"Christ in the flesh."

Good Afternoon to you and to each of my esteemed listeners. Welcome to EWTN's Open Line Tuesday edition! I'm Barbara McGuigan, alive and grateful to be your host each Tuesday! Hope all our Mom's out there had a glorious Mother's Day! God's airwaves are open! Here are the numbers:

In North America call 1-800-585-9396
Outside North America call 1-205-271-2985
Our email address is always Openline@ewtn.com

Because we live in such a sex-saturated culture where nothing is sacred and women, men and even little children are objectified and sexualized at a very young age, the mere mention of the word "flesh" brings a dark and seedy connotation on the first bounce. How difficult it has become for many to see the body as something to be held with respect, with reverence, something even God-like.

I was really taken, yet again, by a testimony in this, our Year for Priests, at a story written by a priest, Fr. Richard Veras, about a priest, St. Damien of Moloka'i, whom he referred to as "Christ in the Flesh." You will find this beautiful piece in our May 2010 *Magnificat.*

Fr. Veras explains how St. Damien, just canonized last October, was a Belgian priest who volunteered to live and minister to the lepers on the island of Moloka'i in Hawaii in 1873 until he died himself of leprosy in 1889. The Church celebrated his feast day yesterday, May 10. Fr. Veras writes:

> **He is perhaps an even greater witness to the continual incarnation of Christ through the Church...God became flesh, and Jews and Gentiles had to come to terms with the fact that a carpenter from Nazareth, complete with rough hands and northern accent, is God! Love and holiness were no longer distant realities; they had become flesh...and God's love and holiness spread through the world, not spiritually, but through the flesh, through people.**

Fr. Veras goes on to say,

> **Moloka'i was filled with sons, daughters, wives, and husbands whose leprosy had separated them from their families. For many, love had become distant, something only to dream about or lament. Damien knew these people needed someone who was *their* priest, who lived life with them. He moved to the island and built a church and rebuilt the humanity of those whose suffering was much deeper than the flesh. He recognized the face of Christ in the deformed faces of his new friends. Jesus was not present despite this mess;**

he was present in it. He was not a future hope, but a present reality. Infinite love, truth, beauty, and life made himself recognizable in physical surroundings that looked like death.

I particularly love how Fr. Veras refers to "incarnational holiness." He writes:

We often think of holiness as moral perfection, something far away and attainable only by great men and women who are rare or only fictional. We think of Christ as only available to the perfect, or "religious" types. Damien had many weaknesses that were evident to his parishioners, his colleagues, and his superiors. At his beatification, John Paul II said,

> **Holiness is not perfection according to human criteria; it is not reserved for a small number of exceptional persons. It is for everyone, it is the Lord who brings us to holiness, when we are willing to collaborate in the salvation of the world for the glory of God, despite our sin and our sometimes rebellious temperament.**

Fr. Veras writes how Robert Louis Stevenson, who was "no friend of the Catholic Church...visited the island a month after Damien died. He came with the intention of discrediting Father Damien against his detractors..."

My brothers and sisters, I've never known a holy person or studied a saint who did not have detractors. My spiritual director always says, "Beware of those who have no enemies."

Anyway, writes Fr. Veras, Stevenson ended up writing a moving and powerful defense of Fr. Damien. Fr. Veras says Stevenson was:

…clearly moved by the fact that his investigation did reveal a man full of weaknesses, and that these weaknesses did not detract, but accentuated the greatness of Damien. Stevenson concludes his defense by stating that Damien is his "father." Stevenson might not have described it as holiness, but he recognized something so real and so attractive that he abandoned his preconceptions and risked his public image in order to bear witness to what he had seen.

John Farrow, who wrote the best known biography of Damien, is described by his daughter Mia in the preface to the 1999 Doubleday edition as "a devout Catholic, and a womanizer of legendary proportions." Whatever contradictions he lived, Farrow was capable of being moved by the story of Damien when he heard it from a native of Moloka'i. He was struck by the reverence of the Hawaiian who would make a "genuflection-like movement" whenever he would mention Damien's name. Clearly, for that man, Damien was Christ in the flesh. Perhaps for John Farrow, that man was Damien,

and thus Christ, in the flesh. The same Christ that Damien loved in the flesh of the lepers.

My brothers and sisters, I'll never forget and will always teach Pope John Paul the Great's words, "At our baptism, we become monstrances of God." Of course, a monstrance is a beautiful vessel designed specifically to hold Christ's Real Presence; His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Host. The real Jesus, the whole Jesus is in the consecrated host. Now, the very fact that Pope John Paul the Great said we " at our baptism become monstrances of God" said to me that we should be well-disposed to kneel respectfully before every person we meet, because each baptized person is a sacred vessel designed specifically to carry "Christ in the flesh" to whomever we meet.

Now, I'd like to point out that we don't kneel down to worship or to adore another human being. Only God is worshipped and adored, but we kneel down out of reverence for Christ dwelling within this person who is in the flesh and who is bearing Christ to us, in spite of his weaknesses and imperfections, even on his darkest days. We love Christ in the flesh in another human being. We might consider, even if only in our minds, making, like the Hawaiian at the mere mention of the name Damien, a "genuflection-like movement."

Would that all men and women could develop this practice interiorly! In fact, what a sea change would take place if our irreverent culture could deeply understand the meaning of the word RESPECT: "To look at a person, keeping an Other in mind." The word respect comes from the Latin *respicere*, which has the same root word as *respicere* (to look at.) The prefix re means that we keep our gaze "turned to" the object, like someone who walks while keeping his eyes on his goal. In other words, we look at a person in the flesh, all the while keeping an awareness of the Presence they carry, in our minds...and hearts.

I will close with Fr. Veras' final sentence:

May God's love and holiness continue to make itself tangibly present through the flesh of persons like those lepers, like Damien, like John Paul II, like Robert Louis Stevenson, like John Farrow, like that Hawaiian, like you, like me.

I look forward to our time together today! What's on your mind? Let's talk about it! Here are the numbers: 1-800-585-9396 and 1-205-271-2985.

Closing: Many thanks for your calls and emails today! It's wonderful to meet you, even if it's over God's airwaves!

I'd like to leave you with beautiful words from today's meditation in our *Magnificat* prayer book, a meditation composed by Fr. Maurice Zundel:

We must necessarily go through God to become aware of the greatness of the life each one bears not only in his mind, but in his heart. Each one of us bears the life and presence of Jesus Christ. We are of such greatness in our heart and in our mind that we can reach ourselves only by going through the Heart of God. Our life is a mystery, hidden and rooted in the heart of the Most Blessed Trinity.

Until next week on Open Line, Blessed be God and may our Great God bless you abundantly! Bye for now!