

“They will expel you from the synagogues; in fact, the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God” (Jn 16:2). In the name of fear and deceived by the devil exploiting our weakness, we are all capable of doing great harm all the while thinking we are doing the right thing.

In the 1860’s the Hawaiian government and King Kamehameha V were at a loss as to how to protect the native people from leprosy. They chose extreme social distancing and passed a law forcing lepers to quarantine themselves in an isolated colony on the island of Molokai. The lepers were ostracized and left to fend for themselves. Life became a living hell. Victims of leprosy and guided by their own fear, the outcasts made life even more unbearable for one another.

The local bishop asked for volunteers to go where no one wanted to be, to the leper colony known as Kalaupapa. A young missionary priest who had come from Belgium offered to go. He had his own fears and worries. Despite harboring an inner repugnance for lepers, Fr Damien de Veuster drew strength from God to overcome his reluctance. He began his ministry in the leper colony in 1873.

“When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me... I have told you this so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you” (Jn 15:26, 16:1)

Fr Damien observed all that was wrong in Molokai. The fear, the infighting, the unhealthy and unsanitary living conditions, the trauma of abandonment, the lack of charity among all of the victims of leprosy made for total chaos.

Fr Damien prayed to God for the strength to face all the challenges. “He spent the first hours of each day in prayer... And he constantly refreshed his spirit by reading the Imitation of Christ”ⁱ so that he might respond to each difficult situation with the compassion and mercy of Jesus. He preached the Good News. Although outcast by society, each person was not shunned by God. Every leper was created in the likeness and image of God. Jesus loved them so much that he suffered and died for them. Fr Damien brought Christ’s healing touch through the sacrament of confession. He fed them with the Bread of Life and nurtured all that was good and holy in the people who had abandoned hope.

Fr Damien was a carpenter, mason, baker, farmer, and nurse who helped to create a sense of order and wellbeing among the people. He worked from morning until nightfall helping to dramatically improve the living conditions. “He improved water and food supplies and housing and founded two orphanages.”ⁱⁱ He did his best to invite others to join in his mission of building a civilization of love.

Love conquers evil. Love dispels fear. Love calls forth the best in others. There was a transformation in the heart of Fr Damien. “Over a period of time—his journal is very clear, and the writings of the Hawaiian people in that town are very clear—that he fell in love with the people.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There was also a dramatic change for every leper in the colony. Slowly but surely living conditions improved. The bickering stopped. A spirit of cooperation developed among the people. The living hell gave way to the Kingdom of God. Everyone began to care for one another in a healthy and lifegiving spirit of cooperation.

When Fr Damien contracted leprosy, people urged him to leave for treatment. He had no desire to lay down his cross for some potential cure away from the Hawaiians he ministered to. He chose to stay. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for [those whom one loves]” (Jn 15:13).

ⁱ americamagazine.org/issue/100/damien-molokai

ⁱⁱ britannica.com/biography/Saint-Damien-of-Molokai

ⁱⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/news/45365/after-aoc-decries-statue-hawaiian-catholic-says-st-damien-of-molokai-gave-his-life-serving-lepers