

DANIEL J. DEMERS

Letters for Damien

ON FEBRUARY 12, 1935 Belgium's King Leopold III penned a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the letter, the king recited the good deeds of Father Joseph Damien De Veuster who "worked 16 years for the spiritual and physical welfare of the lepers of Molo-kai where he became himself a victim of the disease and died."¹ Noting that Damien's body was buried near the church of Kalawao and due to "the recent transfer of the leper hospital to Kalapapa [*sic*], his grave had been abandoned."² As a result of this abandonment, the king asked FDR, on behalf of the Fathers of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts, to assist the priests who were "particularly desirous of transferring the remains of Father Damien to Belgium."³

On July 30th the United States Ambassador to Belgium Dave Morris telegraphed the White House inquiring if the president ever received the letter since no response was ever received by the king.⁴ A series of memoranda and letters passed between the White House and State Department and it was determined the president's response had been lost. The *faux pas* was quickly resolved with a suggestion that the original communication be transmitted by telegraph to Ambassador Morris, who would then relay "the sense of the President's original letter" to the king.⁵

Daniel J. Demers, a semi-retired businessman who resides in the San Francisco Bay area, writes about historic 19th and 20th-century events. In another article, published in America in 2009, he recounts the little-known story of why Father Damien's body was unexpectedly delayed leaving San Francisco for Belgium in 1936: a prisoner uprising at Alcatraz.

The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 44 (2010)



FIG. 1. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933. Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.



FIG. 2. King Leopold III of Belgium, 1950. *Encyclopedia Britannica Inc.*



FIG. 3. Father Damien De Veuster, 1889. Hawai'i State Archives.



FIG. 4. Father Damien's remains are moved from St. Philomena's Church at Kalawao to the Kalaupapa hearse, January 27, 1936, and flown to Honolulu. Bishop Stephen Alencastre can be seen at far right. Private Collection.



FIG. 5. Father Damien's remains leave the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace in Honolulu to be conveyed to the Army transport ship the USS *Republic*, February 3, 1936. Private Collection.



FIG. 6. Damien's remains are carried to Honolulu Harbor via Bishop Street, February 3, 1936. Photograph appears to have been taken from the Roof Garden at the Alexander Young Hotel. ACME Newspictures. Courtesy of Bettmann/Corbis and San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



FIG. 7. Father Damien's remains leave Honolulu Harbor for San Francisco aboard the *USS Republic*, February 3, 1936. Private Collection.

Roosevelt's response was that he would "be very happy to take steps immediately . . . to see that every facility may be extended in the transfer of Father Damien's remains from their present resting place to his native country."⁶ The president also instructed the State Department to "take up with the proper officials of the government the matter of rendering any possible assistance in the desired transfer of Father Damien's remains."⁷

By November of 1935, the United States and Belgium were working out the itinerary of the transfer. FDR, the former governor of New York, was pushing for Damien's remains to be transferred from the "the East coast of the United States by a cruiser to Antwerp" so that the body could be venerated there.⁸ On January 20, 1936, the president once again inquired, this time of the Secretary of War, George Dern, as to the itinerary of Damien's remains. Roosevelt's Assistant Secretary, W. H. McIntyre in a memo to Dern asserted the president's



FIG. 8. United States troops and clergy form the honor escort for the remains of Father Damien when his casket reaches San Francisco from Hawai'i, February 11, 1936. The casket is decked with the Belgian flag. ACME Newspictures. Courtesy of Bettmann/Corbis and San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.



*Under the high auspices of the Belgian Government
and through the courtesy
of the United States Government,
the remains of
Father Damien, the Apostle to the lepers of Molokai,
are being conveyed to his native land.*

*While in transit through San Francisco, the body will lie in state at
St. Mary's Cathedral,
Van Ness Avenue and O'Farrell Street.*

*Solemn Pontifical Mass of Requiem
Friday, February 14, 1936,
at ten-thirty o'clock*

FIG. 9. Announcement for requiem mass for Father Damien at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco, February 14, 1936. Private Collection.

desire that the body be transported from Hawai'i to New York "where it will be transferred to a Danish ship. The President feels that we should arrange for some military honors at New York."⁹

Two days later, Dern advised the president that Damien's remains were to be sent on the army transport *Republic*, which was "scheduled to sail from Honolulu on February 3, 1936 to Cristobol, Panama, where the transport will arrive February 25, 1936. At Cristobol, the remains are to be transferred to the Belgium School Ship *Mercator*."¹⁰ Dern went on to advise FDR that "present plans do not contemplate that the remains shall be brought to New York."¹¹ Instead Belgium authorities agreed that the ship would stop in San Francisco for five days where the remains would be venerated at that American city. The same day, Leopold sent FDR a letter thanking him for his assistance in transferring Damien's remains, "It is owing to your personal intervention alone that the ardent desire of Belgium has been fulfilled."¹²

The *Republic* arrived in San Francisco on February 11, 1936.



FIG. 10. Father Damien's remains were transferred to the Belgian ship *Mercator* at Cristobal, Panama Canal Zone, February 28, 1936. Private Collection.

Damien's body was removed and, amidst great pomp and ceremony, taken to St. Mary's Cathedral. After five days of ceremonies, masses and eulogies attended by thousands, Damien's remains were taken to Cristobol. On February 28th they were transferred to the *Mercator* where "special official formalities were observed by the commanders of the two vessels."¹³

Damien's remains finally arrived in Belgium on May 3, 1936 with "attending ceremonies" attended by King Leopold and the U. S. Ambassador.¹⁴ At the ceremony the king publicly expressed his deep-hearted appreciation "to the President for his kindness in facilitating the transfer of the remains."¹⁵ Three days later, on May 6th, Father Damien was finally buried in Belgium. His long trek home had finally ended. When he was laid to rest, one newspaper speculated that the memory of his deeds in Hawai'i—caring for the lepers—might lead to his eventually "being enshrined in sainthood."¹⁶

Two more letters were exchanged between FDR and Leopold. On May 10th the king once again expressed his and the Belgium "people's profound gratitude for the solemnity with which the precious body



FIG. 11. Damien's remains arrive in Antwerp, Belgium, May 3, 1936. Private Collection.

was honoured.”¹⁷ The king noted how the memory of Damien’s “life of abnegation and self sacrifice has given rise to such a transport of enthusiasms.”¹⁸ In response, FDR wrote the king that he, as a “small boy,” remembered “the forceful lesson which was brought to us all by the death of this saintly man who, so that the ill and suffering might profit by his aid, with cool deliberation gave his own life.”¹⁹ Later in his letter, the president contemplated on Damien’s “lesson of self-denial” which “will never grow old and the recent event of the return of his body to Belgium must freshen in our minds with deep veneration the remembrance of this priest who gave his all for his brother man.”²⁰

When Damien was removed from Hawai‘i in 1936, it was done so amidst the “wails and lamentations” of the Hawaiian people who considered him one of their own. In 1995, Pope John Paul II presented the bones of the Damien’s right hand to a delegation of Hawaiians. The relic—the hand that had helped so many Hawaiian lepers—was returned to Damien’s original grave on Moloka‘i.

Father Damien was canonized a saint on October 11, 2009.

NOTES

The diplomatic correspondence cited below is from the President’s Papers, Official File 14. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York.

¹ Letter from King Leopold III to President Franklin Roosevelt, February 12, 1935, Official File 14 (Belgium).

² King Leopold to FDR, February 12, 1935.

³ King Leopold to FDR, February 12, 1935.

⁴ Telegram from U. S. Ambassador Dave Morris, Belgium to President Roosevelt, July 30, 1935, Official File 14 (Belgium).

⁵ Memorandum from Rudolf Foster, Executive Clerk to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, recipient unknown, August 15, 1935, Official File 14 (Belgium).

⁶ Draft of letter of response by President Roosevelt to King Leopold III, undated, Official File 14 (Belgium).

⁷ Memorandum from Rudolf Foster, Executive Clerk to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, recipient unknown, August 15, 1935, Official File 14 (Belgium).

⁸ Letter from M. H. Gaulin, Secretary to Ambassador Dave Morris, United States Embassy, Belgium to Miss Marguerite Le Hand, Private Secretary to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, November 1, 1935, Official File 14 (Belgium).

⁹ Memorandum to United States Secretary of War George Dern from M. H. McIntyre, Assistant Secretary to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 20, 1936, Official File 14 (Belgium).

¹⁰ Letter from George Dern, United States Secretary of War to M. H. McIntyre,

Assistant Secretary to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 22, 1936, Official File 14 (Belgium).

¹¹ George Dern to M.H.McIntyre, January 22, 1936.

¹² Letter from King Leopold III to President Franklin Roosevelt, January 22, 1936, 1, Official File 14 (Belgium).

¹³ King Leopold III to FDR, January 22, 1936, 2.

¹⁴ Letter from Malcolm Phillips, United States Department of State to M. H. McIntyre, Assistant Secretary to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 26, 1936, Official File 14 (Belgium).

¹⁵ Malcolm Phillips to M.H. McIntyre, May 26, 1936.

¹⁶ "Father Damien Buried in Belgium," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 7, 1936, 28.

¹⁷ Letter from King Leopold III to President Franklin Roosevelt, May 10, 1936, Official File 14 (Belgium).

¹⁸ FDR to King Leopold III, May 10, 1936.

¹⁹ Letter from President Franklin D. Roosevelt to King Leopold III, July 9, 1936, Official File 14 (Belgium).

²⁰ FDR to King Leopold III, July 9, 1936.