

One Parish, One Prisoner

I was in prison
and you came
to visit me.

Matthew 25:36

A New Ministry at St. Elizabeth of the Trinity Parish

It's no secret that visiting the imprisoned is the most challenging of the Works of Mercy. The thought of jails and prisons makes some of us uncomfortable. In addition, relatively few opportunities exist for the average parishioner to help someone in prison.

However, at St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, that's changed with the "One Parish, One Prisoner" (OPOP) program, launched in February 2023.

OPOP was founded in 2017 by Chris Hoke, a chaplain and pastor to violent offenders in Skagit County in the state of Washington. As he traveled, Hoke continually challenged Christians of all denominations with this simple question: "How would you feel if you came back to life inside your own tomb – *but nothing else happened?*"

Typical answers were: "Terrified, desperate and hopeless." And these are the exact same words, asserts Hoke, spoken by countless individuals who are released every day from prison.

Responding to the Lord's call to attend to the needs of our neighbor, parishes like our own have been forming teams of volunteers (typically six or seven) to build a

relationship with a person about to be released from prison. That relationship is developed over a period of months through an exchange of letters, periodic phone/Zoom calls, and even in-person visits to the prison.

The goal is to connect a soon-to-be-released prisoner with a parish that will assist with the numerous and complex obstacles to re-entering society. The parish volunteer team – *and the parish as a whole* – prays for and "walks" with that individual even after he or she is back in society.

In the Chicago area, the OPOP program is connected with the Kolbe House Prison ministry of the Archdiocese of Chicago and came to the attention of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity through our St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Returning to the Community

St. Elizabeth of the Trinity team volunteers concur that the list of questions facing a released prisoner is daunting. For example:

- *Where will I live? Who will rent to me?*
- *Where will I get medical care?*
- *Who will hire me? How will I get to a job without a car or driver's license?*
- *How will I be treated by my family, and by my community?*
- *Can I change my life for the better and not fall into old patterns?*

A key part of the OPOP program is a series of modules that provide valuable, practical information and guidance to both the volunteer team members and their inmate friends. The parish teams meet regularly to discuss what they have learned and share questions and concerns.

However, the centerpiece of the volunteer team involvement is the trust-building component. No amount of knowledge about the challenges of re-entry are useful if the individual inmate friend does not have a deep-seated trust in the volunteers.

Parish Team Meetings – A Learning Process

At St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, there are two separate teams working with inmate friends: “Team Michael” and “Team Christopher.” Here are comments gleaned from their respective team meetings:

- *At first, it was difficult to write a letter to this unknown person in prison. As we found we had things in common, communicating came easier and naturally. Likewise with phone calls.*
- *An unforeseen benefit to volunteering is our personal bonding together as a parish team for an important mission.*
- *This is not like other parish ministries where you might show up at some meetings or participate in an event or project. It's an ongoing commitment to help another human being.*

- *Everyone's journey is different. Don't assume that because someone is in prison you know their story. OPOP founder Chris Hoke said, “Rarely does the Spirit look like what you'd think.”*
- *Our inmate friends are people who are hurt and wounded on multiple levels. We're gaining a deeper appreciation of Pope Francis' description of the Church as a “field hospital on a battlefield.”*
- *We've learned that being in prison can be a result of a bad choice combined with a lifetime of bad breaks.*
- *This program is a two-way street. At our meetings, we learn not only about how to help our inmate friend, but also more about our authentic selves. There is mutual transformation.*
- *Most of us can get through any hard time as long as we are not alone. This program gives the entire parish community the opportunity to surround our inmate friend with prayer and material support.*

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I'd really like to work with troubled teens... The thing that scares me most is being alone and by myself for the rest of my life.

– *Our inmate friend Michael*



“Team Michael” (left to right): Susan Gomez; Carol Lupinski; Tony Lupinski; Andres Gomez; Dave McNaughton (not pictured: Ezio Berrettini).

The Critical Role of the Parish

Father Michael Grisolano, pastor, St. Elizabeth of the Trinity Parish, underscores the critical role of the parish. “The Lord calls the entire parish community – not just a handful of volunteers – to embrace this Work of Mercy, pray for all involved as well as tangibly and financially assist the individuals who are re-entering society. We are inspired by what St. Mother Teresa said, ‘God does not require that we be successful, only that we be faithful.’”



“**Team Christopher**” (left to right): Len Strauch; Father Michael Grisolano; Jill Powers; Kathleen Cullen-Conway; Kevin Powers; Jill Hawkes; Peter Cullen-Conway.

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*I’m a good listener and I like to learn.
I’m a people person... The hardest
thing I face is meeting people and
putting trust in them.*

– Our inmate friend Christopher

Reaching Out with Mercy

“None of us deserve the freedom and redemption that God has freely given to us because He loves us,” said Bishop Mark Bartosic, auxiliary bishop of Chicago, Vicariate II, and former director of the Archdiocese of Chicago Kolbe House Jail Ministry.

“All of us are responsible for the brokenness of the world and we all have a mutual responsibility for providing healing. The OPOP program is an opportunity for a parish to reach out with mercy to people who are experiencing isolation, loneliness, and guilt.”

Why does ‘One Parish, One Prisoner’ use the ‘Raising of Lazarus’ image for the program?



Like Lazarus, incarcerated men and women are effectively dead to society. And like Lazarus, their situation seems hopeless. However, with Jesus all things are possible including new life. Recall that Jesus addresses Lazarus by name and that the stone had to be rolled away for Lazarus to come out. Recall, too, that Lazarus had to be unbound to be free. Similarly, it often takes a community, such as a parish, to overcome the barriers for released prisoners.



What is it like to visit an inmate friend in person?

“Team Michael” member volunteers Tony and Carol Lupinski drove 250 miles to the Robinson, Illinois, Correctional Center, in December 2023. During their face-to-face visit in the cafeteria, Michael confided more about his feelings of guilt, strengthening their relationship as trusted friends. Carol and Tony confirm that the security measures regarding visitors are a bit intimidating. However, they note that as soon as they saw the look on Michael’s face, they knew the trip was worth it. They add, “We can look for inspiration in the model of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who leaves the 99 to go in search of the one sheep who is lost.”



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Kolbe House

In cooperation with the Kolbe House Jail Ministry

“ St. Elizabeth of the Trinity: You have a beautiful parish community culture of welcome and hospitality. I am so excited for you to be part of this movement to create havens of welcome for our brothers and sisters coming out of prison.

– Emily Cortina, coordinator of outreach and formation,
Kolbe House Jail Ministry, Archdiocese of Chicago

To learn more about the Kolbe House, visit us at www.kolbehouseministry.org

Here is how you can help.

- Give generously in the second collection on April 6 – 7, 2024.
- Drop off a donation at the Rectory and mark it, “One Parish, One Prisoner”
- Keep our inmate friends, Michael and Christopher, in your prayers as they continue on their journey.
- If you have access to employment or housing opportunities for our OPOP friends, please contact the Rectory.
- Go to **Faith Direct** to give online, or scan the QR code below.



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