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Bruno Abate, founder and president of Recipe for Change, gives Pope Francis a painting of Mary and the child Jesus made by an inmate at Chicago's Cook County Jail during a meeting in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Feb. 9, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Eight hours after meeting Pope Francis, Bruno Abate still could not believe it happened.

Abate, a chef and restaurateur, is founder and president of Recipe for Change, which offers culinary education, job skills training, art and music activities and mentorships to detainees at Cook County Jail in Chicago.

Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, who celebrates Mass at the jail each Christmas and has shared meals with the men who cook with Recipe for Change, secured the papal audience for Abate Feb. 9 to talk about his work with inmates.

At the end of the audience, Abate told Catholic News Service, he asked Francis to record a video message for the inmates, which Cupich recorded on his phone.

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On the day of the private papal audience, the Cook County Sheriff's Office reported having almost 6,300 people in custody at the jail; the majority are awaiting trial or sentencing and cannot afford the bail that was set.

"Every prison should have a rehabilitation program," not only to prepare people for jobs when they are released, but also to give them something interesting and productive to do each day, because "your brain doesn't stop" just because one is in jail, Abate said. Participants spend about 40 hours a week involved in program activities.

Francis, who has a long history of ministering to inmates and advocating for them, wanted to hear all about the program at the Cook County Jail, said Abate, who estimates that he has personally taught kitchen skills, food safety and cooking to 4,000 inmates since he started the program in 2010.

Abate gave the pope a painting of Mary and the child Jesus done by a 20-year-old resident at the jail, and "I asked him to bless me to give me a lot of energy to do better and to do more."