

## In the Spirit of Service: From Outcaste to Prize Winner

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And Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to the Father who is in heaven.” Mt. 5:16

### The Transformative Power of Service



One way to measure the true value of a service initiative is by weighing how much has positively changed after the service has been rendered and you have moved on. If your initiative went into a community where you built part of a clinic and your departure was followed by hundreds of patients having their medical needs taken care of, that clearly would be a valuable result. Often, however, results of service projects are not visible or apparent in the short run, though, over time, they will prove themselves to be very profound.

A well-crafted service initiative can provide an environment where volunteers are introduced into an ethos of service. Some discover in that environment such a deep sense of joy and satisfaction that they decide to redirect their life and make service a higher priority. The passion for service for some is a way to glorify God, while others find that it provides meaning and fullness to life. Well-crafted service initiatives, in addition to being life-transforming, can often stimulate a legacy of further giving.

For more than a generation, I have worked with thousands of young adults in programs that created an environment richly influenced by the ethos of service. On completing a project, many participants enthusiastically announced that their lives were changed through their service experience. After the initial enthusiasm faded, some continued to move forward and establish a personal legacy rich in good will and humanitarian achievements.

Fr. Nithiya was one of those who would make service his legacy. Fr. Nithiya's journey to Hungary to participate in RYS provided an additional spark to his passion for service. That passion grew over time and touched the hearts of thousands, especially the poorest of the poor.

### ***Part 1: In the Footsteps of the Great Teachers*** **Arriving in Hungary**

Fr. Nithiya Sagayam, a young Indian Roman Catholic priest, applied to RYS when he was a year older than the official RYS age limit. Our organizing team was in a dilemma because, after reading his background and studying his responses to our questionnaire, it was clear that he also had many of the qualities we were looking for. A difficult decision had to be made as we struggled to narrow one thousand applications down to 85 participants.

Rules exist for a reason and those reasons are often important. Yet, in some ways, Fr. Nithiya's clear and pure motivation spoke louder than the rules. After we reviewed and discussed each application, we decided to invite Fr. Nithiya to join the program. Time would prove the wisdom of our decision.

Fr. Nithiya arrived in Hungary for a month-long RYS project during the summer of 1991 when the nation was bursting with energy that had been pent up for decades. Communism was out, and capitalism was coming in. Billboards were being constructed on the side of major roads and they had words written on them explaining that they were for advertising. People needed to know what the billboards were used for because, over the past 45 years, the government was almost the only business in town.

The RYS volunteers and staff came from 40 nations and met for our orientation in Budapest. This initial contact provided us with a chance to mix and socialize with people from all over the world. During the orientation we participated in various team building exercises and enjoyed visits to historic and cultural areas. At the conclusion of the orientation, we divided into three teams and traveled to separate areas where we would live and work on a variety of projects.

Fr. Nithiya and his team went by bus to the industrial city of Tatabanya where they were warmly welcomed by the local residents. While in Tatabanya, our volunteers and staff slept in a dormitory at night, and during the day we worked on repairing and expanding four community schools. Despite these schools being closed for summer break, we often were visited by young students anxious to meet our curious team of workers. Many residents had never seen an African, a Malaysian or a South American nor had they ever seen such a variety of people living and working together. It must have come as a welcome surprise to see so many young people from different nations sharing light-hearted laughter while working hard to improve the schools.

### **Doing What Is Needed**

Just a few days after we had arrived, we received word from Fr. Stephan, the local Roman Catholic priest. He wrote that he had heard that among our participants was a young priest and he requested that the priest join him in celebrating Mass on Sundays and on various evenings. The note went on to explain that he was the sole spiritual caregiver for 50,000 congregants and that his work was becoming overwhelming. We all realized that the struggling priest needed support and we were happy when Fr. Nithiya accepted the priest's request.

This was a period when there were critical shortages of active Roman Catholic priests in Hungary and also in neighboring nations that had just removed their communist governments. The transition was marked by a surge in religious observance as many were using their new freedom to seek answers and quench a deep spiritual thirst. Fr. Stephan's growing congregation brought with them additional needs that were overwhelming for a single local priest. Though Fr. Nithiya could not speak Hungarian, his generous support was greatly appreciated.

Father Nithiya took on double duty, working with the RYS volunteers on expanding and repairing schoolrooms during the day and, in the evening, offering Holy Communion to a Hungarian congregation. Despite the extra work, Fr. Nithiya was always trying to share with those around. With humble family roots, he saw a kindred spirit in those who had to toil for their daily bread. For Fr. Nithiya, it did not matter if a person was Indian or Hungarian, Catholic or agnostic, because he naturally sought to discover the richness of each person's spirit and the value of their unique individuality.

Fr. Nithiya was a Franciscan and an Indian, and he found deep inspiration in the lives of two great saints—St. Francis, a Christian and Mohatma Gandhi, a Hindu. He saw in their lives brilliant examples of what it meant to live for the sake of others. He tried in many ways to walk in their footsteps.

The work of Fr. Nithiya did not escape the attention of the Bishop of that region and he was recognized for his efforts. Yet, Fr. Nithiya did not feel his efforts were special or unusual, for he was simply responding to a need and walking in the footsteps of his spiritual heroes.

When the time came for our RYS team to head back to the varied nations we called home, we said our emotional goodbyes. We felt a sense of satisfaction that our widely diverse team showed to our hosts that people of different religions and nations can successfully work together. Many of the volunteers exemplified the best aspects of their various religious and cultural heritages. Surely, some learned about the spirit of Christianity through a young Catholic priest, Fr. Nithiya.

Watch for part 2 tomorrow!