

15 April

DIES NATALIS OF SAINT DAMIEN DE VEUSTER



ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH

Here is how Father Wendelin Moellers, who was present on site, described the last days of Damien:

On Saturday March 23rd he was, as usual, active, coming and going. It was the last time I saw him thus. Beginning March 28 he never left his room. That day he put in order his daily affairs. After signing his papers, he said to me: *"How happy I am to have given all to Monseigneur! Now I die poor, having nothing of my own."*

On Thursday March 28th he began to be bedridden. On Saturday 30th he made his preparation for death. It was really inspiring to see him; he seemed so happy. When I had heard his general confession, I made my confession to him, and then together we renewed the vows that bind us to the Congregation. The next day, he received the Holy Viaticum. All day he was cheerful, joyful, as usual.

"See my hands? –he told me; All the wounds are healing and the crust is becoming black –that is a sign of death, as you know very well. Look at my eyes. I have seen so many lepers die that I cannot be mistaken. Death is not far off! I should like to see Monseigneur once more, but God is calling me to keep the Passover with Him. May God be blessed."

Then he only thought of preparing to die. There was no way to be wrong: it was very obvious that death was approaching.

On April 2nd he received the Extreme Unction from the hands of Reverend Father Conrardy. *"How good God has been –he told me during the course of that day– to have preserved me long enough to have two priests at my side to assist me in my last moments, and then to know that the good Sisters of Charity are at the leprosarium. That is my 'Nunc dimittis'. The future of the work with the lepers is assured. I am no longer necessary to them. So before long I shall go up yonder."*

"—When you are there, Father—I said—, you won't forget those whom you are leaving orphans." –Oh , no!– was the reply–; If I have any credit with God, I shall intercede for all who are in the leprosarium."

I pleaded with him to leave me his mantle, like Elijah, so I could inherit his big heart. *"What would you do with it? —he asked– It is full of leprosy."* I then asked for his blessing instead. He blessed me with tears in his eyes; he then blessed the courageous daughters of St. Francis whose presence he had prayed so much for.

The following days, Father Damian felt better; we even conceived the hope to still keep him for some time. The sisters came to visit him often. What I admire most in him was his extraordinary patience. Him, so passionate, so alive, so strong, even when he was so badly bed-ridden, though without showing much suffering. He was lying on the floor, on a poor straw mattress just like the simplest and poorest of the lepers, and it took no small effort on our part that he finally accepted a bed. And such poverty! He, who spent so much to relieve the lepers' suffering, forgot about himself to the point of having neither spare clothes, nor bed sheets.

His commitment to the Congregation was admirable. How many times he told me: *"Father, you'd represent me for the Congregation, would you not? We will recite all the prayers of the Congregation. How sweet it is to die as child of the Sacred Hearts."*

He asked me several times to write to our reverend father and tell of his sweetest consolation in this time of death as a member of the Sacred Hearts Congregation.

Saturday, April 13th, it was worse, and all hope to keep him vanished. Shortly after midnight, he received the Good Lord for the last time; he should soon meet Him face to face. From time to time he lost consciousness. When I went to see him, he recognized me, spoke to me, and we bid our farewells, because I had to go

to Kalaupapa the next day, a Sunday. The next day, after the offices, I returned; I found the good priest strong enough, but his ideas were not very clear. I could see in his eyes the resignation, the joy, the satisfaction; but his lips could no more articulate what was happening in his heart; from time to time he shook my hand affectionately.

Monday, April 15th, I received a note from Rev. Fr. Conrardy who told me that the priest was dying. I hastened to go with him, but while on the way there another letter came to announce his death.

He died without any effort, as if asleep; he died quietly, after nearly sixteen years amid the horrors of Leprosy. The Good Shepherd gave His life for the sheep. When I arrived, he was already wearing his cassock. All signs of leprosy had disappeared from his face, the wounds in his hands were all dry.

At about 11 o'clock, we carried him to the church, where he remained exposed overnight until 8:00 the following day, surrounded by lepers who prayed for their revered father. In the afternoon of Monday, the nuns came to adorn the coffin; they lined the interior part with white silk and covered the exterior with black cloth and a white cross.

The next April 16th, I celebrated Mass for my dear colleague. After Mass, the funeral procession began marching; we passed the new church to enter the cemetery. The cross bearer led the way, then came the musicians and members of an association, then the sisters, women and girls, and the coffin carried by eight white men, lepers; Behind the coffin walked the officiating priest, accompanied by Rev. Fr. Conrardy and the acolytes, followed by the brothers with the boys and men.

Father Damien began his life on Molokai in the greatest poverty, to be obliged to spend the first night under a large tree. Honoring his wish to be buried under the same tree, a pandanus, during his illness I had already prepared a pit on the indicated place. This is where his body lies, awaiting the glorious resurrection. It is facing the altar. The tomb is covered with a thick layer of cement. This is where the precious remains of the good Father Damien are contained, that the world rightly calls the hero of charity.

Molokai, 17 April 1889

Fr. Wendelin, ss.cc.