

## **Father Damien De Veuster (1840-1889)**

### **A Missionary in and of the Periphery**

#### **From early childhood towards priesthood.**

On 3 January 1840, the seventh child of the De Veuster family was born in the Brabant village of Tremelo in Belgium. The father, Frans, was a corn merchant, and mother Cato took care of the family. Frans was a hard-working man, and Cato, a rather self-centred woman. This seventh child was named Joseph. He went to school in the nearby village of Werchter and was known as a healthy countryside boy. Still very young he learnt what suffering was like. In 1847, his younger sister died of cholera, and in 1854 another sister, Eugenie, died. She was a nun at the convent of Uden. He also learnt how God could take possession of a person's soul, because another sister, Pauline, left to take the place of her deceased sister, and his brother August, joined the congregation of Picpus in Louvain. He dreamt of becoming a missionary. Joseph was not an easy child. He was stubborn and sometimes a bit quick-tempered. He was also a bit of a daredevil. One day he tried to jump on a fast-moving cart, but he missed, fell and got hit by one of the wheels, causing him to have a painful back and an eye injury that would never really heal.

After primary school his parents wanted him to stay home and help with business. But on his explicit request, and inspired by the example of his brother August, who studied in Louvain, he was allowed to go to Braine-Le-Compte, to the 'Ecole Commerciale' ('School of Commerce'). That education would have a positive influence on his later career, he claimed. It proved a tough period, for Joseph did not speak a single word of French. But he demonstrated what a stubborn Fleming was capable of, because in no less than a year he was at the same level as the others. He spent the summer of 1858 in Louvain with his brother August, who had in the meantime taken the habit as Brother Pamphile. There he learned all about convent life, and at the beginning of 1859, he decided to become a Father of the

Holy Hearts, a Picpus as well. He chose Damien for religious name, and his first idea was to become a brother, and as a working brother, to leave for the missions in the company of his brother. In June 1860, he was sent to Paris to become priest after all. Once again, his great capacity for work had vanquished: through self-study he had learnt Latin and thus made up for his lag in development. In Paris he was often the victim of insults, but Damien did not really mind or even take notice of it. But he was nevertheless glad to be able to return to Louvain in 1861, and to accompany his brother once again. The latter was ordained priest on 28 February 1863, which resulted in a great family celebration. It was also a moment of 'goodbyes', because Father Pamphile was to leave for Hawaii as missionary. Due to an acute typhoid infection, however, he was forced to stay at home. Damien, who had in the meantime been ordained minor religious orders, asked the general superior if he could leave instead of his brother. After a first refusal, he eventually got the permission. On 29 October 1863, Damien left Paris to take the boat to Hawaii in Bremen on 8 November. The journey took a little less than 5 months and on 19 March 1864, the feast of Damien's patron, Saint Joseph, he reached Honolulu. Before his departure, he had had himself photographed posing as his example, Saint Francis Xavier, missionary in India.

#### **On his way to become a missionary.**

The first days in Honolulu, Damien got acquainted with Msgr. Maigret who quickly saw through him, concluding that Damien was a good man. On 20 May 1864, Damien was ordained priest, and immediately appointed priest responsible for the district Puna on the Great Island. He learned the language very quickly, the integration went smoothly, and he learned to eat the semolina with his hands. He started the struggle against idolatry, and especially against the goddess Pele, who was idolised by the indigenous people. In this region

with its active volcanoes people often saw a connection with their gods. In 1865, Damien moved to the northern side of the island, where he became responsible for the Kahola district. For nine years he gave himself entirely to the people, and he became known as the carpenter-priest who built no less than 8 churches. Meanwhile, he had also discovered this horrible disease that threatened the population, leprosy. In July 1865, the island's Health Council bought a piece of land on a peninsula on the northern side of the island Molokai. This part of the island was separated from the rest by an enormous mountain wall, turning the peninsula into a natural prison. Lepers were brought there, and were not allowed to ever leave the island again. The first 12 lepers left on 6 January 1866, and very quickly they became nature's playthings. Heavy storms ruined the roofs of their houses, and because of their handicap the lepers were incapable of repairing them. It was the start of a lot of misery.

Damien also had problems. It was hard work, and his urge to convert people did not have the expected results, which made him very depressed on regular occasions. There was also the very strong competition with the Protestants who were also setting everything to work to convert as many people as possible. The good relationship with Bishop Maigret was a source of support though. When the latter suggested in 1873 to send a priest to the lepers, and to replace him every three months, Damien was immediately prepared to leave. The stories about the lepers' lives were becoming ever more widespread, and even the press had reported several times on the promiscuity that was common among the sick on the island, those rejected by society.

### **To the real periphery of existing.**

On Friday, 9 May 1873, Damien took the boat to Molokai, accompanied by the Bishop. The latter advised him not to eat with the lepers, not to touch them and never to ride in their saddle. Damien promised that he would follow those instructions, but realised that it would be most difficult to be convincing as these people's priest if he were indeed to follow those instructions. They arrived in Kalawao the following day, and read mass together. After a

visit to the lepers' village Bishop Maigret left, leaving Damien behind all by himself. A new period in his life had now started.

Very quickly, the inhabitants started calling him 'Makua Kamiano'. The first days he slept in the open air under a pandanus. He immediately started with the construction of a water pipeline to the central dispensary, and the construction of a fence around the graveyard to stop wild boars from digging up and eating the bodies, buried in shallow graves. He learnt about more and more injustices and inhumane situations, like e.g. the terminally ill having to go to an isolated spot in order to die there in complete solitude. He therefore started distributing information, which resulted in a conflict with the Health Council.

When he returned to Honolulu for the first time in July in order to regain some strength, he made the firm decision to return to his people. However, the Health Council made its rules stricter, and decided that Damien had to make a choice, either stay in Honolulu, or go back to the leprosy colony and stay there definitively. They claimed that the risk of contamination was too high, if Damien were to travel back and forth between Honolulu and Molokai. Silently, they hoped to get rid of that annoying priest. But Damien, stubborn as he was, obtained the permission of his superiors to return and to stay. Back at the leper colony, Damien started his homily with the words, "We, lepers." He explained to the people that as from now, he would be one of theirs, and that he felt he was an exile just like them. He also made the decision to eat from the same pot as the lepers, and to share the pipe with them. A well-known anecdote is that Father Damien wanted to confess, but not receive permission to board the ship. So, he was forced to confess in public to a priest leaning over the rail.

Damien became a great defender of the lepers, and stepped on many people's toes. Jealousy was growing, especially when his begging-letters raised considerable sums of money. He struggled against the moral corruption that ruled among the lepers as a result of their hopeless situation. Another serious problem was alcoholism. He also tried to organise the community, founded a brass band, and even organised horse races.

In February 1874, a second priest was sent to Molokai, the Dutch Picpus Father, André Burgerman. He was originally meant to help and support Damien, but quickly became the source of major conflicts and disagreement. Because Father Burgerman had studied medicine for a couple of years, he demanded the responsibility for the leper house. It became a fierce battle, costing both priests enormous amounts of energy. Several accusations were made, one of them that Damien was having relationships with women. When Damien started to arouse royal interest, this encouraged the ambitious and jealous Burgerman to cause even more commotion. Meanwhile, Damien built several churches and tried to buy medication for the patients with the funds he received. The Health Council allowed him to return to Honolulu for a short period. Those were moments that Damien used to go on retreat and to refine his spiritual life.

At the beginning of 1876, a leprosy specialist, Dr. Woods, came to visit the island. He wanted to determine whether there was a connection between leprosy and syphilis. Some people claimed that leprosy only infected syphilitics. It was in that period that Father Damien noticed that he himself had the first symptoms of leprosy. When Dr. Woods started praising Father Damien after his departure, this was not appreciated by the congregation. They thought that Damien was getting too much attention.

What is certain is that he continued to worry about finding medication to cure leprosy. He bought Chinese medication with which he experimented. In order to measure their effect, he divided the test group into two subgroups, one received the medication, and another received a substitute. Thus, unknowingly, he developed the idea of placebos.

In August 1880, Father André Burgerman left again. For Damien this meant a return to peace and quietness, but once again he had to solve problems all by himself.

The year 1881 was marked by the ordination of a new Bishop. Köckeman became the successor of Maigret, and in that same year he would visit Damien. Damien received a medal from the King.

Another dramatic incident was when a ship dumped a group of lepers in sea during violent autumn storm. Several people got killed, and Damien fiercely protested against this barbarous deed.

He continued to ask the assistance of Sisters to nurse the lepers. A first step was the arrival of American Sisters of the Order of Saint-Francis, who came to help in the leper house in Honolulu. In the meantime, a fellow priest had arrived, a certain Albert Montiton. This French father had a terrible skin disease, and an impossible character; Once again this caused enormous problems for Damien.

In November 1883, the first Sisters arrived in Honolulu. However, on Molokai still no Sisters were available, and doctors avoided the island. In March 1884, Damien was officially examined and diagnosed with leprosy. A humiliating examination it became, because people were still convinced that leprosy was a consequence of an infection with syphilis. One visitor, Charles Stoddard, wrote a first book about Damien. It became a best-seller and was translated in many languages

In 1886, Damien was officially acknowledged to be a leper, and therefore segregated by his superiors, meaning that he was no longer allowed to leave the island. He would return to Honolulu one more time, where he was treated by the Sisters. It was for him the opportunity to plea with the Sisters to go to Molokai. Meanwhile, plans were being made to erect a hospital on Molokai. In 1888 his wish became true when in October the first Sisters arrived. Once again, there were allegations that the funds that Damien had raised were being used in a wrong way. These allegations were more crosses for him to bear, adding to them the illness that grew worse every day. In 1889, his condition got worse and he died on 15 April. He was laid out in his Saint-Philomena Church and buried in its shadows. In 1936, his mortal remains were brought back to Louvain. In 1977 the Pope, Paul VI, declared him venerable. Beatification followed in 1995 and canonisation in 2009.

### **Father Damien's unique pastoral approach.**

Father Damien was already famous in his own lifetime. He did not want to, but with the publication of his letter and other writings by his brother Pamphile, his dedication to the lepers on Molokai became known. His first and greatest worry was to improve the fate of these people, and to free them of their stigma. By becoming a leper, himself he physically learnt what it meant not to be welcome anymore among your confreres.

Damien was a Brabant cart horse. He was hardworking man, who was very outspoken. On the list of saints and blessed people he is certainly one of the most violent-tempered. His tough character caused him trouble more than once, but he nevertheless went his own way with it. His beatitude is not so much the result of the brave nature of his charity efforts, but all the more of the quickness and the humility with which he recognised his own limitations and used them as stepping stones to start all over again. He always insisted on the importance of regularly examining one's conscience, and he considered the sacrament of confession as sacred.

On the basis of the order of the day that he used to write down during his retreats, we know that he was very keen about praying. In the end it became the only thing he could fall back on. Prayer had to help him resist the temptations, and had to give him the strength to continue to love his fellow man. His childhood ideal was never to speak badly of someone, the reality of a tough life showed him that it was not always that easy, but it also allowed him to refine that ideal. Although he was very much concerned about converting as many people as possible in the beginning of his career as missionary, he became more ecumenical toward the end, living peacefully and constructively together with the Protestants. Against the Bishop's will, he used to call the local vicar his brother in Christ.

Damien often had problems with the rather strict and rigid way in which the Church and worldly authorities took their decisions. His pastoral sensitivity often caused him to break a law, but his conscience justified those offences,

because he committed them because he always radically opted for the wellbeing of his fellow man.

Upon his arrival on Molokai, he was facing an impossible task. How could he stop these people, living in this place stripped of all possible hope, from giving in? He did not develop an intricate strategy, but did things step by step. After having constructed a number of houses, he suggested other projects that had to improve the life situation of the patients.

His most profound experience was the constant confrontation with death. In the 17 years that he spent on Molokai, no less than 3000 people died. His presbytery stood next to the graveyard, and he made a habit of praying the rosary amidst the graves every day. Death became ever present in his life, and faithfully he learned to deal with the deceased across the border between life and death. He had nursed, and assisted many of these people during their final moments. We can safely state that Father Damien was a specialist in palliative care.

Above all, Damien was a man who had well understood the words from the Gospel: "Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10: 39). Unconsciously, we are impressed, comparing Damien's and Pamphile's letters. Both had started with the same kind of idealism. Pamphile had to resign himself to a more secure and comfortable life due to the circumstances, and could therefore concentrate on details, and become annoyed owing to minor inconveniences. To Damien, the other – in the concrete, his suffering fellow man – was the dominant reality. All of his own worries and concerns disappeared to be confirmed by his fellow man. He turned out a true apostle of charity.