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To Seek and Save the Lost



The Newly Elected CBCI Administrative Team.



CBCI Commission Secretaries at 36th General Body Meeting, Bengaluru.



CBCI PMI Regional Chairmen's Meet during the 36th General Body Meeting, Bengaluru.



Bishop James Athikalam's Visit to Kolbe Home.



Kolbe Home Parents Meet, Carmelaram.



PMI Christmas Program at KR Nagar Prison.



Felicitating Most Rev Alphonsus Mathias Archbishop Emeritus of Bengaluru.



PMI Pune Awarded with a Certificate of Appreciation from Beggars' Home, Pune.



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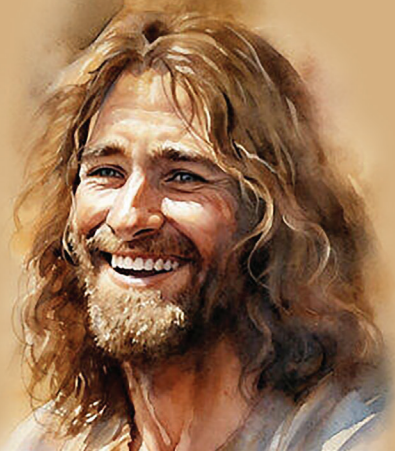
Are You Willing?

"Help a Prisoner's Child Prevent a Potential Criminal" 80% of the children of prisoners are potential criminals unless somebody takes care of them. Prison Ministry India has begun a scheme to educate 1000 children of prisoners: Kindly contribute Rs. 5,000/- for the education of a child.

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*Be Joyful in Hope, Patient in Affliction,
 Faithful in Prayer.*

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Sr. Amala DC

Prison Ministry India: Volunteers' Spirituality

The Presentation of the Lord in the Temple

The World Day for Consecrated Life is celebrated on the feast which commemorates the presentation of Jesus in the temple by Mary and Joseph, “to present him to the Lord” (Lk2/22). The Feast of the Presentation is among the most ancient feasts of the Church. According to Old Testament Law, a sacrifice had to be offered in the Temple when a child was consecrated to the Lord. The Gospel scene reveals the mystery of Jesus, the One consecrated by the Father and had come into the world to carry out his will faithfully (Heb 10:5-7). In this way the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple became an eloquent icon for all those who are called to show forth in the Church and in the world of the total offering of one's life, through the evangelical counsels.

World Day of Consecrated Life

In the year 1997, Pope John Paul II instituted a day dedicated to men and women in consecrated life. This day was attached to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on February 2nd. This Feast is also known as Candlemas Day, the day on which candles are blessed symbolizing Christ who is the light of the world. Similarly consecrated life is also called to reflect the light of Jesus Christ to all peoples. In her autobiography, St Teresa asked herself, “What would become of the world if there were no religious?” This is a question that brings us to reflect on our own consecrated life and give unceasing thanks to the Lord

for by the gift of the Spirit, He continues to enliven and sustain the Church in its demanding journey in this world. A consecrated life is dedicated more to prayer and divine worship and to the explicit spread of the Gospel by word and work. A distinction is made in the Church between institutes dedicated entirely to contemplation and those devoted to apostolic and missionary activity in imitation of Christ.

PMI Volunteers Spirituality

As this month is dedicated to all the religious, we thank God for the wholehearted service of the Religious in Prison Ministry India which adds double joy and honour to God, to society, and the PMI. Living in one's own comfort zone but to be set apart for the love of God and humanity is an adorable act. PMI volunteers have to learn from the Marian school the virtues of humility, selfless service mindedness, self-sacrifice and leadership qualities which are essential in prison ministry. As Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple let's present our incarcerated brethren in the saving hands of Jesus to be healed, sanctified, liberated, reintegrated and redeemed. On behalf of Fr Francis, I wish and thank all the religious who have dedicated their life to PMI. We wish and pray that your dedicated and selfless service to PMI be blessed by the Lord forever. We also invite you all to join the network for PMI through Incessant Intercessory Invocation for the Incarcerated. Please log on to PMI zoom video meeting: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83089593521> and the password is 217812.

GOOD GOVERNANCE: PRINCIPLES AND COMMITMENTS



Fr Francis
Kodiyan MCBS

Good Governance?

Prison Ministry India volunteers, especially its national, regional, state, diocesan and unit coordinators, as well as her directors for rehabilitation centres for released prisoners and homes for prisoners' children are expected to know and practise the norms and principles of good governance. Good governance means how governments, institutions and other social organizations interact, how they relate to one another, and how decisions are taken in a complex world. Governance is a process whereby societies or organizations make their important decisions, determine whom they involve in the process and how they render account. This is a process that recognizes and supports people's real freedoms and enables people's own actions. Governance is 'good' only to the extent that it benefits the social groups who are most impoverished and socially vulnerable. To better understand good governance, we need to focus our attention on the governance system or framework upon which the process rests - that is, the agreements, procedures, conventions or policies that define who gets power, how decisions are taken and how accountability is rendered. Good governance is integral to economic growth, the eradication of poverty and hunger, and sustainable development.

Biblical Foundations

According to prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah one who is worthy to rule ought to be endowed

with the Lord's Spirit, full of wisdom and capable of rendering justice to the poor (Is 11,2-5; Jer 23, 5-6). Good governance is to bring peace to the nations (Zech 9, 9-10), to render just judgements and abhor iniquity (Prov 22,11), to serve others, and give one's life as ransom for many so that all may have life in fullness (Mt 20, 28; Mk 10,45).

Characteristics

The major characteristics of good governance as outlined by the United Nations are the following: accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, partnership, transparency, responsibility, consensus-oriented, equality, selflessness, integrity, impartiality, commitment, justice, and peace. The parameters of good governance, according to venerable Francis Xavier van Thuan, are the following:

Preferential Option for the Poor

For John Paul II, the preferential option for the poor is always at the centre of good governance. "The love of preference for the poor, and the decisions it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope for a better future" (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 42).

Centrality of the Human Person

This indicates that the person is at the centre of governance, and that good governance must serve the human person and not vice versa. John Paul II in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, emphasised the importance of this principle, "today the decisive factor is increasingly man himself, that is, his knowledge, especially his scientific knowledge, his capacity for interrelated and compact organisation, as well as his ability to perceive the needs of others and to satisfy them" (CA 32). In *Redemptoris Hominis* he states, "Man is the primary route that the church must travel in fulfilling her mission" (RH 14). In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI asserts, "The principle

of the centrality of the human person, as the subject primarily responsible for development, must be preserved” (CiV 47).

The Rights and Dignity of All

Speaking at the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations, Pope John Paul II calls the Universal Declaration, “a true milestone on the path of humanity’s moral progress” (2nd October 1979). He affirms that the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights “remains one of the highest expressions of the human conscience of our time” (Address to the 50th General Assembly of the UN, 5 October 1995). The challenge to good governance in this context is to help every human person realise all rights and develop fully in all dimensions that make up human existence.

The Universal Destination of the Goods of Creation

This is rooted in the very first pages of the Bible and relates to the harmony that God wishes to see in the whole of God’s creation: within human persons, among people, between people, and the rest of the creation, among generations, and among different peoples and nations. A major challenge to good governance today in this regard is to achieve development with equity, sustainability, participation, dignity and respect for the community of life.

Principles of Good Governance

Following are the eight principles of good governance: 1) Consultation among all, beginning with the lowest possible level, regarding problems, needs, and their solutions. 2) Access of services to all regardless of one’s position. 3) Service standards that ensure and educate the public on the level of service entitled. 4) Courtesy towards all regardless of one’s social or economic standing. 5) Information regarding all rules, programmes, entitlements and their implementation in a manner that is accessible and understandable to all. 6) Openness and transparency at the micro and macro level not only of the programmes and budgets of the government, but also of NGOs, corporate, and other actors in society. 7) Redressal mechanisms that

ensure compensation if promises are breached. 8) Positive discrimination that compensates for historical wrongs of class, caste, or gender.

Impacts on the Church

The Church, a counter cultural community, shall give itself to the development of the whole person and the entire humanity beginning with the least, the lost, and the last in society. The Church ought to manifest the way to the true values of democracy through transparency, accountability, inclusion and democratization of its administrative structures. Dignity and equality of gender, empowerment of women, and lay participation are to be implemented in the structures of the Church, sharing of power, participation and decision making at every level such as parish councils and other church organisations.

Practicalities

As PMI volunteers we hold a prime responsibility to be torchbearers of good governance in our life, mission and administrative structures. In formulating policies, programmes and norms we shall choose that which benefits the most impoverished and vulnerable. We shall devise appropriate ways to ensure the participation of people and accountability to them in the visualisation, planning, implementation and evaluation of all programmes and works. We shall be committed to empower prisoners through our mission of education, healthcare, welfare and other different ways. We shall be models of transparency and accountability with regard to our financial resources and their mobilisation, administration, policy on staff and personnel, and planning and implementation of programmes. We shall pursue necessary measures to educate ourselves in the vision and concepts of human rights, and consciously undertake the personal and structural transformation necessary to make them an inseparable part of our culture and functioning. We shall resolve to follow the principle of sustainable development of ensuring care for the community of life and the needs of the future generations. We shall restructure our lifestyle, spirituality, exercise of authority and take all other measures to ensure this necessary transformation. ■

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR LENT 2024



Through the Desert God Leads us to Freedom

Dear brothers and sisters!

When our God reveals himself, his message is always one of freedom: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:2). These are the first words of the Decalogue given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Those who heard them were quite familiar with the exodus of which God spoke: the experience of their bondage still weighed heavily upon them. In the desert, they received the “Ten Words” as a thoroughfare to freedom. We call them “commandments”, in order to emphasize the strength of the love by which God shapes his people. The call to freedom is a demanding one. It is not answered straightaway; it has to mature as part of a journey. Just as Israel in the desert still clung to Egypt often longing for the past and grumbling against the Lord and Moses – today too, God’s people can cling to an oppressive bondage that it is called to leave behind. We realize how true this is at those moments when we feel hopeless, wandering through life like a desert and lacking a promised land as our destination. Lent is

the season of grace in which the desert can become once more – in the words of the prophet Hosea - the place of our first love (cf. Hos 2:16-17). God shapes his people, he enables us to leave our slavery behind and experience a Passover from death to life. Like a bridegroom, the Lord draws us once more to himself, whispering words of love to our hearts.

The exodus from slavery to freedom is no abstract journey. If our celebration of Lent is to be concrete, the first step is to desire to open our eyes to reality. When the Lord calls out to Moses from the burning bush, he immediately shows that he is a God who sees and, above all, hears: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:7-8). Today too, the cry of so many of our oppressed brothers and sisters rises to heaven. Let us ask ourselves: Do we hear that cry? Does it trouble us? Does it move us? All too many things keep us apart

from each other, denying the fraternity that, from the beginning, binds us to one another.

During my visit to Lampedusa, as a way of countering the globalization of indifference, I asked two questions, which have become more and more pressing: “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9) and “Where is your brother?” (Gen 4:9). Our Lenten journey will be concrete if, by listening once more to those two questions, we realize that even today we remain under the rule of Pharaoh. A rule that makes us weary and indifferent. A model of growth that divides and robs us of a future. Earth, air

and water are polluted, but so are our souls. True, Baptism has begun our process of liberation, yet there remains in us an inexplicable longing for slavery. A kind of attraction to the security of familiar things, to the detriment of our freedom.

In the Exodus account, there is a significant detail: it is God who sees, is moved and brings freedom; Israel does not ask for this. Pharaoh stifles dreams, blocks the view

of heaven, makes it appear that this world, in which human dignity is trampled upon and authentic bonds are denied, can never change. He put everything in bondage to himself. Let us ask: Do I want a new world? Am I ready to leave behind my compromises with the old? The witness of many of my brother bishops and a great number of those who work for peace and justice has increasingly convinced me that we need to combat a deficit of hope that stifles dreams and the silent cry that reaches to heaven and moves the heart of God. This “deficit of hope” is not unlike the nostalgia for slavery that paralyzed Israel in the desert and prevented it from moving forward. An exodus can be interrupted: how else can we explain the fact that humanity has arrived at the threshold of universal fraternity and at levels of scientific, technical, cultural, and juridical development capable of guaranteeing dignity to all, yet gropes about in the darkness of inequality and conflict.

God has not grown weary of us. Let us welcome Lent as the great season in which he reminds us: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex 20:2). Lent is a season of conversion, a time of freedom. Jesus himself, as we recall each year on the first Sunday of Lent, was driven into the desert by the Spirit in order to be tempted in freedom. For forty days, he will stand before us and with us: the incarnate Son. Unlike Pharaoh, God does not want subjects, but sons and daughters. The desert is the place where our freedom can mature in a personal decision not to fall back into slavery. In Lent, we find new criteria of justice and a community with which we can press forward on a road not yet taken.

This, however, entails a struggle, as the book of Exodus and the temptations of Jesus in the desert make clear to us. The voice of God, who says, “You are my Son, the Beloved” (Mk 1:11), and “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:3) is opposed by the enemy and his lies. Even more to be feared



than Pharaoh are the idols that we set up for ourselves; we can consider them as his voice speaking within us. To be all-powerful, to be looked up to by all, to domineer over others: every human being is aware of how deeply seductive that lie can be. It is a road well-travelled. We can become attached to money, to certain projects, ideas or goals, to our position, to a tradition, even to certain individuals. Instead of making us move forward, they paralyze us. Instead of encounter, they create conflict. Yet there is also a new humanity, a people of the little ones and of the humble who have not yielded to the allure of the lie. Whereas those who serve idols become like them, mute, blind, deaf and immobile (cf. Ps 114:4), the poor of spirit are open and ready: a silent force of good that heals and sustains the world.

It is time to act, and in Lent, to act also means to pause. To pause in prayer, in order to receive the word of God, to pause like the Samaritan in the presence of a wounded brother or sister. Love of God and love of neighbour are one love. Not to have other gods is to pause in the presence of God beside the flesh of our neighbour. For this reason, prayer, almsgiving and fasting are not three unrelated acts, but a single movement of openness and self-emptying, in which we cast out the idols that weigh us down, the attachments that imprison us. Then the atrophied and isolated heart will revive. Slow down, then, and pause! The contemplative dimension of life that Lent helps us to rediscover will release new energies. In the presence of God, we become brothers and sisters, more sensitive to one another: in place of threats and enemies, we discover companions and fellow travellers. This is God's dream, the promised land to which we journey once we have left our slavery behind.

The Church's synodal form, which in these years we are rediscovering and cultivating, suggests that Lent is also a time of communitarian decisions, of decisions, small and large, that are countercurrent.

Decisions capable of altering the daily lives of individuals and entire neighbourhoods, such as the ways we acquire goods, care for creation, and strive to include those who go unseen or are looked down upon. I invite every Christian community to do just this: to offer its members moments set aside to rethink their lifestyles, times to examine their presence in society and the contribution they make to its betterment. Woe to us if our Christian penance were to resemble the kind of penance that so dismayed Jesus. To us too, he says: "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting" (Mt 6:16). Instead, let others see joyful faces, catch the scent of freedom and experience the love that makes all things new, beginning with the smallest and those nearest to us. This can happen in every one of our Christian communities.

To the extent that this Lent becomes a time of conversion, an anxious humanity will notice a burst of creativity, a flash of new hope. Allow me to repeat what I told the young people whom I met in Lisbon last summer: "Keep seeking and be ready to take risks. At this moment in time, we face enormous risks; we hear the painful plea of so many people. Indeed, we are experiencing a third world war fought piecemeal. Yet let us find the courage to see our world, not as being in its death throes but in a process of giving birth, not at the end but at the beginning of a great new chapter of history. We need courage to think like this" (Address to University Students, 3 August 2023). Such is the courage of conversion, born of coming up from slavery. For faith and charity take hope, this small child, by the hand. They teach her to walk, and at the same time, she leads them forward.¹

I bless all of you and your Lenten journey.
Rome, Saint John Lateran, 3 December
2023, First Sunday of Advent. ■

1 Cf. CH. PÉGUY, The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue.

CHRIST IS PASSWORD FOR A JOYFUL LIFE: POPE FRANCIS

- Devin Watkins -



“Reading the Gospel, praying assiduously, and studying the catechism with enthusiasm help us to ‘transfer’ to our heart and our mind the eyes, feelings, and attitudes of Jesus.” Pope Francis offered that positive review of a new edition of *YOUCAT*, in a letter to young people published in the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, on Monday. He encouraged young people to study the Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church, recalling that love is the real reason we are Christians. “Love is the primary reason for the existence of the Church,” said the Pope. “I speak, first of all, of the love of tenderness and mercy that God the Father has for every human being and that Jesus the Son has revealed to us with His life, His death, and His resurrection.”

Each of us, he added, is invited to respond to God’s love for us with love for Him and for our brothers and sisters. Joy in knowing Jesus and

making him known. Pope Francis recalled Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus caritas est* and his assertion that our Christian life flows from an encounter with Jesus, which gives our lives a new horizon and direction. At the same time, we must know about the person whom we love in order to love properly and make Him known. “This is, in truth, the sweet joy of evangelization: the joy of bringing to the whole world one’s love for Jesus,” said the Pope. “This beautiful book that you now have in your hands is born from such love: the love for Jesus that we believers carry within.” He noted that the *YOUCAT* is based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1992, but presented in a style and rhythm directed to young people. Pope Francis invited young readers to “love this book, because it is the fruit of love.” “You will discover that it has no other intentions than to awaken or reawaken in you a great love for Jesus. This is its only purpose,” he added. “What would Christ do in my place?”

The Pope urged young Catholics to study the catechism so as to learn more about Jesus and to understand better His message of love and plan for our lives. He said the secret to maintaining our connection with Jesus is to consider “what Christ would do in my place” at every moment. “Here is the password for a truly ‘alive’ and joyful life: to look and judge what happens to us and the decisions we are called to make with the same eyes, with the same feelings, with the same posture that Jesus embodied,” he said. By combining the study of the *YOUCAT* with frequent prayer, young people can learn to look at the world and daily events with the eyes of Jesus. Christ, concluded Pope Francis, offers us the true “password” to happiness. “This youth of life, this newness of life, this fullness of life is what I wish for you, dear young friends.” ■

ONE LOOK AND TWO WORDS!



Sr Lini Sheeja MSC,
Germany

Dear friends, today we are called, because someone's cry has reached the Lord. How many of us have understood this fact about the core of our calling?

Did Jesus find no other place than the seashore to call the first ones whom He wanted? In the days of Jesus fishermen were not considered as members of high society. The occupation of the fishermen was not considered as a great job, but rather the lowest of the low in society. Among the 12 disciples of Jesus, eight of them were fishermen. In Matthew 4:19 we read that Jesus tells to the ones whom he wanted, "Follow me, I will make you fishers of men". Jesus the master of our vocations respects the profession which was considered as the lowest of the low. As Jesus calls these fishermen, He tells them with complete respect that what they were doing was good; but added that he was happy with their fishing, but he wanted them now to fish people instead. Jesus wanted them to set their goals with His goals. The God who chose most of His disciples from the seashore continues to call us from our humble backgrounds to place our goals alongside the goal of Jesus. Our humble backgrounds are appreciated and loved by the Master who called us and who continues to call us.

The Powerful Two Words

Jesus just goes to the seashore and finds some people who are dependent on the sea for their livelihood and tells them just two words: "Follow me". Are these two words so powerful that the fishermen responded immediately leaving their families and livelihood? These two words remain so powerful even today that it

continues to call people from different corners of the world for one purpose and goal. Will Jesus ever abandon the ones whom He called to be with Him and to be sent out for His mission? Are we all afraid of the moments when we are facing hardships in our lives? Or we are ready to go ahead and stand firmly with our Master as these fishermen did? As we are celebrating the Month of the Consecrated, it is good to reflect on the one look and the two words of Jesus which has had a great impact even after 2000 years.

The Background of Two Words and One Look

"And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them" Exodus 3:9. When God heard the cry of the Israelites, he looked at Moses and picked him from his working place. The call of Moses had a purpose. When God called Moses, He said that the cry of the Israelites had reached Him and He needed Moses. Dear friends, today we are called, because someone's cry has reached the Lord. How many of us have understood this fact about the core of our calling? When we have to walk on thorns in our religious journey, we ought never to take a decision to quit religious life. Remember always, that someone has cried to the Lord and the Lord wanted us to be His feet, hands and hearts in this world. Our vocation is to wipe out those tears which God saw and heard.

How can we remain in our comfort zones and let them continue to cry?

The Purpose of the One Look and Two-Words

The One look and two words of Jesus have a great purpose in our lives. He wants us to be courageous and work hard for Him. He wants us to unload all our worries on to Him and focus on the goals to which we are called. When we are facing a hardship in our lives or when we are misunderstood in our communities, let us recall the look of our Master who called us from our humble backgrounds. When we are tired, when we are worn out in our tasks, let these two words of our Master, "Follow me" echo in our hearts and strengthen us. God who picked us in our littleness is so great that nothing is impossible to Him. We need to trust in Him and trust our journey.

The One Look and the Two Words that has ever since Continued

God who looked at Moses and picked him from his work place continues to pick fishermen from seashores through the person of Jesus. His call continues to reach us today in our seashores and farms as He calls each of us today. Ordinary fishermen were called and sent out on an extra-ordinary mission. Remember, we too are called and sent on a mission to the ones whose cry resounded so loud before God. Are we not wasting our lives, if we have not discerned the core of our vocation? We entered religious and priestly life with the dream of becoming a priest/religious. Our dreams have been fulfilled and we find ourselves now as religious and priests. Now, we need to move towards becoming visionaries. We need to die for our master by battling against the evils of the world. Stand firm for the Lord and He will make a way for us. Be generous with your time for the Lord and let the Lord rejoice over us.

The Power of One Look and Two Words

Dear readers of this article, youth of our today, you men and women, who are discerning your vocation today: Are you all so occupied

with your daily routines? Be open to the voice of the Lord who wants us from our littleness and brokenness. Take a moment and lift up your eyes to have a gaze on that one look of our Master which is so powerful. Open your inner ears and listen to those powerful two words of Jesus, "Follow Me". This one look and two words can change you and give you a new life. This one look and two words will help you to redirect your ways. This one look and two words are so faithful that will they will carry you and comfort you when you are down. This one look and two words will pour on you the graces that you are in need of. This one look and two words will never cheat you or let you down. If you can rely and trust on this one look and two words of Jesus which are so powerful, say yes now, embrace Jesus and follow Him. ■



CBCI DESK FOR PRISON MINISTRY INDIA



Fr Francis
Kodiyan MCBS

As Holy Father Pope Francis asked from prison ministry volunteers, we need to take care of the reintegration process of prisoners by assisting them in their employment, housing, education and medical care.

36th CBCI General Body Meeting

The Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) held its 36th General Body Meeting at St John's National Academy of Health Sciences, Bengaluru from 31st January to 7th February 2024 to reflect on the theme: The Church's Response to -Political Situation of the Country and the Benefits and Challenges of Artificial Intelligence. The Conference commenced with a solemn Holy Eucharist at St. John's Auditorium. The main celebrant was Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the Apostolic Nuncio to India and Nepal. Archbishop Girelli inaugurated the meeting with the lighting of the lamp. In his welcome address, Most Rev Peter Machado, Archbishop of Bangalore, set the tone for the gathering, expressing the Church's commitment to upholding the dignity of every human being. Archbish-

op Girelli, in his inaugural address, emphasized the responsible use of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity, highlighting its ethical aspects. Archbishop Andrews Thazhath in his presidential address spoke about the violence in Manipur, and thanked fellow bishops for responding against human atrocities in a Christian manner. He reiterated the Church's commitment to the poor, needy, and downtrodden despite the challenges faced by Christians in India. The Secretary General Archbishop Felix Machado, presented the biannual report, shedding light on the CBCI's activities and achievements. Messages from Pope Francis, and Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches were shared by Archbishop George Anthonysamy, the CBCI first Vice-President.



Regional Chairmen for Prison Ministry India Desk

On 4th February at 3pm we had a meeting of the regional chairmen for Prison Ministry India Desk together with the chairmen of justice, peace and development commission. Most Rev Jerard Isaac Lobo and Most Rev Jose Pulickal chaired the session. We discussed matters related to prison ministry in different regions and all the bishops expressed their cooperation. Following are the names of CBCI regional chairmen for Prison Ministry India Desk for your reference:

1. Agra	-	Most Rev Vincent Nellaiparambil
2. Bengal	-	Most Rev. Nirmol Vincent Gomes
3. Bihar	-	Most Rev Sebastian Kallupura
4. Chhattisgarh	-	Most Rev Emmanuel Kerketta
5. Jharkhand	-	Most Rev Telesphore Bilung, Svd
6. Karnataka	-	Most Rev Francis Serrao SJ
7. Kerala	-	Most Rev Jose Pulickal
8. Madhya Pradesh	-	Most Rev James Athikalam MST
9. Northern	-	Most Rev Deepak Valerian Tauro
10. North East	-	Most Rev Joachim Walder
11. Odisha	-	Most Rev Aplinar Senapati CM
12. Tamil Nadu	-	Most Rev George Antony Samy
13. Telugu	-	His Eminence Anthony Cardinal Poola
14. Western	-	Most Rev Jos Chittooparambil CMI

PMI Regional Secretaries

Following are the names of CBCI regional secretaries for Prison Ministry India Desk:

1. Agra	Fr Pius Philip	9068807755
2. Bengal		
3. Bihar	Fr. Cebin SJ	7760364405
4. Chhattisgarh	Fr Alexander Ekka SJ	8959215469
5. Jhaan	Sr Niveditha	9142017090
6. Karnataka	Sr Therese Maschirahas	9591851890
7. Kerala	Fr Martin Thattil	9447964663
8. Madhya Pradesh	Bro Sunnilal Avarappattu	8770148605
9. Northern		
10. North East	Sr Ireine D'Souza UFS	7736944578
11. Odisha	Fr Rijo Thomas	8249044972
12. Tamil Nadu	Msgr Antony Swamy	9444209591
13. Telugu	Fr J Naveen	8187843450
14. Western	Fr Joby Kurian	9004729259

PMI Report

Most Rev Jose Pulickal, the CBCI chairman for PMI desk introduced and welcomed Fr Francis to present the report. His Excellency highlighted that prison ministry is the need of the time which has been renewing the face of the Indian Church. He requested the brother bishops to encourage this ministry by appointing diocesan coordinators in every diocese. Rev Dr Francis Kодиyan MCBS the CBCI secretary for prison Ministry India desk presented the biannual report of 2022-2023. Fr Francis highlighted the urgent need to shift our focus from prison to prisoners' families as day by day we are denied permission to visit prisons. As Holy Father Pope Francis asked from prison ministry volunteers, we need to take care of the reintegration process of prisoners by assisting them in their employment, housing, education and medical care. Accordingly, PMI decided

to continue the projects such as employment, housing, releasing, education, and health care for released prisoners.

Archbishop Alphonsus Mathias

One of the significant events of the 36th CBCI general body meeting was the felicitation given to Most Rev Alphonsus Mathias the archbishop Emeritus of Bangalore who is celebrating his diamond jubilee of episcopal ordination. Most Rev Jose Pulickal, the PMI Chairperson and Fr Francis Kодиyan MCBS, the PMI National Coordinator wished him God's abundant blessings and expressed our immense gratitude to him for it was with his blessing that we began prison ministry in Bengaluru in 1994. When Fr Varghese Karipperu, Sr Clara and Sr Fidelis of Holy cross congregation approached him with the intention to launch prison ministry he blessed and encouraged them by providing financial assistance. ■



COLVALE CHRISTMAS VISIT



Hema Menezes

I had a really good experience at the prison and I thank Christ for giving us this chance to share the joy of Christmas with one another in the hall as well as for being able to bring smiles on the faces of the inmates.

Christmas is regarded as a very family-oriented time of the year and hence can be a difficult time in prison. Thanks to the Prison Ministry who organised a Christmas programme and included parishes to be part of the programme. The programme was on the 28th of December 2023 from 2.30pm till 05.00pm. Among the two parishes chosen, St Catherine of Alexandria and Se' Cathedral, Old-Goa was one of them. We were 12 parishioners (Parish council members, Catechists and Parish Youth) along with our Parish priest Fr. Rosario Oliveira who put up a stage entertainment programme for the inmates at the Colvale Jail. The program to be staged was for 20 minutes so it was decided to split the programme into durations of 10 minutes each. In the first 10 minutes a Hindi dance "Hai Di Awaz" was performed with a Christmas message of the angels proclaiming from heaven that the Lord is born in human form to set us free from the bondage of sin, to renew the lives of the lost, to bring to light all those in darkness and those living in despair to share the joy of the Lord and so to 'Praise the Lord.' The Second was a Konkani medley dance which was purely entertainment for the inmates. The Next 10 minutes which was staged at the end of the programme was an orchestral performance of remix of Boney M. songs

Hooray! Hooray! It's a Holi-Holiday, Daddy Cool and Hindi Aaj Kal Tere Mere Pyar Ke. Both the dances did bring joy to the inmates.

The Experience of visiting a prison and being a part of the Christmas programme was a matter of joy for all of us. Showing hospitality in our performance to strangers was like showing hospitality to angels without knowing it. The prison visit was a reminder to the people that they're loved and cared for by the Church community. The sharing from the hearts of members who visited the prison, is given below

It was a great experience visiting a prison with members of the Prison Ministry. I must say, never miss such an opportunity to visit the prison. Messina Costa (Parish Youth).

"I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25:36). Visiting, spending some time, sharing the joy of Our Lord Baby Jesus with all the inmates of the prison was an excellent experience. We experienced the same joy that shone on their faces too. We Praise God for giving us the opportunity. Marcelina Fernandes e Pereira (Catechist).

I had a really good experience at the prison and I thank Christ for giving us this chance to share the joy of Christmas with one another in the hall as well as for being able to bring smiles on the faces of the inmates. They were all hap-

py and seeing them happy brought a smile on our faces too. Valencio Dsouza (Parish Youth).

It was a great Joy for me to be a part of the program. I felt one with them. Oneness and togetherness in our group was a wonderful sign. It was a Joyous moment. Sr Shaila Crasto (Parish Council).

It was a very good experience having a very good time with the inmates, sharing the Joy of Christmas. The smile on their faces truly touched our hearts. Monica Crasta (Parish Youth).

“Service to others

is the rent we pay for our home in heaven”- Mother

Theresa. It was

very touching

to see the

smiles on the

faces of all

the inmates

who were in

the spirit of

Christmas. I

thank Jesus for

giving me this

opportunity to visit

the Colvale central

jail for the Christmas

programme. The Carol

singing and performance by the

inmates brought joy to our lives. Perpetual Menezes (Parish Council).

It was an enriching experience visiting the Colvale prison. I Thank God for making this day possible. Real Joy could be seen in their faces. Thanks for the very opportunity. Sr Vailankani Fernandes (Parish Council).

Thanking the team, and the people responsible for giving us this opportunity of visiting the Colvale prison, which otherwise would not have been possible and thanking God for giving me this privilege specially during the Christmas season for noticing that special smile on the inmates’ faces and brightening up their day. Jacklene Fernandes (Catechist).

It was an enriching experience; I was eagerly waiting for a chance to go and visit the Colvale prisoners and I thank God Almighty as well as the people who took responsibility on their shoulders of conducting this activity and for giving us this opportunity. We experienced great joy seeing all the happy faces of the prisoners. Agatha Alfonso (Parish Council).

I thank God, for I got the chance of visiting Colvale inmates and bringing a smile on their faces. It was an enriching experience. Nancy Pereira (Parish Council).

It was a good experience. Seeing their smiles made us really happy. I had a great time with them. It felt special sharing that joy with them. Their happiness touched our hearts deeply. Crisnoel Fernandes (Parish Youth).

The Christmas programme visit was not like visiting a prison, passing through the gates and seeing the prison

cells. The stage programme for the

inmates was a programme of interaction and participation with all present, bringing Joy to the faces of the inmates as well as ours. It gave us a chance to share Our Christmas Joy with those in despair. The touching moment was when the inmates sang the song by Bob Marley –Three Little Birds (Every Little Thing Is Gonna Be Alright).I did sing it with them to Convey that every little thing is gonna be alright. And receiving a Christmas snack pack from the inmates was a touching moment too. So also receiving a rose and then exchanging it with another inmate touched my heart. May God bless the Prison Ministry. Hema Menezes (Parish Council). ■



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, A MURDER MOST FOUL



John Dayal

The burning alive of Graham Stuart Staines and his two young put the politics of religious hate, and even the apex court, on trial.

I've known Gladys since 1999, and perhaps over the years, I dare call myself a friend, one among thousands she has in India. Some call her the most well-known Christian in India, second only to Mother Teresa. Suppressing her unfathomable pain and anguish, she told television reporters, "I forgive those who have killed my husband and my two sons." But it is not for the State to forgive, or forget, one who commits a murder so foul. Dara Singh, a Bajrang Dal activist from the Gangetic plains whose usual targets were cow traders in Orissa, had burnt alive Graham Stuart Staines, 58, an Australian Christian missionary working with victims of leprosy, and his two sons, Philip, 10, and Timothy, aged 6, as they slept in their jeep in a forest clearing in Manouharpur-Baripada on the night between January 21 and 22, 1999.

A black spot on the nation, said K.R. Narayanan, the president of India at that time, on the deed. Even the prime minister, Bharatiya Janata Party leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee, expressed similar feelings. Vajpayee had just a few weeks earlier made a helicopter flight to Dang in Gujarat, where members of the Sangh parivar had burnt about three dozen small log churches in the bamboo and sal forests not too far from Surat. Back in Delhi, he had called for a national debate on the conversion of tribals to Christianity. He said the arson was the work of fringe elements, "not more than one percent of the people". Vajpayee sent his cabinet minister,

George Fernandes, to Orissa. Fernandes went, returned to the national capital, and firmly announced the gruesome murders were by a foreign hand. Gladys Staines is still involved in Odisha, the new name of the state. Her surviving child, a daughter, is now a medical doctor in Australia. They had not accompanied Graham to his visit to the villages that fateful day. It was when the murder trials began that people came to know of the vicious and inhumane manner of their deaths. The three had woken up when the flames leapt from their vehicles. Dara Singh and his cohort used their long, stout lathis to push them back into the fire, till they died.

The Staines' triple-murders was when the western world came face to face with the violence being meted out to the Christian community in India by religious and nationalist extremists groups, known as the Sangh parivar. It was in 2007 and 2008 that the Sangh targeted Christians once again, in Kandhamal district in the same state, leading to more than a hundred deaths, the burning of more than 6,000 houses and 300 churches and the displacement of 60,000 people. The Christian community also remembers that even the courts apparently had not fully understood the murderous ideology of the killer. The Supreme Court of India, which finally sentenced Dara Singh to a life term in prison, said the murder was to "teach a lesson" to the missionary. It was the strong protest from the Christian community that forced the



Graham and Gladys Staines with their children.

Supreme Court to withdraw those deeply hurtful words in its judgment.

The court upheld the high court judgement which had given Dara Singh a life term, holding that the crime was not the rarest of the rare, and the trial court in Khurda had erred in giving Dara Singh and some of his associates the death penalty in the first place. The Supreme Court had also said, “It is undisputed that there is no justification for interfering in someone’s belief by way of ‘use of force’, provocation, conversion, and incitement or upon a flawed premise that one religion is better than the other.” A day later, civil society activists, among them Navaid Hamid, Shabnam Hashmi, Seema Mustafa, Harsh Mander, H.S. Hardenia and former MP Shahid Sidiqi, and Christian activists including this writer, Dominic Emmanuel and Mary Scaria, issued an angry press note, widely covered in the media. The Christian community is still divided on its support or opposition to the death penalty, but most in the Catholic and Protestant churches say capital punishment is an anathema in this age and time. I am myself a staunch opponent of the death penalty.

There are no more foreigners working in Christian relief and medical missions in the

country. Those that remain, old men and women, have become citizens. But “punishing conversions” became a part of the political lexicon. It has been totally weaponised now, used not just against Christians, but also against Muslims. It is also the main instrument for withdrawing the FCRA licences of tens of thousands of Christian NGOs which were working on donations from co-religionists in the West. The intimidation, indeed terrorising, of the Christian community, continues unstopped. Its victims are the clergy and mission staff who work in forest and tribal areas, among Dalits and marginalised communities, away from urban centres. Three or more cases of anti-Christian violence took place every day in 2023, the United Christian Forum said. Police continue to be inactive and often are complicit in the state of lawlessness. Probes by the National Commission for Minorities, Right To Information (RTI) requests, and other investigations have proven repeatedly there have been no fraudulent or forceful conversions by Christians in India anywhere, anytime. ■

Courtesy: <https://thewire.in>

Prison Ministry Volunteers: Response to Jesus' Invitation



Sr Lini Sheeja MSC,
Germany

A Call within a Call invites the dedicated volunteers to reach out to the rejected and affirm that they are cared for.

On 31 January 2024 as I visited our MSC Sisters' Namibian Province Mother-house in Namibia, Africa, I received a book named *Light through the Bars: Understanding and Rethinking, South Africa's Prisons* penned by Fr Babychan Arackthara MSFS from Sr Bertha MSC, who was serving in Namibian prisons. Sr Bertha MSC and I were sharing our prison ministry experiences from two different countries, Namibia and India and she gave me this above-mentioned book to read. Fr Babychan MSFS has been working as a chaplain in Southern African prisons for nearly 20 years when he published this book in 2019 where he has a remarkable track record of restorative justice and reintegration interventions.

Hats Off to PMI Volunteers

As I was reading through the pages of this book, it made me reflect on the services and commitment of Prison Ministry India volunteers' family in which I'm a member from 2018. First and foremost, hats off to all PMI volunteers for your services, commitment and dedication to which you are called to and for giving our brothers and sisters behind bars a chance to renew and reform.

Prison Ministry Volunteers Role

In his book *Sevasadan*, Munshi Premchand wrote, "Just as the people pick the path of evil in certain circumstances, so do they pick the path of good when they are given a chance. If we care, we can reform". The role of Prison Ministry volunteers is to care for our brothers and sisters behind bars and reformation will take place automatically. We need not work for their reformation as an additional service. We pray and care for them and their lives will be reformed. As Prison Ministry volunteers we are called to serve those behind bars and to bring them the message of life and hope through our humble caring.

The World and Prison Ministry Volunteers

St Francis De Sales says, "Compassionate people are slow to judge and condemn others." This is a clear and unique call of every volunteer who bend down through the prison gates to encounter our God who said, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25:36) in our incarcerated brothers and sisters. The world says, "The criminals are behind bars", but prison ministry volunteers say, "No one



is born a criminal”. The world says, “They are sinners”, but prison ministry volunteers say, “No one is beyond redemption”. The world looks at their crime and the present status, but the prison ministry volunteers look to their future. The world looks at the past failures, but the prison ministry volunteers look at their future successes. The world says that these prisoners need to be condemned, but the prison ministry volunteers say that these brothers and sisters behind bars need to be cared for, reformed and redeemed. The world says that punishment brings rehabilitation, but the prison ministry volunteers say that care and acceptance of these human beings brings about their rehabilitation. The world says prisoners are criminals, rapists and thieves, but the prison ministry volunteers say that these brothers and sisters behind bars are victims of poverty, abuse and violence.

Prison Ministry Volunteers: Response to Jesus’ Invitation

Prisoners are the ones whose dreams are

shattered and rejected. Prison Ministry: A Call within a Call invites the dedicated volunteers to reach out to the rejected and affirm that they are cared for. This powerful message needs to be reached out to every prison cell that our brothers and sisters are loved and the God of the Lost came down in search of them and waits for their return as the father of the prodigal son waited for his son’s arrival. The Prison Ministry plays an important role in our catholic faith as we respond and live the invitation of Jesus, I was in prison and you came to visit me. We are called to bring hope in the hopeless situations, places and people. We are the hands, heart and feet of Christ in reaching out to the dark cells and radiating the love of Christ. We the Christians and the volunteers join hands in this passionate adventure to care the uncared, to accept the rejected, to gather the scattered and to pick up the thrown outs. Is not our service life-giving? Join hands if you feel you are called to this passionate adventure! ■

A Mother's Journey to Recovery and New Life

- Emily Andrews -

Finding the Bible bolstered Mona's faith, and she began to pour over God's Word like never before. Verses about God's faithfulness and grace spoke to her soul.

Mona needed answers. She searched up and down the aisles of the prison library, combing the shelves with the help of her friend LoRay, a fellow prisoner. In matching khaki uniforms, the women scoured the shelves one by one, rummaging and rearranging, driven by their shared sense of urgency. But still, nothing. Ready to give up, Mona turned to a shelf she was sure she'd already checked. On one pile of books lay the Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible she was seeking. It felt like an old friend had appeared out of nowhere. Mona looked at LoRay, eyes wide. "That's God, baby," said LoRay. "I need you to do this for me. I need you to really get into this and start reading your Bible and start praying, and you'll get your answers."

Out of Control

Over the years, Mona had turned to drugs and alcohol for answers, like she'd seen her own mother do. For Mona, substance abuse numbed the pain of childhood trauma. While her dad tried to keep her on the straight and narrow, she spent

much of her teen years fighting, drinking, and getting high. Mona was 15 when she had her first baby. Her dad stepped in to take care of her son as she cycled in and out of juvenile detention centers. Later, as an adult, she spent time behind bars for DUIs and assault. In 2001, Mona began using meth. Her criminal behavior worsened. She had had many children, but she struggled to be a mother, committing crimes like forgery to pay for her drug habit. She would go to prison four times. Leading up to her last prison stint, Mona sat in a Nebraska courtroom. Those four walls felt all too familiar as she sat listening to the judge rattle off her charges one by one. It wasn't the first time she had heard them. But this time, a surprising feeling washed over her. "All I kept thinking was, 'Oh my gosh, this is just what's on that paper. He really has no clue [about] the things that I've done,'" Mona says, looking back. "In my heart, that was the first time I ever felt that I was not a good person and that something had to give. I felt really empty inside, and I couldn't explain what was going on with me. It just hit me way differently."

A Safe Place

At Nebraska Correctional Center for Women, Mona found her longtime friend LoRay and began to confess her shame through tears. Over and over, Mona asked, “Why?” Why couldn’t she get it together? Why couldn’t she be the mom her kids need? LoRay pointed her to a Bible. At first, Mona was hesitant - she wanted more than a reading assignment - but LoRay insisted. Mona said the only Bible that might help was the Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible, a large-print, easy-to-read version of God’s Word. She had found it during a previous prison term but left it behind. Its study notes had helped her glean meaning from Scripture; reading sometimes posed a challenge for Mona, since her early trouble with the law

had limited her formal schooling. But now, Mona was desperate to change. The women searched the prison library with haste. Finding the Bible bolstered Mona’s faith, and she began to pour over God’s Word like never before. Verses about God’s faithfulness and grace spoke to her soul. A few weeks later, Mona heard about the Prison Fellowship Academy, a life transformation program for incarcerated men and women. Created by the same organization that helped provide the Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible, the Academy offers participants the tools and environment they need to change: holistic curriculum, biblical values, and trained, compassionate coaches in a supportive community. Mona didn’t know how she would fit in, but she applied.



In the Academy, Mona discovered a diverse community of women committed to change something Mona had thought was out of reach for so long. “That was scary to me, because I’ve been the way I am my whole life,” Mona says. “So just thinking about changing, that was scary.” Each module of the curriculum challenged her to grow, and the section on victim impact moved her deeply. She realized how her addiction and crimes touched many other lives, including her children’s. From then on, she resolved to speak and act with intention, practicing values like integrity and responsibility. The supportive Academy community was unlike anything Mona had experienced in prison before. Caring Prison Fellowship staff and volunteers helped Mona feel safe to open up. She was inspired by the wisdom and faith of Danielle Wilson, an Academy volunteer who also serves as Prison Fellowship’s church mobilization manager. “I completely trusted her,” says Mona.

Mona’s Miracle

Mona made great strides in the Academy, but it was a difficult climb. Digging into her past and getting to the root of her struggles was painful. Partway through the program, “things got too real,” she says. Then she told Danielle she was ready to quit. Mona was called into the warden’s office, where Danielle and the warden sat down with Mona to hear her concerns and to encourage her to stay in the program. “They told me that I was an asset,” says Mona. “I’ve never been told that before, that I was an asset to the community. It made me feel like I was on the right path ... and they believed in me.” Mona chose to remain in the Academy. Over time, she became a mentor to other women. When somebody needed a trusted friend or listening ear, they called Mona. She gained a reputation as a peacekeeper in the prison. Mona had been estranged from her 12 children for the first several years of her incarceration. Only her dad would answer letters and phone calls. But as Mona’s transformation became evident, her

children began opening up to her. On graduation day, she burst with pride at the claps and cheers of the audience. Completing the Academy almost felt like a dream. “I truly believe that God performed a miracle on me,” says Mona. “He turned me into the woman I am intended to be. When good things happen in my life, He’s the one I think [of]. It has nothing to do with me; it’s all God.”

Mending Broken Pieces

In February 2022, Mona was released, and her son’s landlord rented her an apartment. At times, she struggled to adjust to the new rhythms of life outside. The freedom of her new environment intimidated her. She leaned on trusted friends and loved ones for support. Mona still says the best thing about coming home is being near family. She’s not only a mother of 12; she has four grandchildren and one on the way. The little ones love to play and watch movies with her. “I don’t want to ever do anything to jeopardize the relationship I have with my children ever again,” she says. Today, Mona is six years sober and works full time at a local production and shipping company. While finding work hasn’t been challenging for her, she considers herself blessed. She knows that people with a criminal record often struggle to find steady employment. Mona strives to help others through recovery, walking alongside friends who need accountability. She still believes the Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible is the greatest gift for anyone struggling with addiction. She also keeps in touch with Danielle, her Academy mentor, and they have plans for a special reunion for Academy graduates hosted by a local church. Mona can’t wait to see the others and celebrate how far they’ve journeyed. She recently learned that her full first name, Ramona, means “wise protector.” And it suits her, a devoted mother, grandmother, and friend with a strength that only flows from a source beyond herself. Every time she walks through the door to see her grandbabies’ faces, she marvels at the miracle. ■

Courtesy PFI.

New Year Celebration: District Jail, Sambalpur, Odisha



Sr Mercyan SU

They spoke of the importance of leaving the past behind and living the present moment with joy and looking to the future with hope.

Hope lies in dreams, in imagination and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality. On 20th January, 2024, the New Year Celebration was organized at Nari Bandi Niketan, District Jail of Sambalpur, Odisha by the Jharsuguda Unit of Prison Ministry of India led by Sr. Mercyan, SU. Present on the occasion were Fr. Fuljames Indwar, Parish priest of St. Arnold Parish, Jharsuguda, Fr. George SDB from Don Bosco Yuva Kendra, Sr. Elizebath SU. Meena HM, Sr. Linda FCC, Sr. Kumudini and Sr. Ursula SCGR from Sacred Heart Sisters.

The celebration started off with a message by Fr. Fuljames Indwar SVD. He highlighted the need of hope in one's life in the midst of hopelessness. He said that surrounded by hopeless conditions the spirit of hope will impel one to live for a better tomorrow. Sr. Linda FCC and Sr. Meena HM also addressed the inmates. They spoke of the importance of leaving the past behind and living the present moment with joy and looking to the future with hope. To enliven the moment, party games were conducted. The guests and the inmates took part in it and enjoyed the atmosphere of fun and laughter. Thank you to Fr. Francis and Sr. Amala for gifting the new sarees and Calendars to the inmates. These gifts had been sent all the way from Banga-

lore. Fruits, cakes and articles of daily use too were distributed to the prisoners. The day was fittingly concluded with the shared meals with 20 inmates, the staff and the visitors.

At the end of the programme Sr Mercyan SU thanked the superintendent and staff for their support and cooperation. Reciprocating to Sr. Mercyan, the superintendent Smt. Runi Bala Dei expressed her gratitude to PMI Jharsuguda Unit for their creative initiative for the well-being of the inmates and the prayerful support. She said "whenever you come, they (inmates) know that they are no longer alone and someone is there to love and care for them." It was a beautiful occasion of being together and sharing the new hope and joy of 2024. The joy of sharing was palpable in the entire programme. ■



JAILED VIETNAMESE CHRISTIAN IS A VICTIM OF ‘WRONGFUL CONVICTION’

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACTIVIST NAY Y BLANG WAS CHARGED WITH INCITEMENT AND SECESSION FOR HOLDING RELIGIOUS PRAYER MEETINGS

Religious freedom is limited in the officially atheist Vietnam. The government allows religious activities as mandated by strict laws and regulations.

A Vietnamese Christian recently jailed on charges of incitement and secession was denied proper legal representation in the court and is a victim of wrongful conviction, media reports say. Charges against Nay Y Blang, 48, a member of the Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ, were fabricated, said the church’s founder Pastor Aga, Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported on Jan. 26. The church is not recognized by Vietnam’s communist government. The People’s Court of Phu Yen province sentenced Blang, a religious freedom activist and a member of the Ede ethnic group in the Central Highlands, to four years and six months in jail, pro-government Vietnamese language outlet, Tuoi Tre Online reported. Blang was accused of committing crimes by allegedly holding a religious prayer meeting at his home. He was accused of using these meetings to “gather forces, divide the national unity bloc, incite secession, self-rule, and establish a separate state for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands,” and was convicted of “abusing democratic freedoms,” the pro-government newspaper reported.

Pastor Aga, who goes by a single name and

is now based in North Carolina, US, accused the police officials in Phu Yen province of forcing Blang’s family to retract the permission for legal representation given to lawyer Ha Huy Son. “This is unacceptable. If lawyer Ha Huy Son had been present . . ., it would have clearly been fair and transparent trial to see if Mr. Blang is guilty or not,” Aga said.

“But in reality, only people from the government were present, meaning the government can give Blang any sentence they want. Why were there no lawyers to defend or argue about legal issues?” Aga added. Son, the lawyer, told RFA that the permission he had received to represent Blang was cancelled. He refrained from providing any reason or commenting any further on the issue. Blang was found guilty of “abusing democratic freedoms and belief freedoms to entice and incite others to infringe upon the interests of the State, legitimate rights and interests of agencies, organizations, and individuals,” the court verdict said.

Blang was also charged with providing false information about freedom of religious belief in Song Hinh district, Tuoi Tre Online report-



ed. He was also charged with slander, misrepresentation of religious policies, and infringing upon the interests of the State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Blang had admitted his offenses and had requested the jury to consider “mitigating the punishment so that he could soon return to his family, and reintegrate into the community,” according to the pro-regime newspaper. Aga told RFA that the charges against Blang were all fabricated and the trial was a farce. “Blang has told the truth with evidence, from invitations to summons, video images from Phu Yen province police to suppression of harassment, arrests, confiscation of motorbikes, and fines,” Aga said.

“There is evidence, it [Blang’s activities] is not slandering the government or slandering the police of Phu Yen province,” Aga emphasized. The officials at the Security Investigation Agency of the Phu Yen provincial police declined to comment on Blang’s case. Aga said that the Evangelical church that he had founded was purely religious. The church is “not reactionary, not against the state, not intending

to establish a separate state,” Aga said. “We just want to express our religious beliefs, our own religion, to worship God and follow the religion that suits us, while still following the laws of the Vietnamese government,” Aga added.

This is the third time that Blang has been convicted. In September 2022, Blang was fined 4 million Vietnamese Dong (around US\$163) by the People’s Committee of Song Hinh district for “abusing democratic freedoms and belief freedoms,” Tuoi Tre Online reported. He was convicted of enticing and inciting “others to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of agencies, organizations, and individuals.” In April 2005, Blang was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison by Phu Yen province for “undermining the unity policy.” Religious freedom is limited in the officially atheist Vietnam. The government allows religious activities as mandated by strict laws and regulations. ■

Courtesy: UCA News 29 Jan 2024.

Stripped off Her Clothes and Forced to Walk in the Streets of the City Naked: St Barbara



Sr Lini Sheeja MSC,
Germany

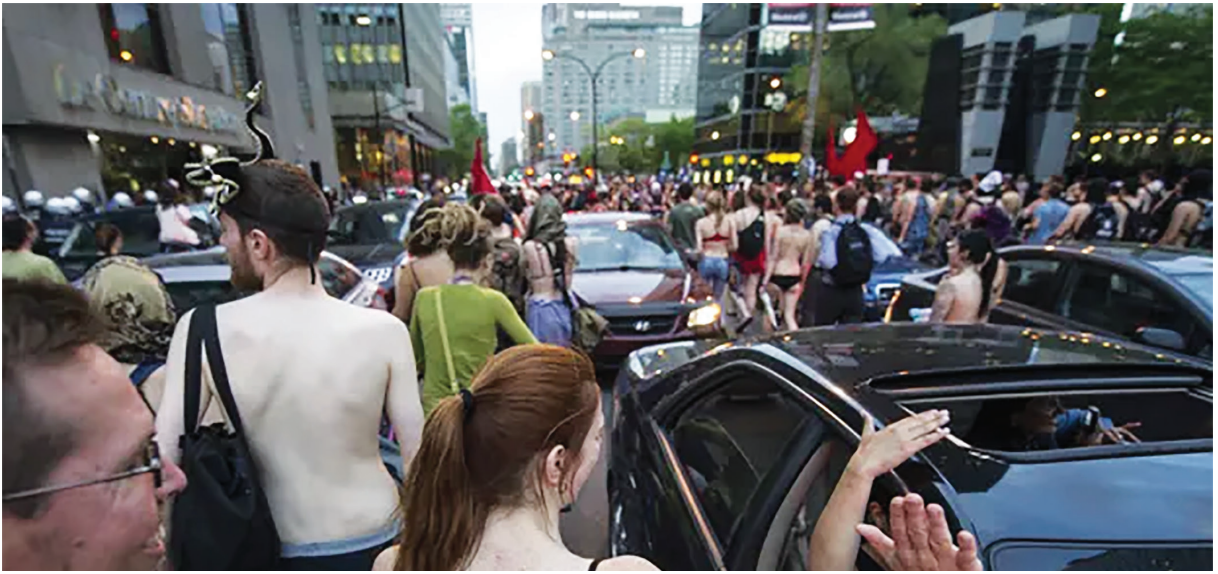
Immediately following Barbara's death, a terrible thunderstorm arose. As punishment for his monstrous crime, Dioscuros was killed by lightning. Immediately After the death of Barbara and Julia the earth shook and swallowed the bodies of both the martyrs.

I wonder how these wealthy and beautiful girls decided to give up all worldly things for the sake of the One who called them to be with Him and to be sent out. For these men/women sanctity and holiness was more important than any other needs and desires. Following Jesus was a choice and not a chance for them. To be a martyr is not our choice, but it's a grace bestowed upon His special chosen ones. For whom did these martyrs give up their lives? They gave up their lives for the One who was born in a manger, who was imprisoned, died on the cross and who was buried in a borrowed tomb. They gave up their lives for the One who said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Mt 8:20). What made Barbara give away everything for the One who had no place to lay His head? Did she find the greatest wealth in this God who taught us to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven? What is that something special in Jesus? Jesus never lived in a palace. Jesus never promised security. Jesus never promised wealth. But one thing Jesus promised was that He would be with us till the end of time. He keeps His promise that He never

abandons us. And, this is what every saint or martyr experienced even in the death chamber. They were willing to die for Him, for in Him they found all the richness, all glory and all joy. Jesus is the most influential person ever in history. Today, 2.38 billion Christians would speak about this Jesus who came down to redeem fallen humanity. Today, these 2.38 billion Christians will proclaim that Jesus is Lord, redeemer, Saviour and everything for them.

Barbara: A Prisoner from Childhood

Barbara had spent all of her life in an apartment in the pinnacle of a tower. Did this child commit any crime to be in a tower all alone? Being born to a wealthy father, she could never enjoy the world outside. She was locked up in a tower. The outside world was of great concern for her father. As a wealthy father, he was too protective of his only child. Although she had committed no crime, she was never allowed to leave her tower. 'There were too many dangers outside', said her father. Because of his love for her, Barbara was a special kind of prisoner. The tower had been constructed to protect her from anyone her father did not trust. So as Barbara grew up in her lonely



tower, her only contact with the outside world was gazing through the windows to marvel at the countryside below. Dioscuros planned to marry Barbara to a very prosperous man, with a view to increasing the family fortunes. At first Barbara asked for time to reflect.

Barbara: New Life in Christ

One day, when Dioscuros was away, Barbara decided to inspect the new bathhouse that her father ordered to be built for her. In it was a large pool - a perfect place for baptism. Barbara told the builders to make a few changes in the design. Instead of two windows, there would be three, in honour of the Holy Trinity. And there, on the wall above, a Cross would be cut into the stone. Then Barbara wrote a letter to the great teacher Origen from Alexandria to come and baptize her. Origen taught her more about the love of Jesus, and His Salvation on the Cross to save mankind. He also gave her a few religious books and told her that she must suffer a lot because of her faith, but at the end she would be crowned with eternal glory. A few days before her father returned, Barbara was baptized in the new pool.

Barbara: Firm Faith in Christ

Whenever her father returned from a trip, he would run straight to his beloved daughter to greet her. And on this particular day as well,

as usual he ran to visit and to greet his beloved daughter after his trip. He was surprised at noticing certain things that day. As he walked by the new bathhouse he noticed the three windows, and saw the cross. "Who had authorized these changes?" he asked himself. "Who could have dared to influence his daughter with signs of those Christians?" Barbara greeted her father warmly and then she revealed to him that she had made the changes in the building, for she was now a Christian. Dioscuros was furious. "Have you been baptized yet?" he asked. "Yes" she replied. All his dreams were shattered. But God's dreams were fulfilled. Did Barbara know what consequences she would have to face by this one yes? What kind of days would be hers from now on? Would she be in safe hands from today? Would Dioscuros be the same father to his first born? Would his love remain the same for his most beloved beautiful daughter?

Barbara: Arrest and Imprisonment

Dioscuros was enraged because all his plans had been thwarted. All of his precautions were for nothing. Barbara saw her father reach for his sword and she dashed out of the room and ran down the stairs of the tower. She escaped from the palace and went to a nearby mountain and there she prayed to God for help. Was it a crime to love the God who was born

in a manger? Was it a crime to love the God who gave sight to the blind, who made the lame walk and the deaf hear? Was it a crime to follow the God who forgave sinners? Barbara escaped from her earthly father and took shelter in the hands of her heavenly father by running to a mountain. Would her earthly father leave her in peace? The soldiers of Dioscuros were sent out immediately to search for her and the next day they found her. When Barbara refused to give up her faith, her father ordered the soldiers to take her to the imperial governor. He handed over his daughter, as a Christian to the Roman pro-consul Martianus, a Supreme Court judge, for the assessment of punishment. Was it a crime to be a Christian? Her own father hands her over to someone to be punished. The girl who was locked up in a tower was brought out, not for good but for the worst. Her father couldn't have mercy on his own daughter. He wanted his name, fame and prestige to be protected. Martianus tried at first to make her break with her faith by kind persuasion, but when this failed, he had her thrashed and cast into jail.

Prison Life Continues...

There she was given two choices: sacrifice to the pagan gods or die. Barbara answered quickly, "I would rather die, for in this way I will witness my love for my Saviour Jesus." The governor sent her to be tortured but Barbara remained firm in her faith. Finally, they threw her into jail with another woman called Julia, who became Barbara's friend and tried to care for her wounds. Around midnight in the dark cell, a bright light shone. Christ himself appeared to Barbara and told her, "Don't fear, my child, for I will be always with you." Jesus walked into her darkness. Jesus came in her woundedness and stooped down to her in her powerlessness. How blessed one can be to meet one's Lord face to face? After these words, all her wounds from the many tortures were healed. Barbara won one more soul for her bridegroom Jesus. Julia her friend herself, decided to accept Christ and follow Barbara in her martyrdom.

Barbara: Sentenced to Death

In the morning when Barbara stood in front of the governor, everybody was amazed by the absence of her wounds. Again Barbara was mercilessly tortured and when it was discovered that Julia also had become a Christian, the governor ordered her to be tortured as well. They stripped her clothes off and forced her to walk in the streets of the city naked. Yet as Barbara stepped outside the prison walls, she was covered with a brilliant light. Not only could her naked body be not seen but also all her wounds were healed again. The imperial governor had grown tired and afraid of this young woman with so much power. He ordered his soldiers to have Barbara and Julia beheaded at the same time. The Emperor was frightened at the power and grace of Jesus that was poured upon Barbara. He was so scared! A great man scared of this young woman! What power did Barbara have?

Walking to Death Chamber in Cheerful Ecstasy

She was sentenced to die by the sword. Barbara went to her place of execution in cheerful ecstasy and enthusiasm for her true faith. Her last wish was that God through her experience help all those confronted with and unprepared for a sudden and untimely death. The Barbarous father was so outraged that he himself severed his daughter's head! The father, who loved her most, killed her with his own hands. Barbara stood quietly and gracefully to be killed. Barbara was martyred at the age of 33. Immediately following Barbara's death, a terrible thunderstorm arose. As punishment for his monstrous crime, Dioscuros was killed by lightning. Immediately After the death of Barbara and Julia the earth shook and swallowed the bodies of both the martyrs. The governor in terror became insane and died. Several days later, a pious Christian discovered the two white-robed bodies of the martyrs. Their bodies were buried by a Christian man named Valentinus. Pilgrims who came to the grave site were healed or received aid and consolation. ■

CATHOLIC PRIEST GETS BAIL AFTER 20 DAYS IN INDIAN PRISON

The court concluded that ‘nothing was found on record’ to punish the priest for unlawfully running a children’s home.

A Catholic priest, detained on charges of violating child rights in central India, has been released on bail 20 days after he was arrested, which Church leaders say is part of a state-sponsored anti-Christian campaign. Father Anil Mathew, a member of the Carmelite of Mary Immaculate (CMI) congregation, working in Madhya Pradesh state was released on Jan. 28. He was arrested on Jan. 7 and was remanded in prison. Father Cyril Kuttianickal, Mathew’s local superior based in the state capital Bhopal, said Mathew was released from jail after a local court granted him bail.

Mathew was not “willing to talk to media,” Kuttianickal told UCA News on Jan. 29. Mathew, director of Anchal Girls’ Hostel in Bhopal was arrested on charges of violating provisions of the Juvenile Justice Act, unlawfully running a children’s home, and engaging in conversion attempts. Mathew’s lawyer told the court that “no case is made out” under the Juvenile Justice Act as the hostel he directs is “not a juvenile home” defined under the act, Kuttianickal said in a statement. Mathew runs a girl’s hostel, not a children’s home, and the girls

staying there “have their biological parents alive.”

“All the girls were admitted in the girls’ hostel upon the written request of their parents,” the statement said. The hostel is registered with the school education department as per the legal requirement, the lawyer told the court. Mathew’s lawyer also told the court a case of conversion attempt will not stand against his client as the law asks not to entertain third-party complaints on conversion. Madhya Pradesh Religious Freedom Act, 2021 says that a case against conversion or attempt to conversion should not be registered or investigated until a written complaint is filed by a person who claims to have experienced such an action. In the case of minors, the complaint should come from parents or siblings, the law stipulates. In the case of Mathew, the complaint was filed by government officials and not by any hostel girls nor by their parents, the lawyer said. “The court appreciated the arguments” and concluded that “nothing was found on record” to punish Mathew “by an imprisonment up to 10 years is made out,” Kuttianickal said in the statement. Mathew’s arrest

came two days after a surprise inspection led by a team under Priyank Kanoongo, chairman of the state-run National Commission for Protection of Child Rights.

The pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has run the state government since 2003, barring a 15-month gap in 2018. The right-wing party emerged winner in the state polls held in December last year. The federal and state child rights protection panels, Church leaders, said “carried out targeted inspections in Christian institution primarily, orphanages, hostels and schools and filed several false cases of religious conversion.” “The raid and arrest of Father Mathew is also part of

that targeted campaign against Church-run institutions of repute to malign their good name in the name of religious conversion,” a Church official lamented. “Since the child rights panel officials are part of the ruling pro-Hindu BJP governments in New Delhi and in the state, the local officials including the police are hesitant to take any stand in support of Church institutions even though they know the truth,” added a Church official who did not want to be named. Christians make up 0.29 percent of more than 72 million people in the state and more than 80 percent are Hindus. ■

Courtesy: UCA News 30 January 2024.



PMI UNIT K R NAGAR, MYSORE



Sr Paul

The chief guest, a social worker Mr Ra Suresh, appealed to the inmates not to regret the past but to use these days in jail for self-realisation that will help for a change of mind and for a change of lifestyle for a better future.

With the prior permission of the Superintendent, PMI KR Nagar organised a Christmas Programme for the inmates of our sub jail on 13th January from 3.30 to 5 PM. The Head Mistresses, some of the staff members as well the students of St. Joseph's Convent School as well as of Divya Jyothi Jnanalaya actively participated in this programme. After the introduction and the prayer song Sr Reema the superior read the Word of God. The students of both the schools shared the message of Christmas through a beautiful dance and powerful drama. 'A Saviour was Born to Save us from Sin and Slavery' was the theme. The chief guest, a social worker Mr Ra Suresh, appealed to the inmates not to regret the past but to use these days in jail for self-realisation that will help for a change of

mind and for a change of lifestyle for a better future. Mr Raghupathi thanked the PMI unit as well as all those who joined hands in this programme and assured them of his whole-hearted cooperation in all the activities of PMI unit.

Sr Paul thanked the superintendent, his staff as well as the inmates for their warm welcome and the cooperation they extended. She also congratulated and thanked the staff and students of both the schools for their cooperation and help. She wished the inmates speedy release and hoped and prayed that they never go back to the old habits, never be the slaves of the so called powerful in our society who may use them for crimes for their own gains. The inmates were served cake and fruits after which they spoke to us freely for some time. ■



JOY AND HOPE IN SUNDARGARH DISTRICT JAIL



Sr. Mercyan SU

The cycle of night and day goes on and on. Similarly, in the life of everyone, joy will certainly make its way some day. But we have to wait for it patiently.

PMI Jharsuguda Brings Joy and Hope in the Sundargarh District Jail. “If you have the chance to make people happy, just do it. Sometimes people are struggling silently; may be your act of kindness can make their way lighter”. PMI Jharsuguda Unit loves visiting the District Jail of Sundargarh to bring joy and hope to its inmates. On 5th February 2024 led by Sr. Mercyan and Sr. Elizabeth from Society of St. Ursula Marya Sadan, Fr. Fuljames Indwar Parish Priest of St. Arnold Church, Jharsuguda, Sr. Ramita FCC, Sr. Ursula SCGR, Sr. Lalita HM Sr. Emilia HM, paid a loving visit to the jail with a short festive programme. For this joyous occasion 450 prisoners had assembled.

The program commenced with the words of welcome from Mr Sanjib Kumar DP, assistant Superintendent. It was followed by presentation and self-introduction by the members of PMI, Jharsuguda Unit. As usual, the address to the inmates followed the introductory formalities. Fr. Fuljames Indwar SVD sang a beautiful song and in his message he highlighted the need of hope in one’s life. He said that as a day ends the night follows. The cycle of night and day goes on and on. Similarly, in the life of everyone, joy will certainly make its way some day. But we have to wait for it patiently. Sr. Emilia HM in her short talk presented the means of being happy in the midst of difficulties. Finally, Fr. Robin-



son SDB, with his exuberant style led all into action song; he also sang a beautiful number for the brethren in jail. Joy was manifest in the singing and dancing of the inmates assembled for the programme. In response to the visitors one of the inmates sang a song.

The PMI unit also visited the women’s cell and interacted with them. They presented a saree each and fruits to prisoners as gift. A few catholic prisoners were gifted the Holy Bible. The recipients were happy to receive the holy book and they expressed their wish to read the Word of God. The credit for the gifts goes to Fr. Francis and Sr. Amala who made available sarees and calendars for the prisoners. The programme, rightly concluded with words of gratitude by Sr. Mercyan SU. While concluding the event, she thanked the police staff for their whole hearted co-operation and for the full participation of the inmates. ■

KOHIMA DISTRICT PRISON



Mhalenuo Regina

On 12 February 2024 ten of us, which included two religious sisters, three college students, one brother and four lay people representing Don Bosco College, Kohima attended the morning service in District Prison, Kohima.

On 12 February 2024 ten of us, which included two religious sisters, three college students, one brother and four lay people representing Don Bosco College, Kohima attended the morning service in District Prison, Kohima. There were 74 inmates of which around 34 of them attended the service. The service was led by an inmate and from Don Bosco, Regina gave a talk on 'the importance of the Word of God' and 'the importance of prayer'. After which the Don Bosco College students lead the inmates with praise and worship and ended the service with a prayer. After the service ended, the whole team went to the women's ward and prayed with them and returned back. ■



AWARENESS SESSION AT WOMEN'S CENTRAL PRISON, SHIMOGA 2024



Sr. Helen Moras SCB

They explained how everyone must concentrate on the well-being and safety of their family members and associates.

The volunteers of Prison Ministry of India Shimoga unit organised a half a day session on Friday, 9 February 2024, at the Central Prison for women at Shivamogga. The sessions centred round the topic: Women's Mental Health and Safety, thus to create awareness in the minds of inmates stressing on mental health and safety. The session commenced at 11 am invoking God's blessings by the PMI volunteers.

Sr Elize SCB welcomed the people gathered there and particularly the Prison Authorities for their cooperation and support. She made

a special mention of the Superintendent Mrs. Hemavathy, the Jailor Mrs. Savitha and the sub. Jailor Mrs. Shanta. Mrs. Anna Davis and Sr. Rita Saldanha were the resource persons of the day. They explained how everyone must concentrate on the wellbeing and safety of their family members and associates. The Superintendent spoke expressing her gratitude to all the volunteers and the PMI for their sessions and inputs. The group was grateful to Mrs Erudhaya Mary who sponsored cakes and fruits distributed to the inmates. The session ended at 1.30 pm with a vote of thanks. ■



DELHI DREAM



Fr Francis
Kодиан MCBS

On 19th February 2024 the Delhi Dream will also be accomplished by the grace of God. Most Rev Kuriakose Bharanikulangara the Archbishop of Faridabad will bless the newly purchased apartment on 20th February 2024 at 10AM. Let's praise and thank God who takes care of every minute need of PMI since its very inception.

PMI Dreams

From the inception of Prison Ministry India on 8 December 1981 onwards its founders and pioneers have been dreaming. Their first dream was to visit the Kottayam Prison. Within a few weeks it was realized through Dr Kunjumon Chacko the founding chairman of Prison Fellowship India. Our next dream was to convene the All-Kerala Prison Pilgrimage. We not only accomplished it well in 1986

but it continues very fruitfully even today by the initiative of major seminarians. We envisioned Dawn – a magazine for prisoners, All-Kerala art and literature competition and its publication in a book entitled Prison Melody in 1987. All these continue even today by the leadership of different major seminaries in Kerala. In 1998 PMI dreamt to come under KCBC and PMI was recognized by the Kerala Catholic Bishops



Conference on 8 September 1989. Our Bishops gave an office at POC, Palarivattom and appointed Fr Francis Kодиyan MCBS as the full-timer to serve the lost sheep entangled in prison. In 1990s PMI imagined of having rehabilitation centers for released prisoners. The result was two Snehashramams – rehabilitation centers - one in Thrissur for released men prisoners and the other in Trivandrum for released women prisoners. Many religious congregations followed this style of ministry by launching homes for released prisoners. Then we visualized having homes for prisoners' children – the first one was Snehadeepam - launched by Mar Jose Pulickal, bishop of Kanjirappally by donating his own house and property to this mission. Now we have about 15 homes for children known as Kolbe homes.

Duc in Altum

In 1994 PMI fantasized extending the ministry from Kerala to all over India. Fr Varghese Karipery who was appointed and anointed with this mission came to Bangalore in 1994 and with the blessing from Archbishop Alphonsus Mathias began the ground work to do prison ministry all over India. It was Most Rev Peter Remigius who took much pain to insert PMI under the CBCI. On 24 August 2000 PMI officially came under the Justice, Peace and Development Commission of CBCI. Another dream was to establish a research center for prison ministry. When Fr Francis Kодиyan MCBS came back after his doctoral studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, he took initiative to open the Reformatory Research and Documentation center (RRDC) at Thrissur on 13 May 2003. From RRDC we publish our news magazine Prison Voice, the research journal – Reformatory Explorations and books as well. Our next dream was to establish regional headquarters in Guwahati, Delhi, Mumbai and Kochi. We purchased a flat in Guwahati in collaboration with Ursuline Franciscan Sisters and purchased a plot in Karjat near Mumbai.

In 1990s PMI imagined of having rehabilitation centers for released prisoners. The result was two Snehashramams – rehabilitation centers - one in Thrissur for released men prisoners and the other in Trivandrum for released women prisoners.

Delhi Dream

PMI Delhi dream has a history of more than 25 years. It was Fr Joseph Kavalakkatt VC who initiated the ministry in Delhi. Sr Archangel SABS did incredible ministry for many years. Bro Naveen, Fr David MSC, Fr George Peter Kachiryil MST, Fr Jose Thannippara MST, Sr Inigo, Sr Winifred, Sr Celine FCC, Sr Grace CHF, Sr Kokila, Sr Joy SCC and laypeople like Mrs Pramila Fernandes, Mr Sanu and many others worked hard for the wellbeing of the incarcerated brethren in Tihar prisons. Always there was the dream to have an office and residence of our own in Delhi. On 19th February 2024 the Delhi Dream will also be accomplished by the grace of God. Most Rev Kuriakose Bharanikulangara the Archbishop of Faridabad will bless the newly purchased apartment on 20th February 2024 at 10AM. Let's praise and thank God who takes care of every minute need of PMI since its very inception. ■



Jail Day Celebration, Moovattupuzha Prison.



PMI Volunteers' Visit to Mavelikkara Special Sub Jail.



Released Prisoners' Family Gathering, Karaikal.



Carmel School Chatrapur Visits Berhampur Jail.



PMI National Office Distributes Agricultural Tools to Open Prison, Devanahalli.



PMI Bengaluru Unit's Pilgrimage.



PMI Raipur Volunteers' Visit to Raipur Central Jail.



Kolbe Home, Premodaya and Jeevodaya Children's Picnic.



Fr Francis Kodiyan MCBS Presenting PMI Report at CBCI.



PMI Chairman's Visit to Kolbe Home.



PMI Chairman's Visit to Kolbe Home.



Medical Camp Conducted at Goharganj Sub Jail, Raisen.



Udupi PMI Members Distributing Carom Boards to District Jail Hiriaddkka, Uduppi.



KGF Volunteers Distributing PMI Calendars.



Alcoholics Anonymous Gathering, Pala.



PMI National Office Members' Visit to Open Prison, Devanahalli.