
FATHER DAMIEN

by Glynn MacNiven-Johnston



CTS Biographies

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Front cover image: *Father Damien.*

Father Damien

Apostle to the Lepers

Second Edition

by Glynn MacNiven-Johnston

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Author's note

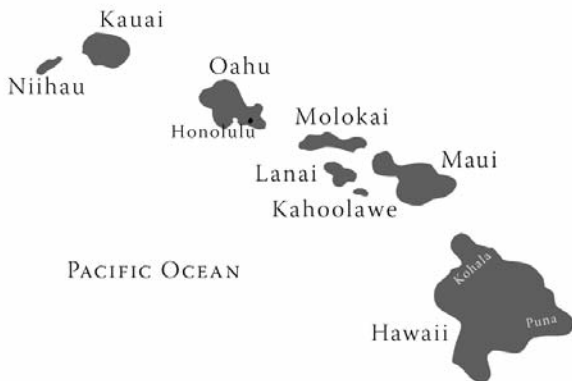
I have chosen to refer to Hawaii rather than The Sandwich Islands for ease of understanding, and have preferred to write leprosy and lepers over Hansen's disease and Hanseniens again for ease of understanding; also because this was the usage in Fr Damien's time and it captures the horror his contemporaries felt.



Father Damien, courtesy of The Hawaii State Archive.

THE HAWAIIAN GROUP OF ISLANDS

100 mi
100 km



Introduction

On 7th May 1984, Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote to Pope John Paul II about the lepers her sisters were nursing in India, Yemen, Ethiopia and Tanzania: 'In order to continue this beautiful work of love and healing, we need a saint to lead and protect us. Father Damien can be this saint. Holy Father, our lepers and everyone on earth beg you to give us a saint, a martyr to love, an example of obedience to our religion.'

On 11th October 2009 this will happen as Damien de Veuster is canonized.

It would be easy to think of St Damien de Veuster, the 'Apostle to the Lepers' of Hawaii, as a social reformer - and he did reform. He devoted his life to a situation which was so horrific that perhaps only comparison with the concentration camps can accurately describe it, and he made a difference through years of battling with the authorities, who were not monsters but whose priorities were different. Truth to tell, he might not have had to battle with them so much if he had had a different personality, but then if he had been different he would not have gone there and he would not have stayed. Damien was by no means a perfect person. By all accounts he was

very difficult to be with because he expected of others what he expected of himself, although he always asked forgiveness of those he had hurt. Now he has been declared a saint. This means that in some way his life reflected Jesus Christ. But in what way?

St Damien's life shows that there is no degradation which can separate us from the love of Christ, and there is no suffering where He is not present. It shows us that anyone's life can be transformed by God; that we should not be afraid to embrace the life that He has given us, nor feel destroyed when we find ourselves unequal to the events and situations we have to face. Damien made huge improvements in the leper colony, but he could not take away the leprosy. What he did was to help make Christ present in that situation and many of the leprosy sufferers discovered meaning in their suffering. More than any medical or social work, Damien's gift lay in his becoming a leper for the lepers, rejected for the rejected - like Christ Himself. They, in turn, discovered their own vocation - to share in the redemptive suffering of Christ, and this is finally what changed everything for them. This is very hard for us to understand, perhaps for our generation more than for others, because our world wants to eliminate suffering, to make everything clean, perfect and beautiful. Damien's life was a challenge to his contemporaries, and it challenges us too.

As Pope John Paul II said: ‘What could he have offered the lepers who were condemned to a slow death, if not his own faith, and the truth that Christ is Lord and God is love?’

Early Life

Growing up in Belgium

Damien de Veuster was born on 3rd January 1840 in the village of Tremeloo near Leuven in Belgium, the seventh of the eight children of Frans and Anne de Veuster. He was named Joseph and called Jef for short. The Veusters were a farming family, by no means rich but not poverty stricken either. Frans de Veuster grew and marketed grain. The family's Catholicism and the practice of their faith were woven into the fabric of their daily lives. Anne de Veuster especially was a deeply religious woman, and it was from this background that two of the daughters entered a convent and two of the sons became priests. There were also religious vocations among their grandchildren. Jef was only five years old when his eldest sister Eugenie took her vows as an Ursuline nun and eleven years old when she died in a typhus epidemic. At that point Pauline, the next sister, chose to enter the same convent 'to take Eugenie's place'. This made a strong impression on Jef which was to be very important later on. Jef's elder brother, Auguste, a brilliant student, entered the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary¹, taking the name Pamphile.

¹ Often called the Picpus Fathers, after the street in Paris where their mother house is.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Damien first became famous, saints were usually portrayed as totally perfect, and stories of their ‘saintly piety’ even as children were popular. Damien’s brother Fr Pamphile told a story of how Damien, aged only four, went missing at a local fair and how his family, after looking everywhere, finally found him deep in silent prayer in the local church. The parallels with the child Jesus being found in the temple are unmissable but in case you do miss the intended comparison with Jesus, this story is sometimes coupled with the information that he enjoyed looking after the family’s flock of sheep. Fortunately for modern readers there are other events which show him as a little more human. Jef was a popular boy and was usually to be found with a whole gang of other village boys, one of whose favourite games was to jump onto the back of a fast-moving cart. The boys would wait for a cart to pass and one of them would jump onto the back and hold on to the tailgate. To make sure that it was moving fast enough, the other boys would throw stones at the horse to make it bolt. By the time the carter had got the horse under control, the boy had had a dangerous and exciting ride. The boy would then run off while the carter was still calming the horse. On this particular day it was Jef who jumped on to the cart, but the horse failed to bolt. The carter stopped it at once and seeing and recognising Jef, shouted after his fleeing figure dire threats of informing

his parents. Jef had heard that sanctuary could be claimed by fugitives in any church, so he went there. His parents found him inside the altar rail deep in prayer - a prayer he had begun as soon as the door opened. Frans and Anne were pious people and could not hit him in church nor even shout at him, so they had to resort to hissing at him to come out. Jef was nothing if not stubborn and he finally wrung from his parents a promise that he would not be punished. Only then did he accompany them home. This incident did not deter him. Fr Pamphile mentions another cart riding episode when Jef fell off and the loaded cart's wheels went right over his head. He should have been killed but the ground must have been soft. On the whole, however, Jef was a quiet boy. In fact, the neighbours called him 'Silent Jef', but this was not a sign of timidity: he was the local speed skating champion. Nor was he withdrawn. His letters to his parents when he was away at school show that he was open, demonstrative and affectionate.

From farm to seminary

Jef left school at thirteen to work on the farm. He also helped the village blacksmith who doubled as local gravedigger. Jef was of average height but very broad and strong. When he was only thirteen, he could lift 100kg (over 220lb) sacks of grain as if they weighed nothing. Jef was quite happy on the farm, but Frans wanted to do the

best for all his children and for the family as a whole. It was decided that Jef should go to business school to learn better ways of marketing the family grain. The school was in the French-speaking (Walloon) part of Belgium. The fact that Jef spoke only Flemish was not considered an insurmountable problem so, when he was sixteen, Jef was sent to school in Braine-le-Compt in Hainault. The first few months must have been very difficult. He spoke no French and had never been away from his family before, but he did not complain. He wrote to his family: 'It is with great pleasure that I take pen in hand to write to you a short letter for the first time. By now I am quite accustomed to this place. I talk to the Walloons a little. I know my work, my lessons, my companions, and my bed. Everything in the house is clean and comfortable. Our table is like the one at the annual fair and the beer is very good. Any Walloon that laughs at me I hit with a ruler.'

Whilst in Braine-le-Compt, Jef went to a mission preached by the Redemptorist Fathers and there he heard a call to the religious life. He wrote to his parents that he wanted to become a Trappist monk. This was a complete surprise to his parents, who thought of his brother as the priest of the family. They thought it must just be a phase and told him to wait and reconsider. Jef then asked his brother, Pamphile, who was very supportive, and with the help of the parish priest managed to convince their father to allow Jef to try his vocation. After talking to Pamphile,

Jef reconsidered and decided to enter the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. In 1858, then, at the age of eighteen, Jef entered the same Congregation as his brother and took the name Damien after the fourth-century saint and doctor. (Incidentally, it was in a church dedicated to St Damian that St Francis of Assisi had heard Christ's call to rebuild his Church.) The Congregation accepted Jef only after much deliberation and then only as a lay brother, not as a candidate for the priesthood. He had already been refused outright by the American College at Leuven who did not see in this rough and burly farmer the kind of candidate for the missionary priesthood they wanted. The report of his interview says he was rude and obviously uneducated in Latin or anything else. Damien did not protest at the position he was given, but he asked his brother Pamphile to read Latin with him during recreation, and Pamphile, the kind of man who loved learning for its own sake, agreed. When he saw how seriously Damien was studying and how determined he was to learn, Pamphile approached the superiors of the seminary and asked that his brother be admitted as a candidate for the priesthood. Strangely they agreed, although they made his novitiate two months longer than anyone else's, just to be on the safe side.

Longing to be a missionary

Damien was happy as a seminarian. He took as his motto: 'Silence, recollection and prayer' - and to remember it better he carved it into the top of his desk with a knife.² Damien was enthusiastic but calm, and his superiors were won over by his modesty. He felt that the other seminarians were much more intelligent and spiritual than he was. Studying did not come easily to Damien. He was only an average student but he had great determination and perseverance. He prayed every day for the grace to become a missionary in front of a picture of St Francis Xavier, who was one of his heroes. Damien's novitiate photograph shows him standing in a pose very like the portraits of that saint.

The French that Damien had learned in Braine-le-Compt was put to good use when he was sent for a time to the order's motherhouse in Paris. There he made his profession on 7th October 1860. Part of the ceremony involved the candidate prostrating himself, covered in a black pall, before the altar, symbolising his free acceptance of death to the things of the world. This ceremony was later to take on an even deeper meaning for Damien. Damien liked being in Paris, though he was not so impressed by the promenading ladies and gentlemen and fashionable carriages, which he complained got in the way of his walks.

² Damien's family home is now a museum dedicated to the saint and the desk can be seen there.

In 1863 Pamphile was chosen as one of a group of missionary priests to go to Hawaii, at that time called the Sandwich Islands, but a few weeks before the group was to go he caught typhus and, although he survived, it was obvious that he would not be well enough to sail with the others. Remembering how his sister Pauline had felt called to take his sister Eugenie's place when Eugenie had died, Damien offered himself in Pamphile's place. He did not ask anyone's advice nor, believing he would be refused, did he ask the rector of the seminary. Instead he wrote directly to the Father General of the Congregation. In his letter he added that this would also mean the ticket money would not be wasted. To everyone's amazement, since Damien was not yet even ordained, the Father General agreed. However, the rector of the seminary made sure he berated Damien for his forwardness and recklessness before he told him he was allowed to go. Oddly, Francis Xavier too got a place on a ship when another missionary fell ill.

At this time the Hawaiian islands were an independent kingdom; they did not have a regular Catholic diocesan structure, but had been assigned as 'mission territory' to the Sacred Hearts Fathers. Protestant missionaries had arrived there in 1820 and there was a strong Mormon presence on the islands. There were numerous white settlers, most from the United States, many of whom had come to grow sugar cane.

Bound for Hawaii

Short of time before his ship left, Damien did not even stop to eat but made a brief visit to take leave of his family. He went with his mother and sister-in-law to the shrine of Our Lady of Montaigu, to ask her protection. He prayed that he could labour twelve years in the mission fields. In the event he was given double that. So, at the age of only twenty three, Damien left with the group of nine priests and ten missionary sisters to sail from Bremerhaven in Germany. From there he wrote to his parents: ‘Do not trouble yourselves in the least about us. We are in the hands of God... who has taken us under his protection. All I ask is that you pray for us to have a good voyage and that we may have the courage to fulfil our mission. This is our life. Good-bye, my dearest parents. We will never have the happiness of seeing one another again in this life but we will always be united by our love for one another and in our prayers.’³ The voyage to Hawaii was round Cape Horn as the Panama Canal had not yet been completed. It took five months, and most of the group spent all one hundred and forty six days being seasick. Damien spent it trying to convert the Protestant crew with no success at all.

On 19th March 1864, Damien arrived in the Hawaiian Islands, and a few months later, on 21st May

³ Although Damien did not expect to come back from Hawaii, he kept close links by letter.

1864, was ordained by Bishop Louis Maigret, the first vicar apostolic of the islands, in the Cathedral of Our Lady Queen of Peace in Honolulu, Oahu. He said his first Mass in the same cathedral. Damien and a companion, Fr Clement Evrard, were then to begin their lives as missionary priests on the island of Hawaii (after which the whole island group is now called). So, accompanied by Bishop Maigret, they boarded a steamer to make the journey. They stopped off at the island of Maui and then had to stay there longer than expected as the steamer caught fire. Damien did not want to waste any time so he received permission to go out to the villages to say Mass, hear confessions, and to preach. The latter he did in broken Hawaiian, which everyone was too polite to tell him was incomprehensible. When he returned from the villages he found that Bishop Maigret and Fr Clement had gone on ahead, so he sailed on alone, finally catching up with the bishop on 24th July in the parish that was to be his own.

Setting up parishes

As a parish priest, Damien was energetic and resourceful, supporting himself by farming, raising livestock and growing tobacco. He kept bees for honey and for wax to make the church candles. He found his parishioners enthusiastically Catholic except when they were being enthusiastically Presbyterian or Mormon or when they were

ill - then they called in the local sorcerer. He wrote to his brother: 'If only Providence had sent a Curé of Ars [St John Vianney] here, all the stray sheep would have returned to the fold... Pray that Fr Damien will give himself completely to God and devote himself to His service to his last breath. To have begun is nothing, the hard thing is to persevere. This is the work of God's grace. That grace will never fail me, I am sure of that, provided I do not resist it. Pray for me... Continue to pray for the conversion of unbelievers. It is probably to your fervent prayers that I owe the conversion of 40 to 50 pagans and heretics that I baptised this year.' Damien was a man of his era and he did not yet have an ecumenical spirit. He delighted in a kind of rivalry with the Protestant missionaries, whom he lumped together as 'heretics'. Once he heard that a local Protestant minister had climbed a 700m high cliff (almost 2297ft) in two hours so he ran up the same cliff in forty-five minutes. Fr Clement, meanwhile, who was not as robust as Damien, was finding his much larger parish, with an area of about 1600 sq km (about 618 sq miles), too difficult. They decided it would be more sensible to change over, and their superiors agreed.

Much of Fr Damien's life in his second parish reads like a Boys' Own adventure story. One of the villages he wanted to visit was so isolated that he decided the best way to get there would be by outrigger canoe across the sea. He set off with a few of his Hawaiian parishioners but after quite a short time the canoe capsized in the high

waves and he and the others found themselves in the water. He wrote home prosaically that they managed quite easily to swim back to shore as they held on to the capsized canoe, and each of them took turns to beat the sharks off with the paddles. Nothing was lost, but his breviary was damaged beyond repair by the salt water, which he regretted. He decided he needed to recover from this trip, and gave himself a week before setting off again. This time he went on foot, alone. He made the journey, which proved to be four days long, with a huge rucksack strapped on his back in which he carried a 'portable' altar which he had designed and made himself. He had to wade and swim through the sea at various points and then he came to a small mountain. He decided to climb it holding on precariously to plants and stones and in the process cutting his hands and feet on the sharp volcanic rock. When he reached the top he found himself looking down into a ravine with no sign of any village. He climbed down into the ravine and, since he had come that far, up the other side. By this time his boots had been ripped to bits and his hands and feet were torn and bleeding. On top of that, the rains had begun and his way was now further hampered by mud, sometimes waist deep. There was still no sign of a village, but Damien had been assured it was there so he started down the second ravine and then up the third mountain. It was now too late to go back, he decided. At the top of the third mountain he still

saw no sign of any village, even in the distance, but he started down into the next valley. There he collapsed with exhaustion and exposure and lay unconscious in the pouring rain. He would have died there had he not been found by the very villagers he was searching for. They revived him and he was so overjoyed at seeing them that he was soon able to walk to their village, which in fact was quite close by, although not visible from where he had collapsed. As soon as he had rested a little, he began to help with the work in the village, to the astonishment of those who had found him and thought him on the brink of death. He began to catechise and many of the villagers accepted his preaching. Before he left he helped the villagers build a church, 'not a sort of hut as most of our chapels are but... built entirely of wood.' He put a two metre-high cross on the top.

Catechising and building

His vitality, zeal for the proclamation of the gospel, and love of life were inspiring and exhausting. In the seven years he was in this parish he built four small churches with his own hands. 'I play the carpenter when necessary and have a good deal of work in painting and decorating my chapels. In general I have much bother and little consolation', he wrote, but he was in his element. This is not to say he did not have bad times. He found it hard to be so long without the sacrament of reconciliation - to

find another priest he had to make a journey of 100km (62 miles) - and he got very depressed by the level of drunkenness and the resulting casual sex amongst his parishioners. But he came to admire and respect the Hawaiians very much, writing to his brother that apart from the two evils of inconstancy and sexual incontinence, 'You could not wish for a better people, so gentle, pleasant and soft hearted... They do not seek to amass wealth... They are exceedingly hospitable and are ready to deprive themselves even of necessities in order to supply your every need if you should ask a night's shelter of them.' The Hawaiians (who, having no "d" in their alphabet, pronounced his name Kamiano) also liked him and he began to make many converts. He was, however, very careful not to baptise lightly.

Neither was everyone so welcoming of Christianity. On the islands there was a form of voodoo which kept many of Damien's parishioners in fear and at the mercy of its practitioners. Damien decided to discover who the members of this secret society were and to put a stop to it. Being Damien, he dealt with it head on. He had discovered an altar of this cult and destroyed it. Then he made a large cross by tying together two branches and drove it into the ground where an idol had stood. The next day he found a small bundle tied to his door. This was an evil spell, a curse. The whole village was watching, so he untied it from his door, carried it contemptuously over to

a large pig and tied it to its tail. By the evening the pig was dead, although it had been helped on its way by someone who had slit its throat. Damien butchered the carcass and cooked it, but no-one would share it with him. That night a woman warned him that his life was in danger. Damien did not wait for them to come to him. Returning to where he had seen the altar, he found the witchdoctor and many of the villagers. They had sacrificed a dog and were pouring out its blood. There on the altar was a doll dressed in a cassock with Damien's rosary round its neck. Damien rushed forward, grabbed the doll, pulled off its head and throwing it to the ground, stamped on it. Everyone waited for him to die but he did not. 'You are not children,' he said. 'Why are you afraid of dog's blood and a doll?'

After this, there was little opposition to him. He swept through the district with indefatigable energy, building, reforming, setting up schools and even getting help from the government to train Hawaiian women as teachers. Damien also survived a tsunami, a hurricane and a volcanic eruption. He wrote to his family that there was nothing like an erupting volcano to give you a good idea of hell. Despite his energy and zeal Damien knew that it was only God's hand which kept him safe. 'Do not forget, dear parents, to pray for me every day,' he wrote, 'there are so many dangers here for both soul and body.'

During these years on Hawaii, Damien had hoped that Pamphile would one day join him. The brothers often wrote to each other about that, and Pamphile had asked many times to be allowed to do so, but had never been given permission. Then he was offered and accepted a post at the diocesan seminary in Versailles. Damien was hurt and furious and wrote a bitter letter to Pamphile accusing him of not having the courage to be a real priest and of sacrificing the needs of the Hawaiians to a glittering career.⁴ The brothers became estranged over this and it lasted almost three years - probably so long because there was nothing like a postal service in Damien's parish and he had to depend on others passing by and going on to Honolulu in order to send a letter. But finally Damien was able to send a letter begging Pamphile's forgiveness, and the correspondence between them was resumed.

⁴ Pamphile finally came to Hawaii in 1895 (after Damien's death) but the 58 year old scholar was not suited to that kind of work and he left after a year.

Work in the Leper Colonies

A call to the leper colony

A few years after he had arrived in Hawaii, Damien wrote home: 'Leprosy is beginning to be very prevalent here. There are many men covered with it. It does not cause death at once but it is rarely cured. The disease is very dangerous because it is highly contagious.' It seems that leprosy first arrived in Hawaii with Chinese indentured labourers, brought there to work on the plantations. It spread rapidly amongst the Hawaiians, who were extremely hospitable, which to them meant being together all the time, eating from the same dish, wearing one another's clothes, smoking each other's pipes and so on.

By the mid-nineteenth century, as a result of increasing pressure from the white settlers on the islands, drastic measures were being taken to control the disease. King Kamehameha V signed an 'Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy' on 3rd January 1865. Lepers were to be quarantined and isolated from the rest of the population.⁵ Sufferers were to be sent to Molokai, one of the smaller islands, lying between Oahu and Maui. Its geography

⁵ These isolation laws were not abolished until 1969.

made it perfect for quarantine. It is about 65km long but only 12 wide (40 miles by $7\frac{1}{2}$) and slopes up from north to south, the land ending suddenly in a cliff that runs the whole breadth of the island. At the bottom of the cliff there is an area cut off from the rest of the island and surrounded on three sides by water. It was here, in this natural prison, that the lepers were to be segregated. Much of the area was in perpetual shadow from the cliff, the island being so near the equator that the sun did not move round in the sky. Water ran down the cliffs and the area was often cold and wet.

Enforcing the isolation laws was not an easy task for the authorities. The Hawaiians were averse to giving up their loved ones and often hid them until armed police were sent to drag them off forcibly. There was a great deal of resistance, and the police often ended up shooting as many people as they managed to round up. These were herded onto a ship which sailed to the south end of Molokai, where they were dumped in the shallow water off the island and left to wade ashore as best they could. Even children had to fend for themselves. At first it was decided that the lepers should be sent to Molokai not as patients but as settlers. This made economic sense, though no other kind of sense, and the first group, of nine men and three women, who reached there on 6th January 1866 were sent with farming tools and seeds. They were expected to be self-sufficient. It soon became clear that it was ridiculous

to expect people so disabled and sunk in despair as they were, to do this, so the scheme was abandoned. Patients were then given one set of clothes a year and minimal supplies, which were simply thrown into the water with the incoming new sufferers and left to be fought over. At first there were also a few badly constructed grass huts but later arrivals had to build their own shelters. There was a hospital building but no medical equipment, medicine or resident doctor. The Board of Health did send the occasional doctor but most of them were terrified to go anywhere near the lepers. One of them would only lift the patients' bandages with his walking stick; another just put the medicine on a table and left rapidly. In any case, the Hawaiians distrusted the white doctors and referred to the Board of Health as the Board of Death.

The lepers often had little care for each other either. A new patient was horrified at an incident he saw, 'A man... came out from the house that stood near the road. He was pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with a bundle, which at first I mistook for soiled rags. He wheeled it across the yard... The man then half turned over the wheelbarrow and shook it. The bundle (instead of rags it was a human being) rolled out on the ground with an agonised groan. The fellow turned the wheelbarrow round and wheeled it away, leaving the sick man lying there helpless'.

In the midst all this horror was a small wooden chapel dedicated to St Philomena (a saint the Curé of Ars had a

particular devotion to) where some of the Catholic leprosy sufferers would gather to pray, especially the rosary. This church had been built by a Sacred Hearts brother, Brother Bertrand, and a Hawaiian helper in 1872. There was also a small Congregational church which had been built a year earlier. In the past, three different priests had made short stays on the island, but the lepers felt they needed a full-time priest, and this was the request they put to the bishop.

An invitation

In 1873, Damien received an invitation from Bishop Maigret to the dedication of a new church in Wailuku on the island of Maui, and to greet a new group of priests who had just arrived on the islands. He did not take much with him as he did not expect to be away long. He was with the bishop when the letter from the lepers in Molokai arrived. Four priests volunteered to go, including Damien. He was under no illusions about what this meant. He later wrote: 'Monsignor Maigret declared that he would not impose this sacrifice on any of us. Remembering that on the day of my profession I had already put myself under the funeral pall, I offered myself to his lordship to meet, if he thought it well, this second death'. Damien asked that one of the newly arrived priests be sent to his parish and that he be allowed to go to the leper village which was called Kalawao. It was

decided that the four priests would serve there in rotation for periods of four months at a time. Damien was to be the first to go. He left with the bishop for Honolulu, and on their arrival there, they found that fifty lepers were being sent to Molokai that evening. It seemed the perfect opportunity. So the bishop and Damien sailed with them. Damien had no time to get any of his belongings, and went to Kalawao with only the clothes he was wearing, his breviary and an extra shirt. He arrived on Molokai just before dawn on 10th May 1873. The bishop landed with Damien and spoke to the lepers who had gathered round saying to them: 'I have brought someone to be a father to you; someone who loves you so much that... he does not hesitate to become one of you; to live and die for you.' He found no words to say to Damien but he laid his hands on Damien's head to bless him, then he had to get back on the boat. Damien was alone.

He went first to the church and at once set to work cleaning it. After some time, a man came and offered him some fruit and later another came with some flowers to decorate the church. He then saw a small group of people carrying a dead body and he took it upon himself to conduct a funeral - the first of very many. There was nowhere for him to live so he spent that night and the subsequent ones under a tree. He later said:

'By special providence of Our Lord, who during his life on earth showed a particular sympathy for the lepers, my

way was traced to Kalawao (Molokai)... I was then thirty-three years old and in robust good health... A great many lepers had lately arrived from the different islands; there were 816. Some were acquaintances of mine but to the majority I was a stranger... They were all living at Kalawao - about eighty of them in the hospital. All the others were living further towards the valley. They had cut down the puhala groves to build their houses though a great many of them had nothing but the branches of castor oil trees to construct their shelters. These frail frames were covered with sugar cane leaves or grass. I myself sheltered under the pandanus tree which is still in the church yard. Under these primitive roofs these unfortunate outcasts from society were living pell-mell without distinction of age or sex, old and new cases together, all virtual strangers to one another. They passed their time playing cards, dancing the hula and drinking home-made alcohol... Under the influence of this liquor they would neglect everything else except dancing and prostitution. Since they had no spiritual advisor they were hastening down the road to complete ruin. Many of those who were prostrated by the illness were left lying there to take care of themselves and some of them died for lack of help while those who could have helped were going around searching for enjoyment of the most immoral kind.'

When Damien arrived in Kalawao the average life expectancy for a leper, once he or she arrived in the settlement, was four years. About fourteen new sufferers arrived every week, and there were four to five deaths in the same period.

Early work and reputation

In the outside world, Damien became controversial as soon as he landed on Molokai. A Honolulu newspaper wrote that he was permanent chaplain to the lepers (this was news both to the civil authorities and to his superiors) and called him a Christian hero. As soon as Fr Damien heard this he wrote to ask his provincial if he could in fact be made permanent chaplain and since he was also always practical, he asked in the same letter for altar wine and hosts, spiritual books, clothes, flour and a bell. Another article appeared in the *Honolulu Advertiser*, this time about his living under a pandanus tree and donations started coming in from all the Hawaiian islands (mainly from Protestants) which allowed him to build himself a hut about 5m long and 3m wide (17ft by 10). All this acclaim galled the Protestant missionaries, and they began to write their own articles about Protestant ministers who had visited Molokai. It also annoyed the Board of Health whose authorisation for Damien to stay on the island had not been requested.

Damien, meanwhile had begun his ministry. He visited the bedridden, hearing confessions, administering Extreme Unction⁶ and washing and bandaging their sores. He did not find this easy at first. The sight and above all the smell of lepers' decaying flesh turned his stomach, and he often had to rush out of the shelters and vomit. The first time he administered Extreme Unction on the island he was horrified: when he came to anoint the man's feet he found them already full of maggots. He began to smoke a pipe continuously to overcome the smell. He wore boots because he suffered a psychosomatic itch on his legs when he was with the patients, and he suffered terrible headaches from the stress. Even in celebrating the Mass he found great difficulty. He fought to overcome his nausea in the crowded church by thinking of Christ at the tomb of Lazarus. Gradually, though, he became more used to it. Later, visitors were always amazed at his tenderness and skill as he looked after the lepers.

It was not until he had been on Molokai for six months that he found time to write to his brother: 'I have been here six months and I have not caught the infection. I consider this due to the special protection of God and of the Blessed Virgin. Leprosy is incurable... Discoloured patches appear on the skin, especially on the cheeks and

⁶ Sacrament of the Sick, at that time only given to the dying.

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