

Four Lessons in Compassionate Leadership from St. Marianne Cope²

A woman ahead of her time. A healer of body, mind, and soul.

Lesson 1: Lead with presence, not position

Saint Marianne didn't lead from a pedestal; she led by being fully present with the people she served. Even as an administrator, she could be scrubbing hospital floors or sitting at the bedside of someone dying. She embodied the Franciscan belief that true leadership begins in humble service.

Lesson 2: Say yes, even to the hard things

When others turned away in fear, Saint Marianne accepted the call to care for people with Hansen's disease in Hawaii. She showed us that one's comfort doesn't come from avoiding others' pain but meeting it with courage and compassion.

Lesson 3: Care for the whole person

She was a pioneer in holistic care long before the term existed. She saw her patients as whole people: mind, body, and spirit. She prioritized cleanliness, dignity, art, beauty, and laughter as essential parts of healing.

Lesson 4: Build bridges, not barriers

Often surrounded by discrimination, she advocated for those in the margins of society. She stood behind immigrants, nurtured the poor and the sick, and offered compassion to those facing mental illness. Saint Marianne reminds us that inclusive leadership grounded in love has the power to transform entire systems.

What can we learn from her today? Lead with love. Ask boldly: Who are the outcasts of today, and how can we show up for them?

Compassion doesn't just mean caring for those who are excluded but actively seeking them out. In Marianne's footsteps, we are called to confront modern stigma, recognize all suffering, and advocate for those the world forgets.

Prayer: *Saint Marianne, you were a martyr in spirit, laying down your life for those in need of your love and affection. You embraced the outcast wholeheartedly with joy and gratitude. Please pray for me, that I, too, may trust in our Lord in all things. Saint Marianne, pray for me.*

Socials with the Saints

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Sources include: 1. Vatican.va, 2. SaintMarianne.org 3. FranciscanMedia.org 4. NPS.gov
5. ImagesOfOldHawaii.com 6. Prayer based on prayer by MyCatholic.Life

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St. Marianne Cope Religious Sister, Missionary

Born: 23 Jan. 1838 in West Germany

Died: 9 Aug. 1918, Hawaii

Patronage: Outcasts, Leprosy (Hansen's disease)

Feast Day: Jan. 23

Canonized: 12 Oct. 2012, by Pope Benedict XVI

Barbara Koob was born to farmer Peter Koob and his wife, Barbara's namesake. The year after her birth, the family emigrated to the United States and settled in Utica, New York state. There, they became members of St. Joseph Parish, and the children attended the parochial school. Like the names of many other immigrants at the time, the Koob name was Americanized, to Cope.

Peter fell ill, which left Barbara, the oldest child at home, with a responsibility to help provide for the family. Although in her heart she felt called to religious life, she worked in a factory after completing eighth grade to bring in extra income.

In 1862, her father died. Barbara entered the Sisters of St. Francis in Syracuse, New York, at the age of 24. A few months later, she received the religious habit and the name Sister Marianne. She professed vows the following year, and began serving as a teacher and principal in several elementary schools in New York State.

Intelligent and gifted in working with people, Sister Marianne saw her outreach expand into healthcare, as she participated in the establishment of two of the first hospitals in Central New York State. In 1870, she began a new ministry as a nurse-administrator at St. Joseph's Hospital in Syracuse. Her acceptance of "outcast" patients such as alcoholics was criticized, yet she became well-known and loved "for her kindness, wisdom and down-to-earth practicality."¹

In 1883, Mother Marianne, now the Provincial Mother in Syracuse, received a letter from a Catholic priest asking for help in managing hospitals and schools in the Hawaiian Islands, and mainly to work with leprosy patients. The letter touched Mother Marianne's heart and she enthusiastically

responded: “I am hungry for the work and I wish with all my heart to be one of the chosen ones, whose privilege it will be to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the souls of the poor Islanders.... I am not afraid of any disease, hence, it would be my greatest delight even to minister to the abandoned ‘lepers’.”¹ Fifty other Congregations received the same plea for assistance, but only Mother Marianne, in the name of her Sisters, responded positively.

What was then known popularly as leprosy is now called Hansen’s disease, a chronic bacterial disease affecting the skin and nervous system, including sores and damage to the skin, nerves, and particularly the eyes. At its worst, the disease can leave a person disfigured and disabled, eventually resulting in death when the body can no longer fight other illness.

Hawaiians, having lived for generations on islands, were particularly vulnerable to the disease. Many sick people were shamed, and thought to be punished by God. Some were disowned by their families. The Kingdom of Hawai’i confined patients in leper colonies to prevent further spread.

By November 1883, when Mother Marianne and six other Sisters of St. Francis arrived in Honolulu, a cure had not yet been discovered. They began managing the Kaka’ako Branch Hospital on Oahu, the receiving station for patients from all over the islands. The Sisters thoroughly cleaned the facility and began caring for 200 patients. “By 1885, they had made major improvements to the living conditions and treatment of the patients.”¹

In January 1884, Mother Marianne met Fr. Damien de Veuster for the first time, when he appeared to be in good health. Father Damien later became Saint Damien of Molokai, known as “Apostle to Lepers” for his own voluntary efforts of spiritual and material care for those exiled with leprosy. After he began to show visible signs of and was diagnosed with the disease in 1886, Mother Marianne heard that he had become an outcast to Church and government officials. She alone went to provide hospitality for him.

In 1887, a new Hawaiian government decided to reinforce the old alienation policy, closing Oahu Hospital and receiving station. Mother Marianne moved to the leper settlement at Kalaupapa, Molokai island. Surrounded by ocean on three sides and a 2,000 foot cliff on the fourth, the land seemed to form a natural ‘prison.’ By the time the sisters had received permission to travel to Kalaupapa, thousands of people had been brought there and died. Together with Sr. Leopoldina Burns and Sr. Vincentia McCormick, Mother Marianne assured Fr. Damien—now just months away from his own death—that she would look after his beloved people.

In addition to bringing professional hospital care and infection control procedures to the settlement, the Sisters brought a woman’s touch. They improved patients’ quality of life by treating them with dignity and respect, and by creating a meaningful and supportive community environment. Music, flowers, instruments, dresses, lace, and games provided not only a beautiful and fulfilling atmosphere, but also a sense of hope to all those dealing with death on a daily basis. Mother Marianne gave bright scarves and pretty dresses to the women, encouraging a healthy pride and fun.

The three Sisters also ran the Bishop Home for 103 Girls and the Home for Boys. In all, their workload was extreme, and the burden at times felt overwhelming. In one difficult moment, Sr. Leopoldina prayed: “How long, O Lord, must I see only those who are sick and covered with leprosy?”

Mother Marianne provided eternal optimism, serenity and trust in God, which inspired hope in those around her and dispelled the Sisters’ fear of catching leprosy. She taught her Sisters that their primary duty was “to make life as pleasant and as comfortable as possible for those of our fellow creatures whom God has chosen to afflict with this terrible disease...”¹ Her deep faith and spirit of self-sacrifice enabled her to live among and minister to people with Hansen’s disease for 35 years. She died of natural causes on August 9, 1918, and was buried on the grounds of Bishop Home.

Sisters of St. Francis followed in her footsteps by continuing to provide loving care to people with Hansen’s disease and their families at Kalaupapa, Molokai. To this day, no sister contracted the disease, as Mother Marianne promised the first sisters. The Sisters have attracted vocations among the Hawaiian people, and live in Hawaii to this day, along with other missions.

Mother Marianne and the Sisters initiated hygiene standards and patients’ rights practices not seen before in the United States. “*Dignity and Respect for All*” has remained a theme at St. Joseph’s Hospital for 150 years. Surely, Saint Marianne watches over the hospital and Syracuse, New York. Awarded the Royal Order of Kapiolani by the Hawaiian government and celebrated in a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson, Marianne Cope’s life was one of profound faith and love which bore fruit in a missionary spirit of immense hope and trust, dedicating herself wholeheartedly to spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Her remains were returned to Syracuse in 2005, and she was beatified that year. She was canonized seven years later. In 2014, her body was returned to Hawaii, where the Honolulu cathedral has enshrined the mortal remains of both St. Marianne and St. Damien. *Saint Marianne Cope, pray for us!*

Learn more about St. Marianne Cope at SaintMarianne.org.