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Newspaper of the Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

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News

Benedictine priest seeks sponsors for children in India

By Diane Holtz
Catholic Key Correspondent



photo courtesy of Father Paschal

Father Paschal Thomas hugs a child in his native village of Madras, India.

his life's work would be - he was being called to serve God as a priest, and to devote his life to comforting those in need.

"I didn't understand anything but 'comfort the afflicted,' but the prophecy shook me. My whole being was shaking," the soft-spoken priest said.

Now, 57 years later, Father Thomas, a Benedictine monk at Conception Abbey, is still answering that call by not only comforting and counseling people in northwest Missouri, but by helping children who are poor, disabled or orphaned in his native India.

Since arriving in the United States as a newly-ordained priest in 1959, Father Thomas, now a U.S. citizen, has coordinated a monthly sponsorship program of more than 5,500 children in India. For \$20 each month, Catholics in the United States fund a child's education and transportation to and from school, and help pay for clothing, health care,

CONCEPTION

- When Benedictine Father Paschal Thomas was seven years old, he remembers listening in Mass as the lector read of a Messiah coming to comfort the afflicted. Father Thomas said he knew at that moment what

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food, and other needs. The Indian family receives \$19; the remaining dollar is used for program costs.

"For me, this seemed the highest service possible, namely, service to the most underprivileged," said Father Thomas, who joined the Benedictines in 1979. "That is my identity, purely as a servant. For 57 years, it has sustained me."

His latest sponsorship program, named Anawim, from the Aramaic word meaning "the poorest of the poor," supports five groups of children in Madras, the southernmost state in India where Father Thomas grew up.

One group consists of nearly 300 girls ages nine to 15 who were in "bonded labor" to large Indian landowners. To free girls from what he calls "near slavery," Father Thomas has paid "ransoms" ranging from \$50 to \$300. The girls are returned to live with their families, and Catholic sponsors from the United States then supplement the families' incomes so the girls no longer have to work in bonded labor.

In the past, Father Thomas coordinated support for 500 lepers in Madras. The program is now being administered by a local order of nuns. The Anawim program pays for the education and needs of almost 100 children of those lepers.

Sponsors also support over 50 children of executed prisoners, and just over 100 Indian orphans. Twenty-one disabled children are also helped through the program.

Four times a year, the children write letters to their benefactors in the United States. Father Thomas translates the letters for the children's sponsors. He also preaches in about 40 parishes in 10 dioceses throughout the United States to raise funds and promote sponsorship of the children, and grant funding from American Catholic foundations to support the work of religious orders in India.

Father Thomas refers to his work as a "pioneer," or "mobilizing," ministry, because as soon as he has found sponsors for 1,000 children, he turns the administration and resources of the program over to a religious order. He estimates that the Anawim program will reach that number sometime in 2001. At that time, he plans to begin his seventh sponsorship program.

Reflecting on more than four decades of comforting the afflicted, Father Thomas said he was grateful for three things: his gift of compassion, the generosity of U.S. Catholics, and the support of Conception Abbey's Abbot Gregory Polan, OSB. He said he has served under four abbots; each has been supportive of his work.

For information on sponsoring a child in India, contact Father Thomas at: Anawim Benedictine Project, Father

Paschal Thomas, OSB, Conception Abbey, Box 501,
Conception, MO 64433, or phone (660) 944-2808.



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