

UCAN FEATURE -- PRIEST DIES AFTER THREE DECADES OF WORK WITH VICTIMS OF LEPROSY

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A Dominican priest who landed in the Philippines with U.S. marines in World War II has died and been buried among the people he dedicated his life to -- lepers.

Chaplain (Captain) Leo Anthony Hofstee, like hundreds of American soldiers who liberated the Philippines from Japanese occupation in 1945, fell in love with the country and its people, and decided to stay.

But, no ordinary soldier, he felt no ordinary love and the people he settled down to serve were no ordinary people.

They were lepers living in Tala Leprosarium, outside Manila.

Father Hofstee requested release from the chaplains' corps when he realized his place was with these victims of Hansen's disease.

Affectionately known as Father Leo, he spent 41 years with his special charges before dying April 26, aged 83.

The priest was one with them in every way, visiting them in their humble shanties, playing with their children, attending to their spiritual needs.

At all times, he was a veritable Damien, showing neither fear nor revulsion at his charges' deformities.

At his request, Father Leo was buried in the leprosarium's cemetery, among the people he had cared for and loved so much.

-- Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila said in his homily at the funeral Mass that "in the deepest, truest sense, he was one with the inmates of Tala."

"I suspect," said Cardinal Sin, "that deep in his heart, he wanted that oneness to be complete, that he wished -- perhaps like Damien, the Sacred Heart missionary who

tended the lepers of Molokai, Hawaii -- he would contract the affliction, so the dividing line separating him from the people he loved would disappear."

"Well, Father Leo almost got his wish. Late in life, towards the end of his total communion with his wards, his doctors discovered he was suffering from skin cancer. It wasn't what he wanted, but it is fairly close."

Cardinal Sin concluded that Father Leo "is not a saint like Damien of Molokai -- at least not yet. But I have no doubt that he is now in the company of the saints in heaven."

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