

Pastor Letter Prison Ministry India 2006

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

On this Prison Ministry Sunday, the church once again encourages the believers in Christ to live the words of Jesus, "when I was in prison you came to visit me"; contemplating the sorrowful faces of crucified Jesus in more than three lakh faces of human beings languishing in the 1397 prisons of India. The church tries to proclaim through the prison ministry the profound dignity of every human person despite their cruelties even those condemned to death. It bears witness to the truth, that worth of human being is not measured by usefulness or talents, by health or sickness, by age or greed or race. Our human dignity comes from God our creator, whose image we are all made (Gen 1, 26). No amount of privation or suffering can ever remove this dignity for we are always precious in the eyes of God. Despite their criminal behavior they are longing for real love and affection. We shall join in spirit with all those who are engaged in this demanding ministry to bring back the prisoners, victims and affected families in to the main stream of life.

Life in Prison

The life in prison is unspeakably different from the life of an ordinary person. We see people in prison who cry out of their lost future and crushed hopes. They feel acute loneliness and grief. The thick wall of prison divides the world outside and the world 'Inside'. Outside is the world of those who can go wherever they want the world of those who are able to choose the people they want to meet irrespective of time or day. Outside is also the world of inter-personal relationship between families, people at jobs, and also time for leisure. The scene is totally different inside the prison. Inside, the freedom to move is severely restricted, right down to being locked up in a small cell day and night depending on the velocity of the punishment. In such a space, you can find concentrated misery of the world, it's hardship, loneliness, and despair. Many prisoners feel very strongly that they have not just been deserted by people but also by God. For them God seems to be 'outside' and not 'inside'. The thick prison walls left God 'outside'. At least, that is the impression many prisoners have. In short they count themselves as worthless creatures, people of no significance and not the part of the society. They experience helplessness and loneliness. No helping hand is seen. Love is far away mirage in their life.

Merciful Father

Our heavenly father is a merciful father. In spite of all our disobedience God showed His mercy towards us. He sent his own son to us to save us. Jesus himself associated with sinners and the poor Jesus' non-condemning and accepting attitude towards

sinners is a radical way of reforming the people. When the adulterous woman was presented before Jesus for stoning her to death, Jesus not only challenges people who condemned her. He himself refused to condemn her and said to the woman "neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again" (Jn 8:11). The final words of Jesus from the cross were to a prisoner, "Today you will be with me in paradise". Thus he proved that distance from a sinner to a saint is a question of seconds. This reveals that sharing of God's mercy is the duty and responsibility of every Christian.

Mission of the Church

Won't you give me a chance to renew my life? I really wanted to change my life, but I could not, won't you help me? I want to lead a good life, but when I was released, nobody believed me, neither did people accept me. Probably the police will again catch me on the pretext of suspicion. My family has abandoned me. Nobody will dare to give me a job. Would you please find a job for me?" These heart-breaking cries of prisoners moved the hearts of many. The result was the birth of a beautiful ministry in the church. Thus prison ministry India officially was originated in 1986 by the initiative of a group of seminarians in Kerala. Within 20 years under the umbrella of PMI there are 21 rehabilitation centers. Through those centers, hundreds of released men and women, children of prisoners and victims and juveniles in conflict with law find new life. About 7000 volunteers through 860 units who are actively involved in the prison ministry reaches out to the 1397 prisons in India.

Even a simple help or gesture can make a great difference in the life of prisoners. Once there was a call to the national office from a person asking for a favor to be done for a prisoner. The prisoner wanted to see his six years old son who was in a remote Institution. Both are HIV positive. We were asked to make the necessary arrangement for the child to visit the prison. Child was brought to Bangalore. We got the necessary permission and took the child to his father who was in his last stage due to his sickness. Seeing his child, the father was in tears. They prayed and talked for two hours. As time came for the child to leave, the father knelt before the child, put the child's hands upon his head, asked for the blessing. Instead of father blessing the child he was asking for the blessing from his own child! Both were in tears. The child blessed his father. The father's happiness at that time was beyond words. He turned towards us and told us in tears. "This help may not be a big thing for you but it is an unforgettable help for me. Thanks a lot."

Dear friends help given by PMI members may appear very simple and at times even unnoticeable but it is more demanding today. Most of the PMI work is of this nature. General public may not notice it but it is in great demand inside the prison. Today volunteers of PMI rekindle the spiritual flame in prisoners, lift them to high moral standards and renew their lives through counseling, cultural program, visiting the

families, retreat prayer, skilled training programs, marriage settlement, educational aid, free legal aid, moral education and so on. In short PMI is journeying along with them to renew them. The best example of being with prisoners can be found in St Maximillian Kolbe, the patron of Prison ministry India. He was arrested during the World War II and was sent to the concentration camp. In the camp he saw another man crying to be spared from death. This holy priest came forward and offered himself to be killed for the sake of that man in order to send him to his family. His magnificent life and martyrdom place a challenge before us to spare our time, our wealth and energy for the sake of another in prison. Your prayer, service and generous contribution to promote the mission of Prison Ministry India. We do not entertain any foreign projects. It is your prayer, service and contribution, which make a big difference in some one's life. All know the truth that Jesus taught in the parable of Good Samaritan, who shares with injured man what he has; his vehicle, first aid materials, money, time etc. You may be the only gospel that some people ever read in life. Therefore, let us make a decision today to help to rehabilitate at least one prisoner. 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 one, let us do it now and let us not differ nor neglect it for we shall not pass this way again. My heartfelt appreciation and prayers to all the committed works in prison ministry. May God bless all of you with his choicest Blessings.

+ Rt Rev Peter Remigius
Chairman, Prison Ministry India

**N.B: This pastoral letter is to be read in all the churches on 13 of August 2006
in connection with Prison Ministry Sunday.**