

## **Homily Notes**

### **For Use During the Weekend of October 10-11**

### **In Celebration of the Canonization of Father Damien**

On March 19, 1864, Jozef de Veuster, a Belgian missionary, arrived in the port of Honolulu, Hawaii, determined to help spread the Gospel to the native peoples of the islands as a member of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Two months later, he was ordained a priest and began his priestly work in several parishes on Hawai'i and Oahu. During his time there, the Kingdom of Hawaii began to experience a public health crisis, as foreign diseases were introduced to the natives. One of the most devastating diseases was what we now term Hansen's Disease – then, they called it simply leprosy.

The king of Hawaii, Kamehameha V, established a village on the island of Molokai for those afflicted with the disease, with the hopes that they could take care of tilling the land and caring for themselves. Unfortunately, due to bad planning and some hopelessness on the part of the residents, the village soon deteriorated into drunkenness and disarray. It seems, being abandoned by your people and government in your plight has an adverse effect on people.

The local bishop wondered how these people could get spiritual and pastoral care – seeing how such an assignment amounted pretty much to a death sentence. Jozef, however, stepped up. He would go. Upon his arrival, hope returned – even in the midst of that despair and inevitability. Laws were enforced, homes and schools were built, and Jozef himself would dress wounds, bury the dead, comfort the sorrowing and teach the children.

Today, we know Jozef better by his religious name: Damien – Damien of Molokai – and from today, we will know him as *Saint Damien of Molokai*. Damien embodied the message of Jesus that we hear in today's Gospel: that we are not only to keep God's commandments and avoid doing what is wrong, but also to *do what is right*. Because of this, he was able to look beyond the surface of the suffering of his brothers and sisters and affirm who they truly were – children of God. This is the force behind respecting life: recognizing that each one of us is made in the wondrous image and likeness of God. No matter what sort of stigma surrounds a person, they remain a child of God and deserve that respect.

The power of stigma is strong. There are many labels, as we have seen, that place people somehow outside of us and our worlds. Be they illness, political persuasion, sexual orientation, nationality, race, economic condition, or whatever, these stigmas create the barriers that keep us from fully stretching out our hands and touching one another. As much as we may try not to, or want to admit it doesn't exist, there is an implicit judgment.

The challenge of the gospel is to imitate Christ – whether he is speaking out with an unpopular opinion, criticizing authority for hypocrisy, or reaching out to those whom society at large has written off. Our task is, first of all, to see those people in our lives who are calling out to us – be they in the womb, in the streets, in jail or in a nursing home. Sometimes, the first step in healing is to simply be recognized as a

person with intrinsic value.

Before Blessed Damien came to that leper colony on Molokai, the residents had given up hope on themselves because society, it seemed, had given up on them. His arrival must have seemed like a break in the clouds and the very light of God shining down on them. We too can be that ray of light in another's day. When we affirm life and human dignity, we bring hope and a reason to live.

Today, you can visit the US Capitol building in Washington, and there, in the National Statuary Hall, there is a bronze statue, placed there in 1968, of that brave priest from Belgium who found his place with the suffering and dying in Hawaii. He is the only priest to be so honored. But even more important an honor than that, Damien makes his home now among the Blessed around God's heavenly throne. What got him there? His adherence ability to do what Jesus did: to look at even the least of our brothers and sisters and to *love them*.

We may never be honored with a bronze statue anywhere, yet our call is the same. The holiness that our faith demands of us calls us to see Christ in all people – in all circumstances – and to reach beyond ourselves, beyond expectations, beyond convention, and touch those whose lives have been for so long without that touch. Then, as we stretch out our hand, Jesus stretches out his. And we are touched as well.

**INTERCESSIONS FOR LIFE:** from [www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/2009/liturgyguide.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/2009/liturgyguide.pdf)

That our President, members of Congress, and all political leaders throughout the world may recognize the sacredness of life, and defend the fundamental right of every human being to live, from the moment of conception until natural death;

*We pray to the Lord:*

That all children with disabilities will be loved and cared for in healthy and nurturing environments;

*We pray to the Lord:*

That the sick may find strength and courage in the cross of Christ and discover the redemptive value of their suffering;

*We pray to the Lord:*

That all who have been involved in abortion may come to true repentance and seek God's merciful and healing love;

*We pray to the Lord:*

That all bishops and priests may teach the lay faithful to love the Gospel of Life, encouraging them to embrace each new child;

*We pray to the Lord:*

That our country stop resorting to use of the death penalty in response to violence, and that the merciful love of God convert the violent and heal the victim;

*We pray to the Lord:*

That the elderly may cherish each moment of their lives, and in their sunset years experience the love and attention they need;

*We pray to the Lord.*