

Today we celebrate the memorial of Saint Marianne Cope who generously opened her heart to those most in need and taught others to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Sister Marianne Cope entered religious life with the Sisters of Saint Francis in Syracuse, New York in 1862. Along with the sisters in her community, she helped to establish Saint Elizabeth Hospital in Utica (1866) and Saint Joseph Hospital in Syracuse (1869). The hospitals operated with a preferential option for the poor caring for the sick regardless of religion, race, or ability to pay.

With God ever at her side, she proved to be a pioneer in health care. Long before the importance of washing your hands was practiced, she intuitively understood and taught others to practice cleanliness in caring for the sick. She worked in cooperation with a nearby medical college to help train students. She advocated for patient rights and treated “outcast” patients with the love of Jesus. She was a keen observer of best practices and absorbed a lot of practical knowledge that would help her later in life to run hospitals and provide even more compassionate care for the sick.

Half a world away, the Native King of Hawaii was equally concerned for the welfare of his islanders who were suffering greatly from contact with the outside world and the spread of heretofore unknown diseases. He wrote far and wide to seek help for a capable leader to run hospitals and schools. “Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your Son” (Acts 16:14b). Everyone turned the Hawaiian King down except for Mother Marianne. She heard and understood the need to respond with a generous and open heart even when she understood that much of her time would be devoted to caring for lepers. Mother Marianne accompanied a group of 6 Franciscan sisters who set sail for the Hawaiian Islands.

Her early years in Hawaii were filled with many obstacles. Nevertheless, with God’s help the sisters made great progress. In 1884, they set up the first general hospital on the island of Maui. In Oahu, Mother Marianne was given full charge of an overcrowded hospital that had been poorly run by a government administrator. In November 1885, she opened a home for the children of lepers. “The unusual choice was made for these well children to live in a home on the premises of the hospital for patients with leprosy.”ⁱ

Many other lepers lived as outcasts on the island of Molokai under the care of Father Damien. In 1887, as fear of leprosy spread on the island of Oahu, officials decided to send more lepers to Molokai and to close the Oahu hospital. “The unanswered question was who would care for the sick who once again would be sent to the settlement for exiles on ... Molokai.”ⁱⁱ

Mother Marianne and her sisters rose to the challenge despite the isolation of a life in exile. Like Christ, they chose sacrifice and service over and above personal comfort. Mother Marianne arrived several months before Father Damien’s death and helped to carry on the care and love of the sick lepers and their healthy children. “The story of compassionate care brought to others by Mother Marianne is her most precious gift. This legacy of caring continues today in the lives and ministries of the Sisters of Saint Francis.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Whether we look half a world away or next door, there are always people in great need. “Open our hearts, O Lord, to listen to the words of your Son” (Acts 16:14b) that we too may respond with love and mercy to those most in need.

ⁱ catholicahawaii.org/catholic-essentials/saints-traveling-relics/history-of-hawaiis-saints/saint-marianne

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.