As citizens of the world, we all have a duty to help the least among us, but there are 300 million “untouchables” in India who do not receive the food, shelter and education they need. But a Maywood priest is changing their lives.

Thankfully, the “untouchables” have an advocate in Maywood who is easing their suffering and offering hope.

Fr. Ben Chinnappan (pictured, second from right) escaped from India’s society of outcasts. Today he serves as Chaplain at the Edward Hines V.A. Hospital. In 2000, he founded Dalit Solidarity, Inc., a charitable organization, to provide housing, health care and education for residents of the native district he left behind.

Dalit is the modern term for “untouchable” but, even in modern times, this group continues to be oppressed. Fr. Ben traces their current position on the lowest rung of society back to 1500 B.C., when the caste system was first established in India. Brahmins were the ruling caste, who controlled 70% of the wealth and power in India. The lowest caste was the Sudras, or slaves. Dalits, the original natives of India, are not even in the caste system, thus they were treated worse than slaves.

When Christian missionaries came to India, they attended to the upper castes and ignored the Dalits. That is, until Father Thomas Duffy arrived from Dublin, Ireland in the 1930’s. Fr. Duffy became the “patron saint of outcasts,” ministering to residents of rural Villupuram District in the archdiocese of Pondicherry.

“He built schools for them,” Fr. Ben said, “Even though outcasts were not supposed to be educated.” In the depths of the Great Depression, Fr. Duffy traveled to Boston and somehow managed to raise $100,000 to build a boarding school for the children of his Indian diocese.

“Fr. Duffy was from a rich family,” Fr. Ben explained. “He sacrificed his own wealth to open children’s eyes to education. Without his school, many would have become slaves.”

Fr. Ben’s father was among the many outcasts that Fr. Duffy saved. He attended the boarding school and the education he received allowed him to escape the bondage of untouchable society. It also enabled him to give his son, Ben, the education he would need to escape.

“If Fr. Duffy hadn’t opened doors,” Fr. Ben said, “I’d be washing dishes back home.”

Instead, Fr. Ben graduated from the seminary in Bangalore in 1988 and obtained his Masters Degree in Theology from the University of Ottawa, Canada. He worked as a chaplain in Harrisburg, PA for seven years, before receiving an offer from...
the government to minister to the veterans at the VA Hospital in suburban Hines. Fr. Ben lives at St. Eulalia Parish, located at 1851 S. 9th Avenue in Maywood, where he celebrates Mass.

As a child, Fr. Ben saw Dalits being discriminated against in all walks of life. “It’s worse than racism,” he said, “Very few get the opportunities I received. What’s ironic is that the outcasts shunned by missionaries are now 80% Christian. God gave me the privilege of growing up Catholic,” Fr. Ben said. “The caste system didn’t make sense to my teachers. They saw potential in me.”

With his education, Fr. Ben could have passed himself off as a member of the “landlord class” but he refused to ignore or forget his roots. Instead, he used the privileges he enjoyed to lift up his native community. “God calls you for a specific purpose,” he said. “Mine was to empower people, to make a difference in their lives.”

Using Fr. Duffy as his role model, Fr. Ben founded St. Patrick’s Home in 2000 for poor children who are mostly Dalits. The boarding school houses 47 students in grades six through twelve. The students not only receive a free education, they get free health care. More importantly, they are provided with the necessary tools to overcome the stigma of untouchability. More than 200 students receive scholarships with the support from Dalit Solidarity, Inc.

“For these children, being accepted to St. Patrick’s means freedom from injustice, discrimination and virtual slavery.”

In 2005, St. Patrick’s Community College opened, providing advanced education in nursing, teacher training and automotive mechanics. The college attracted 70 students in its first year. All the nursing students got jobs immediately after graduation.

Fr. Ben has raised $225,000 to support these charities, as well as donating most of his salary to the Dalits. His biggest benefactor was an Irish-American attorney named Thomas Aquinas Reynolds from Winnetka. Ben met Reynolds when he was ministering to his daughter, Clare, at a Pennsylvania hospital. After Clare passed away, Reynolds told Fr. Ben, “If you ever need anything, write to my address.” Reynolds sponsored Dalit Solidarity for years but always kept his anonymity. When Reynolds died in February 2008, Fr. Ben wondered how he could continue his ministry. By chance, he wrote to a priest in Cleveland, who provided the $25,000 Fr. Ben needed to meet his budget.

Fr. Ben returns to India every year to see the “fruits of his work.” He sees people who used to die from simple ailments being treated at the free clinic; he attends joyous school graduations and sees widows tending livestock in front of their modest homes.

“When Fr. Duffy died, he only had 800 rupees in the bank, because he believed in providence,” reflected the Hines chaplain. Fr. Ben also believes in providence, emphasizing that Dalit Solidarity has no administrative costs and 99% of the donations received go directly to the poor.

For those neighbors who would like to support Fr. Ben’s work with the outcasts, tax-deductible donations can be made to Dalit Solidarity, Inc., P.O. Box 112, Hines, IL 60141; learn more by visiting the website at dalitsolidarity.org; or feel free to contact Fr. Ben directly at 708-612-4248.