

**ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH  
KAILUA KONA, HI**

**NARRATIVE FOR VIDEO BASED ON ARCHIVAL REPORT AND BOOK  
PUBLISHED BY THE ST. MICHAEL'S HERITAGE COMMITTEE**

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From the arrival of Missionary priests of the Sacred Hearts Congregation in 1840, the North Kona Catholic Community has been one created by love, patience, perseverance and much hard work. Frs. Robert A. Walsh and Louis Ernest Heurtel began what was to be a thriving parish consisting of St. Michael the Archangel in Kailua-Kona, Immaculate Conception in Holualoa, St. Paul's in Honalo, St. Peter's By the Sea in Kahalu'u, and Holy Rosary in Kalaoa.

Mass was first held on Hawaii Island on July 5, 1840, at a spot located inside the present Kona Shopping Arcade. A stone hitching post there serves as a reminder to this precise location. The present St. Michael's grounds were donated to the Church by Gov. Kuakini who, while never converting to the faith, was consistently a generous benefactor to the early priests and the Catholic Church. By 1842 a new church building had been completed on this donated land along with a school begun by Fr. Heurtel. Mr. Thomas Aiu, whose family also donated to the Church a small plot of ground near Alii Drive, was the first lay teacher in 1890. Originally, meetings and services were held in a small grass hut located where the cemetery now lies.

When Fr. Joachim Marechal assumed the duties of the Catholic presence in May 1848, he also took on the task of planning and building a more permanent house of worship. This new building is the large and much loved stone structure that has served well the families of North Kona for so many years. A traditional design built of lava rock and coral sand mortar with a packed dirt floor, it has endured many changes, renovations, damages and repairs since those days. Shortly after the church was completed, a small 3-room Rectory was constructed to house the priests. France sent a treasured gift of a large bell in 1853.

Fr. Marechal passed away in 1859 and was reverently interred beneath his beloved St. Michael's Church.

Years passed and work continued. Priests, sisters, and faithful laypersons labored to nurture a growing number of parishioners who were drawn by example, outreach, education and prayer. A convent was dedicated in 1955 by the Sisters of the Holy Family and the wood structure is currently in use as the administrative offices and meeting rooms.

Time, nature, a tropical climate and significant weather events have taken their toll on the buildings. Major flooding in 1968, 1974 and 1982 added to the damage as well. Even insects have contributed to the plight; termites have been nibbling away at the old convent building. Patchwork repairs have held this wooden structure together beyond what most people might consider reasonable.

The coral sand mortar, hidden from view, deteriorated over the years and was little more than dust between the lava rocks, supported by two thin layers of stucco that had been added at some point along the way. When a 6.7 magnitude earthquake struck at approximately 7:15 a.m. on October 15, 2006, it was not at first apparent how severely the church was damaged. When, a few months later, a second structural engineering firm was retained to investigate further, the shocking result was the immediate closure of St. Michael's Church.

Disheartened but not discouraged, the St. Michael's family rose to the challenge just as it always has since that first Mass in 1840. Not only did we learn that we had a potentially dangerous building damaged by an earthquake, we also were made aware that the building fails current construction, safety, and code requirements. An "unreinforced masonry structure" without proper footings and no foundation had been weakened over the decades by floods and natural erosion processes. As we all know, salt air is corrosive and damages objects much more quickly than one might experience in another type of climate or geographic location. Age, weather, and past flood damage—combined with the 2006 earthquake—was a burden that not many structures of this age and type could continue to withstand.

The Building Committee began to research what could be done. Experts were hired, reports were reviewed, budgets estimated. Repair or replace? Designs and plans were drawn, then offered to the parish and other community members for feedback several times. Emotions and costs both ran high.

Questions formed: If the old building could be repaired, would it look just like it used to? Would we have the same amount of room inside to use? What about the administrative building; while it was not severely damaged by the quake, this old wooden building was falling apart too, bit by bit.

While the need for space to accommodate the congregation continues to grow, ideas also began to take root. One thought: perhaps, this is the right time for a new and larger church facility. Other issues apparent and relevant include safety and the suitability of the facilities in serving this vital ohana of believers. In order to continue the proud tradition the Catholic Church has in serving the poor, the elderly, the children, and its own parishioners—we must also improve the earthly means by which this is accomplished. We strive to restore or repair, and preserve, what is possible by way of the Grotto and the Cemetery. We endeavor to improve the implementation of St. Michael's ministry by building a new and larger church building, much needed additional parking, and more efficient administration areas and perhaps an open-sided pavilion for social outreach and

casual parish activities. Some original construction materials are to be included in the design, such as the stones which comprise the church building's walls, the bell and the stained glass windows.

We believe that this can be done. And, it can be done with reverence for our Catholic heritage in Kona and for our brothers and sisters whose many cultures we enjoy here. A realistic and progressive building plan, in light of the current damage making the church unusable, only furthers this goal.

This might be a good time to reflect on what makes "a church;" we all should know that it is the vibrant, dynamic, and loving members who try to carry Christ to their community and its less fortunate persons. Like those who started it all in 1840 and throughout the years have never ceased their labors and sacrifices, we will continue to serve. Whether we worship in a grass hut, a simple wooden church house, a large stone building with stained glass and air conditioning, or in a huge tent, those who love St. Michael's have never given up to despair or lost hope.

We invite you to join in our efforts by contributing what you can to our building fund, and by purchasing our newly published book, *North Kona's Catholic Heritage....remembered* which is available via our website. This book was written by the St. Michael's Heritage Committee, whose members were inspired to undertake the project after helping with research for an archival report during the initial studies done after the earthquake damage was realized. Retailing for \$20.00 + \$2.50 S/H, each sale adds \$14.00 to the building fund.

Come and see, come with us, work with us to serve. Our ohana is strong with a big heart. Our plea is not one of desperation, rather it is an invitation for you to join us in our ever increasing numbers of family members.