

## May Holy Hero – St. Damien de Veuster

Apostle to the Lepers - feast day May 10



Joseph de Veuster was born in Belgium in 1840. While attending a Lenten Parish Mission, he was inspired to become a priest and joined the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, and took the name of Damien. He wished to be a missionary and got the chance when his brother, Auguste, who was already a priest, became ill and could not travel to his assignment at the Sacred Heart Mission in Hawaii. Damien, who was not yet even a deacon, asked to take his brother's place. He finished his studies in Honolulu and was ordained in 1864.

Around this time, leprosy was spreading rapidly among the natives of Hawaii. Leprosy was a terrible disease that disfigured the skin, eyes and limbs. There was no cure at this time and it was very contagious and deadly. To prevent the disease from spreading, the Hawaiian government established an isolated colony on the island of Molokai and sent all those infected to live there. The poor souls on the island had no one to help them in their spiritual needs. Father Damien volunteered to go and serve the people as their priest, even though he knew he could never leave the colony and it would mean almost certain death.

The sick people on the island were lacking even the basic needs of life. Father Damien was not only their priest, but provided medical care, built a church and many houses, planted orchards, brought in fresh water, organized farming, and established orphanages. He even built coffins for the dead and dug their graves. The colony of outcasts with no hope became a community where people found joy in being together and experienced the love of God through Father Damien. As the settlement became known, many donations for the lepers poured in from around the world.

After 12 years on the island, Father Damien began to show the first signs of the cruel disease. He lived and worked four more years with his precious people on the island before dying in 1889, at the age of 49. He was canonized on Oct. 11, 2009, by Pope Benedict XVI.

*"I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ."*

*Father Damien de Veuster*