

# **Prison Ministry Sunday**

## **14 August 2022**

**Integral Human Development and Pastoral Care for Prisoners**

### **PASTORAL LETTER**

*Please Read this Pastoral Letter in all Churches on 14th August 2022*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

What would we do if our mother/father/sister/brother/daughter or son, whether guilty or innocent, were thrown behind bars? Would we let the shock, doubt, trauma and fear paralyse us? Would we restrict ourselves to praying in the comfort of our homes? Or would we get into action – visit the prison, secure legal aid, petition for better living conditions in overcrowded jails, do whatever it takes to secure their release, and when finally released, ensure their rehabilitation and reintegration?

According to the World Prison Population List published in December 2021, there are 11.5 million prisoners worldwide. In India, according to the National Crime Records Bureau, there are 4,88,511 prisoners in 1306 different prisons. There are 413 death-row prisoners, 20,046 women prisoners and 1427 children living with their mothers. As we celebrate Prison Ministry Sunday, let us remember all these incarcerated members of our human family who are living in utter misery, pray for them in a special way and rededicate ourselves to seek, serve and save them.

### **To God, Through Our Brethren Behind Bars**

We often hear that prison is not a safe place as it is the living space of criminals. But for us Christians, it is the living space of human beings created in the image and likeness of God. The hearts of some of our brethren are filled with revenge and hatred. They need someone to guide them in their desperate moments. As Moses was entrusted to lead and guide the Israelites, we too are called to accompany them on their journey to receive God's mercy and grace.

As Saint Therese of the Child Jesus called Pranzini, a triple murderer, "my first child", the broken ones behind bars are our precious children. God gifted us Jesus, who asserted, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). This only begotten precious child of God was imprisoned, tortured and broken on the Cross. His pain and brokenness manifested the love and mercy of God and granted

us our salvation. God today gifts us the prisoners. When we stoop down through prison gates, we open ourselves to the brokenness and wounded-ness of the incarcerated, and thereby encounter our living God. Through this encounter, let us tirelessly reach out, release, renew, rehabilitate, reintegrate and redeem our brethren behind bars by committing ourselves for their integral human development.

### **Integral Human Development of Prisoners**

The lost and rejected are God's precious children whom he relentlessly seeks out. Jesus respected and embraced the ones whom society rejected – the lepers, the tax collectors, the woman caught in adultery, the thief crucified next to him. For detainees to successfully reintegrate to civilian life, it is important to implement various programmes for their integral development such as education, employment, marriage, and family settlement. Let us recall the message of Pope Francis to participants of the International Meeting for Regional and National Responsible for Prison Pastoral Care at Sala Clementina on 8th November 2019:

“Places of detention often fail in the objective of promoting reintegration processes, no doubt because they do not have sufficient resources to address the social, psychological and family problems experienced by the detainees, and also due to frequent overpopulation of prisons that turns them into real places of depersonalisation. On the contrary, true social reintegration begins by guaranteeing opportunities for development, education, decent work, access to health, as well as generating public space for civic participation. As Christian communities we must ask ourselves a question. If these brothers and sisters have already served their sentence for the evil committed, why is a new social punishment placed on their shoulders with rejection and indifference? On many occasions, this social aversion is one more reason to expose them to fall back into the same mistakes”.

### **The Venerable Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan**

Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan is a fine example of a prisoner who has undergone integral human development. On 30th April 1975, when Coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam), he was unjustly arrested and detained in solitary confinement by the communist government for thirteen years. He was disturbed and devastated, his vision for the people and the kingdom of God shattered. One night, deep within his own heart, Thuan sensed a clear and unmistakable voice directly asking him, “Why torment yourself? You must discern between God and the works of God!” This enlightenment radically changed his way of thinking. When the communists put him in a boat along with 1500 other prisoners, he said, “Here is my cathedral, here are the people God has given me to care for, here is my mission – to ensure the presence of God among these despairing and miserable brothers. It is

God's will that I am here. I accept his will." This became the moment of his liberation.

After his release from solitary confinement, Thuan was kept under house arrest and not allowed to return to Ho Chi Minh City and take up his duties there. Exiled in 1991, his reintegration came about through being given a post at the International Catholic Commission for Migration the following year. He went on to become Vice President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 1994, was appointed its President in 1998 and elevated to Cardinal in 2001.

At the conclusion of the Lenten retreat preached by Thuan to the Roman Curia in 2001, Pope John Paul II said of him, "A witness of the cross in the long years of imprisonment in Vietnam, he has frequently recounted the realities and episodes from his sufferings in prison, thus reinforcing us in the consoling certainty that when everything crumbles around us, and perhaps even within us, Christ remains our unfailing support," while in the 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "During thirteen years in jail, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness, the fact that he could listen and speak to God became for him an increasing power of hope, which enabled him, after his release, to become for people all over the world a witness to hope – to that great hope which does not wane even in the nights of solitude."

Cardinal Thuan's reflections in prison have been published as the books *The Road of Hope: A Gospel from Prison* and *Prayers of Hope, Words of Courage*. His beatification process began on 16th September 2007, his fifth death anniversary. Today, let us echo Thuan and say of the prisoners, "Here are the people God has given me to care for, here is my mission – to ensure the presence of God among these despairing and miserable brothers," and pray for the renewal, release, rehabilitation, reintegration and redemption of our brethren behind bars.

### **Prison Ministry India Rehabilitation Centres**

Jesus never gave up on those with less than perfect pasts for he knew that his infinite mercy gave them the chance for a better future. He brought this about through love, compassion and sacrifice and asked us to do likewise. The volunteers of Prison Ministry India (PMI) do so by offering their time, energy and life to provide a better future to those labelled criminals by society. While the law looks back to the past with judgement, we look towards the future with mercy. When the law condemns the failed ones, we commend them to our Heavenly Father's care. When the law puts them down, we lift them up. When the world fights for justice, we cry out for restorative justice. When the world brawls for punishment, we beg for forgiveness. When the law wants to kill, we want to save. When the world closes the book of a criminal, we open a new chapter saying no one is beyond redemption.

In Biblical times, God delivered the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and gave them possession of a land flowing with milk and honey – the Promised Land. In our times, through rehabilitation and reintegration, PMI volunteers continue to resonate God's covenant as they lead the lost behind bars to PMI rehabilitation centres where these broken ones can find a land of milk and honey, where they find a new spirit. In Prison Ministry India's rehabilitation centres, their hopes and dreams take wings, as volunteers channelise Christ's love to help the lost reintegrate with society.

The heart-breaking cries of prisoners moved the hearts of PMI volunteers, resulting in the establishment of Snehashramam, the first rehabilitation centre, on 1st October 1991. Today PMI has twenty rehabilitation centres rendering full-time service for their integrated development. Each rehabilitation centre becomes a paradise regained for inmates staying at the centre. It becomes a tower of hope to the hopeless, help to the helpless and love to the hated from prisons.

### **A Mother's Testimony**

Prashanthi (name changed) was only eighteen years old when she was married to Lokesh, an irresponsible alcoholic who came home drunk every day and beat her for no reason. Life was miserable for Prashanthi, who trembled with fear and hid behind the door when she would see him coming home. Even the basic needs of their little son, Anand, were not met with. One night, he started thrashing her as usual while Anand was in her arms. Lokesh dragged Prashanthi to the kitchen and battered her fiercely. In self-defence, she pulled out a log of firewood and hit him on the head. He dashed against a wall and dropped dead. Terrified, she ran to the police station while carrying her child, and admitted to the involuntary murder of her husband. She was arrested and sent to prison along with two-year-old Anand to Bangalore Central Prison. At the age of six, Anand was shifted to Kolbe Home in Carmelaram, Bangalore, a rehabilitation centre for prisoners' children run by the National Office of Prison Ministry India. With tears rolling down her cheeks, Prashanthi told Fr Francis Kodiyan, PMI national coordinator: "If Anand had grown up with us, he would not have become the smart and intelligent boy that he is now. His talents in singing, dancing and in sports have also bloomed only because he has been under your care."

### **Conclusion**

Let us collaborate with Prison Ministry India to rehabilitate and reintegrate these broken, vulnerable, rejected, lonely, deprived, harmed, damaged, destroyed, hurt and injured brethren behind bars.

Dear incarcerated brethren, we love you, pray for you, and commit ourselves for your integral human development. We also pray in a special way for the families of our brethren behind bars and their victims.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, you are welcome to join the 24/7 Incessant Intercessory Invocation for the Incarcerated and thereby pray for the renewal and rehabilitation of prisoners worldwide. You are also welcome to join the Special Task Forces of PMI to reform and redeem hardcore criminals such as terrorists, mafia dons, hired and serial killers, and so on. This year Prison Ministry India convenes its quadrennial national convention from 15-18th November in Goa with the theme *Reform to Reintegrate*. Your valuable prayers for the fruitfulness of this convention will highly be appreciated. In many states we are not given permission to visit prisons, and we request your earnest prayers in this regard.

Along with my brother bishops, I express my sincere gratitude to the dioceses, major superiors and well-wishers for your generous contributions towards this ministry. I am sure Jesus who came in search of the lost will bless you abundantly.

I acknowledge and appreciate the PMI volunteers for their profound commitment in reforming and reintegrating prisoners, which all of us know, is a most challenging task. May Saint Maximilian Kolbe, the patron of Prison Ministry India, intercede for the fruitfulness of this ministry and may Mary, our blessed mother, be always there to protect you as we rededicate ourselves to the integral human development of our incarcerated brethren.



✠ **Bishop Allwyn D'Silva**  
Chairperson, Prison Ministry India

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Celebrant:** Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus shows great compassion towards sinners and the poor. Let us therefore pray that we will be guided by the Holy Spirit to show our compassion towards others saying:

R: *Lord, graciously hear our prayer.*

Lord, we pray for the universal Church. May the Pope, Bishops, priests and consecrated people be powerful instruments of your liberating love and helping hands to the brethren behind bars to rejuvenate your image and likeness in them.

Let us pray to the Lord. R

Lord, you were an innocent prisoner and 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 and 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. R

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

Let us pray to the Lord. R

Lord, we pray for all those who are wrongly accused and imprisoned. Lord as you know, they undergo lot of agony and bitterness. Merciful God, graciously bless them with a positive self-realisation and with legal assistance for their speedy release.

Let us pray to the Lord. R

(Pause to pray for personal and community needs)

**Celebrant:** Loving Father, you are the happiest when we your children reach to you. Stretch out your healing hands and touch all our brethren behind bars and help them to lead a renewed life. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord, Amen

Rev Dr Francis Kodiyan MCBS, PMI National Coordinator  
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