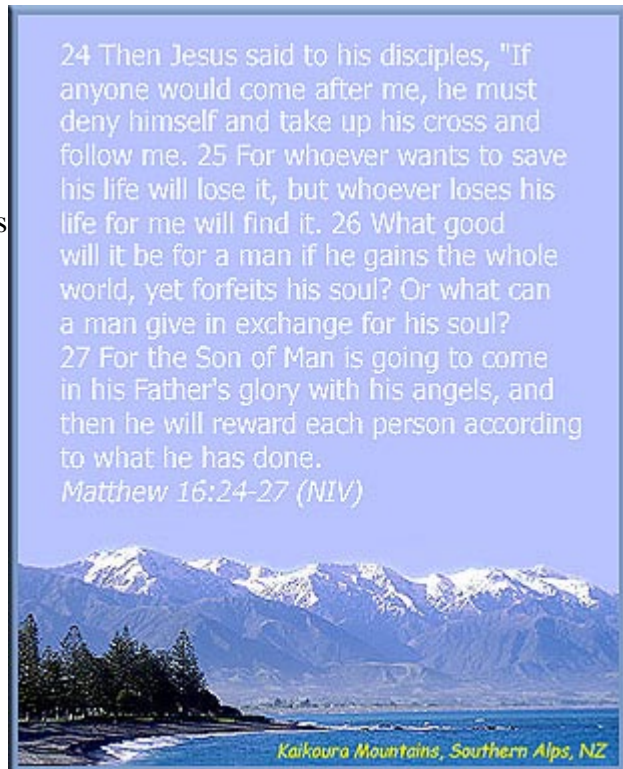


Judah @ 6:10 pm

I have just watched the DVD “*Molokai - the story of Father Damien*” on my computer and it is certainly a very moving and humbling experience. Have you ever seen the movie, or read of Father Damien? This is a true story about a young Belgian Roman Catholic priest who, in the late nineteenth century, saw his calling as living among the exiled lepers of the island of Molokai. His dedication to caring for others was wholehearted and unstinting, a story of unfaltering faith, obedience and sacrifice. Without wishing to create some kind of ranking scale here, I do think I will have to put him alongside Mother Theresa as one of those most inspiring Christians who lived according to their beliefs in ways that show the rest of us how well short of the mark we fall just coping with ordinary everyday matters.



Father Damien, before he set foot on the island of Molokai, was warned by his superiors absolutely NOT to touch the lepers. His superiors would seem to have his best interests at heart as touching would put Father Damien at risk of catching leprosy himself. From a worldly point of view, that would have been good advice at the time with someone's best interests at heart. But from a spiritual point of view, this assessment becomes somewhat debatable.

Father Damien chose straight away to forgo the advice and put his life in the hands of God. When warned again by one of the outcast lepers, he replied that he trusted God to take care of those matters for him. And if you were watching the movie and listening to Father Damien's response, you would have heard the rest of his words - *for as long as He needed him to do His Will.*

Father Damien reached out to the lepers and was not afraid to touch, holding them in his arms when they needed comfort, and showing the love of God without holding back from them. Could he have loved them quite the same if he was too scared to touch? My view is that it would have been more of an intellectual act, nothing quite as complete as the love which God asks us to give to others. More about this shortly. So did God protect him? From a worldly point of view, it would seem not. Father Damien became a leper himself and died from the disease. But the issue was not that God would keep him from getting leprosy, but would take care of those matters until he had completed what was God's Will for him. During his time on Molokai, much was accomplished. From a spiritual point of view, God did indeed do so.

Were Father Damien's superiors right to have advised him as they did? Had he followed their advice he may have saved himself from leprosy. I would say that they were right to have appraised him fully of the facts concerning leprosy, but clearly Father Damien knew whose disciple he was - and that he had another path to follow. Advice is one thing but to my mind,

his superiors could not with spiritual legitimacy make the command - to touch or not to touch - either way. Christ may command of those who would be His disciples, but some decisions are just not for others to be making for us.

[John 15](#): 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

All this must seem like sheer madness to those who know it would be a death penalty to behave in such a way. To touch a leper's wounds when there was no known cure had to be the most incredible foolishness. It was surely asking for one's life to be cut short by a most hideous death. No wonder those who are devout in such a way are often seen as crazies - so silly to believe such nonsense, that God might give them protection, that God indeed wants more people to die besides those already dying. But there is a matter of perspective here, and this is a spiritual one where life is far more than what is known to exist on this planet in this earthly time - and such a love that is willingly generous, obedient and sacrificial yet warm and feeling, is something way beyond that which humans can normally generate and sustain themselves.

[1 Corinthians 2](#) :14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

In order to counter the idea that love is just the warm feelings one may have for another but without the substance of loving deeds, there is another view commonly held these days that love is the loving deeds themselves, ones which may not necessarily come hand-in-hand with any congruent feelings. However, neither is the complete expression of love. Either one without the other is deficient.

An act of love must have the right motives, and from it comes the right feelings as well as being the right deeds. To give of oneself begrudgingly, with resentment or irritation, is not what is asked of us at all. The deed is marred by the attitude, motive and feeling behind it. What is asked of us is not merely the perfunctory performance of some duty, but the act of love where the deed is an outflowing from the joy of giving, the concern and true caring that matches the deed to the need.

[Matthew 22](#): 37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God **with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

It was this complete expression of love that Father Damien showed to the people afflicted with leprosy on the island of Molokai. He gave his whole self, body and soul, in the expression of a love that fully matched the deed to the need. What is foolishness to some is recognized and understood by his brothers and sisters in Christ. If only we all might live such a life, dealing with those daily things that others ask of us - not even life-threatening like the risk of leprosy - by choosing to give unstintingly with generosity and joy, without irritation and resentment.

1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13 (NIV)



Lake Matheson, South Island, New Zealand

[Comments \(3\)](#)

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MOLOKAI

Reviewed by Fr Richard Leonard SJ



Statue of Fr Damien on the island of Molokai

Stars: Starring David Wenham, Peter O'Toole, Sam Neil, Derek Jacobi, Leo McKern and Kate Ceberano
Director: Paul Cox
Rating: PG

THE many Catholic men in Australia named Damien, or who took that name at Confirmation, attest to the impact that the story of the leper priest had on the Catholic community here.

Australian director of Molokai, Paul Cox was one of them.

I have vivid memories of my older brother's book on Fr Damien. It included graphic photographs of him on Molokai. It also promoted the apocryphal story of how, after contracting Hansen's Disease, he addressed his congregation as 'my fellow lepers'. In fact, and even more poignantly, he did this from the day he arrived.

In 1866 a leprosy epidemic sweeps through the Hawaiian islands. The sufferers are quarantined by the British Colonial Administration on the island of Molokai. Some of them are Catholic.

In 1872 the island's Chief Administrator Meyer (Kris Kristofferson) requests a chaplain from Bishop Maigret (Leo McKern) who calls his priests together and seeks a volunteer.

The young, healthy Belgian missionary, Fr Damien (David Wenham) volunteers to go. He is told that he is not to touch anyone and that he will be replaced within three months. From the moment he gets off the boat Fr Damien disobeys the first instruction and dies on Molokai 16 years later, aged 49.

Molokai is the portrait of a saint. Paul Cox is not interested, however, in a plaster saint who never had a cross word, a bad thought or many temptations. Based on Hilde Eynikel's thoroughly researched biography, the screenplay by John Briley brings alive a man who is transparently holy, not perfect.

Fr Damien takes on all comers for the sake of his dying community. He battles his bishops, his provincial (Derek Jacobi), the Prime Minister (Sam Neill) and Dr Kalewis (Aden Young) to get them to provide the care and dignity his parishioners deserve.

When his requests fall on deaf ears, Damien appeals to Princess Liliukalani (Kate Ceberano) and the press in Europe.

This long-awaited film is not perfect. Some scenes have obvious errors and should have been re-shot.

The story gets bogged down in the middle and at 122 minutes feels a little long. There are glaring discontinuities in the lighting and sound and, for all the attention to liturgical and ecclesiastical details, there are still mistakes.

But these do not rob Molokai of an extraordinary power to tell the story of Christian sacrificial love.

David Wenham does an outstanding job in mastering the proselytising bravado, vulnerability and humanity of the young missionary. He also gets Damien's Belgian/English accent just right, which can't be said for Chris Haywood's too obvious and broad Australian accent.

Leo McKern is excellent as the bishop and so is Peter O'Toole as the atheistic Williamson. Jacobi is a little too arch as the envious provincial, and though her meeting with the lepers is a very moving moment, we probably could have done without Kate Ceberano's song.

What is most important about Molokai, however, is the message of fidelity, sacrifice and love it contains. It resonates as strongly now as ever. Blessed Damien of Molokai left our world the richer for having graced it.

Fr Richard Leonard SJ is director of the Australian Catholic Film Office and writes regularly for The Catholic Leader.

Fr Damien role is 'uplifting' – actor



David Wenham and Peter O'Toole in a scene from Molokai

Compassion, love and an unbreakable human spirit attracted David Wenham to “a life-changing experience”, portraying Fr Damien, the leper priest of Molokai. Damir Govorcin spoke to the actor

David Wenham will never forget the leper colony of Molokai in Hawaii.

“Seeing people with no hands, no skin and no thumbs ... it was a life changing experience,” says the award-winning Sydney actor.

Three years ago he took on what is arguably the most challenging assignment of his career, playing the role of the Belgian Catholic missionary Fr Damien, who volunteered in 1873 for a calling that was to cost him his life – serving as priest to the community of lepers on the island of Molokai.

David Wenham portrays the priest in *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien* (released nationally in June), an extraordinary journey into a remarkable man’s life.

For 15 years, Fr Damien almost single-handedly administered treatment and love to sufferers of what is now known as Hansen’s Disease, while fighting continual battles with government and church organisations.

He won some battles and lost some, including his own battle with leprosy, to which he finally succumbed in 1888.

David was drawn to the project by the compassion, love and unbreakable human spirit of the story.

In preparation he had to learn to speak with a Flemish accent – for which he has been applauded – and spend countless hours of research into the life of Fr Damien.

“Playing this role is very dear to me and has affected me on a personal level,” the actor says.

“Leprosy has a stigma about it, but being around these wonderful people was an uplifting experience.

“They are the most joyous people ... there’s not a hint of bitterness about them.”

During his 4½ months on Molokai he developed a close bond with the locals, both on and off screen. Many of them still suffer the effects of the disease and, at first, wanted nothing to do with the film. But, after the cast and crew earned their trust, they agreed that their remarkable stories should be told. Indeed, many of them appear in the film.

Despite the debilitating disease, David says, the locals still embrace life.

And they left an indelible mark on his own.

“Being with the patients is an experience I will never forget,” he says.

“After what they have had to endure, that they can still be upbeat about life is just amazing.”

David says the film has taught him to be tolerant of others.

“This story may have happened 150 years ago, but it’s not dissimilar to what’s happening in our country,” he says, alluding to the plight of refugees.

“It’s dangerous what is going on at this moment.

“We as a society have to learn to be more compassionate and tolerant.”

David, 36, says he drew inspiration from his parents, who instilled in him strong Catholic values.

He says his father, Bill, has worked as a volunteer for the St Vincent de Paul Society for many years.

“I know how much their faith means to my parents and I have nothing but enormous love for them,” he says.

“My father spends many hours helping the less fortunate; that inspires me to be a better person.”

David enjoys a deserved reputation as a gifted actor on both stage and screen.

He stunned audiences and critics alike with his performance as a rapist and murderer in the 1991 Griffin Theatre production of *The Boys* – and, later, in the movie version – and as the chillingly crazy firebug Doug in the stage and movie versions of Louis Nowra’s play *Cosi*.

He has starred or featured in such films as *Moulin Rouge*, *The Bank*, *Dark City*, *Greenkeeping*, *Idiot Box* and *Better than Sex*.

He set women’s hearts racing as the lovable Diver Dan in the ABC TV hit series *Sea Change*.

And his star is tipped to shine internationally with his role as Faramir in the second and third movies in the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

But of all his films, David ranks Fr Damien as the most satisfying role of his career.

And his two biggest fans, his parents, have already given him a big thumbs-up.

“Finally I have done a movie both my parents can watch,” he jokes.

“My parents are my role models and I’m just thrilled that they loved the film.”

Another attraction for him to play the role of Fr Damien (born Joseph de Veuster) was the opportunity to share the big screen with a stellar cast including the likes of Peter O’Toole, Leo McKern, Sam Neill, Derek Jacobi and Kris Kristofferson.

“Having a superb cast to work alongside only enhanced the whole experience,” David says. “It was a wonderful learning experience working with a legend like Peter O’Toole.”

MOTHER TERESA

Reviewed by Fr Richard Leonard SJ



Olivia Hussey plays the title role in Mother Teresa

Stars: Olivia Hussey and Sebastiano Somma

Director: Fabrizio Costa

Rating: PG

PLAYING in selected cinemas around Australia at present is Mother Teresa, a biopic about the saint of Calcutta.

This is a surprising film in the best sense. The production values are much higher than I was expecting, with some scenes beautifully realised by the Italian production team.

It takes up in 1946 with Mother Teresa's growing awareness of the poverty that was

surrounding her. But it also chronicles the spiritual desolation she felt for nearly 50 years.

Francesco Scardamaglia and Massimo Cerfollini's script is a homage to an extraordinary woman, but it doesn't stay away from some other controversies that surrounded her - the Logan scandal, the child trafficking charge, the number of early novices who left, the Nobel Prize dinner incident, questions about where her congregation received its money, how it was administered, and Mother Teresa's famously poor record-keeping.

But in the film, as in life, Mother Teresa's extraordinary and simple faith wins through.

Mother Teresa is touching on a number of other levels as well: How a very obedient woman must disobey her Loreto superiors, often, so that she can obey her conscience. Eventually, she has to leave her order altogether and found a new congregation.

There are a few sloppy mistakes in the direction that are distractions.

Before Vatican II, and especially as a Loreto Sister, nuns went everywhere in twos. This film has Mother Teresa going everywhere on her own.

And no nun in the 1950s would have touched a priest as much as Mother Teresa does in this film - on the hands, face and head.

On a partisan level I was sorry that the film never made clear that all the priests and bishops in Mother's early life were Belgian missionary Jesuits in Calcutta who supported, directed, protected and enabled the Blessed Teresa of Calcutta to found the Missionaries of Charity.

Mother never forgot them, and it might have been fair to their memory to have included this detail.

There is quite a deal of stilted dialogue in the script, filled with quotes taken from Mother's writings and speeches, and as good as Olivia Hussey is in the title role, the rest of the cast cannot match her ability or characterisation.

As a tribute to one of the most famous women of the 20th century, and, arguably, the most celebrated beata ever in the Church, Mother Teresa puts flesh on a complex person, who just wanted to be with Christ in and through the poor.