



ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

October 11, 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When Audrey Toguchi was diagnosed in 1998 with a rare form of cancer, her prognosis was grave: she was told she had less than six months to live. Audrey's doctor suggested she consider chemotherapy, which might extend her life by a few months. "No, I'm going to pray to Father Damien," she replied. Audrey was completely healed, and Father Damien is being canonized today by Pope Benedict XVI.

Father Damien is Damien de Veuster, a Belgian-born priest of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Sent as a missionary to Hawaii, he learned of the plight of Hawaiians who had been diagnosed with Hansen's disease (once called leprosy) and volunteered to go to Kalaupapa, an isolated peninsula on the island of Molokai's coast, where those with the illness were sent to live in quarantine. Father Damien brought them the hope of Christ and significantly improved conditions on the island. He ate with the sick, visited their homes, baptized them, taught them to pray and then prayed with them. In other words, he ministered as Jesus would have, looking beyond a person's outward appearance and opening himself to the gifts of every individual.

It is fitting that *Inclusion Awareness Sunday* is being held on the day of Father Damien's canonization. Recognizing those with physical or cognitive differences as brothers and sisters was the hallmark of Father Damien's ministry. But one need not be a missionary to carry on Father Damien's good work. By treating others with respect and by showing sensitivity to the needs of others, we uphold the dignity and value of every human life.

I encourage you to learn about the ways in which you can welcome people of all abilities at your parish. Pathways Awareness (www.inclusioninworship.org) offers grants for parish inclusion efforts and publishes helpful materials on the many ways to encourage the participation in worship of all members of the Body of Christ.

I thank you for your life of faith and for all you do to serve the Lord. You and your intentions have a special place in my prayers, and I count on the support of yours. God bless you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.
Archbishop of Chicago