

## Father's Notes

*June 1, 2025*

As I write this, I realize how blessed I am, to be a guest of a family I know, sitting on the patio of a home in Kona, Hawaii, where the rolling waves of the Pacific Ocean reach the property, just about 10 meters from where I sit.

It was a few weeks back (May 10) that the Church's calendar presents us with a memorial that bears deep association with Hawaii: St. Damian of Molokai. He was born in 1840 in Belgium. After college, he entered religious life: the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. He greatly desired to be a missionary. Three years later his prayer was answered and he was sent to the Kingdom of Hawaii, which would not be one of the United States until 1959.

In 1864 he arrived and soon began his assignment serving parishes in Oahu. A health crisis emerged: native Hawaiians were becoming infected by disease, brought by foreign traders. Thousands died. One disease was leprosy (aka Hansen's disease). At that time, it was believed to be highly contagious and incurable. Because of this, in 1865 the Hawaiian government created a separate settlement for those with this disease, the island of Molokai.

The settlement, which included 816 lepers, soon became chaotic. Eventually, the local bishop declared that for the sick to be sent there was a death sentence. He requested a priest to care for them. Four priests volunteered and it was initially planned that they would be on rotation.

Fr. Damien was first to go. He built a church. He dressed the wounds of the sick, made furniture, coffins and dug graves: "...I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ". Under his leadership and care, the once disorganized community became more humane. Farms, schools and houses were established and maintained. Fr. Damien requested to remain in the leper colony.

Eleven years later (1884) he contracted leprosy. He knew that it would gradually diminish his ability to care for others, so he pleaded for help. He sent letters to religious communities, far and wide. Some said they couldn't, and others admitted they didn't want to risk exposure to disease. He persisted in his request. Finally, a yes came. Four people came to help him, including a religious sister named (Saint) Marianne Cope of the Sisters of St. Francis of Syracuse, New York.

Fr. Damien grew weaker. In March of 1889, he made his final confession and received last rites. He died at age 49. His heroic work and self-sacrifice inspired people throughout the world, and many sent resources to help support the leper colony. Mahatma Gandhi cited Fr. Damien as an inspiration for his work in social campaigns in India. St. Damian...pray for us!



FATHER TODD O. STRANGE (PASTOR)

ST. PHILOMENA PARISH & SCHOOL (DES MOINES)

ST. THOMAS PARISH (TUKWILA)

