

Pentecost Sunday, 19 May 2024

Scriptures: Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corin. 12:3-7,12-13; John 20:19-23

Homily: Fr. Ken

This weekend we are celebrating the feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church.

We have listened to the narrative in the Gospels each Sunday. Jesus preached and cured people, he was crucified, died, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. Then, the Holy Spirit came and the very lives of the apostles truly changed. The Holy Spirit entered their lives on Pentecost, and they were changed forever.

Over the centuries, the Holy Spirit has entered the lives of million upon millions of Christians. Some have been exceptional inspirations for us.

We are reminded of those in our Church history who dedicated their lives to helping those of our human family suffering physically and mentally.

In May, we celebrate the feast day of St. Damien of Molokai. Fr. Damien was born Joseph DeVeuster in Tremelo, Belgium, just outside the university town of Leuven (Louvain). He was the seventh child of the family. At the age of 18, he asked his parents to let him follow in the footsteps of his older brother. A year later, he joined the religious Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the Picpus Fathers, as they are known. He chose the religious name Damien.

When his brother became ill with typhus, Damien pleaded to take his brother's place on the missionary assignment to Hawaii. After 140 days at sea, he reached Hawaii on March 19, 1864. He immediately immersed himself in the language and customs of

the Hawaiians. He prepared himself for ordination, and on May 21st he was ordained a priest in the Honolulu cathedral.

Damien was a man of action. He was very zealous to convert as many Hawaiians as possible, and he built a number of small chapels traveling all around the islands on horseback. When he was asked where he lived, he pointed to the horse's saddle and said: "That's where I live".

In time, he soon discovered the terrible conditions of the lepers at the Kalawao leper colony peninsula on Molokai. As a man filled with the Holy Spirit, he spontaneously asked the bishop to go there and to minister to the lepers who had repeatedly requested to have a priest.

Damien was deeply moved by the human suffering he found there. He built a cemetery because he believed in human dignity and that the dead should not be eaten by wild pigs, but deserve a decent burial. He also built a hospital and nursing facility, and he built a chapel. He wanted to create an ideal Christian community.

As years passed, word of his work spread throughout the world. The news media called him a Christian hero. He was named the apostle of the lepers.

He also organized a new social life for the lepers. He started a brass band, a choir, various associations, and even horseracing.

The question that moved him most was how he could help people who knew they were dying, who were abandoned and lived in exile on a volcanic island, in hideous surroundings; how he could help them make sense of their lives.

Hawaii was not prepared for the leprosy epidemic. According to their local customs, Hawaiians would never exclude sick people and certainly never regard them as sinners. But Western ideology and some writings in the Bible did.

Damien did not agree. And from then on, he spoke of "We lepers". That phrase was an expression of what he wanted his presence among them to be: namely, involvement in their lives, solidarity, tangible closeness in the simple acts of ordinary life, with no superior detachment.

Damien always tried to make his own family think he was ok. But in 1885, he wrote his brother about the pain in his foot. Rumors spread that he had become a leper. He began to celebrate Mass sitting on the floor with the lepers. When he was no longer able to celebrate Mass, he was very conflicted. He wrote his superior that it was Jesus' presence in the Eucharist that gave him the strength to minister to the lepers all those years.

Three years later, he wrote again:

"There is scarcely a glimmer of hope that I will recover. I believe it is the will of God that I should die in the same manner and of the same sickness as my infected ones".

When asked was there anything the mission still needed, he replied: "Yes, marbles for the children to play with".

Those few moving words summarized Damien's entire spiritual journey: the priest with a great heart, the driven missionary with a calling, an outcast among outcasts, a leper among lepers, the spiritual father of his Hawaiian family of lepers, and above all, the missionary who demanded the right for the sick to a human existence.

Father Damien died on April 14, 1889. He was buried at the leper colony. In 1936 his remains were returned to Belgium and buried in the crypt of St. Joseph's Church in Louvain.

I have visited there many times. Cardinal Levada and I concelebrated Mass together at the tomb of Fr. Damien.

Fr. Damien was canonized a saint by Pope Benedict on October 11, 2009. As you may recall, we had a full week of celebrations here for our St. Rita parish and for our St. Rita School.

I personally first visited the leper colony in 1975. I was met at the very small landing field by a leper named Francis. He took me all around the peninsula all day, and arranged a lunch for me with him and a group of other lepers. He was 35 years old at the time. By 2009 he had become 69, and he was among the large group of lepers who were flown from Hawaii to Rome for the Vatican canonization of Saint Father Damien.

On this Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of our Church, we remember all the saints and all of us as followers of Jesus. Father Damien is a model and example for us. He was a true hero. He gave his life in solidarity with those who suffer, those who are ostracized and abandoned. He is a saint, remaining faithful to his priorities, his priesthood, and his faith.

Like Jesus, he wanted to be there for others, not for himself, not for his own glory, but rather as a servant in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

Throughout it all, he still remained fully human as all of us are: imperfect, vulnerable, sometimes sinning, but always trusting in the mercy of our merciful God, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Father Damien of Molokai was and is today, a brother to us all, a saint to be proud of, and a true inspiration for each and everyone of us here, as we celebrate our feast of Pentecost.

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