

A Message From Hawaii: Love Never Fails

By Fr. Joseph Pellegrino

When I was fourteen or fifteen I had to do a book report for my high school religion class on a biography by John Farrow, Mia Farrow's father, entitled *Damien the Leper*. That was my first exposure to the terrible leper colony of Kaluapappa on the Island of Molokai part of the Hawaiian Islands. It was also my first exposure to the heroism and sanctity of Fr. Damien de Veuster, the Belgian Catholic Missionary who lived among the lepers and contracted leprosy himself.

Up to fifty years ago, leprosy was feared and treated with a form of superstition. Before sulfides, leprosy was a terrible looking disease with sores throughout the body and blockages in the circulatory system resulting in parts of the body deteriorating. The people afflicted with leprosy were treated as though they were criminals. In Hawaii, as in other places throughout the world, hospitals would not even take lepers. Instead the lepers were forced to live in colonies with laws separating them from society similar to those laws we heard in the first reading for today. In Hawaii the lepers were put into cages, shipped off to Molokai, and literally dumped into the ocean. Only those well enough to swim to shore would live. Most of the Polynesians, water people, were good swimmers, many of the Orientals and Caucasians never made it to the shore. Once on shore, the lepers faced total chaos. Everyone was sick. There was no medicine, no doctors, no shelters, no blankets, nothing but the weather beating on the exposed peninsula.

In the middle of the last century, the Catholic Bishop of the Hawaiian Islands, the Bishop of Honolulu, knew that there were seven to ten Catholics among the two or three hundred lepers in Kaluapappa. There was a religious brother, I believe his name was Br. Andrew, in Hawaii who was a skilled carpenter. The bishop asked the brother to build a small Church on Maui, take it apart and number each piece and then reassemble the Church at Kaluapappa. The brother showed up with two Polynesian workmen, but when the Polynesians

saw the lepers they fled, probably hiding in the jungle. Soon after they arrived, the brother flagged down a passing boat and returned to Honolulu where he begged the bishop to never send him back to Kaluapappa.

Now, on the big island of Hawaii, there was a young priest named Damien de Veuster who had been a carpenter before he became a priest. Fr. Damien had built numerous small churches on the Big Island. The Bishop asked Fr. Damien to go to Kaluapappa and reassemble the little church that had been sent there. Fr. Damien was to have no contact with the lepers, for the bishop did not have many priests, and did not want to lose Fr. Damien. He told him that he was not to anoint or hear confessions of the lepers or to bury them or to have any contact with them at all.

When Fr. Damien first saw the lepers he was frightened beyond belief. But he was different. Fr. Damien was the first non leper to stay overnight on Kaluapappa. He didn't see the disease, he saw the people who were suffering. That first night he slept outside under a tree because he didn't think it was right that he should build a shelter for himself if these poor sick people were exposed to the weather. He immediately began building shelters for the people. He constructed the Church and began saying Mass. He was shocked to find over a hundred people wanting to pray with him, even though less than ten of them were Catholic. He was the first to show Christ's love to them.

A boat came to pick up Fr. Damien after his 30 day medical visa expired, but the story goes that the lepers fought off the crew preventing them from landing and taking Fr. Damien. Actually, the bosun who was in charge for the landing party saw the lepers crying out that they didn't want Fr. Damien to leave. It was only after his death that the bosun's memoirs were revealed telling that one of those lepers was his sister. Fr. Damien wanted to stay, so the bosun made up the story and left him there. At that time Honolulu was in the

READINGS OF THE WEEK

Leviticus 13:1-46

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1

Mark 1:40-45

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midst of battling and outbreak of the plague, so Fr. Damien's presence on Kaluapappa slipped through the cracks of the medical people on the island. Time would later reveal that the secretary who was entrusted with the task of making out the medical visas to approach Kaluapappa kept making up new visas for Fr. Damien. Her mother was on that island. After six months, no one wanted Fr. Damien to return to the islands. The medical people were convinced that after being there that long, he probably already had contracted leprosy.

So Fr. Damien stayed. He built shelters, a water system, and turned Kaluapappa into a little functioning community. He planted over a thousand trees to protect the people from the elements. He built the Church and prayed for the people and with the people. Lepers of all faiths and no faith went to his Masses. They said, "He holds our hands when we die." Fr. Damien wrote out to organizations around the world to provide help for these people and received shipments of blankets and food and the everyday supplies that are far more valuable than gold. One leper wrote, "Today is the happiest day of my life. Today I have received my blanket. This is my blanket. I will be buried in it. Today I have hope and joy for I have experienced God's love."

Although leprosy is not as contagious as feared. Fr. Damien contracted leprosy, probably because he did not pay much attention to caring for his own health. Towards the end of his life a Mother Marianne and a group of sisters joined him on the island and continued his work.

On a little hill of Kaluapappa there is a cross with a few words from scripture that sums up what was at the heart of Fr. Damien's work. The words are from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians....."Love never fails."

"A leper approached Jesus with a request, kneeling down as he addressed him. 'If you will to do so, you can cure me.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hands, touched him and said: 'I do will it. Be cured.'"

In Statuary Hall of the Capital building in Washington D. C., the State of Hawaii erected a statue honoring Fr. Damien. What he and Mother Marianne did, their heroism, was extraordinary. They brought back Jesus Christ to outcasts of society. They were Jesus Christ, reaching out and touching a leper, being concerned for leper, not concerned with themselves.

Who are the outcasts of our society? Are the outcasts people with AIDS or other terrible illnesses? Are the outcasts the poor of the third world? Is the outcast of your family or my family that son or daughter, brother or sister, who has embarrassed a family by getting involved with illegal activities?

The example of Fr. Damien, the message of our gospel, is that we can reach out to those who are suffering and touch them with the healing power of Jesus Christ. Yes, by doing this we may open ourselves up to insult and attack from those around us and even from those we want to help. But the healing touch of Jesus Christ which we have been empowered to offer can conquer the pain around us.

Love never fails.

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