

Damien – Program Notes

Father Damien

Born Joseph de Veusters in 1840 in a small hamlet called Tremeloo in Belgium, the man who was to serve the Settlement on Moloka'i chose the religious name of Damien upon entering the priesthood in the missionary order of the Society of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Taking the place of his brother, a priest who had suffered a bout of typhus, Damien received permission to join the mission in Hawai'i. Full of his mission early on, he wrote to his parents: "Here I am a missionary in a corrupt, heretical, idolatrous country. How great my obligations are!"

A decade later, Damien chose to join sufferers of leprosy in the "government prison," as he termed it, of the Moloka'i Settlement. During his first season, he visited each patient every week – a circuit that took five days, with each workday lasting 19 hours – while also working in the hospital, constructing homes, and helping to build coffins for the deaths that occurred daily. Damien's quick rise to authority in the Settlement aroused the resentment of many already there, as well as that of his own superiors in the Hawai'ian mission.

Through the course of his ministry on Moloka'i, Damien's views about leprosy changed: instead of a curse from God, as he initially thought leprosy to be, Damien instead came to believe that the disease could be something other than a punishment – perhaps even a blessing. Despite this belief, when his own symptoms began to appear, Damien at first maintained an anxious hope that he had not become infected. Only later did he interpret his illness as part of a divine plan, and vow to submit himself to what he was certain was God's will. He tried to continue his ministry even after he began having difficulties walking and preaching in late 1888. At age 49, Father Damien died on April 15, 1889.

Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)

From ancient times, the paralyzing disease that led to severe nerve damage, loss of feeling, and deterioration of the flesh was known as leprosy – a terrifying disease that caused disfigurement and that had no known cure. But after 1873, this condition became known as "Hansen's Disease," so named for Norwegian doctor Gerhard Armauer Hansen, who discovered the disease's true cause. Dr. Hansen found that leprosy was not hereditary, as previously thought; nor was there any foundation to the Western belief that leprosy was a punishment from God, or the Hawai'ian belief that disease was the result of the anger of either one of the many Hawai'ian gods, or a person who could channel the gods' supernatural power. Rather, a bacillus known today as *Mycobacterium leprae* is the source of the illness.

Hansen's Disease is much less contagious than many other diseases, such as AIDS, SARS, or the Ebola virus, that have raised concerns in recent decades. Although Hansen's Disease is transmitted through direct person-to-person contact, only about five percent of the world's population is susceptible to contracting the illness – and transference of the bacillus usually requires repeated exposure over a long period of time.

Dr. Hansen's important finding eventually led to the development of sulfone drugs in the 1940's at the US Public Health Service National Leprosarium in Carville, Louisiana. Since 1981, a multi-drug therapy has been administered, consisting of dapson, rifampicin and clofazimine, which kills the pathogen and cures the patient. Yet, even after scientific developments proved that quarantine of people with Hansen's Disease was unnecessary, medical policy in the US

continued to dictate that patients with Hansen's Disease were isolated until the 1980's and 1990's. Critics charged that such policies not only deprived patients of civil liberties, but also used health resources inefficiently and fostered undue social stigma against Hansen's Disease patients. Today medical treatment and social integration are the primary goals of most organizations fighting Hansen's Disease.

Resource List

History:

The Colony, by John Tayman (2006)

A Disease Apart: Leprosy in the Modern World, by Tony Gould (2005)

Carville: Remembering Leprosy in America, by Marcia Gaudet (2004)

Leper Priest of Moloka'i: The Father Damien Story, by Richard Stewart (2000)

The Lands of Father Damien: Kalaupapa, Molokai, Hawaii, by James Brocker (1997)

Exile in Paradise: The Isolation of Hawai'i's Leprosy Victims and Development of Kalaupapa Settlement, 1865 to the Present, by Linda Greene (1985)

The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature, by Saul Nathaniel Brody (1974)

Mother Marianne of Moloka'i, by L.V. Jacks (1935)

"Father Damien" (chapter) in *Lay Morals, and Other Papers*, by Robert Louis Stevenson (1911)

Biography:

Gifts from the Shore: A Kalaupapa Diary, by Roberta Jarrett (1993)

Olivia: My Life of Exile in Kalaupapa, by Olivia Robello Breitha (1988)

Village of the Outcasts, by Robert Wulff (1967)

No One Must Ever Know, by Betty Martin, edited by Evelyn Wells (1959)

The Second Miracle, by Peter Greave (1955)

Miracle at Carville, by Betty Martin, edited by Evelyn Wells (1950)

Novels:

The Pearl Diver: A Novel, by Jeff Talarigo (2005)

Moloka'i, by Alan Brennert (2003)

In the Shadow of the Pali: A Story of the Hawaiian Leper Colony, by Lisa Cindrach (2002)

Banner O'Brien, by Linda Lael Miller (2001)

My Name is Loa: A Story of Exile, Adventure, and Romance on the Island of Moloka'i, written by Dorothea N. Buckingham (1999)

For Youth: *The Dark Light*, by Mette Newth, translated by Faith Ingwersen (1998, 2004)

Film:

Moloka'i: the Story of Father Damien, directed by Paul Cox (2000)

Ways to Help

Spread the Word:

The World Health Organization estimates that today there are about 2.4 million cases of Hansen's Disease worldwide, with only two-thirds of these registered for treatment. Most cases are in Southeast Asia and Central Africa, with smaller numbers in Latin America. Approximately 6500 cases are registered in North America, with about 200 cases being diagnosed annually.

The Education Department of the National Hansen's Disease Programs (NHDP), through their Media Development Services, produces and distributes a wide range of audio-visual materials,

including VHS video cassettes and DVDs relative to all areas of HD care and research. They also offer booklets and brochures that provide both brief and detailed information about Hansen's Disease, including information on self-care for patients. To order videos, contact National Hansen's Disease Programs, 1770 Physicians Park Drive, STOP 18, Baton Rouge, LA, 70816, by fax at (225) 756-3760, or email jmajor@hrsa.gov.

Take Action:

Since 1995, the World Health Organization (WHO) has provided all endemic countries with free MDT, supplied through Ministries of Health. In December 2005, an agreement was signed between the WHO and the pharmaceutical company Novartis to extend this free provision until at least the end of 2010. WHO holds an annual World Health Day (April 7 in 2006), and provides toolkits for local organizers of World Health Day events. See the WHO website at: <http://www.who.int/world-health-day/2006/toolkit/en/>. WHO also provides information on Hansen's Disease, and can be reached at the WHO Media Centre, at telephone 41 22 791 2222, or by email at mediainquiries@who.int.

Many people with Hansen's Disease – particularly women – continue to be stigmatized within their communities worldwide. The *START* Project is a project of the Leah Pattison organization, whose mission is to support women in India who suffer from leprosy. They can be contacted by mail at **START**, C/O Mrs Sandra Pattison, Frosterley Cottage, Intake Lane, Frosterley, Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham, DL13 2TH, United Kingdom; at telephone (UK) 01388 528 497; or at email sandra@leahpattison.org.

The *American Leprosy Missions* provide medical, social, and spiritual care to people with Hansen's Disease worldwide. They can be reached by mail at American Leprosy Missions, 1 ALM Way, Greenville, SC 29601; by telephone at 1.800.543.3135 or 864.271.7040; by fax at 864.271.7062; or by email at amlep@leprosy.org.

Worldwide efforts are also coordinated by two other organizations based in the United Kingdom:

- *LEPRA* a medical development charity. They can be contacted by mail at LEPRA, 28 Middleborough, Colchester, Essex, CO1 1TG, UK; at telephone 01206 216700; by fax at 01206 762151; or by email at lepra@lepra.org.uk.
- *Leprosy Mission International*, a Christian medical organization. They can be contacted by mail at 80 Windmill Road, Brentford, Middlesex, TW8 0QH, UK; at telephone 44 (0)20 83266767; by fax at 44 (0)20 83266777; by email at friends@tlmint.org, or on the web at <http://www.leprosymission.org>.

And, a Foundation honoring Father Damien has been organized in Belgium. They can be contacted by mail at Fondation Damien, Bvd Léopold II, 263, 1081 Brussels; by telephone at 0032 (0) 2 422 59 11; or on the web (in French) at www.fondationdamien.be.