

2026 History Essay Contest

Homeschool 5th Grade Winner

St. Damien of Molokai

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In 1889, 49 year old Father Damien of Molokai made a last request to three Franciscan sisters to take care of the boys in his community. This community was started in 1866, in Molokai Hawaii, to quarantine those with Hansen's disease, commonly called leprosy.

Jozef de Vuester, called "Jef," was the youngest of seven children to Flemish grain merchants. He was born in a hamlet, now Tremeloo, Belgium, in 1840. At thirteen, he left school to help his father and two older brother's work. When he was 18, his father wanted to send Jef into the grain trading part of the business, but he realized he did not have enough education, so they sent him to a boarding school to learn French. At the school, he realized that he wanted to join a religious order, and in 1859, after his brother's persuasion he joined the Society of the Sacred Hearts. He took the name Damian after a 6th century martyr. His brother was asked to go do missionary work in Hawaii but got sick, so Damian went instead. Damian arrived in Honolulu, Hawaii, after a five-month voyage and was ordained a priest by the Bishop of Honolulu.

On the nearby island of Molokai, Hawaii, there was a leper colony called Kalaupapa that was in need of helpers. When the bishop told Father Damian and two other priests to help, he gladly went to see what he could do. At Kalaupapa these three priests were only supposed to stay three months, and then go stay somewhere else so that they would not contract leprosy, but Father Damian stayed for sixteen years.

In those sixteen years he helped build homes for the homeless lepers, taught the faith to those who did not have any, and even shared his pipe with the sick lepers. He built St. Philomena Church, the first Catholic Church on the island, which led to more people in the Catholic faith. He planted vegetable gardens so that no one would be hungry and he improved water supply for the thirsty. To give people something to do he made bands and social groups. When someone died, he would say prayers over them and often make coffins and bury them. One of his most famous quotes was “I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all with Jesus Christ.”

Before Father Damian got to Molokai, the leper colony was more like a prison than a hospital. Father Damien worked hard to make it a home. He knew the residents did not have a choice to come to Molokai, so he wanted to make it a place where people felt welcome. He did a lot to improve the community, but what really matters is what he did for the people. These acts of charity helped build a community where people were known for who they were, and not just known as lepers.

Now a Servant of God, Ira B. Dutton came to help Father Damian in 1886, and stayed on Molokai for forty-four years until he died in 1931. Then Franciscan sisters came to take care of the orphan children at Kalaupapa. 1888, Father Lambert Conrardy came, and seven years after Father Damian died, he became a doctor and went on to China and found a leper colony there. The work of this one man, Father Damien, made many helpers to serve all his lepers.

Father Damien died April 15, 1889, and was canonized October 11, 2009, by Pope Benedict. One of the miracles attributed to him was healing Audrey Toguchi from cancer. He is the patron saint of outcasts and leprosy. As his last wish, Father Damian asked the Franciscan sisters to make a home for the boys with leprosy, just as they had for the girls. Father Damian wanted his work to continue not for his legacy, but because he cared for his lepers.

Saint Damien of Molokai pray for us!

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