

Jesus is Mercy Made Flesh

*A Missionary Commentary on the
Sunday Readings*

Sunday Readings

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11

1 Corinthians 10:31—11:1

Mark 1:40-45

[USCCB link to the Sunday Readings](#)

Our familiar Gospel today narrates Jesus' compassionate healing of a leper who pleaded with him for mercy. This incident evokes a favorite theme of Pope Francis: *mercy*; he insists that *mercy is God's identity card*. The title of Francis' first book as pope was: *The Name of God is Mercy* (2016). Pope Francis declared 2015 as a "Year of Mercy," and he wrote the inspiring document *Misericordiae Vultus* [MV] (*The Face of Mercy*). Francis asserts that Jesus' entire life and "his person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously.... Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion" (MV 8).

Francis continues: "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life" (MV 10). "The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel.... Wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy" (MV 12). In 2014, as he ordained new priests he told them—and us: "For the love of Jesus Christ, *never tire of being merciful!*" As an Asian missionary, I fondly recall the theme of Pope Francis' January 2015 Philippine visit: *mercy and compassion*.

Saint of Mercy. This same Gospel reminds us of one of the Church's favorite saints. Jozef Damien de Veuster, popularly known as "Damien the Leper," was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 11, 2009. In 1863, Damien's own brother—an ordained priest—was assigned to the Hawaii mission, but fell ill when a typhus epidemic broke out in Louvain, Belgium. Damien, still a seminarian, petitioned his superiors to take his brother's place. He left for Hawaii in 1863 and arrived six months later; he was ordained in Honolulu in May 1864.

Damien served for nine years on the Island of Hawaii. In early 1873, he was among the priest volunteers who offered to serve the lepers who were segregated on the island of Molokai, since there was no known cure for the dreaded disease which was ravaging the island archipelago. Damien's assignment letter from Father Modeste, his religious superior, read: "You may stay as long as your devotion dictates...." Damien read the letter over and over again—until his death sixteen years later at age 49.

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Living Mercy. In Molokai Damien approached the lepers one by one, not limiting his compassion to Catholics. Damien aimed to restore a sense of personal worth and dignity in all 8,000 lepers. His cheerful disposition and desire to serve touched the lepers' hearts; his lepers always were always his first priority.

As a missionary on Molokai, Damien wrote his brother in Europe: "I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all for Jesus Christ. That is why, in preaching, I say 'we lepers,' not, 'my brethren'." Damien strove to configure himself to Christ. He died on April 15, 1889; it was Holy Week. Damien lived a transformed and transforming life. His example of service of the poor inspires us not to forget the needy right in our midst.

Notes on the Sunday Readings

First Reading

This reading gives the Levitical regulations concerning leprosy which was a highly infectious and crippling disease, isolating lepers from family and community.

Psalm

The response to the psalm reflects the grateful prayer of someone cured of a terrible disease such as leprosy.

Second Reading

Here Saint Paul is giving us guidelines of how to live uprightly in this modern, passing world.

Gospel

As Jesus begins his ministry of proclamation and mercy, he acts with heartfelt compassion, hoping his message will be properly understood and accepted as revealing the coming Kingdom of God.

Notes and Commentary by Maryknoller James Kroeger, who recently published [Walking with Pope Francis: The Official Documents in Everyday Language](#) (Orbis Books – 2023).

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