

Homily

We are gathered together at an important place in the life of a newly canonized saint: Saint Father Damien. It was here that Damien was ordained a priest of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Here he began his heroic journey as *Father* Damien. Hawaii can be proud, and the whole world along with it. Yes, here it is appropriate to be proud of this heroic man.

Father Damien has been canonized. The Church has solemnly confirmed what he has always been and it has set him as an example worth following for the whole world. He who had been logged in the book of brave people has now been added to the book of all of God's beloved saints. We thank God for our new saint because the people do not make a saint. It is an act of God. It is grace.

Just like every dewdrop reflects the heavens in its own way, so does every saint: He or she shows an aspect of God's infinite perfectness. Observing the saints is like reading the picture album of God's own qualities. We look right through the saints to see God. And to be like God.

When the Church declares someone to be a saint, it is not the case that only then is that person holy. Damien has long been a saint. And there are countless saints who are never canonized. We are all called to be holy. But canonization is more: by declaring someone a saint the Church offers that person to us as an example to follow. That is the purpose of canonization: *"Come and see, and follow me."* Precisely as Jesus already said.

But how are we to follow Damien? In what ways? In many ways. But here are a few.

Say yes to unexpected requests

Damien's life was full of requests and calls that he never could have foreseen; it was full of surprises. His older brother Pamfiel, who was chosen to go to the Hawaiian mission, became ill before he could depart Belgium. And Damien said: "Then it's my turn." And he went without delay. And some years later the bishop was looking for a missionary to go to the leprosy settlement on the island of Molokai. Damien happened to be among those who heard the bishop's sermon. And he said: "Here am I. I will go." Damien very often said "yes" to things he never could have foreseen and had never planned. Damien obeyed the circumstances because he believed that God speaks through circumstances. And so he says to us today: "Do not set me too high on the podium. Come up there yourself and do what I did." Do as Samuel did and say to God: *"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."* Speak through the circumstances. Those who want to

honor Damien must be able to say “yes” a lot. Also to unexpected requests. In everyone's life there are those moments where something is asked of us that we never expected. And Damien says: “Say ‘yes’.”

Stay there

It was originally foreseen that Damien would stay on Molokai only for a time, and then be relieved by fellow brothers and sisters. But he stayed. And one day he could no longer go back: he himself had become ill. He had become one of them. Very early on, long before his illness, he had already written in his letters: “*We lepers.*” He stayed with them. When no reasonable outcome can be seen—and how often is that not so—there still remains this solution: stay there, do not flee. We are so inclined to leave when things become hopeless: with the seriously ill, the dying, the tested, and incomprehensible suffering. Is not this the purest form of love: not to run away. Even when there is no longer any prospect, there remains love. True love will not run away. If you wish to do me a favor, Damien says to us today: “Do not walk away! Stay!”

An active faith

What fundamentally characterized Damien was that faith alone is not enough. You must also act. “*Faith without works is dead,*” says St. James. Faith expresses itself not merely in a conviction, in a hidden mysticism of the heart, not even in prayer alone. Faith descends to the ground: it is practical, resourceful, and efficient. Damien did everything for his people: he provided medical care, built churches, worked on the human fabric on the island—social, recreational, cultural. He even founded a brass band, and to play more than just death marches. He was a “*worker of the faith,*” to use the words of James. Damien tells us: “*Believe! But do something!*”

For those who believe there are no hopeless causes

Damien never had a view of the fruits of his work. The horizon was closed, and the sky, so to speak, sealed. But he never thought or said: “*There is nothing that can be done about it.*” Whoever believes remains hopeful: nothing is impossible. That he was able to remain hopeful was entirely due to his Christian faith. Because only with God is it so that nothing is impossible. If Damien must become a patron of something, should it not be as “the man of all those working on hopeless causes”? Every age has its outcasts, its new “lepers,” its rejected and marginalized. We can think of AIDS patients. But there are countless others: alcoholics, drug addicts, those with severe depression, hopeless

young people who choose death, immigrants who have no home or belongings. And many others whom we often do not think about, whom we often do not see, who have fallen through the social safety net. Underneath the network of organized social assistance, it is our Christian caritas—which hopes against all hope—that must provide a second safety net. For those who believe there cannot be any hopeless causes.

A hero or a saint?

Damien has something to ask us today, I think. He says: for more than a century now, you—together with the entire world—have admired me because of my heroism. You have honored me with a statue on the steps of your state capitol building as well as inside the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. And Belgians have honored me with the title “the Greatest Belgian.” I am a hero in your eyes. So be it!

But am I also for you a saint to whom you pray? A hero is someone who is looked up to with admiration. Before a saint people kneel asking intercession before God. Do you do that: pray to me? I am ready to help. But you don’t ask me often enough.

Brothers and sisters, it is time that we not only admire Damien, but approach him as a saint and an intercessor before God. Damien wants to work, as he always did on Molokai. Maybe he is telling us: you do not give me enough work. I have too little to do. Give me work. Pray to me and ask more of me: there is so much to do for you. So, more requests, please ...

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