

Pastoral Letter
PRISON MINISTRY SUNDAY
14 August 2005

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today being Prison Ministry Sunday I invite all the believers of Christ to think about or brethren who are behind the bars, neglected by the society, desperate, disappointed and remain behind prison walls. Despite their cruelties they are longing for real love and affection. Nobody thinks about these people who are spread over 1387 prisons in India. It is a pity to see that prisoners and their family members become subjects of constant ill treatment in the society. At this juncture our significant mission is to bring this stratum of society to the main stream of life.

Life in prison is one of acute loneliness and grief as freedom is denied. They are endorsed as criminals and called by their numbers, not names. It is shocking to know that large percentage violent criminals among the convicts and undertrials who are lodged in Indian jails are youth between the age group of 18 to 35. These youth who represent the future and pillar of India have unfortunately turned to be violent criminals, antisocial elements, Naxalites, dacoits and rapists. Prisoners do not lose their fundamental rights as prisoners, says Cardinal Renato Martino (Vatican). "An imprisoned man has the right to be considered as a person" asserted the president of the Pontifical Council for justice and peace, when opening a seminar on the "Human Rights of Prisoners". The crime in the world is rising at an alarming rate. The prison population has reached to 8.6 million and in India alone 3, 22,357 of which 2,23,038 are undertrials. Many of the inmates of prisons are innocent. But in no way their innocence is proved in the court and 70% prisoners are from broken families.

Jesus saw Mathew in the office of the tax collector and called him to follow. Mathew got up and followed Jesus (Mt 9, 9-14). Jesus calling him to follow him was his acceptance of mathew as a tax collector, a sinner. Mathew's following Jesus is the sign of this conversion. Secondly, Jesus' noncondemning and accepting attitude towards sinners is also his way of reforming people. When the adulterous woman is presented before Jesus for stoning her to death Jesus not only challenges the people not to condemn her, he himself refuses to condemn her and says to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you, go and don't sin again" (Jn 8, 11). This noncondemning attitude of Jesus is a challenge thrown to the woman not to sin again. By this attitude Jesus revealed to her that she is a precious child of God, in and through whom divine glory may shine. Thus Jesus proved himself not only to be the greatest friend of prisoners,

but also to be the greatest and unique re-formatter of prisoners. For Jesus says "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Mk 2, 17). This reveals that reformation of the lost and the least is the duty and responsibility of every Christian. "I was in prison, and you visited me" (Mt 25,36). These words of Jesus show how important prison ministry today. One day Michael Angelo, the world-renowned sculptor stood gazing for hours at a crude marble block. One of his assistants after patiently waiting for a long time, asked, "Sir this is only a crude and rough piece of rock, why are you staring at it for such a long time"? Michael Angelo replied, "You only see the rough surface of the rock, but I see a beautiful angel and I am thinking how to shape it". Yes, similar is the task and attitude of the PMI. During prison visits the inmates frequently ask questions such as "Will you help me when I will be released? Won't you give me a chance to renew myself so as to lead a better life? "Once a criminal, always a criminal". This is the view of the society in general. Prison Ministry India is an answer to their cry. The cry of prisoners broke the hearts of many people and in an organized way it was started by a group of seminarians in the year 1986 at St Thomas Apostolic Seminary, Kottayam, Kerala though there were frequent visits by the members of the church in earlier period also.

Now the PMI has become the official ministry by the recognition of CBCI linking it with its Justice, Peace and Development Commission in the year 2000. Within these 19 years of time, under the umbrella of PMI, there are 18 rehabilitation centers. Through these centers hundreds of released men and women who are in morally dangerous atmosphere, children of prisoners and wears and juvenile delinquents found new life. About 6000 volunteers through 850 units are actively involved in carrying out various program like counselling, medical camps, legal aid, cultural programs, inner healing retreats, job-oriented training programs and so on in the prisons of India.

As Christians we have the responsibility to participate in this mission. Jesus reminds us, "truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (Mt 25, 40). Jesus himself was an innocent prisoner brutally murdered. The last good deed on the cross was the rehabilitation of a criminal in his heavenly paradise. Keeping this in mind, I earnestly request you to pray and help these prisoners, their families and all those who suffer because of them. The best example of being with prisoner can be found in St Maximilian Kolbe, the patron of Prison Ministry India. St Maximillion Kolbe was arrested during the World War II and was sent to the concentration camp. 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 good confession and prayed for them. And at the end, he took another man's place to be put to death so that he could save a poor soul who could be freed and join his family. This is what Jesus expects of us to share our time money and prayer. Let us make a decision today to rehabilitate at

least one prisoner by our prayer and sacrifice. Remember that we shall pass this way but once. Therefore, any good 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 or neglect it; Because we shall not pass this way again. I express my heartfelt appreciation to all who are involved in this mission of the church to release, renew and rehabilitate the brethren in prisons. Peace and love to each and every one of you.

+ Rt Rev Bishop Peter Remigius
Chairperson, Prison Ministry India

**(N.B: This pastoral letter is requested to be read in all the churches on Sunday
14 August 2005)**