

A detailed oil painting of Father Damien in profile, facing left. He has a thick, dark beard and mustache, and wears round, thin-rimmed spectacles. He is wearing a dark, wide-brimmed hat with a black band. The background is a light, textured greenish-grey. In the top left corner, there is handwritten text in pencil: "Molokai" and "19 + 20.12.93".

FATHER DAMIEN

Portrait of Father Damien by Edward Clifford (1888)

During the last years of his life, Damien struck up a remarkable friendship with the Anglican artist Edward Clifford (1844-1907), an accomplished portrait painter within the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

In 1888, Clifford landed at Molokai where he stayed with Father Damien as a guest for two weeks, during which time he visited the leprosy settlement. He talked to Damien about the latter's life and work and in between made a number a portraits.


Clifford's fascination for Damien's work on Molokai extended beyond the care for the patients. Throughout their personal contacts, both Clifford and Damien very strongly felt like they were putting the same commandment of "love thy neighbor" into practice across the boundaries of the ecclesiastical structures.

Damien aptly expressed his sense of connection with Edward Clifford in his last self-written letter to Clifford on 28 February 1889 in which he wrote: 'During your long traveling-road homewards, please do not forget that narrow road we both have to walk carefully so as to meet together at the home of our common and eternal father.' ■

FATHER DAMIEN

“In our own time, as millions around the world suffer from disease, especially the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, we should draw on the example of Father Damien’s resolve in answering the urgent call to heal and care for the sick.”

President Barack Obama

 On October 11, 2009, Joseph De Veuster, better known as Father Damien, was canonized by the Vatican. He was the tenth person recognized as a Saint by the Catholic Church to have lived, worked, or died in what is now the United States. To commemorate and celebrate Father Damien's legacy in New York City, 33rd Street between First and Second Avenues has been named "Father Damien Way" in honor of this remarkable Belgian priest.

Joseph De Veuster was born in Tremelo in Flanders, Belgium in 1840. He entered the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Leuven, took the name of Damien, and left for Hawaii as a missionary in 1864.

Once arriving in Kalaupapa on the island of Molokai, he took care of those who had been spurned by society because of Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy. For 16 years, Father Damien cared for the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of those who had been confined to the settlement until he eventually contracted the disease and succumbed to it in 1889.

Father Damien's legacy of faith, compassion, and dedication for the most vulnerable among us is an inspiration to us all. He was a priest and a healer, a community leader and early human rights activist, and a catalyst for the current movement to eradicate neglected infectious diseases.

On May 11 The Honorable Geert Bourgeois, Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and His Eminence, Timothy Michael Cardinal Dolan inaugurated "Father Damien Way" together at the Chapel of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary on 33rd Street between 1st and 2nd Avenue. ■

Damien De Veuster

Joseph De Veuster, the future Father Damien, was born in Tremelo in Belgium, January 3, 1840. His was a large family and his father was a farmer-merchant. When his oldest brother entered the congregation of the Sacred Hearts (called 'Picpus' after the street in Paris where its generalate was located), his father wanted Joseph to take charge of the family business. Joseph, however, decided to become a religious himself. At the beginning of 1859 he entered the novitiate at Louvain, in the same house as his brother. There he took the name of Damien.

In 1863, his brother who was to leave for the mission in the Hawaiian Islands, became ill. Since preparations for the voyage had already been made, Damien obtained permission from the Superior General, to take his brother's place. On March 19, 1864, he arrived in Honolulu where he was ordained as a priest the following May 21. He immediately devoted himself, body and soul, to the difficult service of a 'country missionary' on the island of Hawaii, the largest in the Hawaiian group.

At that time, the Hawaiian government decided to take a very harsh measure, aimed at stopping the spread of leprosy, the deportation to the neighboring island of Molokai, of all those infected by what was at that time an incurable disease. The entire mission was concerned about the abandoned people and the Bishop, Louis Maigret, talked to the priests about the problem. He did not want to send anyone 'in the name of obedience', because he knew that such an order meant certain death. Four Brothers volunteered, they would take turns visiting and assisting the people affected by leprosy in their distress. Damien was the first to leave on May 10, 1873. At his own request and that of the inhabitants of the Kalaupapa settlement, he stayed indefinitely on Molokai.

He brought hope to this hell of despair. He became a source of consolation and encouragement for the people affected by leprosy, their pastor, the doctor of their souls and of their bodies, without any distinction of race or religion. He gave a voice to the voiceless, he built a community where the joy of being together and openness to the love of God, gave people new reasons for living. When he himself contracted the disease in 1885, he was able to identify completely with them.

Father Damien was above all, a witness of the love of God for His people. He got his strength from the Eucharist: 'It is at the foot of the altar that we find the strength we need in our isolation...' It is there that he found for himself and for others, the support and the encouragement, the consolation and the hope, he could communicate to the people of Molokai, with a deep faith. All that made him 'the happiest missionary in the world', a servant of God, and a servant of humanity.

Father Damien died on April 15, 1889, having served sixteen years in the leprosy settlement. His mortal remains were transferred to Belgium in 1936. He was interred in the crypt of the church of the Congregation of Sacred Hearts at Leuven. His fame spread to the entire world. In 1938, the process for his beatification was introduced at Mechelen (Belgium). In 1995, Father Damien was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Brussels. After the beatification the cause for his canonization was introduced in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Fourteen years later, the canonization took place in Rome, October 11, 2009.

In 2005, the Flemish people chose Father Damien as their greatest historical figure of all times in a poll conducted by the Flemish public broadcasting service. At the same time he was ranked third on the list of Les plus grands Belges ('The Greatest Belgians') by the French-speaking audience. ■

Father Damien's statue
in the State Capitol in
Washington

In 1959, the Territory of Hawaii became the fiftieth state of the United States of America. Therefore, they were entitled by federal law to name two illustrious people from their past and place their statues in the Washington State Capital. In 1965, Father Damien and Kamehameha, the Hawaiian warrior-king who unified the islands, were appointed to be represented in Washington. In 1969, the two statues were inaugurated in the National Statuary Hall Collection in the United States Capitol. At the same time a second cast of the Father Damien statue was placed as a centerpiece at the entrance to the Hawaii State Capitol in Honolulu.

An international competition was organized to choose the artist for the Father Damien statue. Marisol Escobar, who won this competition, did not make a conventional or pious representation of Damien. Her design prompted a lot of criticism and discussion.

Marisol chose to show Damien in the advanced stages of leprosy. She constructed a broad and lumpy face with ruined features. The hand holding the walking stick is obviously diseased, while the diseased feet are hidden in solid workman's boots. However, Father Damien is still very recognizable by the wire spectacles and the battered black head with the strings.

The squat, bulky body is draped in a bronze mantle with a look of implacable solidity so that Damien appears to be standing upright, sturdy, inextinguishably alive. His cloak has become a burial pall, which in turn became a coffin, all of which had always been part of the man himself. ■



Marisol Escobar: “I received a number of pictures of Father Damien. I selected one which shows him as a mature man. To me this is a truly nice picture of Father Damien and I’m deeply touched by it. It displays a strong character and the personality of someone who has realized his dream. It felt to me like this was a man who had discovered himself in Hawaii and had become a Hawaiian himself. I cannot picture Damien as a young European before he had accomplished what he wanted to, and without the marks left by his accomplishment.

I see nothing negative in being old. On the contrary, I find it fascinating and beautiful, and I respect it. I sense the mystery of a physical transformation in Damien, as if he has become what he aspired to be”.

Damien immortalized
in pictures

Damien's life coincides with the emergence and breakthrough of photography. Some dozen pictures of Damien have been preserved, which were often taken at decisive moments in his life. These are moments when the photographer made time stand still for Damien and immortalized him. Though small in number, the pictures circulate all around the world and strongly define, both before and after his death, the image we have of Damien. To contemporary people, who are immersed in a visual culture, these pictures represent a direct and personal contact with Damien. ■

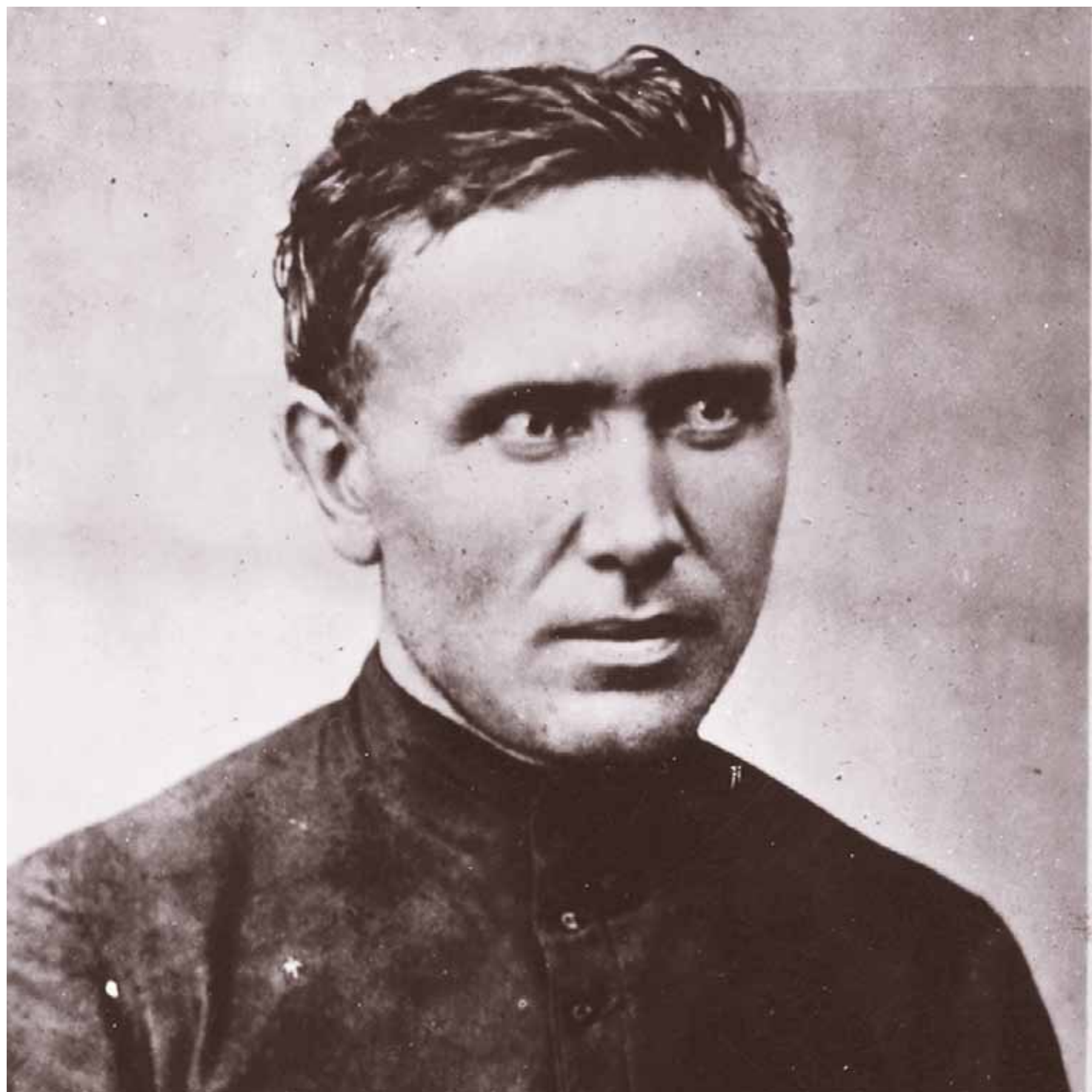


Damien before his departure for Hawaii

Philippe Guillaume Houdet (1855-1892)
Paris, October 24, 1863

October 1863. On the spur of the moment, Joseph De Veuster asks his superiors to be allowed to go to the Hawaiian Islands as a missionary, instead of his brother who is ill. Amidst the feverish preparations he finds the time to pay a visit to photographer Houdet in Paris. At that time, over a thousand photographers are working in Paris. Every day, photographer Houdet is visited by citizens, soldiers, priests and missionaries who want to have their picture taken, as a future reminder. Damien stands out. He has a plan. He deliberately wants to have his picture taken in the pose of the quintessential missionary, i.e. the 16th century Jesuit Franciscus Xavierius: standing tall, ostentatiously holding the cross, gazing with indefinite focus. A statement for the rest of his life.

Houdet takes several pictures. Damien has two pictures printed in a large number of copies which he sends to his family and fellow brethren. He considers it important for his family and friends to keep his picture in their prayer books. He does not want to be forgotten. ■



Damien upon his departure for Molokai

Menzies Dickson (1870-1882)

Honolulu, late June or early July 1873

In May 1873, Damien's life takes a new turn. He has been working as a priest-missionary on the Hawaiian Islands for almost ten years now. During his missionary work he is confronted with a strange disease: leprosy. The debate on the material and mental care for people affected by leprosy, who live isolated on Molokai, does not escape Damien's attention. When he is asked by the bishop if he wants to go live and work with them, he whole-heartedly says 'yes'. On May 10, 1873, he leaves for Molokai, initially for three months, but he soon realizes that his work there will take the rest of his life.

At the end of June or at the beginning of July 1873 Damien travels to the Hawaiian capital of Honolulu to sort out his entry visa and residence permit for the Kalaupapa settlement. This is also an opportunity for him to pay a visit to photographer Menzies Dickson, who not only took pictures of clergymen and civilians, but also photographed the Hawaiian royal family. The austerity with which he portrays Damien is in sharp contrast to the Victorian pomp and circumstance that generally characterises his work.

Damien keeps this portrait to himself for a number of years and does not send it to his parents until 1880. In 1882, the French missionary magazine *Les Missions Catholiques* publishes an engraving based on this picture, an honor only rarely bestowed on ordinary missionaries. Damien is becoming a celebrity. ■



Damien and the girls' choir

Henry L. Chase (1862–1901)
Molokai, May–June 1878

In the late 1870s, Damien's work on Molokai is starting to bear fruit. Thanks to his commitment and vigor he succeeds in putting a number of wrong things right. Moreover, his presence at Molokai brings the problems in the Kalaupapa settlement to the attention of politicians and the outside world.

A storm of complaints and criticisms force the Hawaiian government to take action. At the end of May 1878, a parliamentary health committee visits the colony to check out the situation on site and see which measures can be taken. Photographer Henry Chase is part of this delegation. This is remarkable, since the Hawaiian government is doing its utmost to hide the leprosy from view, in order not to damage the paradisiacal image of the islands.

On this occasion Henry Chase takes some pictures of patients. Twelve of them are used to illustrate the official report of the health committee. Chase also succeeds in getting Damien and his girls' choir in front of his lens. This picture, numbered 13 on the negative, is not included in the report. However, prints of it circulate when Damien is still alive. Damien himself had some of them in his possession. ■

Damien in front of Saint Philomena Church and the presbytery

Eduard Arning (1883–1886)
Molokai, 1885

After the discovery of the leprosy bacillus in 1873, the medical and scientific world shows a growing interest in leprosy in the 1880s. The British-German doctor Arning stays on the Hawaiian Islands in the period 1883-1886 to carry out research. He dissects the bodies of dead patients and carries out microscopic examinations. During the period of his research he visits Molokai about five times. He examines and photographs patients there. In November 1884, he diagnoses Damien with leprosy. He shows a great interest in how the disease progresses in Damien. He examines him several times and asks him to frequently report to him.

Arning uses photography not only for his scientific activities, but also for his ethnological interest in Hawaiian art and culture. Interestingly, his sizable photo collection does not contain a single photo portrait of Damien. Damien probably refuses to have his picture taken for fear of being confronted with his own deteriorating condition. Arning does succeed, however, in taking a picture of Damien with some important buildings (church, presbytery, orphanage) in the background, which form the setting of Damien's everyday life.

In the background, the ocean reaches as far as the horizon and the cliffs loom up. We also see a number of small white houses for patients. This panoramic picture also shows Saint Philomena Church, Damien's presbytery, the dormitories of the orphan boys and the cemetery. A Pandanus tree peeps out from behind the church. This is the tree under which Damien spends his first nights on Molokai. It is also the tree where he will be buried. ■







Damien amidst his orphan boys

William T. Brigham (1887–1926)
Molokai, March 1889

In March 1889, a few weeks before Damien's death, American leprosy specialist dr. Prince A. Morrow sets foot ashore Molokai. He is accompanied by two other doctors, dr. Emerson and dr. Swift, who is the resident physician of the leprosy settlement. The American Joseph Dutton, who has been a tremendous support to Damien at Molokai since 1886, draws up notes for him about how the disease progresses in some ten patients. William Brigham, another member of the company, takes pictures of those patients for Morrow. On the basis of Duttons' notes, Brighams' pictures and his own observations Morrow publishes the article 'Personal Observations of Leprosy in Mexico and the Sandwich Islands' in The New York Medical Journal in July 1889.

In March 1889, Brigham grasps the opportunity to take two telling pictures of Damien. One picture is a portrait of Damien sitting in a chair against the façade of Saint Philomena Church. The other picture shows Damien surrounded by orphan boys who had leprosy. The sharp camera lens mercilessly shows Damien's deteriorated condition. ■



Damien on his deathbed

Sidney Bourne Swift (1888 - 1892)
Molokai, April 14, 1889

In 1888, Sidney Bourne Swift is appointed as the new resident physician of the leprosy settlement by the Hawaiian government. A passionate amateur photographer, he takes his camera with him. Damien and dr. Swift get along very well. The doctor works hard and is not reluctant to try a modern approach and new methods. As his physician and close friend, Swift assists Damien as he approaches the end of his life.

Swift never succeeded in convincing Damien to have his picture taken. When Damien is on his deathbed, Swift decides to keep his camera ready. At this point, Damien is no longer capable of protesting. On Palm Sunday, April 14, 1889, Swift places his camera at the foot of Damien's bed and takes two pictures. Damien dies on Monday, April 15. ■



Damien's body laying in state

Sidney Bourne Swift (1888 – 1892)

Molokai, April 15, 1889

After his death Damien is laid in state at Saint-Philomena Church. Swift takes another two pictures.

Damien rests in peace, shrouded in a white priestly robe, complete with chasuble, stole and maniple. It looks as if he is asleep. There are hardly any outer marks of his illness left, as is often the case in patients after death. His body is being flanked by two Franciscan sisters from Syracuse (New York): Mother Marianne Cope (left) and Sister Leopoldina Burns (right). Father Damien drew a lot of support from the presence of the Sisters during the final months of his life.

Mother Marianne Cope and six other Sisters of St. Francis arrived in Honolulu in November 1883. With Mother Marianne as supervisor, their task was to manage Kaka'ako Branch Hospital on O'ahu, which served as a receiving station for Hansen's disease patients gathered from all over the islands. Here the more severe cases were processed and shipped to the island of Molokai for confinement at the settlement at Kalawao, and then later at Kalaupapa.

In November 1888 Mother Marianne, along with Sister Leopoldina Burns and Sister Vincentia McCormick, accepted the challenge to go to Kalaupapa, where they ran the Bishop Home and the Home for Boys, founded by Father Damien.

Mother Marianne's example - her never-failing optimism, her serenity, her caring nature, and her considerable abilities - gave strength to the other sisters. Together, through devotion and self-sacrifice, the Sisters of St. Francis rendered a remarkable service to humanity in the islands of Hawaii.

Mother Marianne never returned to Syracuse. She spent the remainder of her life at Kalaupapa. She died in 1918 at the age of 80 and was buried on the grounds of Bishop Home. Her remains were returned to Syracuse in 2005. Mother Marianne was declared a Saint in 2012. ■

DAMIEN DE VEUSTER,

Child of his time – a man for all times

Father Damien does not belong in the collection of saints who are believed to have extraordinary qualities from an early age onwards and are thus destined to take their place in the gallery of the great and holy.

When we look at who he was, we should not forget the time and the spirit of the time he lived and worked in. If we still speak of him today, and if he still speaks to us, it is because - as a child and missionary of his time - he transcends the spirit of his time and in doing so, he becomes the man for all times. ■

The time Damien lived and worked in (19th century) was marked by the idea of “Restoration”. In the Western world, there was a reaction against the ideals and consequences of the French Revolution. After Napoleon’s downfall, the congress of Vienna (1815) had reorganized Europe politically, according to the legitimacy principle. On a religious and ecclesiastical level, there was also a reform movement going on.

Several new religious movements would contribute to this. Devotions such as “adoration” and “rehabilitation” were given new impulses and the image of “the heart” would play an important role as a reaction against “reason” which had been turned into a goddess by the French Revolution.

The “devotion to the heart of Mary” was blossoming and was sustained and stimulated by different appearances and the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854). Many male and female congregations were resorted under the sign of the “Holy Heart of Jesus or Mary”, or of both holy hearts, such as the congregation Joseph De Veuster joined in 1859. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Restoration would gain power, because of the dogma declaration concerning papal infallibility (1870), also a powerful factor against the movement in favor of the unification of Italy under Garibaldi.

The missionary movement, having had a hard time in the 18th century because of the abolition of the Jesuits (1773), revived. Several new religious congregations were founded with one purpose: the foreign missions.

Other congregations were also leaving for missions, after having seen a modest growth in their own country. This was also the case

for the congregation of the Sacred Hearts. Their missionary work overseas was supported by an enthusiastic group of supportive, noble people at home. A kind of bond between the homeland and the missions was thus formed.

Colonial and religious interests often coincided. Just like the State wanted to have colonies, the church wanted to have missions. And, whereas in Europe, Church and State grew more distant, they did find each other in their colony missions.

Paternalism and tutelage were also part of this missionary principle. Christianity was too easily linked with the “West” and “European culture” was too easily regarded as the normal, self-evident, even superior form of culture. Mission work was almost equaled with civilization.

This strong missionary elan was certainly connected with the current theological idea that there was no salvation outside the Church. The poor heathens should be baptized as quickly and as numerous as possible, otherwise they would be lost forever. Here we can recall the image of the missionary-soulseeker, the unflinching Baptist. Related to this was the holy competition with the Protestants. If Protestant missionaries were not downright enemies, they certainly were rivals to be feared.

But... the missionary always meant well; he wanted to be the father to his “children”, the benefactor of the needy. His charitable devotion was huge, he did a lot for the poor, uncivilized heathens.

Set against the backdrop of the 19th century, the missionary is thought to have heroic qualities. He is the pioneer who - at the cost of superhuman sacrifices - ventures into the most remote and

desolate territories, looking for people who were thought to be in distress. Connected with all this readiness to make sacrifices, there was also the idea of “martyrdom”. Young missionaries left their families and country for the rest of their lives, often dying young. Many unknown young men have gone this way. They have actually made up a chapter of missionary history, which will never be written down.

Damien was a child and a missionary of that time. During the first years of his missionary life, on the big island of Hawaii, he thought and worked in the spirit of his time. This becomes clear while reading his letters. Following his ordination (May 21, 1864), he wrote to his parents:

“I am a priest now, dear parents, a missionary, in a depraved, heathen and idolatrous country! What a task this is to me! What apostolic zeal should be mine! How pure must my own life be, how just my opinion in the eyes of others! Alas, don’t forget this poor priest who wanders day and night across the volcanoes of the islands, searching for one lost sheep. I’m begging you, pray for me, day and night! Let them pray for me at home, because should God only for one moment take His mercy away from me, I would immediately sink into the same mud of vices as I’m trying to save others from.” (August 23, 1864).

The vicinity of active volcanos on the island was a good opportunity for him to deliver his fulminating sermons about hell as God’s punishment against idolatry. He travelled a lot, built chapels and small churches so he could celebrate masses in many different places. More mass services meant more opportunities for mercy and

deliverance. He baptized many people and he baptized them rather quickly. He was convinced that the sacraments would work for themselves.

He was extremely vexed by the moral standards of the Hawaiians and protested against their medicine men and their weird practices. In 1866, he wrote to his General Superior:

“Corruption is apparent from a very early age among the natives! The children have been hardly taught to speak and yet they seem to know more than a theology student still has to learn. The parents do not refrain from discussing all kinds of matters of life in front of the children. They even go as far as explaining the practices of former idolatry and other terrible heathen customs.”(December 20, 1866).

Damien found himself in a context of rivalry with the Protestant missionaries who had come to the Islands 7 years before the Catholic missionaries arrived. In 1872, he wrote to his brother:

“I’m always out on the battlefield. The heretics continually lie in ambushes, ready to get hold of my poor Christians. For a while now, I’ve been teaching a theology course to the natives who are well grounded. This way, I’m preparing them to defend our religion against the heretics and to support the faithful, when they are in need of a priest.” (July 14, 1872).

But we should not forget that Damien had always tried to be close to his people. He was not the detached, superior, western-culture fanatic. He was much too modest for that and not so thoroughly

grounded. He was the much-loved missionary who dearly loved his people, like a father loving his children similarly to God who loves his children. He wrote to his parents:

“I do love these poor people a lot, because they are so simple and I'd do anything for them. They, in turn, love me like children love their parents. Through this mutual affection I hope to convert them to God because, if they love their priest, they will easily love God as well.” (October 24, 1865).

If Damien had remained this classical missionary, we would no longer speak of him today. And he would have nothing to say to contemporary people either... ■

Damien has – without much of a theory and maybe even unconsciously - provided the background for contemporary ideas and he has even exceeded them. This only happened since he had taken the decisive step of going to the Kalaupapa settlement on Molokai (1873) where he would stay till his death (1889). His life practice can still serve as an inspiration to today's world.

Damien went to Molokai as an outsider, in order to do a lot for the people affected by leprosy. But, in doing so, he himself became the poor fellow man, one of them, fellow sufferer and partner; he evolved from a “me and you” to a “we, together” relation. He became a living example of solidarity with the outcasts and pariahs. He calls upon us to look at the problems of the poor and outcasts, not from aside or from above – from a safe distance, but to share whatever there is, be it much or little.

Damien founded a community with the people who happened to be around, with the talents and the potential they still had, a community of equals, where he did not stand aside or above.

Damien's commitment was not unaffected by suffering. He did not seek this suffering actively and he did not escape into the mysticism of suffering either. He experienced his suffering as purifying and liberating. No Easter for him without Good Friday.

We should not forget that Damien at some point had completely lost the support of his religious superior and of his bishop. This was also connected with worldwide attention and fundraising from Anglican communities in England and the USA. Did the government refuse to do anything for these poor people? Why so much money for such a small project? Did the rest of the mission not count then?

The Bishop wrote to Damien: “Since I feel very strongly about the principle of justice that should be applied to everybody , including my enemies and the enemies of the Good, I notice with discomfort that the powers that glorify you, are exaggerating and are putting things in the wrong light, without taking into account what the government or others are trying to do; the mission, too, is contributing. I beg your pardon if I'm making a few prosaic notes here on the poetry of the lepers on Molokai. As I'm reading in the papers, the world has the impression that only you care about “your” lepers, that you are their agent, doctor, nurse, gravedigger etc., as if the government does nothing at all.” (January 2, 1887).

Damien would later say that he received gold (money) and incense (publicity) from strangers, but myrrh (bitter resentment) from his own superiors. The Bishop interpreted this metaphor as an assault on his authority and dignity. He wrote to Damien:

“After gold and incense, you did not care much for myrrh and you spit it back into my face, together with the old bile you had still left in your heart. Let's hope everything has come out now? I, on the other hand, have never ceased to admire your heroism and to make it public at every given opportunity. I beg your pardon if I relied too much on your humility!” (February 5, 1887).

Moreover, this imagery of gold, incense and myrrh had also been noticed by his own religious Superior:

“If you wish to follow our Holy Savior, by accepting the gold and sniffing from the nice odor of incense that is so freely bestowed upon you, then you should also - without complaining – accept the myrrh, as a small recompense for the human feelings you experience as you receive those two other gifts.”
(February 14, 1887).

In the eyes of his superior, Damien was dominant, fickle and vain. He had swallowed all the praise and had now become dangerous. Whatever his superior thought or said, Damien could not allow himself to give up his work or to refuse the means he was given to be able to do his job as well as possible. He did not oppose his superiors, but he kept on dedicating himself to his work, together with the people of Molokai. Stubbornly, he kept on going, even when his personal integrity was put to doubt and he had to pass humiliating medical examinations to find possible traces of advanced syphilis.

On Molokai, Damien did not make any distinction between Catholics and others. He did not ask for people's profession of faith before he helped them. He helped wherever he could. And they resented him for not denying the Sacraments of the Church to dying people who were not Catholic, but who had been baptized.

He was becoming more and more aware of all the good things he saw outside his own church. He did not find these ecumenical ideas in books, but by observing and experiencing reality around him. Quite a few non-Catholics became his closest friends. Basic ecumenism is possible...

Damien never asked questions about people's past. In 1886, he met a peculiar character: Joseph Dutton, who had led a rather troubled life; he had been married, fought in the American Civil War, got divorced, became a Catholic, joined a Trappist monastery, left this place too... When he wanted to become Damien's fellow worker, Damien did not make any enquiries about the man's 'files'. Dutton became his most faithful collaborator, Damien even called him his real brother. Dutton would stay and work on Molokai until his death in 1931. This can serve as a valuable lesson for contemporary people - to keep our eyes open for the “marginalized”, who can surprise us when it comes to astonishing acts of dedication.

Excerpts from his letters prove clearly that Damien found strength in his religious commitment. When he speaks about his departure for Molokai (1873) and about his certitude of having been infected with leprosy himself, he looks back on his religious profession.

“Since, on the day of my profession, I was put under the pall, I see it as my duty to report to the Bishop, who did not have the cruelty, as he said, to force anyone to such sacrifice.” (November 23, 1873).

But the recollection of the fact that I was under the shroud, 25 years ago, on the day of my profession, encouraged me to defy the dangers of this terrible infection, by doing my duty here and in relinquishing more and more of myself, every day; the more progressive the disease, the more content and happy I become in Kalawao.” (October 29, 1885).

A prophetic commitment of religious people also means: choosing the side of your fellow men. In the settlement of Molokai, new relationships would develop between people who had to leave their

partners behind on the islands. Often, they found a new partner on Molokai and they asked Damien to give their marriage a religious blessing. He did so, without much asking whether the first partner was still alive or not. His superiors blamed him for this.

“Sometimes, Damien is tempted by his unlimited zeal to say, write and even do things that the ecclesiastical authority can only criticize, like blessing a marriage between people who have left their partners behind as they went to the settlement. The reason for this is, that he has gained too little information about these cases. His blind enthusiasm prevents him from correcting himself. He is loved and hated likewise, because one knows it’s only his thoughtlessness that makes him go astray, not a lack of good intentions.’ (November 16, 1883).

Damien had shown us what kind of power can originate from small beginnings. The settlement of Molokai was only a small project. Its size was not bigger than 6.5 km². There were never more than 1.000 patients at a time. And the period Damien spent there, was relatively short: 16 years.

But from that distant little corner, amidst the Great Pacific Ocean, an appeal was launched across the world. The miracle of that small beginning reminds us of the small seed in the soil, and of the yeast in the dough, of the Utopia that is turned into history.

Damien may seem like an “unruly saint” to us, not a saint we should demand things from, but a saint who demands something from us, who calls upon us to become the fellow men of today’s outcasts. ■

DAMIEN INSPIRES

Damien forces respect and admiration, in Belgium but also in countries far afield such as India, in which famous people like Mother Theresa and Mahatma Ghandi thought and spoke highly of him. Until today, Damien's acts and life continue to inspire people from all walks of life.

Mother Theresa

Mother Theresa learnt how to dispense ambulant care to people with leprosy and other illnesses during an internship in Polambakkam under the supervision of the Belgian physician, Frans Hemerijckx, who was working for one of the "Damaanactie" projects in South-India. She also assisted at Damien's beatification in Brussels and sent a letter to pope John Paul II, urging a canonization. For, according to Mother Theresa, Damien was 'himself a miracle'.

"I know of a miracle. The removal of fear from the hearts of the patients to acknowledge the disease and proclaim it and ask for medicine - and the birth of the hope of being cured is a miracle. The second miracle is the altered attitude of people and governments toward people suffering from of leprosy: greater concern, less fear, and readiness to help - any time and all the time."

Mahatma Ghandi

Also Ghandi highly valued father Damien as a person. He praised him in the following words: "The political and journalistic world can boast of very few heroes who compare with Father Damien of Molokai. The Catholic Church, on the contrary, counts by the thousands those who after the example of Father Damien have devoted themselves to the victims of leprosy. It is worthwhile to look for the sources of such heroism."

Rigo Peeters

Rigo Peeters headed Damiaanactie, an a-political and pluralistic NGO as its secretary-general for years. For over fifty years, Damiaanactie has been fighting diseases of poverty like leprosy, leishmaniasis and tuberculosis throughout the entire world. Hundreds of volunteers and the staff members In Belgium, the medical teams in the countries where the action is being implemented all rally behind the values embodied by Damien which are still very much up to date: respect, persistence, collaboration and inspiration.

Rigo Peeters still marvels at how one single person managed to lift the values of the whole of society to a higher level.

"Damien's life lifted society of that time to a higher level. Since then, there has been increasingly less tolerance for the inhuman exclusion of fellow citizens. For one single man to have influenced the prevalent norms and values of society, is still nothing less than a feat. Therefore Damien still is a source of inspiration for anyone willing to commit themselves to improving the lives of their fellows."

Yohei Sasakawa

In 2010, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on ending discrimination against people affected by leprosy, endorsed unanimously by 192 countries. The resolution approved principles and guidelines declaring that states should promote, protect and ensure the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for persons affected by leprosy.

Yohei Sasakawa, the World Health Organisation's Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, comments: "The UN resolution and its accompanied principles and guidelines will have no meaning unless it is implemented." (...) "discrimination takes many insidious forms, such as the common usage of the word, leper. This carries the meaning of a pariah, or social outcast. Once that label has been applied, it sticks for the rest of a person's life. Let the word no longer be used as a term of derision and exclusion."

Colophon

Authors

Damien De Veuster | Louis Hermans

Father Damien's statue in the State Capitol in Washington | Patrik Jaspers

Damien immortalized in pictures | Ruben Boon

Mother Marianne Cope - p. 25 | <http://www.nps.gov/kala/learn/historyculture/marianne.htm>

Damien De Veuster, Child of his time - man for all times | Juliaan Vandekerckhove

Damien inspires | www.damiaanactie.be and www.nippon-foundation.or.jp

Pictures

Portrait of Father Damien by Edward Clifford - cover | Damien Centre Leuven

Damien immortalized in pictures - p. 10 -25 | Damien Centre Leuven

Father Damien Statue - Bronze by Marisol Escobar - p. 9 | Architect of the Capitol

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Catalogue Number

D/2015/3241/141

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