

# Our Newest Saint

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On October 11, Pope Benedict XVI will be canonizing a new saint: Saint Damien of Molokai. Father Damien was born Joseph de Veuster in Tremeloo, Belgium, on January 3, 1840. In 1860 he joined the Contemplative Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary.

After regular work in a parish in Belgium, he heard about the Hawaiian island of Molokai where incurable lepers were sent. He followed the Lord's call to serve as a missionary and left his home to take the love of Jesus to the people of Molokai. With his creative imagination Father Damien brought new breath of hope to these people who were living without hope. At the same time he studied new ways of treating lepers. He also offered a context of celebration; he encouraged festivity to provide Christian joy in the midst of horrific illness.

In his work, Father Damien sought to restore in each leper a sense of personal worth and dignity. He encouraged lepers to help him in all his activities. With their assistance he built everything from coffins to cottages; he constructed the rectory and built a home for the lepers' children. Damien continued to minister to the sick, bringing the sacraments of confession and Holy Communion and anointing bedridden lepers. He washed their bodies, bandaged their wounds and tidied their rooms and beds. He did all he could to make them as comfortable as possible and created in Molokai a place for them to live and not just a place to die.

In 1888, the Englishman Edward Clifford visited Damien in Molokai and later wrote, *"I had gone to Molokai expecting to find it scarcely less dreadful than hell itself, and the cheerful people, the lovely landscapes, and comparatively painless life were all surprises. These poor people seemed singularly happy."* Clifford asked lepers if they missed not being back home and their response was, *"Oh, no! We're well off here. The government watches over us, the superintendent is good, and we like our pastor. He builds our houses himself and gives us tea, biscuits, sugar and clothes. He takes good care of us and doesn't let us want for anything."*

When Damien entered into his life at Molokai, he made a decision. He believed that these people were sick and suffering and he had to show them Christ's love, regardless of the price. Somewhere during the first part of his stay he made the decision to set aside his fear of contracting leprosy. He cleaned and bandaged their wounds and sores; he embraced them and he dined with them. He placed the host upon their battered mouths. He put his thumb on their foreheads when he anointed them with the holy oil. Six months after his arrival at Kalawao he wrote his brother in Europe: *"I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ. That is why, in preaching, I say, 'we lepers', not 'my brethren...'"*

Father Damien contracted leprosy and eventually died of its complications. As requested, he was buried in Kalaupapa, but in 1936 the Belgian government succeeded in having his body moved to Belgium. Part of Damien's body was returned to his beloved Hawaiian brothers and sisters after his beatification by Pope John Paul II in 1995. When Hawaii became a state in 1959, it selected Damien as one of its two representatives in the Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol.

When Joseph de Veuster was born in Tremelo, Belgium, few people in Europe had any firsthand knowledge of leprosy. By the time he died at the age of 49, people all over the world knew about this disease because of him. He is a wonderful example of the loving gift of self, offered in love regardless of the cost in our own lives. And with his canonization, many more people will come to know about his love and service in the name of Jesus Christ. St. Damien of Molokai, pray for us!