

Prison Ministry Sunday 2004
A Brief History of Prison Ministry India
(Notice to be Distributed in the Church)

Prison Ministry India originated as a challenging step taken by a group of seminarians in the year 1986 at St Thomas Apostolic Seminary, Kottayam, Kerala. Fr Varghese Karipery and Fr Francis Kodiyan MCBS were the pioneers in this challenging breakthrough. The first visit as a prison pilgrimage to all prisons of Kerala after a period of prayer and fasting really was an opening of new challenging ministry - Prison Ministry India.

In 1989, this initiative was accepted and recognized by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Kerala (KCBC). In the year 1994 Prison Ministry India became a national organization with a national coordinator and started working in all the 1397 prisons of India from Bangalore. For the effective coordination of PMI, we have divided India as three regions, South, North, and North East. In Jubilee year August 24, 2000, the PMI became the official ministry by the recognition of CBCI linking it with Justice, Peace and Development Commission. Another important event in the history of PMI is the allotment of quarters to the sisters to stay with prisoners by Bangalore Central Prison Authority on May 4, 2002. Within these 17 years of time, under the umbrella of PMI, there are 14 rehabilitation centers. Through these centers, hundreds of released men and women who are in morally dangerous atmosphere, children of prisoners and victims and juvenile delinquents found new life. About 6000 volunteers through 560 units are actively involved in the Prison Ministry. PMI shall not wait for people to come. It searches out to see the disfigured face of crucified Jesus. It is a struggle with them, not a mere service. No security is promised and the path always is always insecure. It does not wait for appointment, but it is an inner call to plunge into darkness with deep faith. No foreign contribution, but the style is begging. The result of all these troubles and struggle is maximum inner joy with the Lord. Can you be a partner in Prison Ministry works through your prayers, financial support, and personal presence?

- Chairman of PMI Bishop Peter Remigius
- National Coordinator: Fr. Sebastian Vadakumpadan
- Total Number of Prisoners: 3.04,893, 30 prisoners per lakh of population
- Undertrials: 2,25.817, 74% of the total prison population
- Highest Number of undertrials: Prisons of Dadra & Nagar Haveli, 100%
- Lowest Number of undertrials: Andaman and Nicobar (249)
- Total Jail Capacity in India: 2,32,412 prisoners
- Overcrowded prisons: Delhi with 217% more its capacity

- The Number of Women Prisoners: 10,414, 3.42% of total population
- Women prisoners with their child: 1,369 women prisoners

Inside Prison

Counseling, cultural programs, library facility, recreational facility, skill training, arts and sports competition, higher education, medical camps, and legal assistance.

Outside Prison

Renewal Centers, Rehabilitation works, Family contact, Family readjustments, Treatment to the sick, Job facilities, Reconciliation with victims, Education, Marriage arrangement.

Contact

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Prison Ministry Sunday Pastoral Letter for the Year 2004

One afternoon on first January 1951 in a small Japanese city, a poor clad little girl approached the entrance of the prison and handed a parcel to the superintendent to give it to some condemned criminal. It was a bundle of religious books with a consoling letter, which ended thus, "in the eyes of God, a criminal is his child". It was signed from a schoolgirl. The superintendent gave it to a man who was condemned to die for the murder of a family of three. The prisoner was deeply moved and wrote the little girl a letter. In it he stated, "I, the most wicked villain, have been afraid of death which I must face in the near future. But now the fear has been lessened. How great is the mercy of God to me the sinner? May God bless you". Dear friends, this is the situation of every prisoner. They are moved by a word of love and concern. Despite their cruelties, they have a heart yearning for love and concern. Nobody thinks about these people who are spread over 1397 prisons and likeminded institutions in India. Prisoners and their families as well as the victims become subject to constant ill treatment in the society. The Christian mission to bring stratum of society to the mainstream of life is very significant today. This has been conferred by Pope John Paul II during Christu Jayanti Jubilee Year Celebration (Vatican News Letter April 16, 1999). The immense mercy of God on each one of us is greater than the morality with which we punish the prisoners. Prison Ministry India continues to perform this mission of the church. This is the voluntary organization working for the renewal, release, and rehabilitation of the prisoners. I invite all the believers in Christ to think

about these least, last, and the lost people of the society on this Prison Ministry Sunday.

Life in Prison

Life in prison is one of acute loneliness and grief as the freedom is denied. It is not rare that we see people in prison who cry out of their lost future and crushed hopes. They are endorsed as criminals and called by their number, not name. Thus prisons become places of utter extradition from the society. Traditionally, the prisons are built to protect the people from their antisocial activities. Most of the prisoners being innocent in their activities, become marginalized and downtrodden. Man created in the image and likeness of God, turns into a mediocre product.

A high officer once commented on the prisoners thus, "they are criminals, waste, rejected, and unwanted. We have done away with them. They impart no value to them as an individual. Only the number endorsed on them becomes what is mattered. No one cares even if they die". Prison department does not seem to take into account the individuality of the prisoner. Government has ample programs for the rehabilitation and development schemes for various sorts of people, but nothing for the rehabilitation of the prisoners. They are not equipped with appropriate programs and enough money. As a result, prisoners are lost in their life physically and mentally. As reported by the Hindu on May 3, 2003, the Human Rights Commission estimates the number of prisoners spread over 1397 prisons in India to be 3,04,893, of which 225,817 are undertrials.

Mission of the Church

"I was in prison, and you visited me" (Mathew 25:36). These words of Jesus expose the importance of prison ministry. The church in no way can forget the prisoners. We read about the healing that took place near the pool called Bethzatha in the gospel of St John chapter 5 verse one onwards. When the angel stirs up the water, many invalids are waiting to jump into the pool. Jesus visited the place. He asked the man who was paralyzed 38 years, "Do you want to be made well?" His answer is thought provoking "Sir, I have been to this place for the past 38 years, not one or two. A lot of people pass by me every day. Many got healed. I had my kith and kin. But nobody is there to put me to the pool". He was crying when he told, that he had no one to help him. The same words echoed when we go to prisons. No one comes to the help of the prisoners once they are ready to make a better life, not even parents, children, sisters, and brothers. No jobs are offered to them. They are branded as criminal forever. Dear friends, the words of the paralyzed man are again heard through these inmates that "nobody helps me". Prison Ministry is an answer to their cry. It was started in 1986 at St Thomas Apostolic Seminary as a prayer group. Now, this ministry works under the CBCI and is based at Bangalore. With the help and prayer of the bishops, priests,

nuns, and laity, prison ministry could reach out to the 1397 prisons in India in 17 years. About 850 units have been established for the prisoners in view of their release, renewal, and rehabilitation. Someone to love something to hope for, and something to do-these are the things failing of which man becomes desperate. Fourteen rehabilitation centers are working under the umbrella of Prison Ministry India to give hope, love, and conviction of their goals. Many a life is touched and transformed through these centers. We could lead them in a better way so as to get them married. Children of prisoners and victims, study in our centers. Recently, we had a gathering of 36 families who have been renewed through the rehabilitation centers. We could really feel the joy they experience in their life. Volunteers go to the prison to give them moral and spiritual teachings, counseling, and books and magazines to read. They conduct variety of programs both for the prisoners and police officials in prison. To quote one prisoner, "I have been in prison for the last 6 years. Nobody comes here to visit me. I am happy that you came to visit me." These are the words we hear from them. Volunteers go to the families of the prisoners and victims to help them in whatever way they can. In addition to that, Prison Ministry India has formed a Reformatory Research Documentation Center and it was officially inaugurated on May 13, 2003.

We have a responsibility as a Christian to participate in this mission. Jesus reminds us. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mathew 25:40). Keeping in mind these words, I request you to pray and help for these prisoners, their families, and all those who suffer because of them. During the VI National Convention of Prison Ministry India, Home Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Sri T Devender Gouda proclaimed, "gun cannot change a prisoner, but you can change a prisoner. We go with lathi, but you go with love and concern. It makes them changed and renewed persons". We need to meditate on these words. The best example of being with prisoner can be found in St Maximillian Kolbe, the patron of Prison Ministry India. St Maximillian Kolbe was arrested during the World War II and was sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. When he was there with the prisoners, he shared his meager ration of food with those around him. He prepared many of them to have a good confession and prayed for them. And, at the end, he took another man's place to be injected poison so that he could free one man from the jail to join his family. We need this dedication to share our time, money, prayer, and what we all have to help these prisoners who are badly in need of help and it is only you can provide a better life for them.

Many of the inmates of prisons are innocent. But no way their innocence is proved in the court. The naked truth about the prisons is that 70% of the prisoners are from broken families. From the moral standpoint, a criminal is to be punished.

However, today the punishment does not produce better life afterwards. Concern of the law today is the security of the society separating the criminals from the society. Temporary separation should be a time to correct their mistakes. It should lead them to the conviction that they are the part of the society to commit themselves for the betterment of the society. This fact is hardly accomplished in the present scenario. The approach to make them subject to cruel punishments and thus denying their dignity will be futile. This, in turn will produce only antisocial beings.

Trends in the Society

Mental conflict of human beings in the society leads certain people to commit suicide, others to drugs and alcohol, and still others become sick due to that. Many of them come to the prison for their crimes. Still, others wander in the streets. The fact is no one is born a criminal. It is the society we live in breeds the criminal. The responsibility again falls on us. But, once they become criminals, society hates and is scared of them. They become ostracized and viewed with contempt. The fact is they are similar to us in all respects. What was the state of a prisoner before stepping in to the criminal activities? He was a child of somebody. He was a brother of somebody. He was a nephew of somebody. He was a cousin of somebody. He was a relative of somebody. He was a friend of somebody. He was a classmate of somebody. He was a neighbor of somebody. He was a citizen of our country. Above all, he/she was a human being. They are also born and brought in a family. They had the social obligations and responsibilities. They are no different from us. They are one among us. They are the integral part of the society, not the outsiders. If all the people had tried to give them love and concern, they would not have become a prisoner. It is their particular circumstance, which makes them criminals and we, as a society are responsible for these particular circumstances. Can we ever keep them out of the society as a Christian? We will agree that it is not right, as we are one body in Christ.

God-Merciful Father

God allowed us to partake in the glory of God creating us in His image and likeness. We dejected it very much. It was in the Eden itself that the divine plan for man to live in harmony with God was shattered, followed by the elope of man from the Paradise. Not very late, the first murder took place. Then, he continued to be away from God. God came down to us in spite of all our disobedience. It was not God's plan to wash out the sinful man from the earth and create a new being incapable to sin. God's plan was to go in search of this sinful man and call him by his name. God was so empathetic with man. God responded to his needs positively. And, God's plan was to bring him back to the love of God. Jesus gave paradise to the thief who was crucified with him. Showing mercy to the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your and from now on do not sin again. (John 8:11). Let us show the same divine mercy to the prisoners.

It is depending on the providence of God that all the programs of Prison Ministry India are carried out. Prison ministry holds three principles: They are 1) inconvenience is our convenience, 2) begging is our lifestyle, and 3) God's providence is bank balance. We have come across a lot of people who are ready to share their belongings with the prisoners like a lady who gave their new dress, a student gave a set of books, a family who took fasting and was the money so the family of a prisoner, a group of young people performing cultural programs for the prisoners, couples giving Rs. 5000 on the wedding anniversaries to sponsor the rehabilitation of prisoner and some giving their birthday share of Rs 500 for daily meal in our rehabilitation centers. This mission of Prison Ministry India is substantiated by the contribution of the local people. We do not entertain any foreign funds. It is your small sharing that is going to make big in some one's life. All know the truth Jesus taught in the parable of Good Samaritan. He shares with the injured men what he has, his vehicle, first-aid, materials, money etc. Let us make a decision today to help rehabilitate at least one prisoner. Let us receive as the loving father received the prodigal son who came with a hope of better life. Remember that we shall pass this way but once. Any good, therefore, that we can do or any kindness that we can show to any human being, let us do it now and let us not defer nor neglect it, for we shall not pass this way again. My heartfelt appreciation to all PMI regional, state, zonal, and unit coordinators for all their committed work. May God bless all of you.

With His choicest Blessings,

+Peter Remigius, Bishop of Kumbhakonam
Chairperson, Prison Ministry of India