

Saint of the Month for May 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

**Saint Joseph Damien de Veuster, Priest**  
**Saturday, May 10**

Father Damien of Moloka'i was born Joseph de Veuster in Tremelo, Belgium on January 3, 1840, the son of farmers. He is now known for giving many years of his life in Hawai'i helping the lepers physically and spiritually, and finally losing his life from the same disease.

Leprosy is a term we encounter a number of times in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, but it is probably a generic term for a wide range of skin diseases. Fr. Damien took care of patients who had what is now called Hansen's disease, a communicable skin and nerve disease that was then incurable and fatal. It can now be treated, but there was no hope in his day. (The native people of Hawai'i are thought to have been particularly susceptible to the disease.)

Some cases of leprosy in the Bible were probably less severe, but were then still regarded as dangerous and communicable; those with leprosy were cast out of society to fend as best they could.

The Hawaiian Islands were discovered by Europeans (Captain James Cook) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and were studied by the U.S. Exploring Expedition led by Lt. Charles Wilkes (*circa* 1840), who called them the Sandwich Islands. Christianity had come in the early 1820s with Congregationalist missionaries from Boston, who had made the very long and dangerous journey around Cape Horn at the tip of South America and northwestward into the Pacific Ocean. They brought with them a printing press intending to produce sacred texts for the local people, including of course the Bible. There was a problem: these people had no written language! So the missionaries listened very carefully to what they heard, and devised a written language using as few letters as they felt were needed to capture the sounds they heard, including the glottal stop (ʻ), a sound used in some other world languages. They wound up with the shortest alphabet in the world, with 12 letters: a, e, i, o, u; h, k, l, m, n, p, and w. Catholicism came later.

Father Damien was educated at the College of Braine-le-Comte, and in 1858 joined the Society of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Picpus Fathers) at Louvain. He went as a missionary to the Sandwich Islands in 1863; he was ordained in Honolulu in 1864. He volunteered to take charge of the leper colony at Kalaupapa on Moloka'i (established about 1873).

This island has the highest sea cliffs in the world, and the colony was on a small peninsula, and very hard to reach. (My wife Denise visited it while we lived in Honolulu (1988-1992) by taking a small plane to the island and then riding a mule down the switch back trail to the peninsula.) The government greatly feared anyone who had leprosy, and people with the disease were put on a ship bound on a one-way journey to the shore near Kalaupapa. You were then thrown into the sea, and if you made it to shore, well, good,

but you were still going to die of your disease, and you were removed from other people who might get your disease.

A few very blessed souls had a helper, a *kokua*, who was willing to go with you on their own one-way trip.

Father Damien improved water and food supplies and housing, founded two orphanages, and offered the sacraments to give the lepers aid from God. Other priests helped him for only 6 of his 16 years at the colony. He contracted leprosy in 1884, but would not leave the island because he would not abandon his lepers.

He wrote: "If I cannot cure them as [Christ] did, at least I can comfort them, and through the holy ministry that he in his kindness has given me, I hope that many of them, cured from leprosy of the soul, will go before his tribunal able to enter the society of the blessed."

Some of you might remember two photographs of Father Damien shown at Mass by Fr. Robert Sewvello a few years ago- a healthy young priest and an emaciated man near death.

Father Damien died on April 15, 1889 on Moloka'i. He was buried on the island, but his remains were moved to Louvain in 1936.

As has happened before, there were rumors circulating before and after his death of immorality, but he was exonerated of these false charges shortly after his death.

He was canonized in 2009.

The celebration is given the rank of Optional Memorial. (**Magnificat**, May 2014; **Loose-Leaf Lectionary** for May 1 – July 31, 2014 (Liturgical Press); **Encyclopædia Britannica**, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition)

**Collect from the Mass of Saint Damien de Veuster:**

Father of mercy,  
who gave us in Saint Damien  
a shining witness of love for the poorest and most abandoned,  
grant that, by his intercession,  
as faithful witnesses of the heart of your Son Jesus,  
we too may be servants of the most needy and rejected.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

Perhaps we can learn from Saint Damien to have more compassion for the sick, including those who face an incurable illness. Perhaps we can be with them in prayer, in person, or both, depending on the case. We probably also can try to achieve greater perseverance in continuing on our path of compassion for the ill. Saint Joseph Damien de Veuster of Moloka'i, pray for us!