

## St. Damien of Molokai *Priest & Apostle to the Lepers*

**Born:** 3 January 1840 (Belgium) | **Died:** 15 April 1889 (Molokai, Hawaii)  
**Feast Day:** May 10 | **Canonized:** 11 October 2009 by Benedict XVI



Born Jozef de Veuster to a Catholic family on a Belgian farm, he entered religious life at the age of 20 after three of his siblings had taken religious vows. He took the name Damien after a sixth-century martyr. While still in seminary, he volunteered for missionary work – going in the place of his brother who had been ordered to serve in Hawaii. He arrived in Honolulu on the feast day of St. Joseph, and two months later was ordained a priest at the age of 23.

Leprosy as a disease was not understood at this time. In order to contain its rapid spread in Hawaii, the government had established a colony on the Kalaupapa Peninsula where lepers were sent.

After Fr. Damien had served on the Big Island of Hawaii for 10 years, he attended a church dedication in Maui and heard that the bishop was looking for priests and volunteers to serve the leper colony. Father Damien accepted the challenge, planning to join the schedule of rotation of priests and volunteers. But after beginning his ministry there, he grew to love the people so much that he requested and received permission to remain permanently at Molokai among the lepers.

Generally speaking, leprosy or Hansen's Disease as it is now known, involves the rotting of the body. Those who suffer from the disease usually cannot use their hands or legs, and death is frequent. Because of these factors, with lepers unable to bury the dead, wild pigs would often feast on the corpses. Father Damien dug hundreds and hundreds of graves, cleaned and bandaged the lepers' wounds, built homes, brought order to the colony and gave protection to the children who were without parents. He often wrote letters advocating with government officials for the better treatment of and conditions for the lepers.

Now, a quality about Father Damien's personality was that he had a very delicate conscience, and he had frequented the Sacrament of Confession before going to Molokai. After a time, the Board of Health forbade any priest to visit Molokai to hear Father Damien's confession.

About 8 months since his last confession, the Bishop sent a priest to hear Damien's confession; the two priests were on separate ships. Father Damien was so excited, he rowed out to the other priest's ship. Permission from the captain was asked to let Father Damien aboard, but he refused, saying he would order his men to fire on the priest should he attempt to board – even though at this time Father Damien did not have leprosy. Instead, kneeling in his bobbing canoe, Fr. Damien shouted his confession in French to the priest who stood at the ship's railing, with curious crewmembers surrounding. You can imagine how humiliating this must have felt for Father Damien – his personal confession was like entertainment for the ship's crew!



Years later, Fr. Damien contracted Hansen's disease, and while traveling back from a hospital by ship, he heard a man offer to share a glass of wine with him. He was surprised to see the captain who had once threatened to shoot him – that very humiliating day years ago. The captain asked forgiveness, saying that he had never forgotten how he had placed Fr. Damien in such a position. He told the leprous priest that he was the bravest man he'd ever known. Not only did Fr. Damien forgive the captain, but he blessed him.

Father Damien of Molokai was finally able to identify himself with the people he served, using the phrase, "We lepers." Like Jesus, he had entered into the pain of outcast people and helped them to see themselves as beloved, valued, with lives worth living. Father Damien pursued peace among the people of Molokai, but also acted as their advocate when no one else cared for their suffering. In the end, we see that he forgave even the person who had threatened his life and put him in one of the most humiliating situations he ever experienced. Fr. Damien found

Jesus' peace by making peace with humiliation; he gave his entire self out of love for the people who needed love.

*St. Damien of Molokai, pray for us; that we would pursue peace within our own hearts, prepared and ready to receive the gift of God's love, the Holy Spirit, so as to live with Jesus' peace.*