**Homily of Archbishop Kurian Mathew Vayalunkal**

**Apostolic Nuncio to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands**

**Christmas Mass at Bomana Correctional Centre**

**14th December 2017**

It is a joy and an honor for me, as the Apostolic Nuncio/the Representative of Pope Francis, to be with you today to celebrate this Christmas Mass. It is totally true that there are still other 10 days more for the official Christmas celebration, but still we make it as festive as we can.

Before reflecting with you on today’s Scriptures, I would like to take a moment to thank all of you for your generosity in welcoming the Apostolic Nuncio and the accompanying priests and nuns. A special word of thanks to the honorable authorities of this correctional center for allowing us to this place and making all the arrangements for sharing the joy of Christmas with these brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

I realize fully that it is never easy to be in such an environment. Further more, Christmas could be one of the most difficult times for all of us to be away from families and friends. This was my own personal experience. During my seminary times in India, while spending Christmas with my brothers in one of the correctional centers during the Christmas holidays there, I myself experienced it. My dear friends, I have come to be with you today, because you could not come and be with me at Christmas. I have come today to you, because I want, particularly, to bring the love and affection of Pope Francis to each and every one of you.

Recently, I happened to watch a TV program of Pastor Jim Bakker, who was explaining his own Christmas experience behind bars. With tears in his eyes he said, “the greatest pain was the pain of loneliness”. In that program he talked about a book that kept his moral up while he was in prison for five years. The title of the book is “Through the Wilderness of Loneliness”. It is written by Tim Hansel. This book is a kind of an edited version of the journal of Tim Hansel. He was a guide to mountain climbers. Once he fell from a cliff and damaged his spine. He was bedridden and lived with terrible pain for the rest of his life. All his friends left him one by one. At the end, his wife divorced him. At that point he wrote, “The loneliness was so bad tonight that it sucked all the oxygen out of the room. It was so intense, it felt like it could peel the paint off the walls”. But at the end, Tim realized one marvelous thing. On page 21 of his book it is mentioned: “The pain of loneliness is one way in which God gets our attention”.

My dear friends, it is absolutely true. In times of trial and difficulties you ask—we ask—: “God, where are you? have you left me? That is the time we feel that everybody has walked away. Yes, when I am on top, when I was in powerful positions, everybody came in. But when I had a disgraceful situation, all left, all walked away leaving me all alone in the darkness of this cell. Pastor Jim had the same experience. But he said: “One very special friend came in, when the whole world walked out, and that was my Jesus. It is in the loneliness of the prison that I had my intimacy with my God. My God always whispered to me, ‘I have brought you here Jim, not to punish you, but I brought you here to get to know me’. That assurance created a real bond with my Lord that never left me”.

This same assurance is given to us today in the first reading from the book of Isaiah 41:13-20. The Lord says to us as He said to the Jews in Babylon: "I am the Lord, your God, who grasps your right hand; It is I who say to you '***Fear not***, I will ***help you***’”. This is indeed a great assurance and a perfect guaranty that our Lord is there for us. He never abandons us. Even if we feel that he is nowhere near to us, later we will realize that in our trials he was carrying us on his shoulders. Dear friends, when you look into Bible you will see this phrase, “Fear not”, or similar words, at least 365 times. That means one for each day of the year. (Some say it is mentioned 366 times to fill 366 days in the leap year).

Through the Prophet Isaiah, our Lord promises that He will help us. But remember that Jesus said, "ask, and you shall receive". We need to ask for help. We can't do all of life alone, especially the big sorrows that come our way. The challenge is to understand God’s mysterious ways in helping us. He has His own ways, and He comes to us with His own plans. God’s plans are mysterious to us. Very often ***God upsets our plans to set up His plans***. I am sure that most of you had your own plans for life. I am sure, none of you ever planed to be here in this facility. But, the truth is, He upsets our plans to set up His plans. ***We*** *plan our future looking into our present*, but ***God*** *plans our present looking into our future*. We look into our life in a small frame, but God has no frame and His vision is eternal.

When our plans are all shattered, then we become disappointed. We become upset and complain to God, saying, ‘God you are not walking with me…you are not by my side”. But, friends, I would like to tell you again and again, God has His own plans for us. Whatever happens in our life, is God’s plan and His way of telling us that ‘You are mine and you are dear to me’. Let me tell you a secret. When you are disappointed with something, please take out that prefix ‘dis’ from the word disappointment, and replace it with ‘His’, and make it ‘His appointment’. Yes friends, everything that happens in our life is ‘His appointment’. Then, just like Pastor Jim, we also could hear the voice of God saying, ‘*I have brought you here dear, not to punish you, but I brought you here to get to know me*’.

My dear friends, through the prophesy of Isaiah, God gives us a promise of hope. A hope that helps us to move forward with greater trust in God, the Merciful Father. As Pope Francis said, “Hope is a gift of God, and should be nourished”. He continues to say: “Hope is the strength to keep moving forward. It is the power to press on towards the future and a changed life. It is the incentive to look to tomorrow, so that the love we have known, despite all our failings, can show us a new path.”

When you have that hope and trust in your God, no one can put you down. Nothing can control your attitude or your mind. The story of ***Dr. Victor Franklin*** tells us this. He was a renowned Austrian psychiatrist who was consigned to the Nazi concentration camps along with his family, including his wife. On April 27, 1945, Victor Franklin was liberated by the Americans. Among his immediate relatives, the only survivor was his sister. After years of suffering in the concentration camps he came to his hallmark conclusion that even in the most absurd, painful and dehumanized situation, life has potential meaning, and that therefore even suffering is meaningful. In whatever circumstances you find yourself today—weather it is prison bars, physical sickness, psychological worries, whatever—you still have the power over everything if you put hope in your Savior. It is your choice whether you will focus on the outward/external situation, or whether you can go deep inside yourself and remember that God is with you and that He is in control, and ready to show you “great and mighty things.” It is the same thing that, from the depths of prison, Prophet ***Jeremiah*** heard God say, “Call unto me, and I will show you great and mighty things that you do not know.”

My dear friends, the hope that we felt in the oracle of Prophet Isaiah has become our real hope, fulfilled through the birth of Christ, the Son of God, as our Savior. In Him, God became no more a myth but a reality; God became not someone who sits up in heavens, but someone who walks along with His people. Yes, Christmas teaches us that we have a God that is very, very close to us. We have a God so close to us that He became one of us. We have a God who knows what you are going through in this facility. He became a little baby in Bethlehem; therefore we are never separated from God. You may be separated from your wife, your mother and father, but you can never be separated from God. Yes friends, we have a God who was born out with animals in a manger. He himself was a prisoner,and he suffered and died as a criminal. He knows you. He knows what you're going through and is very, very close to you. Dear friends, Christmas wasn't just 2,000 years ago. Christmas is now. Christmas wasn't just in Bethlehem. Christmas happens now at Bomana Correctional Center, because God always wants to be reborn in our hearts. So the invitation is to make your heart a crib, a place where Baby Jesus could come and be born.

Dear brothers in Christ, sorry to say that, we are living in a world where there is a deliberate attempt to take Christ away from Christmas. We are at a particular juncture in history when both the Church and world are threatened by violent forces of consumerism and materialism. Our Christmas celebrations are also engulfed with the influence of materialism and consumerism. That is why Christmas has become a X’mas and there is only business. Let me tell you, my dear friends, Christmas without Christ is just a mess. If you take out Christ from Christmas, then who will remain with you?

Few years back, while I was on my tour of office in an Asian Country, I read an interview during Christmas time. A journalist walking around the street of the busy Capital asked what Christmas means to the people. She asked the same question to a young man dressed up as Santa Clause standing at the gate of a mall, greeting people who come in for shopping. The answer was shocking. He said: “I have no idea. The owner of the shop promised me 5 dollars per hour, and that is important for me”.

Sometimes, we just forget Christ in the middle of our celebrations. I have a story to tell you on that. When I was a parish priest in India, along with the youth group we decided to organize Christmas Carole and … (*story*).Yes, we leave our Christ behind and we move forward without him.

Even today, Christ comes to us through our fellow beings—through our suffering friends, through our sick and abandoned brothers and sisters. By welcoming them in our life, we welcome Jesus himself. There is a beautiful ***Christmas story***: One Christmas evening Olga, a poor widow, got a letter without stamp and postmark, with only her name and address. As she read the letter she was trembling. “Dear Olga, I would like to pay a visit to you tomorrow. Love always, Jesus”. Why would Jesus visit me? I have nothing but 5 dollars in my pocket. Olga thought to herself. It was cold outside. But anyway she walked to market with her worn-out overcoat. She bought a piece of bread and a carton of milk. While she was hurrying back home, on that cold and snowing Christmas eve, she saw a homeless man sitting at the sidewalk. He was unshaven and dirty, with a shivering arm holding an empty cup. “Lady, can you help me? I have been living on the street, and it is getting really cold on an empty stomach… If you could help me, I would really appreciate it..” “Sir, I would like to help but I myself am a poor woman… and all I have is some bread which I bought for an important guest coming tomorrow”. “That is okay… I can understand. Merry Christmas, the man replied. As Olga walked away her footsteps stumbled, there was an unknown sadness at the corner of her heart. She turned back towards the man and said, “Sir, wait, I think, may be, I can help you. Take this food with you! I will figure something out to serve my guest” Olga said. “Thank you, thank you, he replied with sincere happiness. Olga unbuttoned her coat and gave it to him and said, “You, take this sir, I have another old one at home”. She was panicking about not having anything to offer to Jesus after she reaches home. She found another letter under the door, similar to the first one. The letter said, “Dear Olga, it was good to see you. Thank you for the lovely meal and also for the beautiful coat. Love always, Jesus”. Yes, Jesus comes to us in the form of the homeless person at the sidewalk. He will come to us in various ways. The important thing is that we have to recognize him. Try to see Jesus in everyone. That is the best.

Today, while we celebrate this Holy Eucharist to remember the birth of Christ, let us close our eyes and just listen to the knocking of Jesus at the door of our heart. He is asking us, “will you give me a place in your heart?” Are you willing to invite him to your heart—to your own individual life? If we do not do that, we will be just like the innkeeper, who just refused saying that there was no place. Yes, there was no place in the inn because he failed to find place for Christ in his own heart. There he lost the golden chance of seeing God and having God under his roof. He lost the chance of being the first witness of the historical event. My dear friends, when we refuse a place for Christ in our life, we become real losers.

Let us invite our fellow brothers and sisters to our life, and be ready to serve them with whatever we have. Our compassion towards an unfortunate person is our compassion to Jesus himself. May be, you might find some of your friends here in this facility who are wanting for a good word or a smile of appreciation and kindness. Don’t forget friends: A word of encouragement during a failure is worth more than an hour of praise after success. Try to be that beautiful star that guided the wise men to Jesus. Let us shine like the star and be an inspiration to our friends, and show the love and mercy of our loving Jesus.

Yes, my dear brothers and sisters, through Christmas, we celebrate the goodness of God who so loved us that he took on our human flesh and became one with humanity. He did so with a specific purpose—to redeem us from our sins and restore us to eternal life. In the midst of this mission of salvation, God revealed Himself to us and showed us a path to live in a new way. He restored us to unity with Him, and made us His children. God accomplished all this by sending His only Son into the world. Christmas marks this sacred beginning. May our celebration of Christmas mark the beginning of good things in our lives through Christ our Lord.

***Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year to you all!***

**May God bless you all!**