

Life

Saint Damien of Molokai was born in Belgium in 1840 to a poor family. He was used to work since childhood and was skilful in handy work such as woodworking. His two sisters were nuns, and one brother was a priest. At the age of 20, he followed his elder brother to join a religious congregation. In 1864, he was allowed to replace his sick brother to preach in Hawaii. He was ordained a priest after his arrival in Honolulu. Father Damien was originally sent to the Catholic diocese of North Kohala. In order to shepherd his flock of hundreds of Catholics dispersed in a vast area, Father Damien literally carried the entire church on his shoulders: he took with him rods, cloth strips, portable altar, and necessary accessories so he could celebrate mass in various places. Eight years later, the bishop had to find a priest to serve the leprosy patients who lived on Molokai Island, and Father Damien volunteered without any hesitation.

At that time, leprosy was thought to be highly infectious and incurable, so leprosy patients were sent to Molokai Island for mandatory isolation. They lost the care of relatives and friends and could not get the care they needed. They felt abandoned on this "prison island", just waiting to die. Many residents felt desperate, and numbed their emotional pain with alcoholism and lewd conduct. Father Damien knew they needed a goal and meaning to stay alive, and asked everyone to build houses, schools and churches. Initially, the residents were suspicious and even hostile to this new foreign priest, but Father Damien showed them his incomparable love and perseverance; besides saying mass, he also became the residents' carpenter, farmer and doctor, even made coffins and dug graves. He encouraged them to serve others, and the attitude of the residents as well as their livelihood greatly improved. The king of Hawaii awarded him a medal to honour him. The princess was very moved when she presided over the awarding ceremony and spread his deeds overseas. Some European organizations spontaneously raised funds. Father Damien became a part of the residents, leading them to build houses, roads, schools, and hospitals, organized a church choir and held parades on special feast days. He served in Molokai for sixteen years, brought joy and dignity to the residents, and turned "a hell on earth" into a hope-filled community. St. Damien was infected with leprosy in 1884 and died in 1889 at the age of 49.

Reflection

St. Damien encountered a lot of hardships, and some of them were unimaginable to us, such as he was unable to make regular confessions. Because he lived on the island of lepers, even if a priest passes by on a boat, the captain would reject his boarding the boat. In order to make a confession, Father Damien had to take another boat, and confess to the priest in a loud voice from a distance. There were many other difficulties and sufferings, but in order to preach the gospel, he was willing to sacrifice and tolerate. St. Damien brought Christ to those marginalized by the society. His service revealed the face of Christ, which made people understand that everyone was recognized and loved by the Lord. Let us learn from St. Damien not to fear hardships and spread the gospel of love to those in need.

Prayer

The mass is the most perfect prayer of the church, and it was very important for Father Damien's ministry. In 1886 he mentioned in a letter to his superior that the number of people who wished to attend mass was so great that the church could not accommodate them. He praised the choir consisting of leprosy patients for their beautiful singing. After mass, the faithful on the island gathered together to share food. It can be seen that under Father Damien's care, the faithful devoted themselves to mass, united in the love of Christ when receiving Holy Communion, and even after the mass, they remained a community of solidarity. When other residents saw how they faced life's challenges with peace and joy, they were attracted, and this was how they spread the gospel. Let us also learn from their enthusiasm to participate in Mass, so that we can gain strength and attract people in our lives to the Lord.

May we learn from Father Damien to preach the gospel with love and perseverance, and without  
fear of hardships,

May we pay special attention to the neglected brothers and sisters.

St. Damien of Molokai, pray for us.