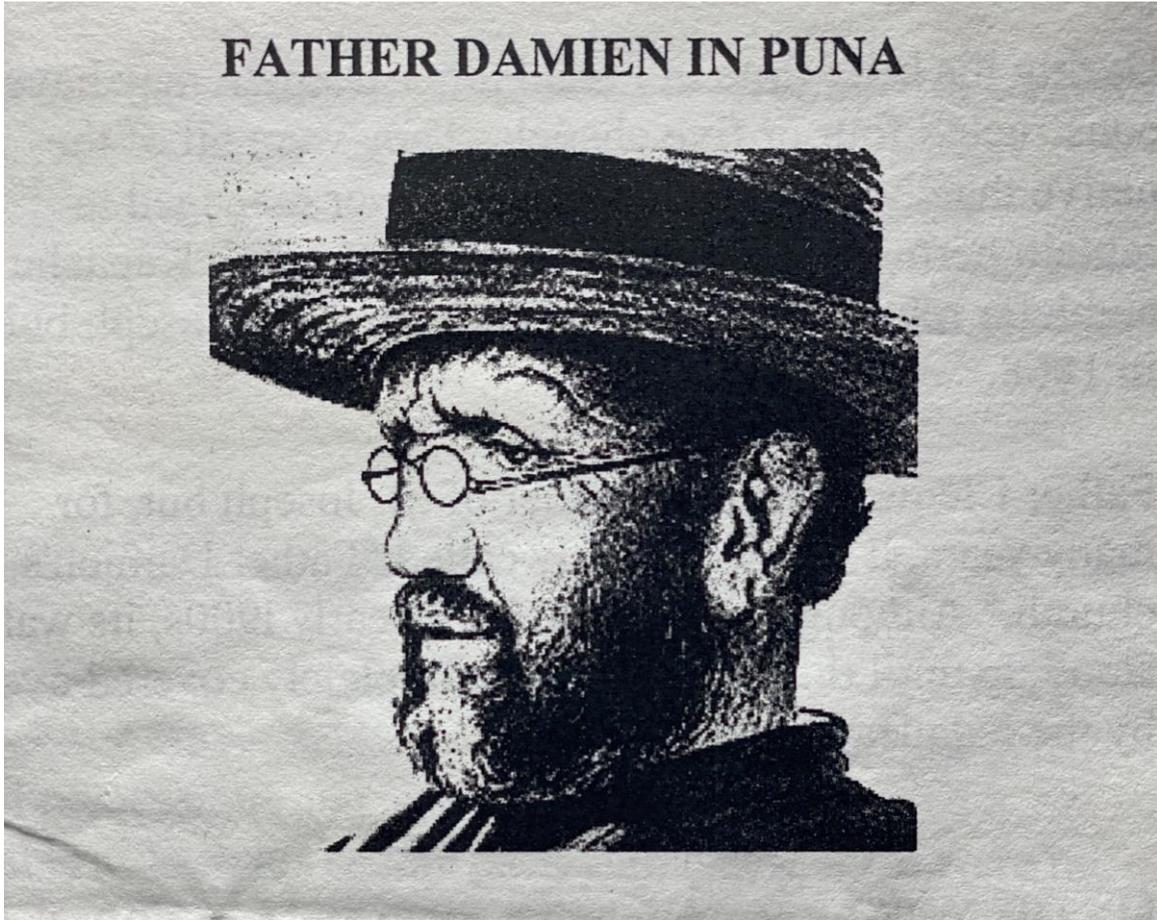


FATHER DAMIEN IN PUNA



Father Damien began his Puna assignment on August 6, 1864.

Primitive Conditions:

The Puna district was first visited by Catholic missionaries in 1840 and 1841. Fathers Robert A. Walsh and Ernest Huertel, who established the island's first Catholic mission on July 5, 1840, in Kailua, Kona, had made several visits in the area. By 1848, Puna had its first resident priest, Father Eustache Preteseille. But when he was reassigned to Oahu in 1857, the district was once again without a priest. When Father Celestine was assigned to the Kau mission in 1858, he was asked to make occasional visits to the 200 Catholic natives living in the Puna area.

When Father Damien arrived in Puna, there were no churches, not even a house to live in. A simple dwelling was quickly put up and in a matter of a day, the young priest was building two churches in the district. We learned this in a letter to his brother Pamphile in which he also asked for two chapel bells from Europe which he never received.

During his brief time in Puna Father Damien may have constructed four or five chapels. They were all the native thatched hut-variety which never managed to remain permanent. One, perhaps, was build at Kapaahu and later replaced by the stone church of St. Joseph built in 1868.

Father Clement was the builder of St. Joseph but, for many years, it was mistakenly called “Father Damien’s church.” Although abandoned in the early 1900s, its walls stood up until they were almost completely covered over by the Kilauea lava flows in 1987.

On the Move:

As with the chapels he put up, we have no records where Father Damien maintained his residence while in Puna. A priest’s life in the mid-1800, Hawaii was, of course, not the same as his modern counterpart. Father Damien never stayed, so to speak, at home. On a horse or a mule, his priestly duties consisted of making the rounds, requiring several days, of the villages in the district, places like Kaimu, Kalapana, Kaneleau, Pohoiki, Kapaahu, Kehena, Panau, Laiapuki, Malama, Kahuwai, Kapoho, and Halepuaa.

Father Charles would later note, “His zeal would not let him stay a day in one place.” And years, later, maintaining the same kind of routine in Kohala, he once was asked by a Hawaiian where he lived. Father Damien jokingly gave his answer by pointing to the saddle on his horse!

After Father Celestine introduced the young missionary to his Puna mission, he commented. “The people are completely happy with him, and he with them!” Father Damien had an immediate love-affair with the Hawaii people. In a letter to his brother, he extolled their praise: “You could not wish for a better people: gentle, pleasant-mannered, exceedingly tenderhearted, most hospitable and read to deprive themselves even of necessities in order to supply your every want!” About all else, he was their spiritual father, and they were his children.

Six Months, One Hundred Baptisms:

In the scattered villages of Puna, the priest cared for his “children.” He preached and gave catechism instructions, heard confessions, and anointed the sick. He carried a portable the sick. He carried a portable altar in his saddle pack and, where there were no chapels, offered Mass in the people’s homes. He baptized and married people readily. The very first time he went around Puna, he baptized a total of 29 adults and children.

Interestingly, the first three individuals he baptized, he gave the Christian names of Damien, Catherine, and Francis, which are his name and those of his parents. The Puna baptismal records show 325 baptisms administered in the 17 years before Damien from 1847 to early 1864.

From August 1864 to January 1865, the length of Father Damien's Puna assignment, he had baptized nearly 100 persons and performed seven marriages.

Father Damien's love-affair with the people of Puna lasted six months. Finding it "harder than leaving home, he departed from Puna and arrived in Kohala in February 1866 to begin his new assignment.

An excerpt from an article by retired diocesan historian Father Louis Yim, published on September 18, 2009, issue of the Hawaii Catholic Herald. Used by permission.

PRAYER TO SAINT DAMIEN

Saint Damien,
Enlightened by the Holy Spirit
And moved by the sorrows of the poor,
You dedicated yourself tirelessly
To the service of the lepers
And became one like them.
In doing so, you enhanced their
God-given dignity
To the last minutes of your priestly life,
Regardless of many trials and sufferings.

We, touched by your self-sacrifice,
Beseech you to help us
Follow your footsteps
In sharing our time, energy, talents,
And other God-endowed gifts
With our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Now you have been glorified
with Jesus Christ
in the Heavenly Kingdom.
We ask you to continue interceding for us
Before our loving and caring God,
That we may have the gift of faith in Him,
Humility and the courage
To bring love and courage
To bring love and healing
To our poor brothers and sisters
In the world.

AMEN.