

"YOU ARE NOT ALONE"

**PRISON MINISTRY
SUNDAY**



12th August, 2018

PASTORAL LETTER

[Please read this pastoral letter in all the churches on 12th August, 2018]

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

As human beings, you and I experience a variety of feelings. However, one feeling you and I would rather not like to experience is the feeling of being alone. Certainly, there are many ways in which we may feel lonely. The feeling of being alone can be a difficult emotion to live with. The feeling of being lonely is felt most in prisons. On this Prison Ministry Sunday, the Church is taking us to the lives of prisoners with the topic, "You are not alone". Through the celebration of Prison Ministry Sunday, the Church wants to declare once again to each one of those 4,19,623 prisoners held inside 1,401 prisons in India that they are not alone. The Church also wants to enlighten us about the isolation and loneliness that many of the volunteers experience as they minister to our brothers and sisters in prisons.

God created all of heaven and earth, the beasts of the fields, the birds of the air, and said it was all good. Everything was good. That is, until He made man. And then it happened. The first problem, the first of God's concerns regarding mankind emerged. God looked at all that He had created and then looked at man. He said, "It is not good...that man should be alone..." Loneliness is not part of God's plan for our lives.

Loneliness and the society at present

Prison is a sample of our society. Prison is the climax of loneliness and isolation that we see so often today. There is loneliness all around us, and it is our own fault. We are, as God says, seeking to fulfill our own desires, and ignoring God. Within families, husbands and wives are distracted by social media, hobbies or entertainments. Our young are surrounded by so many people every day, but they are so lonely. Look at the young who are not involved in all the acceptable activities our schools and culture offer to

the youth. They spend hours by themselves playing video games, surfing the internet, often without supervision. They are allowed to follow their own desires and they grow, due to their parents' negligence, to seek their own desires. They give their children gifts that are not generous, but selfish, because all these things do increase their loneliness and isolation within the family. Everyone is "connected," but everyone is disconnected from real love and healthy relationships. Gone are the porches in front of our homes where we once made it a point to invite our neighbours over for a cup of coffee or a glass of lemonade. According to God's plan, we are not to be alone. Mother Teresa said, "Loneliness is the leprosy of modern society. And no one wants anybody to know they are a leper."

We are not alone in our suffering.

The message, "You are not alone in your suffering" is applicable both to inmates as well as to volunteers of Prison Ministry. Being together is very important in the lives of volunteers. Sometimes volunteers may be very active in the local prison. They may have to undergo a lot of hardships for the ministry. It may be personal, sometimes regarding finance, sometimes regarding permission. They may feel that there is a lack of cooperation from officials or from within the church. Sometimes we hear from volunteers that a very active person has left the ministry. We wonder what had happened to his dreams and plans. What happened to his work as a volunteer for the Prison Ministry? Then we realize that perhaps he/she felt alone in his/her ministry, maybe he/she was abandoned by colleagues, maybe he/she was abandoned by his/her own church, or he/she was just fed up with the corruption happening in prisons. So we have to realize that the message that "we are not alone" is not only valid and urgent for the inmates to whom we all give pastoral care, but also and especially, for the volunteers who work in the prisons.

The gospel of today tells us that suffering may block our eyes from seeing God. In the lovely passage of the disciples at Emmaus, (Luke 24:13-33), we see that the disciples were sorrowful and grieving. They were walking along disconsolate, and even though Jesus Himself was with them, they did not recognize Him. What prevented them from recognizing Him was precisely their suffering and sorrow on Jesus' death. Time and again we cannot see Jesus either because we are very hurt or the suffering keeps us from recognizing Jesus. Often prisoners cannot see Jesus because their personal suffering is so great that it overwhelms them. Sometimes their crime is so heinous that they believe that they cannot be forgiven. Therefore it is important to believe in His promise and to share with them the message that they are not alone.

Let us recall the testimony of Mr. Elie Wiessel, a Jew who survived the Nazi Concentration Camp. People asked him, "Where was God when so many people were burning in the Crematoria of Auschwitz? Where was God when thousands of prisoners were in that concentration camp?" Mr. Wiesel replied, "God was in those concentration camps, God was in those Crematoria." When we see the dead, the injured, and the innocent in the prisons of India, when we see the inhuman treatment meted out to prisoners, when people are raped and brutally killed, can we answer along with the Jew in Faith, with the same words, God was in those prisons, police stations, victims houses, God was with those injured and dead? How hard it is to say that he or she is not alone. How hard it is to tell ourselves in our tribulations, we are not alone. It is difficult but necessary since, that is precisely our mission as Prison Ministry Volunteers.

In the Lurigancho Prison of Peru, the most dangerous prison in the world, a fight between two wings led to an uprising throughout the prison. The police could not control the crowd and started firing to control them. Finally some of the Christian volunteers along with the Bishop argued with the authorities and gained permission to enter the prison to bring the situation under control. Many of the prisoners were taken to the hospitals outside and medicines were supplied. They talked to the gang leaders. These were moments of high tension, anguish and pain for the injured. There were five dead and 25 badly injured people in the prison. The situation in the prison was brought under control in the end after multiple levels of intervention. Finally, the story of the Lurigancho Prison did not end with this and in the next week the same prisoners wanted to surrender their weapons as a peace gesture. For this, they insisted that the Bishop and the Christian volunteers who were with them when they needed them the most be called. The inmates handed over to the Bishop their weapons, a rifle, a machine gun, ten pistols, eight revolvers and seven

grenades. The inmates knew that this was someone they could trust. The prisoners could personally experience that they were not alone. Even failures or crimes committed by someone should not put a stop to your relation with the other until you gain the other over to the Lord for good.

We are not alone in our joy

The story of the prodigal son reveals the loving heart of our Heavenly Father. He is happy and joyful when a sinner returns to Him. One lost sheep is greater than ninety nine. A prisoner told to other volunteers after a year that he was alive that day because of a sister who was a full time volunteer in that prison. A year ago he had been sitting on a bench in the hospital after deciding to commit suicide. While he was sitting there restless she had come along and held his hands saying, "Do not worry, we are all with you; this is not the end of your life; be courageous enough; that was an experience of heaven coming down towards me." All the volunteers were happy. So we are not alone in our joy. We can be glad along with our brethren inside and outside the prison.

We are not alone in our Prayer.

A prisoner wrote, "I did not cry when I was arrested, I did not cry when I was sentenced, I did not cry when I came to prison; but I cried the day when I found God in my life in the prison". This is our prayer, 'to help someone to find God in his life.' Pope Francis addressing the prisoners at Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia, on September 27, 2015, said, "I am here as a pastor, but above all as a brother, to share your situation and to make it my own. I have come so that we can pray together and offer our God everything that causes us pain, but also everything that gives us hope, so that we can receive from him the power of the resurrection". While addressing the National congress of Chaplains of Italian prisons in 2014, Pope Francis said, "Jesus is there in prison cells, he weeps with them, works with them, waits with them. His paternal and maternal love reaches everywhere. We shall join in the prayers of many and feel that we are together in prayer".

We are not alone in our mission

Mary and Elizabeth, being given one to another is a model for us to follow. How good is God, that God gave Mary and Elizabeth to each other. These two women were given one to another. It is a tender scene, when Mary arrives to see Elizabeth; these two women in their exquisite embrace; pregnant with the message and the messenger. It is one of my favourite images in art...the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Mary sings a hymn of praise on God's mercy and the upturning of the social order. Mary and Elizabeth both inappropriately pregnant, one is too young and unmarried

and the other is too old and has suffered a life of shame for not having children. Since Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months we can imagine them laughing, eating, embracing, and resting telling stories. How good is God that He gave them one to another. The same is true for us. We are given one to another. We are not alone.

Every programme in prisons becomes an occasion for the inmates to express their feeling of loneliness. "My son lost three fingers in a machine last week; now I cannot eat and sleep in the prison. I think about my family", said by an elderly woman in Berhampur Prison, Odisha. Any celebration in the prison becomes an occasion to express their loneliness to the volunteers. We promise them that they are not alone.

Conclusion

We need to let every parent, child, sibling, friend or co-worker struggling with the effects of dealing with a person in prison, victims and their families know that they are

not alone. We need them to hear loud and clear that the family of the Church is here to walk with them and support them. God is giving us one to another. Along with my brother Bishops, I express my sincere gratitude for the generous contribution towards this ministry every year and acknowledge the dedicated service of all the volunteers of this most demanding mission of the church today. May the patron saint of Prison Ministry India, St. Maximilian Kolbe guide you.



Bishop Allwyn D'Silva

Chairman of Prison Ministry India

LITURGY

Entrance Antiphon:

When you go through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt; the hard trials that come will not hurt you- Alleluia. (Is. 43: 2)

Penitential Rite:

One day a person wrote in his blog, "When I went into middle school there was a boy whom everyone just left alone. He would always sit alone at lunch and never once had a friend to call his own. But I never said a word. I was too scared to lose my friends... I was too selfish to help someone in need. A few years later I remembered how many times this boy had tried to talk to me... It made me cry thinking of how alone he must have felt. I decided not to let anyone experience the same treatment from me again. And I want others to learn from my mistake. When you see someone down on the ground, have the courage to be the hand that picks them up." All of us are part of that effort to make somebody feel part of togetherness/a group; all of us are invited to encourage, help and enable others especially prisoners, victims and their families to be rehabilitated. God becoming human was God's message to us: you are not alone. You are not alone in your sin. You are not

alone in your joy. You are not alone in your grief. You are not alone. God is giving us one to another. How often do we ignore others? For the moments of our failures we ask pardon....

Collect:

Merciful father, you expect from us to go where lives are bruised and broken; go where children are wasted and deformed; go amongst the lost and forgotten; go where sorrow shrouds your light! Bless us lord that we may show every person in prison that there is help and there is hope. Pour your spirit upon us so that we may get the message out to every corner of our country. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen

First reading: Gen. 2: 18-23

Let our response be: The Lord is my light and my salvation. I will fear no one. Psalms 27

My father and mother may abandon me, but the Lord will take care of me.

Teach me, Lord what you want me to do, and lead me along a safe path, because I have many enemies.

I know that I will live to see the Lord's goodness in this present life.

Trust in the Lord, Have faith, do not despair. Trust in the Lord.

Second reading: 2 Cor. 4: 7-12

Acclamation:

Alleluia, Alleluia: Don't worry, because I am with you. Don't be afraid, because **I am your God.** Alleluia!

Gospel: Lk. 24: 13-33

Prayers of the Faithful:

God, you told Joshua, "Remember that I have commanded you to be determined and confident; Don't be afraid or discouraged, for I, the Lord you God, am with you wherever you go." He washes our feet so that we may come back to the table, the table from which he wishes no one to be excluded, the table spread with food for all and to partake of which, all of us are invited. Let us all join together and pray for all those in prisons and those who have to care for the wounded, to soothe pain, to offer new possibilities saying, Lord, help us to walk with you.

Lord we bring to you in prayer our Holy Father Pope Francis, Bishops, Priests, and Consecrated people that they may be worthy instruments of your togetherness; to our brothers and sisters behind the bars, and help them to proclaim to the whole world that they are not alone. Let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, you were an innocent prisoner. You had experienced the plight of a prisoner. We bring before you all our brothers and sisters behind the bars with their mental torture and physical discomforts. We request your blessings upon them and their families. Bless the jail authorities to be kind, gentle and understanding towards the inmates. Let us pray to the Lord.

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

Lord, we pray for all those who are wrongly accused and imprisoned. Lord as you know, they are undergoing a lot of agony and there is bitterness within them. Merciful God graciously bless them with positive self-realization and provide them with the means to avail of legal assistance that they may be released fast. Let us pray to the Lord.

Lord we bring to you in prayer all the parishes and parishioners who have always been generous towards our ministry. May our loving God bless them and their families abundantly and keep them in His loving care. Let us pray to the Lord.

(Pause to pray for personal and community needs)

Concluding Prayer:

Lord we place all these intentions at your feet, knowing that you will grant them to us in your favoured time. May we all who intercede for our brothers and sisters behind the bars become channels of Your Presence by our deeds and words. We make this prayer through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Prayer over the gifts:

Accept the gifts we offer you, O Lord, in praise and thanksgiving, may your merciful love fill our hearts and the hearts of all those who are feeling lonely and bearing the hardship of loneliness. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Communion Antiphon:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be satisfied with what you have. For God said, "I will never leave you; I will never abandon you". (Heb. 13: 5)

Communion rite:

Lord we have indeed, experienced your mercy in its abundance. For, you have refreshed us with your body and blood. Help us to love and show compassion to those in prison and to all those who seek it. May your mercy flow from our hearts and gently heal souls that are wounded and lonely. May we all be united one day in the land of the living. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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