

WITNESS

ST. DAMIEN OF MOLOKAI

If you say the word “Hawaii” what comes to mind? Paradise beaches, clear blue water and sunlit skies? When Fr. Damien De Veuster arrived on Molokai, this was not what he encountered.

Early Years

Joseph de Veuster, otherwise known as Fr. Damian, was born on January 3rd. 1840. He was the youngest son and the seventh of eight children of Frans and Anne-Catherine de Veuster, who were small farmers from Tremeloo, near Louvain in Belgium. As a child he was known to be sociable, competitive and a bit of a trickster, but he also had a religious frame of mind. At the age of 13 years he was able and strong enough to help his father in the fields. His brother Auguste became a religious in the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Joseph followed in his brother’s footsteps and entered the Congregation on February 2nd. 1858 under the religious name of Brother Damien. Because he lacked education, his superiors did not consider him a good candidate for the priesthood. However, he was not unintelligent and since he learned his Latin well from his brother, his superiors decided to allow him to be eventually ordained.

Missionary Work in the Living Graveyard

Damien’s brother, known as Brother Pamphile, was instructed to go to the Hawaiian Islands as a missionary but he fell sick with typhus and Damien asked to go in his place. After a five month voyage, he landed in Honolulu on March 19th 1864 and was ordained by Bishop Maigret on 21st May 1864. Damien was assigned to a large volcanic region where the people worshipped a goddess. He began to learn the language and preached sermons on the open sexual misbehaviour of the natives because adultery, concubinage and pagan customs were rife. Fr. Damien suffered terribly from loneliness

and depression and pleaded with his superiors to send him another priest. Bishop Maigret began to look for volunteers among his priests to go to the leprosy settlement at Molokai. Leprosy had become an epidemic in Hawaii where it was brought by the white man on the whaling ships and by other seafarers. The natives had been isolated for many hundreds of years and consequently had no resistance to outside diseases, even apart from leprosy. However, the Board of Health had been conducting a rigid isolation and segregation policy to keep the disease under control. It was a sad state of affairs. Under this policy, a mother, for example, could be lifted from the bosom of her family and taken by force on ship to Molokai. Sometimes spouses, and even the whole family went so as not to be divided. Often when the ship carrying these abandoned people arrived on the shores of Molokai, they were thrown overboard and left to sink or swim and many of them drowned because they were so ill. Once there, they were expected to fend for themselves even though as the disease progressed, one may lose one's fingers and toes. Between 1866 and 1873, 797 lepers arrived at Molokai and almost half died. In April 1873 a clever and colourful politician Walter Gibson, Prime Minister to the Hawaiian King David Kalakaua, was to write in "Nuhou", a Hawaiian newspaper,

"If a noble Christian priest, preacher or Sister should be inspired to go and sacrifice a life to console these poor wretches, that would be a royal soul to shine forever on a throne reared by human love".

Damien himself wrote to his Superiors around this time,

"Many of our Christians here at Kohala also had to go to Molokai. I can only attribute to God an undeniable feeling that soon I shall join them..... Eight years of service among Christians you love and love you have tied us by powerful bonds".

So on May 10th 1873, Fr. Damien set sail for Molokai wondering how he could best serve these poor people. They had been living and dying in desperate conditions without the sacraments. There were

600 lepers on the settlement including 200 Catholics. His Bishop had instructed him,

“you must avoid any form of contagion. If they pass around a pipe you must refuse it. Above all, you must not join in meals and eat from the communal pot with your fingers as others do. Even the saddle that a leper has sat upon must be taboo to you and I forbid you to sleep in the hut of a leper”.

What he encountered was not a paradise island, but a paradise lost, an island prison.

He walked amid the living dead and was appalled to see grotesque disfigurement, dire poverty, destitution and emotional pain. The lepers were given only one change of clothing by the State and they were expected to grow their own food from the rocky volcanic soil. There was a hospital of sorts, few medicines, but no doctor. The male nurse showing him around stated,

“we have no enemies here save scabies, vomit, fleas and lice.”

Fr. Damien said his first Mass in the chapel which was too small and boiling hot. There were so many suppurating sores that there was a constant stench of rotting flesh. One of the symptoms of leprosy is excessive salivation and people constantly coughed and spat on the ground. Damien had to turn away so as not to be sick.

His visit to the “dying shed” convinced him of God’s will for him in this desolate island. Patients were put in this miserable place when they approached their last moments of life so as to not demoralize the other sick in the hospital. When he entered he found a young man who had,

“been reduced to a quivering bundle beneath a dirty sheet, his pleading eyes staring out from his swollen face”.

Damien could see the maggots crawling around in the sores in his body. Although forbidden by his Bishop to touch the patients Damien began to stroke the man’s neck where the skin was untainted. The

priest spoke to him of Heaven and of God's welcome there and anointed him. As he prayed, a spasm went through the young man's body and he died in the loving presence of the young priest.

Fr. Damien was immensely practical and his ministry had four concerns:

He cared for the spiritual needs of the lepers. Within ten days, he had twenty catechumens, the following week he performed thirty baptisms and by the end of six months he had four hundred Catechumens. Facing death as they all were, it was easy for them to throw off all moral restraint and squeeze from any source, some pleasure before they died, including drunkenness and sexual profligacy. His own vow of celibacy was a constant demonstration of his commitment to holiness. Damien built chapels with his own hands and he encountered witchcraft under the surface, due to a legacy of their former religion, He wrote to his brother,

“when desperate, the exiles sacrifice to their old gods”.

He began perpetual Eucharistic adoration in the settlement, which gave his lepers a place to pour out their hearts to the Lord in the midst of their sufferings.

Secondly, Fr. Damien attended to their medical needs. In addition to leprosy for which there was no known cure, patients suffered from many other illnesses such as scabies, lung infections, ulcerated sores, coughs and diahorrea, not to mention lice and tick infestations. He dealt with these often in the face of delays for supplies, indifference and opposition. He cleaned and bandaged their wounds and even conducted little trials in research, giving placebos to try and document the effectiveness of new treatments he had read about.

Thirdly, there were many orphans on Molokai who were prey to pimps or used as house slaves. There he was caring for 100 boys whom he involved in his building projects as well as instructing them spiritually.

Lastly, he worked to raise the living conditions of the exiles by helping them build cottages, by bringing in an adequate water supply, obtaining better food and clothing for them, digging their graves and making their coffins. He ran foot races for the sports-loving lepers even though some of them had no feet and organized a choir even though leprosy often attacked the vocal chords causing their voices to produce peculiar sounds. Nevertheless, the choir sang joyfully. He formed a band although some had few fingers to play the musical instruments. One witness reported two organists who played at the same time, by managing ten fingers between them! The Hawaiians loved music.

Fr. Damien was not only priest to them, but also doctor, architect, friend and builder. By 1888 he had helped to build many of the 374 buildings on the island. He aimed to restore in each leper a sense of personal worth and dignity. To show his poor battered flock the value of their lives he had to demonstrate to them the value of their deaths and he organized a Christian Burial Association to provide a decent burial for each deceased person. This organization arranged for the requiem Mass, proper funeral ceremonies and provided a musical group that played during the funeral procession. Under his vigorous guidance a sense of dignity, joy and order replaced Molokai's despair and lawlessness. There was no self-pity in this colony and Damien's cheerful disposition and desire to serve, touched the leper's hearts, without patronizing or bullying them.

Fr. Damien constantly harried the government authorities who often regarded him as obstinate and headstrong, but in all things his lepers came first. He suffered great loneliness as he had no other companions for a long time to help him and those three priests who were eventually sent at different times by his superiors proved difficult to work with and caused him a great deal of angst.

For many years he himself could not avail of the Sacrament of confession because he had no one to whom he could confess. His Bishop came to hear his confession but the captain of the ship would not allow the Bishop to disembark. In order to see the Bishop,

Damien sailed out to the boat, but was not allowed to board the ship. So, Fr. Damien had to shout his confession from the boat and receive absolution from the Bishop. Many of the seamen on board listening were moved by this humble priest so willing to confess his sins in public.

A very touching letter written by Fr. Damien, in the following private confession during a personal retreat, revealed the extent of his sensitive conscience and his honesty. He loved God and his whole life long, was true to his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, though all were a struggle for him.

“Angry on Sunday three times before Mass. Impure thoughts, nakedness. Listened to tittle-tattle and gossip and did the same myself. Neglect of self-examination and prayer, distraction during prayers (partly intentionally), insults to the Mormons, two or three times allowed someone to die without the Sacraments, vanity, hatred, too brief and too little teaching of the catechism, not strict enough with the children, grumbling with others, inflexibility.”

One might say that it demonstrates that saints are not perfect people but rather people who remain faithful, people who carry out ordinary things with extraordinary love, people who live the virtues to a heroic extent, even in the face of their own weaknesses, trials and disappointments. Such was the person of Fr. Damien.

Damien realized very early on in his apostolate that, despite being forbidden by his Bishop to take any risks of being contaminated with leprosy, he had to make one with his flock and identify with them completely. Long before he contracted leprosy he spoke of himself and the people of Molokai as “we lepers”. He wrote to his brother in Europe,

“I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ. That is why, in preaching, I say ‘we lepers’; not, ‘my brethren’”.

He embraced the leper but not leprosy. He dreaded the disease. In September 1881, Hawaiian Princess Liliuokalani visited Molokai. She

was deeply moved by the plight of the lepers and was unable to give the speech she had prepared. On returning to Honolulu, she requested that Fr. Damien be made Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Kalakaua in recognition of his “efforts in alleviating the distress and mitigating the sorrows of the unfortunate”. Damien accepted the award because he felt it would bring attention to his lepers, but he never wore the medal.

Final Golgotha

One day in December 1884, as Fr. Damien was soaking his feet in extremely hot water, he felt no sensation of heat or pain. The disease had finally claimed him. Some said that there was a connection between leprosy and venereal disease. In order to witness against those who claimed that leprosy could only be spread by sexual contact, Fr. Damien submitted to the indignity of having his blood and body examined in detail after he had contracted the disease. Dr. Arning, a world-famous specialist in the disease, reported that Damien had no sign of syphilis.

History has borne out the wisdom of Damien’s decision to take these embarrassing measures. Shortly after his death, a Protestant missionary from Honolulu Dr. Charles McEwen Hyde bitterly attacked the priest’s moral life. The good clergyman opined that Fr. Damien contracted leprosy because he was licentious. However, Damien did not lack defenders. In a magnificent statement, Robert Louis Stevenson, holidaying in Honolulu with his family, visited Molokai after Damien’s death and rose to champion the priest’s cause. His defence rested upon the complete sacrifice the man made of his life on behalf of his lepers. Damien continued working as best he could to serve his flock. In 1885 he wrote to his Superior,

“I am a leper. Blessed be the good God. I only ask one favour of you. Send someone to this tomb to be my confessor.”

Help came first in the person of Mother Marianne Kopp, Superior of the Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse, New York, who served the Honolulu leper hospital. Damien asked her to care for the girls’

orphanage in Molokai. He furthermore promised her that not one of her Sisters would ever be afflicted with leprosy. The Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse are still at Molokai. To this day, not one of them has ever contracted leprosy.

Catherine de Veuster, Damien's mother, now eighty three years old, heard that her son had leprosy. Someone had advised her that the newspapers reported that "the flesh of the leper priest of Molokai was falling off in hunks". Damien had tried to keep it from her, but it was too much for her and with her son's picture and that of the Blessed Virgin before her, she died peacefully and calmly in April 1886.

Death

Fr. Damien's health began to deteriorate as the disease ravaged his body externally and internally. Still he kept working in a flurry of activity, with his arm in a sling and his foot dragging behind him. As death drew near, Fr. Damien entered into what we call "the dark night of the soul". He felt he was unworthy of heaven and suffered mental anguish as many saintly people have experienced. There were a few priests of his Congregation present who had come with the Franciscan Sisters. One of them, Fr. Moellers heard Damien's last confession. Fr. Damien de Veuster died on April 15th 1889. It was Holy Week and some time before this he had said that the Lord wanted him to spend Easter in Heaven. Interestingly, before Damien left Belgium for the missions he had prayed at the Shrine of Our Lady of Montaigu. He asked her for 12 years of missionary service. In his 12th year in the leper colony he was diagnosed with the most virulent form of leprosy. He lived and worked for 4 more years and died at the age of 49 years. On Pentecost Sunday 1995, Pope John Paul II declared Fr. Damien among the "Blessed", giving him the title "Servant of Humanity". He was a man who laboured in that field ripe for the harvest, a lonely place, where he modelled for his lepers the love of Christ – like them abandoned, even at times persecuted and humiliated but always full of joy and hope. He sacrificed all to gain all.

He was canonized by Pope Benedict XVII on 11th.October 2009 – a Saint for our modern times. Saint Damien, as he will now be known, is a shining witness of love and service for mankind and in particular for the priesthood in this specially designated “Year of the Priest”. As Christ emptied Himself of His divinity to become one of us, so did St. Damien empty himself of almost everything that the world regards as precious. He became one with his beloved leper colony. To Christ’s sacrifice of His own Body and Blood, St. Damien joyfully added the sacrifice of himself and his little flock.

His Feast Day is May 10th, the day he arrived to serve the Leprosarium in 1863.

Fr. Damien was to write in a notebook where he counselled himself while in Molokai,

“Be severe towards yourself, indulgent toward others. Have scrupulous exactitude for everything regarding God: prayer, meditation, Mass, administration of the Sacraments. Unite your heart with God....Remember always your three vows, by which you are dead to the things of the world. Remember always that God is eternal and work courageously in order one day to be united with Him forever.”