Columns
Coronavirus
Ministry



Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak celebrates Christmas Mass in the Central Jail, in the Berhampur Diocese, in Odisha, India. (Provided photo)



by Shanti Pulickal

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 31, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

One of the deepest desires of the human heart is to live in communion and good relationship with others. We are sociable by nature and hence, social life and social activities have important roles in our life.

But the present global crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic has become a threat to our social life.

As the race for vaccine production is on, maintaining social distance, wearing face masks, and washing hands frequently have become mandatory as precautionary measures. But social distancing is alien to human nature; many people are falling into loneliness and a host of negative emotions that have sucked the world of its vitality and energy. Some have even harmed themselves out of desperation, depression or distress.

Social life is a need for every human being. But millions of prisoners, all over the world, are condemned to a life of social and societal distancing — some for life and some for many years. They are isolated from home, loved ones and society. Many of them are locked up in congested prisons, in unhealthy environments and among unfriendly people.

One of them said, "Although I am here for committing a crime, I am a human just like you."

The prisoners live under heavy bondage because of alienation from home and society.

They experience a great deal of anger, fear, revenge and insecurity. They need release from these, and indeed from the jail itself. It is with this goal in view that the organization called Prison Ministry India, or PMI, was launched in 1986. Now, it is established in 650 dioceses in India and has around 8,000 volunteers. I am happy to be a part of it.



Prison Ministry India volunteers in the Berhampur Diocese provide materials for activities such as volleyball for the prisoners of the area's Central Jail. (Provided photo)

I serve as a PMI volunteer in the Berhampur Diocese, in Odisha, one of the northeastern states of India; Prison Ministry India's vision and mission are:

- Release: Release the prisoners from their mental and emotional bondages, and from the prison itself;
- Renew: Renew and transform their entire life;
- Rehabilitate: Help the released prisoners to adjust to society after a gap of many years in prisons.

We, the volunteers in the Berhampur Diocese, try to realize this vision through various ministries. At first, we were reluctant, but the local Bishop Sarat Chandra Nayak motivated us, saying, "Be ready to be humiliated for the sake of the humiliated ones in the jail." The prisoners were grateful.

The physical and mental well-being of the prisoners is one of our major concerns. We visit the prisoners, listen to them, understand their needs, and counsel them. Jesus said, "I was in prison and you visited me (Mt 25:36)." Yes! We visit the prisons to meet Jesus there, aided by the two basic principles of Prison Ministry India: "Prayer is our powerhouse and inconvenience is our convenience."

Many of the prisoners were suffering from eye ailments — some even had worms in their eyes — and so we arranged eye camps in different prisons in our diocese. At our request, the local eye hospital gave free medical check-ups for nearly 500 prisoners, but we paid for the medicines and 300 pairs of glasses. We met all our expenses following the norms given by Prison Ministry India: "God's providence is our bank balance and begging is our lifestyle."



The inaugural session of eye camp for the prisoners (Provided photo)

Most prisoners' families live in poverty, especially when the breadwinner is in jail. If the prisoners request it, we visit their houses, conduct prayer meetings, counsel them, help in resolving family quarrels, understand their needs and support them.

Rohen (whose name has been changed) was depressed. He had six small children and no income to support them. We helped his wife to get a small job, met all the initial expenses, and arranged hostel facilities for the children to study.

With that, Rohen was relaxed. He repented of all his crimes. And now, he spends much of his time reading the Bible and praying. He encourages and inspires other fellow prisoners to do the same. Every year, we help with the educational expenses of poor prisoners and their rehabilitation when they are released from jail.

Two seminarians visit them every Sunday, and teach spoken English for young men who are pursuing their studies. The prisoners are happy, since this will enable them to get a job on their release. This is also an opportunity for them to share their problems and concerns, and the seminarians listen and counsel them.

Advertisement

Most Christian prisoners in the Central Jail here — around 60 out of 800 prisoners — were arrested for drug trafficking, for which the punishment is about 10 to 14 years.

At their request, we provided Bible and hymn books for all, and they conduct regular prayers. Every year we celebrate Christmas with them.

Our bishop takes delight in offering Mass for them, and they are happy to speak to him and get his blessings. Local schoolchildren perform cultural programs, and we give fruits and cake to all the inmates in the jail.

Mass is also offered on other important days like Easter and Prison Ministry Day. All the Catholic prisoners make their confession too. The jail authorities tell us of their good behavior, and we feel happy.

Most prisoners live under high tension. "We get all the necessities of life here," they say. "But what we want is our freedom, and that is taken away from us."

Some cry for their loved ones, some for the free use of money, some for drugs, and some for gambling. Some are so depressed that they spent their time eating and sleeping. Some, after they are released, will commit the same crime again and return to jail. We try to counsel them and also organize programs to motivate them to the real values in life.

Playing is an excellent way of releasing their inner bondage. So we provide many game materials such as volleyball, carom boards, and Chinese checkers, and conduct matches. It is a delight to see smiles on their faces.



Volunteers with Prison Ministry India visit the women prisoners to distribute saris to them as Christmas gifts. (Provided photo)

Female prisoners are few, and we visit them often. Most of them are depressed, and so we spend quality time with them, counseling them and providing the support they require.

A "women's day" is conducted every year with different awareness programs on health and hygiene, the need for forgiveness, and women's empowerment — even in jail. We organize some games for them and teach handicrafts — like making paper bags, ornamental pieces, toys and jute table mats. We also provide a health camp on gynecology; these are all postponed amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Our strength is in the Lord and prayer is our powerhouse, so a prayer cell had been formed in one parish, but it is not vibrant now. But we do chain fasting and praying. When the lockdown situation is lifted, we will begin Prison Ministry India units in parishes near the jails, so that more volunteers can join the ministry. In the meantime, I have been sewing some face masks and providing some sanitizer for the prison.

In December, seven volunteers were allowed to enter and meet the Christian prisoners (40 are Catholic, the rest are other denominations.) They were depressed — no family could visit because of the novel coronavirus — we tried to help them realize that this is true of the whole world, and offered Mass for them. We distributed cake for all 800 prisoners. We also got to visit the women to distribute saris; they cried upon seeing us, happy that we thought of them. We experienced great joy in sharing with our sisters and brothers behind bars.

Prison ministry is dear to the heart of Jesus because he came to save the last, the least and the lost. May he multiply the little we do that it may contribute to the release and transformation of our brethren behind bars.

[Shanti Pulickal is a member of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod of the Kolkata Province, India.]