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In an Age of Celebrities: A True Role Model for Graduates

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Families gather this month for graduation ceremonies for sons and daughters entering the work force where Model for Grad jobs are scarce, debts are high and hope is waning. Today I am happy to report that many faithful fans around the globe celebrate a beloved role model for graduates, Damien De Veuster. This memorial beckons one to reflect on the life of one who answered the call to serve a cause greater than oneself, namely God and neighbor near or afar. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi who drew his inspiration from this humble man, "The political and journalistic world can boast of very few heroes who compare with Father Damien of Molokai. It is worthwhile to look for the sources of such heroism."

In a world more focused on material gain and personal status, let us highlight the fruits of spiritual growth and shared virtues. In an age of celebrities, Damien is a true "rock star." He devoted his life to climbing the rocky terrain of isolated villages to alleviate the plight of humanity struggling under the stars. For those graduating and searching for purpose, the life of this young man may inspire you to follow a similar path. Damien courageously dedicated himself to service of the then most "outcast" people in the world, those suffering from Hansen's Disease also known by the dreaded word "leprosy."

The "sources of such heroism" began with the teachings and prayer life in the De Veuster home. Damien was born in Belgium in 1840, the seventh of eight children in a practicing Catholic family. They were taught early to pray and read Holy Scripture together, to obey God's commandments and God's Will and to emulate the lives of saints. As a teenager Damien looked up to the 16th century Jesuit missionary priest St. Francis Xavier as his role model. Francis Xavier, in turn, was inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, the 13th century saint who was awakened to the human dignity of the outcasts in his community called "lepers." "And when I left them," St. Francis proclaimed, "what had seemed to me bitter was changed into sweetness of body and soul."

In 1863, Damien travelled by ship for 148 days to get to Hawaii where his mission took root. Was it Divine Providence that inspired him or the example set by others? Author Gavin Daws illustrates in his biography *Holy Man* that Father Damien's source of heroism was the influence of his family and faith. After his older brother Auguste who had first become a priest became ill, Damien wrote his parents of his decision to take his brother's place and go into a life of service with the simple words, "my turn." Shortly after arriving in Honolulu in early 1864, the Church ordained the 23-year-old Damien as a priest. Immediately, he began utilizing his talents as a carpenter on the Big Island building churches and homes

while caring for the poor and sick. Daws informs that Father Damien had a strong work ethic, carrying the heaviest loads and organizing community feasts. One could say, he was accepted by the Hawaiians because he demonstrated true "aloha spirit," a spirit of love, hopefulness and hospitality.

When all of the clergy gathered in Maui, Bishop Maigret asked for the first volunteer to go to Molokai to minister to the "leper colony." Damien put up his hand again responding, "my turn." He was warned not to touch the people and not to eat with them so not to catch the disease, but he chose to become one of them. Father Damien cleansed their wounds, fed them and prayed with them holding their hands and giving of his heart to touch their hearts. He let them know they were loved by man and by God.

Damien died in 1889 in Molokai and was canonized a saint on October 10, 2009. There are many documented miracles attributed to the intercession of St. Damien. Part of his remains are buried in the hallowed grounds at St Philomena Church that he helped build and can be visited today. In 1987 our company AmericanTours International (ATI) organized the inaugural visit to Kalaupapa which was a deeply spiritual experience for all and is arguably one of the most beautiful places on earth.

For those inspired by Damien De Veuster, there are many modern day "outcasts" near and afar who need to be cared for and be respected with human dignity. The mentally disabled, abandoned elderly, suffering adults and children with AIDS are a few examples of "outcasts" in many communities. Graduates, there is plenty of "help wanted." Consider answering the call to serve, simply say "my turn" and become a hero, a role model and a saint too.