**Role of Society in the Transformation of the Prisoners**

**Introduction**

Jesus was led by the Spirit to wilderness (Lk: 4:1). He was on his spiritual journey to reflect about God’s Will in His future Mission. There appeared the devil to break His Sadhana by tempting him to give into that mortifying hunger and the lure of money and power. He tried all possible means to deviate Jesus from the spiritual path. But Jesus answered the Devil by the Word of God and came out of the desert with a clear Vision Statement: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. I have been sent to release the captives…..to preach the Good News to the Poor” (Lk: 4:18-19). According to this statement, His first ministry seems to be to work for the liberation of those who are languishing behind the bars in prisons.

We are given a clear mandate to continue this sacred mission of Jesus as His followers and disciples. For me this ministry is not an option but an obligation “so that everybody will know you are my disciples” (Jn: 13: 35). The Church in India is strengthening its commitment and seriously responding to this call through Prison Ministry-India, a registered voluntary organization recognized by our Bishops’ Conference, working for the reform, release and rehabilitation of the inmates. The inspirational figure St. Maximilian M. Kolbe, Conventual Friar Minor killed in a Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz and canonized by Saint Pope John Paul II, has been chosen by PMI as "the patron saint" of prisoners.

**What is a prison?**

Prisons are known to have existed throughout the history. In ancient times a prison was considered a house of captives and a place of punishment. Today it is viewed as a correctional institution for Rehabilitation. Prisoners are sent to prison not for punishment but for rehabilitation. People in prisons are still human beings who need our compassionate look, understanding and love.

But the utility of prison as an institution for rehabilitation of offenders and preparing them for normal life has always been a controversial issue. As we see it today, prison is not a normal place. The prisoners are deprived of freedom and personal contacts with family and friends. We are putting people in prison, many times, for non-violent crimes and turning them out more violent and dangerous than when they went in. I think our goal should be ultimately to help turn people's lives around — but we are not treating our prisoners that way right now.

**Who are the prisoners?**

: There are quite a large number of offenders who are otherwise well behaved and are persons of respectable class of society. But they fall prey to criminality and become victims on account of momentary impulsiveness, provocation or due to situational circumstances.

: There is also another class of prisoners who are there due to illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and victims of peer group pressure.

: There is yet another class of prisoners who are otherwise innocent but have to bear the rigours of prison life due to miscarriage of justice. Obviously such persons find it difficult to adjust themselves to the prison surrounding and find life inside the prison most painful and disgusting.

: All are not criminals. Many are wrongly accused and are wrongfully detained or negligent acts of the prison personnel.

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**Consequences of imprisonment**

: At the outset, it affects the image of the person imprisoned. He is labelled as criminal before court gives its verdict. It affects his job, his social status and his future.

: Imprisonment disrupts relationships. When a member of a family is imprisoned, the disruption of the family structure affects relationships between spouses, as well as between parents and children.

: Imprisonment affects the prisoners and also their family living in poverty. When an income generating member of the family is imprisoned the whole family has to suffer and adjust to the loss of income.

: The family has to suffer financial loss because they have to engage a lawyer, arrange food for the prisoner, transport to prison to visit the prison etc.

: Although under-trial prisoners should be presumed innocent until found guilty by a court of law, and treated as such, their conditions are often much worse than those for convicted prisoners . Persons who have committed offences for the first time come into contact with hardened criminals and hence is likely to become professional criminals. There is no separation of offenders of serious offences and minor offences. Hence hardened criminals may spread their influence over minor criminals.

: It is a known fact that prisons in India are overcrowded, there is no fresh air, absence of proper and nutritious food etc. Prisons have very serious health implications. A prisoner can easily be affected by serious illnesses when he lives with other patients or due to malnutrition.

**Why should we help the prisoners?**

Very often people do ask why we should help the prisoners. They are criminals. They are in the prison because of their crimes. They must be punished for the same. It is right. But as we look into the life of Jesus Christ, our master and saviour, He himself was in the prison at the last moments of his life with the hard core criminals. But we believe that he was an "innocent prisoner". There are many innocent prisoners in our prisons, who are unjustly punished. Cardinal Newmanonce said that: "We both are same but you are caught and we are not caught". We all make mistakes but we are given a chance to repent but though they want to prove themselves good, first time itself chance is denied.

I was touched by what an inmate once said:"Speak to God about us - prisoners before you speak about God to us - prisoners".Though this was the ministry of Jesus from the beginning of His life, but it was not given much importance in our Church. Jesus was for the sinners and for the downtrodden, but in our ministries we still forget to take care of the strayed ones and keep them away from our society. Prisoners are not our enemies. Very often many of them are victims of situations. The only difference is that "they are inside and we are outside". It is God’s providence for us that we are safe.

The greatest suffering for our brothers and sisters is loneliness. Mostly families, friends and others abandon them. Rejection by dear ones leads them to choose wrong friends while inside the prison. In ancient times a prison was considered a house of captives; a place of punishment; today it is viewed as a correctional institution for Rehabilitation. The new outlook on prisoners is: Criminals are not born criminals; society makes them that way and people should hate the crime, not the criminal.

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The real purpose of sending criminals to prison is to transform them into honest and law abiding citizens by inculcating in them a distaste for crime and criminality. It is for this reason that the modern trend is to lay down greater emphasis on the prisoners so that they can be rehabilitated to normal life in the community. But who cares for them? Who is responsible for it? What is the back ground of their life? What about their family, the kith and kin? What is their future? And finally who can help them?

**What is our mission / role in the prison?**

: The first question many ask the volunteers is: What are you doing actually in the prison? Ours is a culture which places importance on what we do rather than who we are. It is not what we do is more important. What do the inmates need is our presence and our very being.

: They go through acute loneliness, mental agony and hopelessness. Our compassionate, creative, contemplative, healing and hope-filled presence helps them to experience divine presence. Our presence brings them lots of healing and hope and conversion of hearts. Millions of ways like a surprise visit, a spontaneous smile, a kind word, a sweet greeting, a graceful nod, a concerned look, willingness to listen etc., do make our presence felt by them. They experience peace and joy in these encounters. They eagerly be looking at the gate and waiting for our presence in their crushed hopes. Our presence changes their moods of helplessness.

: They often ask our prayers. They believe that the Lord of history can change their destiny. They have lost everything but they say they can’t afford to lose God. Our assurance of prayers for these unfortunate brothers and sisters will a go long way in bringing hope in their life.

: For cleansing and disciplining mind, Yoga and meditation classes were started in a big way in some prisons with the help of various voluntary organizations. In the year 1994 with the permission of Kiran Bedi, the DGP, Tihar Jail created a history by organizing a Vipassana Meditation camp for more than one thousand prisoners. Since then a permanent Vipassana center has been opened in Tihar Jail No.4, where two courses of ten days duration are organized regularly. Meditation groups impart moral education and techniques of meditation to the prisoners. The prison authorities encourage us and also permit us to conduct prayer services, reconciliation services, conducting Bible study and celebrations of Sacraments to the inmates. This is helping many prisoners in changing the whole approach to life.

: Educational activities are looked after with the help of Government resources as well as NGO’s participation. Study Centres of IGNOU, and NIOS are established at Tihar. Computer training centres are also started in the Prisons for imparting computer education to the prisoners. Being under-trials for a few years we can teach the subjects and encourage them to spend their time in studying and writing their exams. Education is still an important ministry of in India. The statement of the 27th general body meeting of CBCI, 2006 on the theme: Catholic Education and the Church’s concern to the Marginalized insists: "Keeping in mind the words of Jesus that he has come to give life and life in abundance (Jn 10:10), we need to focus on educating the marginalized". By "marginalized’’ they refer specially to the weaker sections of society: the migrants, the displaced etc.

: Prisoners are displaced from the social mainstream and therefore it is a vocation to contribute our mite by concentrating on this weaker section and empowering them through formal and non – formal education. It is very encouraging to see that some inmates pick up spoken English well and even prepared to switch over to English medium when they appear for XII Std.

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: Another area of our service could be counselling and providing psychological help. Many have deep seated anger, feelings of revenge, frustration and even suicidal and homicidal tendencies. Using our skills in this area and spending quality time with them will bring a world of transformation in the life of the inmates.

: Prisoners are our benefactors. They give meaning for our life, for our vocation and mission. Their sharing of pain and struggles with us and our compassionate listening to them is the raw-material and content of our prayers. They teach us many truths of life like the values of hope, endurance, waiting, resilience, sense of gratitude and above all deep faith in God. Our primary purpose of visiting the prisons is to learn these human values from the inmates and deepen our own faith experience.

: The festivals and spiritual discourses should be celebrated through rejoicings and other meaningful programmes so that the prisoners can at least momentarily forget that they are leading a fettered life.

: All may not get pass to enter into prisons. Some can make a visit to the prison or the inmates in the rehabilitation centres and show them that we are their brothers and sisters and we care for them.

: They can also sponsor a meal for them or contribute their mite for the education of the children or for the maintenance of the rehabilitation centres. We can provide medical help by way of organizing free medical camps in the prison and provide them with free spectacles and medicines.

: There are many who wait for their freedom and if possible we can help them with the help of our Lawyer friends for their speedy release, so that they can come back to the main stream of the society.

: We can share with them our material goods like dress, winter clothes and writing materials or help them get a job using our influence when they are released. We can help their children to get admission in our schools and boarding homes so that their future is ensured. Even from our minimum let us contribute generously something for them, for lawyers’ fees and for their families with the same mentality of the widow who shared all her possessions with others.

: We can be beach-menders and bridge builders between the inmates and their families. We are called to carry on our Reconciliation Ministry (II Cor: 5:18-19) in their life and help the families to accept and embrace the inmates upon their release from the prison.

: Our ministry is to give them a feeling that the world is not bad and there are still people to care for them and interested in their welfare. Our dealings and activities make them feel respectable and loveable. This brings tremendous transformation in their attitudes and mind-set. Thus let us try to bring changes in the life of these least, lost and last of our society.