

October 25, 2009

Last week on the occasion of World Mission Sunday, I wrote about our call as baptized Catholics to stand in solidarity with our missionaries through prayer, sacrifice, and generosity. In this column, I wish to reflect upon the life and ministry of a great missionary canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square two weeks ago.

Many of us have known Father Damien, the Leper, since our childhood. I hope you will find inspiration in the life and ministry of this holy priest now known as St. Damien of Molokai.

Father Damien was born on January 3, 1840, the seventh of eight children. His parents owned a small farm near the City of Louvain in Belgium. At age 19, he joined the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. His brother, August, also joined that Congregation and two of his sisters became Ursuline nuns.

Prior to his ordination, Damien was sent to the missions on the Hawaiian Islands where he arrived on March 19, 1864, and was ordained in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace in Honolulu on May 24th of the same year. For nine years, he served on the island of Hawaii and learned the Kanaka language sufficiently to preach, hear confessions, and carry on discussions. He traveled as far as 25 miles one way by horseback and canoe to minister to the sick. In one of the parishes to which he was assigned, there were 3,000 persons. The parish was 80 miles long and 30 miles wide.

The islands of Hawaii were fertile ground for the spread of many diseases including leprosy. Leprosy is a disease of the skin and nervous system. Those thought to be incurable were sent to the isolated peninsula of Kalaupapa on the

island of Molokai. For all practical purposes, society considered persons with leprosy as dead to the world, no longer with rights to which every person is entitled, including the right to live with one's family and friends and to be part of the community.

On May 10, 1873, Bishop Maigret assigned Father Damien to the Kalaupapa settlement. He had little more than his breviary, and spent the first weeks sleeping under the branches of a Pandanus tree whose roots also served as home for rodents, centipedes, roaches, and ants.

Father Damien's cheerful disposition and desire to serve touched the hearts of the people. They were without spiritual or medical care and he ministered to them: hearing confessions, bringing the Holy Eucharist, anointing them, washing their bodies, and bandaging their wounds. He attempted to restore their sense of personal worth and dignity by teaching them to farm, raise animals, and play musical instruments. He wrote to his parents: "My greatest pleasure is to serve the Lord in His poor, sick children rejected by other people" (August 1873).

Father Damien often struggled with loneliness and melancholy because of the forced isolation by the Board of Health to those in the leper settlement. The Board even forbade his bishop to disembark on Molokai to bring him comfort and pastoral care. Despite his own personal struggles, Father Damien touched those afflicted with leprosy, embraced them, dined with them, and cleaned and bandaged their wounds and sores. He spoke of himself and his people as "we lepers."

When it was confirmed early in 1885 that he had himself contacted the disease, Father Damien wrote: "I have contracted leprosy...soon I will be disfigured entirely. Having no doubts about the true nature of my disease, I am

calm, resigned, and very happy in the midst of my people.” On April 15, 1889, during Holy Week, at the age of 49, Father Damien died.

During these very days, the relic of this Apostle to the Lepers is being venerated on the six Hawaiian Islands, the last of which will be Molokai on October 30 and 31. His relic will be enshrined in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace in Honolulu, where Father Damien was ordained a priest in 1864, next Sunday, November 1, the Solemnity of All Saints.

Many have and continue to pray to St. Damien for the help to bear the burdens of illnesses. We might all emulate his self-giving love in imitation of the hearts of Jesus and Mary.