



## PRISON MINISTRY SUNDAY

13 August 2023

*"Today You Will be with Me in Paradise" (Lk. 23, 43)*

### PASTORAL LETTER

*Please Read this Pastoral Letter in all Churches on 13th August 2023*



*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,*

The last moments of Jesus on the cross speak about the turning point in the life of a convicted thief who was undergoing the capital punishment of crucifixion. This good thief on the cross turned toward Jesus and after having admitted his crime, asked in humility and repentance, "Lord, remember me in your kingdom." Jesus responded without hesitation, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk. 23, 43). This thief was punished to death for a crime he had committed and that he admitted; yet, Jesus accepted this person, during the last moments of His life, and opened up the gates of paradise for him. Today, this thief is known as St. Dismas. This is who God is and what

God does. Throughout the Old Testament, we hear that "God is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger and abundant in loving mercy" (Ps. 103, 8; 145, 8). Yes, He is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger and abundant in loving mercy! Saint John the Evangelist puts it this way, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn. 3: 16-17). Jesus sheds his unconditional love and boundless mercy, for all people, including even those whom the world says deserve imprisonment and death. In the Old Testament, Joseph while he was in prison says to the cupbearer something similar to what the good thief had said to Jesus: "When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison" (Gen. 40: 14). The cry of the good thief and Joseph reverberate in prisons all over the world, "Remember us, show kindness to us, mention us to God and release us from prison."

## **Prison Ministry Sunday**

Today, the Catholic Church in India celebrates Prison Ministry Sunday and remembers in a special way our brethren behind bars, their families, their victims, and the prison staff dealing with them on a daily basis. Let's raise up to the Lord our incarcerated brothers and sisters, so that they may be blessed by Jesus' unconditional and forgiving love. According to the National Crime Records Bureau statistics, there are 5.5 lakhs of prisoners in 1319 Indian prisons. There are 1,22,852 convicts, 4,27,165 undertrials, 1867 children, 1650 women with children, 5565 foreign prisoners, and 472 death row prisoners. Among them, there are more than 4 lakh undertrial prisoners who have not been convicted of a crime. They have been arrested, but they simply cannot afford to pay bail and thus they wait for their trial. Their families are left helpless, waiting for their parents to come out and to go to trial.

## **Draupadi Murmu**

At the National Law Day Celebration organized by the Supreme Court in New Delhi on 26 November 2022, the Indian President Draupadi Murmu spoke emotively of her visit to Odisha jails: "I visited all prisons across the state at regular intervals. I was not asked to visit them. I did that of my own volition. I wanted to know who are these people, how they survive, what happens to them when in jail. They are those who don't know anything about their fundamental rights, fundamental duties or the preamble or the Constitution. They are left in jail to languish for 10, 20, 30 years!" She highlighted the plight of poor tribals and scheduled castes, saying that they remain incarcerated despite getting bail due to a lack of money to furnish the bail amount or to arrange sureties. President Murmu appealed to the judiciary to devise ways to help such undertrials come out of jail.

## **Death Row Prisoners**

Jesus and the two thieves who were crucified with Him were condemned to death while they were prisoners. Can you visualize prisoners on the death row, agonizingly awaiting their capital punishment? The "death row" refers to incarcerated people who have been sentenced to death and are waiting for

their execution. In India, as of December 2022, there are 539 death row prisoners. In 2022, Amnesty International recorded 2,016 death sentences in 52 countries. According to recent statistics, there are 28,282 death row prisoners globally. Prison Ministry India (PMI) has designated a special task force known as Death Row Commandoes (DRC) to take care of the death row prisoners and their families. Let's remember and pray for them in a special way and do whatever is possible for their release, reformation, and redemption. Thanks to the PMI volunteers' prayers and hard work, the death sentences of many prisoners have been reduced to life sentences.

## **Hafez Ibrahim: Saved from the Death Row**

Hafez Ibrahim from Yemen was a condemned-to-death prisoner. Thanks to the timely intervention of Amnesty International, his execution was stopped twice. Hafez, who was accused of a crime he insists he didn't commit, first faced a firing squad in 2005. He was taken to a small yard in a Yemeni prison and brought before a row of officers with rifles in hand. He thought that that moment would be his last. Just before he was about to be shot, he was taken back to his cell, thanks to the intervention of Amnesty International. In 2007, when Hafez was about to be executed again, he sent a mobile message to Amnesty International informing that he was about to be executed. It was a message that saved his life. The message sparked an international campaign, persuading the President of Yemen to stop the execution for a second time. Hafez is currently a lawyer helping juveniles who languish on death row corridors across Yemen.

## **Abolition of the Death Penalty**

The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishment. The Catholic Church opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception—regardless of who is accused, the nature or circumstances of the crime, guilt or innocence, or the method of execution. The death penalty breaches human rights, in particular the right to life and the right to live free from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Both rights are

protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1948. In his address to the participants of the 7th World Congress Against the Death Penalty held in Brussels, Pope Francis affirmed that human life is a gift, the most important and primary gift, the source of all the other gifts and of all the other rights. And, as such, it needs to be protected. The human being has been created in the image and likeness of God and the dignity of the human being must be protected without exceptions. Capital punishment implies a grave violation of the right to life. The dignity of a person is not lost even when he/she has committed the worst of crimes. The objective of the abolition of the death penalty is a courageous affirmation of the principle of the dignity of the human person and of the conviction that the human race can address the crime, and also reject the evil, offering the condemned the possibility and the time to repair the damage committed, to think about his/her action and thus be able to change his/her life, at least interiorly.

### **St Maximilian Kolbe**

We celebrate Prison Ministry Sunday in association with the feast of St. Maximilian Kolbe, who offered his life for a coprisoner in the Auschwitz death camp. Kolbe's love bomb explosion in Auschwitz healed thousands of broken hearted and continues to illumine millions today. To commemorate and celebrate the love bomb explosion of St Maximilian Kolbe on 17th August 2003, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) officially declared him as the patron of PMI and decided to dedicate the second Sunday of August every year as Prison Ministry Sunday. In his book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King Jr. stated: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." St. Maximilian Kolbe, the martyr of love and the patron saint of the prison ministry, taught this truth through his life.

### **Kolbe Homes**

In honour of their patron St. Maximilian Kolbe, PMI launched Kolbe Homes for the integral human development of prisoners' children. PMI has many such homes where children stay with us and we

assist them by way of food, accommodation, school fees, medical assistance, and everything required for their integral development. One of the projects in preparation for the PMI golden jubilee is to establish Kolbe Homes in every Indian state. May I request your earnest prayers for the realisation of this dream and for these children, their incarcerated parents and for the religious sisters and priests who run these institutions. Kolbe Homes remind us of the cry of Francis Gayonischak, the coprisoner for whom Maximilian Kolbe dared to dedicate his life. When this prisoner was selected to die, he cried out, "My wife and my children." Hearing this cry, Maximilian Kolbe came forward and expressed his readiness to die. There are thousands of such parents in prisons worldwide who continue to cry for their children, their education, their safety, their better future. Let's extend our generous hands to take care of prisoners' children by praying for them, visiting them, and providing them better education, food, and shelter. Kolbe's feast invites us to think of the sad plight of similar prisoners worldwide. Like Kolbe, let's positively respond to the cry of 1.3 crore prisoners; let's take care of their varied needs, their justice, their suffering, their dreams.

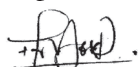
### **Prison Ministry India**

Prison Ministry India (PMI), a national Catholic spiritual movement for the integral human development of prisoners, their families, and their victims, is a registered charitable society that works under the justice, peace, and development commission of the CBCI. In every Indian state and diocese, the coordinators of PMI take care of the pastoral needs of prisoners. Its 8000 volunteers regularly reach out to prisons and through its rehabilitation centres and homes for prisoners' children, thousands of our brethren behind bars have been reformed, empowered, rehabilitated, and reintegrated with jobs and settled in families. PMI has many projects for the well-being of the incarcerated, such as employment and housing schemes for released prisoners, educational scholarships and Kolbe Homes for prisoners' children, and a prisoners' releasing scheme to pay their fine and compensation. You are most welcome to collaborate with PMI diocesan coordinators to seek, serve, and save the lost in your parishes and dioceses.



## Conclusion

Let us collaborate with PMI to rehabilitate and reintegrate the broken and injured brethren behind bars. Dear incarcerated brethren, we love you, pray for you, and commit ourselves for your integral human development. We also pray in a special way for your families and your victims. Along with my brother bishops, I express my sincere gratitude to the dioceses, major superiors, and well-wishers for your generous contributions towards prison ministry. I am sure Jesus who came in search of the lost will bless you abundantly. I appreciate the PMI volunteers for their profound commitment in reforming and reintegrating prisoners, which, all of us know, is the most challenging task. May Saint Maximilian Kolbe, the patron of PMI, intercede for the fruitfulness of this ministry and may Mary, our blessed mother, be always there to protect you as we rededicate ourselves to the integral human development of our incarcerated brethren.



✠ **Bishop Jose Pulickal**  
Chairperson, Prison Ministry India

## PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

**Celebrant:** Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus shows great compassion towards sinners and the poor. Let us, therefore, pray that we will be guided by the Holy Spirit to show our compassion to the incarcerated and the marginalised, saying:

**R: Lord, graciously hear our prayer.**

Lord, we pray for the universal Church. May the Pope, Bishops, priests, and consecrated people be powerful instruments of your liberating love and helping hands to the brethren behind bars to rejuvenate your image and likeness in them. Let us pray to the Lord.

**R: Lord, graciously hear our prayer.**

Lord, you were an innocent prisoner and experienced the plight of a real prisoner. We bring before you all our brothers and sisters behind bars and the mental torture and physical discomfort they experience. We beseech your blessings upon them and their families.

Bless the jail authorities so that they might be kind, gentle, and understanding towards the inmates. Let us pray to the Lord. R: Lord, graciously hear our prayer.

Lord, we ask your blessings upon all the volunteers of Prison Ministry India who dedicate their time and talent for the least, lost, and last. Jesus our Good Shepherd, we ask your guidance and protection always upon them and in their ministry. Let us pray to the Lord. R: Lord, graciously hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for all those who are wrongly accused and imprisoned. Lord, as you know, they undergo a lot of agony and bitterness. Merciful God, graciously bless them with a positive self-realisation and with legal assistance for their speedy release. Let us pray to the Lord. R: Lord, graciously hear our prayer.

**Celebrant:** Loving Father, you are the happiest when we your children reach out to you. Stretch out your healing hands, touch all our brethren behind bars, and enable them to lead a renewed life. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Rev. Dr. Francis Kodiyan, MCBS**  
CBCI Secretary to Prison Ministry India Desk



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