

- In 1873 a young Belgian priest by the name of Damien De Veuster began ministering to a colony of lepers quarantined on the Hawaiian island of Molokai.
- He volunteered for this duty when he learned of the terrible conditions in which the lepers lived. Cut off from the world, the leper colony was lacking basic human necessities such as proper food and medical care, as well as a lacking access to spiritual care.
- And so Fr. Damien went to become, as he said: “a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ.” When he arrived, Fr. Damien found the lepers’ deteriorating physical condition matched only by the deterioration of their souls through immoral living.
- They were lepers inside and out: rotting both physically and spiritually. Yet Fr. Damien persevered, living amongst them as an equal. This holy man tended to their wounds, built homes and furniture for them, constructed coffins and dug graves.
- Fr. Damien also helped the lepers recover a sense of personal dignity by organizing them to improve their surroundings. He led them in building roads, schools, hospitals and farms, and most importantly Fr. Damien preached, and taught, and administered the Sacraments.
- While Fr. Damien wasn’t given the miraculous power to heal the lepers’ physical illness, he was able to heal their souls and lead them to faith in our Lord.
- After 16 years of faithful ministry to these outcasts, the saintly Fr. Damien died after contracting leprosy himself. He was a martyr of charity. And this past Friday was the 10th anniversary of his canonization.
- Interestingly, leprosy is a main focus of both the first reading and the Gospel today. In biblical times perhaps the worst illness one could contract was leprosy. It was a terrible suffering for those who contracted it.
- Not only was it painful and cause disfigurement in its victim, leprosy was terrible because those who contracted it became social outcasts who were quarantined from the larger community, just as were the folks St. Damien worked with.
- While leprosy is not really a threat to us in our time and place, the leprosy stories we hear give us something to ponder nonetheless. Certainly, leprosy is an apt metaphor for sin, because sin, too, disfigures us and isolates us. Just as leprosy rots the flesh, sin rots the soul.
- Just as leprosy causes its victims to be separated from society, sin causes us to be separated from God.
- Our stories of lepers being healed should lead us to consider for a moment what we want most to be healed in our life. What sin most separates us from God? What sin most disfigures the image of Christ within us?
- Yet as we ponder the sin or sins that we recognize are most disfiguring to us, we should also be encouraged by the miracles we hear about today. Jesus is merciful, and He has pity on those who ask for His mercy.
- But note that in both the first reading and the Gospel today, the lepers are healed only after an act of faith on their part.
- In the first reading Naaman is cured only after he agrees to bathe in the Jordan, even though he doesn’t understand the necessity of doing so.
- In the Gospel the 10 lepers are cured when they obey Christ’s command to go show themselves to the priests. There’s an act of faith on the part of the 10 lepers in obeying Christ in this manner.

- So we see the necessity of faith when asking God for healing. Our Lord isn't someone to bargain with. He isn't someone we can pay for a service. He's Love Itself. And He wishes to be believed in and loved by His creatures.
- He wants us to have faith in Him, to hope in His saving grace, and to love Him above all else – with our whole hearts, minds, soul, and strength.
- Last Sunday I spoke of how the virtues of faith, hope, and charity are increased within us when we persevere through suffering. None of us, of course, likes to suffer. Yet suffering with faith, hope, and love never goes unnoticed by our Lord. He rewards it richly.
- You see, suffering – in whatever form it comes to us – is always an invitation to trust God more deeply. It's not a sign that He's ignoring us or necessarily punishing us. No, suffering is God's way of gracing us with an opportunity to become holier.
- When we're willing to embrace our sufferings with faith, hope, and charity, these virtues are strengthened within us, and sometimes our suffering is alleviated – as it was for the lepers in our readings today. Yet what do we do when our suffering is not alleviated?
- What do we do when Jesus doesn't answer our plea for His pity?
- First of all, we give thanks! Our readings show us that it's important to thank God when He answers our prayers, but it's even more important to thank Him when things don't go the way we want them to.
- Truly, we cannot be grateful enough to God for all that He does for us. And if God does not answer a prayer for us as we wish, if He doesn't alleviate a particular suffering, it's because He wants us to bear that cross for a reason! It means He has something better in mind for us!
- The lives of the saints bear this out for us. In the case of St. Damien of Molokai, he had the opportunity to leave the leper colony. He knew that being there, living amongst the physical and moral filth of that leper colony, was exactly what God wanted for him.
- And in embracing that cross so generously as he did: offering up his sufferings in reparation for sin and praying daily for the conversion of the lepers, St. Damian was purified of his own sins and was used so beautifully by God to restore many souls to His saving grace.
- As he got into the habit of seeking the welfare of his lepers before his own, St. Damien very naturally came to the spiritual maturity and generosity that enabled him to offer up his very life for the salvation of the souls entrusted to him. And he's a saint for doing so.
- When a holy man or woman so generously gives his or her life up to God in complete abandonment, and does so out of charity and love for others, God accepts that sacrifice. In this way, St. Damien's suffering and death became like a sweet incense rising up to God.
- Brothers and sisters: what is your biggest cross? What troubles you more than anything else? While it is a good and holy thing to ask for the suffering to be removed from your life, are you willing to bear this cross with faith, hope, and love if God desires that for you, and offer it up for others?
- Sometimes God heals our infirmities and answers our prayers according to our wishes. When He does so, our obligation is to thank Him generously and live with greater faith, hope, and charity.
- And when God doesn't relieve our suffering or answer our prayers as we wish, we must thank Him all the more – for it means that He's inviting us to enter more deeply into His own suffering and death. May we all learn to trust God more deeply by generously embracing whatever crosses He gives, offering it all for the salvation of souls.
- St. Damien the Leper, pray for us.