

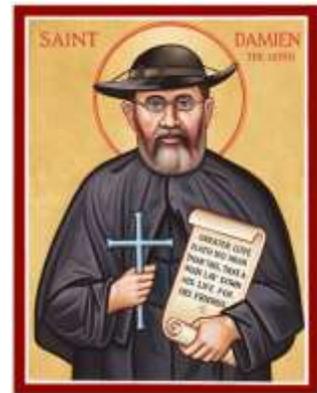
Józef De Veuster

Saint Name: Saint Damien of Molokai or Damien De Veuster

Dates: January 3, 1840 – April 15, 1889,

Location: Belgium

Feast Day: May 10



Józef De Veuster, the youngest of seven children of Joannes Franciscus De Veuster, and Anne-Catherine Wouters was born in rural Belgium on January 3, 1840. Józef grew up on the family farm and had no designs to continue the family business; instead wishing to follow his older brother and two sisters to a life within the church. He worked with his family on the farm until he was old enough to enter the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, where he adopted the name Damien, after a sixth century martyr. In 1864, Damien's brother was ordered to Hawaii. But his brother became too ill to comply, so Damien offered to go in his place. Due to his youth, Damien had to prove his devotion but eventually his religious brothers agreed to send him to Hawaii and have him ordained. Br. Damien arrived in Hawaii in March 1864 and was ordained as a priest on the island two months later. For the next nine years, Fr. Damien fulfilled his responsibilities as a priest to the island people. Hawaii established a leper colony on the Kalaupapa Peninsula; those people stricken with leprosy were in need of spiritual and medical care, and Fr. Damien felt that it was his calling to serve them. In 1873, Fr. Damien made the trip to be with these people in their colony. He found the colony to be in total disarray. Many patients required treatment but had nobody to care for them. Other patients were severe alcoholics, immorality and misbehavior was rampant. There was no law or order within the colony. So, Fr. Damien provided it. He taught the Catholic faith to the community and asked people to come together to build houses and schools and eventually the parish church, St. Philomena. The church still stands today. The sick were cared for and the dead properly buried. Order and routine made the colony livable, and it became Fr. Damien's permanent home. After several years tending to the sick, Fr. Damien contracted leprosy himself, realizing he had the disease when he accidentally placed his foot into scalding water and felt no pain, a common way by which people discovered they were infected (Leprosy attacks nerve endings). Fr. Damien continued his calling, despite his illness. He derived strength from prayer and devotion and often went to the cemetery to pray the Rosary or spend time in the presence of the Eucharist. He wrote, *"It is at the foot of the altar that we find the strength we need in our isolations"*. Fr. Damien was a courageous, headstrong and resilient man. His personal toughness served to inspire others. The day of his passing is a minor statewide holiday in Hawaii.

After sixteen years in the colony, Fr. Damien died of leprosy on April 15, 1889. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Brussels on June 4, 1995 and canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 11, 2009. He is the patron saint of people with leprosy and we celebrate his feast day on May 10.

