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Dear Friend of the Franciscan Missions,

BEGINNING THE SIXTH YEAR! This is meditation **61**. If you would like to receive them by email rather than snail mail, just let me know. I hope that they have proved useful. The Easter Season continues to May 31, the Solemnity of Pentecost. The Solemnity of the Ascension is on May 21 in the Northeast and on May 24 in most other places in the United States and Canada. May the blessings of Easter continue to touch your life. This month is filled with special celebrations. May 4 is Good Shepherd Sunday. Please pray for vocations to ministry in the Church. Of course, Mothers Day is May 10. We will remember all our living and deceased mothers all in a special way. May 10 is also the feast of Blessed Damien of Moloka`i. He will be canonized on October 11. May 13 is the feast of Our Lady of Fatima. May 15 is the feast of St. Isidore the farmer and his wife, Maria de la Cabeza. They are two wonderful and generous people who achieved sainthood as husband and wife raising a large family. May 20 is the feast of St. Bernardine of Siena, a Franciscan writer who encouraged devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus. Memorial Day is observed on May 25. Please pray for all who have died in war. In this month, we especially remember Mary. Thank you for your constant support. Be assured of our prayers!

Damien (Kamiano) of Moloka`i
Servant of God, Servant of Humanity

Russell Becker, O.F.M.

Few have captured people's imaginations like Fr. Damien. His courage, care and selflessness in ministering to the exiles of Moloka`i, who were sent there because they had Hansen's disease or as it is more commonly (and frightfully) known: leprosy. His feast day is May 10. Pope John Paul II chose that day because that is the day he arrived in Moloka`i.

Damien came to Hawai`i because he volunteered to go in place of his brother who was ill (it is odd how we can end up in very different places and spaces when we do something good). They both belonged to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. He arrived on March 19, 1864 after a grueling voyage around South America. When he arrived in the harbor of Honolulu, he walked up the street to the Cathedral of Our Lady of Peace and prayed. (There was a tradition in his religious community that when missionaries were sent out they were placed under the protection of Our Lady of Peace. As a result, the first church established by the missionaries when they arrived to a new land was always dedicated to her.) It was there that he was ordained a priest on May 21, 1864. From there, he began his service to the Church in Hawai`i that eventually brought him to Moloka`i, where he would live and minister until he died on April 15, 1889 at the age of 49.

This remarkable man is to this day inspires people to generosity and self-sacrifice. I would just like to share some reflections on his life and work.

Special Vision. Damien had what many great people have: a special vision. He could see people in trouble, and even see the face of Christ in them! I always thought that the parable of the Good Samaritan would be a great Gospel for his feast. This story shows how many people—even good people—are able to walk by those in trouble because they do not even notice them, making them invisible. The Samaritan, the outsider, had that vision. He could see someone in trouble and see them as a brother or sister. Then he had to stop and help, there was no other choice. Later, as the Church reflected on this parable, the person in trouble was recognized as a vision of Christ--by some, at least. The defense for not stopping is always the question: *when did we see YOU in trouble?*

Damien was an outsider whose vision drew him to those people in trouble, when most others had just walked by. He may have been a bit scared, but he made no excuse for not helping. He did not see a disease that walked and talked, he saw a person, a brother, a sister, another Christ who happened to be sick. What else could he do?

Special Service. The Church in its wisdom did not choose that parable, instead the Gospel for his feast is the Good Shepherd. He was such a remarkable shepherd. Everything that Psalm 23 describes a shepherd doing for the flock, Damien did for his flock. He did not limit himself to sacramental ministry, his was full service from morning till late at night. Perhaps the best way to describe his ministry is that he brought Easter to Good Friday. The settlement at Kalawao was sad, hopeless and in some ways lawless. It was not enough to be sick with such a debilitating and death dealing disease, but exile and the surroundings made the suffering more intense. There was little shelter, no adequate care for the dead, much less the living, and little to protect people from the lawlessness that seemed to thrive. Few, if any, were safe.

Damien set about caring for the dead, providing coffins, funerals and burial so that people discovered dignity even in death. He built houses, changed the place from a barren waste to a beautiful paradise by planting all kinds of flowers, trees and crops. He got people interested in art and all of a sudden that which was so barren and dull became beautiful. Beauty goes a long way to ease pain. Much of the medical help was given by him. He cleaned wounds and sores and did

whatever he could to relieve pain. The sacramental ministry was on-going. He created a true Christian community as well as a truly human and humane community. The seedier side of the place was often dealt with by his cane and his temper, but that never lasted long. There was a school established for the children of the settlement. Education would give even the sick and their children a chance they had never had before.

Part of the success of his work was his ability to identify with his flock. Damien was not just the outsider who cared for the flock, he was truly a member of that flock. There was nothing that distinguished the people in the settlement, but two things bound the community together: the image of God and the life-defeating sickness. Long before he showed any signs of Hansen's disease, Damien would begin his preaching with the words: *We lepers*. That ministry truly embodied compassion. There was no "*there but for the grace of God go I*" condescension.

Blessed Marianne joined him near his death and continued his work along with some sisters and other generous people—more good Samaritans and good shepherds and good brothers and sisters. Joseph Dutton, who died there in 1931 well into his eighties, is another of these special people.

It was not easy. There were two additional burdens that Damien carried: the spiritual darkness in his life and the lack of support from others. It seems as if the God that Damien revealed to the people of the Kalaupapa was not the God that Damien felt in his life. He was lonely, beset with scruples, seemed to have the same dark night of the soul that Mother Teresa suffered and he had a temper that he often fretted over. There is a story of him desperate to go to confession and not able to board a ship that brought the sick to the settlement, so he rowed out and shouted over the surf in French his confession to the bishop on the ship. Yet when you read accounts from the members of the settlement community, they spoke of the peace, the hope and even the joy that Damien had brought to them. This is the God that he proclaimed to the people. His own pain did not prevent his proclamation of the true Gospel.

He always hoped that his community would send others to work with him, but the ones who had the courage to come to work with the sick did not have the courage to live with Damien. He was one of those people that religious life needs to succeed, but often has a difficult time containing. Sometimes the Church and religious communities like to keep things orderly and predictable. That may be the exact reason God sends people like Fr. Damien to us to make sure we are truly living and proclaiming the Gospel. The Church and communities always come around. That is why Blessed Damien will be Saint Damien very soon.

There were people in his time who questioned his motives, defamed his morals and feared him because of his ministry. One of the best defenses of Damien and the one who told the world about him was Robert Louis Stephenson, the English author.

So, we come to his feast again, this time looking forward to his canonization. His feast day and day of death almost always fall in the Easter Season. How appropriate! For this Good Samaritan and Good Shepherd certainly witnessed to the power of Easter. Damien captures our imaginations because he had the courage to do what all of us know we should do, and he did it in spite of his spiritual pain, darkness and an 'interesting' temper. In the letter he received giving him permission to go to Moloka'i, his superior wrote: *you may stay as long as your devotion dictates*. I guess we should all pray that we could one day have such courage and such devotion so we can witness to the power of Easter with such boldness.

Reflection Questions

1. What does Fr. Damien inspire in you?
2. What does it feel like when someone recognizes you as a person and treats you as a brother or sister, or another Christ? Does it help you to treat others in that same way?
3. What can you do for those who are outcast in our time?
4. How well do we treat those who challenge us to excellence?
5. How supportive are we of those who have the courage to minister to the outcast, the sick, prisoners and others whom we tend to pass by?

Please pray for our missionary friars on their birthdays:

Br. Gerald Hudson, O.F.M. (Home Missions): May 6

Fr. Juvenal Leahy, O.F.M. (Brazil): May 17

Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan): May 30

Grant them strength and length of days!

Please also pray for our missionary and former missionary friars who are ill:

Fr. Ignatius McGeedy, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Robert Nee, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Aloysius Siracuse, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Br. Rosario Vieira, O.F.M. (Brazil)

Fr. Finian Riley, O.F.M. (Africa)

Fr. Peter Sheridan, O.F.M. (Home Missions)

Fr. Stanislaus Widomski, O.F.M. (Japan)

May God bless them with health and energy.