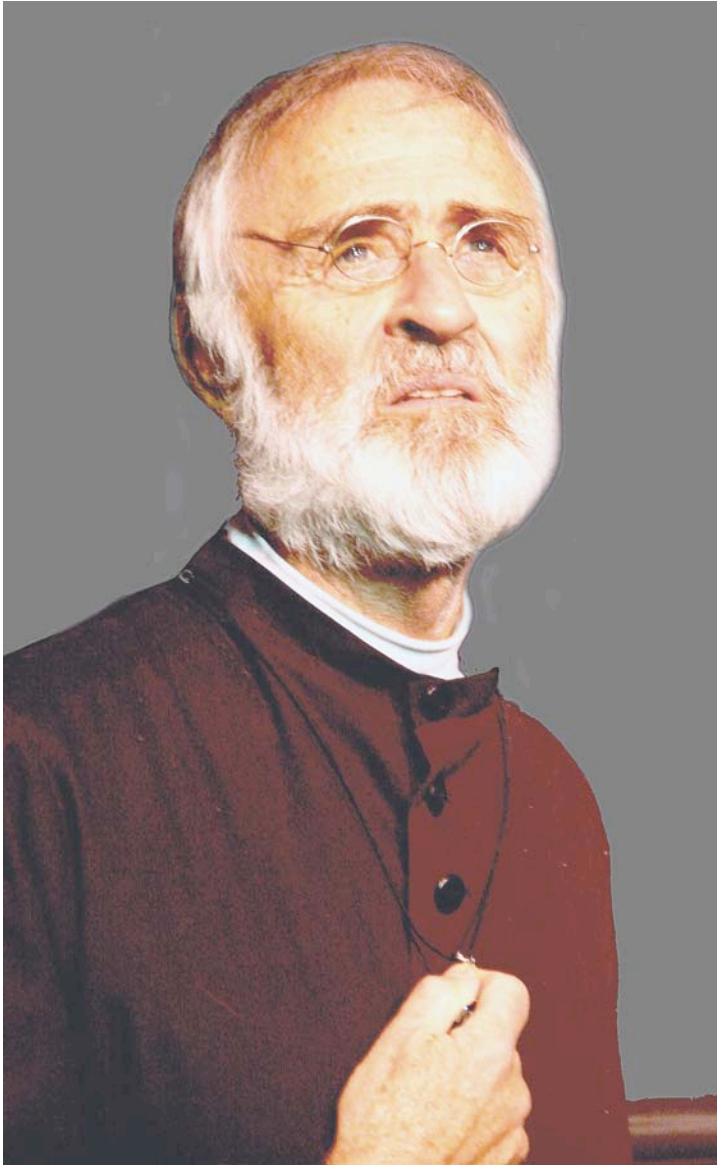




Dan Cawthon Plays Father Damien—The Leper Priest of Molokai

By Andrea A. Firth



Dan Cawthon as Father Damien

Photo provided

It's not unusual to ponder the fact that if you knew then what you now know, you would have done things differently 20 years ago. However, we typically don't get a second chance to bring the maturity and wisdom gained over 20 years to recreate an earlier experience. But that's

exactly what Dan Cawthon, Performing Arts Professor at Saint Mary's College, gets to do when he revisits the role of Father Damien de Veuster in his upcoming performances of the play *Damien*.

Cawthon first performed *Damien*, playwright Aldyth Morris' story of a Belgian

priest's life working among the lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai, in 1982. He thought he had put this one-man show to rest after touring the play throughout the Bay Area, United States, and Europe in 1989 in celebration of the 100th anniversary of Father Damien's death. "I ended up at the Edinburgh Festival for two weeks and had a terrific run with it," describes Cawthon. "It was extremely satisfying. That would be the peak experience that I have had as an actor."

Yet, almost 20 years later as he prepares for his retirement from the faculty of Saint Mary's later this Spring, Cawthon finds himself once again in the black and white garb of a priest telling the tale of the selfless and devoted Father Damien who fought the Church, the Hawaiian government, and his own personal demons to ensure the proper care and dignity of the neglected souls of Molokai. "It's been a wonderful experience for me to realize that that script is still alive and well in my mind," states Cawthon.

The play is set 60 years after Father Damien's death, as his recently excavated remains are being transported from Molokai back to his native country of Belgium. Damien awakens and reflects upon his life story. "He tells it from the perspective of someone who has had time to rumi-

nate or to point out the layers of the experience," explains Cawthon. "He describes what was really happening in him—his doubts about what he was doing, the value of it, and whether he was serving himself, or the [lepers], or God. He's left with a lot of doubts."

Cawthon was 50 years old when he last performed the play—closer to the age that Damien was when he died than the age he is portrayed in the play. "In twenty years I have had experiences that would lead me to look back and see that in our youth, when we set out to achieve things in life, there are a lot of conflicting motivations," notes Cawthon. "Now as I look back upon my own life, I can see threads of things that I would not have been able to see at age 45 or 50."

Dan Cawthon will bring his seasoned perspective to two performances of *Damien* at Saint Mary's College on Thursday and Friday, March 27th and 28th at 8 pm in the Soda Activity Center. Reservations can be made by calling (925) 631-4381 or go to www.stmarys-ca.edu.