

# THE MISSIONARY UNION OF PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS: WHY WOULD ANYONE COME BACK HERE?

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*by Paul Franzetti*

A bishop once said, "If you want to be remembered by the Church, become a saint." The Book of Ecclesiastes says: "A good life lasts a certain number of days, but a good reputation lasts forever." This will be so for Sr. Anne Credidio.

In 1997, my son James joined Rostro de Cristo (Face of Christ) as a volunteer missionary and spent a year among the poor in Ecuador. He served the poor in schools, soup kitchens, and the Damien House, located in one of the most dangerous parts of Guayaquil. He and other volunteers used to wade through piles of rotting fruit behind the supermarkets of Guayaquil to pick out edible pieces for the patients.

But the lepers in her hospital were cheerful and content.

When I met Sr. Annie, I saw the truth in what my son said about her: She lived to serve the poor. Like all saints, she radiated joy. And she worked hard. One time, she lugged seven large duffle bags to the airport filled with medicine.

In 2006, I visited the Damien House. I asked her about a room filled with toys; she answered, "We're running a raffle to raise money." To put it another way, the Wolf is always at the door.

Leprosy is as old as humanity, but it is the same cruel and dreaded scourge today as it was in ancient times. It is also called Hansen's disease, after the Norwegian scientist Gerhard Hansen, who identified the leprosy bacillus.

Most people believe that leprosy is a thing of the past. However, it exists where there is poverty, malnutrition, poor sanitation, contaminated water, and little medical care.

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*León, one of the residents of Damien House, a residential hospital for over 30 Hansen's patients (people with leprosy) in Guayaquil, Ecuador, run by missionary Sister Anne Credidio.*

And it is still feared. **Jesus cured the lepers. Unable to do so herself, Sister Annie hugs them.**

Born in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in 1949, she joined the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity. Before making her final vows, she volunteered to spend a year in South America.

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The event that changed her life occurred on Christmas Eve of 1984, as she waited for Mass to begin. She saw a woman crawling along the floor. The woman dropped her shoes because she had no toes. The woman, whose name was Emma, was a leper; the bridge of her nose was collapsed; her eyes were clouded over. She stretched out the stump of her hand to Sister Annie, smiled, and said, "Welcome."



Brooklyn-born Sister Anne Credidio.

"She had the most beautiful smile, and I knew I was looking at the face of Christ." Seeing the sadness in the eyes of those around her, Annie began to hug them. "That Mass changed my life."

At the clinic, she witnessed firsthand the deplorable situation, the degradation of the patients: most slept on mats on the floor, where rats crawled in the night; the food was inedible, full of vermin. When Sr. Annie went into the hospital kitchen to get food, a rat jumped on her foot. Then she looked up at a hole in the ceiling, and a cat dropped down.

Clearly, the officials had marginalized these patients.

Traditionally, governments don't handle some diseases well. Fear rules their laws. In the 1860s, for example, the Hawaiian government quarantined thousands of lepers to the Island of Molokai, which became a sort of tropical madhouse—until a Belgian priest, Fr. Damien Veuster, came to live, work, and die there.

Sr. Annie walks in Fr. Damien's footsteps.

When she had to return home to complete her vows, she promised the patients she'd be back. They looked at her: "Yeah. That's what they all say. But you won't come back. Why would you? Why would anyone come back here?"

She prayed for direction. She found her vocation: "After that, I never doubted my vocation."

Back in Guayaquil, she battled South American bureaucracy and hostility. "They dragged me through the mud. **I had no voice. I had three strikes against me. I was a woman, a foreigner, and a nun.**"

She persisted, they relented. In 1995, the government allowed her to take over the clinic.

Thirty years later, when other charitable institutions have closed down, the Damien House remains. As she always says, "It's God's work, not mine."

Like Damien isolated on Molokai, today Sr. Annie lives in her hospital. She trusts in God. She is stable, determined, and joyful. She inspires everyone who visits her hospital. One doctor from the Midwest, Richard Schwend, uses his vacation time to do nerve restoration surgery there.

People in the neighborhood revere her name. I saw this for myself.

The Damien House website will give you information about what they do and how you can help. But it won't give you the most important detail, it is run by Sr. Annie, a missionary nun and a living saint, a woman who, like Joan of Arc, can say: "I am not afraid. God is with me. I was born for this."



*Another one of the residents of Damien House.*