

Blessed Damien of Molokai was born Joseph de Veuster in Belgium on 3 January 1840. Like his elder brother Auguste, he joined the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and took the name Damien. In 1864, when ill health prevented his brother going to Hawaii as a missionary, Damien, to the surprise and annoyance of his Superior, got permission from the Superior General of his Order in Paris to take his brother's place. He was ordained eight weeks after arriving in Hawaii and worked energetically for several years as a parish priest.

AN OUTBREAK OF LEPROSY

Hawaii was at that time an independent kingdom faced with an influx of settlers and estate workers from North America and Asia. The local population was seriously affected by diseases brought in from overseas. At that time there was no cure for leprosy and when it was detected, the health authorities decided in 1865 to isolate anyone with the disease (and their families) on a remote island called Molokai.

The health authorities envisaged a 'self-sustaining community of leprosy-affected people, all happily working together'. However, the effects of the disease and the lack of proper medical care caused a general breakdown in morality, with drunkenness and refusal to work. By 1873 it was clear that 'some noble Christian priest or pastor' was needed to help and comfort the leprosy victims and Father Damien volunteered for the task. The bishop's original intention was

to rotate four priests on Molokai. In the event, Damien was to remain there until his death in 1889, sixteen years later.

LIFE ON MOLOKAI

He was appalled by what he found: over 800 men, women and children were living in makeshift shelters of palm leaves without proper food, clothing, medical care or water supplies. He recognised that these conditions were the product of 'despair of soul and body'; he tackled the dire living conditions and gave comfort to the sick and dignity to the dying. He constructed a church, organised a proper water supply, persuaded the health authorities to provide better housing, food and clothing and campaigned ceaselessly for a resident doctor.

It was hard to find anyone willing to endure the conditions in which Damien lived. However a visitor wrote that Damien 'took no precautions whatever, he was kind-hearted, he never forbade lepers entering his house at any time, night or day' nor was he frightened to touch them. Damien was determined to be a true brother to them and said that if Providence saw fit to afflict him with leprosy 'I will gain a crown of thorns, whether I am worthy or not'.

According to his brother Auguste, so totally did he identify with his community at Molokai, that he habitually used the expression 'we lepers' even before he contracted leprosy in 1886. He was persuaded to go to Honolulu for treatment, but was anxious about his 'brothers' in Molokai and returned after a fortnight. He gradually weakened and died of the disease in April 1889 at the age of 49.

AN HISTORIC LETTER

Fr Damien received support from England as well as America and Belgium. Rev. Hugh Chapman, vicar of St Luke's church, Camberwell, was a particularly vigorous supporter and fund-raiser. The Guild's most prized possession is a hand-written letter in English from Fr Damien dated 19 July 1888 thanking Rev. Chapman for continuing to send him funds, and for bundles of letters, which brought tears to his eyes. He now has 80 orphan boys, all with leprosy, under his direct care and the Board of Health has helped with two large dormitories. He has received several hundreds of new arrivals and is expecting more. A problem is weighing on his mind: the falling of the steeple, the arrival of a large, well-finished American altar and above all 'the increase of our lepers' have compelled him to start building a new church 73 ft x 30, part in masonry, part in wood with a corrugated iron roof. He has received \$500 (the equivalent of £100 in those far-off days!) from America but finds this falls far short. He does not want to draw on the 'leper fund', even though the church will be used exclusively by lepers.

Rev. Chapman's reply to Father Damien was published in *The Times*. He sent him a cheque for £1,000, donated by 'many who are grateful to God for the example

of your heroic self devotion'. The money was to be spent as Damien saw fit, for the erection of a chapel.

DAMIEN'S PORTRAIT

Another English supporter was the pre-Raphaelite artist, Sir Edward Burne Jones, who sent Father Damien his painting of 'The Vision of St Francis'. The painting was one of the few things Father Damien kept for himself in his room. It was taken to Molokai in 1888 by Edward Clifford, who painted this portrait of Damien during his visit.



On 4 June 1995 Pope John Paul II beatified Blessed Damien of Molokai. He will be canonized on Sunday 11th October 2009.