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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois
22 February 2009

The Seventh Sunday of the Year (B)
On Blessed Damien of Molokai

The Psalmist sings, "Blessed is the one who has regard for the lowly and the poor; in the day of misfortune the LORD will deliver him" (Psalm 41:2). In the Gospel today we find four such men who "came bringing to [Jesus] a paralytic" (Mark 2:3). What greater regard for the lowly and poor could there be than to bring them to the Lord?

Jesus does not seem to mind that they have torn a hole in the roof, which cannot have been a clean or neat affair, nor does Peter, whose house Jesus was presumably in. These four men were so determined to get near the Lord that they let no obstacle stand in their way, neither crowd nor roof; this is what caught the attention of the Lord, or will we be defeated by them?

Certainly each of us encounters one obstacle or another in the journey of faith. Will we let them, or will we spend all of our strength to get around them so as to arrive at Jesus and speak with him? Will we use the obstacles as a means to encounter him?

For so many people one such obstacle is suffering, whether it be physical or emotional, mental or financial, or any other

form. Certainly the sufferings that we experience are numerous and varied. So very often, it is through our sufferings that the Lord comes to meet us, to take us by the hand, to lift us up and heal us. He comes to give us the joy of our heart, and we often find it by uniting our sufferings with his on the Cross.

We have no indication at all of the faith of the paralyzed man. Presumably his faith was not strong since Jesus said to him, "Child, your sins are forgiven," after he saw the faith of the four who carried him (Mark 2:5). It is a reminder to us all that we must always lift up in prayer those whose faith is weak and those who have fallen away from the Lord and from his Church. In this way, each of us will have regard for the poor and lowly and the Lord will deliver us and, we pray, them as well.

We find such strong and lively faith in the men and women of the ages who have been enrolled in the lists of Saints. We honor and revere them as we seek their intercession for us as we try to follow their example so as to follow Christ. This morning His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI announced the day on which one such disciple, Blessed Damien of Molokai, the Leper Priest, will be declared a Saint: 11 October 2009.

My affection for Father Damien, and my devotion to him, are no secret. When I was away these past few days for retreat and a little vacation in Hawaii, I made it a point to visit - for

the second time - the Kalaupapa Peninsula where he ministered for sixteen years among the lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. I stayed at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace and celebrated many Masses there, where Damien was ordained a priest in 1864. Even when I was walking along the beach or watching the sunset into the ocean, I was often thinking about his life and the example he gives to us all, but especially to priests. I asked him to show me how to be a good and holy priest, how to united the sufferings of my arthritis with those of Christ for your good, and how to serve better those whom the Lord has entrusted to me, especially the youth.

He was born Joseph DeVeuster in Tremelo, Belgium on 13 January, 1840. He entered the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts in 1859, when he took the name Damien, after an early physician and martyr.

His brother, Pamphile, also a member of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts, was to leave for the Hawaiian missions in 1863, but he fell seriously ill and was not strong enough for the journey. Damien promptly wrote to his superiors and his offer was accepted; he would go to Hawaii in his brother's stead. He landed in Honolulu in 1864 and died in 1889 at the age of 49.

Before he left Belgium, Damien wrote to his parents reflecting on the voyage on which he was about to embark:

The sacrifice is great indeed for one who tenderly loves his parents, his family, his brethren, and the land of his birth. But the voice that has called upon us to make a generous sacrifice of all, is the voice of God himself.

Damien heard the call of the Lord and he knew he had to answer it. He knew that "we must choose the state [in life] God has predestined for us, so as to be happy in our next life."

For nine years he ministered on the the Big Island, building churches with his own hands and meeting the spiritual needs of his people. In one letter, he wrote:

Our poor Islanders are always very happy when they see Kamiano coming, and I, for my part, love them very dearly; I would gladly give my life for them.. All things considered, I am very happy, for, along with all the privations and hardships, God often gives me consolations beyond expectations.

In another letter, Damien wrote these words: "It is [Jesus] Who in the midst of trials, contradictions, and sufferings, will cause us to enjoy a happiness of which he who has never experienced it can form no idea."

With time, Bishop Maigret became increasingly concerned about the spiritual needs of those who lived in the leper colony. He found four priests who were willing to take turns in caring for them, each taking a three-month shift. Father Damien agreed to go first and arrived at the colony on 10 May 1873, accompanied by the Bishop. Damien would not allow his turn to end, and there he remained, willingly and gladly, where others were hesitant to go.

Upon arriving at Molokai, Bishop Maigret gathered the people together and said to them:

So far, my children, you have been left alone and uncared for. But you shall be so no longer. Behold, I have brought you one who will be a father to you, and who loves you so much that for your welfare and for the state of your immortal souls, he does not hesitate to become one of you, to live and die with you!

He had no idea how true his words would prove.

When he first arrived at the leper colony, Damien was not trusted because the people did not know his motives. He slowly won them over by eating from the same poi bowls, sharing a pipe with them and speaking their language. When was sent to the lepers he was told to stay several feet away from them, lest he, too, contract the disease. Those who had gone before him followed this advice, but he ignored it; instead, he bent down to the touch and embrace the lepers. In Damien, the people could say, "We have never seen anything like this" (Mark 2:12).

Father Damien once said, "I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ." In these words he echoes the words of Saint Paul who said that he became "all things to all to save at least some" (I Corinthians 9:22).

This is the duty of a priest, to become like his people, to share in their suffering, to show them how to suffer with and for Christ. In doing so Father Damien imitated the love of Christ who gave himself for our salvation.

When he said, "I would gladly give my life for them," he showed that "greater love has no man than this, to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

After he contracted leprosy because of his close work with the lepers, Father Damien accepted this Cross as a true disciple. He said,

Having no doubts about the true nature of the disease, I am calm, resigned, and very happy in the midst of my people. God certainly knows what is best for my sanctification and I gladly repeat, "Thy will be done."

He knew that his sufferings would lead him to grow in holiness if he offered them for his people with the sufferings of Christ.

He found that his "greatest pleasure is to serve the Lord in his poor children rejected by other people." He devoted all of his efforts to the lepers of Molokai, often ignoring his own needs; he spent his life in their service.

His example shines brightly before me, and, by God's grace and Damien's intercession, I pray that I will be able to imitate his zeal for souls, his tireless dedication and his acceptance of suffering with joy and gratitude for the salvation of others.

How was he able to serve so faithfully those who were rejected and reviled? Damien found his strength in the Holy Eucharist. Listen, my friends, to his words:

I find my consolation in the one and only companion who will never leave me, that is, our Divine Savior in the Holy Eucharist. . . .It is at the foot of the altar that we find the strength necessary in this isolation of ours. Without

the Blessed Sacrament a position like mine would be unbearable. But, having Our Lord at my side, I continue always to be happy and content...

Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the most tender of friends... Be not afraid then in your solitary conversations, to tell Him of your miseries, your fears, your worries, of those who are dear to you, of your projects, and of your hopes. Do so with confidence and with an open heart.

In these coming days of Lent, let us deepen our devotion to the Lord's true Body and Blood. Let us seek to imitate him who gave himself for us.

Father Damien found his holiness on Molokai and we, too, are called to holiness. Joseph Dutton, one of his most trusted helpers, said, "One's Molokai can be anywhere." Let us, then, ask the Lord to lead us to our own Molokai, that, we, too, might grow in holiness and deepen our regard for the poor and lowly, leading others to Jesus Christ. Amen.