

'These men...extend friendship and love even to the seemingly unlovable'

Editor's Note: In the 17th century, the Alexian Brothers' original charism of ministering to sick outsiders evolved into a general ministry to physical, social and moral exiles, including prisoners. As the Alexian Brothers today examine opportunities to expand their 800-year-old healing mission beyond healthcare, they are recalling the work of their forebears by ministering to prisoners and pursuing other ways of helping those on the margins of society. In the article below, an inmate at a Missouri prison discusses the importance of the Alexian Brothers in his life. The article originally appeared in a monthly bulletin that the inmate writes for the prison's chapel. We have changed his name to protect his identity, and we have edited and excerpted the letter because of space constraints.

My name is Russell. I am a prisoner at the Potosi Correctional Center in Mineral Point, Mo. I may or may not see the outside of a prison again. That decision belongs to God. But I consider myself fortunate. I have a relationship with God, who loves me and has gener-



Novice Brother Steve Fogi, C.F.A., (left) and Brother Warren Longo, C.F.A., (right) comfort the mother of a prisoner before joining her for a visit with her son at the Potosi Correctional Center in Mineral Point, Mo.

ously placed in my life a kind and tender mother and a godly man – Brother Warren Longo, who is like a father to me.

I was raised by my mother and hadn't even known of a father until I was 10. The day I met him was the day he took me away from my mother, my family, my friends and the only home I've ever known. He somehow convinced my naïve and trusting mother that leaving St.

Louis and moving to Chicago with him and his new family were the best option for me. She believed him. She was wrong.

I will not elucidate the horror that my life became or the abuse that transpired. What I will tell you is that by the time I turned 15, I refused to be abused anymore. I ran back to St. Louis, back to my family. My father tried to forcibly take me back to Chicago, but he did not succeed.

You can probably imagine that I never had a positive male role model in my life. No man to look up to or to get advice from. I perceived men to be untrustworthy. Looking back, I can see how that distorted view of men led me to prison.

The bright side of my life is and always has been my mother. She has been the one constant in my life. She has never wavered in her dedication and love for me. I never doubted her for a second. So, when she told me about a program she had entered called PACE (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) in St. Louis, I was instantly interested. She couldn't stop talking about how good the doctor was, how sweet her driver was and how nice her new friends were.

The one thing that always led our discussions was Brother Warren. He was to her a "shining star" and a true man of God. But when she asked if I would like to correspond with him, I initially said "No." I had a hard time, even as a Christian, getting over the mistrust instilled in me since childhood. Eventually, I gave in and agreed to correspondence.

I opened the first letter from Brother Warren with apprehension, believing it was a complete waste of time. I was wrong. He didn't try to tell me how I messed up. He didn't try to save my soul from the fires of hell. He was just a really nice guy who talked about PACE and my mother and told me a little about himself. This caught me completely off guard. He didn't want anything from me. He merely extended the proverbial hand. I wasn't prepared for a gentle

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and loving spirit, which is what I got from him.

After just a few letters, I felt as if I'd known him all of my life. I connected with him on a level that was unfamiliar to me. I began calling him "pops." He responded by calling me "son." Amazing!

After months of letters, pops and my mother came to visit me. We talked with ease. He exuded love and honesty. That day solidified our relationship and took my respect and affection for him to another level. I started referring to him as "dad" in my letters. I never even realized that I need or wanted another father. But God knew what I needed. I believe God wanted me to experience what a real father was. He sent Brother Warren to me at a time when I needed a friend, a confidant, a dad.

During the last couple of years, our relationship has grown even closer. If being a father means demonstrating unconditional love, having non-judgmental acceptance, and total honesty, Brother Warren fits the bill perfectly.

I thank God for him every day.

Earlier this year, dad introduced me to Brother Steve Fogt, a Brother in training who volunteers at PACE. What a great guy! Not only does he drive up to Potosi to visit a complete stranger, this guy actually befriended my mom. He is doing all kinds of things for my mother that I wish I could do.

My faith in man has grown exponentially by knowing these two wonderful men. When so many people abandon the thought of rehabilitation and consider offenders as worthless, faithless sub-humans, there are people like Brother Warren and Brother Steve who sincerely care and want to help. They believe that God can touch anyone, no matter where they are. They understand that a man's spirit can grow anywhere, even inside concrete walls. These men follow the teachings of Jesus and extend friendship and love even to the seemingly unlovable.



A drawing sketched by a prisoner whom Brother Warren Longo, C.F.A., befriended shows the prisoner (top center) with his mother (bottom left) and Brother Warren (bottom right). The prisoner calls Brothers Warren "dad" because he has become a father figure for the prisoner, whose real father disappeared when the prisoner was a teen-ager.