see if I could "visit" someone through letters, and they suggested I reach out to you to see if you'd be interested in corresponding.

I'm no theologian, but I've been Orthodox all my life and was raised in an Orthodox household. I enjoy sharing my experiences in church and learning about people from different backgrounds.

How are you doing? If you're interested, please tell me a little about yourself.

If it's alright, I will keep you in my prayers. Please let me know if there is anything specific I can pray for on your behalf.

If this is the only letter you receive from me before Thanksgiving, I want to wish you a blessed Thanksgiving. I'm grateful for the opportunity to write to you.

In Christ,
Mike