

## The man who shared a little and saved thousands

The founder of an extraordinary project to save homeless people honored in Kerala The man who shared a little and saved thousands



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P.U. Thomas was 17 years old when he was hospitalized for peptic ulcer. When he saw the hunger in the eyes of a patient in the next bed, he felt compelled to share the food his mother brought from home. From this simple act grew a life of service and a program that now feeds 5,000 people every day.

This year Thomas was selected for the Benedict Mar Gregorios Award for exemplary humanitarian service in his home state of Kerala in southern India. Cardinal Baselios Cleemis of Trivandrum presented him with the award on Nov. 6.

The Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council has announced plans to further honor Thomas at a Nov. 15 at function to marking the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. They also want to recognize his service to orphans, destitute people and people with mental illnesses.

The teenage Thomas only had a little food to share with than man in the bed beside him, who later died in the hospital ward. But the experience moved him to return to the government-run Kottayam Medical College Hospital and share food with other hungry patients.

The eldest of five children, who studied only up to the eighth grade, Thomas continued to take a share of the family food to hospital. His father did not object, he said. But on several occasions he felt like he was exploiting his father, who struggled hard to bring up the family.

Soon, he got a temporary job in the medical college and he used his salary to feed more people. But it proved inadequate. There were always more mouths than food.

So he found Good Samaritans among the doctors, medical students, nurses and even visitors. "Some came with food packets and others gave money," he said. As the word spread, more people, including school and college students, started bringing food packets, grains, fruits, vegetables and money.

Thomas married at the age of 26 in 1975 but continued his charity service. He had five children but his large family did not deter him from his charity work. Indeed, he had already shifted his attention towards another area: mentally disabled people wandering the streets.

he trust also feeds some 5,000 people daily and cares for hundreds of people with disabilities.

It started in 1985 when a mentally disabled and badly bruised man was brought to the hospital's emergency section where Thomas was posted. The man had lost his way while returning from a pilgrimage and some people in the market area attacked him, disturbed by his strange behavior.

Thomas was shocked to discover that the man was a retired bureaucrat, who had served in the Indian parliament. After helping him recover, Thomas traced his family by taking out newspaper advertisements and eventually saw them reunited.

Unfortunately, for many of the people Thomas cared for, their families did not want to take them back even after their conditions improved. He was forced to start a home for such people after one man called Kunjachan was not accepted back home.

Thomas was, at that time, staying in a small rented house near the medical college, so Kunjachan stayed in the veranda of his house. When more people joined Kunjachan, Thomas decided to rent another room for them.

But their numbers kept increasing so he rented an entire lodge and converted it into a home for people with mental disabilities by registering a trust, Navajeevan (new life). But soon the lodge got overcrowded and the trust was forced to look for even more space.

Their efforts developed into the present complex on 2 hectares of land 7 kilometers from Kottayam town in Kerala. It contains a home for service users, the administrative wing of Navajeevan, its central kitchen and a prayer hall.

Today, Navajeevan is a home for 250 people with physical and mental disabilities who were formally homeless. Food is shipped out from the kitchen, feeding about 5,000 people every day at three hospitals in Kottayam district.

Thomas said he has no funding from government or from overseas agencies and he deliberately

avoided both as he feels that their conditions could derail his objectives.

"I had run out of money and food umpteen times. But there was not a single day in the 50-year-long history when food was not served. God has made it possible," he said.

Many in Kottayam like Maya, a Hindu woman, laud Thomas for saving her life. "My husband who suffers from psoriasis and I, had planned to commit suicide and to kill our two children. We had no money to sustain our lives. The hut in which we lived was on the verge of collapse," But Thomas saw "our condition and gave us a new life," she said.

Thomas arranged treatment for Maya's husband, helped them build a house and gave her a job at Navajeevan.

He said that his mission will only be complete when others do whatever little they can to help their neighbors.

"Many people say they will help the poor after making enough for themselves. But they will never be able to do any charity. If we share whatever little we have, it will make a lot of difference," he said.

Thomas gave the example of a woman who sells dry fish in Kottayam market to take care of her mother who has dementia. The woman still brings a part of the earnings to Navajeevan every month with a request to give it to a person poorer than her.

"People like this woman are the ones making a difference in the world," he said.

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