

The Unseen Friend: Diocesan Youth Pen Pal Exchange Program

I. Program Overview and Goals

Target Audience: Youth (suggested split: Middle School 6-8th Grade; High School 9-12th Grade).

Primary Goals:

1. **Fostering Inter-Parish Unity:** Allow youth from different geographical areas of the diocese to connect and realize they share the same faith experiences.
2. **Faith Reflection:** Encourage deeper personal reflection on faith, service, and church teachings through structured writing prompts.
3. **Community Anticipation:** Build excitement leading up to the final diocesan event where identities are revealed.
4. **Practicing Intentional Communication:** Encourage the art of thoughtful, long-form communication.

Duration: One full academic year (September through May).

II. Enrollment and Anonymity Structure

A. Enrollment & Matching

1. **Registration:** Youth register through their Parish Youth Minister (YM). Registration requires parental consent and agreement to follow the strict anonymity guidelines.
2. **Centralized Data:** The YM submits a roster (Name, Grade Level, Gender - optional for pairing) to the Diocesan Youth Office.
3. **Plan B for those who do not have centralized data or Diocesan Youth Office:** find one other parish and collaborate with other Youth Director to make sure you both are on same page
4. **The Code Name:** The Diocesan Office assigns each participant a unique, anonymous identifier (e.g., SAINT-401, APOSTLE-J). This is the only name to be used on the letters.
5. **Pairing:** The Diocesan Office pairs participants based on the submitted data (primarily age/grade level) and maintains a confidential database mapping the Code Name to the actual name and parish.

B. Rules for Anonymity (Crucial for the Reveal)

- **DO NOT REVEAL:** Parish name, school name, specific city or town, full name, last name, or precise locations of home or activities.
- **Acceptable Details:** General faith reflections, favorite sports/hobbies (without team

names), descriptions of service activities, thoughts on life and faith.

III. Communication Cycle (Monthly Exchange)

Frequency: 8 exchanges (One per month, Sept. - May, excluding December).

Step	Action	Responsibility	Notes
1.	Prompt Distribution	Diocesan Office Or Two parishes working together	Send a themed writing prompt (see Section IV) to all YMs.
2.	Writing Period	Youth	Youth write their letter (250-500 words suggested) focusing on the prompt.
3.	Collection & Screening	Parish YM	YM collects all letters and screens them to ensure no identifying information or inappropriate content is included.
4.	Internal Mail Forward	Parish YM	YM places letters in a single envelope and mails or emails a scan to the Diocesan Office. (or to other parish)
5.	Matching & Redistribution	Diocesan Office	Office matches each letter to its recipient's Code Name and sends the bundles back to the appropriate receiving YMs.

6.	Delivery	Parish YM	YM distributes the anonymous letter to the youth, ensuring they only see the Code Name.
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IV. Content Guidelines and Suggested Prompts

Letters should be focused on exploring faith and life as a young Catholic without giving away identity.

A. Sample Themes (8 Months)

Month	Focus Theme	Sample Prompt
September	Vocation & Purpose	What are three ways you feel God is calling you to use your talents this school year?
October	Service & Justice	Describe a service project you have participated in and how it challenged your understanding of the Corporal Works of Mercy.
November	Gratitude & Saints	Which saint's story or quote resonates with you most right now, and how does it encourage you to be thankful?
January	Worship & Sacrament	What is your favorite part of the Mass or a specific Sacrament, and why do you find that moment powerful?
February	Lent & Sacrifice	If you could choose one spiritual habit to commit to during Lent, what would it

		be and why? (No need to reveal what you actually chose).
March	Community & Church	What does your parish community (without naming it!) do really well to make you feel connected to the wider Church?
April	Growth & Challenge	What is one recent challenge you've faced, and how did your faith help you navigate it?
May	Hope & Future	As the year ends, what is one hope or prayer intention you have for yourself and your "unseen friend"?

V. The Grand Reveal: Diocesan Youth Rally (May/June)

The Climax: The identities of the pen pals are revealed at the annual youth rally or large diocesan event. Or at a joint parish event!

A. Reveal Activity Structure

1. **Preparation:** Participants receive a small card with the Code Name of their pen pal (but not the actual person's name).
2. **The Quest:** The youth are given a physical challenge or scavenger hunt using clues from their 8 letters. For example, a quote from Letter #3 might be posted on a wall, leading them to the next clue.
3. **The Location Clue:** The final clue leads them to a specific designated zone (e.g., "The Saint Peter Zone").
4. **The Meet-Up:** In the designated zone, a Diocesan volunteer holds a sign with the pen pal's Code Name. The two youth who hold each other's Code Name cards meet.
5. **Post-Reveal Activity:** Once paired, the two youth join a small, facilitated group discussion where they reflect on:
 - o What they learned about being Catholic from someone they thought was a total stranger.
 - o Which letter was their favorite and why.

- The difference between talking anonymously and talking face-to-face.

VI. Administrative and Budget Considerations

- **Staffing:** Requires one dedicated administrator (part-time) at the Diocesan level to manage the database, handle pairing, distribute prompts, and coordinate mail/email transfers.
- **Cost:** Small registration fee (e.g., \$10 per participant) to cover postage/printing costs and administrative labor.
- **Security:** Clear policies stating all communication is monitored by adult leaders, ensuring a safe and supportive environment.
- **Technology:** A simple shared document or spreadsheet (accessible only to the Diocesan Office and YMs) is all that is needed to manage the Code Name registry.

The Unseen Friend: Youth Minister Implementation Guide

This guide outlines the critical steps and monthly responsibilities for Parish Youth Ministers (YMs) participating in the Diocesan Pen Pal Exchange. Your role is essential for maintaining anonymity, safety, and the consistent flow of communication.

Phase I: Program Launch and Enrollment (August/September)

1. Promote and Recruit

- **Generate Excitement:** Promote the program as "The Unseen Friend" or "Mystery Pen Pal" to build curiosity. Emphasize the surprise reveal at the final event.
- **Target Participation:** Recruit participants within the suggested age brackets (Middle School/High School).

2. Manage Registration

- **Secure Consent:** Collect signed parental consent forms for every participant. Ensure parents understand the nature of the program, the anonymity rules, and the central role of the YM in screening.
- **Collect Data:** Gather the required details for the Diocesan Office (Participant Name, Grade Level).
- **Submit Roster:** Provide the complete roster to the Diocesan Youth Office by the deadline.

3. Initial Briefing

- **Explain Anonymity:** Host a kick-off meeting to clearly explain the **strict anonymity rules**. Emphasize what they **cannot** share (parish name, school name, specific location, full name).
- **Introduce Code Names:** Distribute the Code Name assigned by the Diocesan Office to each youth. Stress that they **must only use this Code Name** on their letters.

Phase II: The Monthly Exchange Cycle (September – May)

This cycle is repeated eight times throughout the academic year. **Consistency is key.**

Step	YM Action	Security & Logistics Notes
1. Receive Prompt	Get the monthly writing prompt and deadline from the Diocesan Office (e.g., via email or shared folder).	Check communication channels at the start of the month.
2. Share Prompt	Share the prompt with participants and set a local deadline for submission (typically 1-2 weeks).	Encourage thoughtful, faith-based reflections (250-500 words).
3. Collection	Collect all handwritten or typed letters from the youth by the internal deadline.	Ensure all letters clearly feature the youth's Code Name and the month/prompt theme for easy sorting.
4. Mandatory Screening (CRITICAL)	Read every single letter before it leaves the parish. Remove or redact any identifying information (names, school logos, city names, etc.).	If a letter contains identifying information, ask the youth to rewrite that section immediately. Do not send un-redacted identifying details.

5. Forward Letters	Bundle all screened letters and send them to the Diocesan Office using the required method (e.g., secure email scans or inter-office mail).	Send before the diocesan deadline to ensure timely redistribution.
6. Receive Incoming Mail	Receive the bundle of matched letters back from the Diocesan Office.	The outside package will contain letters addressed only by Code Name (e.g., APOSTLE-J).
7. Distribution	Distribute the received anonymous letters to the correct youth in your parish.	ONLY give the letter to the youth assigned to that Code Name.

Phase III: Program Conclusion and Reveal Prep (May/June)

1. Final Reflection and Collection (May)

- Ensure the final (May) exchange is completed and screened successfully.
- Encourage youth to reflect on what they learned from their "Unseen Friend" over the year.

2. Rally/Event Coordination (May/June)

- **Confirm Attendance:** Confirm which pen pal participants will attend the Diocesan Youth Rally or Reveal Event. This is vital for the Diocesan Office to plan the pairings and meet-up logistics.
- **Final Briefing:** Remind attendees that they will be meeting their pen pal at the event. Ensure they understand the final "Quest" or meet-up structure (to be provided by the Diocesan Office).
- **Pre-event Check-in:** Check in with the Diocesan Office contact to ensure all your parish's data and attendance numbers are correct for the reveal.

Your commitment to consistent screening and maintaining the anonymity structure will make the final reveal a powerful and memorable faith moment for every young person involved!