

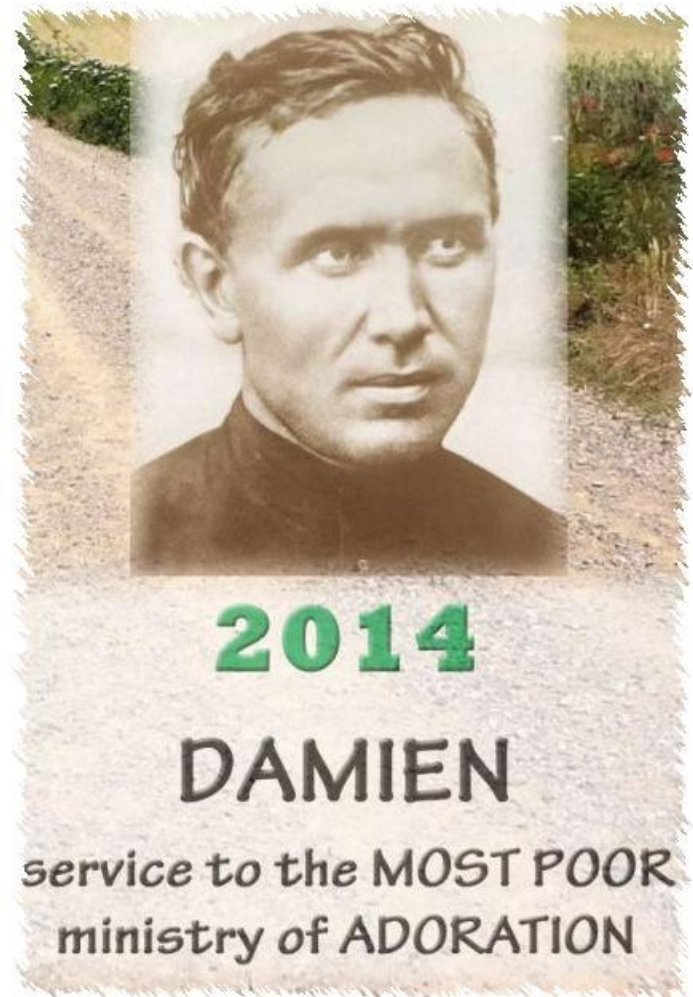
2014 - Damien

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My dear brother, it is really only at the foot of the altar that we find the necessary strength in our isolation. It is there that I meet you each day, as well as all the dear fathers of our beloved Congregation. Without the Blessed Sacrament, a situation like mine would be unbearable. But with the Lord at my side I am always joyful and happy.

Damien's letter to Pamphile
December 13, 1880



In 2014 it will be 150 years since Damien arrived in Honolulu on March 19, 1864 and also 150 years since his priestly ordination on May 21 when he was just 24 years old. We will also be celebrating the fifth anniversary of his canonization on October 11, 2009.

However those anniversaries are not why we are proposing 2014 to the Congregation as a **"Damien year"**. The reason that Damien is part of the General Government's plan of animation is the statement of our last General Chapter, "Our brothers, Damien, the twentieth century martyrs and Eustaquio are an inspiration for our mission." (Mission 20) Last year (2013) we focused on the martyrs of the twentieth century. In 2015 we will look at Eustaquio. During this year that has just begun, let us find our inspiration in Damien.

The General Chapter also said, "Think of Damien De Veuster, who leaving home, family and country gave himself generously to the service of those abandoned on Molokai, opening possibilities for those who had lost hope and coming to identify himself with his beloved leprous patients even to the point of death." (Mission 4) "Damien invites us to go to the people who live in extreme poverty." (Mission 20)

Much has been said and written about Damien. It is not the General Government's intention to add to the literature about him. At the end of this letter, you will find references to some excellent works on Damien. What we do want to do is issue a call to action. In the light of who Damien was, might we do some simple, humble, small ...or big things during this year, which respond to what our SSCC vocation is asking of us today?

This call to action focuses on two specific areas: service to the poorest of the poor and the ministry of adoration. These are two areas that the General Chapter emphasized and that Damien had a particular passion for.

This letter is meant as an introduction to this year dedicated to Damien and as a brief presentation of the two dimensions we have chosen (service to the poor and adoration).

Damien, child of the Sacred Hearts

It would be irresponsible to set out following in the footsteps of Damien and even more to ask others to join us, if we did not realize that a love such as his requires great inner spiritual strength. Sometimes people fall to pieces because they take on commitments for which they do not have sufficient inner resources, or they get frustrated because they set ideals for themselves that they are incapable of living out. Like the house built on rock (Mt. 7:24-25), the life of Damien withstood adversity because he kept his hope secure in the sure hand of the Lord.

In the meeting of the Superiors General with the Pope on November 28, Francis asked us not to "play" at being with the poor and not to "play" at being prophetic, but to be true servants of those who suffer in the everyday reality of life. Our involvement with the poor becomes a "game" when it is fleeting; when we undertake it keeping open the possibility of giving up if we tire of it; when it is valued more for the personal enrichment it brings us than the service that others expect of us; or when we have a lot of correct talk, but very little real action that really affects our way of living. On the other hand, our service ceases to be a game when we don't center it on our needs, expectations or mood, but on others, people in whom Christ suffers in the flesh; and when that affects us physically in the way we live and the commitments we make.

As Mother Teresa would say, we have to love until it hurts. When body and soul hurt, it is then we know that we're not just "playing" but really loving. Many of you, brothers, know what this is all about, because you serve and love at the cost of sacrificing your health, your security, your preferences and your attachments. And at times it means putting up with scorn and isolation as consequence of the commitment of your religious profession.

This is the zeal that the Good Father would speak of, "They must sacrifice themselves out of zeal for the Lord; they will be unfaithful to their most essential vow the moment they want to live just for themselves and not work for the salvation of their brothers."¹

Damien didn't play at anything. Damien lived, he acted, he gave himself... in truth. The inner edifice that sustained his life resisted great adversity because it was solidly founded on the love of God understood in the spirit of our SSCC charism.

¹ Memoir on the title Zealots, December 6, 1816

"Damien was a true son of the Congregation and was penetrated by the SSCC spirit; because of that he can speak to us." ² In spite of being obliged to live alone for many years and to have a rather tense relationship with some of his superiors, Damien's dedication can only be understood in light of his consecration to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in the Congregation.

He himself explained who he was and what he did as a fruit of his religious profession, "It was by the remembrance of having laid under the funeral pall twenty-five years ago- the day of my vows-that I risked the danger of contracting this terrible illness in doing my duty here, and trying to die more and more to myself." ³ And on his deathbed he would exclaim, "How sweet it is to die a child of the Sacred Hearts!" ⁴

During his years of formation, Damien received the spiritual heritage of the Good Father mainly through his Novice Master, Caprasius Verhaege, and the Superior of the community in Louvain, Wenceslas Vincke. "However, the one who had most influence on Damien was the then Superior General in Paris, Father Euthyme Rouchouze, whose lessons on the founders of the Congregation, the spirituality of the Sacred Hearts, and indispensable fidelity to the rule, left a profound mark on Damien. Later as a missionary, Damien wrote to him each year as prescribed. In those letters one feels the heartfelt affection of the disciple toward the master."⁵ In a letter dated August 1874 five years after the death of Father Rouchouze, Damien still recalled with appreciation the teachings of the Superior General who preached in several of his retreats, probably the one in preparation for his profession (1860) and the one he made with his traveling companions shortly before leaving for the islands of the Pacific. (1863)

Euthyme Rouchouze was the third Superior General of the Congregation, serving from 1853 to 1869. His predecessor, Raphaël Bonamie, lived through the turbulent period that followed the death of the founders. The internal conflicts of that period led to the departure of a group of brothers and sisters from the Congregation, who rejected any change in the original Constitutions (the so called "schism"), and caused serious tensions between the brothers' branch and the sisters'. Bonamie, as well as the Mother General at the time, Constance Jobert, had to resign at the request of the Holy See.

Rouchouze took on the challenge of rebuilding communion and he resolved to give a new impulse to the spiritual renewal of the Congregation that was still young and fragile. Some consider Rouchouze a "second founder," for he dedicated himself to giving the Congregation's spirituality a theological expression. With his yearly letters and the retreats he preached, he clarified many elements of the charism and even created an organic vision that was able to sustain the religious life of the brothers and sisters.

What was it that Damien heard from Rouchouze about SSCC spirituality? I am going to try to synthesize it under a few essential headings:

² Patrick Bradley, *Father Damien, SSCC missionary*, p. 6, 1990

³ Letter to Mgr. Köckemann, October 29, 1885

⁴ Notes of Fr. Wendelin Moellers, April 17, 1889

⁵ Jan De Volder, *De geest van Damiaan -the spirit of Damien-*, 2009, chapter 1

- JESUS AND MARY - We are consecrated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. These two hearts are intimately united in virtue of the mystery of the incarnation. God comes to us when Jesus is born of Mary. The union of these two hearts, the mystery of love and redemption blooming from them, is the vital principal of our Congregation. We live and die in their service.
- FAMILY – The Sacred Hearts exercise a parental role toward us. We are their sons and daughters. For that reason we are brothers/sisters. We are brothers and sisters because Jesus and Mary bring us into a new family. In that family, the sons and daughters try to resemble their parents.
- FOUR AGES – In order to know and be steeped in the love manifested in Jesus and Mary, we should know the real life of Jesus, as the Gospels present it, in all its stages (childhood, adolescence, public life, death on the cross) and do particular ministries that help us draw close to the sentiments of Jesus and Mary (schools, missions, adoration, asceticism etc.)
- WOUNDED HEARTS – The hearts of Jesus and Mary are wounded by the evil that we all do. Anyone who knows the Sacred Hearts develops a deep awareness of the power of evil acting in the world and of the sin that causes such suffering to people. The poor, sinners and the afflicted are the suffering flesh of Jesus, his least brothers and sisters. We are called to enter into the interior suffering of the hearts of Jesus and Mary, broken (“offended”) by the lack of love and by the disdain for God’s sons and daughters.
- REPARATION – The purpose of the Congregation is to repair this suffering. We are ready to do everything necessary to relieve the sorrow in the heart of God caused by the lack of love among humans. The son or daughter of the Sacred Hearts forgets himself and offers himself as a VICTIM (“the spirit of immolation”), that is, unreservedly and throughout one’s life, so as to share in God’s work of saving the world through love.
- ADORATION – Adoring Jesus in the Eucharist, we bring him our sin and that of the world, we intercede for suffering humanity and for ourselves, we let him draw us into the shelter of his loving heart, and we find there the strength to be his servants and witnesses.
- DEVOTION – The purpose of the Congregation is also to spread the faith, to proclaim the love of God, which is unknown by so many. We want people to become enflamed by this love and get caught up in it. This is what we call “devotion to the Sacred Hearts.”

This is what Damien learned of the founders from Euthyme Rouchouze. Damien assimilated this and it became the foundation of his inner self. This way of living the faith directed all his energies and forged the robust and committed missionary that we know. The SSCC vocation was for Damien a spiritual itinerary, a journey along which he savored God in an overwhelming way, a path that would lead him to say without exaggeration and from the heart:

“My greatest joy is to serve the Lord in these poor sick children, who are rejected by other people”⁶

“The joy and contentment that the Sacred Hearts lavish on me make me think that I am the happiest missionary in the world.”⁷

Service of the poorest of the poor and the ministry of adoration

Damien can shed light on many dimensions of our life. The General Government suggests that during this year we concentrate on two that were emphasized by the last General Chapter.

Service to the poorest of the poor

Is it really necessary to go on about Damien giving himself to the very poor and marginalized, loving them to the end even at the cost of his life? I’m not going to bore you going back over all that. It’s as clear as it can be.

In paragraph 20 of the document on Mission, in the section “To evangelize on the margins,” the General Chapter says,

This Chapter makes an appeal to all the brothers for this same missionary spirit to pervade and transform all of our apostolates. At the same time the Chapter asks the major communities of the Congregation over the next six years to commit to implementing some missionary presence directed explicitly to these marginalized situations: those who live in extreme poverty, those who experience difficulty in believing, the many who seek reconciliation, health and peace in today’s world.

We repeat that call and during this year we would like to stress the call to move toward those **who live in extreme poverty**, after the example of Damien.

Damien did much for the poor sufferers of Hansen’s disease on Molokai. Damien decided to remain among them forever. “Doing” and “being”, let’s look at those two dimensions:

- a) **DOING** something for the poor. We should all be taking some action for the poor. There are many ways of doing that: collecting money, sending needed goods to aid projects, educating young people for justice, raising consciousness about situations of suffering, praying for those who are less fortunate, supporting those who are involved in service to the marginalized, dedicating some of our time to volunteer work, adopting a more austere lifestyle, demanding that political institutions adopt greater social awareness etc. I believe that in all the places where the Congregation is present and in all the works that we do, we can do something for the poorest of the poor.

⁶ Letter to his family, November 25, 1873

⁷ Letter to Pamphile, November 9, 1887

- b) **BEING** with the poor. Some not only do things for the poor, but they've taken the further step of living in such a way that they spend most of their time with the poor. Being with the poor allows us to create personal relationships, bonds of affection and friendship. The poor cease to be a sociological category and become faces with a name, friends, people who complicate my life and for whom I am ready to sacrifice myself if necessary. Damien's real love for the sick on Molokai made his Christian witness credible. Being with the poor made his charity genuine. It was not some kind of unhealthy paternalism or just an emotional release⁸. Those who are with the poor are very likely to be struck by the presence of Jesus in his most lowly brothers and sisters and they can better understand his praise of the Father "who has revealed these things to the childlike." (Lk. 10:21) Being with the poor can involve many things: moving to another house, living in another place, being committed to other things, having other friends, being more often with those who are not members of my family or long-time friends, leading a more frugal life, giving up comforts, adopting new ways of speaking... As Pope Francis says often, the periphery does not come to us. It's we who have to go to the periphery. It means an exodus, a departure that uproots us. Being with the poor is a blessing, because it leads us to understand God's word in a new, fresh and deeper way. That is what Damien experienced, "It's in places that are poor and abandoned... that the Good God always gives me the most consolation."⁹

It's clear that we can do many things for the poor without being with the poor. However, it's more in keeping with our religious life to actually be with the poor. This was the desire of God himself in the incarnation of his Son, Jesus (*Emmanuel*, God-with-us). In different parts of the Congregation there are brothers who are in direct contact with situations of great poverty. However we can surely expand our presence among the poorest of the poor. The challenge that Damien offers us is this: are there not more brothers in the Congregation who can be with the poor, giving themselves to live and work among them and with them?

Along that line, let me tell you about some projects that the General Government is involved in.

You are aware that we are trying to set up a new international community in Louvain, as was requested by the General Chapter. An important aspect of the community's PARL will be precisely "to be with" the marginalized. We are in conversation with people working in prison ministry in Belgium, looking for how we might be able to welcome some people who are getting out of prison in the community's house, helping them in their transition toward reintegration in society. Our brothers will live in the house with these people. It will be difficult, it will involve complications. However we are confident that the fact that we, religious, share our life with our brothers who are going through a difficult moment in their lives, will be a simple but authentic way of making reparation that is part of our commitment and a beautiful way of continuing Damien's way of living and serving.

In the Generalate we have also raised the question of how we could be closer to people in need, in spite of the fact that the particular characteristics of our presence here make an ongoing commitment to the marginalized difficult. A short while ago the Vicariate of Rome asked religious with large buildings in the city to offer hospitality to immigrants, who arrive by sea from the north of Africa. We have spoken with Caritas Rome and have offered one or two rooms in the Generalate for temporary hospitality for people in need. What a way to complicate your life, you could say. That's true but it would be a way that we could "be" a little with the poor each day, sharing our house and our table with them. It's not likely that they will take us up on our offer but it could be that at some point they will send the family members of children who come to the hospitals in Rome from other parts of Italy to stay with us for a few days. We'll see what happens.

⁸ "A witness becomes genuinely relevant only through loving and selfless presence among the poor", Jan De Volder, chapter 10

⁹ Letter to Pamphile, March 1865

Another recent concern has been for the victims of the conflict in Syria. There are many displaced because of the war living in drastic conditions in Lebanon and Jordan. The Syrian Christians are suffering especially, for besides fleeing the horrors of the war as everyone else, they suffer systematic persecution on the part of the armed Islamic militias. I and some other superiors general have been in contact with the bishops in Syria through the Vatican. Our desire was to send some religious to Syria or Lebanon to be with the Christians and the refugees. However sending personnel seems very complicated at the present time. They have requested economic aid. We have taken the responsibility for buying winter clothing for 300 children. Thanks to all of you who have contributed something! In this case, we are not able to “be” there, but at least we have been able to “do” something.

So let us ask ourselves, brothers, what can we do? Where can we be? Let us ask ourselves, decide and do something.

Ministry of Adoration

Neither is it necessary to point out the importance that Eucharistic adoration had for Damien. As he wrote to his brother Pamphile, “Without the Blessed Sacrament, a situation such as mine would be unbearable.”¹⁰

In paragraph 38 of the document on Mission, the General Chapter stated,

The Chapter wants to remind all the brothers that we have been called to the ministry of adoration which makes us participate in the attitudes and the sentiments of Jesus before the Father and before the world, and associates us especially to his redemptive work. Adoration impels us to assume a ministry of intercession and reminds us of the urgency to work for the transformation of the world according to the criteria of the Gospel, (cf. Const. 5). Each community is encouraged to renew its concrete and meaningful ways of living Adoration and each brother is asked to reaffirm his commitment to daily adoration (cf. Const. 53.4).

What can we do during this year so that we deepen our commitment to the ministry of adoration? We would propose the following:

1. **Individual Adoration daily.** When we speak of the ministry of Adoration we refer particularly to the time that each brother spends individually each day before the Eucharist. The Constitutions say that, “each brother commits himself to spend a time, to be determined by the Provincial Chapter, before the Blessed Sacrament each day.” (Cons. 53.4b) I note that in the majority of the provinces the chapter has not said anything about this. So I would suggest that we set aside at least a half hour each day for individual adoration, as the Constitutions indicated for many years. It is a service that we owe to the Church and a means –with unforeseeable consequences- through which God can configure us always more to the heart of his Son.
2. **Guides for Adoration.** Within a few days each brother will receive an envelope containing six pamphlets. They are entitled “Journeying with Damien”. One is an explanation. Four are guides for individual adoration (that can be used at any time during the year). The last is a guide for communal adoration. They are resources for adoration inspired by Damien.

¹⁰ Letter to Pamphile, December 13, 1880

3. **An hour of Adoration by everyone together** on May 9, 2014. We propose that all the brothers of the Congregation be in adoration before the Eucharist on May 9, the vigil of the liturgical feast of Damien, between 9:00 and 10:00 PM GMT. GMT time is the time in London that is taken as a reference internationally. 9:00 PM GMT May 9 would be 10:00 PM in Rome, 11:00 PM in Maputo, 4:00 PM in Lima, 11:00 AM in Papeete and 5:00 AM on May 10 in Manila. The idea is that we would all be praying before the Blessed Sacrament at the same hour, simultaneously, as a sign of our communion in the ministry of Adoration. Please put it on your calendar. Thanks. You could use the guide for communal adoration that you will receive in the envelope of pamphlets I just spoke about.

As you can see, we are proposing that we perform actions, do things. OK, let's do them. Over the course of the year, these letters in INFO will go deeper into the spirit of all this. However we are not dedicating this "Damien year" to just talking about him, or to theorizing about a few topics that he might suggest to us. We want to act inspired by what he did.

Happy New Year 2014.



SOME READINGS ON DAMIEN

Any of the following books, which are translated into different language, could be excellent reading during this year.

- Gavan Daws, *Holy man: Father Damien of Molokai*, 1973
- Edouard Brion (introduction et notes), *Un étrange bonheur - Lettres du père Damien lépreux (1885-1889)*, 1988
- Patrick Bradley, *Father Damien, missionary of the Sacred Hearts*, 1990
- Edouard Brion, *Comme un arbre au bord des eaux*, 1994
- Bernard Couronne, *Petite vie de saint Damien De Veuster*, 2009
- Jan De Volder, *The Spirit of Father Damien*, 2009