

February 2023

# Saint Raphael



MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

## St. Raphael Prison Pen Pal Ministry

By Joy Horvath

**P**en, paper, postage. The decision to spend a few moments writing an old-fashioned letter, the dedication to uplifting someone in need, the desire to share your faith. The St. Raphael Prison Pen Pal Ministry is a small but enthusiastic group of men and women who correspond regularly with incarcerated individuals. Is the Holy Spirit calling you to be part of this program?

For the past ten years, the Cleveland Diocesan Prison Ministry has sent birthday cards each month to about two dozen Ohio inmates at the Grafton Correctional Institution, a men's medium and minimum security facility with about 2000 prisoners. Included in each card is an invitation to participate in a letter-writing program. Positive responses depend totally on each individual--no one is forced to participate. Correspondents are randomly matched with inmates. This effort has been spearheaded by St. Ladislav parishioner George Scherma; St. Raphael Parish officially joined this endeavor in 2020. He stresses that this a "Ministry of Friendship," and that pen pals are not necessarily Catholic or even Christian, although the St. Raphael return address gives an indication of the religious origins of the program. Correspondents are randomly matched with inmates. The relationship is NOT for hearing confessions or sharing great theological insights, but rather for reaching out to someone who needs a friend.



*"I Was in Prison and  
Ye Came Unto Me."  
- Matthew 25:36*

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## St. Raphael Prison Pen Pal Ministry

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Our St. Raphael coordinator, Anne Straitiff, speculated about why someone may respond to this invitation. There are inmates who have had spiritual awakenings, and want to share prayer and witness with another believer. Some inmates, estranged from or disowned by family and friends, are looking for “outside” contact. Unfortunately, some may be hoping for legal advice or financial help, which the program does not allow. One gentleman was up front about looking for a girlfriend! George chuckles and says he’s not a matchmaker. Conversely, Anne believes invitations are sometimes ignored because inmates don’t understand what a pen pal is, or cannot write or read particularly well and so are embarrassed to participate.

Parish volunteers need to be 18 years old or older and open to sharing friendship with someone currently in an Ohio prison. They’re expected to be respectful and non-judgmental, write about once a month, and offer friendship, encouragement, and moral support. No money or gifts, no legal advice, no visitation—just letters. Ages of participants range from college-age to retired, and there are more women than men.

The prison system allows one free postage-paid letter per month, so many writers expect a monthly communication. Anne advises writers to be sensitive to where these prisoners are, and refrain from “bragging” about lavish trips or lifestyles. She shares her sample first letter with volunteers so they can have some idea of where to start and what to say. She also cautions pen pals against divulging professional or personal backgrounds that might encourage inmates to request legal or financial help, which is not permitted. In this “Age of Information,” an inmate’s criminal record is readily available, but Anne asks that a pen pal approach an inmate with an open mind and heart before doing any research.

Of course, there are safeguards built into the program. Each volunteer uses a pseudonym, usually only one name (no last name). The return address is our Parish Office, so no personal information is revealed to the inmate. Writers are strictly forbidden by Ohio prison policy from sending inmates anything but a few sheets of paper in an envelope—no stickers, stamps, magazines, money. Once an inmate is paroled or released, all communication ceases.

Why would anyone be interested in this ministry? Anne loves writing letters, and has a special sympathy for lonely and estranged people. “Elizabeth” said she now has the time and the desire to help someone in a different way, and letter-writing is a small but meaningful way to reach out. She’s been writing for over a year, and finds her faith is strengthening along with that of her friend. She also adds that her views on incarceration have changed, and that she thinks our justice system is biased and could be more forgiving. “Linda” also responded to the call of the Holy Spirit, with the hope that her letters bring a ray of sunshine into someone’s day, and that she offers some spiritual encouragement.



*“If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.”*

– Ecclesiastes 4:10

# St. Raphael

George Scherma, the founder of the group, reports there are more than 40 inmate correspondents, chiefly at Grafton but also in other prisons in Ohio due to transfers. He also accepts requests that come by word of mouth from friends of participants; thus, there are a few pen pals in Florida and Georgia! There is LOTS of “room to grow,” as there are 40,000 men and women in the Ohio Corrections System. This is a nascent ministry in the Diocese, with principally St. Ladislav and St. Raphael parishioners, but George looks to expand into other churches.

If the Holy Spirit is calling you to explore this endeavor, contact Anne Straitiff (440-263-6874) or George Scherma (440-465-8944).

Right: *“I Was in Prison and Ye Came Unto Me” (Matthew 25:36)*  
John Trumbull, c. 1834. Yale University Art Gallery.



## Save the Date!

### Ash Wednesday is February 22

Age 14 and up: Remember to abstain from meat.

Age 18-59: Remember to fast. As a general rule, this means having one full meal, and two smaller meals that, together, don't equal a full meal. Liquids and medications are permitted.

Common sense exceptions apply: Sick people, pregnant women, or people with eating disorders don't have to fast, for example. The obligation to fast and abstain is a serious one, but the Church doesn't expect us to do penance that would harm our health or the health of others.

Ash Wednesday is not a holy day of obligation, but it's one of the busiest days of the year at St. Raphael! Check [saintraphaelparish.com](http://saintraphaelparish.com) to pick a Mass or prayer service time that works best for you. And invite a friend – Ashes are not a sacrament, and non-Catholics can receive them.

# Remembering Pope Benedict XVI

*By Maggie Brady*



Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI died on December 31, almost 10 years after he surprised the world by resigning from the Holy See, thus becoming the first pope to retire in about six centuries.

He was baptized Joseph Ratzinger more than 95 years ago in a small village in Bavaria, but his intellectual talents soon took him to bigger places. As a young theological advisor at the Second Vatican Council, he played a key role in shaping the teachings of Vatican II. He continued to write, both before and after his papacy, eventually building a reputation as one of the most important theologians of the 20th century.

No doubt, you'll already have read or viewed the secular media's take on Pope Benedict's life and legacy. But here's a few details they may have left out.

Pope Benedict canonized 45 people and beatified – the step before canonization – hundreds more.



St. Hildegard of Bingen, receiving a vision and dictating to teacher Volmar. *Scivias* c. 1151. Wikimedia Commons.



A statue of Kateri Tekakwitha in Santa Fe, NM outside the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. Wikimedia Commons.

The most well-known saints he raised to the altars include:

St. Hildegard of Bingen: Not only did Pope Benedict canonize Hildegard in 2012, he also declared her a Doctor of the Church, placing her with the likes of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and St. Thomas Aquinas. She was born in 1098 in Germany and became a scientist, abbess, composer, artist, theologian, and visionary. One of her books, titled *Medicine*, was groundbreaking in her time. Even today's secular scholars honor her as one of the first feminists, whose thousand-year-old writings on gender, female sexuality, and natural history are both authentically Catholic and stunningly modern. Check out her portrait at St. Raphael in the hallway outside the Community Room.

St. Catherine "Kateri" Tekakwitha: The first Native American saint, also called "the Lily of the Mohawks," she was born in 1656 in what is now New York, but fled to Canada amid persecution from others in her tribe. The nave of St. Angela Merici Parish in Fairview Park features a stained glass window of St. Kateri, which predates her 2012 canonization. Her name is pronounced Gah-deh-LEE Deh-gah-GWEE-tah in her language.

St. Damian of Moloka'i: Born in Belgium, he ministered as a priest in Honolulu, before volunteering to provide pastoral care on the Hawaiian island of Moloka'i. This was a dangerous mission: The island was being used as a quarantine center for disabled and terminally ill people sick with leprosy. He served among them until eventually he contracted the disease himself, losing his ability to see and speak. He died on Moloka'i in 1889, and Benedict canonized him in 2009.

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*Benoit-Joseph, one of the nine bells created in 2013 for the 850th anniversary of Notre Dame Cathedral, refers to Pope Benedict XVI's papal and baptismal names. 2013. Wikimedia Commons.*

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The Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris has a bell named after Pope Benedict.

In 2013, nine huge new bells were created for the 850th anniversary of the iconic cathedral, to replace the originals that were stolen centuries ago and melted down for cannonballs by French revolutionaries. New church bells are often blessed and engraved with a name, and Notre Dame's were christened Marie, Gabriel, Anne Genevieve, Denis, Marcel, Eitenne, Maurice, Jean-Marie, and Benoit-Joseph. Of course, Benoit-Joseph refers both to the pontiff's papal name, and his baptismal name. Thankfully, these amazing bells survived the Cathedral's devastating 2019 fire.

**A Pope Benedict Reading Plan**

As the author of more than 5 dozen books, many of them densely packed with scholarly material, Pope Benedict can be an intimidating writer to get to know. Try starting with these major works from his career:

*Salt of the Earth and God and the World:* Designed as interviews with the fallen-away journalist Peter Seewald, these texts are full of approachable, convincing, and sometimes surprising insights about how it's morally and practically possible to live a life of faith in the modern world. Seewald, at least, was impressed enough to return to the Catholic Church afterward.

*The Spirit of the Liturgy:* Then-Cardinal Ratzinger named this book after a classic text by Servant of God Romano Guardini. "We might say that in 1918, the year that Guardini published his book, the liturgy was rather like a fresco. It had been preserved from

damage, but it had been almost completely overlaid with whitewash by later generations," the future pope wrote. "The fresco was laid bare... in a definitive way, by the Second Vatican Council. For a moment its colors and figures fascinated us.

"But since then the fresco has been endangered by climatic conditions... In fact, it is threatened with destruction, if the necessary steps are not taken to stop these damaging influences. Of course, there must be no question of its being covered with whitewash again, but what is imperative is a new reverence in the way we treat it, a new understanding of its message and its reality, so that rediscovery does not become the first stage of irreparable loss."

Perhaps Benedict's greatest legacy will be a renewed appreciation for the reverent celebration of the Mass, the beating heart of Christian life, as Vatican II teaches us.

*Jesus of Nazareth:* This 3 volume series covers Jesus' childhood, His years of ministry, and His journey through Holy Week. The Pope wrote that he wanted to share a way of "observing and listening to the Jesus of the Gospels that can indeed lead to personal encounter," while also grounding readers in the real, historical Christ, as opposed to popular myths born from pious (or impious) imaginations. Benedict challenges his readers to consider what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ means, and the personal implications of that meaning.

*"The death of any pope is a time of sadness for the Church universal. The death of our Holy Father, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, is surely a time of intense grief for our local Church. Yet it is also a time of hopeful expectation as we place our trust in the Lord who promises the kingdom of God and the resurrection of the body for those who have followed him in this life. The faithful witness of his life and ministry, his theological and spiritual writings, and his almost hidden and prayerful example in recent years have provided the Church with a rich legacy. As such, the death of Pope Benedict XVI invites us to enter a time of remembrance and prayer. We pray for the repose of his soul and for the forgiveness of his sins so that he might see God face to face in the beatific vision of heaven."*



– **Bishop Edward Malesic**

# New Age Trends Point to the Persistence of the Irrational

By Ashley Herzog

Not long ago, a friend forwarded me a headline from the popular magazine *Psychology Today*: “Who Believes in Astrology? The Odd Role of Narcissism.” We both shared a laugh over it. As members of the Millennial generation, we both hear a lot of talk about horoscopes, healing crystals, and elusive “energies” that supposedly radiate from our fellow humans.

I already suspected these beliefs function as a stand-in for prayer and other practices that keep people connected to God when they’re looking for answers. But even I was surprised to learn that researchers have linked belief in astrology—and other “New Age” beliefs – to both narcissism and low intelligence.

“Narcissism and the belief that astrology is scientific were the two strongest factors in the model,” *Psychology Today* reported. “Astrology might appeal to narcissists because it is self-focused and may enhance one’s sense of uniqueness; hence, the sardonic statement, “Even the stars think I am superior.” This might be because narcissists think astrology grants them special knowledge that most people don’t have or confirms that they have some special relationship with the cosmos.” In the same study, the people with the strongest faith in astrology also tended to register low IQ scores.

The rise in “New Age” beliefs has come hand-in-hand with record low church attendance, especially among young people. So much for the claim that throwing out traditional faith would make us smarter and more rational. In fact, the opposite seems to be true.

In 2017, David French, an attorney, author, and popular opinion columnist, wrote an article titled “Post-Christian America: Gullible, Intolerant, and Superstitious.” French recounted amusing stories of Harvard-educated colleagues who scoffed at his traditional religious beliefs, but believed in reincarnation and “indigo auras” that imbued their children with special gifts.

“And how can I forget the strange sight of Harvard students walking in and out of the neighborhood witchcraft store?” French asked. (Apparently, some people believe dried Sage—the kind available for



\$3.99 in a plastic canister at Walmart—can cleanse a home of evil spirits and “negative energies.”)

The Catholic Church’s official position on occult practices, including astrology, is often mocked in pop culture. Movies and novels portray religious people as wiggled-out fanatics who are terrified of Ouija boards and hide at home during Trick-or-Treat. However, the Catechism of the Catholic Church is far more *rational* about these practices than pop culture would have people believe. For starters, they undermine the concept of free will.

“Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading...all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings,” says the Catechism. “They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.” (CCC, #2116)

It is said that God “set eternity in the human heart.” As French explains, belief in pseudosciences like astrology often starts as a quest to find meaning and get answers when we face difficulties in life. However, the Church advises us to seek these answers via prayer, not a pack of Tarot cards. We might not always get answers right away, or in the tangible form we expect as humans. But, as Proverbs says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.” (Prov 3:5-6)

# St. Raphael

## CHURCH

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## Do You Want to Write for the Newsletter?

Do you want to share the Good News about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with others? Would you like to support our St. Raphael parish family? Do you enjoy writing and have good interpersonal skills? Consider writing for this monthly newsletter! Contributions are approved and edited for content and length. Please email Maggie Brady at [margaretbrady@protonmail.com](mailto:margaretbrady@protonmail.com) if you are interested in contributing regularly!



### *Liturgy Schedule*

**Saturday Vigil:** 4:30 p.m. | **Sunday:** 8:00 a.m., 10:00 a.m., Noon

**Weekday Mass:** M, T, W, F, 7:45 a.m. | M, T, Th, F, 9:15 a.m.

**Confessions:** Saturdays 3:00 - 4:00 p.m. | **Eucharistic Adoration:** Friday 10:00 a.m. - Saturday 4:00 p.m.