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## PRISON VOICE NATIONAL MONTHLY

The devil  
had a plot,  
But God  
has a plan.



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### *Are you willing?*

*"Help a Child of a Prisoner*

*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, by  
giving*

*Rs. 3,000/- per child in a  
year. Your contribution is a  
help to mend a life.*

*Please send your valuable  
contribution.*

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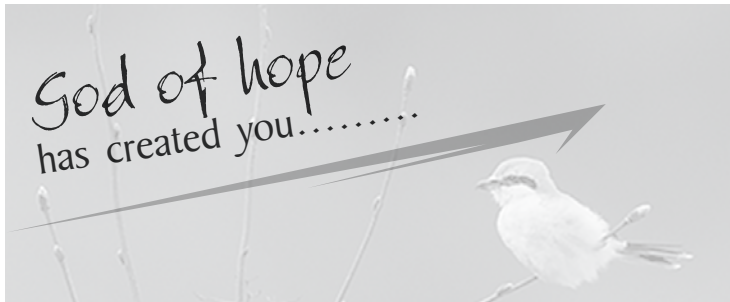
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**Sr. Lini Sheeja MSC**  
*Chief Editor*

Each human life is created not by chance, but born with a purpose. The God who created us is the God of purpose, the God of meaning. The God who blessed us humans with life is the God of life, a life of abundance. The moment we feel grateful for the very life given to us as a gift, life begins to have purpose. We find meaning in life. It is said that one of the best practices in life is, 'to sit silently for at least 10 minutes a day, to look within oneself.' Spirituality is where people find meaning in their life. It is something higher than us. How many of us take care of our inner spiritual beauty with the same amount of care as we do in beautifying our external selves, spending a lot of money and time? Outer beauty attracts, but inner beauty captivates is what each one of us have to remember today.

Ever since I joined the religious life, I was taught to sit and contemplate silently to know myself in order to discover the God within. Knowing is not enough, rather one must begin to apply and there the meaning and purpose of life begins. We might be regular in our personal prayers and want to be faithful in our spiritual life. But after spending hours together in prayer, once outside the space of prayer, if we cannot adjust or bear with others in our families and communities, those hours spend together have no meaning. Life should be balanced with prayer and practice. Live our spirituality is what we are taught in our families. Is it hard to practice this?

God is within us, is in every person whom we live with, in every person whom we meet daily, in suffering humanity, in the person who lost the meaning of his/her life, in a person who is sick, who is depressed and who needs our presence, our listening ears. Anyone who finds God becomes a new creation, especially, as I have seen, in the life of prisoners. Their entire life changes as they undergo spiritual transformation. 'Spirituality makes you a better person' is the theme of this particular issue of Prison Voice. If we are a man/woman of prayer we would have inner strength. Whatever life offers, we know that our living God is with us. When we become God-centred our life transforms and it becomes different.

Spirituality in prisons is a large concept. Whenever I have visited prisons for counselling, classes or for interviews, I have repeatedly heard from the inmates that it was within those four walls that they had found the Lord. I realized the presence of the living Lord in the darkness. God's presence is felt more clearly and tangibly when all the other faces fade from our lives. All of us aspire to become a man/woman of prayer. As I have already mentioned, praying does not mean spending hours together in a prayer hall avoiding the needs of others in our families and communities. Awareness of God is a grace. Prisoners are ones who have lost hope in their lives. And then with spirituality they receive the grace of hope and the awareness of the presence of God in their lives.

## Mothers follow you Till the Tomb



**Fr. Sebastian Vadakumpadan LLM,**  
National Coordinator & Secretary to C.B.C.I  
for Prison Ministry India

On the 26th of January, I went to the Sevasadan Institute of Franciscan Brothers at Bangalore to take my vehicle parked there and to meet Bro. Maurus, the Superior. We chatted while waiting for one of the workers at the reception to bring the key of my vehicle. I was talking about Br. Mathew who was the Superior many years ago. I told him about the Brother's visit to the national office of Prison Ministry India located in a colony a few years ago. He saw our office with its old plastic chairs and the very next day he came with a sofa set saying, "Your chairs are so shabby, you need a sofa set for people to sit on". I acknowledged the kindness of the Brother though he is no more. Hearing our conversation, the servant told us that Brother Maurus was also kind towards him and his family. He continued, "During Christmas and other occasions of importance, he would be the first to ask me whether my children have new dresses and so on". I told the Brother that it was really wonderful to hear about his goodness from others. Brother Maurus then told me that they had left their parents and brothers long ago; now the workers with them were their parents, brothers and sisters; if they did not look after their needs, who would take care of them? Their joy and their family were their happiness; though they did a lot of things for other people they had to take care of the people who cooked and took care of them. I asked the Brother, "Who is your inspiration?" He said that it was his mother

who sent no one away without giving them something for their need. No beggar was sent away with harsh words or empty-handed. Their house was close to paddy fields and many workers would take the path through their place to go to the fields for work. His mother used to grind mangoes and other items to make a special water for them. They used to enjoy this freely given gift as they had to work under the scorching sun. She would also give away whatever they had to eat in the house. "I had grown up watching all the good deeds of my mother; I follow my mother's gracious actions towards the poor people. Today many of us children are settled abroad, and God blessed us for our parent's goodness." As I left the Brother, I was filled with the motivation to do more. I felt that mothers follow us till the tomb. Meeting and listening to certain people inspire us to do more for society. It is said that Galileo had a great mind, Einstein had a genius mind, Newton had an extraordinary mind, Bill Gates had a brilliant mind and we however have a never mind. We are not bothered about others. What we are bothered about today is: my comfort, my parents, my children, my room, my opinion, and so on. Everything starts with "I". Even phones are named I-Phone and I-Pad. Gone are the days when people bothered about others. Now it is: never mind others, mind myself. The 'we' should make a comeback. We should not forget the other.

## When I breath I breath God



**Fr. George Vettikuzhiyil OCD**  
*Scripture Scholar,  
Director AVP Bangalore*

The word spirituality derives from the Latin word *spiritualitas* which is related to 'Spirit', and is opposed to 'material' things. Spirituality is characterized by an immediate and direct experience of God. Reduced to its most fundamentals, Spirituality is understood as friendship with God. Spirituality is being focused on one's relationship with God. Spirituality is a matter of "Life in the Spirit" (Jn 1: 15, 16). Spirituality refers to the interaction between these two spirits: God and man. It is a matter of inter-relationship.

The term spirituality is used in various senses by different scholars and different religious traditions because spiritual life in itself is complex. Spiritual life is applicable to all human beings - to theist and atheist, to members of different religions, 'life movements' etc. Each one has his or her own method of relating with God. All the religions of the world have their own spirituality based on their sacred writings. As Indians, we are familiar with Hindu Spirituality, Buddhist Spirituality, Islamic Spirituality and Christian Spirituality.

Now let us concentrate on the salient features of Christian spirituality. Fundamentally, Christian spirituality involves the relationship between the whole person and holy God who reveals himself by words and deeds in human history. The relationship with God begins at creation and reaches its climax at the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The test of Christian spirituality is conformity of the heart and life to the confession and character of Jesus as the Lord (1Cor 12:3). The guarantee of Christian spirituality is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Christian spirituality is therefore a participation in the mystery of Christ through the interior life of grace, actuated by faith, charity, and other Christian virtues. The life that the individual receives through participation in Christ is the same life that animated Jesus Christ, who shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Through Christ, the spiritual life of the Christian is eminently trinitarian. Jesus described the ultimate test for Christian spirituality when he told his disciples: "all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34-35). God has revealed himself to us definitively and normatively in Jesus Christ, in human form and in human history. We are called to communion with God through Christ in the Spirit. Human destiny depends on our fundamental option for or against this self-offer of God. We lead a life charged by the Supreme Spirit - God or a Supernatural Being. We are possessed and permeated by the Supreme Spirit, live according to the principles of the Spirit, guided by the Spirit.

Spirituality is used not in opposition to materiality, but to mean the manner in which humans transcend themselves and reach out to the ultimate possibilities of their existence. Spirituality entails both the understanding

of the deepest meaning of human existence and a commitment to realizing the same. A genuine spiritual life implies commitment to justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, love, and other human and humanitarian values in addition to secular values in this life. At the same time an authentic spiritual person would show his/her commitment to the sublime destiny of the human existence, the union with God.

It is evident, therefore, that the supernatural life received through the grace of God, like all

life is meant to increase and expand through our effort and cooperation. Spiritual life is not a treasure to be buried in a safe place: it is a seed that must be watered and cared for until it reaches full growth and maturity. The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is the glory of God and the proximate goals are sanctification and salvation. The gateway to a life of holiness is selfless love towards God and humanity irrespective of caste and creed, and this is the simplest definition of spirituality.

## *Christmas Celebration* at Observation Home, Hyderabad

Volunteers of Vimochana (Telangana unit of PMI) guided by Fr. Dion, the unit coordinator, celebrated Christmas at the juvenile prison at Nimboligadda, Hyderabad. Eighty inmates along with the officials thoroughly enjoyed the two-hour show on 23rd December 2019. Mrs Brigith, correspondent of Christopher High School, brought with her twenty boys and girls who enacted the nativity scenes. It entertained and astonished the eighty young girls of the prison. Sr. Fathima, Principal of St. Pious High School, Ramnagar, brought another twenty young students wearing modest but attractive pink dresses. They sang melodious carols in three languages - English, Hindi and Telugu. The inmates were so taken up with the visitors' dances and songs that in the end they all started clapping their hands and joined steps with the designated Santa Claus. Both the principals brought gifts, cakes and fruits



**Maria Regina LLB, LLM**  
*General Secretary, PMI Hyderabad*

for all the eighty inmates and officials while Mr M.D Vincent distributed cupcakes to all forty students who entertained the inmates. Mr. Patricks said in his speech that the children were good and God loved them. Mrs Brigith in her message wished all the inmates that they may soon be released and that they may live happily as responsible citizens of our country. Sr. Shantha of Providence, along with Sr. Leena Fernandez of Nirmala Convent, organised games and got the prizes distributed by the Superintendent and the principals. The Superintendent appreciated the Vimochana volunteers who visit the inmates regularly, and celebrate Christmas and other feasts with them. These activities relieve their stress levels and the monotony of their lives, and also helps them on the path of reform. The two-hour programme was anchored by Mr M.D. Vincent with apt quotes, stories and scriptural references. Miss Diana proposed the vote of thanks. The function began with a prayer by Mrs. Sleevamma and ended with the National Anthem. Thanks to the Superintendent, wardens and all the volunteers and students who made the glory of God felt and brought overwhelming joy to the inmates.

## THE PRISONER IS NOT TO BE PUNISHED, BUT TO BE REFORMED



**P. S. Ramesh**

Superintendent, Central Prison,  
Bangalore

The prison has a vital role in assisting offenders to learn skills and knowledge they need to lead a good life, so that they develop the right attitude towards life and society. The aim and objective of prison service is protection of society, reformation of offenders and therapy in the form of rehabilitation. That is reintegration of reformed prisoners back in society. Simultaneously, for prisons to do this well, they must have the basics of a safe, secure and decent environment. The fundamental aim is resettlement of discharged prisoners in to a purposeful, meaningful community-oriented life.

Prisons act more as moderators between prisoners and Civil Society. Prisoners should be kept occupied by allotting appropriate work. Additionally, education & library facility, vocational training, and reformation programmes should be in place. Prisons aim to support prisoners to make the right choices and take the right path in the future through rehabilitation and reformation programs.

The assumption of rehabilitation is that people are not permanent criminals and that it is possible to restore a criminal to a useful life, to a life in which they

contribute to themselves and to society as well. The aim of prison rehabilitation is to prevent habitual offending, also known as criminal recidivism. Rather than punishing the wrong in/committed by a criminal, restoration would seek, by means of education or therapy, to bring a criminal into a more normal state of mind, or into an attitude which would be helpful to society

Most prisoners agree, incarceration is suffering!!! Prisoners who are incarcerated are less likely to return to a criminal lifestyle. The principal aim of prisons is to deter criminal intent, and to transform criminal behaviour.

Increase emphasis on non-punitive and individualized methods of dealing with prisoners, for instance remission, parole, psychotherapy etc. It is widely believed that the objective of punishment is to bring about change in the mind-set of the offender, to avert him/her from committing the crime again, and to prevent other persons from committing crimes as well. It is widely perceived that crime is the outcome of a diseased mind and the prison must have the environment of a hospital for treatment and care of mental disease. Mahatma Gandhiji also believed that criminals should be

treated as patients in hospitals, and jails should be hospitals admitting such patients for treatment and cure.

Similarly, punishment then, with detention, involves a re-educating process and not a mere tormenting process. The offender should, while punished by detention, be brought under educative and healthy or ameliorative influences. Prisoners should be re-educated, and his/her character traits reshaped and placed once again in the furnace for being moulded.

Likewise, Pandit Nehru observed, "Any reform must be based on the idea that a prisoner is not punished but reformed and made into a good citizen." If this very objective is implemented once, it would result in a complete overhauling of the prison system.

The Mulla Committee also echoed a similar opinion when it said that the primary aim of incarceration is reclamation and overall reformation of the offender.

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## REPATRIATION OF A VIETNAMESE PRISONER

A. Jesu Raja  
Secretary, PMI, Tamil Nadu

A Vietnamese citizen named Pham Thi Tuyet Phuong aged 50 (now) was arrested at the International Airport, Chennai on 4th September 2008 for carrying 2800 gm of heroin which is a crime under Section 50 of the NDPS Act 1985. She also confessed that she was promised \$1000 and free air tickets to Hanoi for carrying the suitcase containing contraband. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison and a fine of one lakh rupees was set by the special judge, special court under the EC and NDPS Act Chennai on 9th November 2012. She was in the special prison for women at Puzhal. After serving her sentence and paying the fine she was released from prison on 3rd November 2018.

The Mother Teresa Sisters from T. Nagar community took care of her. We approached the Vietnamese embassy in New Delhi. They came in person and gave her the temporary

passport. We applied for the Exit Permit from the FRRO office. But they demanded a NOC from the Customs department. We went to the Customs department. When we approached the Customs department, we were shocked to see that there was an order no. 09/2009 dated 15th July 2009 served to Pham Thi Tuyet Phuong with the knowledge of the advocate while she was in prison, wherein she was to pay a penalty of ₹ 10 lakhs.

With the help of her family members she was able to pay the penalty of ₹ 10 lakhs, pledging their house in their native town. After paying the penalty we got the NOC from the Customs department. We produced the same at the FRRO office. They also demanded that she pay ₹ 21,600 as visa processing fees. After we requested

*Contd. on page 24*

## Trust God's Timing

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Ms. Teena Antony, PhD

This is a question that has no right answers. Our Christian ancestors spend hours on end in prayer and at church taking part in ceremonies, listening to sermons, etc. So, were they more spiritual than us? My experience is that some of my grandparents/grandparents-in-law were deeply spiritual, some were religious, and some were agnostic. Most of them went to church. But then, church was the only avenue open to them for socialization. After finishing with one's regular chores, there were not many options of spending one's free time.

Previously, religion was equated with spirituality. But today, they are not considered the same. Religion is more to do with organized and communal expressions of faith. Spirituality is more an internal belief that guides an individual's actions. Spirituality can be an expression of religious belief, but it need not always be so. For the purposes of this article though, I will be speaking about spirituality that is an extension of our Christian faith.

To come back to my question in the title, does prayer equate to spirituality? True prayer from the heart is an expression of spirituality, I feel. There are prayers we have learned by rote as children, which we recite at homes and at our places of worship. Do we always engage with these prayers, or have they become mere rituals that are followed without meaning? In certain faiths, prayers learned by rote and repeated endlessly, have as much meaning and power as prayers uttered from the heart.

When I was a child, family prayers were held in a designated place, at a designated time, and lasted more than half an hour. The children played silent games with each other, trying not to come under the notice of the adults. A few of the adults had their eyes closed, some in prayer, while some used to fall asleep. Then there were the grandparents, grand-uncles and grand-aunts. My grand-uncle, in particular, was a disciplinarian; he would spend his time making sure the rest of the family looked suitably prayerful. That was a time when everyone came home at fixed times, there were no traffic snarls and deadlines, no internet and mobile phones.

Times have changed, parents come home late, or at different times every day. The nature of work has changed, including school curriculum. Therefore, time is in short supply. Having a family prayer that lasts 45 minutes does not work out in the family anymore. To put it in a lighter vein, with lesser people around in the nuclear family, we do not have the luxury of falling asleep and not being noticed. So, we have had to shorten the prayers. We have had to be flexible with the prayer timings, and we have the prayer in whichever room everyone is at the moment.

However, it is not just prayer that enriches and inculcates spirituality in a family. Families need to be able to have open discussions about God, faith, church, religious ceremonies, etc. Our method of teaching and schooling has evolved; our access to information and knowledge has increased; it would be natural for children



brought up in such an atmosphere to question and balk at earlier rituals, ceremonies and traditions. We need to be able to distinguish among morality, spirituality, religiosity and tradition. We need to be flexible to make changes to how we approach religion and spirituality.

It is a generally held belief that families that eat together stay together. However, I do not remember my family having any meal together on weekdays, but we used to pray together. Whether in the joint-family or later on in the nuclear family, everyone would come together for the prayer; some amount of time would be spent in prayer, while the rest of it was about bonding as a family. The silent games, the falling asleep, the disciplining during prayer - all added to keeping the family together as a cohesive, loving unit. Afterwards, people would sit back and share their day, or have an informal discussion on what the Bible reading of the day was about. This would lead to further discussions about themes related to Christianity, the life of Jesus, and so on. There would be heated arguments about many of these aspects, but it was also educative and informative for the younger generation. We learned about leading a spiritual life, about sharing, about keeping an open-mind, about giving turns to others to express their opinions, about morality, and much more through these debates and discussions.

A few months ago, a cousin-in-law had a private chat to me about a spiritual matter. She was extremely hesitant about being critical of a matter related to a church ritual. Her family did not encourage any kind of criticism related to religious matters, so while she was seething with doubts and pent up anger at what she felt was an injustice she could not discuss it with anyone. It was then that I realized that the open-minded

attitude in my extended family regarding religion, rituals, ceremonies, etc. had given me an insight into many of the raging debates in the media. We learned early on to differentiate between the core values inherent in Christianity and everything else that arose due to the fallibility of human nature, to differentiate between culture and religion. So, when Dan Brown published his *Da Vinci Code* we were not shocked to our core, because for us spirituality was about good/bad, love/hate, and ultimately about our faith in God.

Our faith is what gives us the strength and courage to face adversity. We were taught as children to pray not just when we needed help from God, but also to thank him when things went well. We were taught to believe that God's plan is larger than our daily concerns. We were taught that it was not enough that we prayed daily, went to mass etc. but also should lead a life that reflected Christian values. Afterall, it is not true spirituality if we go to Church, and on the way back shout at the driver of the car who cut us off at the traffic light! There goes the lesson about patience and Jesus' teaching about forgiving our brother seventy times seven!

Hence true spirituality is something that has to be instilled in the next generation through prayer and instruction in families, by school authorities and (religious) teachers. Being truly spiritual increases our happiness levels, makes us more committed to our families, promotes the healthy development of our children, help us cope better with serious adversities including diseases and death, lower the risk of depression and suicide, and increase longevity. And rituals like family prayers and attending mass regularly do help us to nurture and strengthen our inner spirituality.

## THE SPIRITUALITY of our brethren behind the bars is THE SPIRITUALITY OF HOPE



Rev. Fr. Pascal Cuthina CP

Spirituality is a broad concept with room for different perspectives. In general, it includes a sense of connection to something bigger and deeper than ourselves, and it basically involves a search for meaning in life. As such, it is a universal human trait, something that touches everyone. People describe spirituality as sacred or transcendent, or simply as a deep sense of aliveness and interconnectedness. Some find spiritual life as being intrinsically connected to their relation to a church, temple, or mosque. Others find comfort in a relationship with God himself or a greater power. In certain instances, spirituality is concerned with nature or art. Furthermore, one's spirituality can have a personal definition, adopted from one's own experiences and relationships.

Christina Puchalski, MD, Director of the George Washington Institute for Spirituality and Health contends that "spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred". In trying to understand Christina Puchalski, on the one hand, a person could be very spiritual and not belong to any religion, but on the other hand a person could be attached to a religion, and may not be spiritual at all. Thus, spirituality

can be a choice at times, depending on the experiences of the individual. For those who are followers of Christ, the word spirituality signifies an itinerary for growth in our friendship with Christ, with its destination being holiness, purifying ourselves and aligning ourselves with the wisdom and will of God. In our journey towards that holiness, holiness itself is the process of making every aspect of normal human life - our time, our places, our goods, our bodies - into an expression of God's values. This expression of God's values is expressed further in our ministry to the prisoners,

"Crime is the outcome of a diseased mind and jail/prison must have an environment of the hospital for treatment and care" - Mahatma Gandhi.

Can there be spirituality for prisoners? I definitely believe that there is spirituality for prisoner, and that spirituality is the 'spirituality of hope'. Addressing inmates in a federal prison in Argentina, Pope Francis said that serving time behind bars without any hope of eventually being reintegrated into society is not punishment but torture.

Interest in spirituality and in spiritual matters continues to grow around the world. More than ever spiritual/spirituality has become the focus of books, magazines, movies and television talk shows. A deeper hunger for meaning and a hope for

personal and universal peace are what most people express as important in their lives. Spirituality is the common experience in the midst of chaos and suffering. Spirituality is an inner search that attempts to connect oneself with a greater power, ultimately God himself. In the event of untold human suffering, spirituality is a purposeful guide. And this 'purposeful guide' is the focal point of Prison Ministry India. As the founding fathers of Prison Ministry India envisioned, "Be a love bomb, let it explode, not to kill but to heal the broken hearts";

we are to carry with us as PMI volunteers, a spirituality of hope, spirituality of respect and honour, a spirituality that says, 'Crime I hate, the Criminal I forgive'.

As volunteers of PMI, let us march forward with hope and trust in our Lord Jesus, carrying the same hope for all those brothers and sisters behind the bars with love and respect, and thus find fulfilment through the words of the Scripture: 'I was in prison, you visited me' (Mt 25:36).

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## **New Year Celebration** with the inmates of Central Jail, Udaipur

**January 12, 2019:** Sarva Dharma Maitri Sangh along with the Universal Senior Secondary School and Lions Club of Udaipur celebrated New Year with the inmates of Central Jail, Udaipur on Saturday in the afternoon. The Director of Maitri Sangh, Fr. Norbert Herman SVD began the programme by invoking the almighty God through a Sarvadharm song "*Ek Tu Hi Sahara*". The prisoners were entertained by the students of the Universal Senior Secondary School, Fatepura, by a group song on national integration in their melodious voice, and a poetry recitation by Soumya Bhatnagar "*Kal mere kvaab mei aye ramji*". The students of St. Paul Senior Secondary School presented a group song on national unity, and the students of St. Antony Senior Secondary School performed a dance and mono act. The main attraction of the day was Master Ehzaan Chanchal entertaining the inmates with his poetry recitation. Some inmates like Jharmana Pradeep Prakat Singh, Sunil Rao and Chain Sukh too sang "*Mere khuda ne har paap maaf kar diya*" in their melodious and

powerful voice.

The president of Sarva Dharma Maitri Sangh, Mr. Sandeep Singatwadia gave a very moving spiritual talk to the prisoners noting that everyone is a prisoner in this world, and that we commit crimes unknowingly. He donated 100 slates to the prisoners for fun learning. The vice president of Sarva Dharma Maitri Sangh, Mrs. Pramila Fernandes, Jail Superintendent, Mr. Surendra Shekavat and Assistant Jail Superintendent, Mr. Mahavir Prasad, Educationalist Shrichand, Mr. Ashish Harkavat, the president of Lions Club, Mr. Anil Nahar, Brother Raju Soosai from Maitri Sadan, Sister Pushpa and Mr. Samuel from St. Paul Senior Secondary School, and Sister Lilly and Sister Sandra from St. Mary's Convent Titardi were present on the occasion. Mr. Mushtaq Chanchal was the master of the ceremony. Fr. Norbert Herman SVD proposed vote of thanks at the end of the programme.

**Fr. Norbert Herman SVD**  
Director, Maitri Sadan



**Sr. Shanti Pulickal SCC**  
State Secretary - PMI Orissa

## For the Light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present

*Light and darkness are two opposing realities. We live under their influence and so we have to make a choice between them constantly. What we choose will influence our lives and will make a difference in our behaviour and attitude. Those who choose light will live in light and will become agents of light and vice versa. This is particularly true in the lives of prisoners and in the Prison ministry.*

Jonas (name changed) had almost collapsed when he heard the verdict that he was convicted to 12 years of imprisonment for drug trafficking. He was the breadwinner of his family of 6 children, born within a span of 9 years and the youngest was only 6 months old. Because of the BPL card the family was not starving. But they had other needs like the education of the children, medicines etc. His wife was earning a meagre income doing odd jobs but that was not sufficient. When we met him he was crying with despair. *In his dark moments he found his inner spirituality and transformed his life. After spending hours in silence at prison, he realized that there was*

*a family who needed him, children who needed his love, care and protection. Changing anew he asked us to contact his family.*

We searched for his family and with much difficulty arranged a job for his wife. We met all their expenses till she started earning a regular income. Jonas has another 6 years to go till his release. *But he lives in peace, because he recognizes that there is a power above him. The story does not end here. Jonas is an agent of transformation for others in the jail. He, through his silence and transformation, is leading an exemplary life among the brethren behind the bars. Because he received the light he believes that there is hope for his future.*

*Most of the prisoners are not educated and they face numerous challenges when they return to society. They struggle to find stable employment, acceptable housing and*

*supportive family members. Because of this some ex-prisoners commit the crime again and return to prison. Follow-up programmes and rehabilitation centres could solve this problem to a great extent. Anxiety about the future on being released is particularly acute for the younger people who are educated. "Will society accept me? Will I get a job? Will I be fired when they come to know about my background?" These are some of the dark thoughts that sap their energy.*

*We are privileged to have as PMI volunteers some of the seminarians from Vianny Bhavan Seminary. They visit the prison every Sunday and spend time with the younger prisoners who are pursuing their graduation. The seminarians teach them spoken English as it will enhance their chances of getting a job. They also spend time listening to them and counsel them in the dark moments of despair and frustration. They help them to experience the light of faith in God and thus find inner strength.*

*Suresh (name changed) was doing his MBA when he murdered someone in a moment of passion. Ever since he has repented about it. He was convicted for 8 years. With encouragement from the Brothers he has completed his studies and has also done a few diploma courses offered by IGNOU. He will soon be released but his anxiety is creating dark shadows in his mind. He is afraid to leave the prison. He said, "What will I do when I get released? I will buy some goats and look after them for my livelihood." With regular counselling and support from the PMI volunteers he is regaining his confidence and is ready to face the future.*

*The visits of our Bishop Sarath Chandra Nayak is a source of relief to the Catholic prisoners. The bishop never misses a*

*chance to offer mass for the prisoners at Christmas and on Prison Ministry day. They seek his blessing and tell him about the pastoral needs of their family members. Martha could not get the job she desired because her father was in jail. The desperate father asked help from the bishop. He has promised to look into the matter and do the needful. The worried father gave a sigh of relief and kissed his crucifix in gratitude because he has surrendered all his problems at the foot of the Cross.*

*It is a challenge for us to minister to the needs of each and every prisoner. Once we conducted a volley ball match in which all the prisoners were present either as team members or as audience. Every year we distribute cake to them at Christmas. The inmates are eager to meet us and talk to us because they know that we care for them and do not betray their trust. The smile and sign of recognition they give when we meet them in the jail is a clear evidence of the joy they experience at our presence. We see this joy particularly in the female ward. Some of them come and lean on our shoulders, embrace us and weep. They say that we are the messengers of God's love and care for them.*

*Prison ministry should make a difference in the lives of the prisoners. At the same time it should make a difference in our lives too. It is like a two-edged sword bringing transformation in the lives of those we serve and simultaneously bringing transformation deep within ourselves. We begin to see the prisoners not as criminals but as children of God who deserve our love, care and respect. Prison ministry is one way in which we can live our vocation among the most marginalised. It makes us humble too. As the Pope said, "But for the grace of God many of us could be in their situation."*

## God's Grace is Your Inner Strength



Fr. Gnana Dhinakaran

This small reflection can also be named the spirituality of inner strength. When I was working in the Prison Ministry national office as an editor for *Prison Voice*, I had many opportunities to visit important prisons in India and meet the inmates. The closed walls, bright flashlights, isolation cells, massive razor wire-topped gates, iron bars and numbers always gave the feel of a life totally removed from our life outside. The usual security check-up at the entrance always create a feeling that we are entering an isolated world. It is with this constant mental disposition that the inmates in the prison live. I think so! Overall, a day in the life of a prisoner is equal to a year outside. Our honourable Prime Minister Modi once said on the radio that the mood of the people is always changing according to the moods of nature. It is so that when the season is hot, people's mindset is warm. Therefore, the general mindset, prevailing mood and the physical structures around us always contribute to our growth.

As I said earlier, all these physical structures create a mental conflict within the prisoners and even their own longings for home, relatives also make them sad. They lose their positive energy. Hence, the negative energy produced inside the closed walls has to be faced with inner strength and spirituality.

The psychological changes that many prisoners are forced to undergo in order to survive the prison experience manifest both in their private and public persona. Constantly attending counselling, participating in religious activities and doing manual work are the ways to relief. In private it is only through one's inner strength and spirituality he or she can overcome these psychological changes. Spirituality is my interpreted experience of the unfolding and enfolding of the spirit through my very being. It is a development from pre-personal to personal, from personal to transpersonal

and from transpersonal to universal spiritual relation.

Spirituality is a broad concept. It typically involves a search for meaning in life. It is a human experience. Some may find that their spiritual life is intricately aligned to their association with a church, temple, or mosque. Others may pray to God or a higher power. Some find spirituality in nature. Nurse Ruth Beckmann Murray writes that the spiritual dimension tries to be in harmony with the universe, and strives for answers about the infinite and comes into focus when the person faces emotional stress, physical illness or death. The spirituality of inner strength is like this: it comes into focus when we are faced with emotional stress and/or physical illness.

One of the great examples for inner strength linked to spirituality is that of Victor Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning* is a 1946 book by Victor Frankl narrating his experiences as a prisoner during World War II, where he found a psychotherapeutic method, which involved identifying a purpose in life to feel about, and then immersive imagining of that outcome.

A person who has found a purpose in life can overcome any obstacle in their life. If he or she knows why their life is important and knows their goal is a positive one, they can suffer through almost any defeat without giving up or quitting. Victor had lost his family and energy, but his inner strength was being able to fathom why he was there, and it made him the pioneer of psychotherapeutic method. It is this inner strength that could make the inmates travel forward amidst all the physical structures and mental illnesses. Volunteers are also expected to help create this spirituality within prisoners, and not merely physical help, but developing a positive energy.

## *Human beings are used Materials are loved*

**Sr. Lini Sheeja MSC**  
Chief Editor

**Editor:** Good morning.

**Manoj:** Good morning, sister. Sir told me that you wanted to interview me.

**Editor:** Yes Manoj, if you are willing.

**Manoj:** Very much, sister. Today if I'm here before you as a man with commitment and courage, it's just because of Prison Ministry India volunteers!

**Editor:** Thank you! It's indeed encouraging to hear such words about the Prison Ministry India volunteers.

**Manoj:** Yes, Sister. The years have gone by faster than I could ever imagine. Years ago, when I came to this prison, I was depressed. The way before me was closed. I'm the only child of my parents. I was loved, pampered; had more things than I needed. I was like a flower in the garden loved by parents and relatives. I'm an MBA graduate. I was brought up by my parents and they had instilled family values in me. When it was time for my marriage, my parents arranged one. I loved my wife and respected her.

But I found that my wife did not love or like my parents. She was under the influence of her mother. My wife would always speak negatively about my parents and I still remember her words, 'If we have a baby, I'll never allow your

parents to touch my baby'. I began to construct a house, a two-storey building with the plan of having my parents in the first floor which she opposed tooth and nail. I felt like I was caught between a hammer and an anvil. Neither could I share certain things with my mother nor could I fight with my wife because I was brought up in a serene and calm family atmosphere.

I kept quiet many times and my emotions started reaching a breaking point. Life was totally different after marriage and I no longer had peace of mind. We lived together only for two years and many things which were bottled up within me fizzled out when my wife died. When I saw her dead body, I thought of ending my life too. I was charged with killing my wife and I was put behind the bars. Life turned to be a series of thorn bushes. A person full of love became a person with scars. I was totally depressed and at this juncture the Prison Ministry volunteers entered my life and told me, 'there is a reason for everything'. I believed those Sisters' words and started to approach life positively.

'Does God exist?' was a question that I kept asking myself in the beginning when I entered prison. But now, when I look back, I know it's only because of the

providence of the Lord that I'm what I'm today. He had protected me from many dangers and evil forces. I completed my Diploma and Post-Graduation in Business Law. I helped 39 inmates to pursue their studies, such as MBA, BCom, BA, MPA, and helped many of them master spoken English. Now, I help with the office work here and I'm paid for it.

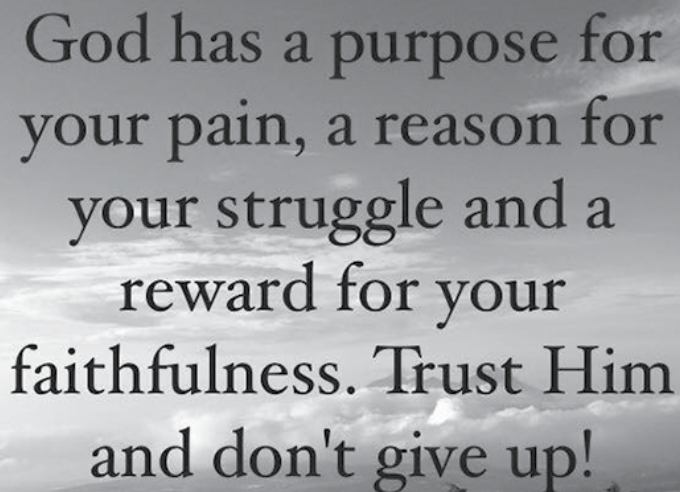
I learned many things, here, within these walls. Life brought to me a wide range of experiences. Human beings long for material things as our world as a whole turned materialistic from a spiritual world. I've learned humanity here, learned to lead a simple life. Life here taught me to prioritize things. I miss my wife and my lovely parents. They are totally dependent on me as I'm their only child. I understand life more and learned to put myself in the other's shoe. My motto is 'Trust God and love humanity'.

The man who was overly sensitive and emotional became a man of courage and strength. All these happened only because of God's intervention in my life. He has kept me healthy and sound. Moreover, he has kept me positive. I go to church and spend time in prayers.

I want to contribute to society and to spend my time and energy on those in need of help.

**Editor:** That's moving. Indeed, you are a living witness to many others who have lost hope in their lives. I see you as a 'wounded healer', willing to heal many more. Let this message of yours, 'Be human and love humanity', reach out to many more people. Society needs you and others like you to show the right path to humanity as you have learned the value of life from your experiences. Be sure of our prayers and constant support.

**Manoj:** Thank you. May the good Lord continue to bless you and all the Prison Ministry India volunteers!



God has a purpose for  
your pain, a reason for  
your struggle and a  
reward for your  
faithfulness. Trust Him  
and don't give up!



Thieves, robbers, burglars, muggers, stealers, raiders, and looters who illegally take money, property and other valuable things from others, constitute a large number of prisoners. There are various types of thieves such as motor vehicle stealers, train raiders, bank looters, credit card muggers, pick-pockets, ATM robbers, identity thieves, property burglars and so on. We meet many of these people when we visit correctional institutions and counsel them when they come to our rehabilitation centres. Most of them are called habitual offenders and are considered to be the most difficult people to be reformed, rehabilitated and redeemed. Police consider them problems, families have no hope in them, and society curses them. But for Jesus they are precious children of God created in His image and likeness. He strived hard even on the cross at the last minute to save one of them. This saving act of Jesus on the cross emanates hope to millions of habitual offenders and thieves, and inspires prison ministry volunteers to confidently continue their work for their redemption. Anchoring on Jesus' consoling words to the good thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43), this article invites your attention to Jesus' approach to saving thieves and habitual offenders.<sup>1</sup>

### Jesus on the Cross

While hanging on the cross at Calvary, Jesus made use of the opportunity to save one of the thieves condemned to death. Jesus' attitude towards him shall be our own attitude towards thieves and criminals. The

<sup>1</sup> My book *Rainbow* illustrates the spirituality of prison ministry volunteers elaborately. I recommend that PMI volunteers study and practice the different aspects of this spirituality such as PMI spirituality, reformatory spirituality, spirituality of the Good Shepherd meant for those who visit the prison and the spirituality of the Father of the prodigal son meant for those who serve in rehabilitation centers for released prisoners. See Francis Kodiyan, *Rainbow: Theological Foundations of the Jesus Fraternity and Prison Ministry India*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore 2007.

You will be with me in paradise:

## Redemption of habitual offenders



Rev Dr Francis Kodiyan MCBS  
Co-Founder of PMI

saving action commenced when one of the criminals began to mock Jesus. The other criminal defended Jesus and acknowledged his rule. Pardoning the repentant thief Jesus blessed him with eternal life and thereby proved that conversion and redemption of thieves can happen even at the last moment of death. Jesus' last-minute successful attempt at saving a hardcore habitual offender should inspire us not to abandon our efforts to reform and rehabilitate habitual offenders; and to try our best and continue our efforts until the last moment.

### The Thief on the Left

The criminal on the left was on the cross, broken, bloody and dying with just a few minutes left of life. Hurling abuse at Jesus and blaspheming him till his dying breath, he proved himself a classical habitual offender. He rejected the only hope that he had in the world and was right next to him. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39). His traumatic life-experiences might have forced him to be pessimistic, unrepentant, harsh, hopeless and unwanted. He knew the pain of rejection, abandonment and being

unloved. There was no one on Golgotha to mourn his death, to support him on his cruel deathbed. Though he cried out to Jesus to save him, the condition of his heart was not suitable to receive redemption. There was no brokenness, no humility, no contrition in his heart. He had no repentance over his sins and crimes. He just saw Jesus as someone who could be manipulated to get him off the cross. A good number of thieves and prisoners are like him who rarely admit to their crimes, acknowledge or confess their sins; instead they proudly and victoriously speak of their bad deeds and cruel crimes.

### **The Thief on the Right**

The thief on the right confessed his sin and cried out to Jesus for mercy. Rebuking the thief on the left he said, *“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong”* (Luke 23:40-41). The condition of his heart was suitable to receive forgiveness and grace. He asked his friend if he feared God. This reveals he had a fear of God in his heart. He acknowledged that he was a sinner, the basic requirement to obtain forgiveness and grace. He accepted that he had fallen short of the glory of God and deserved the cross. He confessed it. Firstly, he had a fear of God in his heart. Secondly, he confessed he was a sinner. Thirdly, he proclaimed Jesus was not a sinner. Fourthly, he prayed to Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”* (Luke 23:42). The last thing he did was to throw himself to the mercy of God, admitting Jesus was the only hope and asked Him to remember him.

### **Jesus’ Response**

Jesus forgave the good thief and offered him eternal life right then. *“Today you will be*

*with me in paradise”* (Lk 23:43). The good thief cried out for Jesus to save him and Jesus saved him by forgiving his sins. How did Jesus save him? By his self-sacrifice on the cross; by his precious blood; by his suffering. Nothing is impossible for God. Everything is possible with Jesus. He brings the gift of salvation to those who seek, ask and knock. Voluntary acceptance of sufferings, day-to-day crucifixions, humiliations, and readiness to shed sweat and blood for others are the best means of saving hardcore criminals and habitual offenders. Redemption of prisoners is difficult. Redemption of thieves and habitual offenders is more difficult. Here, Jesus on the cross proves that even this is possible. If so, why do we hesitate? Let us go and do like Jesus.

### **You Will Be with Me in Paradise**

The spiritual life of PMI volunteers shall enable them to tell prisoners, *“you will be with me in paradise”*. The basics of spiritual life is communion with the Lord and His people. A graceful state without any stain of mortal sin is its requirement. Frequent reception of the sacraments of reconciliation, the most Holy Eucharist and constant acts of love and forgiveness will certainly sanctify us and will lead us to deeper union with the Lord. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, strengthened by the Word of God and fortified by ascetical practices we should meet prisoners and guide them to the shores of paradise. Let us not be satisfied with material assistance, recreational and emotional enthrallment, psychological allurements, educational promotion, and socio-cultural support. Redemption of prisoners is the ultimate goal of prison ministry. The criteria to measure the fruits of prison ministry depends on how many prisoners we could release, reform, rehabilitate and redeem.

## *“You have touched me and I have grown spiritually”*

Sasikumar hailed from a poor family in a remote village at Sendhamangalam, Namakkal District. He was the only child of his parents and was brought up with love and affection. He lacked interest in studies. After completing Std IX, he stopped his education and started to work along with his friends. The outcome of the wrong friendship was alcoholic addiction. Slowly he started to develop hatred towards his parents and out of anger, he started wasting his wages. He did not support his family.

This change in Sasikumar affected the parents and the father was forced to correct his son. Things reached such a stage that he started laying hands on his parents. Although the villagers were aware of the fact none had the courage to speak up.

When he was 23 years of age, he demanded that his father dispose of the property and give him his share as he was not interested in earning a livelihood. He burned with anger when his demands were not met. He brutally murdered his father who was fast asleep at his paternal grandmother's place. Next, when he tried to attack his mother, she headed to the police station. On her complaint, he was sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment and a penalty of Rs. 10,000.

I, Sr. Joyce, the Prison Ministry coordinator used to hold regular counselling classes in prison. He used to attend my classes regularly. He started helping with cleaning the classrooms, preparing for Holy mass, and was friendly with everyone who associated with him. Every month, he would participate in the Holy mass without fail. The word 'mother' would make him explode like a



Sr. Joyce SJC,  
Coordinator, PMI Salem - Tamil Nadu.

volcano whenever I used it in the classes. He condemned me for using the term 'mother' and abruptly left the classes. He stopped talking to me for 2-3 days.

Ultimately after 5 years of strenuous effort with the aid of acquaintances and individual counselling, his ill-feelings lessened. In addition, I helped him, provided him with books and required accessories, made him the admin leader, and also appreciated his efforts frequently - all of which brought about a slight change in him. This in turn empowered him to request a meeting with his mother. But he stressed that neither his mother nor the villagers would speak to me on hearing his name. He also accentuated the difficulties in reaching his place, which had no bus service, but only a path, almost as if asking me to think twice about taking this initiative.

After listening to him patiently, we knelt and prayed for divine providence. With courage Ms. Melkiya and I left for the village. As he said, the path was rugged, and people's

animosity was palpable. They showered us with hostile questions on our purpose for visiting the place on his behalf. They felt that if at all he returned, it would pose a huge threat to his mother's life. Also, they threatened to put an end to his life if he returned. However, we placed our trust in God and went on to meet his mother, reciting rosaries.

Finally, when we reached his home, we saw that his grandmother was bed-ridden. With eyes streaming with tears, she narrated the heart-breaking incidents that took place, which resulted in her being confined to bed. She was thankful that her daughter-in-law's life was spared. She gave us her daughter-in-law's phone number. On calling, the mother returned from her work on the farm. It was a horrible shock when the mother showed us the wounds caused by her son. She led us to the dark room where her husband was barbarously murdered. We were dismayed to hear his mother state that if he returned, neither she nor the villagers would accept him as it would affect their peace of mind.

We spent nearly 2 hours with them. While we were taking our leave, they gave us vegetables and flowers from their farm. When we told them that we do not use jasmines, they told us to offer it to God. The mother said, "Only your God can convert him". We gave them hope of his conversion and promised them our prayers.

When we narrated the meeting with his mother to Sasi, he could not believe it. From then onwards, we spoke to his mother periodically over the phone. It was a surprise when after a month of regular phone conversations, his mother asked to meet Sasi. Our joy knew no bounds! With overwhelming feelings, we asked her to come over. When Sasi was informed, he burst into tears and hesitantly gave his consent. We counselled Sasi to ready him to meet

his mother after a gap of 6 years. On the said day, we made arrangements for the mother and son to meet in the jailor's cabin. When they met, silence overpowered them. Both of them were transfixed. Then there was an emotional outburst. They broke and wept like a summer tempest. Sasi broke the silence and pleaded with his mother to forget everything and forgive him. He promised to be a responsible son if he was released.

Yes, there was a real change of heart and we could see the rays of joy on Sasi's face. Since then he has become close to us. At this eventful juncture, he was transferred from the Salem prison to Coimbatore. The SP of Coimbatore informed us that he had a strong feeling that Sasi's mother would make arrangements for his release.

The heart won over the mind! Yes, love conquers the world! The mother changed the attitude of the villagers with her strong faith and conviction that Sasi had transformed. She appealed via the advisory board to the supreme court and brought her son out of prison on 19.12.2017. We were amazed to see the entire village celebrating the occasion with festoons and other festivity on his return. The jewel in the crown for us was when we managed to get him a job and arrangements could be made for his marriage. He kept his word and continues to be a worthy son to his mother by taking care of both her and his grandmother. He is visited by many, but he visits none.

His mother's words touched us, 'Your touch has brought a tremendous change in the life of my son and my villagers. All this has happened because of your prayers. I wish you all the best to continue with your Prison Ministry work. All praises go to God.'

I wish Sasi a **bright future**. I thank God Almighty for his machinations in reforming Sasikumar.

*A first time experience  
Electrifying and Exhilarating!*

- PMI PUNE HALF MARATHON

Sr. Marina Gulati

In every race it is a challenge to reach the destination and it needs sacrifices, hard work, perseverance and a faith in oneself to continue till the end. After a year of preparation, the 13th of January finally dawned! This day will be a landmark in the history of PMI with the organization of the PMI Pune Half-Marathon dedicated to the release, renewal and rehabilitation of prisoners. This was a first for the PMI Pune unit and the event was held in association with the Blue Brigade Running Club under the leadership of Mr. Ajay Desai.

The focus of the run was two-fold: to sensitise the general public to the cause of prisoners and to raise funds for the construction of a fully equipped state-of-the-art rehab and skill development centre for released prisoners and their families at Karjat.

With the help of ambassadors and diligent PMI volunteers, more than three thousand children, adults and the elderly participated in this event. We were honoured to have

the SRPF, AFMC, NDA and CME join in as well. To cater to all these different segments, four race categories were offered - 21K, 10K, 5K and 3K. The warm-up zumba session to get participants into the rhythm was appreciated by many. "Before the marathon there was a zumba warm-up which made us all very energetic. When we finished, we each got a medal and a nice breakfast. I liked that we all got medals even if we didn't win," remarked Sharal Figer, a 9th standard student.

Special thanks to Mr Prasad Akkanouru, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Mr U. T. Pawar, and Superintendent of the Open Jail at Yerwada, Fr. Francis Khodayar, the co-founder of Prison Ministry India, Fr. Andrew Fernandes, Provincial of Pune Jesuit Province and many others who braved the cold that morning to support us.

For Ms. Sharmila Vasudha Kamat it was a run to prove a point after an injury. "Not every person is going to understand you and that's okay. They have a right to their opinion, and you have every right to ignore it."

For Rowena Luis from Mumbai, the marathon was synonymous with the struggles of the PMI Ministry and its work, "A first time experience of a marathon is the most amazing one... electrifying and exhilarating... 'You are not alone!' the theme of our ministry was the perfect icing on the cake as this extended family of PMI sang Happy Birthday to me, with wishes,



blessings and hugs galore. Although I ran the shortest distance it brought home the greatest joy of youthfulness despite age, cheerfulness despite the slowed down trot and purposefulness despite the difficulties of this ministry..."

The experiences of Walter Kamble, 63 years young, probably sums up the spirit of the marathon perfectly, "I ran my very first very marathon and I want to share my marathon experience. 'You are not alone' - The tag line of the half marathon being organised by the Pune Team of PMI had been haunting me since its announcement. I was curious to know how the runners run the Marathon... Now that I am 63+ years old and this being my



very first marathon experience. Somehow, I was never nervous signing up for this race surprisingly... This very first experience of the Marathon has infused in me a new confidence. I am now waiting for the next Marathon, as I have gained confidence. I have decided to take part in any upcoming Marathon for a good cause."

*Contd. from page 9*

## REPATRIATION OF A VIETNAMESE PRISONER

for a waiver and taking into consideration the situation of Phuong it was waived. We booked the ticket for her. And send her back to her country on 3rd February 2019. It being the Vietnamese New Year day they were all particularly happy to receive her at the airport. She was separated from her husband. She has two boys: the first son is handicapped, and the other son is taking care of the family.

We are very much thankful to the Lord Almighty for all that could be done from

3rd November 2018 to 3rd February 2019. We also thank the MC Sisters in the T. Nagar community. Their patience and struggle for Phuong's repatriation are commendable. Very often they would not have the opportunity to have food while waiting from morning to evening in various offices. But now seeing her joy at being with her family is a great feeling and it cannot compare to all the past sufferings... We also thank the Prison Department and other officials who facilitated Phuong's resettlement with her family.

# Is it hard for the Prisoner to believe in the forgiveness of God?

Amira Peter  
Kolbe Knight, PMI Pune

The news of a prison sentence is traumatic for prisoners and their families alike. It is similar to receiving news of a terminal illness or the news of the death of a loved one. No matter the period of incarceration, a prisoner will experience an array of emotions. For us volunteers, an understanding of a prisoner's mental and emotional state can certainly help us provide more effective spiritual support.

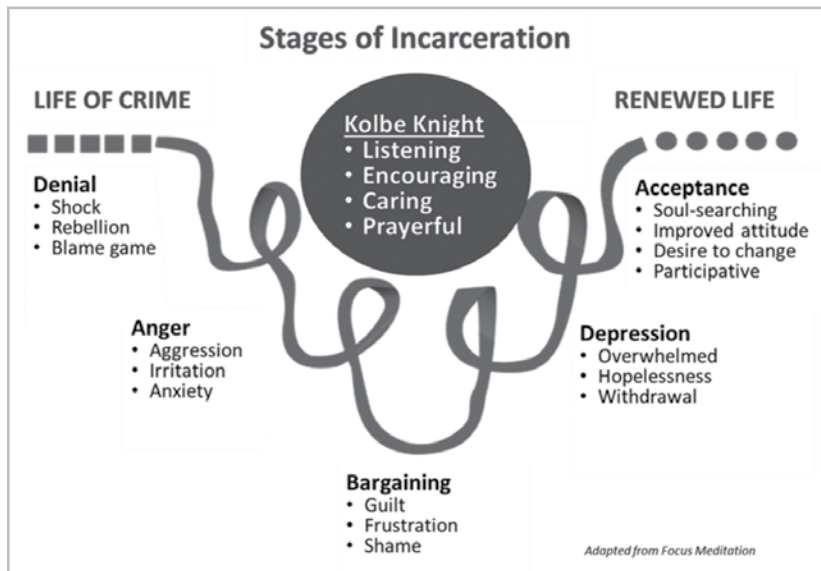
Studies have shown that there are five stages of incarceration—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These have been derived from the traditional stages of grief outlined by American-Swiss psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

These stages are not necessarily linear or compartmentalized. Like someone experiencing grief, a prisoner too goes through an emotional process, flowing in and out of a stage, moving back and forth between them. Often a prisoner's behaviour can be explained by where he/she is within these stages. Spiritual support will thus need to be appropriately weaved in.

In the first stage of denial prisoners find it hard to believe they are actually in jail. Their focus is on getting released. This phase of denial generally

lasts between one and three years for those sentenced to more than ten years. Some short-termers may remain in denial for their entire sentence. In this phase emotions swing from rebellion to withdrawal as the prisoners come to terms with their sentence. The "blame game" also tends to surface here as they blame their situation on others including God.

In the second stage of anger, the prisoners realize they can no longer deny the situation. Anger creeps in and is expressed in a variety of ways including aggressive behaviour. They are angry with themselves, others and even God. Some prisoners may join prison gangs during this anger stage. Their interactions with you as a volunteer may be laced with anger.



Next is the bargaining stage where a sense of “if only” begins to play – “if only my dad had been around”, “if only we had more money” etc. Here the prisoner may resort to making promises or deals with God or others to mend their ways in exchange for favours. Often filled with guilt, frustration, and shame, it is hard for the prisoner to believe in the forgiveness of God.

Once the prisoners find that anger and bargaining are not getting them any peace of mind, feelings of hopelessness and despair take over. In this fourth stage, the prisoners feel depressed and tend to withdraw from others, focusing on their loss of freedom and separation from loved ones. “I realized that I won’t see my children growing up. They will soon forget me and that made me very sad” said an incarcerated mother. As the prisoners grieve, they begin to reflect on their past actions and its consequences.

Ultimately the prisoners begin to accept the fact that they are in prison for the long haul. While some become emotionally numb to everything and everyone as a way of coping, others go through a period of genuine soul-searching and acceptance of responsibility for their situation. Thus, begins the fifth stage of acceptance. The prisoners’ attitudes show signs of improving as they fall into a routine. They develop a sincere desire to change and begin to engage themselves in activities being conducted at jail. Gradually, a sense of peace fills them. Prisoners tend to be more prayerful and calm in this stage.

Situations like a family crisis or a move to a new facility can trigger a return to earlier feelings. As volunteers we can support the prisoners as they work through the emotional stages of incarceration again so that they do not remain in denial, anger, or depression.

It is interesting to note that prisoners’ families also experience these stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. As we work with the incarcerated and their families, an awareness and understanding of these stages will help us provide appropriate spiritual support – from providing a listening ear to gently reminding them of God’s unconditional forgiveness. Here are some tips for our volunteers:

- ✓ Don’t put the prisoner down. Gently guide him/her to acknowledge that he/she is not a victim and his/her actions had consequences.
- ✓ For prisoners, transformation of the mind must come first. Jobs, housing, family acceptance will fall into place later.
- ✓ Provide a listening ear without condemning. Healing comes when they share their faults with us.
- ✓ Let them tell their story.
- ✓ Build rapport and trust with the prisoners and their families. Validate their feelings and frustrations.
- ✓ Through positive words of encouragement and action show prisoners and their families that help and hope are possible through faith in God.
- ✓ Pray for the prisoners and their families.
- ✓ Help them see that some of our darkest times can be used for God’s glory.
- ✓ Don’t forget to pray for our Ministry, its work and its volunteers.

Let us continue to forge ahead strengthened by the words of St Paul to the Galatians (6:1-2) *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.”*