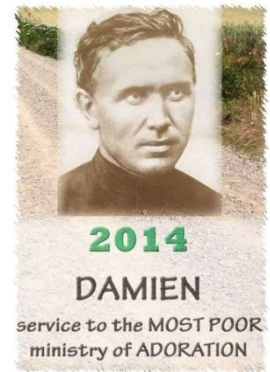


# The calabash of poi

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The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction.

**I would love them very much and I would gladly give my life for them like our Divine Saviour.**

Damien's letter to his parents  
March, 1865

*Evangelii Gaudium* 88  
Francis

The school in Paccha, Huancayo (Peru)

"We've already talked a lot about Father Damien. Now is the time to do something concrete for the needy who are all around us." This is what one of our provincials wrote recently in his province's newsletter.

I believe that this brother's challenge reflects the desire of many. This desire often runs up against the frustration of not knowing exactly what direction to go in. Can we help one another in looking for new ways? In this letter I would like to contribute to that search with an image and a proposal.

## A desire

The invitation comes to us from many directions. The General Chapter encourages us to evangelize on the margins. Pope Francis is continually asking us to go to the periphery, that we be "a Church that goes out". He tells us that things cannot just remain the way they are and that the Church needs a real pastoral conversion at all levels.

Just two days ago, Francis asked the bishops of Italy, "not to cling to pastoral plans from the past, which in fact are generic, inconclusive, fragmented and of little influence. Instead adopt a pastoral plan that hinges on the essential." (May 19, 2014)

Let us go out. Let us go further! It's what a lot of us want. But, how do we do it? Where do we go? Why leave what we know how to do and which is so good for so many people? Will we be able to do other things different from those to which we are accustomed?

This desire can end up in sheer frustration if we don't look for a specific way of realizing it. We can talk a lot about religious life that offers newness but without getting specific; we speak high sounding beautiful words that arouse dissatisfaction with what we are and what we do but in the end don't help us move forward because they don't indicate a specific direction. This doesn't help us. Desire seeks a channel to express itself generously.

They say that a cat isn't really a cat until it doesn't let the mouse go. A cat who always eats prefabricated croquettes will never know what it's capable of. However, when a mouse appears, its feline instinct is aroused and it jumps, runs and hunts. What will the "mouse" be that wakes us up, that sets our lives on fire and liberates us from our routine?

## An image

According to the testimony of Dr. Woods, who spent time at Molokai in 1876, Damien ate *poi* with the lepers from the common calabash, where everyone dipped their fingers. Dr. Mouritz, who arrived at the leprosarium in 1884, relates that *"in his gentleness, Damien never prohibits the lepers from entering his house; they can enter day and night."*

What "mouse" awakened such openness and closeness in Damien? He tells us himself, love for his people. *"I love them very much and would willingly give my life for them."* Only love leads to that hearty tenderness that overcame all barriers to taking care of the other specifically and directly.

Enough discussions, enough distance: better to have open doors and our hand in the calabash of *poi*. That was Damien's response to his own desire to be with the sick of Molokai. He didn't just talk about them or do things for them. His response was to BE-WITH them "in person".

## A proposal

How can we provide an outlet to this desire for pastoral conversion and renewal of our life and mission? I'm going to dare to make a proposal inspired by Damien. The proposal is this: hospitality for the poor.

Hospitality means living with the other. It can take different forms: bringing them into your own house, or dedicating a good amount of time to being with the other, sharing with him the conditions of life. Hospitality is always reciprocal. You welcome the other into your home, into your life; you share with him time, meals, the calabash of *poi*. At the same time you are welcomed, visited, transformed and blessed by the presence of the other.

*When we live out a spirituality of drawing nearer to others and seeking their welfare, our hearts are opened wide to the Lord's greatest and most beautiful gifts. Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God. (Evangeli Gaudium 272).*

Let us do this with the poor, with those on the margins. Let us give time, lots of time, to being and walking with them. With real people, whose name and life story we learn, people that we come to love even to the point of willingly giving our life for them.

This can be done, for example, by letting people stay in our houses (travelers, immigrants, former prisoners, the homeless etc.) or by going to visit the poor who are

not seen, who are hidden, or committing hours and hours to listening, or working in a ministry that welcomes them, or...

We have to admit that many of us give an increasing amount of time to virtual communication with people who are far away, with folks to whom we are bound by affection and friendship. That's fine but what I am proposing is that we give still more time not to virtual contact with others but to "our close interaction" with people who would never spontaneously be part of the circle of our relationships because they are poor, they suffer, they are foreigners, they are sick, they are in prison, they are different...Let us go toward them, let us put our hand in the same calabash of poi, let us love them and allow ourselves to be loved by them...and everything else will change.

And so then all of a sudden there is the "mouse" and we will have discovered why we were made.

