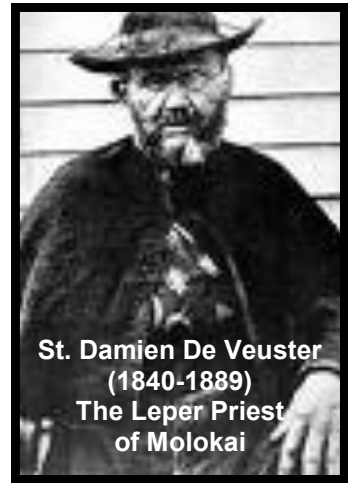


Born on January 3, 1840, in the village of Tremelo, Belgium, Jozef, or “Jef”, De Veuster was expected to one day run the family farm and grain business. Instead he followed an older brother into the congregation of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, a missionary order of priests, taking the religious name of Damien. When his brother became too ill to be sent to Hawaii, Damien was chosen to take his place. It was there that he was ordained in 1864 and spent the next nine years serving as a priest in various parishes and missions throughout the islands.



During that time leprosy, or Hansen’s Disease, appeared in Hawaii. Damaging the skin and limbs, leprosy caused horrible disfigurement and eventual death to the sufferer. There was no cure and little understanding of how it spread. Out of fear the government established a leper settlement on the isolated island of Molokai where those suffering from leprosy were in effect abandoned. They were constantly short of food, clothing, and drinkable water while living in dirty shacks.

One of several priests who offered to go to the settlement, Fr. Damien was chosen in part because of his experience in farming and construction. Arriving on Molokai in 1873 he found more than 800 men, women and children in the settlement. There he was to labor for the next sixteen years, most of that time alone and unknown to the outside world.

He served the spiritual needs of the people as their priest but also set about building 300 hundred small homes, eight churches and chapels, and laying a pipeline to bring in fresh water. He embraced the people as his brothers and sisters. He cleaned and bandaged their ulcers caused by leprosy, smoked from their tobacco pipes and ate from their dishes. When they died, he also built their coffins and dug their graves. He continually interceded on their behalf with officials in the church and state, at times becoming unpopular with both.

In spite of the great demands placed upon him, Fr. Damien always reserved the first hours of each day for prayer and spiritual reflection. His union with Christ gave him the strength he needed as a priest. When he was diagnosed with leprosy in 1884 he told the people he could now truly say that he was a “brother leper” to them. During the last five years of this life, the story of people of Molokai and Fr. Damien became known throughout the world. Other priest, nuns, and lay people volunteered to serve at the settlement. Fr. Damien died on leprosy on April 15, 1889 and buried on Molokai, only to be reburied in Belgium in 1936. A statute of him represents Hawaii in the US Capital building. On October 11, 2009, Fr. Damien will be canonized a saint of the universal church. St. Damien of Molokai, pray for us!

Priest of the Week!