



## **ASIA/INDIA – Prison Ministry: the Church denounces overcrowding and is inspired by Fr. Kolbe**

New Delhi (Agenzia Fides) - The Church in India is strengthening its commitment in the prison Ministry. On the one hand, denouncing overcrowding, a long-standing problem in Indian jails. On the other hand choosing an inspirational figure such as St. Maximilian M. Kolbe, Conventual Friar Minor killed in a Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz. Pope John Paul II canonized Fr. Kolbe as a "martyr of charity", proclaiming him "the patron saint" of prisoners.

Overcrowding in prisons in India gets worse and worse: according to the latest data available, at the end of 2012 the total number of prisoners in the country was over 385 thousand, out of a total capacity of about 340 thousand people. Some prisons are home to double the number of detainees. To reduce overcrowding, the Indian government launched a plan for the modernization and expansion of prisons in the last decade, building 125 new prisons, 1,579 additional barracks and 8,658 accommodation for prison staff.

But, for the Church, the solution is not to build new premises: as stated in a note sent to Fides, the right way is the prevention of crime, public education to legality and ethics. The figure of Fr. Kolbe, finally, may be a reference and a concrete experience to proclaim the Good News to those who live the pain of imprisonment.

The association of the apostolate "Prison Ministry India" (PMI) is "close" to the detainees. The association started 28 years ago in Kerala, approved by the Bishops' Conference of India as one of its activities, and today falls under the aegis of the "Justice and Peace" Commission. The members of the PMI visit the prisons and dialogue and prayer meetings are held with prisoners, they also manage rehabilitation centers for ex-detainees. The approach is to visit prisons, encouraging inmates to regain peace of heart, establishing contacts with the detainees' families and providing opportunities for rehabilitation after their release. This work is also carried out together with the "Missionaries of Charity" which have opened a home called "Shanti Dhan" ("Gift of Peace") for men and women who have been in prison.

Today, the PMI has 850 bases on the Indian territory, 30 rehabilitation centers and 6,000 volunteers across India. It continuously organizes education programs in parishes, universities, schools and other institutes. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/07/2014)