

Blessed Marianne Cope (1838-1918)

Sisters of the Third Franciscan Order of Syracuse, New York

by Sr. Elizabeth Ann, SJW

I am not afraid of any disease; hence it would be my greatest delight even to minister to the abandoned "lepers".

— Letter of Blessed Marianne Cope

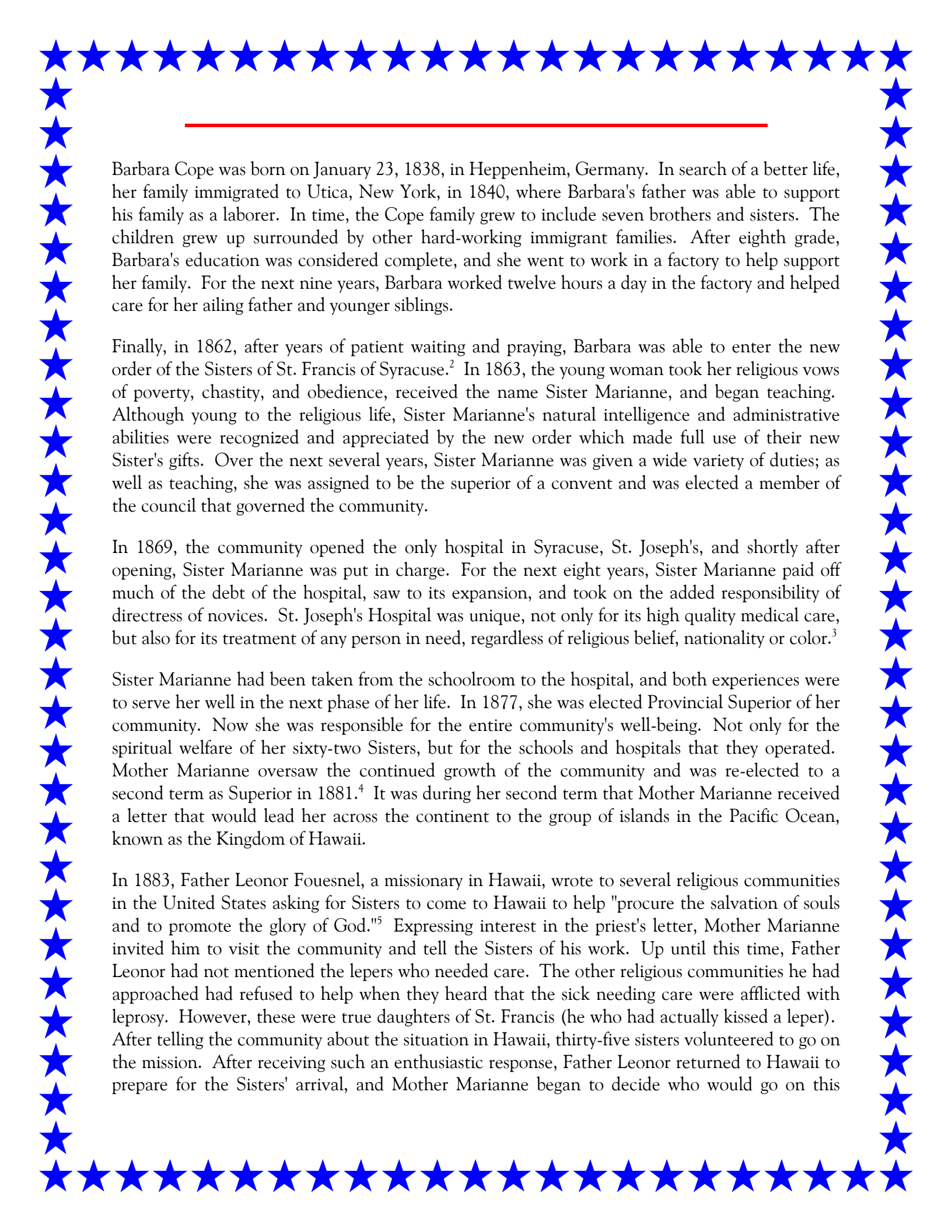
Two thousand miles off the coast of California lay the Hawaiian Islands. The first Europeans to reach the Hawaiian Islands arrived in 1778, with Captain James Cook and found about 250,000 inhabitants. Unfortunately, as often happened when the "Old World" met the "New World", the people of the "New World" suffered the most. The native populations had no resistance to the diseases Europeans were so familiar with; smallpox, influenza, cholera, tuberculosis and leprosy.

The many diseases to which the Hawaiians were exposed reduced the population of the islands from 250,000 in 1778, to about 60,000 within the span of one hundred years. Leprosy (now called Hansen's disease), was the most terrifying of the diseases encountered by the Hawaiians. The leprosy bacteria destroy the inside as well as the outside of the body, leaving its victims with open sores and rotting flesh as bone and cartilage gradually disintegrate. By the 1870's, the government was confronted with a leprosy epidemic. Desperate to stop the spread of the disease, the government ordered anyone with leprosy, regardless of age or gender, to be taken to Molokai, the fifth largest of the islands. Spouses were separated and children torn from their parents.

The peninsula on Molokai was a natural prison, "On three sides the peninsula is surrounded by the harsh and unforgiving Pacific Ocean. To the south stand sheer, towering cliffs, making the rest of the island inaccessible."¹ The government had promised to care for the leprosy patients, but there was little of anything on the island. The lepers, knowing there was no hope for a cure, became a law unto themselves. On Molokai, it became "survival of the fittest". The weak, especially women and children, were easily abused and exploited. Days were spent drinking and gambling and the seriously ill were left to care for themselves.

Into this mess, came a Belgian priest and an American nun, each of whom would spend their lives with and for the lepers. **Blessed Damien de Veuster** is well known as the priest who contracted Hansen's disease after many years of caring for patients on Molokai. Not as well known is the life and work of **Blessed Marianne Cope**, who spent many years carrying on the work of Blessed Damien and whose cause for canonization has been introduced in Rome.





Barbara Cope was born on January 23, 1838, in Heppenheim, Germany. In search of a better life, her family immigrated to Utica, New York, in 1840, where Barbara's father was able to support his family as a laborer. In time, the Cope family grew to include seven brothers and sisters. The children grew up surrounded by other hard-working immigrant families. After eighth grade, Barbara's education was considered complete, and she went to work in a factory to help support her family. For the next nine years, Barbara worked twelve hours a day in the factory and helped care for her ailing father and younger siblings.

Finally, in 1862, after years of patient waiting and praying, Barbara was able to enter the new order of the Sisters of St. Francis of Syracuse.² In 1863, the young woman took her religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, received the name Sister Marianne, and began teaching. Although young to the religious life, Sister Marianne's natural intelligence and administrative abilities were recognized and appreciated by the new order which made full use of their new Sister's gifts. Over the next several years, Sister Marianne was given a wide variety of duties; as well as teaching, she was assigned to be the superior of a convent and was elected a member of the council that governed the community.

In 1869, the community opened the only hospital in Syracuse, St. Joseph's, and shortly after opening, Sister Marianne was put in charge. For the next eight years, Sister Marianne paid off much of the debt of the hospital, saw to its expansion, and took on the added responsibility of directress of novices. St. Joseph's Hospital was unique, not only for its high quality medical care, but also for its treatment of any person in need, regardless of religious belief, nationality or color.³

Sister Marianne had been taken from the schoolroom to the hospital, and both experiences were to serve her well in the next phase of her life. In 1877, she was elected Provincial Superior of her community. Now she was responsible for the entire community's well-being. Not only for the spiritual welfare of her sixty-two Sisters, but for the schools and hospitals that they operated. Mother Marianne oversaw the continued growth of the community and was re-elected to a second term as Superior in 1881.⁴ It was during her second term that Mother Marianne received a letter that would lead her across the continent to the group of islands in the Pacific Ocean, known as the Kingdom of Hawaii.

In 1883, Father Leonor Fouesnel, a missionary in Hawaii, wrote to several religious communities in the United States asking for Sisters to come to Hawaii to help "procure the salvation of souls and to promote the glory of God."⁵ Expressing interest in the priest's letter, Mother Marianne invited him to visit the community and tell the Sisters of his work. Up until this time, Father Leonor had not mentioned the lepers who needed care. The other religious communities he had approached had refused to help when they heard that the sick needing care were afflicted with leprosy. However, these were true daughters of St. Francis (he who had actually kissed a leper). After telling the community about the situation in Hawaii, thirty-five sisters volunteered to go on the mission. After receiving such an enthusiastic response, Father Leonor returned to Hawaii to prepare for the Sisters' arrival, and Mother Marianne began to decide who would go on this

mission. A letter written by Mother Marianne to Father Leonor during this time reveals her feelings:

*"...I am hungry for the work and I wish with all my heart to be one of the chosen Ones, whose privilege it will be to sacrifice themselves for the salvation of the souls of the poor Islanders...Waking and sleeping, I am on the Islands. Do not laugh at me, for being so wholly absorbed in that one wish, one thought, to be a worker in that large field."*¹⁶

Of the thirty-five volunteers, six were chosen to accompany Mother Marianne, who planned to oversee the establishment of the new mission and then return to Syracuse. After attending Mass on October 22, 1883, the missionary band set out. They traveled six days and five nights by train to reach San Francisco. Next, they boarded a ship that would take them the 2,200 miles to Hawaii. After seven days, the group arrived in Honolulu. Their first assignment was the Branch Hospital where those suspected of having leprosy were taken to be examined. If they passed the medical exam they were allowed to return home. If they were declared lepers, they were taken to a remote peninsula on the island of Molokai. The sisters were appalled at what they saw at the hospital; "filth, swarms of flies, the stench of open, untreated sores."¹⁷ After settling in their own quarters, the Franciscans "declared war on filth, armed with buckets and brooms."¹⁸ Not only was the hospital cleaned, the patients were cared for with gentleness and respect.



As Mother Marianne continued to lead her sisters in their work, she also had to deal with government officials who often seemed to cause more hindrance than help. With tact and determination, she was able to overcome the obstacles put in her way. In time, the leading authorities in Hawaii concluded that she had to remain on the Islands or the mission would fail.

Eventually, the Sisters in Syracuse elected a new Superior, and Mother Marianne remained in Hawaii. The few weeks she had planned to stay would stretch out to thirty-five years. Meanwhile, the Sisters' desire to go to Molokai only increased. They encountered strong opposition from people who thought it a "crime to allow those Sisters to live in that filthy place."¹⁹ In true Franciscan spirit Mother Marianne's response was that they were "not only willing, but anxious to go and care for the poor outcasts."¹⁰

On November 13, 1888, Mother Marianne, accompanied by two of her Sisters, set out for Molokai, arriving early the following morning. The main focus of Mother Marianne's work was the well-being of the women and girls at the Molokai colony who were often taken advantage of. Now, the female leprosy patients were able to live in cottages near the Sisters who cared for them. The Sisters went to work, tending the sick and maimed and planting trees to make the area beautiful. Mother Marianne often made dresses for the girls, insisting that they have the latest fashions. In the midst of this busy life, Mother still spent many hours in prayer.

Beauty and love bloomed on Molokai as Mother Marianne and her Sisters cared for Christ in His suffering children. The girls were educated, there was music and sports. On Molokai, "Life was to be lived, even in the face of death. And when death came, it was the gateway to eternal life."¹¹ And so the years passed, and the island continued to develop under Mother's guiding hand. In spite of her continued cheerfulness and peacefulness, Mother Marianne also knew grief. Some of the sisters who came to work on Molokai with her were unable to cope with the situation and had to leave. There were criticisms from government officials and even fellow religious. In the face of all this, Mother continued her work and was able to write,



"Take up thy cross and follow me' — not on path of roses. No, no not on an easy road, but one that is full of thorns and rocks. We follow the call of Jesus to come to Him as His Spouse, and since we are numbered among His chosen ones, it behooves us to take up our cross and follow Him."¹²

The last summer of her life was 1918. Worn out from her years of hard labor, Mother died on August 9, of a combination of kidney disease and heart failure. She left a legacy of schools, orphanages and hospitals on four islands. Mother

Marianne was beatified on May 14, 2005.

I am indebted to Sister Mary Laurence Hanley, O.S.F., for her comments and suggestions while writing this article. Sister is the promoter for the cause of Blessed Marianne Cope in the United States. For more information on Blessed Marianne Cope please contact:

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FOOTNOTES:

- 1: Tim Drake, National Catholic Register, (June 25-July 1, 2000).
- 2: Source of details of early life: "Mother Marianne of Molokai, Missionary to the 'Lepers'", Sr. Mary Laurence Hanley, Sisters of Saint Francis, Syracuse, NY, 1977, 1-6.
- 3: Source of details regarding St. Joseph's Hospital, Syracuse, NY: Report of the Historical Commission on the Cause of Mother Marianne Cope, 1983, 72.
- 4: Hanley and Bushnell, Pilgrimage and Exile, 2nd ed., Sr. Laurence Hanley and O.A. Bushnell, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, Oahu, 1992, 39.
- 5: Hanley and Bushnell, 42.
- 6: Hanley and Bushnell, 72.
- 7: Mary Cabrini Durkin, OSU, Mother Marianne of Molokai, Valiant Woman of Hawaii, Editions du Signe, 1999, 19.
- 8: Hanley and Bushnell, 139; Durkin, 19.
- 9: Hanley and Bushnell, 273.
- 10: Hanley and Bushnell, 257.
- 11: Durkin, 30.
- 12: Hanley and Bushnell, 390.