

## History Remembers Father Damien

October 4, 2009

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Tremelo

Your Majesties. Excellencies, Ministers, Members of the Clergy, Fellow Belgians, Fellow Americans and Fellow Citizens of the World:

I am honored and humbled to participate today after a Mass as glorious as the one we just witnessed in the unveiling of this statue to Father Damien.

To represent a country I have long loved . . . in a country I am growing to love. . . in a city and in a honoring a man that even the angels love . . . and on behalf of a President in whom I believe to my core.

I have recently arrived from my 27 year home in Washington, D.C.,. We share so much in common. We in fact share statues of Father Damien. For I have visited the beautiful bronze statue of Father Damien that sits in Statuary Hall in the Capital Building of the United States of America.

But more important than even bronze and molds, we share the legacy of Father Damien and the values represented by that legend.

You see, Statues are one way that men and women remember history . . . and that history remembers great men and women.

History remembers all sorts of men and women and we build statues for all sorts. History remembers and we build statues to the truly brave -- explorers, war heros, great leaders and yes priests, who set out without full knowledge of where they are going, but rooted in the belief that the justice of their cause will protect them whenever the path leads. History remembers the truly righteous – men and women who understand that the rewards can never be measured by what someone has collected, but by what they have given back. And history remembers and we build statues for the truly wise -- inventors, scientists, leaders and priests, who see a little further down the road and recognize that building a better tomorrow is the most important contribution to mankind today.

Father Damien of course was all three and far more: a brave explorer; an ambassador from your then fledgling new country to what would someday be a part of my country; a healer; a righteous man, a hero and a saint.

But Father Damien was first and foremost a teacher . . . a teacher for us all,. . . and for our children.

You see, history remembers such men and women and we build statues not simply to honor the past. Statues are also about the present and even more importantly about the future. By reminding us from where we have come, they remind us who we are and where we need to be going. By honoring the past, we pledge to try to replicate such action, such bravery, such righteousness to build a better future.

The righteousness of Father Damien:

By crossing the water, when a beautiful farm awaited him here in wonderful Tremolo,

By choosing poverty, when relative wealth awaited,

By reaching out endlessly to his fellow man in a different land,

By insisting, despite pressure on burying all who died, regardless of faith, nationality or religion,

By dying to do the right thing,

Damien has taught us all.

He has taught kings and ministers, presidents and ambassadors, mothers and fathers, grandparents and children,

He has taught Americans and Belgians, Catholics, Protestants and Jews,

He has taught people living in Hawaii, and New York, in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia,  
He has taught us that we are all in this together . . . .

That to get it right . . . that to sail rather than to sink,

We have to get it right together. That we will all find health, safety and prosperity, or none of us can.

That what happens in Washington or Paris or Honolulu, in Africa, Afghanistan or Pakistan, in Mechelen or in Bree, where I travelled in my first two weeks, or in Charleroi where I travelled this past Wednesday, or in Molenbeek, where I visited a community center yesterday,

Affects us all whether we live in Tremolo, or in Washington, in Brussels or New York, in Africa, Flanders or in Wallonia, in Tel Aviv, Rabat, or Ankara.

That this time, we have to get it right. . . and we have to get it right together.

Father Damien taught us that we all must become and remain better listeners, better learners and better partners.

And not because it is politically expedient, not because of what we get, but because it is the right thing to do.

We share the problems . . . we must work together on the solutions.

Father Damien taught us that the problems that we face that unite us are far greater than the differences and prejudices that have previously divided us. That as our world gets flatter, we must become better neighbors. That given our mutual respect and mutual interest, no voice of opposition,

no extremism, no economic hardship, and no threat to our health, or to the climate of our soul or of our planet can be allowed to separate us. That there are no zero sum games – we all rise together – or none of us can truly prosper. That the world we will leave to our children must be safer and more harmonious than the one we were left by our parents. And that we can never even appear to compromise the principles that we believe in for short term gains.

So what would be Father Damien's leprosy colony today if he were alive. For what mission would he leave that idyllic farm in Tremolo?

Would he be championing the cause of AIDS? Of drug addiction? Of poverty in third world countries? Or even in cities where half of our youth cannot find a job?

A champion for our safety and security whether challenged by health or by extremism?

Father Damien would be a champion for them all...for a better planet tomorrow than the one we found yesterday.

He is and will remain an inspiration. To Belgians and Americans. To us all.

And particularly a special inspiration to those who grew up in Tremelo and in Hawaii,

And so, when I called my White House to see if, because he grew up in Hawaii, our President knew about and had thoughts about Father Damien, I learned that in fact, even from his days as a little boy, President Obama had learned of the feats of Father Damien and that he was long admired and been inspired by him.

So from Hawaii to Washington, from the White House and our Embassy, we thank the citizens of Tremelo and of Belgium for your son Damien in 1840, and for your friendship and your partnership for the 170 years since.

Thanks so much.