

A Hospital for Sinners

The Catholic Church is Apostolic

Father Damien arrived in Molokai as a young, healthy priest.

On an isolated corner of this island, the Hawaiian government had established a quarantine settlement for those with leprosy, a frightful disease that slowly disfigured the body and brought a painful death. Those with leprosy were taken from their families and exiled on Molokai. When Damien arrived in 1873, it was a place of lawlessness and despair, a place where the strong stole from the poor and the dying had no one to care for them.

Damien sought to share God's love with the lepers.

Moved by their suffering, he had volunteered to come to Molokai. He did not shy away from physical contact with his new flock, but treated each person with respect and dignity. He trusted God to keep him safe as long as he was needed. He wrote to his brother, "I make myself a leper with the lepers to win all to Jesus Christ."

He worked tirelessly for all of the residents.

He tended their wounds and cared for their needs, whatever their religious affiliation. When someone died, he personally dug a grave, built a coffin, and ensured a respectful burial. He inspired the healthier residents to work alongside him to plant crops, build stronger houses, and even create an aqueduct! And through it all, he ministered as a priest, joyfully sharing the Good News of Jesus. As the residents experienced God's unconditional love through Damien's words and actions, the settlement was gradually transformed into a place of joy and hope, despite the disease.

Eventually, Damien gave his life for his flock as a fellow leper.

After eleven years on Molokai, Damien contracted leprosy. He did not slow down, but worked even more tirelessly for another five years. The smaller portrait was taken around the time Damien left for Molokai at age 33. The larger portrait shows his youthful face ravaged by leprosy, shortly before he died for his flock at age 49. Damien is now recognized as a saint of the Catholic Church.

In our own way, we all suffer like the people of Molokai.

Each of us are spiritually broken and wounded, in need of healing from God. This is the reason Jesus gave us a Church, a family of faith. The Church is not meant to be a club for perfect people but rather a hospital for sinners, where those who so desire can encounter the Divine Physician and experience his healing and his mercy. Through his Church, Jesus continues to minister in our midst, healing us and nourishing us, just as Damien cared for his flock.

In saints like Damien we see the holiness of the Church.

Like all churches, the Catholic Church struggles with brokenness and sin, a reality painfully evident in recent years. When we say that the Church is holy, we do not mean that its members are perfect. The holiness of the Church comes from Jesus, and from the fact that Jesus offers us through this "hospital" all that we need to become holy. The Church's holiness is best seen in people like Damien, who so beautifully allow Jesus to fashion their hearts to be like his own.

