

10 May 2021

**Father Damien's Feast Day**  
**Celebrating the life and work of "martyr of charity" Father Damien**  
**(3 January 1840 – 15 April 1889)**

Today, SFLG commemorates the life and work of Father Damien, Saint Damien of Molokai or Saint Damien De Veuster.

Jozef De Veuster was born in Tremelo, Belgium, in 1840, the youngest of seven children, to corn merchant Joannes De Veuster and his wife Anne. Although expected to join the family business, instead, he joined the novitiate of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, a missionary religious institute. It was there he received the name Damien and later, in 1860, became a Roman Catholic priest.

Father Damien arrived in Honolulu in March 1864 where he was assigned to the Catholic Mission in Hawaii and served in several parishes. Many of his native Hawaiian parishioners suffered high mortality rates due to infectious diseases brought to Hawaii by foreign traders, sailors, and immigrants. One of those diseases was leprosy; at that time, incurable and thought to be highly contagious.

Fearing the disease, the Hawaii legislature passed laws that forced people with leprosy into quarantine on the remote Island of Molokai. Between 1866 and 1969, over 8,000 Hawaiians were forcibly sent to the Kalaupapa Peninsula settlement in Molokai under these laws.



Although the Royal Board of Health in Hawaii provided the settlement with food and other supplies, it did not have the resources to offer proper healthcare. Father Damien, having volunteered to serve and minister to the settlement, arrived on 10 May 1873, to find 600 people with leprosy living out their lives in impoverished conditions. He led his ministry from 1873 until his death in 1889.

Throughout his ministry, he taught the Catholic faith and cared for the patients with compassion and love. He dressed ulcers, built a reservoir, made coffins, dug graves, and shared his life with the community providing both medical and emotional support. He also established leaders within the community to build houses, schools, roads, hospitals, and churches. This incredible ministry transformed the lives of those living in the community.

His work was recognised during his lifetime by King Kalakaua who bestowed upon him the honour of Knight Commander of the Royal Order. Consequently, Father Damien became internationally acclaimed in the United States and Europe, where large sums were raised in support of his work.

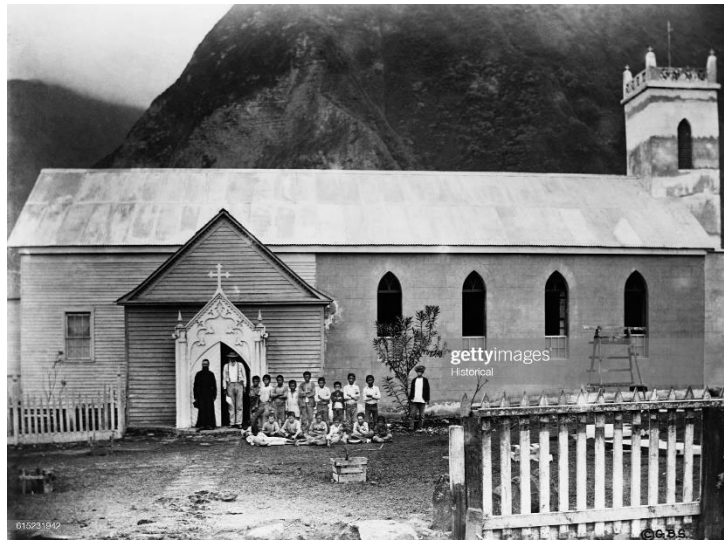
After eleven years caring for the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of those in the community, Father Damien himself contracted leprosy. He continued with his work unceasingly, despite the infection, but finally succumbed to the disease on 15 April 1889 aged 49.

Father Damien is venerated as a saint in the Catholic Church. He was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on 11 October 2009. Libert H. Boeynaems, writing in the Catholic Encyclopedia, calls him "the Apostle of the Lepers."

In the Anglican Communion and other Christian denominations, Father Damien is considered the spiritual patron for leprosy and outcasts. Father Damien is the patron saint of the Diocese of Honolulu and of Hawaii. Father Damien Day, 15 April, the day of his death, is also a state-wide holiday in Hawaii.



Photo of Father Damien taken in 1889, just weeks before his death.



Father Damien's Church. Father Damien stands with patients outside his church on Molokai Island.