



PRISON MINISTRY SUNDAY

PASTORAL LETTER

11 AUGUST 2024

PRISONERS ARE OUR FRIENDS
Please Read this Pastoral Letter on 11 August 2024

“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15-16). Jesus the redeemer, who lives behind prison walls - “I was in prison, you visited me” (Mt 25:36) - uttered to his disciples in his farewell discourse that he calls his chosen ones as friends. Who are these chosen ones? Did he bring them from heaven? Are they all the holiest of holies? Jesus in spite of knowing that Peter who would deny him in a few hours, calls him friend. He calls Judas the betrayer as friend too. He calls Matthew the tax collector as friend. He calls all these 12 disciples friends, all those who discussed among themselves about greatness and who wanted special place. He calls Thomas, the one who could not believe without seeing Jesus, his friend. Jesus called these imperfect beings as his friends. If so, are prisoners not Jesus’ friends? And as the followers of Jesus are they not our friends too?

Prison Ministry Sunday 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ, as we celebrate Prison Ministry Sunday, let us consider prisoners as our friends and do whatever is possible for their integral human development. Prison Ministry India, a Catholic spiritual movement, has been committed to the release, reformation, rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners and

their victims. This voluntary organisation registered as a charitable society works under the Catholic Bishops Conference of India’s justice, peace and development commission. Every diocese has a PMI unit and coordinator to look after the needs of prisoners. Parish priests should take special care to reach out to the lost sheep in prisons and when they come home after their release or for bail. Consecrated people have a greater responsibility to take care of the welfare of the incarcerated. Pious associations and lay faithful are cordially invited to take part in prisoners’ reintegration projects of PMI. For Jesus came “to proclaim good news to the poor... to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4: 18-19).

No More Servants, but Friends

Pope Francis says Christian love embraces what is not lovable; it offers forgiveness and blesses one’s enemies. This “greater love,” which comes from God, drives us where humanly we would not go. This is the love for the poor, for those who are not lovable, for those who do not care for us and are not grateful. It is love for what no one would love, even for one’s enemy. This “great selfless love” includes love for the poor, the sick and the helpless, such as unborn children and prisoners. When Job prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes,

giving him twice as much as before (Job 42:10). “God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). God loves the sinner but hates the sin. God came down because He wanted everyone to be saved. Jesus called Matthew the tax gatherer, because He knew that this sinner would have a future. Jesus went in search of the one lost sheep, because He knew that the lost sheep would have its future. Jesus forgave the woman who was caught in adultery and blessed her, for He knew that she too would have her future. Yes, every saint has a past and the sinner a future! Never give up in life, for we have a God who is never tired of forgiving. Embrace life with hope, for we have a God who restores, renews, reinstates and recreates every broken being! Jesus remarked about sinful people to righteous people. Although prisons are filled with hard-core criminals, terrorists, rapists, hired-killers, thieves, grace too flows there in abundance. Who can stop the flow of the mercy of God?

Prison Statistics

According to the prison statistics of National Crime Records Bureau published on 31st December 2022, there are 1330 prisons and 5,73,220 prisoners in India. Out of them 4,34,302 prisoners are undertrials languishing in jails without conviction. There are 23,772 women prisoners, 1537 women with children, 544 condemned to death prisoners and 6283 foreign prisoners. About ten percentage of the prisoners are considered innocent. Globally, there are more than 1.3 crore prisoners. Christian *spiritual life demands from us that we visit and take care of the spiritual and material needs of our incarcerated brethren.* For Jesus said “I was in Prison, you visited me” (Mt 25,36).

St Maximilian Kolbe

The Catholic Bishops Conference of India decided to celebrate Prison Ministry Sunday on the second Sunday of August. This is to meaningfully commemorate and celebrate the feast of St Maximilian Kolbe (1894-1941) the patron saint of prisoners and prison ministry that is celebrated on 14th August. Maximilian Maria Kolbe, a Polish Catholic priest and Conventual Franciscan friar, volunteered to die in place of a man named

Franciszek Gajowniczek in the German death camp of Auschwitz during World War II. He had been active in promoting the veneration of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, and offered his life for a coprisoner and manifested the supreme love of God and neighbour. He considered Gajowniczek the coprisoner as his own friend and sacrificed his life for him, following Jesus’ teachings: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15,13). On 10 October 1982, Pope Saint John Paul II canonized Kolbe and declared him a martyr of charity.

Jesus’ Friends behind Prison Walls

Fear kills every one of our brethren behind bars. The worry of what tomorrow will bring takes away their energy. When we meet our brethren in prison, most of the time, their only request is ‘Sister/Father, pray for me and my family. Tomorrow is my hearing, my bail order, my daughter’s marriage.’ And the list goes on. The pain, fear and suffering behind the prison walls are uncountable. A prison is a place of pain, tears, struggle and suffering! What will prisoners’ reaction be, if they know that their tears will one day be turned into grace? Jesus acclaimed of the sinful woman who anointed Him, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house, you did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair” (Lk 7:44-45). I’m sure that Jesus is acclaiming our brethren who are crying out to Him from the prison walls, who wet His feet with their tears, whose kisses are unstoppable, from their brokenness and in their transformation. The woman was a sinner in the eyes of humans, in the eyes of the so-called Pharisees. But in the eyes of Jesus, she was a child of God, a friend of God, nothing else. Each brother/sister of ours from the dark cells of prison is the friend of Jesus.

Prisoners’ Reintegration

Prison Ministry India ensures that there are volunteers near every prison to visit prisoners and to take care of their various needs. Under the paternal care of our bishops, every diocese has a PMI coordinator and a group of committed volunteers. PMI has various projects for the

integral human development of prisoners, such as employment schemes, educational scholarships for prisoners and their children, prisoners' releasing scheme, marriage and family settlement projects and housing scheme. PMI has many rehabilitation centres for released men and women prisoners and homes for prisoners' children. In 2020 PMI established Incessant Intercessory Invocation for the Incarcerated to pray incessantly before the Blessed Sacrament for the renewal and reintegration of our brethren behind bars. You are most welcome to join this online intercessory prayer.

Prisoners' Redemption

God also chooses the filthiest of places, stinking places, for his work of redemption. Behind the walls of maximum-security prisons, hard-core criminals are being transformed into messengers of hope. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17). The purpose of Jesus coming to this earth was to call sinners and to redeem the lost. Jesus who cried out from the Cross, "I thirst" (Jn 19:28) continues to thirst for the souls behind the dark cells of prisons. Jesus who offered paradise to the good thief continues to offer redemption to innumerable prisoners through PMI volunteers. What shall we do for the reintegration and redemption of prisoners?

Three Ways

Dear people of God, do you have a question of how you can support this ministry, a ministry which excludes no one. You can support this Mission for the Lost in three ways. Firstly, through your prayers. Recently, PMI established a Contemplative Wing to pray silently before the Blessed Sacrament for the renewal of prisoners worldwide at PMI National Office, Bengaluru. You are most welcome to join this PMI contemplative wing to profoundly pray for the reformation of worldwide prisoners. On January 21st, 2024 Pope Francis inaugurated the Year of Prayer in preparation for the Holy Year 2025. Let's pray in a special way for the reformation and rehabilitation of prisoners during this year of prayer. Secondly, through your voluntary service.

Prison Ministry is a call within a call to reach out to the broken, dejected, unvisited, the lost, least and the last. You need not be a judge, lawyer or a police officer to work for prisoners. But you can be an ordinary human being, who can do small things with great love for the love of our brethren behind the bars. If you have the eyes of Jesus who looks at the prisoner with eyes of compassion and the heart of Jesus who can hold the prisoner with love, just say 'Yes' to the call of our Redeemer. If you want to visit the God of the Lost, walk into the dark cells of prisons where broken beings await you.

Thirdly, your financial support. Your financial assistance for prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration will highly be appreciated. One of the basic principles of PMI is 'begging'. We consider begging as a blessing, because we beg for those who are helpless. We beg to give our friends a better future. We beg to provide them a life of dignity. We beg to make them kings and queens. We do not have any foreign funding to meet expenses, but we actualise our plans and visions by meeting people personally. Here we become not mere distributors of easy money, but we become one with the helpless in their struggle. PMI volunteers stand at the church doors with a bucket in their hands, begging something from those who have to give to those who don't have.

Blessings

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 one of the most challenging tasks. 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.



✠ **Bishop Jose Pulickal**
CBCI 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, graciously hear our prayer.

Lord, you were an innocent prisoner and experienced the plight of a prisoner. We bring before you all our brothers and sisters behind 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, graciously hear our prayer.

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, graciously hear our prayer.

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: Lord, graciously hear our prayer.

(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

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