

Some Notes on Blessed Damien of Molokai: 1840-1889

by Bro. Jim Dods, SM

Most Catholics and non-Catholics in Hawaii are familiar with the heroic life of Fr. Damien de Veuster, a member of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, who volunteered after a 1873 retreat at Saint Anthony Church in Wailuku, Maui, to tend to the desperate needs of the leper colony on Molokai Island in Hawaii. Those with leprosy (Hansen's disease) in Hawaii were literally excluded and abandoned, without much care, to shift for themselves in the most miserable of conditions on an isolated section of Molokai.

Because Damien became a vocal advocate for the lepers and their situation at the colony, he was considered a trouble-maker by his religious congregation and the Hawaiian government and therefore mainly ignored in his requests for medical and volunteer assistance. He built housing, treated the wounds of the afflicted, buried the dead, brought clean water to the area, and serviced the spiritual needs of the colony.

Blessed Damien died of the ravages of the disease and is greatly revered by the native Hawaiians for his saintly perseverance in the face of almost insurmountable odds. He was beatified in 1995 and his canonization to sainthood is slated for October of this year.

Some Factoids about Blessed Damien

- Damien arrived in Honolulu from Belgium as a seminarian. He completed his studies for the priesthood at the College of Ahuimanu (the first site of what would later become Saint Louis School.) Therefore Damien is considered an alumnus of our school. Saint Damien will be posthumously inducted into Saint Louis School's Gallery of Distinguished Achievers at a special Banquet ceremony on October 13th.
- It was Father Damien who celebrated the welcome Mass of Thanksgiving at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace when the first eight Marianist Brothers arrived in Honolulu on September 5, 1883. The Brothers were then escorted to their new home at Saint Louis College a few blocks from the cathedral.
- At the request of the Belgium government and the Sacred Hearts order for the remains of this great man, Damien's body was exhumed from his gravesite in 1936 in preparation for his trip back to his home. The father of Brother James Dods, Chester A. Dods, Sr. was a Honolulu police officer who traveled to

Molokai to assist in the verification of the remains of Damien which were then sealed in Koa wood casket.

- When Father Damien was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1995, a relic of Damien, encased in a Koa casket, was brought back to Hawaii escorted by two Sacred Hearts fathers and by Brother Franklin Pao who led the Hawaiian procession from the plane.
- The casket was displayed in Saint Anthony Church in Wailuku on its way back to Molokai. Brother James Dods, the principal of the high school at the time was photographed by the Maui News as he was reverencing the relic. In the news article, it related that Dods' father had seen Damien leave the Islands and his son was welcoming him back.
- The Franciscan Sisters of Syracuse who arrived in Honolulu during same year (1883) as the Marianists were sent to the leper colony to assist Fr. Damien in his latter part of his life. Blessed Mother Marianne Cope, the foundress of the sisters toiled on Molokai and was also beatified for her heroism and care of the leprosarium.
- Brother Jim's uncle, James Archibald Dods was a bi-plane pilot during the 1930's who flew supplies to the Hansen's disease Outpost in Kalaupapa. He later was killed in a tragic airplane crash in Honolulu.
- One of the most recent miracles attested by Damien occurred to a retired public school teacher in Honolulu. The doctors had diagnosed a virulent and fatal cancer in this woman. She prayed for the intercession of Blessed Damien and at a later checkup with her doctor--all traces of the cancer had disappeared. She is still living--a devoted advocate of Blessed Damien. She will attend the canonization of Damien in Rome along with at least 500 other pilgrims from Hawaii. One of our staff members at Saint Louis School, Raymond Abregano had this teacher in middle school.