

Pastoral Letter
PRISON MINISTRY SUNDAY August 12, 2007

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus,

On this Prison Ministry Sunday, the Church reminds us of our mission towards the brethren behind the bars. They are about 3 lakh people who are kept behind bars in 1397 prison of India. All of them may not be criminals. Some are there as victims of circumstances, some are wrongly accused, some are there without any trial for years and some are there who are guilty due to their own failures. The society condemns all to be punished.

The words of Jesus "I came not to call the righteous but the sinners" (Mt 9,13) encourage to understand and accept these brethren in prisons with compassion and love as Jesus himself approached the lost and the least, the sinners, downtrodden in the society. He embraced them but never condemned. For, "God so loved the world, that he sent his only son, not to condemn but to save (Jn 3,16). Our Lord extended God's mercy and forgiveness, "Son of man came to seek and save the lost" (Lk 19, 10.) Jesus entered into the life of Zacchaeus who experienced total transformation. There are so many in prisons, like Zacchaeus, who are longing for somebody to enter into their lives and provide an opportunity to be transformed.

It is to this challenging call and mission Prison Ministry India had responded with divine inspiration. Today PMI is a national voluntary registered organization of the Church recognized by CBCI. There are 24 rehabilitation centers established under the umbrella of PMI. About 7000 volunteers, priests, religious men and women, lay people, commit themselves in this ministry and reach out to 1397 prisons in the country. The mission of Prison Ministry India is "Release, Reformation and Rehabilitation" of the people behind the bars. The volunteers follow three basic principles such as inconvenience as convenience, God's providence as bank balance, begging as lifestyle. In order to fulfill the above mission, the volunteers enter into prisons with regular visits to meet our brethren.

Prison Ministry India looks at these unfortunate people to encourage, enlighten, energize and build hope for their bright future through moral, spiritual animations, extending personal counseling to restore the lost human dignity by equipping psychologically and physically for their post-imprisonment period. Various cultural programs, recreational facilities, legal services are provided. Building up family contacts, job placement, educating their children and providing rehabilitation for the released prisoners are main activities of PMI inside and outside prisons.

This Prison Ministry Sunday is arranged nearest Sunday to the feast of St Maximilian Kolbe, on 14th August, the Patron Saint of Prison Ministry. He was a Catholic priest from Poland who was imprisoned during World War II. In a concentration camp he sacrificed his life in order to save another man who had a family.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a God given opportunity for us to reach out to these unfortunate brethren behind the bars through PMI organization. I appeal to you! first of all, you can be the volunteers of Prison Ministry India, if you are able to spare a little time. Secondly, you can support with prayer, your prayer is so valuable for the prisoners, their families and the volunteers. Thirdly, you can support the ministry with your generous financial contributions. PMI doesn't encourage foreign funds, but depend totally on local contributions. We have experienced the generosity of the people all through out these years. You can approach the parish priest or any volunteer of prison ministry to offer your financial support. We shall live the words of Jesus, "When I was in prison, you came to visit me". We shall remember the words of Karl Rahner, the theologian, "We are not essentially different from prisoners whom we visit in prison; it is only circumstances that distinguish us and we must be grateful to God for these circumstances". May God bless you as his instruments of love, compassion and forgiveness to the brothers and sisters behind the bars.

+ Rt Rev Peter Remigius
Chairman, Prison Ministry India

N.B. This pastoral letter is requested to be read in the churches on 12th August 2007 in connection with Prison Ministry Sunday.