

"We Lepers"

May 5, 2016

Fr. Keith Streifel

I recently met a missionary whose congregation sent him to a country with a language he couldn't understand. In order to help him learn the language, they shipped him to a remote part of the country where no one would know his native language to live with a family. He experienced not only an immersion in the language, but a complete culture-shock therapy. Imagine the differences: sure, different language, different climate, different food, different hygiene, different deference to elders and family members, just to name a few.

Fr. Damien de Veuster volunteered to serve at an island where all of this, and more, was true. Some of the people on the island had not even had the luxury of a rowboat when sent to the island, they were kicked from the transport a long way from shore and expected to swim or sink. They were also dealing with an, at the time, incurable disease which disfigured bodily and which sometimes created, or at least tempted, moral disfigurement as well. Some even thought that the moral fall preceded the bodily one, that Hanson's disease, leprosy, came as a punishment for sins.

But Fr. Damien's heart burned like that of his Master for love of these poor, disfigured, lost and even fallen children of God. And so, like his Master, Fr. Damien pitched his tent among them. (In truth, he didn't have a tent and had to spend his first days with them under the protection of a tree.) He didn't go to preach at them, rather he was sent among them. His mission, like that of his Master was incarnational. Like his Master, he didn't just touch their minds and hearts; he did the unthinkable and touched their hands, their wounds, and their

foreheads with sacramental oil. He raised their eyes from their own decaying flesh, and met them with the gaze of the Master's resurrected Body, restoring hope and courage. Fr. Damien addressed them with "we lepers..." even before they could see he was one of them, thus reminding them of their membership in the Body of Christ.

Damien de Veuster died of leprosy on April 15, 1889, but he is especially remembered on May 10, the day on which he went to Molokai in 1873.