

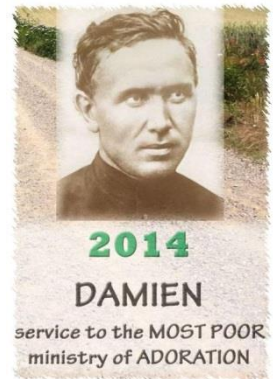
Joy

Javier Álvarez-Ossorio ssc
Superior General

INFO SSCC Brothers No 82 – 8 July 2014



Algeciras (Colombia)
June 8, 2014



**The joy and happiness
that the Sacred Hearts
have given to me
make me believe that
I am the happiest
missionary
in the world.**

Damien's letter to Pamphile
November 9, 1887

Only in the contemplation of Jesus crucified do we find the real reason for wanting to be poor.

A short time ago I spent three days with a sharp pain in the pit of my stomach. I had just returned to Rome having been away for almost a month and I came back to a desk piled up with pressing matters and the computer in-tray full.

I didn't know what caused me such discomfort in the intestines. Had I eaten something rotten? Was it an infection such as I had when I was in Africa? Was I overtired? Was it stress? The fact is that I was not able to rest at night and during the day everything became particularly burdensome: conflicts, the long faces of angry brothers, the silence of those who would not respond, letters from brothers which were very sensitive, confusion about the way forward, people with their own agenda, my own mediocrity, the inescapable solitude....

Finally I went to the doctor. I gave him a dramatic account about my sickness. He didn't give it too much importance. He prescribed an antacid. Two hours later I was like new. No sign of pain. I ate with a voracious appetite. I had a great siesta.

By the afternoon, the problems seemed more bearable. The hot air of the Roman summer became a friendly caress. I once again heard the sound of the birds in the trees surrounding the General House. The shouts of the brothers playing Ping-Pong put me in a good mood. The more weighty matters did not darken the mood.

As I was going down to the chapel to pray a little, I laughed at myself. How small we are! How easy it is for something minor to become the crossing point between a spirit that is distressed and a spirit that is light, between a harsh sadness and a soft joy. And how can we compare our petty pains to the unimaginable suffering of so many others.

How did Damien cope in Molokai when leprosy gripped his body and mind and stole the sense of wellbeing that health gives us? How did he manage to hold on to joy in the face of the miseries of sickness, the demands of the work, the bitterness of conflict, the imminence of death?

"The joy and happiness that the Sacred Hearts have given to me make me believe that I am the happiest missionary in the world" wrote Damien to his brother a year and a half before his death. This is a very well-known quote, but no less striking. Often we only cite the second half (.... the happiest missionary in the world); however, what Damien says can only be understood if we meditate on the start: the happiness that comes from the Sacred Hearts. What does this mean?

There are many, noble, joyful moments that can colour life. The joy of friendship, of a work well done, of beauty, of harmony among people, of feeling useful, of loving and being loved All genuine occasions of joy, but such joys can be snatched away from us: a cooling down of the friendship, people no longer appreciating us, work becoming banal, strengths weakening, the heart no longer at peace, the suffering of the people I care. And besides all this, my stomach hurts.

Jesus spoke of a joy that no one can take away from us. (John 16:22) It is a joy that allows us to live with patient faithfulness through times when the ministry is hard work and persevere through adverse times without our soul becoming poisoned. Without this joy, we are fragile, weak and bland and we are unable to 'take our part in suffering for the Gospel' (2 Tim 1,8).

Damien was sturdy and hard, he endured, he fought the good fight, and finished the race preserving not only his faith, but also joy. Damien found the source of that joy that nothing can take away. The Hearts of Jesus and Mary, together, show the love that God has for us. That's enough to be happy. Unbelievable but true.

St. Benedict in his Rule warns that *"there is a bitter zeal, a bad spirit, which separates us from God and leads to hell"*, but at the same time he states that there is *"a good zeal which separates us from vices and leads us to God and eternal life."* Thus he invites the monks to *"exercise this zeal (good) with all the fervor of love"* (Ch. 72). Damien practised this good zeal that he lived in love and in joy. That is the gift of the Sacred Hearts.

Even though his stomach hurt. Even though leprosy would kill him. Even though he was left alone. Even though his heart was wounded.

