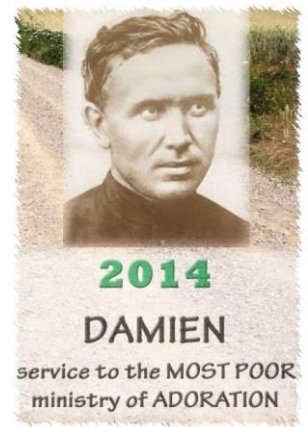


I'm not worthy

*Javier Álvarez-Ossorio ssc
Superior General*

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Damien in Kalawao
A photo by Eduard Arning
1884

Pray and ask people to pray for me, so that the Good God might see fit to strengthen me in grace, as he once did for the apostles. Ah, I am just a poor sinner.

Saint Damien of Molokai SSCC
Letter to Fr. Janvier Weiler, Secretary General
December 30, 1886

*Javier Álvarez-Ossorio ssc
Superior General*

The saints

Toward the end of his life, Damien suffered interiorly from problems of conscience. Doctor Arthur Mouritz, who was with Damien toward the beginning of 1888, detected in him "the unmistakable signs of profound sadness and anxiety. " According to the doctor, Damien was suffering a kind of "religious melancholy that troubled him at times, as strange as it might seem: disappointment at being unworthy of heaven."

Sick, pained by the cruel criticism of his superiors, without a priest companion for months at a time, aware that death was approaching, Damien saw himself as a useless, unworthy sinner. Even though he suffered symptoms of depression, we know that Damien did not give in to the temptation of scruples or despair. On the contrary, his confidence in God was firm to the end, just like that strange happiness with which he was blessed right up to his death. However this growing sense of being unworthy and sinful was a characteristic that Damien shares with many people who seriously follow the path of sanctity. The closer one gets to God, the greater the recognition of one's sin.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, who was also devoted to the poorest of the poor out of a passionate love for Jesus, for many years was burdened with a secret indescribable darkness: the pain of feeling herself unloved and unwanted by Jesus, of not being worthy of his love. "In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me." (letter to Jesus, September 3, 1959).

These feelings of unworthiness recall the reaction of the centurion in Capernaum, who says to Jesus, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof..." (Mt 8,8) or Peter, throwing himself at Jesus' feet, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." (Lk. 5:8).

Humility

It is unsettling to consider the humility of the saints. We could say that God's love, to the extent that He is transforming them in his image, opens their eyes to the truth and the truth is that we are sinners, poor and little before God. There is no room to coddle ourselves. For all the things that we do, none of it really can justify our lives. Everything is always so little, so ambiguous, so relative, so bound up with our self-centeredness...

Damien would have had good reason to consider himself unjustly judged by his detractors (among others his superiors). He could have assumed the role of victim, the one wronged and set himself up as "the good guy in the movie" against the bad guys who were attacking him. The excellence of his work for the most abandoned could have furnished him with powerful weapons to come out victorious in the public debate.

However, Damien chose the way of meekness and patience. He didn't set himself up as judge of his own case. He turned his critical gaze on himself and not toward those who were accusing him. He really made his own those words we pronounce every day in the Eucharist: at the beginning when we ask pardon (Lord, have mercy.) and toward the end when we prepare ourselves for Communion (Lord, I am not worthy.)

This is what it means to walk in truth. The friend of God, standing before God, leaves aside the masks with which we usually disguise ourselves. The truth of who we are is our littleness and unworthiness. Only God saves with his merciful love.

Cultural heresy?

The humility of the saint, who recognizes their unworthiness before God and esteems others more than oneself (Rom. 12:9) can seem like idiocy according to our present cultural parameters.

There is a certain psychology that considers as unhealthy anything that damages one's self-esteem, that places blame on a person, that prevents them from affirming themselves and coming to self-realization. It is always healthier to have a positive perception of one's self. We seek personal happiness that promotes an individual's emotional well-being. Each person has to be proud of who they are and what they do. If others do not respect my path to personal fulfillment, then I have the right to consider myself a victim and to defend myself. When my inner world falls apart, I have to distance myself from what causes the suffering and undergo an appropriate therapy that will restore the necessary equilibrium.

Given such a view of things, the humility of Damien or Mother Teresa constitutes a kind of cultural heresy, something to be "healed" and corrected.

We have to recognize the good that these psychologies contribute, warning us of the perverse effects of a neurotic mentality. However I believe that it is precisely the "unworthiness" of the saint that allows us face the reality of things. This is a hidden wisdom, accessible only by a profound- and often painful- conversion.

The saint understands that we are all creatures, little, sinners, with a narrow outlook. Always. We cannot claim to have the perspective needed to understand everything. No one can claim the title "good" (Lk. 18:19) Only God is Holy. Only God can judge. Only Jesus is "worthy to receive the scroll and break open its seals." (Rev. 5:9) The publican, who does not dare lift his eyes to heaven and knows that he is a sinner, is justified. The Pharisee, who trusts in himself thinking himself just and looking down on others, is not. (Lk. 18:9-14)

Liberation

What great consolation! What a joy to be able to say each day, "Lord, I am not worthy...!"

Life in community becomes more bearable. If we are not good, everything becomes easier. Others become nicer. We get to the point where we can forgive one another and we don't hold grudges. I no longer have reason to feel wounded or offended. I am not better than others. We are all brothers in sin and mercy. Forgiven sinners.

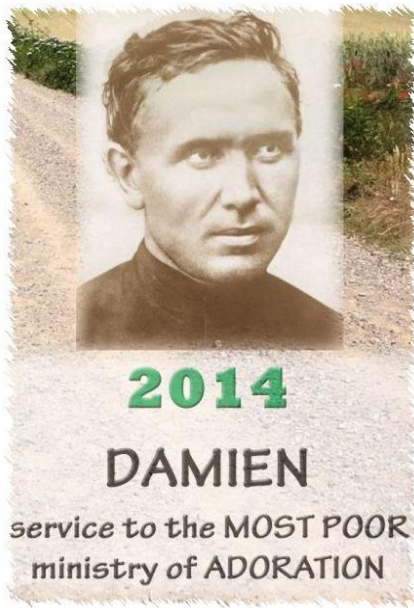
We no longer have to live in the tension of judging one another, nor do we have to worry about ridding others of their defects, nor of comparing ourselves to one another. We can put aside the hidden pleasure of accusing others, a pleasure that secretly justifies us and makes us feel good. We let God be the only judge. Looking at others with kindness of heart is awakened in us. This is how brotherhood is built.

What a liberation and consolation for those older brothers who feel useless because they don't have energy! We don't have to worry if we find ourselves in a time of life when we have to be less active, doing less things. Nor do we have to be scared when we realize that we are not nor have we been as good as we thought, or if we are ashamed of having often sung our own praises, when in reality we know that we are only poor conflicted men. What a consolation to know that is how we are and that we don't have to bear the burden of making our existence valuable. That's up to God. Only God saves. Happy fault, happy sin, happy unworthiness that make us receivers of the merciful love of God.

Thank you, Damien, for knowing yourself to be a sinner and unworthy right to the end. Your example helps heal our false pride. Your faith helps us understand that we do not bring salvation, only Jesus brings salvation. In Jesus mercy triumphs.

May your Kingdom come. Come, Lord Jesus!





2014 ends: this year, dedicated to Damien is coming to an end. Together with **Damien**, we have recalled our ministry of adoration and the call to serve the poorest of the poor. Damien's strength that sprang from his faith in Jesus made him walk with humility, with freedom and with dedication to others. During this time of Advent we can finish this year by evaluating our lives in the light of faith and the works of Damien and asking for the gift of conversion.

The year 2015 will be dedicated to our brother **Eustaquio**. With him we will try to delve into the ministries of healing and reconciliation in light of the mystery of Redemption. The letter in INFO this coming January will speak about this. Until then, have a good Advent and a holy and blessed Christmas celebration.

