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DAMIEN OF MOLOKAI AND MISSIONARY COMPASSION

"He stretched out his hand and touched the leper" (Mark 1:41)

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"The joy and contentment of heart that the Sacred Hearts deluge me with, make me consider myself the happiest missioner in the world" are words written by St. Damien in a November 9, 1887 letter to his brother, Fr. Pamphile. Damien knew that his death was nearing, for in the same letter he noted that "leprosy has a pretty strong hold on my body." He continued: "Please help me with your good prayers to obtain persevering strength, till I happily arrive at the top of Calvary."[1] On March 23, 1889, less than a month before death, Damien remarked, in a conversation with Fr. Wendelin, "How happy I am to have given all.… Now I die poor, having nothing of my own."[2]

Indeed, deep joy and profound happiness mark the life of this extraordinary missionary priest. In Damien's final letter to his parents before he set sail to Hawaii from Bremerhaven (October 30, 1863), he wrote, "It is He [Jesus] Who in the midst of trials, contradictions, and sufferings, will cause us to enjoy a happiness of which he who has

[1]P. de Veuster, ed., *Life and Letters of Father Damien: The Apostle of the Lepers* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1889), 142-143. Hereafter referred to as *Life and Letters*.

[2]*Life and Letters*, 146.

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never experienced it can form no idea."[3] He also declared, in another letter to his parents, "Do not worry about me in the least, for when one serves God, one is happy anywhere."[4]

Damien wrote again to his parents after his arrival in Hawaii (the letter is dated March 22, 1864), saying that it is "impossible to express how immensely happy a missionary is when he sees the new land that he must water with his sweat to gain civilized souls for God."[5] Writing to his parents and brothers from Molokai (November 25, 1873), he noted: "I am the happiest of men because I can serve the Lord in the poor and sick children rejected by others."[6]

After six years in the leper settlement, Damien wrote to his superior general in Paris on February 4, 1879: "I am still happy and content among my beloved lepers of Molokai."[7] When his death was approaching, he noted: "I die as a leper, but I am the happiest missionary in the world."[8] Pope John Paul II beatified Damien on June 3, 1995 and noted the latter's joy and happiness. During the canonization on October 11, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI said of Damien: "His missionary activity, which gave him such joy, reached its peak in charity."[9]

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[3]*Life and Letters*, 48.

[4]G. Daws, *Holy Man: Father Damien of Molokai* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 35.

[5]J. de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien: The Leper Priest—A Saint for Our Time* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 20.

[6]John Paul II, "Discover the Heart of God in Prayer," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 28:24 (June 14, 1995): 7. These words are inscribed on Damien's tomb in the church crypt in Louvain.

[7]de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, 61.

[8]R. Obbels, "Damien de Veuster: A Leper among Lepers: Centenary of Death," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 32:15 (April 10, 1989): 5.

[9]Benedict XVI, "Heroes in Holiness Go Against the Tide" [Canonization Homily], *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 42:41 (October 14, 2009): 5.

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Pope Paul VI often spoke of the "joy of evangelizing," asserting that people readily

> receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world.[10]

Damien, the joyful evangelizer, the "happiest missioner in the world,"[11] remains a contemporary witness of profound holiness and authentic charity for the entire Church.

Brief Biographical Sketch

As a prelude to exploring the missionary witness of Joseph Damien de Veuster, readers will benefit from a brief narrative of the life of this remarkable saint. It will allow one to appreciate the confluence of many events and their contribution to a holistic understanding of Damien's missionary witness. Indeed, an account of Damien's missionary journey without a brief timeline would lose some of its potential impact on readers.[12]

Joseph de Veuster was born in Tremelo, Belgium on January 3, 1840, the seventh of eight children of Frans and Anne-Catherine de Veuster. The family was rather well-off—they owned a small farm and had a modest house at Tremelo, a Flemish-speaking village near

[10]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), 80.

[11]*Life and Letters*, 143; see also John Paul II, "Holy Father's Letter for the Hundredth Death Anniversary of Father Damien de Veuster," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 32:15 (April 10, 1989): 2.

[12]Detailed footnotes are not supplied for the materials used in this biographical narrative as they are commonly known and are found in various print and online sources within the public domain. A historically accurate presentation of the life of St. Damien is available in the 112-minute film by Paul Cox entitled *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien*.

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the city of Louvain, and Joseph's father was involved in business as a grain merchant. After his primary schooling, Joseph worked for a few years on the family farm before continuing his college studies at Braine-le-Comte, Belgium. His father dreamed that he would succeed him in the grain-marketing business.

The spirituality of the family with its many devotions, typical of Catholics of the day, made a deep impression on all the children. In January of 1859, Joseph entered the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts at the age of 19. His brother, August, had preceded him in entering the same Congregation, which in Europe is known as the "Picpus Fathers" from the *Rue de Picpus* in Paris on which the motherhouse is located, while two sisters, Eugenie and Pauline, became Ursuline nuns. Joseph made his first vows on October 7, 1860 and took the name Damien, having known of Sts. Cosmas and Damian, two brothers who, according to tradition, were medical doctors and twins. It was in these missionary saints that Joseph saw parallels for himself and his brother August.

Damien proceeded with his spiritual and academic formation as is common in religious congregations, although it was doubted whether he could become a priest due to his lack of proficiency in Latin and other prerequisites for theological studies. He was finally accepted to study for the priesthood with the assistance of his brother August, whose religious name was Pamphile. Damien's passion was to serve as a foreign missionary; during his student days he would pray daily before an image of St. Francis Xavier, apostle to the Far East.

When his brother Pamphile fell ill during a typhus epidemic in Louvain in 1863, Damien, though not yet an ordained priest, wrote directly to the superior general in Paris, requesting to replace his brother in the mission band setting out for Hawaii, then known as the Sandwich Islands. His request, in God's providence, was granted; along with five other priests and brothers and ten sisters of the same congregation, he set sail on October 20, 1863. The journey took five months, with Damien arriving in Honolulu on March 19, 1864, his own patronal feast day of St. Joseph. On May 21, 1864, Damien was ordained a priest in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace and was soon

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sent to Puna on the Big Island of the archipelago where he served in two vast parishes for nine years.

In May of 1873, Bishop Louis Desiré Maigret, SS.CC. convened a meeting with several Sacred Hearts Fathers and raised the issue of a residential priest for the lepers residing in Molokai, the segregated colony that King Kamehameha V had established in 1865. Damien was among the four candidates who immediately volunteered (the bishop initially planned to have them serve voluntarily on a rotation basis); 33 years of age at the time, he saw this as a *kairos* moment.

On May 10, 1873, Bishop Maigret accompanied Fr. Damien to Molokai.[13] Both pastors tried to offer comfort to about 50 poor lepers who were being exiled to the island onboard their ship, the *Kilauea*. Upon their arrival, the bishop introduced Fr. Damien by telling the leper community that they would now have a resident priest, "one who will be a father to you, and who loves you so much that he does not hesitate to become one with you, to live and die with you."[14] The bishop's words were prophetic, and they also captured Damien's core motivation—he was first and foremost a priest, one dedicated to pastoral charity; from his priestly and fatherly identity flowed his heroic virtue and tireless service. Damien's religious superior had concurred in the assignment, having written to him: "You may stay in Molokai as long as your devotion dictates." These were words which Damien took to heart, frequently recalled, and brought to his prayer and meditation.[15]

Though the Religious of the Sacred Hearts had built a small chapel in Molokai and dedicated it to St. Philomena, there was no house for a priest. Damien thus spent the first months of his stay living under the branches of a *pandanus* tree (its roots also served as shelter for rodents,

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[13]May 10 was eventually chosen as the feast day of St. Damien in the Church calendar.

[14]"Catholic Dictionary—Damien Father (Apostle of Lepers)," Section 4, http://dictionary.editme.com/Damien (accessed December 30, 2015).

[15]"Catholic Dictionary," Section 4.

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roaches, centipedes, ants, and other vermin). The harsh realities of Molokai quickly became apparent—there was chaos in the settlement, with no organization of the community, minimal health and social services, no communal order, and nothing to promote a dignified human life, even if the conditions were rough. The anguished cry of the lepers that greeted Damien was the axiom *Aole kanawai ma keia wahi* ("in this place there is no law").[16] He thus set about trying to bring order and organization to the situation; where no law existed, he sought to bring the transforming law of love.

Damien began his mission by visiting his flock. He ministered to the sick, bringing them the sacraments of confession and anointing as well as Holy Communion. His efforts, however, did not stop at the spiritual needs of the lepers; he understood that he was called to bring genuine hope to the people. He set about washing the lepers' bodies, bandaging their wounds, and even cleaning and tidying their little huts and surroundings. He did all he could to make the lepers as comfortable as possible.

To instill a sense of personal worth, Damien gave attention to improving the cemetery, seeking to demonstrate human dignity both in life and in death. He fenced it to prevent pigs, dogs, and other scavengers from entering and eating the shallowly buried corpses. He made coffins and dug graves. He organized the lepers into the Christian Burial Association which helped to provide for decent burials of the deceased.

Damien described this aspect of his mission in a letter to his brother Pamphile on January 31, 1880: "Since I have been here I have buried from one hundred and ninety to two hundred every year, and still the number of living lepers is always over seven hundred."[17] Damien called the cemetery the "Garden of the Dead" and noted:

[16]B. J. O'Leary, "Molokai: A Centenary of Joseph Damien de Veuster, the Leper Priest," *Sisters Today* 61:2 (October 1989): 96.

[17]*Life and Letters*, 118.

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> My greatest pleasure is to go there to say my beads, and meditate on that unending happiness which so many of them are already enjoying.… I confess to you, my dear brother, the cemetery and the hospital, where the dying lie, are my best meditation books, as well for the benefit of my own soul.…[18]

It took years of hard work and dogged determination to provide for the numerous needs of his flock. He solicited clothes and other necessities for distribution. Two homes, one for boys and one for girls, were built with the help of generous benefactors. He established an abundant and clean water supply early on with some government assistance. He taught the people how to farm, raise animals, and even play musical instruments. A band and a choir were organized. One witness reported that he saw two people playing an organ at the same time, managing ten fingers between them. Hundreds of simple houses and even a road were built. An addition was made to enlarge the small chapel. Under his direction, lepers blasted the coral rocks of the Kalaupapa shoreline to open a decent docking facility. Damien, who was a skillful carpenter, good mason, and an experienced farmer, was not daunted by any development project.

Such ambitious efforts—both spiritual and material—demanded heroic dedication which was not "natural" or "automatic." Damien himself wrote:

> Many a time in fulfilling my priestly duties at the lepers' homes, I have been obliged, not only to close my nostrils, but to remain outside to breathe fresh air. To counteract the bad smell, I got myself accustomed to the use of tobacco. The smell of the pipe preserved me somewhat from carrying in my clothes the obnoxious odor of our lepers.[19]

Damien sought assistance (often with great audacity) from a variety of sources: generous benefactors, his own religious community, government authorities, the Hawaii Board of Health, and the diocesan bishop. His fame grew among most Hawaiians; indeed,

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[18]*Life and Letters*, 118.

[19]"St. Damien of Molokai," http://www.ewtn.com/saintsHoly/saints/D/stdamienofmolokai.asp (accessed August 1, 2018).

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Princess Lili'uokalani, sister of the then-reigning monarch, King David Kalakaua, visited the settlement on September 15, 1881, eight years after Damien's arrival in Molokai. She was so moved that she wept openly, was unable to deliver her planned address, and subsequently had her brother confer on Damien the award of the Royal Order of the Knight Commander of the Royal Order of Kalakaua in recognition of his efforts "in alleviating the distresses and mitigating the sorrows of the unfortunate."[20]

Additional pivotal events during the final years of Damien's life can be mentioned briefly (some of these will be described in greater detail in the sections that follow). In December of 1884, Damien suspected that he had contracted leprosy when he soaked his feet in hot water and realized that he did not feel it; a doctor confirmed the diagnosis several days later. On July 19, 1886, Fr. Damien welcomed Joseph Dutton to Molokai; he stayed for 45 years without leaving the colony. On November 14, 1888, Mother Marianne Cope (canonized in 2012) settled at Kalaupapa to care for the lepers; she died in Molokai on August 9, 1918. Two other persons came to the leper settlement in 1888: Fr. Louis Conrardy, a diocesan priest from Oregon, and James Sinnett, a nurse from Chicago.

On March 19, 1889, the Feast of St. Joseph, Damien fell ill and became bed-ridden; it was Sinnett who nursed him during the final phases of his illness and closed his eyes in death. On April 2, 1889, Damien received the last rites but lingered for 13 more days. On April 15, 1889, the Monday of Holy Week, Fr. Damien died at the age of 49. He was buried, according to his own request, under the same *pandanus* tree where he had spent his first night on Molokai sixteen years earlier.

Some of Damien's final words are recorded in an April 17, 1889 letter written by Fr. Wendelin: "How happy I am to have given all.… Now I die poor, having nothing of my own." "Death is not far off … the good God is calling me to celebrate Easter with Himself."

[20]M. R. Bunson and M. E. Bunson, *Saint Damien of Molokai: Apostle of the Exiled* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2009), 18.

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"How sweet it is to die a child of the Sacred Heart." Fr. Wendelin also describes the death and burial of Damien in the same letter; he notes: "the grave is sealed up.… Therein rest the remains of the good Father Damien, whom the world calls, and calls rightly, the 'hero of charity.'"[21]

Family: Roots of Faith and Vocation

In an article written on the occasion of Damien's death centenary, R. Obbels noted the impact that Damien's family had on his person:

> Damien derived his faith from his family, from the society of his time, and from the religious family to which he belonged. In the 19th century, faith in the family was marked by fidelity to the doctrine of the Church; it was not biblical and it nourished itself with devotions and practices. At the same time, it was simple and of the type that moves mountains. His religious faith was the basis of Damien's religious vocation; it was also, as he himself affirmed, the reason he chose to aid the lepers.[22]

Pope John Paul II, during the beatification homily on June 4, 1995, spoke of Damien's family and how Damien's faith was imbibed "with his mother's milk in his family in Flanders."[23] The pope had also noted the influence of the love and faith of Damien's family while giving his arrival speech at the airport the day before: "He inherited the qualities of his family and his people, from whom physical distance never separated him spiritually."[24]

Damien wrote many very personal letters to his parents and family expressing his love and affection—and his deep faith. He often signed them "Your devoted son," "Your obedient son," "Your affectionate

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[21]*Life and Letters*, 146-150.

[22]Obbels, "Damien de Veuster," 5.

[23]John Paul II, "Father Damien's Life Shows that Holiness is not Perfection according to Human Criteria," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 28:23 (June 7, 1995): 2.

[24]John Paul II, "May Father Damien Strengthen Your Faith," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 28:24 (June 14, 1995): 5.

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son," or, later on, "Your devoted son, Father Damien, Missionary Priest." Damien's most important letters to his family are contained in a small, inspiring book which was edited with introductions and a narrative by his own brother, Fr. Pamphile. *Life and Letters of Father Damien: The Apostle of the Lepers* was published—most remarkably in 1889, the very year of Damien's death—in English by the Catholic Truth Society of London.[25] One finds a clear engraving of Fr. Damien, based on the photograph he had taken in Paris prior to his departure for mission, opposite the title page. He is posed in his religious habit and is displaying the crucifix, much in the same manner as St. Francis Xavier, his missionary model, is traditionally portrayed. The photograph manifests an earnestness which speaks of his profound mission commitment.

An early undated letter addressed to "My dear Parents," sent from Braine-le-Comte where Damien did his college studies, notes: "I do not know how I can ever prove as I ought my gratitude for all the benefits you have conferred on me from my earliest years."[26] It was at this time that he (then 18 years old) attended a mission preached by the Redemptorist Fathers, an experience that struck him deeply; he sensed that God was calling him to religious life. That same Christmas (1858), Damien wrote to his parents:

> I cannot hesitate to write to you on this grand Christmas Day, for this great feast has brought me the certainty that God has called me to quit the world and embrace the religious state. Therefore, my dear parents, I ask again for your consent; for without it I cannot venture to enter on this career.… Do not think that in choosing the religious state I am guided only by my own will; I assure you that I do but follow the will of Divine Providence.… You know, my dear parents, that each individual is bound to conform himself to the designs of God in choosing a state of life, … do not, therefore, distress yourselves at God's designs for me.[27]

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[25]*Life and Letters;* see note 1.

[26]*Life and Letters*, 25.

[27]*Life and Letters*, 27.

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During his novitiate in Paris, Damien wrote once again to his parents (January 16, 1861) to express

> [my] feelings of filial love which urge me to write and express to you my affection. Alas! The immense distance between us does not allow me to throw myself into your arms, and to prove to you the feelings of love and gratitude with which my heart is so full.… I feel sure, my dear parents, that God will bestow on you the plenteous graces and the blessings unnumbered that I shall ask for you every day.[28]

Upon learning, on Easter Sunday of 1861, of a death in the family, he wrote the following: "You understand yourselves, my dear parents, better than I can express to you, the sorrow and regret with which I learnt [about] the death of my grandmother"; containing his emotions, Damien later reflected, "All that God does is right."[29]

On the eve of his mission departure (October 30, 1863), Damien wrote from the port of Bremerhaven:

> We are now, my dear parents, on the eve of leaving not only our fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, not only our second family, our brethren of Louvain and Paris, but also the fair continent of Europe.… The sacrifice is great indeed for one who tenderly loves his parents, his family, his brethren, and the land of his birth. But the voice that has called upon us to make a generous sacrifice of all is the voice of God Himself.… So, my dear parents, do not trouble yourselves in the least about us. We are in the hands of God.

Accepting that this mission departure was for life, he also said: "Good-bye, dearest parents, henceforth we shall not have the happiness of seeing one another, but we shall always be united by that tender love which we bear to one another."[30]

Writing from his mission in Hawaii in March 1865, Damien asked his beloved parents to remember that

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[28] *Life and Letters*, 33.

[29] *Life and Letters*, 35.

[30] *Life and Letters*, 47-49.

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> in the midst of the great Pacific, on an island about one hundred and fifty leagues in circumference, you have a son who loves you, a missionary who passes his time seeking the lost sheep of our adorable Savior. I have plenty of cares and troubles here, my dear parents. Still I am very happy.… Pray for the poor missioners, my dear parents, for we have many difficulties here.[31]

After moving to Molokai, Damien continued, though less frequently, to write to his family in Belgium from whom he had received so much loving affection and encouragement in his faith and missionary vocation. On the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1874, Damien penned this letter to his mother, brothers, and sisters: "As I told you last year, I am living here in a village consisting entirely of lepers. Though this disease is contagious, I am still enjoying perfect health, and am very happy in the midst of these unfortunate people."[32]

In one of his letters (March 15, 1876), Damien expresses his displeasure at becoming known for his work among the lepers: "I was a little annoyed at seeing my last letter printed in the *Annales*. Once for all, let me tell you I do not like that done. I want to be unknown to the world, and now I find, in consequence of the few letters I have written, that I am being talked about on all sides, even in America."[33] Yet, in the same letter, Damien affectionately inquires about the health of his mother, expresses his satisfaction concerning the arrangements made about the family farm before his father's death, and condoles with Gérard over the death of his wife Dorothea.

Damien continued writing periodically to his family, especially to his brother Pamphile. The letters express his affection for his family, especially his aging mother; they offer encouragement to all the family to remain faithful Christians; they express his joy in serving the lepers; they assure the family of constant prayers and beg for their prayers on

[31] *Life and Letters*, 67-68.

[32] *Life and Letters*, 99.

[33] *Life and Letters*, 110.

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his behalf. Indeed, the letters constantly express a deep family solidarity rooted in Christian faith and service.

In Damien's last letter, dated February 19, 1889 and sent to his brother Pamphile, one reads:

> Considering the nature of the disease from which, by the will of God I am suffering, I abstain from writing.… Still I am quite happy and contented, and though seriously ill, all I desire is the accomplishment of the holy will of God.… I am still able, but not without some difficulty, to stand every day at the altar, where I do not forget any of you. Do you, in return, pray and get prayers for me, who am being greatly drawn towards the grave. May God strengthen me, and give me the grace of perseverance and of a happy death.[34]

Damien's life is a testimony to faith—nurtured in childhood, matured in adulthood, and committed to an entire life of service.

Context of Damien's Missionary Service

To come to know and appreciate Damien and his commitment to mission, one needs to understand the realities he encountered. When Damien arrived in Hawaii early in 1864, the scourge of leprosy was already being felt. It was growing into an epidemic of vast proportions, with the first authenticated case having been documented in 1840.[35] Leprosy was one of those diseases, along with smallpox, cholera, influenza, and whooping cough (*pertussus*), that entered Hawaii with the arrival of foreigners; within thirty years, these maladies had spread widely and affected many defenseless Hawaiians who lacked any natural resistance to them.

Gomes describes the tragic effects and their proportions which these "new" diseases had upon the native people: "Most modern authorities have estimated the Hawaiian population in 1778 to be between 250,000 and 300,000. By 1896 only around 31,000

[34]*Life and Letters*, 145-146.

[35]"St. Damien of Molokai."

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remained."[36] In short, 90% of the population had died within a century of the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1778 because they had no immunity to European diseases.

It was 1850 when the government established the first Board of Health and 1865 when Hawaiian King Kamehameha V issued a decree instructing those afflicted with leprosy to present themselves to it. In 1868, the government established a leper settlement on the island of Molokai. Those deemed incurable, including children and infants, were removed from their communities and sent to Molokai permanently; others were treated in hospitals and released.

The area of the leper colony on Molokai did not cover the whole of the island; it was a small finger of land on the northern peninsula which measured ten square miles and jutted out into the Pacific Ocean. The colony was often called Kalaupapa after the landing place; its largest village was Kalawao. It was a well-chosen spot for segregation and isolation, the only then-known means of controlling the spread of the disease. The area was surrounded by ocean on three sides and separated from the rest of the island on the land side by a towering, two-thousand-foot *pali* (cliff).[37] In short, the colony was a natural prison that precluded any escape.

Damien already encountered cases of leprosy during the nine years (1864–1873) in which he served in parishes in Puna on the Big Island. He wrote in a letter to his parents (October 12, 1869) that the "native population is continually decreasing"[38] and noted to his sister Pauline (July 14, 1872) that death "carries off in these islands more in a year than are brought into life: so the native population is continually

[36]H. Gomes, ed., *Damien: Servant of God, Servant of Humanity* (Honolulu, HI: Hawaii Province of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, 2002), 8.

[37]de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, 33.

[38]*Life and Letters*, 73.

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decreasing."[39] Witnessing the ravages caused by the disease, Damien observes in another undated 1872 letter to his parents:

> Leprosy is beginning to be very prevalent here. There are many men covered with it. It does not cause death at once, but it is very rarely cured. The disease is very dangerous, because it is highly contagious. The population of our islands consists of some sixty-two thousand at present. It was larger formerly.[40]

Damien arrived in the leper colony in May of 1873. After some months of living in Molokai, he wrote a letter (November 25, 1873) to his brother Pamphile in which he described the situation:

> God has deigned to choose your unworthy brother to assist the poor people attacked by that terrible malady, so often mentioned in the Gospel, leprosy.… Shut up in a corner of the island of Molokai, between inaccessible cliffs and the sea, these unfortunate creatures are condemned to perpetual exile. Out of two thousand in all, who have been sent here, some eight hundred are still living.… A priest who should be placed here must consider himself shut up with the lepers for the rest of his life.[41]

In the same letter, Damien recalls a unique practice which formed part of the profession ceremony of the Sacred Hearts congregation: "So, remembering that on the day of my profession I had already put myself under the funeral pall, I offered myself to his lordship [the bishop] to meet, if he thought it well, this second death."[42]

Ministering to the lepers demanded great sacrifice:

> I still feel some repugnance when I have to hear the confessions of those near their end, whose wounds are full of maggots. Often, also, I [scarcely] know how to administer Extreme Unction, when both hands and feet are nothing [but] raw wounds.… I make myself a leper with

[39] *Life and Letters*, 77.

[40] *Life and Letters*, 79.

[41] *Life and Letters*, 91.

[42] *Life and Letters*, 91-92.

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> the lepers, to gain all to Jesus Christ. That is why in preaching, I say, *We lepers*, not, *My brethren*, as in Europe.[43]

Parenthetically, one notes that Damien began addressing the people as "We lepers" within months of his arrival; some writers have erroneously asserted that he initiated the use of the phrase "We lepers" only after he himself had contracted the disease.[44]

Joan Guntzelman sensitively captures the harsh realities of the situation, even though the Hawaiian King and Board of Health had wished for a peaceful settlement in Molokai:

> Leprosy threatened to destroy the Hawaiian population, in spirit as well as in body.… Victims were often judged, avoided and seen as somehow deserving their affliction.… [Lepers were overcome by] grief, depression, despair, isolation, physical pain and suffering, feelings of abandonment and hopelessness.… When Damien arrived he found a sinkhole of suffering. Lawlessness, promiscuity, poverty, pain and misery prevailed.[45]

Making God's Love Visible

Damien chose to look at the situation on Molokai with the loving eyes of the compassionate Jesus. He genuinely tried to lift the people up; they were human beings who needed love and affection. He realized that he most probably could not cure them; he could, however, bring comfort, understanding, sympathy, and human warmth.

The example of Jesus was certainly uppermost in his mind. As the Gospel of Mark notes: "A leper came to him and pleaded on his knees: 'If you want to,' he said, 'you can cure me.' Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him" (Mk 1:40–41). Damien took

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[43]*Life and Letters*, 93-94.

[44]A. Scurani, "Padre Damiano, Lebbroso per Cristo," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 140:3 (III:1989): 233-235.

[45]J. Guntzelman, *A Retreat with Mother Teresa and Damien of Molokai: Caring for Those Who Suffer* (Cincinnati, OH: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1999), 26-27.

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Jesus's words literally—he engaged in direct ministry, constantly in close contact with the lepers. He knew Jesus's words well: "Whatsoever you have done to the least of my brethren, you have done unto me" (Mt 25:40). Damien's faith concretely manifested itself in deeds of service; he "touched" people on many levels—spiritual, physical, emotional, and social as well as psychological and communitarian.

Damien obviously did not draw a line between the spiritual and physical needs of his people. He believed what James had written in his letter:

> If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, "I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty," without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? Faith is like that; if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead. (Jam 2:15–16)

For Damien, the missionary is a person who lives *incarnate faith and love.* In a multiplicity of ways, he strove to make God's compassionate love a living reality in the lives of the lepers of Molokai.

Writing on the centenary of Damien's death, a fellow Sacred Hearts missionary describes how Damien went about making God's love visible:

> Damien served as did the *missionaries of his time*. He organized a parish, started several associations, presided at the Eucharist, heard confessions, visited the sick at home.… What we call today the work of development was also an integral part of his missionary apostolate.… For him there was *no distinction* between material and spiritual well-being; he promoted them both.… Even though the expression "basic community" was not used then, and even though there was no theology expressly to support such a movement, Damien was guided by his faith and his love to bring the lepers into a true communion, and to lead them to a full liberation.[46]

> Since just about *everything was lacking* in the leper colony, Damien set about remedying that situation. He built houses, brought in a water supply, improved the port, enlarged the hospital, built a church

[46]Obbels, "Damien de Veuster," 5.

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> and an orphanage, made coffins, encouraged gardening, opened a store where the sick could get supplies [for] free … and he financed everything himself.[47]

Damien was not a medical doctor yet he did all in his power to improve the medical care given to the lepers. His assistance, however, went much deeper: he was concerned about the lepers as human persons. He gave the tenderness and affection of a friend to those separated from their families and loved ones. He promoted a sense of community, encouraging the lepers to care for one another. He tried to instill a sense of human dignity and respect. He promoted hope and joy by encouraging games, singing, and other community activities. He brought his profound faith convictions to everything he said and did. He sought to maintain a cheerful disposition; indeed, his obvious desire to serve the people's needs made a deep impression on the lepers. Very importantly, he did not surrender to destructive self-pity or allow his flock to sink into despair. Obbels concludes: "This is why Damien's example can help us to keep development aid from falling into the temptation of becoming exaggerated pragmatism; his example can inspire those who want to help others and keep them, in so doing, from forgetting the human person."[48]

Transforming Power of Grace

Damien undoubtedly had a very strong personality; he was self-willed, enterprising, indefatigable, and creative yet practical. He could prove to be very assertive; some would say even stubborn or bullheaded. J. de Volder bluntly notes:

> That certainly is how he was when it came to defending the cause of his people, to organizing the life in the community entrusted to him, to following his own vocation. Without that character trait, he probably would not have achieved much in the challenging setting of Molokai. Damien's perseverance, however, cannot be disconnected from a

[47]Obbels, "Damien de Veuster," 5.

[48]Obbels, "Damien de Veuster," 5.

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> profound fidelity to his evangelical vocation: to give himself fully to the least of Jesus' brothers, the diseased outcasts with whom he shared his life and for whom he was prepared to give his life.[49]

There were times when Damien had less-than-smooth relationships with his superiors and confreres as well as with officials from the government or the Board of Health. He received various reprimands from the latter, especially when he left the Molokai settlement to visit Catholics in other areas. He harried and badgered government authorities when he felt that they could be doing more to help improve the lot of the lepers. His religious superiors were sometimes critical of him for taking on too many responsibilities or seemingly giving the Sacred Hearts congregation a bad name in public. Petty jealousies arose now and then whenever Damien received much attention for his work or when he received substantial financial gifts. Indeed, it is a truism to assert that most missionaries (both past and present) are dedicated, independent, and determined individuals. Yet while such personality traits can, without a doubt, be interpreted as constituting weaknesses, they can also be, at the same time, placed generously at the service of apostolic initiatives and effective evangelization. Missionaries are, in fact, very ordinary persons; their accomplishments are testimonies to the transforming power of God's love and grace shining through weak vessels of clay.

Charles Paolino notes that Damien was criticized at times "for being demanding and headstrong, particularly when he was soliciting for his lepers"; he was at heart, however, "a missionary unafraid to live and die with his people."[50] John Farrow, who authored a widely read biography of Damien in 1937, offers this insight into the saint:

> This harsher side of him was revealed only to ordinary men, for his ill-temper never touched the lepers. To them he always remained the same, a kind father, sometimes stern perhaps, but always just and understanding and ready to help. No matter how violent his rages or

[49]de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, 85.

[50]C. Paolino, "A Missionary Unafraid to Live and Die with His People," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 42:41 (October 14, 2009): 8.

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> how wrong his quarrels, it must be remembered that they were never motivated by selfishness. Whatever he did, he did for his lepers. Their life was his life; he had made it so since he first put foot on the island.[51]

Another honest and fair evaluation of Damien's traits can be drawn from Joseph Dutton, an American Civil War veteran who joined Damien in 1886 and remained at the colony for more than forty years. He speaks of Damien as

> vehement and excitable in regard to matters that did not seem to him right, and [he] sometimes said and did things that he afterwards regretted. I am safe in saying that, in all the differences, he had a true desire to do right, to bring about what he thought was best. No doubt he erred sometimes in judgment, as all of us do. These things make his relations with the Government officials more readily understood. With some they were better than with others; with all better at some times than at other times.… I believe that his efforts for the people here for material improvement have been beneficial to the place. In spiritual matters he did great good.[52]

The qualities of Damien's person are also manifested in another area which today would be termed "missionary adaptation." When Damien set out for mission, his perceptions of the people he was going to serve were probably ill-informed and thus quite negative. In the last letter he wrote in Europe (October 30, 1863) before leaving on the ship from Bremerhaven, Damien told his parents that he would be "[crossing] an ocean whose billows often threaten to engulf us, for the purpose of living among men who are uncivilized, and according to some accounts, more like brutes than human beings."[53] He mentioned to his father in his October 12, 1869 letter that the local people use neither spoons nor forks to eat and that they "eat with their fingers," that they do not use tables and chairs and that they simply "sit on the

[51]J. Farrow, *Damien the Leper* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937), 155.

[52]C. J. Dutton, *The Samaritans of Molokai: The Lives of Father Damien and Brother Dutton among the Lepers* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1932), 67-68.

[53]*Life and Letters*, 47.

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ground." He also noted that while they are better dressed on Sundays, "on week-days they go half-naked."[54]

To his credit and as a sign of missionary sensitivity, Damien's ideas and attitudes were modified to reflect a much more positive view of the Hawaiian people. Writing to his parents in March of 1865, after only one year in mission, Damien penned these words:

> Sometimes I shall have to go by boat. The poor islanders rejoice when they see Kamiano [the Hawaiian pronunciation of Damien's name] coming, and I, for my part, love them very much and would willingly give my life for them, like our Divine Lord. So I do not spare myself, when it is a question of going to visit the sick.[55]

He wrote to his sister Pauline: "Well, I certainly love my savages, who will soon be more civilized than Europeans."[56]

If one were to write a composite overview of Damien's attitudes toward the people he served, one could express it, using the words of H. Gomes, as such:

> Damien believed that the Hawaiians were basically good. He set aside his fear of contagion. He touched those afflicted with leprosy, he embraced them, he dined with them, he cleaned and bandaged their wounds and sores. He put his thumb on their forehead when he anointed them with the holy oil. All these actions involved touch.[57]

And, since touch is a powerful means of communication, the Hawaiians instinctively felt Damien's love and concern.

> Damien was not blind to the vices of the people he served. Many Hawaiians, by their irregular and permissive sexual habits, greatly contributed to the spread of leprosy. But, Damien knew that this was not the only way the disease was communicated [although such was a common medical opinion at the time]. Above all, he rejected the

[54]*Life and Letters*, 73.

[55]*Life and Letters*, 68.

[56]*Life and Letters*, 76.

[57]Gomes, *Damien: Servant of God*, 17-18.

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> insufferable notion that God had laid this disease as a curse upon these people.… Damien hated leprosy. He did not see it as a tool of a vengeful God.[58]

Over the course of his fourteen years of service on Molokai, Damien's priestly heart readily practiced pastoral charity; he identified closely with his flock. As he wrote in an 1885 letter:

> During the week I visit my numerous sick, and busy myself with my orphans, who are all lepers. It is more or less repulsive to be always surrounded by these unfortunate children, but I find consolation in it: for being now a bit of a doctor, like my patron Saint Damian, I try, with the help of God, to alleviate their bodily pains, and so bring them on in the way of salvation.[59]

In his daily routine, Damien endeavored to walk on a selfless path to sanctity.

It is appropriate at this juncture to mention briefly an incident that attracted worldwide attention. A month after Damien's death on April 15, 1889, a Presbyterian missionary in Honolulu by the name of Charles M. Hyde wrote a private letter that was published without his permission. Hyde said of Damien: "The simple truth is, he was a coarse, dirty man, headstrong and bigoted.… He was not a pure man in his relations with women, and the leprosy of which he died should be attributed to his vices and carelessness."[60] The letter received rather wide circulation in Protestant publications.

Damien's friends were shocked and disturbed; a response was needed, and indeed one came. Hyde's letter provoked a vigorous rebuttal, albeit from an unexpected source. Robert Louis Stevenson, himself a Presbyterian and the author of *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, was in Honolulu when news of Damien's death reached him. Stevenson had become fascinated with stories about Damien's work during his travels in the Pacific, though he had

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[58]Gomes, *Damien: Servant of God*, 18.

[59]*Life and Letters*, 135.

[60]de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, 159.

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never met Damien personally. Thus, even though he was susceptible to disease himself, Stevenson went at his own expense to Molokai and stayed there for eight days in May of 1889, asking many people about the priest's character and ministry. All witnesses, whether friends or adversaries of Damien, agreed that he had scrupulously kept his religious vow of chastity.[61]

Stevenson thus penned a 32-page open letter to refute Hyde's accusations one by one. To Hyde's charge that Damien "was coarse," Stevenson said: "It is very possible"; then he reminded Hyde that Peter the apostle was also a "coarse, headstrong fisherman." Hyde wrote: "Damien was dirty"; Stevenson said: "He was. Think of the poor lepers annoyed with this dirty comrade!" When Hyde asserted that Damien "was headstrong," Stevenson replied: "I believe you are right again; and I thank God for his strong head and heart." Regarding the transformations that Damien wrought in Molokai, Stevenson wrote: "If ever any man brought reforms, and died to bring them, it was he."[62]

Stevenson went on at great length, noting that Damien was most loving and generous, spoke with candor, and possessed a fundamental good humor. He admittedly shared the vicissitudes of all human beings, yet, in spite of his weaknesses and limitations, Stevenson believed that he was a saint and hero indeed, and foresaw that "a hundred years after the death of Damien" there would be "the process of canonization" and that Damien would be declared a saint.[63]

Stevenson, who always stood by the content of his response, died four years later. On October 11, 2009, Damien was canonized by Benedict XVI during the "Year of the Priest" which Benedict himself proclaimed and celebrated. One marvels at the transforming power of

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[61]de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, 159-160.

[62]J. Beevers, *A Man for Now: The Life of Damien de Veuster, Friend of Lepers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), 183-185. The Stevenson letter is readily available online; see http://www.fullbooks.com/Father-Damien.

[63]Beevers, *A Man for Now*, 174.

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God's grace at work in the lives of humble persons like the missionary priest of Molokai.

Collaboration in Missionary Service

Desiring that his beloved lepers receive the care and attention they deserve as human beings, Damien sought assistance for his apostolic activities, and indeed a variety of volunteers and benefactors began to emerge. R. Bauman notes a remarkable fact: "Through the decades more than 1,100 people came to Molokai to work with the lepers. Only one of them contracted leprosy—Father Damien."[64]

In addition to the ever-mounting workload which motivated his desire for workers in the vineyard, Damien strongly sought priestly companionship. The Sacred Hearts congregation sent some priests periodically over the years to work with Damien, yet they stayed for relatively short periods of time for a variety of reasons. Many factors entered into the situation—one may recall, for example, that two Sacred Hearts Fathers had contracted leprosy while laboring in other parts of the Hawaiian Islands.[65] The superiors also had to be sensitive to government policy on the segregation of lepers when considering assignments.

Damien thus sorely missed the availability of a priest to whom he could confess and receive absolution from. Indeed, a moving incident took place during one of the periods when the government policy of isolation was strictly being enforced. When Damien's bishop came to visit him by ship, the ship's captain forbade the bishop, under government orders, to disembark on Molokai. Damien was adamant:

> In order to see the bishop, Damien sailed out to the boat. The captain refused Damien's request to board. The priest pleaded in vain with

[64]R. Bauman, "Brother Joseph: Servant to the Lepers," *Liguorian* 98:8 (October 2009): 23.

[65]"Blessed Father Damien," http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/DAMIEN (accessed January 18, 2015), 11.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> the captain, saying that he wanted to confess his sins. "Bishop," the priest called to the boat, "will you hear my confession from here?" The bishop consented, and Damien[,] in an exercise of humility that touched all who witnessed it, confessed his sins aloud to the bishop.[66]

Some additional personnel did arrive but they came quite late. Four unique and special persons, whose inspiring life narratives will be presented briefly here, came to Molokai from diverse and remarkable backgrounds, all arriving after Damien himself had contracted leprosy. Their names and date of arrival in Molokai are: Brother Joseph (Ira) Dutton (July 19, 1886), diocesan priest Louis Conrardy (May 17, 1888), Brother James Sinnett (September 1888), and Sister Marianne Cope (November 14, 1888). Damien died knowing that his commitment to serving the lepers would continue in good hands through these missionary collaborators.[67]

The first and most prominent of these four apostles to come to the Hawaiian Islands was Sister "Mother" Marianne Cope. Arriving in Honolulu on November 8, 1883, she and six of her fellow sisters began work in the hospital in Kakaako near Honolulu, where 200 leprosy patients were being served. The details of the arrival of the Sisters of Saint Francis from Syracuse, New York form a beautiful story of faith and commitment.

It was early in June of 1883 when a letter written by Fr. Léonor Fouesnel, superior of the Sacred Hearts community, arrived on the desk of the superior of the Sisters of Saint Francis. Desperate for assistance (negative responses had been received from some fifty other congregations), the letter read:

> I have passed twenty-nine years of my life as a missionary in the Sandwich Islands. At present I am in America. My bishop … requested by the King of the Archipelago and his government, sent me to this country to look for sisters who would take charge of our hospitals, and

[66]"Blessed Father Damien," 12.

[67]R. Stewart, *Leper Priest of Moloka'i: The Father Damien Story* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 337-350.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> even of our schools.… The King, remark it, and his counselors are Protestants.… Have pity, Reverend Mother, on our poor sick, help us.[68]

Mother Marianne responded immediately after receiving the letter, signaling her genuine interest. After further communications and clarifications, she gave her definitive response:

> I am hungry for the work and I wish with all my heart to be one of the chosen ones, whose privilege it will be to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the souls of the poor Islanders.… I am not afraid of any disease; hence it would be my greatest delight even to minister to the abandoned lepers.… Waking and sleeping, I am on the Islands. Do not laugh at me for being so wholly absorbed in the one wish, one thought, to be a worker in that large field.[69]

When the Franciscan Sisters arrived in Hawaii in 1883, two of their first visitors were King Kalakaua and Queen Kapiolani. The emotionally overwhelmed queen, speaking in Hawaiian, said to them: "I love you! You have left your home and country to come to these faraway islands to care for my poor afflicted children. I shall never forget you. You are my sisters, and I shall always love you."[70]

By 1888, twelve additional sisters had arrived to continue the medical and educational apostolates. It was only then that Mother Marianne went to Molokai along with Srs. Vincentia McCormick and Leopoldina Burns, arriving there on November 14, 1888. They would live in the new village of Kalaupapa where there was a house for unprotected girls and women.[71] Damien's prayer was finally answered; he was at peace. They assisted Damien during the last weeks of his life, and assured him that they would also look after his home for boys in Kalawao.

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[68]V. Parachin, "Trouble in Paradise: The Story of Mother Marianne Cope," *Liguorian* 96:3 (March 2008): 28-29.

[69]Parachin, "Trouble in Paradise," 30.

[70]Parachin, "Trouble in Paradise," 30.

[71]M. Shelgren, "Mother Marianne: Angel of Mercy in Hawaii," *Sisters Today* 63:1 (January 1991): 15.

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Mother Marianne and her sisters engaged in caring for the lepers with unflagging optimism, unconditional love, self-sacrificing dedication, and profound faith. The community continues to serve in Molokai up to this day and none of the sisters have ever contracted leprosy. Mother Marianne, who often reminded them that the "charity of the good knows no creed, and is confined to no one place,"[72] thought at first that her assignment in Hawaii might be for one year only. She never returned to her home in New York—she died in Hawaii on August 9, 1918 at the age of 80 and was canonized on October 21, 2012 by Benedict XVI. *Pilgrimage and Exile: Mother Marianne of Molokai,* co-authored by M. Hanley and O. Bushnell, is considered to be the definite biography of this holy servant of God.[73]

Several lines of the homily at her beatification in 2005 capture her deep spirituality, committed faith, and profound witness:

> The life of Blessed Marianne Cope is a wonderful work of divine grace. She demonstrated the beauty of a life of a true Franciscan.… For 35 years she lived, to the full, the command to love God and neighbor. She willingly worked with Blessed Damien de Veuster, who was at the end of his extraordinary apostolate. Blessed Marianne loved those suffering from leprosy more than she loved her very self.[74]

A second and well-known collaborator of Fr. Damien was Ira Barnes Dutton, whom Damien called "Brother Joseph." His life-story is genuinely remarkable. Born in the state of Vermont, he grew up in Wisconsin, U.S.A. and served in the Union Army during the American Civil War (1861–1865). He continued working for the military afterwards, married and divorced within one year, and turned to excessive drinking for over a decade. He then experienced a radical conversion, became a Catholic on his fortieth birthday, and later on

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[72]Parachin, "Trouble in Paradise," 31.

[73]M. Hanley and O. Bushnell, *Pilgrimage and Exile: Mother Marianne of Molokai* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Publishing, 2009).

[74]J. Saraiva-Martins, "They Served the Neediest, Led by the Spirit," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 38:20 (May 18, 2005): 9.

https://publications.lst.edu/

entered the Trappist monastery at Gethsemane, Kentucky where he stayed for nearly two years.

Still searching for God's will in his life, Dutton was in New Orleans when he picked up a discarded magazine that contained an article about Fr. Damien. He then realized that he had probably discovered his life's work, and so he inquired about Damien and how to get to Hawaii. As R. Bauman notes: "Dutton didn't contact Father Damien before he set out to Molokai, and thus stepped off the ship at the Molokai dock unannounced in 1886. He introduced himself as 'Brother Joseph' to Damien, his few assistants, and the lepers."[75] Would he stay a few weeks or months and then flee to more comfortable surroundings?

> Brother Joseph never left. He did
>
> > whatever needed to be done, from bathing lepers and treating their diseased bodies to building houses and digging graves. He became not only Father Damien's helper but also his caregiver. He nursed Damien through the last stages of his illness.… Brother Joseph labored on after Father Damien's death. He took over much of the administration of the colony.[76]

During his 44 years on Molokai, "Brother Joseph never doubted that God wanted him to work with the lepers. He believed that God had put that magazine in his path as he traipsed through New Orleans in 1886—and he thanked God often for doing so."[77] Dutton never contracted leprosy and died on March 26, 1931 at nearly 88 years old.

Bro. Joseph had one last wish: to be buried at the feet of Fr. Damien. There his body still lies in Molokai near the Church of St. Philomena and Damien's grave (though now only Damien's right hand remains buried there; his body is interred in Louvain, Belgium). *The Samaritans of Molokai*, an authoritative biography of Dutton (and Damien) written by Charles Dutton, was published in 1932, one year after Bro. Joseph's

[75]Bauman, "Brother Joseph," 21.

[76]Bauman, "Brother Joseph," 22.

[77]Bauman, "Brother Joseph," 23.

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death. The last sentence of the book reads thus: "Let us remember Joseph Dutton by the name that he called himself—Brother to Everybody."[78] Plans are underway for his beatification.

Two other key figures that intersected with Damien in the last period of his life were Fr. Lambert Conrardy and Bro. James Sinnett. Conrardy was a Belgian diocesan priest who worked as a missionary among the Native American people in Oregon in North America. Coming to Molokai eleven months before Damien's death, he provided the spiritual and social companionship that Damien craved.

Fr. Lambert stayed on in Molokai for six years after Damien's death. He then left to study medicine and ultimately qualified as a doctor. In 1908, he went to work in a leper hospital in Canton, China where he died in 1914 of pneumonia, not leprosy, at the age of 73. Following the desire he had often expressed during his lifetime, Fr. Conrardy was buried between two lepers.[79]

Bro. James Sinnett, an Irish nurse hired by the Hawaiian Board of Health, arrived in Molokai one year before Damien's death. He became totally devoted to Damien, nursed him during the final phases of his illness, and closed his eyes in death.

Bro. James could not bear to stay in Molokai after Damien died. Nothing was heard of him thereafter.[80]

Damien's co-workers and collaborators helped to achieve his heartfelt goal: compassionate service for the lepers. Missioners constantly try to realize some kind of "multiplier effect": more apostles translates into more service provided for a greater number of needy persons. The self-sacrificing dedication of the band of apostles on Molokai has also fostered a kind of contagious sanctity—the holiness of one person undeniably attracts and motivates the greatness and

[78]Dutton, *The Samaritans of Molokai*, 278.

[79]G. MacNiven-Johnston, *Father Damien: Apostle to the Lepers* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1999), 44.

[80]Gomes, *Damien: Servant of God*, 21.

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generosity of others. Molokai has already produced two saints: Damien and Mother Marianne (and possibly Joseph Dutton in the future). Molokai has inspired numerous vocations in the Church, like that of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta who heard the call in 1946 to serve the neediest in the world; she was present at the 1995 beatification of Damien. As J. de Volder notes: "It is probably due to the tireless advocacy of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who has meanwhile been beatified herself, that Damien's canonization happened at all."[81] Mother Teresa was canonized by Pope Francis on September 4, 2016.

Solidarity in the Paschal Mystery

Christian faith, at heart, is a paschal faith; Christian life can be described succinctly as "living into the Paschal Mystery." The salvific mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ is much deeper than a dogmatic teaching or a rational formulation of a truth of the faith. The Christian's experience centers on a living encounter with the Lord—in his life, ministry, passion, death, and glorification.

The cross of Jesus is the paramount Christian symbol because it reminds Christians of the centrality of the Paschal Mystery in their faith lives. Concomitantly, all Church missionary activity focuses on the paschal nature of life, of faith, and of salvation. Christian mission is always cruciform, always signed by the cross. *Crux probat omnia.*

St. Paul spoke of his missionary consciousness in writing to the Corinthian community: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). He proclaimed a crucified Christ, seemingly nonsense to Jews and Gentiles alike (cf. 1 Cor 1: 22–25). The synoptic gospels affirm that the cross is the only path whereby one follows Jesus (Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23; 14:27). The cross is central to Jesus's act of *kenosis* (Phil 2:5–11).

The cross indeed is not an accidental of Christian faith and mission. Christians believe that God embraces the suffering of the world in

[81]de Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, xv.

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the suffering Jesus for the sake of humanity. God in Christ saves us *in* and *through* suffering, not necessarily *from* it. In a word, Christians are called to live into the mystery of the cross.

These foregoing paragraphs on the paschal nature of Christian life and mission provide important foundations for interpreting Damien's own life and mission. He was called to share deeply—even in his own body—in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

G. MacNiven-Johnson briefly describes Damien's physical living into the Paschal Mystery during his last days:

> The disease now made rapid progress. Marks and sores appeared on his face; one of his arms swelled beyond recognition and was so heavy it had to be carried in a sling. His nose collapsed which made wearing his glasses difficult, he had acute diarrhea and felt desperately tired. He had difficulty walking. But worst of all, his larynx was affected. He could not breathe if he lay down, so sleep became almost impossible. He would wake up coughing. Melancholia is a common symptom of leprosy, and Damien became profoundly depressed. He believed he had failed in the mission God had entrusted to him and that he was not worthy of heaven. Night after night he would walk through the cemetery, praying the rosary, praying for the souls of the dead and asking them to pray for him. He started to go blind, but he struggled to continue saying the Divine Office. He had bouts of fever.…[82]

In his last letter to his brother Pamphile (February 19, 1889), Damien noted: "I am still able, but not without some difficulty, to stand every day at the altar, where I do not forget any of you."[83] He continued in his determined commitment: "I would not be cured, if the price of my cure was that I must leave the island and give up my work."[84]

Damien's living of the Paschal Mystery was manifested in many diverse ways throughout his sixteen years in Molokai. He was the

[82]MacNiven-Johnston, *Father Damien*, 47.

[83]*Life and Letters*, 146.

[84]*Life and Letters*, 134; see also D. Murphy, "Contagious Spirit," *U.S. Catholic* 74:12 (December 2009): 47.

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third Sacred Hearts missionary to contract leprosy. He had to follow severe restrictions if he visited the mission headquarters in Honolulu. If he stayed in the mission central house, he was relegated to one room which he was not to leave until his departure. Advised by his superiors that it was better for him to stay at the Franciscan Sisters' leper hospital, he was told not to celebrate Mass even while he was there. The other priests would not use the same vestments or drink from the same chalice; the sisters were not to receive communion from his hands. Indeed, one can readily understand the concerns of Damien's superiors regarding contagion, yet Damien also felt them as a form of rejection. He spoke of this distancing from his own brothers as "the greatest suffering he had ever endured in his life."[85] Four years before his death, Damien wrote in 1885 to his Superior General in Rome concerning his own leprosy diagnosis, making reference to the Hawaiian monarch's earlier recognition in 1881: "I have been decorated by the Royal Cross of Kalakaua and now the heavier and less honorable cross of leprosy. Our Lord has willed that I be stigmatized with it.… I will keep on working.…"[86]

Damien also experienced prejudice and envy, at times from members of his own religious congregation but most frequently from various Protestant missionaries and people of other faiths who resented that a Catholic priest was in the limelight because of his work in the leper settlement. Others were jealous of the monetary contributions that were sent to him to help with various needs in the leper community.

Concerning the daily trials that Damien faced, R. Obbels has noted: "For sixteen years Damien lived among 500 to 1,000 deformed lepers who awaited only one thing: their own death. Just about every other day one of them died."[87] Damien also longed for his beloved family back in Belgium; he was particularly concerned about his aging mother who

[85]"Catholic Dictionary," Section 10.

[86]"Catholic Dictionary," Section 10.

[87]Obbels, "Damien de Veuster," 5.

https://publications.lst.edu/

died at 83 years of age on April 5, 1886.[88] He experienced depression, melancholy, feelings of unworthiness, and even religious scruples toward the last days of his life, what he himself called "black thoughts." Damien was tested indeed as he experienced the "dark night" of the soul, the seeming absence, distance, or hiddenness of God.[89]

Damien's living into the Paschal Mystery of the suffering-dying-rising Christ had another important dimension—he linked his own daily trials and the sufferings of his beloved lepers with his deep love for and dependence upon Christ's presence in the Eucharist. John Paul II noted this aspect of Damien's life when he addressed the religious women and men after the beatification ceremony on June 4, 1995:

> Where did Damien's clarity and happiness in often difficult situations come from? He drew his strength from the spirituality of his congregation: *the contemplation of the Eucharist*, the mystery of love in which Christ truly communicates with the one who receives him and whom he invites to total dedication. "I find my consolation in my one companion who never abandons me," he used to say when speaking of the real presence of Christ in the tabernacle.[90]

When he addressed the Belgian bishops on the same date, John Paul II emphasized in similar fashion that "Damien attached such importance to the Eucharist."[91]

In a letter to his brother (December 8, 1881), Damien wrote:

> For six months there was an absolute prohibition of communication between the islands; and as I happened at the time to be the only priest on this island, you can understand the inconvenience this isolation caused me. But I have always our Lord in the Tabernacle. In fact, without the Blessed Sacrament a position like mine would not

[88]"Catholic Dictionary," Section 11.

[89]Guntzelman, *A Retreat*, 88-95.

[90]John Paul II, "Discover the Heart of God in Prayer," 7.

[91]John Paul II, "Moral Doctrine is Essential to Gospel," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 28:24 (June 14, 1995): 6.

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> be tolerable. But having our Lord with me, I am always gay, and work cheerfully for the relief of the unfortunate lepers.[92]

Damien promoted the same devotion to Christ's presence in the Eucharist among his people. His brother Pamphile narrates a moving scene:

> There was nothing in which the lepers took more pleasure than in the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. Of all the beautiful and touching sights in Molokai this held the foremost place. "I myself," says Father Damien, writing to his brother, "strong, healthy, and vigorous, bearing in my hands the Blessed Sacrament, was followed and preceded by one long line of lepers, some deprived of hands, others of feet, crawling along on their knees as well as they could, joining in the great act of adoration."[93]

Damien's living into the Paschal Mystery, which was linked to his deep love of Christ in the Eucharist, flows directly from the charism of the religious institute that he entered in 1859. The official canonical name, though a bit long, is very specific: Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and of Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. As the title indicates,

> the primary purpose of the congregation is to "practice and propagate devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary" and to carry on daily adoration. Each member makes a half hour adoration each day. Father Damien remained faithful to this practice, even during his busiest days at Molokai.[94]

John Paul II, while speaking to the religious women and men in Belgium during Damien's beatification on June 4, 1995, had a special word for the members of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts: "The Mystery of the Eucharist and the love of the Sacred Hearts must remain the pillars and foundation of the Congregation's spirituality."[95]

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[92]*Life and Letters*, 124.

[93]*Life and Letters*, 130.

[94]Gomes, *Damien: Servant of God*, 7.

[95]John Paul II, "Discover the Heart of God in Prayer," 7.

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Damien had taken the charism and core spirituality of his congregation and internalized it. He had the heart of a truly "paschal-eucharistic" priest and missioner!

The Missionary is the Saint

John Paul II, the pope who beatified Damien on June 4, 1995, asserted in his mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) that "the true missionary is the saint" (RM 90). For the pope, "a missionary is really such only if he commits himself to the way of holiness.… The Church's missionary spirituality is a journey toward holiness" (RM 90). Again, "missionaries should reflect on the duty of holiness required of them by the gift of their vocation.… The missionary must be a 'contemplative in action'.… The missionary is a person of the Beatitudes.… The characteristic of every authentic missionary life is the inner joy that comes from faith" (RM 91). Many evident parallels exist between the life of St. Damien and these words of John Paul II.

One also recalls that Pope Paul VI devoted an entire chapter in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) to "The Spirit of Evangelization." The pope asserted that "our evangelizing zeal must spring from true holiness of life.… The world calls for and expects from us simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity towards all, especially towards the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, detachment and self-sacrifice" (EN 76). "The work of evangelization presupposes in the evangelizer an ever increasing love for those whom he is evangelizing" (EN 79). Once again, the life of Damien clearly exemplifies these essential spiritual qualities of the authentic missionary.

An examination of several addresses John Paul II gave during his June 3-4, 1995 pilgrimage to Belgium for the beatification of Damien repeatedly reveals a central theme: Damien's genuine holiness of life. "The apostle of charity, who gave himself up for his sick brothers and sisters, was also a man of intense spiritual life.… Damien's zeal for God went hand in hand with his *love for others*."[96] Indeed, Damien's "humble

[96]John Paul II, "Moral Doctrine is Essential to Gospel," 6.

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holiness was resplendent in his own times.… [He] had a special love for the most deprived of his brothers and sisters."[97]

John Paul II asserted:

> Today, through me, *the Church acknowledges and confirms the value of Father Damien's example along the path of holiness.… She joyfully contemplates what God can achieve through human weakness*, for "it is he who gives us holiness, and it is man who receives it".… Father Damien displayed a particular form of holiness in his ministry; *he was at once a priest, religious and missionary.* With these three qualities, *he revealed the face of Christ.… Holiness is not perfection according to human criteria;* it is not reserved for a small number of exceptional persons.… This celebration is also an appeal to deepen our spiritual life, whether we are sick or healthy, regardless of our social status.[98]

One also finds a special emphasis on the dimension of charity toward the needy within John Paul II's addresses on Damien's holiness:

> *Service to the poor and the sick* is of course in the world's eyes the most outstanding aspect of Damien's tireless witness to charity, to the point of his physical identification with lepers and the final offering of his life. Is it necessary to stress that love of the poor, those wounded and defenseless people, is just as vital a need today?… We all know that charity covers an ever broader area. It includes many ways of serving one's neighbor.…

The pope recalled that "aid to the most underprivileged peoples is part of a true witness to Gospel charity."[99] "Whether in his parish ministry or his works of charity, he [Damien] found a place for everyone."[100] Damien's loving compassion knew no bounds!

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[97]John Paul II, "Continue to Develop the Gifts You Have Received," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 28:24 (June 14, 1995): 6.

[98]John Paul II, "Father Damien's Life Shows," 2.

[99]John Paul II, "Moral Doctrine is Essential to Gospel," 6.

[100]"A Catholic Missionary First and Foremost," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English) 28:23 (June 7, 1995): 1.

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Damien's self-sacrificing love for and service of the needy in imitation of the love of the Sacred Hearts unquestionably make up the center of his mission spirituality. He followed the Gospel literally, which asserts that one "can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). Damien could own the words of St. Paul: "To the weak I have become weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:22–23). Within months of his arrival in Molokai, Damien wrote (November 25, 1873) to his brother: "As for me, I make myself a leper with the lepers, to gain all to Jesus Christ."[101] To paraphrase the words of John Paul II, Damien was "at once a priest, religious, and missionary"—aflame with the love of Christ!

Various authors have sought to identify the core of Damien's spirituality. He "was indeed all things to all men and women. Primarily he was a priest."[102] "[He] was before all else a Catholic missionary."[103] "Damien de Veuster practiced heroic virtue in the service of the exiled lepers, but he did so because first and foremost he had given his life to Christ as a priest."[104] For the occasion of Damien's canonization, the Superior Generals of the Sacred Hearts Congregation and the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts published a joint letter in which they asserted that "Damien is a universal brother, model of humanity, apostle of the lepers, hero of charity, inspiration for every human being who feels called to serve the marginalized and forgotten, pride of the Belgian and Hawaiian peoples, glory of the entire Church."[105] At the heart of all these accolades one finds verified a simple verse of scripture: *Caritas Christi urget nos*—"The love of Christ compels us" (2 Cor 5:14).

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[101] *Life and Letters*, 93.

[102] O'Leary, "Molokai," 98.

[103] "A Catholic Missionary," 1.

[104] M. Bunson, "The Lepers' Priest," *The Priest* 65:10 (October 2009): 21.

[105] "Father Damien, Apostle of the Lepers to be Canonized 11 October," https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/14944 (accessed July 21, 2018).

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Self-sacrificing Christian charity, loving others with no thought of oneself and for no motive other than Christ's love, genuine altruistic and compassionate love and service—all these would be valid attempts to describe the heart of a *martyr of charity*. Damien died as a martyr of charity not by the force of someone else's decision or action but by his own choice. Such martyrdom comes through one's daily living out of one's deeply held faith convictions. A martyr is killed for his beliefs; a martyr of charity freely lays down his life for his faith.

In his July 11, 2017 apostolic letter on the "Offer of Life," *Majorem Hac Dilectionem*, Pope Francis formally recognized that "the *offer of life* is a new cause for the beatification and canonization procedure." Some required criteria are "a free and voluntary offer of life and heroic acceptance *propter caritatem* of a certain and untimely death" as well as "a nexus between the offer of life and premature death." The pope thus accepts those who "have voluntarily and freely offered their life for others and preserved with this determination unto death" as worthy candidates for canonization.[106] St. Damien would, without a doubt, adequately meet the criteria established by Pope Francis!

In his famous letter defending Damien's character and virtue (discussed earlier), Robert Louis Stevenson actually speaks about Damien's free gift of self which made him a martyr of charity. He recalled how Damien had voluntarily gone to Molokai and stayed at the settlement. An introduction to his letter notes: "Of the sixteen years Damien spent on Molokai, he was away from the settlement for less than six months and that includes the visit he made to the Catholics in the rest of the island when he was the only priest on Molokai."[107] Stevenson's poetic description of Damien's "self-martyrdom" affirms

[106]Francis, *Majorem Hac Dilectionem*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20170711_maiorem-hac-dilectionem.html (accessed August 8, 2018).

[107]Beevers, *A Man for Now*, 173.

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that Damien, in going freely to the leper colony, shut "with his own hand the doors of his own sepulcher."[108]

John Paul II wrote that Damien was truly a "singular witness of charity" in the manner of his service, and that he should thus be remembered as a "model of charity" who motivates Christians to be in human solidarity through "charity towards the lowly."[109] During Damien's canonization ceremony in 2009, Benedict XVI said that his "missionary activity, which gave him such joy, reached its peak in charity.… He invites us to open our eyes to the forms of leprosy that disfigure the humanity of our brethren and still today call for the charity of our presence as servants."[110] Indeed, the letter that Fr. Wendelin wrote from Molokai two days after Damien's death (April 17, 1889) has proven to be eminently accurate: "The grave is sealed up.… Therein rest the remains of the good Father Damien, whom the world calls, and calls rightly, the 'hero of charity.'"[111]

An additional insight into Damien's love and charity can be gained through a brief examination of the compassionate ministry of Jesus, the missionary of the Father who, moved by genuine love (Jn 3:16), sent his Son Jesus into the world. Jesus manifests God's compassion for humanity, even to the point of his own vulnerability. Jesus is Emmanuel, God in profound solidarity and communion with humanity, particularly with the suffering, oppressed, and marginalized.

The Gospels often portray Jesus as "moved with compassion" for the needy: for the leper (Mk 1:41), the crowd who are like sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34, Mt 9:36), the hungry crowd of five thousand (Mt 14:13–21), and the two blind men of Jericho (Mt 20:29–34). Diverse people approached Jesus, asking him to show them mercy or pity: the Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed (Mt 15:22), the father

[108]Beevers, *A Man for Now*, 180.

[109]John Paul II, "Holy Father's Letter," 2.

[110]Benedict XVI, "Heroes in Holiness Go Against the Tide," 5.

[111]*Life and Letters*, 150.

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of an epileptic (Mt 17:15), the widow of Naim whose only son has died (Lk 7:12), the Roman official whose daughter has died (Mt 9:18), the centurion with a sick servant (Lk 7:2), and the ten lepers (Lk 17:12).

Jesus constantly showed his compassion in words and deeds: in his profound sympathy with Martha and Mary at Lazarus's death (Jn 11:17–44), parables of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37) and the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11–32), recognition of the faith of the four men transporting the paralytic (Mk 2:1–12), and teaching on the last judgment where he notes: "As long as you did it to one of these least brethren…" (Mt 25:40, 45). Jesus was known to be in solidarity with the needy: he welcomed sinners and ate with them (Lk 15:1–2), went to Zaccheus's house (Lk 19:1–10), and showed compassion for the adulterous woman (Jn 8:1–11).

Upon examining Jesus's compassionate ministry which Damien so closely imitated (one of his favorite spiritual books was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis), one observes three key characteristics that emerge: 1) a deep awareness of and sympathy with the sufferings of others; 2) from this depth awareness of the other's pain, a personal commitment and effective action to do something about it; and 3) a desire to deepen people's faith in God in the process. Profoundly modeled on the ministry of Jesus, Damien practiced what can be called "active compassion," a self-sacrificing charity that promotes human relief and restoration and thereby leads to an encounter with God. As a "martyr of charity," St. Damien's missionary "compassionate faith-in-action" was his selfless pathway to profound sanctity.

Concluding Reflection

Any attempt to capture the depths of Damien's person, his profound spirituality and holiness, priestly and religious commitment, missionary life and vocation, genuine love of God and service of neighbor, example and witness of the Christian life, and powerful impact on the people of his time as well as on the contemporary world would most probably appear to be an inadequate and superficial summary. A conclusion will thus be offered in the form of two prayers—one is drawn from the

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beatification homily of John Paul II on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 1995[112] and the other is the official prayer to St. Damien of Molokai that is used in the Diocese of Honolulu, Hawaii.[113]

> Blessed Damien, you let yourself be led by the Spirit as a son obedient to the Father's will. In your life and your missionary work, you show forth Christ's tenderness and mercy for every man, revealing the beauty of his inner self, which *no illness, no deformity, no weakness can totally disfigure.* By your actions and your preaching, you remind us that Jesus took on himself the poverty and suffering of mankind, and that he has revealed its mysterious value. Intercede with Christ, physician of soul and body, for our sick brothers and sisters, so that in their anguish and pain they may never feel abandoned, but that, in union with the risen Christ and with his Church, they may discover that the Holy Spirit comes to visit them and they may receive the comfort promised to the afflicted.

> Saint Damien, brother on the journey,
> happy and generous missionary,
> who loved the Gospel more than your own life,
> who for love of Jesus left your family,
> your homeland, your security and your dreams.
> Teach us to give our lives with joy like yours,
> to be in solidarity with the outcasts of our world,
> to celebrate and contemplate the Eucharist
> as the source of our own commitment.
> Help us to love to the very end
> and, in the strength of the Spirit,
> to persevere in compassion
> for the poor and forgotten
> so that we might be good disciples
> of Jesus and Mary. Amen.

[112]John Paul II, "Father Damien's Life Shows," 2.

[113]"Saint Damien Prayer," https://catholichawaii.org/catholic-essentials/saints-traveling-relics/history-of-hawaiis-saints/saint-damien/ (accessed July 25, 2018).

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