

CELEBRATING THE NEW SAINT: DAMIEN OF MOLOKAI

THE TEXT FROM THE TALK BY FR. JOHN BARRY

On October 11th, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI declared Blessed Damien of Molokai as now a full saint of the Roman Catholic Church. This priest who served in Hawaii, just prior to its becoming a part of the U.S., was the 7th child to Belgium farmers, near Lovain. He became a priest of a missionary religious order of priests, fulfilling a dream to take the gospel to faraway places, such as to the Pacific peoples. He was ordained in Honolulu in 1864.

When Damien accepted the assignment to Molokai, the segregated leprosy settlement, he would be the first priest they would have. He started on May 10, 1873. Fr. Damien was physically strong and worked hard. He began a life's work of putting up small hospitals, orphanages, houses and all kinds of buildings on the island settlement. The physical condition and great sufferings of the lepers were grotesque and scary to the initial onlooker, as it was to Damien, with seeing bared intestines and ribs, rotting flesh, disfigured faces, and the puss and redness. The awful smells of repugnant odors were all around. Insect infestation added to the miseries. Yet, upon one's accepting the human dignity of the lepers, a loving perspective could come.

He immediately began the spiritual care to the 200 Catholics of the settlement, with the celebration of the Sacraments, and in his first year he had 400 catechumens to join the church. He began perpetual adoration. "Jesus is Present in this settlement," he declared. The work was often a solitary one as priest. He worked alone for most of the years at Molokai. When he was joined by a second clergyman a couple of times, the disagreeable natures and misunderstandings of those helpers (about the difficulties of the mission) had them leave his side, and worse yet, they complained to the Honolulu bishop and made things strained between the chancery and Damien's mission for many years. It made his personal devotional life and vocation quite tested.

There were supply problems to the settlement, with struggling issues for basic needs and medicines and such. There also was a constant problem of Hawaii officials and medical persons and Protestant leaders giving a public misperception of the disease—saying that the leprosy was caught mostly in sinful sexual conduct and other such touch. Protestant clergy



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accused Damien of sexual relations with lepers, and falsely explained that his mission wasn't a spiritual one, but a carnal one! There were other awful untrue allegations. (They would even continue this attack on Fr. Damien after his death.) This outcast judgment from others, along with the divergent opinions on treatment and care, added to the turmoil of Damien's service of God to these lepers. Yet he recalled the stories of the Lord Jesus and His deep care for lepers and all the poor, and for the social outcasts of society. Damien remembered how the prophets like Elisha gave witness of care to the lepers, too. It spurred him to keep serving God in this priestly mission, even amidst these emotional and spiritual heartaches.

Then, of course, the physical problems of being around lepers did come to Damien. Fr. Damien began getting signs of catching the leprosy disease, and by 1883 had lost the feeling in a leg and foot. The leprosy spread to other areas. He pleaded for more assistance to his work from his bishop and fellow priests, but found a discouraging reluctance from them, and even unfounded criticism to his ministry. He publicly appealed for help in newspapers. He described the great difficulty of the work, but the reward of serving God in such an unconditional love for others. It received interest from others, and a long-denied appreciation of his work at Molokai. Laymen, priests, and sisters responded to his call. It would be the last year of Damien's life. At the age of forty-nine, Damien died on April 15th, in the middle of Holy Week 1889. By 1893, a great respect had come to Fr. Damien's work and witness, with a public monument being erected. In 1898, the annexation of Hawaii to the U.S. caused Hawaiians to become American citizens. In 1959, Hawaii became officially a U.S. state, and a statue of Hawaii's famous priest was erected in the U.S. Capitol building to his honor. One can see it on tours of the Capital today.

St. Damien, pray for us. Pray for our hearts to learn more of unconditional love, constant love even under persecution, compassion on the sick, and by your intercession, please grant health to those with skin diseases, or then, the strength to live with one's bodily weaknesses.

IT IS MY HOPE THAT THIS BRIEF STORY OF ST. DAMIEN WILL INTEREST YOU TO COME TO CHURCH ON NOV. 21ST TO SEE THE PLAY "DAMIEN."

Damien is interred in his native Belgium. The leper colony location in Hawaii, where he served, is now called Kaluapapa National Historical Park. It is shown in the photo below.

