



Damien of Molokai: Priest and Leper

A well-known congresswoman recently singled out a statue in the Capitol's statuary hall as a symbol of "patriarchy and white supremacist culture." It had been presented by the people of Hawaii in 1969 to mark their tenth anniversary of statehood. It is a statue of St. Damien of Molokai.

In this summer of contempt for the past, it's only natural to ask what this man did to merit such a toppling of his reputation. Who was this Damien? What did he do?

A native of Belgium, Jozef De Veuster was born in 1840; at age 19 he joined the Congregation of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, an order founded for missionary work in the Pacific islands. Taking "Damien" as his religious name, he was sent to Hawaii and ordained priest when he arrived in May 1864. He was 24 years old.

The Hawaii Damien came to was afflicted by a frightful outbreak of leprosy. Government quarantine confined patients to hospitals where doctors could study the disease. What they learned did not empower them to cure. Leprosy sores came and went, only to return as ulcers that could and did get infected. Rapidly the leprous infection spread from person to person, and panic ensued. In the face of seemingly irresistible contagion the government adopted a sterner form of quarantine: deportation. Lepers were sent to

the nearby island of Molokai, cut off from their families and their church. Incoming ships brought supplies and new lepers, but no visitors. Molokai was an island of exiles.

For Bishop Louis Maigret to send priests to this scene of affliction would have been to give them an assignment to death, so he could not order them to go. But he could ask if any felt called to heroic sacrifice, and he did ask. Four men stepped forward, Father Damien De Veuster among them. To lessen their chances of contracting the disease themselves it was agreed they would serve successive three-month terms.

First to set out was Father Damien, charged with the task of establishing a parish, on the understanding that the other priests would rotate in to replace him. Months went by, then years. They never came. Father Damien's "term" extended from 1873 to 1889, the year of his death.

The Molokai he landed on was overrun by thievery, drunkenness, and prostitution. Because of the putrid odor from their sores, the sickest lepers underwent a second exile – to the "death sheds" – when they could no longer move. There no visitors came to see them – none but Father Damien. In the evening he brought them meals and prayed the Rosary over them, smoking his pipe all the while to make the stench tolerable. He invited them to receive the sacraments; and when they died, he built their coffins and buried them with full Christian dignity.

Mindful that he was not immune from the disease that encircled his life, Father Damien

trusted that God would protect him as long as he was needed; and he made the world of the lepers his own. He shook their hands, embraced them, dressed their wounds. For orphaned leper children he organized sports and put the healthiest in work crews, teaching them to grow crops and build — schools, roads, an orphanage, a hospital, a graveyard. But to his exiled parishioners this remarkable world changer was first and foremost the priest who brought God to them and them to God. By the time he died, Molokai numbered over 600 Catholics among its 1,000 residents.

For eleven years God's protection of Father Damien kept leprosy at bay, but then the dreaded spots began to appear on his skin. In his last five years, as the disease gained ground on his body, his parishioners could see their suffering exactly mirrored in that of their priest.

At his passing they did not denounce him as an agent of "colonialism" or condemn him for imposing "white supremacist culture." Instead, Hawaii's prime minister called him "a Christian hero," and a statue of him was erected in front of the state capitol.

What Hawaiians seem to have recognized in Damien De Veuster was not "patriarchy" but fatherhood. Perhaps we would do well to let his statue in Washington stand until the rest of the country is "woke" to his splendid example.