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## **Making the Largest Impact as a Catholic Minister in Prisons and Jails**

Prison Ministry changes both the life of the prisoner inside and that of the volunteer. Prison ministers will often say that it is both the most rewarding and challenging activity any volunteer will undertake. In this document, the Prison Ministry of the Diocese of Baton Rouge includes several of the skills, practices, virtues, and values that are typical of successful volunteers, with the goal of attracting new members and providing volunteers with guidance that can support them in their discernment and ministry.

Note: The last page includes administrative and safety guidelines that are important to know and follow in this ministry.

Catholic Social Teaching calls us to walk with the forgotten and marginalized. To bring them hope and lead them to the realization that, despite the mistakes of the past, God's mercy, and love for them are immense.

### **Virtues, skills, and practices that are valuable in prison ministry:**

1. **A conviction in the inherent dignity of every human person** - Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and retains this dignity regardless of his or her actions in life.

*Prison ministers acknowledge the need for public safety and accountability but also the potential for renewal in every prisoner. They seek to be instruments of God's grace in helping prisoners find Him as their source of Faith, Hope and Charity.*

2. **A belief in *solidarity*** which demands that we do not abandon one another but rather remain committed to each other so that everyone may flourish.

*Prison ministers respond to the call to solidarity in Hebrews 13:3: "be mindful of those in prison as though you were imprisoned yourself."*

3. **Heroic generosity (magnanimity)** – An expansive sense of charity and a desire for great good.

*Prison ministers strive to give of themselves cheerfully, without counting the cost and practicing "charity as an immediate response to the human need" (Deus Caritas Est, Pope Benedict XVI)*

4. **Perseverance and dependability** – Prison ministry is one of presence, of being there.

*Prison ministers realize they build trust and relationships when those “inside” can rely on their regular visits.*

5. **Patience** – Much in this ministry requires patience. From the approval process for becoming a volunteer, to security checks before entering the facility, to waiting for guards to open gates, and more importantly the time that the inmate or others need from the volunteer, patience is key. Adjusting to what is known as “prison time” is essential. Communications with staff from the prison or the Department of Corrections (DOC) can also require the volunteer’s patience. These personnel have difficult jobs and deserve our consideration and respect.

*When their patience is tested, prison ministers recall that the people they visit often spend 23 hours a day inside a small cell. It is another way they live solidarity with them.*

6. **Empathy** – To try to understand the world from the prisoner’s perspective and show them genuine interest.

*Prison ministers strive to feel what others are feeling and help them feel valued and understood. Prison ministers are not judgmental and strive to make prisoners feel safe.*

7. **Listening skills** – To be open to listening more than one speaks, to take the time and not be in a hurry.

*Prison ministers know that the ministry is about those they visit.*

8. **Conversation skills** – Storytelling and being engaging in conversation are great gifts to share with the prisoners.

*Prison ministers recognize that prisoners live lonely, monotonous, and constrained lives and that the “gift of gab” can make a big difference in someone’s day.*

9. **Humility** – Prison ministers realize they receive more from the prisoners than what they give and they remain open to this.

10. **Willingness to evangelize** – To recognize over time where the person is in his or her faith journey and be willing to talk about our Faith and walk with them.

*Prison ministers understand that their one mission is to bring the message of the gospel. They strive to do this in a spirit of invitation and openness without being forceful, recognizing the need to communicate care and concern first.*

11. **Love and reverence for the Eucharist** – Prison ministers recognize in the Eucharist the source of strength they need to joyfully persevere, especially when conditions are difficult. They also know that in their reverence of the Eucharist they witness to prisoners and others about the real presence of Christ.