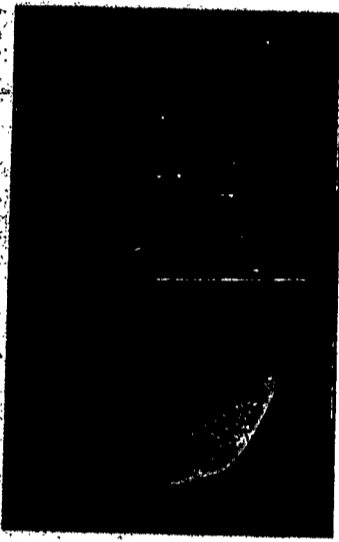


FATHER DAMIEN RETURNS HOME

By Rev. Leopold Jeurissen, C.S.S.C.

The Author



THE REV. LEOPOLD W. JEURISSEN, C.S.S.C., assistant pastor of Our Lady of Victory Church is a keen student of the life of Father Damien. Father Jeurissen is a member of the same order to which Father Damien belonged. He came to Rochester from Louvain, Belgium in 1930. Before entering the priesthood Father Jeurissen served with the Red Cross in the Belgian Army.

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God and the salvation of souls! These were the two great motives which animated and inspired Damien to put himself, heart and soul, in the service, making himself all to all, in order to gain all for Christ! For, before all, Damien was Priest and Missionary! If he applied himself to the weary labor of a mason, a carpenter, a grave-digger, a teacher, a doctor and what else, if he took care with fatherly tenderness of the bodily needs of his poor sequestered lepers, it was to reach their immortal souls, to save those souls from despair, to pour in them a ray of hope; it was to prepare them as a rich harvest for the eternal granary of heaven.

The little chapel was too small and too far from the lazaretto. Father Damien drew the plan of a new church and submitted it to his Bishop for approval. With the help of his able men, he built a church which even today may vie in beauty with many churches of the continent.

All those who are able to walk, gather every morning for the morning prayers, the holy sacrifice of the Mass and the instruction; and again at night the church is crowded for the evening prayers. Feast days and holy days of obligation are celebrated with great solemnity; processions are organized; frequent reception of the holy sacraments is in vogue. For sixteen years perpetual adoration during the day has not been interrupted. In short, Molokai, the lobby of Death and Despair, has been transformed into a vestibule of Hope and of Heaven!

When one may ask—did this giant of zeal and of charity, draw that untamable courage to devote his life to the plague-stricken lepers of Molokai? Father Damien explains it himself in a letter to his Brother Pamphile (1883). "Without the Blessed Sacrament were a position as mine unbearable." And one year later he wrote: "Without the presence of our dear Master in my poor chapel, to persevere in my resolution to live with the poor lepers." Father Damien's sacrifice in that living cemetery, was indeed the triumph of the Holy Eucharist in Molokai!

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But God reserved another decoration for his faithful servant; a decoration of much more value in His eyes and in the eyes of Father Damien: the decoration of the stigmata of leprosy!

One day, while taking a foot bath, to relieve a sore foot, Father Damien did not feel any effect of the almost boiling water. This was for him an infallible omen. A doctor, who happened to visit Molokai, examined the patient and after a short while he said: "Alas, Father, you also are contaminated." "I expected it," was the simple answer, "and since a few days I was convinced of it!"

Alas, it was true. Father Damien was stricken by the dreadful disease which slowly but surely undermined his frail constitution. His left cheek

where even nature yielded difficultly to a painful event like his work was beyond his strength. The leprosy, indeed, needed in dealing with it, a mind to relieve his suffering friend by sacrificing his blood and promising himself for that of Father Damien's. Monsieur Maiget consented to that change and Father Damien, not without sadness, left his dear flock and set out for his new station.

It took him more than six weeks to reach his 75 mile parish and the first impressions during that visit were far from encouraging.

For nine years he labored in this district, building churches, erecting schools, preaching and teaching. Night and day he worked on the beach; through the weather and wind he climbed and descended the hills and cliffs, through water and woods he cut his way in order to alleviate physical and moral distress, to gain souls for Christ and to raise his backward district to a fervent and flourishing community. It hardly needs to be said that during those nine years he was following his Calvary heavenward. Following his Master, he had will to take up the cross of suffering and pervasion and to carry it to the top of Golgotha, trampling with

Mohelnot Maiget happened to dedicate a new church on the Island of Maui and Father Damien was among the many priests who assisted at the dedication. After the ceremony, the zealous Bishop spoke to his priests of the dire need of his flock and most wretched of his flock, the lepers of Molokai. Every one of the young priests volunteered himself to go to the leper settlement, but Father Damien, whose face was glowing with holy enthusiasm, insisted so earnestly that he was selected for this great work.

In May, 1873, a few days after his first glimpse at the human wrecks standing at the wharf, would have been enough to frighten the most courageous of men.

"My children," said the Bishop to the gathered lepers, "so far you have been abandoned and neglected, but now I have changed. Father Damien, who for love of you and of your soul, does not hesitate to abide with you, will be a real Father to all of you. He will live with you and if necessary die for you."

These words were received with great joy by those unfortunate people. Henceforth they would have a Father, a Friend, a visible Providence! But, what must Father Damien have suffered, brave and zealous as he was, when an hour later the boat weighed anchor and left him a prisoner, a voluntary and lone prisoner in this life of Doom surrounded by a steep impassable cliff, the moaning ocean and covered by the blue high sky.

Who can ever fathom the depth of the moral suffering which pierced Damien's heart, when seeing those poor, plague-stricken and mutilated people, disfigured by the most dreadful of all diseases, and, worse yet, as a consequence of their grief, their discouragement and their despair, surrendered to all vicissitudes of human degradation!

No time, however, to make considerations of this kind! Father Damien's great charity and burning zeal urged him to start the work at once! The first day in Molokai was spent in visiting the spots of the eight hundred lepers, bringing a ray of hope and consolation in their gloomy existence. Controlling his natural repugnance for the festering sores which the afflicted bodies exhibited, he, a real Samaritan, Damien, drew over his decaying limbs and bandaged the wounds which any person would shrink from touching.

Not long thereafter this outbreak was abolished! The Board of Health and the Government did their utmost in supporting the leper colony and in alleviating the needs of the sick but their assistance was far beneath the needs, urgent necessities and requirements of his unfortunate people. Again Damien pleaded their cause by

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