

Joseph Damien de Veuster was born on the 3rd of January, 1841, near Louvain, in Belgium. On his nineteenth birthday his father took him to visit his brother who was preparing for the priesthood, and left him there while he went to a neighbouring town. On his return, Joseph informed him that this was the moment for taking a step which he had long intended and, that rather than return home and suffer all the pain of saying farewell, he wished to remain and prepare for the sacred office he desired. His father objected, but eventually had to agree, and, later on, Joseph went home and received his mother's blessing and consent. His brother was to have gone on Mission work to the South Seas, but when at the last moment he was stricken with fever, Joseph offered to go in his stead and, to his joy, the offer was accepted. After working for some years on other islands in the Pacific, he reached Molokai in 1873. To quote his own words,—“By special providence of our Divine Lord, who during his public life shewed a particular sympathy for the leper, my way was traced toward Kalawao in May, 1873. I was then 33 years of age, enjoying a robust good health. About eighty of the lepers were in the hospital; the others, with a very few helpers, had taken their abode further up, towards the valley. They had cut down the old pandanus groves to build their houses, though a great many had nothing but branches of castor-oil trees with which to construct their small shelters. I myself was sheltered during several weeks under the single pandanus which is preserved up to the present in the churchyard. Under such primitive roofs were living, pell-mell, without distinction of age or sex, old or new cases—all, more or less strangers to one another—those unfortunate outcasts of society. They passed their time with playing cards, dancing, drinking ki-root beer and home made alcohol, and with the sequels of all this. Their clothes were far from being clean and decent, on account of the scarcity of water which had to be brought at that time from a great distance. Many a time in fulfilling my priestly duty at their domiciles I have been compelled to run outside to breathe fresh air, and made myself accustomed to the use of tobacco to preserve me somewhat from carrying in my clothes the various odours of the lepers.

At that time the progress of the disease was fearful and the rate of mortality very high. The miserable condition of the settlers gave it the name of a ‘living graveyard,’ which name, I am happy to state, is no longer applicable to our place.”

When Damien first put foot on Molokai, he said to himself,—“Now Joseph, my boy, this is your life-work!” and nobly he consecrated his powers to this end. The water supply was soon attended to by the Government, and none worked harder than Father Damien in search for springs. Housing was seen to under his energetic directions. The small building he at first used as a chapel is now incorporated as a transept in the church at which he worked with his own hands. In December, 1888, Mr. Clifford, not without great difficulty, obtained leave to visit the settlement, and was the bearer of many presents and other tokens of sympathy and affection from friends in England, none of which touched him more deeply than a copy of Faber's hymns on which was inscribed in a large childish hand—“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” In Mr. Clifford's Bible, Damien wrote the words, “I was sick and ye visited me,” and always spoke with deep gratitude of the sympathy of those who sent him messages.

Father Damien had been ten years at Molokai before he caught the terrible disease, but at length, too surely, the symptoms showed themselves. On learning the full truth from the physician, Dr. Arning, he answered calmly, and bravely,—“It is no shock to me, for I have long felt sure of it.” To Mr. Clifford he said,—“I would not be cured if the price of my cure was that I must leave the island and give up my work.” With unabated zeal and faithfulness he continued his heroic work, attending to the bodily wants of the sufferers as assiduously as to their spiritual needs—cheering and upholding them in hours of suffering, and inspiring many with the hope in a merciful Saviour to give up their bad habits. The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, had so taken possession of his soul that amid all the suffering in his surroundings and the burden of secret suffering in his own lot, he had no thought of self, no consciousness that he was doing anything remarkable in thus sacrificing