

encounter

Lent

Encounter ourselves.
Encounter our neighbors.
Encounter our God.



St. Damien De Veuster of Moloka'i:

Servant of God, Servant of Humanity

Saint Damien was born Jezef De Veuster, January 3, 1840 in Tremelo, Belgium and died April 15, 1889 in Kalawaoa, Moloka'i, Hawaii. At the age of 20, he joined the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and took the religious name Damien. Three years of daily prayer were answered when Damien was sent to Hawaii as a missionary in 1864. After two short months, he was ordained a priest of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace, Honolulu.

At this time, Hansen's disease (leprosy) was widespread and thought to be highly contagious. The Hawaiian legislature passed the Act to Prevent the Spread of Leprosy in 1865, effectively quarantining all Hawaiian leprosy patients to settlement colonies at Kalaupapa and Kalawao on Moloka'i. Fr Damien bravely volunteered to go and care for the 600 to 800 patients living there.

In his primary role as a pastor, Fr. Damien cared for the spiritual needs of his flock. Additionally, he led the settlement communities in building a reservoir, homes, orphanages, furniture and coffins. He dug graves, dressed ulcers, cared for the sick, organized schools and farms, enforced laws and taught farming, music and singing. Fr. Damien restored dignity and joy to the lives of leprosy patients in the Kalaupapa and Kalawao settlements. In 1885, it became apparent that Fr. Damien had contracted leprosy. Nevertheless, he continued caring for patients until he succumbed to the disease himself in 1889.

Fr. Damien was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on Sunday, October 11, 2009. Damien is the unofficial patron saint for people living with HIV/AIDS. A relic—a part of bone from St. Damien's foot—is enshrined in the Cathedral Basilica of Our Lady of Peace, Honolulu.

In recognition of the humanitarian aid Fr. Damien so faithfully rendered to the resident-patients at the Kalawao Settlement on Moloka'i, Princess Regent Liliuokalani bestowed the Knight Commander Cross of the Royal Order of Kalakaua on Reverend Damien De Veuster, SS.CC, on September 20, 1881. There is a statue of St. Damien in the U.S. Congress and another in front of the State Legislature of Hawaii in Honolulu.

This write-up is courtesy of the Diocese of Honolulu. To learn more, visit the History section of the Diocese of Honolulu Cathedral website www.cathedralofourladyofpeace.com and the Catholic Essentials—Saints section of the Diocese of Honolulu website www.catholichawaii.org.