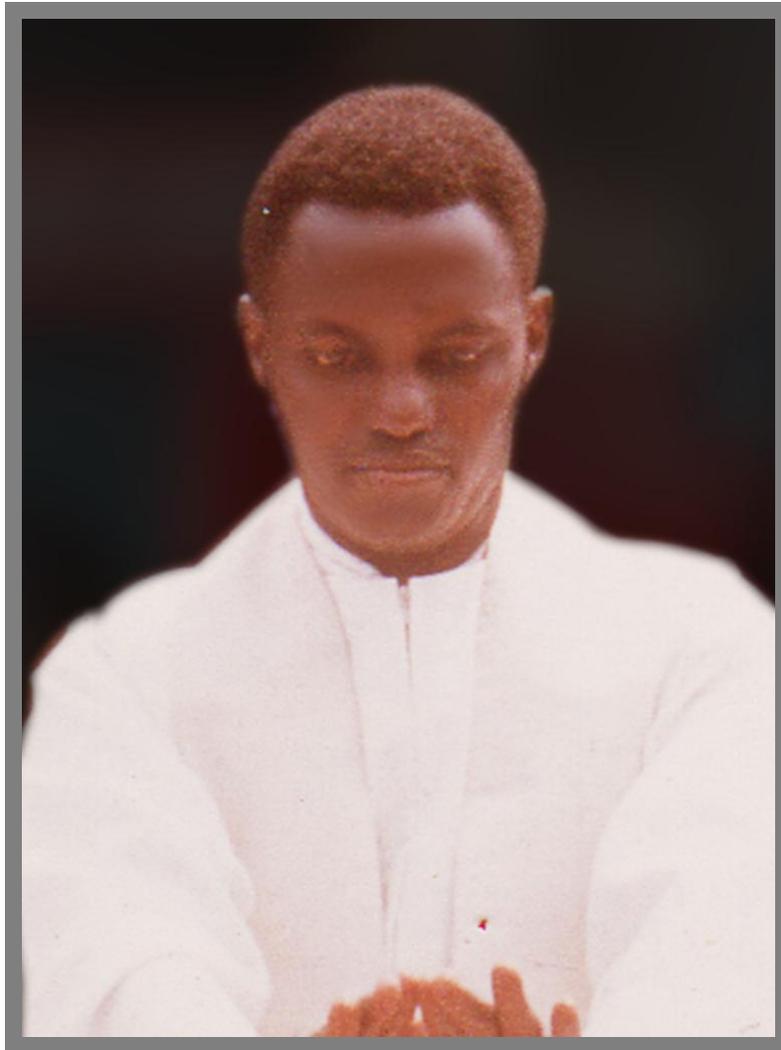


“HE NEVER CEASED TO AMAZE ME”

A Tribute to Father Joseph Niyomugabo



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PO Box 3836, Kigali, Rwanda

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A Tribute to Father Joseph Niyomugabo

April 2012



PO Box 3836, Kigali, Rwanda

“Fr. Niyomugabo was special, someone of noble character. Anyone who knew him and survived would remember him. He always had time for people and he was humble and discreet. I was constantly impressed by his kindness and capacity for organization. It was a privilege to serve under him.”

François Masabo

“When Fr. Niyomugabo was at Cyanika, there was no distance between priest and parishioner. Instead, there was hope.”

Senator Jean-Damascène Bizimana

“He always spoke the truth, even if the truth hurt influential people or people stronger than him. He did this in his sermons and in his conversations. He never minced his words.”

Sr. Renata Kanziga

“This priest was a hero and a parent to a lot of people. He was a worthy disciple of Christ in his everyday actions. The legacy he has left for us is the responsibility to fight for peace for our fellow men. He chose to give his life, instead of abandoning others whose pain he shared. He could have left Cyanika, and possibly died elsewhere, but he did not do so.”

Sr. Marie-Josée Mukabayire

“He didn’t just read the gospel. He took into account the fact that everyone, even the young, has something to say and to teach. He didn’t just preach: he listened to people.”

André-Martin Karongozi

“Even though I was still young, I could see how much Fr. Niyomugabo cared about his parishioners. He was what a priest should be. He showed his love for us at the most difficult of times, when everyone was trying to save his own skin. I have never seen in anyone else the devotion and sacrifice he showed us at that time. Even though he has died, we need to show him how grateful we are. I hope that one day he will be canonised.”

Marianne Nikuze

“The government should recognize Fr. Niyomugabo and give him a place among the national heroes.”

Spéciose Mukangenzi

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The church at the Parish of Cyanika, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

INTRODUCTION

On 26 February 2012, the remains of an estimated 25,000 victims of the 1994 genocide were laid to rest at a memorial site in Cyanika, Nyamagabe district. The bodies had been buried in three mass graves near the Parish of Cyanika. The majority of the victims had been killed at the parish on the morning of 21 April 1994. The soldiers, local officials, politicians and militiamen who bear responsibility for their deaths had, that very morning, killed an even larger number of Tutsi men, women and children in a school under construction in Murambi, in the town of Gikongoro, now a national genocide memorial site. Some of the survivors of Murambi had run to Cyanika, hoping they would find protection at the parish. They had barely caught their breath when they endured a second large-scale massacre.

The victims who were reburied on 26 February 1994 included Father Joseph Niyomugabo, the senior Catholic priest in charge of the Parish of Cyanika during the genocide. He had been a priest in Cyanika since 1985. Fr. Niyomugabo had many opportunities to leave the parish between 7 and 21 April and to safeguard his life. Given the animosity with which he was regarded by local government officials, he had more reason to leave the parish than anyone else. His fellow clergy, who knew the risks he ran, pleaded with him to accompany them to safety. But he refused to leave. Saying he had spent many years with the refugees who crowded the parish, and who had turned to him in their hour of need, he told his colleagues he could not desert his parishioners at such a critical moment. By putting the needs of others before his own, in the most terrifying of circumstances, he proved worthy of the refugees' trust in him.

Inspired by his faith and the values he held dear, Fr. Niyomugabo, a man of unfailing courage and integrity, ignored the dangers he faced. Instead, he devoted himself to the care and protection of the refugees. They were frightened, anxious, in desperate need of food, water, medical care and moral and spiritual comfort and they were under constant siege. He welcomed them to his church, and did all he could to shelter them from danger and to provide every assistance possible.

Most important of all, as the survivors emphasize in their testimonies, he stayed by their side. Eventually, he also died by their side. On 24 April 1994, prisoners brought in to bury the victims of the massacre of 21 April discovered his hideout. He was subjected to torture and humiliation before he was murdered.

Forced to scatter once the killing began on 21 April, the survivors of Cyanika learned about the death of Fr. Niyomugabo either while they were still in hiding, or after the genocide. The passage of time has not diminished their love for him, or their awareness of his sacrifice. In this report, survivors, including priests and nuns who worked alongside him, and others who knew him prior to the genocide, talk about the man they knew and the priest who reached out to them and who touched them in so many aspects of their lives, individually and collectively. They explain why, in the words of Sister Renata Kanziga, he never ceased to amaze them.

“He Never Ceased to Amaze Me”: A Tribute to Father Joseph Niyomugabo is part of a series of publications by *African Rights* to record and celebrate the lives and courage of the unsung heroes of the genocide. In the midst of the horrors of 1994, the efforts of the brave men and women, both Rwandan and foreigners—who did all they could to shield, feed, heal and watch over the men, women and children who were the targets of the genocide — provided a rare glimmer of hope. As they have acknowledged over the years, many of the survivors owe their lives to the kindness, bravery and sense of solidarity shown by these men and women. They refused to be cowed by the unrelenting propaganda and pressure intended to divide people, severing bonds which had linked individuals and communities over the years.

Conscious of the huge debt Rwanda, and humanity, owe them, *African Rights* has written a book, as well as individual reports, about the people praised for taking a stand against the genocide. In December 2002, we published *Tribute to Courage*, in English and French, a 299-page book which commemorates the compassion and strength of 19 people who risked their lives to save others. This was followed, in April 2003, by *The Gisimba Memorial Centre: No Place for Fear*, which detailed the battles of Damas Mutezintare Gisimba to defend the Tutsi orphans and the refugees at his orphanage against the violence of 1994. In December 2006, *“A True Humanitarian”*: A Tribute to Carl Wilkens, examines the challenges faced by the country director of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) who refused to leave his Rwandan colleagues and friends in 1994.

The choices and achievements of those who took a stand against the genocide, in the process saving lives, are significant to Rwanda’s past, present and future and to the international human rights cause. The values they fought for, and in some cases, died for — our common humanity, a sense of mutual responsibility and the importance of compassion — are essential to highlight as Rwanda seeks to recover from the genocide and to build a future of justice, peace, tolerance and unity. In identifying and honouring them, by publicizing their deeds and their sacrifices, *African Rights* hopes they will find their special and rightful place in the history of Rwanda, and in the international struggle to defend and promote human rights and to prevent genocide.

THE LIFE OF FR. JOSEPH NIYOMUGABO

Father Joseph Niyomugabo was born in commune Muko¹, Gikongoro, in 1941 to Anastasie Nyirambibi and Niyibizi. He had three sisters and two brothers. He was baptized on 22 January 1953 and was confirmed on 17 May 1953 at the Parish of Kaduha, also in Gikongoro. He went to primary school in Mushubi and Kaduha. In 1956, he went to the Junior Seminary in Kabgayi, Gitarama, for his secondary education. He did well in school where he also liked to play football.

He attended the Grand Seminary in Nyakibanda, Butare, where he trained as a priest. He went for further studies to Rome, Italy, and studied philosophy, and then to Belgium where he studied theology. He was ordained as a priest on 28 July 1968 at Orval in Belgium. He returned to study in Rome and in Strasbourg, France.

In 1971, Fr. Niyomugabo returned to Rwanda and started to teach at the Junior Seminary in Kansi, commune Nyaruhengeri, Butare, before becoming the rector there in 1972. But in 1973, when there was a wave of intimidation and violence directed at Tutsis in educational institutions and in the civil service, Fr. Niyomugabo, fearful for his life and that of his students who had been expelled, left for Bujumbura, Burundi. He went with a group of his students. They settled at the Junior Seminary in Kanyosha, in Bujumbura, and he stayed with them until they completed their studies in 1976. While in exile, he kept in touch with his family by sending letters and financial support through a European priest who was a friend, Fr. Edouard. On one occasion, a nun living in Bugesera arranged for him to meet up with his mother at the border of Rwanda/Burundi.

Etienne Bisengimana also left Rwanda for Burundi in 1973, together with his sister, Sr. Patricie Kankindi, a nun at a convent in Save, Butare. He was a secondary school student in Save. While in Burundi, he got to know Fr. Niyomugabo through his sister and because he came to give lessons at his school, St. Albert in Bujumbura. There was an even more direct link.

He paid my school fees throughout secondary school which I completed in Burundi. During the first three years, Fr. Niyomugabo personally gave me money on a monthly basis. But when he went to France, he sent the money through other priests who were coming to Burundi. There was no condition attached to paying my school fees. He gave me the money freely.

He helped others as well, according to Etienne.

¹ Following the reorganization of Rwanda's administrative structure, the former commune of Muko is now part of the district of Mushubi.

Fr. Niyomugabo paid the school fees of many Rwandan students in Burundi, including the students who went to Burundi with him. I don't know where he got the money for the school fees from. I think he got it from Europe because he had a lot of friends there.

The support he gave to students went beyond financial aid, said Etienne.

Fr. Niyomugabo was a good person who tried to show solidarity to Rwandan refugees in Burundi. He also worked to find school placements at the Junior Seminary or at St. Albert for all the refugees of school age. For the students at the Seminary, he organized meetings for them to air their complaints. When Burundian students grumbled that there were too many Rwandans, he talked to the Burundian priests to try and defuse the situation. He said Rwandans also had the right to study at the Junior Seminary.

Fr. Niyomugabo also gave advice to all of us. He came to visit me at home sometimes, and I would also go to see him, even though we could only visit for a few minutes at a time.

The fact that Fr. Niyomugabo maintained contact even after he left for France has endeared his memory to Etienne.

In the letters he sent from France, he asked me about school and if my studies were going well. I told him about my problems. He also wrote to the other students he was giving money to. Fr. Niyomugabo sent the money and the letters to me through a priest called Fr. Kayiranga.²

Between 1976-1979, Fr. Niyomugabo studied at the Sorbonne in Paris on a scholarship. When he returned to Rwanda in 1979, he became the curate at the Parish of Gisagara, Butare, and secretary of the bishopric of Gisagara. In 1982, he gave courses at the Junior Seminary of Karubanda, in Butare town, while still at Gisagara. In September 1985, he was transferred to the Parish of Cyanika, situated in Nyanza I cellule, sector Cyanika in Karama as the senior priest.

Fr. Niyomugabo's own history reflects the deep-seated culture of impunity which explains many aspects of the 1994 genocide. His father was killed in 1959 by a neighbour. His mother and siblings stayed at their family home until 1963. In 1963, when there was again violence directed at Tutsis, which was particularly marked in Gikongoro, they took refuge at the Parish of Kaduha after their house was burnt to the ground by neighbours. After two weeks, they went back to rebuild their house.

In 1994, his mother was killed at home, and his two brothers, Vénuste Nsanzubuhoro and Ananiè Bugingo, died in Muko along with his nephews. One sister perished in Ruhuha, Bugesera, and the other two sisters were killed at the commune office of Muko on 19 May. He is survived by a niece, Agnès Usengumuremyi, and a nephew, Fidèle Rwamuhizi, whose testimonies are included in this report.

² Interviewed in Kigali, 24 April 2012.

“An Outstanding Teacher”

Jean-Bosco Gakwisi was in his first year at the Junior Seminary of Karubanda when Fr. Niyomugabo was teaching second year students. His students, he remembers, spoke highly of him.

They said he was an outstanding teacher who cared deeply about the success of his students, encouraging hard work and intellectual rigour.

From Montréal in Canada, Gakwisi, a former priest, recalled his independence of mind and the qualities which attracted visitors to the Seminary.

In his relations with his bishops, Monsignor Jean-Baptiste Gahamanyi and Monsignor Augustin Misago, he stood out for his independent spirit which enabled him to express his ideas without being afraid of negative consequences for himself.

A priest who was welcoming, jovial and generous, Fr. Niyomugabo was certainly the most loved of his colleagues. Several priests used to like spending the evening in his parish, where they knew they would find a tranquil and friendly atmosphere and a sense of fraternity.³

Later, he added, young trainee priests sought a transfer to the Parish of Cyanika because Fr. Niyomugabo “offered them work which allowed them to flourish by giving them freedom in exercising their pastoral responsibilities.”

André-Martin Karongozi, a lawyer, was also at Karubanda between 1980-1981, at the same time as Fr. Niyomugabo. He was not taught by him. But, like Gakwisi, he was aware of his reputation as a teacher.

He was teaching French to students in their final year. Those who were in his class used to say he was intelligent and that he expected a lot from them. He himself had a degree from France and he wanted them to speak an advanced level of French. I didn’t have him as a teacher, but students always know the teachers of a school. I was happy to look up to him because he was a special person. He was not only a very good French speaker, but also a kind person. I admired him.⁴

In September 1985, Fr. Niyomugabo left for the Parish of Cyanika.

“We Share Our Beliefs”: Fr. Niyomugabo as a Priest

In common with many Catholic parishes in Rwanda, the Parish of Cyanika sits on sprawling grounds. In addition to the church and its buildings, it was linked to a school, a health centre and a convent, giving the priest in charge considerable influence over the lives of local residents. The fact that the parish is located in the centre of the village made it more accessible to a larger number of people.

³ Written statement sent from Canada.

⁴ Interviewed in Kigali, 17 April 2012.

In the exercise of his pastoral duties, from the content of his sermons to his relations with his flock and the priests who worked with him, and the manner in which he ran the affairs of the parish, Fr. Niyomugabo appears to have been considered an inspirational figure.

André-Martin is himself from Gikongoro and considered Fr. Niyomugabo “a close friend.” He said it was a great fortune to have had him as the principal priest at Cyanika, both in terms of what he preached, but also the manner in which he chose to express himself.

He was the first priest I saw celebrating mass without reading from a paper. He would leave the pulpit and come and speak directly in front of the parishioners. It was new for us to have a priest come out from behind the pulpit to preach. He was a great speaker. He illustrated what he was saying through proverbs. People loved this about him.

He attracted people to church through what he said. This was really something special about him. The fact that he preferred to be physically close to people was another exceptional quality. He was very smart in how he did this. Sometimes people who studied in Europe like he had were disconnected from the people and didn't speak Kinyarwanda well. But he spoke Kinyarwanda and French very well.

He started every mass by saying: “*Bakinstu dusangiye ukwemeru,*” meaning “We share our beliefs.” By using this phrase, he was trying to tell people that we have everything in common, that we are all learning from each other. He didn't just read the gospel. He took into account the fact that everyone, even the young, has something to say and to teach.

“He didn't just preach: he listened to people.”

François Masabo arrived at the Parish of Cyanika in 1986 and remained there until 1990. He is grateful to have worked with Fr. Niyomugabo during his first posting as a young priest. François, who now works as a lecturer at the National University in Butare, was impressed by his superior's managerial skills, his capacity for organization, his interest in education, his ability to raise funds and, among other qualities, his unwavering commitment to meet the needs of the poor among his parishioners.

He really taught me the importance of organization; to work in a structured manner and to have a plan. He managed the parish well. He was able to organize people and was capable of preparing a strategic plan for up to three years or so in advance. He put people into different groups so they would come to the parish on different days. The meetings were a sort of bible study. He was also capable of mobilizing money from donors, especially in Europe.

One of the projects was the installation of a large stained glass window behind the altar. He also built a conference hall for meetings and for teaching parishioners. It was part of his bible revival project which focused on teaching people the gospel and theology. He really believed in education.

He was very serious about the content of his speeches and sermons. He prepared every time and encouraged us young priests to do the same. I would often seek his input. He had a clear mind and was wise and a good advisor.

He also encouraged me as a young priest. I was free to decide when someone needed food and I could give them something from the store.

At the parish there was always, he said, support for widows and orphans, especially food.

We often had milk, maize flour and sometimes cooking oil. These donations came through Caritas and Catholic Relief Services. Fr. Niyomugabo was very humble and discreet. Sometimes he would transport the food for people in his car.

He gave credit to Fr. Niyomugabo for his sensitivity in the face of poverty.

He went to look for people who needed assistance but who didn't want to ask.

He summed up what he saw as his strengths.

His strength was to organize people and projects at different levels. It was a very unique quality to him. He always found time to hold meetings with his team and this was important to how he ran the parish. He also made the schedule for the parish three months in advance, so I knew where I would be all the time. The people were also impressed and liked his level of organization. They all understood the schedule because there was a board where it was posted.⁵

Faith Mukarango, who had moved to Cyanika in 1987, worked at the health centre. She said she found Fr. Niyomugabo "kind and very sociable."

Sometimes there were gatherings at his home and he invited everyone, without making any distinctions.⁶

Senator Jean-Damascène Bizimana was a primary school teacher in Cyanika when Fr. Niyomugabo arrived there in 1985. A native of Cyanika, he lived near the parish with his family. A member of a group of parishioners who helped direct the parish, and part of a group of parish teachers, he became involved in many activities at the parish. This interaction gave him the opportunity to get to know Fr. Niyomugabo well, and he said they became friends.

Fr. Niyomugabo cared for poor people. He helped by giving them school fees and showing them how to start small businesses to generate some income. But he also gave them advice and encouragement.

His ability to inspire and reach out to people, irrespective of their age, educational or social background acted as a magnet, commented Bizimana, drawing people to church during his tenure.

⁵ Interviewed in Kigali, 20 April 2012.

⁶ Interviewed in Cyanika, 28 March 2006.

He spoke to people with a good humour. Young or old, he knew how to talk to people. When he was at Cyanika there were many people in church. Because he had studied, he was able to convince educated people, who sometimes avoided church, to come to mass. Before Fr. Niyomugabo came to Cyanika, people were afraid to go to the parish. But when he was there they came freely and happily. People became dynamic under his leadership. They formed groups and he encouraged open discussion. When students came home, they even met to discuss events. This helped people develop a sense of community and positive values.⁷

Espérance Mukamana first became acquainted with Fr. Niyomugabo in 1988, before she got married. She said she came to appreciate him as someone “who valued integrity and told the truth.” Underlining his insistence on punctuality, she recalled, at the same time, the humour with which he chided those who turned up late.

When you came to the church late for your marriage ceremony he would ask you why and call you a grandmother and grandfather. Although he said this in jest, he was at the same time expressing a truth.

Fr. Niyomugabo was a good leader, teaching parishioners according to their age. He was kind to everyone. When he didn't give mass, everyone would go home sad. I can't find the words to explain just how kind he was. He encouraged us to love God and helped us to believe. He preached equality and never division.⁸

Vincent Kajyibwani, a farmer who lived in sector Kiyumba in Karama, echoed Espérance.

Fr. Niyomugabo taught pure gospel, mainly about how to love each other and how to live in harmony with everyone. He didn't tolerate segregation and considered everyone as equals.⁹

Although a young boy at the time, Dominique Safari, from sector Cyanika, heard the same message.

When he preached, he told us to like each other and to live in peace. He didn't separate people by ethnicity or by where they were from. He treated people as equals.¹⁰

When Vérédiane Mukamugeme attended mass at Cyanika, Fr. Niyomugabo did not, she said, waver in his instructions to his audience.

He liked to teach about love, living well with everyone and caring about others.¹¹

⁷ Interviewed in Kigali, 20 April 2012.

⁸ Interviewed in Nyanza, Butare, 17 April 2012.

⁹ Interviewed in Cyanika, 16 April 2012.

¹⁰ Interviewed in Kigali, 13 April 2012.

¹¹ Interviewed in Cyanika, 5 December 2005 and 16 April 2012.



Vérédiane Mukamugeme, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

1990-March 1994: “Fr. Niyomugabo Was Not Deterred”

The war which began in October 1990, between the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which launched a surprise attack from Uganda, had a dramatic impact on the lives of Tutsis in Cyanika, as elsewhere in Rwanda. Because the RPF had been established by exiled Tutsis, the government came to regard all Tutsis as RPF sympathizers. Hundreds were imprisoned on suspicion of being RPF accomplices and many were subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Some were subsequently dismissed from the civil service. Educated males, in particular, were looked upon as a fifth column, and officials were told to keep a watchful eye on their activities, movements and contacts.

As a highly educated priest who had earned a reputation as an influential community leader, Fr. Niyomugabo had precisely the profile local authorities feared the most. All the interviewees who were living in Cyanika at the time spoke of what they described as the “hatred” of Fr. Niyomugabo by those in charge of commune Karama. But he refused to be intimidated or silenced, they added, and instead spoke openly, criticizing the discrimination against Tutsis, while urging his parishioners to be united and to live in peace, side by side.

Clemence Niringiyinana, was living in sector Gikoni, commune Rukondo, but attended church in Cyanika. She described Fr. Niyomugabo as “kind to everyone and as someone who liked to help people in need.” Those “in need” in 1992 included Clemence and her husband.

People—our neighbours—started to harass my husband and myself in 1990. We couldn’t live a normal life. In 1992, the beatings increased, led by a certain Nkeramugaba.¹² They came often to our home. One day, around 2:00 p.m., they chased us out of our home. They were coming to kill us and we fled with our children. When we returned home we found everything we owned had been destroyed.

Clemence and her husband turned to their priest for help.

We went to the Parish of Cyanika to see Fr. Niyomugabo. He welcomed us and told a Sister to take care of my sick child. Fr. Niyomugabo also tried to ask for help on our behalf but there were no results.

In 1993, Fr. Niyomugabo built us a house and had us write down all the household materials we would need. He also gave us work so we could become independent. This house was near the parish. We stayed there until 1994.¹³

¹² André Nkeramugaba was préfet of Gikongoro in 1963. He is widely seen as the man who instigated the killing of Tutsis in Gikongoro in 1963.

¹³ Interviewed in Cyanika, 16 April 2012.



Clemence Niringiyinana, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

As intended, the arrests created fear and anxiety, and led people to watch their words and to keep their distance from the individuals and families who were affected. But not Fr. Niyomugabo, said André-Martin, whose own father was thrown in jail.

Most people didn't want to visit the families of the people who had been imprisoned, but Fr. Niyomugabo wasn't deterred. My father was arrested in November 1990. He was released five months later, in March 1991. My father didn't have a car and was walking the 12 kilometres home. He first stopped by the parish to see Fr. Niyomugabo before going home. Some people would have told my father that they didn't want to be seen with him, but not Fr. Niyomugabo. He put my father in his car and drove him all the way home. Everyone knew Fr. Niyomugabo's car and could clearly see he was driving my father who had just been in jail.

Given the positions he took prior to 1994, André-Martin does not find it difficult to understand his stance during the genocide.

I was not surprised that he decided to stay put during the genocide, even though he knew it was a big risk.

For Isaïe Iyamuremye, living in sector Ngoma in Karama, the animosity directed at Fr. Niyomugabo during this period is in itself a reflection of the influence of the clergy.

During this time, all Tutsis were called *inkotanyi* [RPF]. Priests were leaders of their community, so it was a logical accusation for the local leaders to make.

The bourgmestre, Ngezahayo, hated Fr. Niyomugabo a lot. He told people during official meetings that he was the highest-ranking *inkotanyi* in Cyanika. Even during mass this bourgmestre wouldn't take communion from Fr. Niyomugabo and he didn't invite the priest to any official meetings.

Despite this, Fr. Niyomugabo continued to lead his people well and remained a caring person. He liked to give advice to people. A man called Joseph Karongozi¹⁴ was arrested, accused of helping the *inkotanyi*. Fr. Niyomugabo called all the intellectuals, especially teachers, and told them to be careful about what they said and where they went. He also talked about this during mass.

I never heard of Fr. Niyomugabo supporting the *inkotanyi* or of collecting money for them. It was a lie the bourgmestre was saying to make people afraid to associate with him.

But the animosity of local officials did not, said Isaïe, change his behaviour.

He told the community during mass that the local leaders were committing injustice. That is when local leaders really started to say he was the leader of the *inkotanyi* in Cyanika. They wouldn't say this during mass, but in meetings held at the sector office. He even talked about the injustice of this in the presence of the bourgmestre because Fr. Niyomugabo knew the bourgmestre was not right in telling people not to trust him.¹⁵

Nor did Espérance notice any difference in the conduct of Fr. Niyomugabo.

After the RPF attacked, local leaders were calling Fr. Niyomugabo an *inyenzi*,¹⁶ like all the Tutsis. They were against him, especially the bourgmestre, Ngezahayo, and the sous-préfet [Joseph Ntegeyintwali]. But he didn't react badly, was not daunted or discouraged. He continued with his duties. As 1994 approached, the situation became worse for every Tutsi, including Fr. Niyomugabo. We were all frightened.

One of the people who had special reason to be worried at the end of 1993 was Sister Marie-Josée Mukabayire who was living in Cyanika, in the congregation of the Sisters of Benebikira. She was working in a health centre near the parish.

In December 1993, there were death threats in Cyanika and a few people from Muganza took refuge at Cyanika parish. They said a list of people to be killed had been drawn up, and that I was among the people on the list, as was Fr. Joseph Niyomugabo. We thought of fleeing toward Butare.

¹⁴ Joseph Karongozi was the father of André-Martin Karongozi.

¹⁵ Interviewed in Cyanika, 16 April 2012.

¹⁶ Meaning a snake, *inyenzi* was first used to refer to the RPF but after 1990, and especially during genocide, it was used to mean all Tutsis.

The intervention of Fr. Niyomugabo put an end to those plans.

He stopped us, saying it could sow fear amongst the parishioners who felt threatened as well. He telephoned the préfet and asked him to defuse the situation.

The violence, however, continued into the New Year, said Sr. Marie-Josée. She mentioned a family whose home was burnt down in January 1994.

Fr. Niyomugabo had a small house built for the couple right next to the parish. This couple was massacred in April 1994.¹⁷

According to Vincent, the efforts by local officials to label Fr. Niyomugabo as an RPF mole gathered pace in the months leading up to the genocide.

They claimed he was collecting money for the RPF so they could accuse him of being an accomplice of the *inkotanyi*. But he wasn't. There were many spies following him around at the time so there is no way he could have collected money. They were always trailing him. They also hated him because in 1959 his father was killed, he himself later went to Burundi, studied and then came back.

Whatever challenges Fr. Niyomugabo and the people of Cyanika had faced since October 1990, and whatever the political and social pressures they had been subjected to, no one could possibly have imagined the events which were to unfold in their commune and region between April and July 1994.

¹⁷ Interviewed in Kabuga, 6 December 2005.

“IT’S SERIOUS THIS TIME” 7-20 April 1994

The death of President Juvénal Habyarimana on the evening of 6 April 1994, when the plane in which he was travelling was shot down near Kigali airport, would prove to be a pivotal moment in the history of Rwanda, with far-reaching consequences extending beyond the borders of Rwanda. His death was immediately attributed by Radio Rwanda, and the influential and inflammatory Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), to the RPF, and in the political context of the time, by definition to all Tutsis. Within hours, roadblocks went up in some regions of the country and Tutsis became the targets of suspicion, anger and violence.

Karama, and the surrounding communes, were no different. Given the political tensions since October 1990, some Tutsis chose to leave their homes on 7 April and to seek safety in numbers at the Parish of Cyanika. Others initially slept in the bushes and returned to their homes during the day. They came from different sectors of Karama, but also from the communes of Rukondo and Kinyamakara. However, they lost confidence with each passing day, as homes were razed to the ground, neighbours refused to hide them and they learned of the deaths of people they knew. Increasingly, they saw the parish as their only hope.

But getting to the parish was no easy matter. A network of roadblocks, and the omnipresence of interahamwe wielding machetes and clubs, were formidable obstacles. Disoriented by fear, families scattered, making it more difficult to make decisions.

Juvénal Gasasira, a driver at Cyanika health centre, mentioned one roadblock he considered particularly forbidding.

There was a roadblock very near the home of the deputy-préfet, Ntegeyintwali, where a lot of Tutsis who were coming to seek shelter at the parish were massacred.¹⁸

Jean-Damascène Bizimana had left Cyanika by 1994, and was studying in Switzerland. But he had maintained contact with Fr. Niyomugabo and said they communicated by telephone on 7 April.

He told me there were already Tutsis at the parish and that homes were burning. He said he thought Tutsis could be killed in large numbers. He told me that even the local authorities were participating in the planning meetings.

¹⁸ Interviewed in Cyanika, 5 January 2005.

Offering Shelter and a Warm Welcome

The refugees who managed to reach the parish were assured of a warm welcome by Fr. Niyomugabo. Because of the large number of people who began to arrive as early as the 7th, he asked for assistance from the nuns in the Benebikira convent nearby, as Sr. Renata Kanziga recalled.

Fr. Niyomugabo made it possible for the refugees, who came from all corners, to get settled. He distributed the vegetables we had so they would have something to eat. He called us over to help them as well because there were more and more refugees as time passed. He tried to share out the rooms as best as he could, and gave his office to the most vulnerable—the sick and women with small children. He was not able to take care of everyone because there were simply too many. With everything he had to do for the refugees, he didn't have time to rest for even a moment. Night and day became indistinguishable for him.¹⁹

Sr. Marie-Josée is grateful for his prompt response in evacuating their colleagues.

On 10 April, we were told that the nuns in our congregation, in the convent of Kirambi, were facing danger. Without thinking about the fact that he could be killed, he went out to bring them to the parish.

“He thought much more about others than about his own life which was very precarious at that time.”

Sr. Renata agrees they owe him a debt for his timely intervention.

The nuns in our congregation, in Kirambi, felt very threatened as people were trying to kill them. Father Niyomugabo took his vehicle and went to bring them to Cyanika. He helped others without thinking about the risks he was taking.

One of the first arrivals at the parish was Marianne Nikuze, then aged 12, who was living in Birambo, sector Cyanika. By 3:00 p.m. on the 7th, the family abandoned their home and headed for Cyanika. She left first, together with her young brothers and sisters, after they saw people burning down houses. They met many others on the road on their way to the parish. She said they ran into the bourgmestre, Désiré Ngezahayo, on the way and stopped to ask him what had happened.

He told us: “Wait, you will see. Your time has come.”

We continued along our way. Once we reached Gatyazo, there were lots of people on the road. They asked us: “Do you think you are going into a boulder where we can't enter? Don't fool yourselves. We will follow you and kill you.” We continued to Cyanika parish.

¹⁹ Interviewed in Byimana, Gitarama, 23 March 2006.



Marianne Nikuze, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

After a few days, Marianne's stepmother, her grandmother and uncle joined them. Her father and other men remained outside the church looking after the cows, but joined the others inside the compound after two days because, she said, "they realized things were becoming serious."

"For us," said Xavérine Mukansoro, "the genocide began on 10 April." She lived in sector Gikoni, commune Rukondo. Alarmed by the reaction of neighbours with whom they had previously been on friendly terms, she visited a number of Tutsi families to gauge their mood and exchange ideas.

I told them: "Let's take refuge in Cyanika. Remember that in 1963 they didn't kill the ones who were in the churches." They said that they didn't want to go to Cyanika, and that they had Hutu friends who would protect them. Three families gave me their children. The adults were to come the next day. I took my children and mother-in-law. We left our house that Sunday, at 8:00 p.m. There were more than 12 of us. My husband had died of poisoning a week before.

They reached the parish on the morning of Monday, the 11th.

Fr. Niyomugabo said to us: "Where will you hide? It's serious this time." We met others who had come from Bunyambiriri, some with arms cut off, others covered with wounds. Fr. Niyomugabo approached us and asked that we pray fervently to God.

Dominique, aged 12, was playing with other children on the 7th, but said he was struck by “the change in people’s behaviour,” saying he noticed that “people were separating.” The situation became increasingly precarious.

Houses were burning at a neighbouring village between the 7th and the 10th, and I saw refugees coming to Cyanika parish to seek refuge with Fr. Niyomugabo. So I knew, even as a child, that something was very wrong. Between the 10th and the 12th, the interahamwe started killing in my village and Tutsis were not sleeping in their homes.

As in other families, the strategies used by parents and grandparents during times of uncertainty in the past influenced decisions.

During the troubles of 1959 our parents were told to seek refuge at the commune office or the parish, so this is what we tried to do.

Dominique first went to the sector office, but said he left after he saw Tutsis who were being beaten. He attributes the fact that he was ignored to his age. He then passed by his family home, only to discover that it had been set ablaze. He did, however, find his older brother, Athanase, and together they tried to make their way to the parish.

It was difficult because the interahamwe were on the road beating and killing Tutsis. We used small paths instead of the main road where there were roadblocks. We came upon some interahamwe killing a cow. They were distracted so they didn’t see us when we slipped into a sorghum field. We met other militia who were looting homes, but their hands were full of the things they had stolen so they didn’t try to kill us. We made it to Cyanika very early in the morning, when there were not many people out yet. We were welcomed and other refugees were happy to see us alive. Because of what our parents told us—that once we got to the church we wouldn’t be killed—I felt safe.

There were too many refugees at Cyanika. There were people everywhere, in the church, school and even the dispensary. But Fr. Niyomugabo took good care of us and he didn’t want to leave. In the evening, he had rice cooked for the children, but we had no bowls so we ate out of our hands.

Later, Dominique’s brother, Athanase, paid the gendarmes guarding the parish to bring their mother, three of their sisters and a cousin.

Worried by the sight of homes on fire, Clemence and her husband also went to the parish. She said Fr. Niyomugabo gave her family one of the priests’ residences.

He walked around and encouraged us every day, saying the misery would end. He also tried to get help from other people, but at one point the gendarmerie took his car so he couldn’t travel.

Rémy Kamugire was 15 in 1994. His family lived behind the parish and they made their way there on 15 April.

Fr. Niyomugabo received us with open arms. He looked after all the refugees, giving us rice and beans to eat. Some people came to the parish with absolutely nothing, and he always tried to find them something to cook with.

He was always by our side and tried to keep our spirits up. He kept away the officials who came all the time, telling him to send the refugees to the office of the sous-préfecture or to Murambi where, they said, “they will find security.” But the priest preferred to keep us close to him; he didn’t want to abandon us.²⁰



Rémy Kamugire, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

²⁰ Interviewed in Butare town, 5 December 2005.

Dalie Gacendeli was not at home in commune Muko on 7 April as she had gone to visit relatives in Gikongoro town. She was told that her entire family had been killed on the evening of the 7th, which forced her to think about seeking a place of refuge.

I went to Cyanika because I knew Father Joseph Niyomugabo. I arrived on the 9th. Some people had come to the parish, but the situation was still relatively calm. He was a good friend of my parents; he used to visit us often and we used to visit him.

He took me in and comforted me a lot, because he knew that I had just lost all my family. That, at least, is what we thought, because at the time we didn't have clear information. He gave me a lot of advice. He told me I would live, even without my parents, because friends of the family would take care of me.

“In the short time I spent in Cyanika, Fr. Niyomugabo was like a parent to me.”

He did everything he could for me. It was he who advised me to go with the first refugees who left for Butare, following the departure of the nuns for Butare.

Providing Food, Water, Medical Care, Moral and Spiritual Comfort

For the clergy who suddenly found themselves caring for thousands of refugees in April 1994, finding sufficient food and water, and ensuring adequate medical care for the sick and wounded, were major challenges. The fact that places of sanctuary were surrounded by militiamen precluded the possibility of going outside to buy provisions. The refugees included the elderly, children and pregnant women who required particular attention. Living in fear brought its own trauma, making it both necessary and important to offer solace and spiritual comfort.

Fr. Niyomugabo was aware, as early as 7 April, that he would need additional provisions. He asked for assistance from the nuns at the Benebikira convent, as confirmed by Sr. Marie-Josée.

On 7 April, Fr. Niyomugabo called on us to help him to welcome the refugees. He gave them something to eat. He attended much more to children and pregnant women.

Rémy regrets that Fr. Niyomugabo did not have more help, making him all the more appreciative of his efforts.

He was on his own to take care of the wounded, transporting them to the health centre to make sure they received the necessary care. He went out of his way to find food for the refugees. He even tried to contact officials to ensure our security.

He had many opportunities to escape, but he knew very well how much his presence meant to us. Because of him, we had food and shelter. The other priests did not show any interest in us.

Rations were necessarily limited, said Clemence.

Fr. Niyomugabo was kind to all the refugees and he gave us cooked rice and beans. We only ate once a day because there were too many of us. We had water, but it was cut off by the interahamwe after we had been there only a few days.

The effort to repair the damage to the water supply brought about consequences which were intended as a warning.

Fr. Niyomugabo sent someone to try and fix the water, but the interahamwe killed him because he was trying to help Tutsis.

At a certain moment, the stocks of the parish were almost depleted, and Fr. Niyomugabo began to reserve what was left for the children and the sick.

Dominique, who praised Fr. Niyomugabo for making sure children were a priority in the distribution of food, said the disruption in the water supply was a major blow. His older brother paid local residents to buy water for them.

Jean-Damascène said he spoke to Fr. Niyomugabo again on 12 April, by which time his own mother was also at the parish.

On 12 April, he told me there were a lot of Tutsis at the parish, including my mother. I spoke to her. He told me the lack of food was a serious problem.

12 April, he added “was the last time I had contact with him.”

The consideration he showed to people with special needs is one of the qualities which most struck Sr. Marie-Josée.

There was a pregnant woman who was about to deliver. He separated her from the other refugees and gave her a room with two other refugees who were ill. He was always worried about us.

When a woman, wounded by a machete right next to the church could no longer walk to the church, Fr. Joseph went out with some refugees and carried her in his arms. Afterwards, he called me to give her medical care.

Vincent said he arrived at the parish in the guise of an interahamwe. After his brother was killed at their home, two Hutu neighbours accompanied him to the church on 16 April, and suggested that he walk between them and carry a machete as a precautionary measure. The ruse worked and he entered the church without difficulty.

Fr. Niyomugabo gave mass every day, outside in the compound. Afterwards, he went around giving words of encouragement. In his sermons he taught the gospel and sensitized parents who had children who were not baptized. He asked them to bring the children so they could receive the sacrament.

Dalie said the refugees found consolation in the actions and words of Fr. Niyomugabo.

He said mass every morning to confide us to God. He talked to us in ways which provided relief to the refugees who were so scared.

Standing Firm: Staying When He Could Have Left

As the security situation in Cyanika deteriorated, news was also filtering in about the widespread killing of Tutsis elsewhere in Gikongoro and throughout the country. By mid-April, it had become increasingly evident that the chances of survival for the refugees at the parish was, at best, minimal. Fr. Niyomugabo himself was fully conscious of the gravity of the situation and for this reason urged others to leave, including the nuns from the Benebikira convent. But he himself chose to stay, despite the risks and the pleas of his fellow-clergy.

By all accounts, Sr. Marie-Josée was particularly sought after, and was strongly advised to leave Cyanika. She said she tried to persuade Fr. Niyomugabo to go at the same time.

When I told Fr. Joseph we should go to find refuge elsewhere, he responded that he could not leave the refugees.

“He added that he had spent years with these parishioners, and that he did not have the strength to abandon them when they were in such a difficult situation.”

He asked us not to worry about him and to save ourselves quickly. He concluded that the situation was indeed serious and he advised us to leave Cyanika. We begged him to go with us, but he refused. We did not have strong hearts like his, and we left him with his parishioners.

He then, she said, put measures in place to help her and her family get out of Cyanika.

As it was difficult for me to get to Gikongoro, he called the préfet and told him that I needed to come to the diocese to get food for the refugees, because the stocks at the parish were empty. The préfet came personally to look for me. I left with my two younger sisters and three other children. He left us at the diocese of Gikongoro.

Sr. Marie-Josée mentioned a subsequent opportunity for Fr. Niyomugabo to leave Cyanika, which he also turned down.

The other nuns had stayed at Cyanika, and the Mother Superior came from Butare to fetch them. Fr. Niyomugabo once again refused to go with them.

Sr. Renata was one of the nuns who left with their Mother Superior. She too, she said, tried to convince Fr. Niyomugabo that he could not afford to remain in Cyanika.

On the day we left for Butare, an old man named Joseph took my arm and led me to the back of the church. He told me we were going to be killed that day. He didn't tell me where he received that information.

He told me this while crying and begged me to inform Father Niyomugabo and to ask him to go with us. I said I doubted that I would be able to convince him, and suggested that he should intervene. He replied that we should both speak with him in order to show him how urgent it was that we flee, given the reality of the situation.

She gave details of the exchange with Fr. Niyomugabo.

I went to see him in his room and found him throwing papers in the trash bin. I said to him: "They are going to kill us. Look for a way to save yourself because they are going to torture you." He told me that he was not going to run away, that Straton had also been a man. Straton Gakwaya was a priest, the bursar of the diocese of Gikongoro who was killed on 7 April at the Centre Christus [in Kigali]. He added: "I cannot desert all these refugees simply to save my own life. But you must tell your fellow nuns to leave this place immediately." Disoriented, I told him "But you will be massacred!" He replied: "I will be worried if you stay here with me. I am a man, and I will try to defend myself. Take as many people with you as you can." We left with the wounded²¹, and we went to link up with Sister Josée at Gikongoro to proceed with her towards Butare.

Dalie believes it was the commitment he had made to God which would not allow him to turn his back on the refugees.

"He often told us that he could not abandon us to save his life, because God would ask him: 'Where did you leave the flock who ran to you?'"

He had the means to leave Cyanika before the massacre. He definitely didn't know whether he would be able to survive, but he could at least have tried if he had wanted to.

Instead of worrying about himself, he lived in fear that the refugees would be massacred in his presence, according to Dalie.

He was always concerned that we would be killed before his very eyes. He was constantly telling me that he was frightened of seeing me being killed in front of him.

Dalie said he advised her to look for an alternative place of refuge "because he could see that we were going to die." Dalie left for Butare on 17 April.

He gave me some money and told me that he would keep on praying for me.

²¹ According to Sr. Renata, most of the wounded who left with them were later killed at Butare University Hospital.

Dominique, although only a young boy, understood the efforts by Fr. Niyomugabo to raise their morale.

One evening he gathered us together to pray for us. Fr. Niyomugabo even planned baptisms for young babies.

Survivors who remained at the parish until 21 April all agree that a grenade attack, on or about 14 April, which killed a number of people, including the husband of Espérance, was a turning point in Cyanika, and served to undermine the confidence of Fr. Niyomugabo. Espérance, who knew him well and who had been at the parish since 8 April, said “he became discouraged.”

All the refugees were afraid and disheartened, but Fr. Niyomugabo kept trying to raise our spirits even though he was feeling low himself.

Dominique became aware of the changes at the parish.

The adults sat in small groups to discuss events, but as the days went by they were discouraged and they didn't pray or talk as before.

Nevertheless, Fr. Niyomugabo remained at the parish, by the side of the refugees.

**“YOUR HOUR HAS COME”
The Massacre of 21 April 1994 and the Murder of Fr.
Niyomugabo on 24 April 1994**

In the early hours of 21 April 1994, close to 50,000 Tutsi men, women and children are thought to have died in a carefully planned massacre in a school in Murambi, on the outskirts of Gikongoro town, in the commune of Nyamagabe. The killings were organized by military officers and officials who had prepared the ground well. They included, among many others:

- Laurent Bucyibaruta, the préfet of Gikongoro;
- Joseph Ntegeyintwali, the deputy préfet of the sous-préfecture of Karaba which made up the communes of Karama, Kinyamakara and Rukondo;
- Captain Faustin Sebhura, the deputy head of the gendarmerie in Gikongoro;
- Col. Aloys Simba, a retired army officer who was appointed in 1994 as head of the civil defence for the préfectures of Gikongoro and Butare;
- Frodouald Havugimana, a deputy-préfet in Gikongoro;
- Félicien Semakwavu, the bourgmestre of commune Nyamagabe;
- Emmanuel Nteziryayo, the bourgmestre of commune Mudasonwa;
- Désiré Ngezahayo, the bourgmestre of commune Karama;
- Dénys Kamodoka, the director of the Kitabi tea factory in commune Mudasonwa.²²

Some of the survivors ran to Cyanika, only to be killed along the way. Others drowned in a nearby river which had flooded during the rainy season. Those who entered the compound of the parish had every reason to consider themselves fortunate. But they had no time to share their experiences with the refugees at the parish before they were, in the words of Grâce Mukantarindwa, “plunged back into the horror,” living through a second massacre prepared by the same forces which had devastated Murambi.

Our plan proved to be a dream. Firstly, very few survivors of the massacre in Murambi reached Cyanika. And, by the time we got there, the soldiers and interahamwe had already come to kill people, as they’d just done in Murambi. We were met by the sound of gunfire and exploding grenades. We could hear nothing but the crackle of firearms.

²² Laurent Bucyibaruta is living in France. Joseph Ntegeyintwali is in prison in Rwanda. Captain Faustin Sebhura had been fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with the armed group known as the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) until he returned to Rwanda in 2010 when he was very ill and died shortly afterwards. Frodouald Havugimana has also been with the FDLR in the DRC. Col. Aloys Simba has been convicted to a sentence of 25 years by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Félicien Semakwavu is believed to be living in the DRC. Désiré Ngezahayo has been tried and convicted in Rwanda and is serving a sentence of life imprisonment. Emmanuel Nteziryayo was arrested in the UK on 28 December 2006. He was released after a court in the UK rejected a request for extradition to Rwanda. Dénys Kamodoka remains at large.

We tried to turn back but the killers had already surrounded us and they forced us into the courtyard at the centre of the priests' houses. They threw stones at us, and anyone who tried to run away was immediately shot. Some soldiers who'd come from Murambi were there in a Suzuki. I'd seen them in Murambi, but I didn't know who they were.

Grâce drew some comfort from discovering the presence of Fr. Niyomugabo.

Fr. Joseph Niyomugabo had refused to abandon the refugees.²³

The men who inspired, led and armed the soldiers and interahamwe in Murambi were pleased with the "work" at Murambi, which was considered as completed by about 10:30 a.m. Bucyibaruta, Semakwavu, Simba and Sebhura congratulated them. The militiamen from commune Mudasomwa, in particular, were judged to have distinguished themselves. But, they were told, there was still work to be done. Vincent de Paul Nsabiya, head of a vaccination programme in Gikongoro who spoke of his own role in the killings, summed up the speech given by Bucyibaruta.

The préfet thanked everyone, especially the interahamwe from Mudasomwa, for what had been achieved. Cars were put at the disposal of the bravest so they could go and lend a hand to the militiamen of Karama who had also begun to exterminate the thousands of Tutsis at Cyanika.²⁴

Emmanuel Nyirimbuga, who admits that he made a significant contribution to the killings in Murambi, also listened as the men were urged to proceed to Cyanika.

I realized we were being backed by all the authorities. Bucyibaruta, Semakwavu and Sebhura expressed their appreciation to us, especially to the interahamwe who'd come from Mudasomwa. They were asked to track down the Tutsis who had eluded us and made it to Cyanika. They drove off in the Daihatsu owned by the tea factory in Kitabi. They'd been using these vehicles throughout the night. The militiamen from Mudasomwa were promised they'd be allowed to clean out the shops in Gikongoro town once the Cyanika massacre was over.²⁵

Juvénal Gasasira, the driver at Cyanika health centre cited earlier, said he witnessed the arrival of the survivors from Murambi, and their vain efforts to warn and advise the refugees at Cyanika to try and get away in time.

The worst happened on 21 April. I saw everything with my own eyes. Very early in the morning, the first survivors of the massacres at Murambi arrived at the Parish of Cyanika where they thought that they would find a sanctuary. The people who came from Murambi were so fearful that they told the other refugees to leave and to head for Nyanza. Given what they had just experienced in Murambi, they had little doubt that they were going to be killed.

²³ Interviewed in Kigali, 26 January 2004.

²⁴ Interviewed in Gikongoro town, 14 January 2004.

²⁵ Interviewed in Gikongoro town, 20 January 2004.

But confidence in Fr. Niyomugabo, he commented, provided those who had been at the parish with the strength to stay.

The refugees at Cyanika were still hopeful. They were still with Fr. Niyomugabo. Some nevertheless were courageous enough to make a run for it. But I don't know if they were able to venture far from the parish before they were killed.

Gasasira described the massacre of 21 April.

There was a huge attack and the assailants were armed to the teeth. There were soldiers with guns and peasants with traditional weapons. They killed until 5:15 p.m. There were corpses everywhere in the courtyard and inside the buildings. Those on the point of death were subsequently finished off by those with traditional weapons. Ntegeyintwali and Captain Sebhura were particularly active in the killings.

Even after the massacre began, Xavérine said Fr. Niyomugabo tried to bolster their morale.

Fr. Niyomugabo told us: "Keep praying, say the Lord's Prayer, put yourself in God's hands and do not cry out." After a few minutes, the interahamwe were yelling: "May the blood that will flow be a curse on Tutsis and their children." And so they began to shoot at us. We didn't have anything but bricks as weapons. They took off the doors with their rifles.

Marianne drew succour from his words.

The day they exterminated the refugees at Murambi, Fr. Niyomugabo came and told us: "Be strong and pray. They have killed the people at Murambi, and it's certain that we are also going to be killed. But don't be afraid: pray and if we die, we will die at peace." So we began to pray and shortly afterwards, the militia were already there.

Safeguarding Fr. Niyomugabo

Once the killing started, Juvénal Gasasira took the decision to save the life of Fr. Niyomugabo, as well as that of another priest who was at the parish, Fr. Musoni, as well as and two young deacons who had come to spend the Easter holiday at the parish. By then, the other clergy had left.

I put them in the pharmacy at the health centre. I used to bring them food during the night. They stayed there for three days.

Spéciose Mukangenzi a trader in Cyanika, had been at the parish for sometime on the 21st. She said she witnessed the arrival of Fr. Niyomugabo at the pharmacy.

I fled to Cyanika health centre, about 20 metres from the parish, where I saw Niyomugabo accompanied by a man named Gasasira. They went into the pharmacy. In that instant, someone hit me with a machete, and I fell unconscious.²⁶



Spéciose Mukangenzi in front of the Cyanika memorial, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

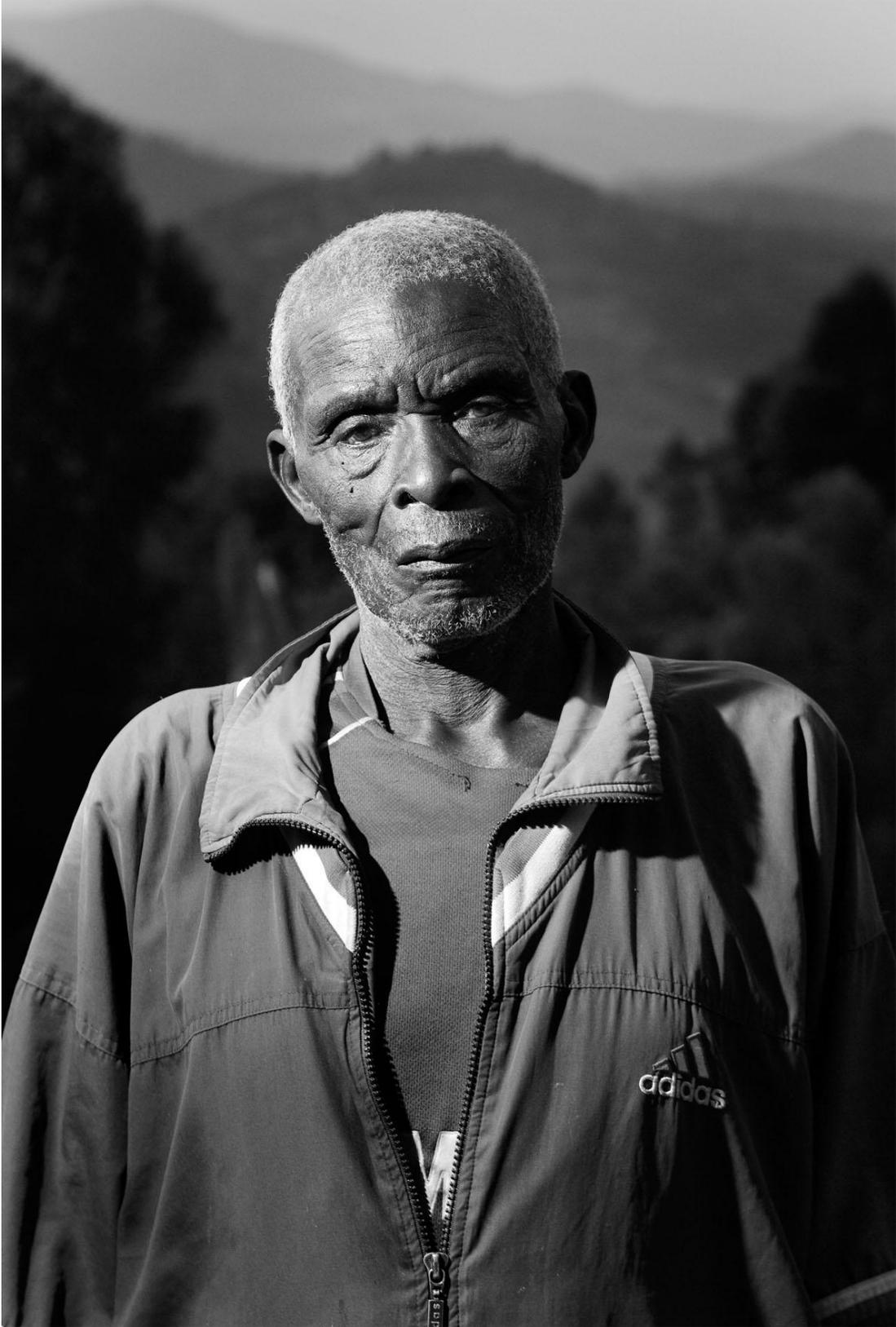
24 April 1994: The Murder of Fr. Niyomugabo

Fr. Niyomugabo had only spent three days at the pharmacy when he was killed. The man who hid him, Gasasira, provided details about his death.

On 24 April, one of the prisoners who were gathering up the corpses passed behind the pharmacy. He pushed open the window and saw them inside. He cried out to call the others. There were already suspicions that they might be there as I never left the place.

The deputy-préfet came immediately with other people. They immediately struck Fr. Niyomugabo and one of the deacons with a machete. Fr. Niyomugabo had been stripped naked by the prisoners. He, the deacon and two girls who were discovered near the parish were killed on the spot. Fr. Musoni and the other deacon were not touched. I saw they were asking them to produce their ID cards. They were taken to the bishopric of Gikongoro. The deacon, Ignace, was ordained a priest and is still alive. Fr. Musoni was murdered in Gikongoro.

²⁶ Interviewed in Cyanika, 28 March 2006.



Juvénal Gasasira, Photo by Petterik Wiggers

The prisoner who discovered Fr. Niyomugabo's hideout is Jean de Dieu Kayigamba who was working at Cyanika health centre. His uncle, Juvénal Mudenge, who himself admits to active participation in the killings at Cyanika, confirmed the presence of Ntegeyintwali when Fr. Niyomugabo was killed.

My nephew, Jean de Dieu Kayigamba, revealed Fr. Niyomugabo's whereabouts. His clothes were ripped off and his naked body was stretched out on the road, in front of Ntegeyintwali, who then took all the medicines home.²⁷

After the genocide, Sr. Marie-Josée succeeded in finding where Fr. Niyomugabo's body had been buried.

It was in January 1995 that I found his corpse, after paying quite a lot of money and after a long search. I was shocked to discover that he had been left naked.

For the survivors of Cyanika, for whom he did so much, and meant so much, Fr. Niyomugabo continues to live on in their hearts, as the fulsome tributes below show.



A headstone marking the mass graves at Cyanika parish. Photo by Petterik Wiggers

²⁷ Interviewed in Gikongoro town, 5 January 2005.

“YOU WILL REMAIN IN OUR HEARTS” Tributes to Fr. Joseph Niyomugabo

For survivors, paying tribute to the men and women who took a stand against the genocide of 1994, and who protected its intended victims, is seen both as a moral responsibility and a cathartic experience. The people who knew Fr. Joseph Niyomugabo before the genocide, and those he helped during their darkest hours, in April 1994, welcomed the opportunity to remember him and to honour him.

Agnès Usengumuremyi is one of only two people in Fr. Niyomugabo’s family who survived. Her mother, Josephine Nyirakabuga, was his sister. As she grew up in her grandmother’s house, she spent time with him when he was at home. Agnes’s younger sister, Athanasie Nyirahabimana, was visiting her uncle in Cyanika during the genocide and was killed there. She draws comfort from the fact that “people remember Fr. Niyomugabo.”

During the commemoration week and on 24 April, people put flowers on his grave. When they removed his remains to rebury him this year, they put him in the church and many people came, wanting to show their respects. Because people wanted to see him and say goodbye, we had them come, one by one, into the church where his remains were. I was there to wash his bones and people were crying for him. After seeing his remains, I feel at peace and find it easier to go to church and listen to the teachings of God.

People loved Fr. Niyomugabo because of his actions. He would build houses and pay school fees for the very poor. When he was in Cyanika, pregnant women would come and knock on his door at night when they were in labour and he would drive them to the hospital.

I always think of him because he was helpful to everyone.²⁸

Fidèle Rwamuhizi, a nephew, is the other member of Fr. Niyomugabo’s family who survived. He struggled to sum up the many different aspects of his uncle’s character.

It’s not easy to explain what Fr. Niyomugabo was like. He valued the truth and could even die for his beliefs. He told local leaders that he didn’t like the discrimination against Tutsis. He believed discrimination was wrong.

I visited him many times in Cyanika. The people of Cyanika loved him a lot, even though they killed him. He helped people but he wasn’t someone who bragged about it and told other people of his kindness. During mass, he liked to teach about love and he tried to make sure everyone understood what he was saying. When he was preaching, he told people about equality and said that discrimination was wrong. He was also different in that he gave mass from out behind the pulpit. People liked this.

²⁸ Interviewed in Kigali, 20 April 2012.

Even when he was young, he had many friends. If you were old or young, he knew how to talk to you.

Fidèle remarked on his affinity with children.

He liked children. When he came to visit my parents, he always came with kids. He had many friends. His students loved him and he also loved them. Even if the students were on holiday, they would come to visit him.

He believes that he became a priest out of a desire to be of service.

He decided to be a priest of his own volition because he liked serving God and he wanted to give to people more than he took for himself. I think he wanted to become a priest so he could help people.²⁹

Many interviewees, including André-Martin Karongozi, commented upon the ease with which he communicated with young people.

Fr. Niyomugabo was someone who communicated well with young and older people alike.

My father was a primary school teacher and had been for 30 years, so the parents who sent their children to his school knew him. But even my father had to visit Fr. Niyomugabo because he was the head priest.

During the holidays we had to go and see our parish priests at home. We were expected to go and greet them in the morning and show them our marks. It was a way of keeping watch over us during the holidays. But with Fr. Niyomugabo, it was a pleasure. He was happy not only to meet with community leaders, but also with young people. He would even make remarks about how we had grown up and changed. This astonished me because he saw many people every day, and I wondered how he could remember small details about me. He paid attention to individuals. He also had a good sense of humour and was always smiling, even when he was very serious.

He also commented on his unusual combination of speaking his mind, while doing so in a tactful manner.

When the RPF attacked in 1990, Fr. Niyomugabo was able to say what he thought but in a nice way. If you were doing bad or good, he would find a way to tell you this. He once wrote a newspaper article about a bourgmestre who had been dismissed because he wasn't Catholic. Fr. Niyomugabo thought the bourgmestre suffered an injustice and he wasn't afraid to say so. He was a man who said what he needed to say, even if he knew it would cause a problem.

²⁹ Interviewed in Kigali, 19 April 2012.

Sr. Marie-Josée Mukabayire reflected on the speech Fr. Niyomugabo gave when he celebrated the 25th anniversary of being in the priesthood.

It was in August 1993, and signs of possible violence had become apparent in Gikongoro in general. He spoke the following words: “On my anniversary, what I ask of all the inhabitants of Cyanika, is that each person searches for peace there, where he is, for his fellow man, for one can never put a price on peace, or find a substitute for peace.”

The invitation was in itself, she added, an eloquent commentary on his relations with people.

He wrote: “Your child/ father/ friend/ (choose whatever is suitable) invites you to be united with him to celebrate.” These words really touched me and showed me his simplicity.

If it were not for the vigilance of Fr. Niyomugabo, Sr. Marie-Josée is not certain she would be alive today.

I will always be grateful to him for protecting me from death since August 1993, and even during the genocide, a time when I felt alone and overwhelmed by indescribable fear.

This priest was a hero and a parent to a lot of people. He was a worthy disciple of Christ in his everyday actions. The legacy he has left for us is the responsibility to fight for peace for our fellow men. He chose to give his life, instead of abandoning others whose pain he shared. He could have left Cyanika, and possibly died elsewhere, but he did not do so.

Sr. Renata Kanziga arrived at the Benebikira congregation in Cyanika in September of 1992, and was working at the adult literacy centre known as CERAI.

Father Niyomugabo was truly a hero. He was killed because of the love he had for Christians. He could have easily left them, and told them to seek refuge somewhere else, and added that he could not even guarantee his own survival.

Sr. Renata says she owes her life to Fr. Niyomugabo.

We must thank him for our lives because it is he who told us to get away. We asked him to go with us and he refused because he did not want to expose us in danger. He was a saintly priest. His sainthood was demonstrated by his love for God and for God’s children, like the scripture says. He followed the example of Jesus who sacrificed himself for all of us. Fr. Niyomugabo also sacrificed himself for everyone who was being threatened around him. He was a fearless hero who always spoke the truth, even if the truth hurt influential people or people stronger than him. He did this in his sermons and in his conversations. He never minced his words and that is why the authorities were so unhappy with him. Even during meetings with the bishop, he was not afraid to speak the truth.

He was an exemplary priest. I am sure that Christ has received him well because he earned it. I have a lot of things to say to him, but I'm not able to recount them all now because there are so many. During all of the years we spent together, he never ceased to amaze me.

What struck Isaïe Iyamuremye is a conviction that “Fr. Niyomugabo loved people and helped them.”

He paid the school fees of my brother so he could attend secondary school. He did so because we were a poor family. He also paid the school fees of Ngirumpatse's child.

Etienne Bisengimana said he named his son after Fr. Niyomugabo out of a sense of gratitude and respect.

Fr. Niyomugabo had a lot of love for people. I wouldn't have finished my secondary school education if it weren't for him. I gave his name to my son.

Marianne Nikuze believes that the exceptional nature of Fr. Niyomugabo's courage should be recognized by the Catholic Church and he should be canonised.

What makes Fr. Niyomugabo particularly special is the fact that he stayed with us, at a time when all the other priests had left for Butare. Even those who were not targeted left, but he stayed put and died alongside our relatives. He could have left with the others, but he refused to abandon us. I remember him the same way I remember my relatives who died in Cyanika.

Even though I was still young, I could see how much Fr. Niyomugabo cared about his parishioners. He was what a priest should be. He showed his love for us at the most difficult of times, when everyone was trying to save his own skin.

“I have never seen in anyone else the devotion and sacrifice that he showed us at that time. Even though he has died, we need to show him how grateful we are.”

Grown-ups did not seem to be surprised by his behaviour, for they said he was a dedicated priest even before the genocide, fulfilling his vocation as he should. I hope that one day he will be canonised.

Dominique Safari reiterated similar sentiments.

When other Catholic clergy from Butare came to Cyanika and tried to take him to safety, Fr. Niyomugabo said no. He didn't want to leave us alone because he wanted to protect us. He showed us love and cared for us.

Unable to think of words which capture her feelings, Vérédiane Mukamugeme said she wanted to “entrust the soul of Fr. Niyomugabo to God.”

He died with our families because he didn't want to desert them. I will always pray for him, just as I am praying for him today. He did everything he could. He went beyond the

force of human beings and more than fulfilled his role as a priest. Normally, people are governed by self-interest. With Fr. Niyomugabo, it was the opposite.

For Dalie Gacendeli, Fr. Niyomugabo has a special place in her heart.

Fr. Niyomugabo was not like the others who wanted to save their lives at any cost. He remained close to us and he knew that he faced the same dangers as we did. I don't have the words to express what he was to me: he was like a parent to me.

“What can I say about Fr. Niyomugabo?, asked Spéciose Mukangenzi, at a loss to know where to begin.

It's really impossible to tell you everything that he did, to speak about his kindness. If I had all day I would be able to tell you something. Fr. Niyomugabo was like a parent to all the people at Cyanika parish. He swore to never leave his Christians.

Even before the genocide, he was always good and kind towards everyone. He was good to the poor. He gave to each person according to his needs. Those who killed him were the same ones to whom he had given food and clothing.

He could have escaped the killings. He could have easily left the parish like so many other religious figures who were in Cyanika, but he decided to stay with us. He was a Tutsi and he knew Tutsis were going to be exterminated. Yet, he found the courage to remain with us. He was a noble man with a noble heart. No words can describe my feelings towards him. Only God knows what he did. God alone saw what he did. I don't doubt that he has received his reward and that he is royalty in heaven. I can do nothing but pray for him. I ask God to protect him.

She put forward a suggestion to the government for consideration.

The government should recognize Fr. Niyomugabo and give him a place among the national heroes.

“I must,” said Rémy Kamugire, “insist on the extraordinary heroism shown by Fr. Niyomugabo.”

Even though I was only 15 at the time, I remember everything that happened.

He could have left Cyanika, but he didn't walk out on us. To be as brave as he was, under the circumstances which existed at the time, is something out of the ordinary. The fact of staying in the midst of Tutsis who were meant to be wiped out shows unusual courage. He knew very well that he could be killed once the interahamwe came. I don't know what I, as an individual, can do to thank him for the kindness he showed to the refugees gathered at the Parish of Cyanika. There is no reward for the goodness of Fr. Niyomugabo and for the humanity in his heart. I pray to the Almighty God that he keeps Fr. Niyomugabo by his side. He was everything to us. Even if we lost our relatives, he did the best he could to save us, whatever the risk to his own life.

For François Masabo, it was an honour to have served under Fr. Niyomugabo as a young priest.

Fr. Niyomugabo was special, someone of noble character. Anyone who knew him and survived would remember him. He always had time for people and he was humble and discreet. I was constantly impressed by his kindness and capacity for organization. It was a privilege to serve under him.

He was also very respectful. He believed every human being deserved to be treated with consideration. Sometimes he wondered if he gave some people too much respect because many times he was disappointed by people.

Senator Jean-Damascène Bizimana has no doubt about the contribution Fr. Niyomugabo made to the lives of people in Cyanika.

When Fr. Niyomugabo was at Cyanika, there was no distance between priest and parishioner. Instead, there was hope. He valued the truth and didn't tell lies. He was kind, smart and people loved him a lot when he was at Cyanika.

The murder of Father Joseph Niyomugabo was tragic, as was that of every other victim of the atrocities of 1994. But the death of Fr. Niyomugabo in Cyanika, when he had every possibility to escape, demonstrates the extent of his compassion, fortitude and loyalty to his parishioners and the refugees who looked to him for succour and protection. For this, he should be remembered by all of us. *"He Never Ceased to Amaze Me": A Tribute to Father Joseph Niyomugabo* reflects the love and gratitude with which he is remembered by the survivors of the Parish of Cyanika, and by all those who consider themselves fortunate to have known him.

The struggle against the genocide was lonely and extremely dangerous. The story of Fr. Niyomugabo, and of the few men and women who acted with similar courage, provides a glimmer of hope in the legacy of grief and despair left by those who turned churches, schools, hospitals and homes into graveyards.



*The exhumed mass graves at Cyanika. The building in the background is the memorial where Fr. Niyomugabo is buried alongside those he tried to protect.
Photo by Petterik Wiggers*