

Authentic Missionary Service

Once again today, our Gospel passage illustrates the priority of merciful compassion in the ministry of Jesus. Notice how Jesus combines his miracle of healing with his teachings about the true nature of his message of the *Kingdom of God*. Jesus also provides a clear, down-to-earth example of practicing compassion: rescuing someone from drowning in a well—even though it may be a Sabbath day. Yes, mission demands “compassion in action.”

Admittedly, I am inspired by the lives of several missionaries of mercy; one of my favorites is “Damien the Leper.” Jozef Damien de Veuster, popularly known as “Damien the Leper,” was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 11, 2009. Born in 1840 on a small farm near Louvain in Belgium, he left for Hawaii in 1863 and arrived six months later; he was ordained in Honolulu in May 1864. Damien served for nine years on the Island of Hawaii. In early 1873, he was the first priest volunteer who offered himself to serve the lepers who were segregated on the island of Molokai, since there was no known cure for the dreaded disease which was ravaging the Island archipelago.

Damien's assignment letter from Father Modeste, his religious superior, read: “You may stay as long as your devotion dictates.” Damien read the letter over and over again—until his death sixteen years later at age 49. As a missionary on Molokai, Damien wrote his brother in Europe: “I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all for Jesus Christ. That is why, in preaching, I say ‘we lepers,’ not, ‘my brethren’.” Damien strove to configure himself to Christ. He died on April 15, 1889; it was Holy Week. Damien lived a transformed and transforming life. His example of service of the poor inspires us not to forget the needy right in our midst. Saint Damien, missionary apostle of compassion, pray for us.