



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

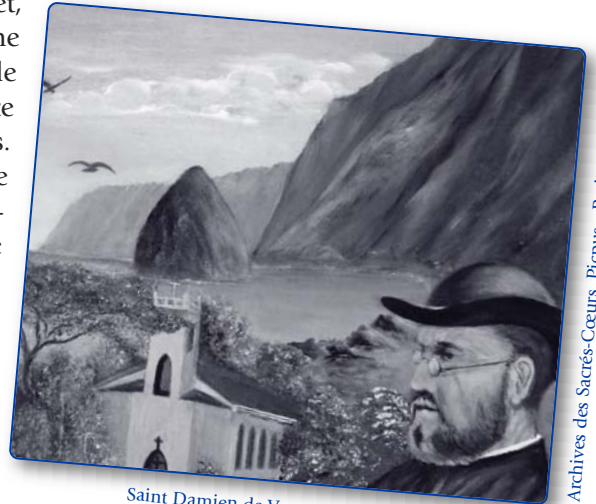
Newsletter of July 31, 2010,  
Saint Ignatius of Loyola

**Dears Friends,**

**I**N May 1873, the apostolic vicar of Hawaii, Bishop Maigret, shared with some of his priests the concern he had about the state of neglect the lepers were suffering. Since 1864, the terrible scourge of leprosy had been spreading in the archipelago. In the face of the danger, the government had decided to quarantine the lepers. "It presents a situation that troubles me greatly. I am thinking above all about those poor lepers, so many of whom die each year without the opportunity to purify their souls before they appear before God, and who have, during their lives, no moral support in their trials." — "But Bishop," Father Aubert replied, "all you need to do is appoint one of us to become their pastor, and you will be immediately obeyed!" The priests were unanimous—all of them were ready to go. One of them, Father Damien de Veuster, said in a firm voice: "Bishop, given that at my religious profession a funeral pall was placed over me as a sign that a willingness to die is the principle of a new life, I am ready to be buried alive with these poor wretches, many of whom I know personally." — "How old are you?" — "Thirty-three." — "The age Our Lord was at the hour of the cross," replied the bishop.

## A live wire

**T**he man who, at his canonization on October 11, 2009 would become Saint Damien, was born on January 3, 1840 in Tremelo, in Flemish Brabant (Belgium). Baptized the same day, he received the name Joseph. His father owned a farm and ran a grain business, which allowed his large family (eight children) to live in relative comfort. In this Christian home, in which four of the children would enter religious life, there was no deviating from the commandments of God and the Church—even sewing was forbidden on Sunday. On that day, the entire family went to the parish church for Mass and Vespers. During the week, the day was punctuated by family prayer; in the evenings, the lives of the saints were read. Joseph, the second youngest, possessed a healthy constitution and soon became the live wire of the household—his high spirits in games earned him a reputation as a daredevil. Intrepid and always in motion, he nevertheless had a real inclination toward meditation. One day when the family was searching everywhere for him, his mother found her seven-year-old Joseph in church, deep in prayer. His teacher considered him very intelligent, but his parents intended him for agriculture, so at the age of thirteen, Joseph left school to work on the farm.



Saint Damien de Veuster in Molokai

Archives des Sacrés-Cœurs, Picpus - Paris

In 1858, he attended a parish mission preached by the Redemptorist Fathers in Braine-le-Comte. It was during this retreat that his vocation was set. "You know," he wrote to his parents, "that each of us must choose the state in life that God has predestined us for, in order to be eternally happy. This is why you must not be distressed over my vocation." He chose the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, in which one of his brothers had already given himself to God. This religious family, founded in 1800 by Father Coudrin, had begun in France, and spread out from the motherhouse on Rue de Picpus in Paris. In 1825, the Holy See had entrusted it with the evangelization of eastern Oceania. The following year, a group of missionaries embarked for the Hawaiian Islands. In 1840, the monastery in Louvain was opened to receive missionary vocations from Belgium, Holland, and Germany. It was there that Joseph joined his eldest brother on February 2, 1859. Coming from a primary school without studying Latin, he was received as a simple brother and took the name "Damien". But God had other plans for him. The novice taught himself Latin in six months, and demonstrated such an interest in and facility for study that the superior accepted him as a student novice. On October 7, 1860, in Paris, Brother Damien made his perpetual vows. Prostrated on the flagstones of the chapel, he was covered by a funeral pall as a sign of his death to his former life, so as to be born to a new life, that of Christ. This rite, perhaps surprising today, marked him for life,

and opened for him the path of total gift of self. First in Paris and then in Louvain, he studied seriously and with persistence. In 1863, his brother, was about to board for Oceania but was forced by illness to give up his plans. Damien seized the opportunity and asked the Superior General for permission to go in his place, even though he was far from having completed his formation.

### Looking for the lost sheep

On October 30, he was part of a group of missionaries embarking for the Hawaiian Islands. The ship arrived at the port of Honolulu on the feast of Saint Joseph, March 19, 1864. Ordained a priest the following May 21, Father Damien was assigned to the district of Puna, where there was no shortage of apostolic work. For eight years, it had had no resident priest. On foot and horseback, he eagerly sought out lost sheep. Soon everyone knew Kamiano ("Damien" in Hawaiian). He wrote to his brother that his desire was "to possess the pure love of God, the ardent zeal for the salvation of souls that burned in the Curé d'Ars [St. Jean-Marie Vianney]... Our poor islanders," he continued, "consider themselves very lucky when they see Kamiano coming. As for me, I love them very much, I would gladly give my life for them, as Our Divine Savior did." In March 1865, Kamiano experienced a heartbreak even greater than separation from his family—he had to leave his Christians. A confrère whose health was declining was no longer able to manage the vast Kohala mission alone. Father Damien agreed to switch ministries with him—alone, he would have to do a job that would take ten missionaries to do. His robust constitution allowed him to achieve quick results. He formed solid Christian communities, organized houses of prayer, preached, heard confessions, visited the sick, and made himself architect, carpenter, and mason, building churches and schools himself. He reached the most inaccessible areas by climbing dangerous cliffs, and several times almost drowned in perilous crossings. The missionary's energy galvanized the courage of his flock, which was threatened by temptations on all sides—the trickery of witch doctors, the instability of marriages, general loose morals and, among the good, laziness in prayer. "These are the weapons of hell that cause the very best to fall," he wrote on December 22, 1866. These years were a preparation for the heroic mission that was in store for Father Damien.

During his visits to the villages, Kamiano discovered increasing numbers of natives suffering from leprosy. In 1865, the government decreed that lepers be quarantined. They were sent, willingly or by force, to the leper colony established on the peninsula of Kalawao, on the northern tip of the island of Molokai. It was a desolate strip of land, 17 square kilometers, hemmed in by a nearly inaccessible coastline on one side, and a chain of steep mountains on the other. A government committee was assigned to oversee Kalawao, but in reality, the fear

of leprosy and the administration's usual negligence made it a lawless area. The government provided the recluses with food and clothing, but they had no shelter other than several miserable huts, where the lepers vegetated in sordid promiscuity. To leprosy, which hideously eats away the flesh, were added all the physical and moral miseries of those who are in the grip of despair and idleness. Most were pagans—among them every imaginable depravity seethed, sharpened by the prospect of an impending death in cruel suffering. They got drunk, forcing the women to prostitute themselves; their orgies took place before the altars of the goddess Laka, the Venus of the Hawaiians. The Christian lepers, too, had trouble resisting being carried away by passion. This situation weighed on many consciences. But what was the remedy for the epidemic? Bishop Maigret was concerned about a small group of Catholics who had been sent to Molokai. He had a chapel dedicated to Saint Philomena built on the site. Several priests took turns staying there for several days at a time. It was a start. But these short visits were few and far between. The newspapers underscored how inadequate they were: "What the lepers need right now is a faithful minister of the Gospel and a doctor willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of this unfortunate community."

Since 1865, Kamiano had helplessly watched the horrifying spread of the scourge that was decimating his people. For the lepers, to the ordeal of the disease was added the even greater ordeal of being torn from their families and villages, with no hope of return. Father Damien promised to visit those who were brought to him, and accompanied them on their way as far as he could. So it was in full knowledge of the facts that on May 4, 1873, he readily went to join the lepers.

### A journey of hope

In his encyclical *Spe salvi*, issued November 30, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI enlightens us on the relationship between suffering and compassion: "[T]he individual cannot accept another's suffering unless he personally is able to find meaning in suffering, a path of purification and growth in maturity, a journey of hope. Indeed, to accept the 'other' who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also. Because it has now become a shared suffering, though, in which another person is present, this suffering is penetrated by the light of love. The Latin word *con-solatio*, 'consolation', expresses this beautifully. It suggests being with the other in his solitude, so that it ceases to be solitude ...

"Bernard of Clairvaux coined the marvelous expression: 'Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis—God cannot suffer, but He can suffer with'. Man is worth so much to God that He Himself became man in order to suffer with man in an utterly real way—in flesh and blood—as is revealed to us in the account of JESUS' Passion. Hence in all human suffering we are joined by

One Who experiences and carries that suffering with us; hence 'con-solatio' is present in all suffering, the consolation of God's compassionate love—and so the star of hope rises" (nos. 38 and 39).

### *Live and die with you*

**F**ather Damien, accompanied by his bishop, landed at Kalawao on May 10, with his breviary his only baggage. Many of the able-bodied lepers came to greet the prelate and the young thirty-three-year-old missionary. "Until now, my children," Bishop Maigret told them, "you were alone and abandoned—but no longer. Here is a man who will be a father to you. His love for you is so great that, for your good and the salvation of your immortal souls, he does not hesitate to become one of you and asks to live and die with you." The lepers were unable to hide their emotion. The bishop embraced his priest, blessed him, and left him to his heroic and super-human task. It was difficult at first—at night, his only shelter was a tree close to the chapel. The sight of the lepers and the foul odor given off by their rotting limbs were the most painful to endure, but, he wrote, "They have souls redeemed by the Blood of our Divine Savior. If I cannot cure them like Our Savior, at least I can console them." He took up their cause in the name of Christ. From the start, he identified with these poor wretches: "I am making myself a leper among lepers," he confided. "When I preach, I'm used to saying: 'We lepers...' May I win them all for Christ!" Kamiano's presence gave these abandoned men and women—800 of them when he arrived—a glimmer of hope. Each week, he made the rounds to every hut, with no distinction between believers and nonbelievers, Protestants and Catholics. To save their souls, he cared for their bodies, and sought to win their trust. By turns nurse, carpenter, engineer, gravedigger, lawyer, and bandmaster, Father Damien would stop at nothing for the good of the lepers.

His heroism sparked a veritable contagion of generosity. The Protestants competed with the Catholics, and sizeable gifts flowed in to Molokai. The newspapers unanimously praised the Belgian priest. A German Protestant journalist wrote, "Only one Catholic priest has entered into this leprous hell. He lives among these dying men and women, these hopeless ones, to bring them the consolations of eternal life." This praise did not sit well with the board of hygiene, headquartered in Honolulu—they frowned upon this Catholic priest's decision to settle in Molokai. Did his tireless activity imply that the board's actions were inadequate? Access to the island was forbidden to all but lepers. Father Damien became a prisoner, because he had been forbidden to leave this hole. It was hoped that this measure would discourage him and cause him to abandon his post. What pained him the most was that this prohibition kept him from going to confession. But it was revoked after several months, thanks to a change in administration.

Where the law of the jungle had prevailed only yesterday, now blossomed a community where the last was the first! Kamiano discovered that for the seed of the Gospel to sprout, it needed the support of the human virtues—the whole man must be raised up. Christ Himself came near lepers to cure their bodies and give them once again the desire to live. Kamiano's cheerfulness and loving presence enabled him to do this: "From morning to night, I am in the midst of physical and mental sufferings that drown the heart. Nevertheless, I try to appear cheerful at all times, so as to boost the spirits of my invalids" (December 17, 1874). Driven by the desire to alleviate their sufferings, Father Damien also took an interest in advances in science and, when he himself was stricken with the disease, experimented with new treatments. In 1884, sixteen years after a first visit, an American professor passing through Molokai could not believe his eyes. The muckheap had become two beautiful villages of white houses surrounded by flourishing gardens and crops, with access roads and water pipes. There was a hospital where the most seriously ill were well cared for, orphanages filled with happy children, two churches packed with the faithful, and a beautiful cemetery. Feast days, magnificent processions, and horse races were the occasion for celebrations of all sorts, made all the more lively by a brass band. Only love given in humble service is capable of making the deserts of humanity flourish again.

"Father Damien," John Paul II would say during the beatification Mass in 1995, "was at the same time priest, religious, and missionary. Through these three qualities, he revealed the face of Christ, showing the path of salvation, teaching the Gospel and working tirelessly for development. He organized religious, social, and fraternal life on Molokai, at the time an island of banishment from society; with him everyone had a place, each was recognized and loved by his brothers and sisters."

### *Father Damien's secret*

**W**hat was the source of this love and strength that gave birth to so many wonderful initiatives? Following the example of his founder, Father Coudrin, his heart beat in unison with the Hearts of JESUS and MARY, taking on their feelings, their joys and sorrows. But most of all, he gave himself completely to the Heart of JESUS in Eucharistic adoration. "Without the continuous presence of our Divine Master in my poor chapel," Father Damien noted, "I would not have been able to persevere in my resolve to share the lepers' fate." He drew his life from the Eucharist. "Having Our Lord at my side, I continue to be cheerful and happy at all times, and work zealously for the good of these poor wretches." This is why he instituted perpetual adoration in Kalawao as soon as he could. "Every day," a witness recounted, "the good Christians seek relief from their sufferings from the Divine Consoler of all who suffer. They do yet more, offering themselves as victims in reparation for

the insults against the Divine Hearts made by ungrateful children upon whom the benefits of Christian civilization have been lavished."

Father Damien's path was fraught with difficulties, sometimes exacerbated by his impetuosity, which he nevertheless strived to keep in check, fixing his eyes on God. His days began with prayer. He never ceased praying his rosary; prayer had become his soul's breathing, and he remained continually in the presence of God. His trust in Him was unshakable: "From the beginning," he wrote, "I entrusted the matter of my health to Our Lord, to His Blessed Mother and to Saint Joseph." In sharing the life of the lepers, he exposed himself to the risk of contagion. From 1876 on, he referred to the time "when the Lord would want to give me the gift of this terrible leprosy."

### *A leper among lepers*

**D**id Father Damien take all necessary health precautions? Early on, he put aside the strict constraints. Here it was impossible to apply the rules that would be observed in a hospital. How could he be a Father to these poor people without coming near them, touching them, accepting their invitations, eating with his hands from the dish the family shared? In short, he had chosen to live with them to save them. As Benedict XVI said during his canonization, "Thus he was exposed to the disease from which they suffered. He felt at home with them. The servant of the Word consequently became a suffering servant, a leper with the lepers, for the last four years of his life."

The thought of death did not frighten him—stationed at the frontier of his land of exile, he lived on the edge of eternity. "The cemetery and the hut of the dying" he said, "are my most beautiful books of meditation." By

1885, he had already buried 1,800 of his brother and sister lepers, an average of three a week. He had cared for them, heard their confessions, and been at their sides during their death agonies, as though they were his own children. Father Damien then detected the first signs of leprosy on his body. In October, he informed his Provincial about it: "There is no longer any doubt about it—I am a leper. Praised be the Good Lord!" To his bishop he wrote: "I have faced the danger of contracting this terrible disease by doing my work here and trying to die ever more to myself. As the disease progresses, I am happy and at peace." To this terrible physical deterioration that he, once so vigorous, would suffer, was added the anguish of loneliness, his superiors' lack of understanding, and slander ... Yet Father Damien, already disfigured by leprosy, was not disheartened, "but always cheerful and smiling," in the words of a witness. "He is joyful in spite of everything, and one is joyful around him." In 1887 he wrote to his brother in the congregation: "The joy and contentment of heart that the Sacred Hearts are lavishing upon me make me think myself the happiest missionary in the world." In 1888, Father Damien had the pleasure of being joined by a second Belgian missionary, Father Conrardy. That same year, three Franciscan nuns came to live in the leper colony. This was the culmination of fifteen years' work. God granted Father Damien, in the evening of his life, the consolation of seeing that others would continue the work he had begun. The disease soon worsened, attacking his internal organs. On March 9, 1889, Father Damien ascended to the altar for the last time. At the end of March, he became unable to leave his room, and declared, "This is the end. The Lord is calling me to celebrate Easter with Him." On Holy Thursday, April 15, 1889, at the age of 49, after having spent sixteen years serving the lepers, he passed away with a smile, having received the sacraments of the Church, like a child falling asleep in his Mother's arms.

During the canonization of Father Damien, Pope Benedict XVI said, "Following in St Paul's footsteps, St. Damien prompts us to choose the good warfare (cf. 1 Tim 1: 18), not the kind that brings division but the kind that gathers people together. He invites us to open our eyes to the forms of leprosy that disfigure the humanity of our brethren and still today call for more than generosity—the charity of our presence as servants."

*Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.*

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

**ABBAYE SAINT-JOSEPH DE CLAIRVAL – 21150 FLAVIGNY-SUR-OZERAIN – FRANCE**

Fax : + 33 3 80 96 25 29 – email : [abbey@clairval.com](mailto:abbey@clairval.com) – website : <http://www.clairval.com/>