THE NOBLE LEGACY OF FATHER SERRA

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Who Was Father Serra?

Junípero Serra was born on the Island of Majorca, off the coast of Spain in 1713, and died in Monterey, California in 1784. Partly of Jewish ancestry, this young and sickly boy applied to enter the Order of St. Francis of Assisi; he became a Franciscan in 1731. In 1742 he received his doctorate in Theology from the Lullian University in Palma. Two years later he assumed the Duns Scotus chair in philosophy at the university.

He is known as the greatest missionary in U.S. history, traveling 24,000 miles, baptizing and confirming thousands of persons, mostly Indians (in 1777 the Vatican authorized Serra to administer the sacrament of confirmation, usually the reserve of a bishop). His commitment to bringing the Gospel to the New World was such that he walked nearly 300 miles to consecrate his mission at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe before coming to California.

On May 2, 2015, Pope Francis discussed how important this event was. He said, "Friar Junípero entrusted his missionary activity to the Blessed Virgin Mary. We know that before leaving for California he wanted to consecrate his life to Our Lady of Guadalupe and to ask her for the grace to open the hearts of the colonizers and indigenous peoples, for the mission he was about to begin. In this prayer we can still see this humble brother kneeling in front of the 'Mother of the true God,' the Morenita, who brought her Son to the New World. The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was and has been present in the twenty-one missions that Friar Junípero founded along the coast of California. Since then, Our Lady of Guadalupe has become, in fact, the Patroness of the whole American people."

Father Serra had but one goal: to facilitate eternal salvation for the Indians of North America. A humble man, he was nonetheless zealous in his work. A fervent preacher, he went out of his way to bring the liturgy to the Indians. His devotion to the Stations of the Cross is legendary:

during the Way of the Cross he carried a cross on his shoulders, thus uniting his sufferings to Christ. For the same reason, he practiced self-mortification.

Who Had the Biggest Effect on His Life?

Three persons who had a big effect on Serra were Duns Scotus, María de Agreda, and Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Serra was very much attracted to the philosophy of Duns Scotus, the 13th century Franciscan who argued that God's boundless love was made manifest in the Incarnation. By giving us his only son, Jesus, God empowered us to seek salvation through him. Importantly, it was Duns Scotus who proposed the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. It took several centuries for the Church to affirm that Mary was conceived without sin, though there were many who, like Serra, were drawn to this belief long before official approval was granted in 1870.

"To Scotus," Serra taught, "God did not create human beings, but individuals with names. Individualism is very big in Scotus." This teaching took on existential meaning when Serra worked with the Indians; for them, the individual was secondary to the tribe, a conviction that had to be overcome if Christianity was to take hold.

María de Jesús de Agreda, known as María de Agreda, was a 17th century descendant from *conversos* (converted Jews) who took Scotism to a new level: she wrote a book maintaining that Our Blessed Mother revealed herself to her, confirming her own Immaculate Conception.

Serra was greatly inspired by her, especially her role in converting the Indians. It was the gift of bilocation that mattered most: it was believed that she was at two places at one time. To be specific, although she never left her convent in Agreda, between the years 1620 and 1631 she was credited with working with the Indians in New Mexico and Texas. The Indians reported that a beautiful young woman, dubbed the Lady in Blue,

spoke to them in Spanish, and even though that was not their language, they understood her; in turn, when they spoke in their own language, she understood them. She encouraged them to seek out the Franciscans for baptism.

When the Indians claimed that they had been introduced to Christianity by Sister María, Father Alonso de Benavides, a Church official in the area, dispatched priests to investigate. Accompanied by soldiers and converted Indians, they traveled hundreds of miles. When they met the Jumano Indians, they were told that the Lady in Blue (which they described in detail) had recently visited them; the nun told them that the missionaries were on their way.

Benavides felt compelled to follow through on this extraordinary story. In 1630, he went to Spain to report on the events. There he was told by a priest, the Spanish minister general, that eight years earlier he had learned of these same stories from the nun. According to Serra's most prodigious biographer, Father Maynard J. Geiger, when Benavides met Sister María, he was startled by her knowledge of events in New Mexico. "He quizzed her about details of the country which no one could possibly know without having been there and he was satisfied with the answers," Geiger writes. Her confessor, Father Sebastian Marcilla, declared her bilocation experience to be authentic. One thing is for sure: her effect on the missionaries was profound.

The greatest role model for Father Serra was Las Casas. No one championed the cause of human rights for Indians more than this pioneering Dominican priest. Horrified by the way the Indians were treated by Spaniards, he was vociferous in his belief that their barbaric practices were anti-Christian.

This had a great impact on Father Serra. Due to the influence of Las Casas, Spain was the first European country to ban slavery. Serra pressed for Indian rights as well, drawing on his natural law conviction that all humans were entitled to equal rights. It was Serra's beliefs and practices,

grounded in Christianity, that drew so many Indians to his side. Indeed, many Indians, following the experience of María de Agreda, came forward for baptism at the mere sight of Franciscans.

Were the Indians Perceived as Being Inferior?

Culturally, the Indians appeared inferior, but they were not seen as racially inferior. Take, for example, the Chumash Indians of Southern California, the first California Indians to be contacted by Spanish explorers. When the Franciscans first met them, they were struck by how different they looked and behaved. The women were partially naked and the men were totally naked. Serra, in fact, felt as though he was in Eden.

Moreover, the Indians had no written language, and practiced no agriculture. They lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering. They ate things that the missionaries and the soldiers found bizarre, including roots, seeds, birds, horses, cats, dogs, owls, rats, snakes, and bats. These primitive habits, along with what the Europeans saw as their lazy and promiscuous ways, convinced them that changes had to be made.

The Indians also appeared to be docile, and it was this feature that motivated Serra and others to establish the missions. They saw themselves as father figures who were called to minister to them. Was this paternalistic? Yes, but it was a paternalism born of love, not arrogance. The Friars were there to service the Indians, not patronize them.

According to Gregory Orfalea, who has written a superb book, *Journey to the Sun: Junípero Serra's Dream and the Founding of Christianity*, Serra saw the Indians as "something of a spiritual tabula rasa." This proved alluring, even compelling, which explains Serra's determination. It was his job, he believed, to bring the Good News to the Indians. He had his work cut out for himself.

The Indians were accustomed to believing that God existed in the material world; the transcendent was not easy to grasp. Just as hard was the idea of Original Sin. They believed in sin, but with punishment meted out in this world. What they could not envision, at least initially, was the belief that man was "fallen" and could be saved through Jesus.

Another obstacle the Franciscans had to overcome was the Indians' strong sense of group identity; this made the idea of individual responsibility hard to accept. So, too, was the belief that there is a God who suffers for them so that they may prosper spiritually. The notion that God was close to the poor was also a stumbling block; the materialism of Indian culture led them to look with aspersion on this concept.

Sexual practices were very different. For example, polygamy was often practiced, pre-marital sex was not found objectionable, and naked dances were commonplace. Then there were behaviors that, while not a daily occurrence, left a strong impression on the soldiers and clergy alike. Take, for example, what the Chumash called the Coyote Dance: Men would perform oral sex, or might have sex with multiple women in public, followed by a dancer who defecated on the ground. These practices had no counterpart in European culture.

"Indian sexuality did not make the distinctions that Christians did," writes James A. Sandos, author of an important book, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions.* The Indians also had to learn "new ways of thinking" and "newly prescribed prohibitions or taboos against formerly common behavior," none of which came easily.

How Did Father Serra Get Along with the Indians?

For the most part, they got along well. This had something to do with the fact that the Catholic Church led the protests against inhumane treatment of the Indians; the Spanish crown ultimately agreed with this position. It cannot be said too strongly that the primary mission of the Franciscans

was not to conquer the Indians, but to make them good Christians. The missions were supposed to be temporary, not some permanent take over.

Serra frequently commented on the "affability" of the Indians he encountered, and detailed many instances of kindness and affection. He would reach out to them after Mass, offering them gifts. Geiger writes that Serra and the Friars typically relied on Indian hospitality in their travels, dubbing it "the unwritten law of the land." When Serra and his companions set out for Jalpan, Mexico in 1750 for their mission, Christian Indians and soldiers greeted them and escorted them to their new homes in the hills. Serra, in turn, translated the body of Christian doctrine from Spanish into Pame, their native language; he later preached to the Indians in their own language.

On another occasion, when Serra was finding it near impossible to traverse a channel, the Chumash carried him across. "Despite my lukewarmness," wrote Serra, "tears welled up into my eyes when I saw with what good will they came to my assistance, linking me on both sides by the arm to get me over the muddy steep hills, which I could not negotiate on foot or on horseback."

Father Serra did not simply act as a good role model for other priests—he held them to high standards. For instance, he laid down the law on the Franciscans in California, holding them to celibacy. He did not want to see the kind of womanizing that some priests in New Mexico were known to engage in from time to time. This was known to the Indians, which is one reason why they appreciated his leadership.

The Indians drew a distinction between the way the Spanish soldiers treated them and the way the Franciscans did. So when some Indians would act badly, the soldiers blamed them and sought harsh punishments. The priests, on the other hand, saw murderous acts as the work of the Devil. Also, the soldiers were always anxious to take land from the Indians, but they were met with resistance from the priests.

Both the colonial authorities and the missionaries vied for control over the Indians, but their practices could not have been more different. With the exception of serious criminal acts, Serra insisted that all punishments were to be meted out by the priests. While he did not always succeed in challenging the civil authorities, he often did, the result being that the Indians were spared the worst excesses.

Serra also contested attempts by the authorities to settle Indians in lands that had limited resources. He further opposed founding Spanish towns; he knew they would not respect the best interests of the Indians. He believed, with good reason, that the missionaries provided the best environment for the Indians, acting as a buffer against control by colonial authorities.

The Franciscans also sought to protect Indian women from the Spaniards. The missionaries carved out a very organized lifestyle for the Indians, keeping a close eye on attempts by Spanish men to abuse Indian women. The Friars segregated the population on the basis of sex and age, hoping to protect the females from unwanted advances. When sexual abuse occurred, it was quickly condemned by Serra and his fellow priests. It is this kind of benign paternalism that facilitated good relations between the priests and the Indians.

How did Serra Succeed in Contesting Spanish Control of the Indians?

Father Serra had many confrontations with the Spanish colonial rulers. One of the most protracted battles was with Pedro Fages, head of the military. To be blunt, he was anti-Indian, calling them "evil looking" and "treacherous." He wanted nothing more than to control the Indians *and* the Franciscans. He hated Serra for many reasons, most prominent among them being the relentless complaints that the priest brought to his attention. In return, Serra resented his imperial powers.

When Serra protested that the lands belonged to the Indians, he incurred the wrath of Fages. He went over Fages' head, pressing the Viceroy, Antonio María de Bucareli Ursua, to heed his advice. Serra wanted the power to remove soldiers who misbehaved, making the case that they were a bad example to the Indians. In particular, Serra objected to the sexual abuse of Indians by the Spaniards. Bucareli was an Italian aristocrat who liked Serra and ultimately gave him just about everything he requested. Indeed, he sacked Fages.

The Indians had several legitimate grievances. The soldiers wanted to use the land for grazing, allowing cattle and horses to use the open land; the Indians wanted to use the land to cultivate grasses for food. A showdown was inevitable: the Spanish animals sought the food supplies coveted by the Indians. The sexual abuse of Indian women by predatory soldiers also played a key role in turning Indian men against the civil authorities.

Serra called for many reforms. He wanted changes made in the size of the military (he sought an increase) and argued that soldiers coming from Spain should be allowed to bring their wives. As another way to stave off sexual abuse of Indian women, he encouraged marriage between the Spaniards and the Indians. Most of all, he opposed the kind of arbitrary force used against the Indians that had become standard practice. He demanded that predatory soldiers be removed. On all of these matters, he found that Bucareli was more than receptive. The two became good friends.

Serra also clashed with Felipe de Neve, who became the new governor of both Upper and Lower California (the northern and southern parts). Neve was a true student of the Enlightenment, looking askance at anything religious. He pushed for a secularized mission, and as such worked to gut them of their essence. Indeed, he sought to wrest control of the missions. Orfalea says he was "going for the jugular of Serra's utopic dream in California, to live in salvific community with the Indians with as little interference from the Crown and the military as possible."

Neve's secular vision allowed him to object to the paternalism of Serra and the missionaries. For example, he rejected the sexual ethics of the Church, holding that it was perfectly acceptable for the soldiers to fornicate with Indian women. The Indians did not need to be protected, he insisted; they needed to assimilate. This was not Serra's view. He saw Neve's permissiveness as a green light to those soldiers who would abuse Indian women. This was not the path to liberation, he reasoned.

Bucareli, to his credit, told Neve to follow the lead of Serra. Specifically, he called upon Neve to give up his quest to simply issue commands to the Indians. "The good treatment of the Indians and the kindness, love, and gifts showered upon them are the only means, all taken together, to win them over; and may Your Grace prefer those means to others that stem from rigor." This is a perfect example of Serra's effect on Bucareli.

Did the Indians and the Missionaries Ever Clash?

While most of the interaction between the Indians and the missionaries was positive, there were many times when they clashed. One of the ugliest confrontations took place in 1769 at Mission San Diego, the first mission in California.

The Indians in San Diego proved to be the most resistant to conversion. They were more than recalcitrant—they went on a rampage attacking the mission. There would be many battles there, as there would be in Mission San Luis Obispo. Both of these missions were ransacked and set on fire many times. While it was the soldiers whom the Indians targeted, they even attacked some priests.

Serra, showing his Catholic-nurtured optimism, put a positive spin on the violence. After learning that priests had been killed in the clashes, he saw the birth of a new opportunity. "Thanks be to God," he said. "Now that the earth has been watered by blood, the conversion of the San Diego Indians is inevitable." His optimism, however, was not eternal. Just

before Christmas in 1775, he thought of quitting, confessing to Bucareli in a letter that "we are in a vale of tears."

Was it Violence that Decimated the Indians?

No. What killed most of the Indians were diseases contracted from the Spaniards. According to Sandos, "Indians died in the missions in numbers that appalled Franciscans." He describes how this happened. "When Spaniards in various stages of exploration and expansion entered into territory unacquainted with disease," he writes, "they unwittingly unleashed disease microbodes into what demographers call 'virgin soil.' The resulting wildfire-like contagion, called 'virgin soil epidemics,' decimated unprotected American Indians populations." Orfalea is no doubt correct to maintain that it is doubtful if Serra ever understood the ramifications of this biological catastrophe.

The worst disease was syphilis, a malady that proved resistant to attempts by the Friars to treat it. They believed it started in Spain (it was noted earlier by Las Casas), but some historians now claim that the explorers brought syphilis to Europe from the Caribbean. Of the non-venereal diseases, measles was the worst, killing children, in particular.

Isn't It True that the Clergy Flogged the Indians?

By 21st century standards, flogging is considered an unjust means of punishment, but it was not seen that way in the 18th century. Fornication, gambling, and the like were considered taboo, justifying flogging. Sandos puts this in context when he says, "Priestly life was filled with challenges, obligations, and sufferings, and if a priest occasionally abused his Indians that was an incidental but unintentional cost of missionization."

Serra, who never flogged anyone (save himself as an expression of redemptive suffering), admitted there were some excesses, but he also stressed something that is hard for 21st century Americans to understand:

unlike flogging done by the authorities, when priests indulged the practice, it was done out of love, not hatred. "We, every one of us," Serra said, "came here for the single purpose of doing them [the Indians] good and for their eternal salvation; and I feel sure that everyone knows that we love them."

Some say that it makes no difference whether the flogging was done for benign purposes or evil ones. While the objective condition of flogging can be criticized, to discount motive is unjust. For example, when a parent disciplines his child with an occasional slap on the behind, is he doing so because he wants to harm him? Is he not attempting to send him a message? And isn't the message, "do the right thing"? To be sure, reasonable people can still disagree about the practice, but to dismiss motive as irrelevant when evaluating the morality of any act is irresponsible.

Sandos explains why flogging was done. "Franciscans saw the purpose of public punishment before an assembled community as a means to inculcate personal responsibility for sin that in turn would be confessed privately in the confessional," he notes. Similarly, Orfalea observes that for Serra, "the purpose of the whippings was spiritual improvement."

There is also something hypocritical about using 21st century moral standards to evaluate 18th century practices. Abortion-on-demand, through term, is a reality today, and what could be more barbaric than that?

Some Contend that the Indians Were Treated the Way Hitler Treated Jews?

This is perhaps the most pernicious lie promoted by those who have an animus against the Church. Hitler committed genocide against Jews; there was no genocide committed by Serra and the Franciscans against the California Indians. Hitler put Jews in ovens; the missionaries put the Indians to work, paying them for their labor. Hitler wanted to wipe out

the Jews, so that Western civilization could be saved; the priests wanted to service the Indians, so that they could be saved.

Sandos pointedly refutes this vile comparison: "Hitler and the Nazis intended to destroy the Jews of Europe and created secret places to achieve that end, ultimately destroying millions of people in a systematic program of labor exploitation and death camps. Spanish authorities and Franciscan missionaries, however, sought to bring Indians into a new Spanish society they intended to build on the California frontier and were distressed to see the very objects of their religious and political desire die in droves. From the standpoint of intention alone, there can be no valid comparison between Franciscans and Nazis."

Moreover, as Sandos writes, even from the standpoint of results, the comparison fails. "Hitler intended to implement a 'final solution' to the so-called Jewish problem and was close to accomplishing his goals when the Allies stopped him. In contrast, neither Spanish soldiers nor missionaries knew anything about the germ theory of disease, which was not widely accepted until late in the nineteenth century."

Those who make these malicious charges know very well that Jews never acted kindly toward the Nazis. They also know, or should know, that acts of love by the Indians toward the missionaries are legion. No one loves those who are subjecting them to genocide.

What about Slavery? Were the Indians Treated as Slaves?

No. Ironically it was Neve, the authoritarian governor who first made this accusation. The historical record, however, offers no support for this outrageous claim. Slaves in the U.S. had no rights and were not considered human. The missionaries granted the Indians rights and respected their human dignity.

Sandos also says it is "unfair" to compare the lifestyle of the Indians to slave conditions in the U.S. "The purpose of a mission was to organize a

religious community in isolation that could nourish itself physically and spiritually. Surplus production was to feed other missions and local towns and presidios. Profit was never a consideration, unlike plantations, where profit was the purpose and reason for their creation."

Later in his book, Sandos addresses the issue again. "Were the Indians slaves? As has been discussed, the answer is no: there was no sense of ownership of the Indian by the Franciscan." Orfalea agrees with this assessment.

Did the Missionaries Eradicate Indian Culture?

No. While missionary outreach clearly altered many elements of Indian culture, as Orfalea notes, "the fact is, the California Indian did not disappear. From the low point at the turn of the [20th] century (25,000 remained), the Indian population has grown to well over 600,000 today, twice what it was at pre-contact." Indeed, today there are over one hundred federally recognized California tribes with tribal lands, with many others seeking recognition.

Geiger shows that not only did the missionaries not wipe out the native language of the Indians, they learned it and employed Indians as teachers. Some cultural modification was inevitable, given that the missionaries taught the Indians how to be masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, and painters. The Indians were also taught how to sell and buy animals, and were allowed to keep their bounty. Women were taught spinning, knitting, and sewing.

In 1756, an encyclical letter was sent to the missionaries outlining several steps that must be taken to ensure respect for Indian customs. For example, the longer the Indians lived in a mission, the more their wishes had to be respected. If an Indian did not have a fixed domicile, it was he who decided which mission he wanted to go to, and no missionary was permitted to overrule him. As for which language was to be used, the

missionaries were instructed to "employ the best method suited for the advancement of the Indians."

"Although many historians once thought that Indian culture had been eradicated in the missions," Sandos says, "anthropologists and other observers have provided evidence to the contrary. Through the vehicle of the Spanish language Indian shamans and ceremonial leaders as well as their followers kept knowledge of tribal lore alive and transmitted it to succeeding generations through oral tradition. They also preserved what they could of their original Indian language."

Were the Missionaries a Success?

Sandos makes the point that there are two highly politicized schools of thought on this subject: at one end there are the triumphalists, for whom there are no blemishes in the record of the missionaries; at the other end there are the nihilists, for whom there are only blemishes. Both visions are ideologically driven, and are therefore of little value in making an honest assessment. The truth is there were blemishes, but it is also true that, overall, the missionaries served the Indians well.

The goal of the missionaries was salvation. They baptized as many Indians as they could because they wanted to bring them into the Christian camp. Their job was not easy. They did not give up material pleasures and risk their lives because they were indifferent to the Indians. If anything, the missionaries were generous—they gave of themselves selflessly. And they did what generous people typically do when they have something priceless: they shared it with others. They introduced the Indians to Christianity, hoping that they, too, could share in this joyous experience.

Sandos notes that from the Franciscan perspective, the missions were a qualified success. They succeeded in bringing Christianity to a significant number of Indians, thus accomplishing their most important goal. They also provided them with food, clothing, and shelter. Paying the Indians

for their work was another plus. Sadly, however, more Indians were lost to diseases than lived.

It is true that the missionaries were paternalistic, and this is particularly true of Serra. But from their vantage, what were the alternatives? To take a laissez-faire attitude would be to sanction the looming option, namely secularization. The record shows, however, that when the Indians were "freed" of Franciscan authority, they fell under the control of colonial authorities and ranchers. As every honest observer has concluded, that didn't work out too well.

"Secularization undid the missions." Sandos did not come to this conclusion lightly. "At the beginning of the 1830s the mission Indian population numbered 18,000; by 1839 fewer than 1,000 remained. Released from their enforced residence, Indians returned to their homelands, drifted into towns and pueblos, joined the labor forces of newly emerging ranchos, or joined the bands that began raiding the herds of missions and ranchos."

Any discussion of the conditions that Indians lived under in the missions must include a comparison to non-missionized Indians. We know that the greatest decline in the Indian population took place fifty years after Serra died in 1784, and decades after the missions had been disbanded. In 1848, when gold was discovered, there were 150,000 Indians living in California. Twelve years later, in 1860, there were 30,000, a drop of 80 percent.

If there was any attempt to exterminate the Indians, it can be laid squarely at the doorstep of the gold seekers. The single-minded pursuit of gold led to an all-out war on the Indians. Having no missionaries to protect them, they fell victim to exploitation and murder. The plight of the non-missionized Indians was severe.

By any measure, the paternalism of the missionaries provided a better lifestyle for the Indians than what was afforded their non-missionized counterparts. Once the missions folded, conditions deteriorated.

Should Serra Be Made a Saint?

The evidence which has been culled for over 200 years, from multiple sources, is impressive, and it argues strongly for including Father Serra in the pantheon of saints. Those who have been heavily involved in the process—carefully evaluating thousands of documents—know better than anyone why Serra merits sainthood. Capuchin Father Vincenzo Criscuolo, an official in the Vatican Congregation for Saints' Causes, notes that the 1,200-page "positio," or position paper on why Serra should be made a saint, relied on many sources, but none more than the 191 handwritten letters and reports by Serra about his life and work in the California missions that he founded.

No sooner had Serra passed when his first biographer, Francisco Palou, noted how Serra's followers were grabbing every remnant of his that they could find. In 1787, three years after Serra died, Palou's biography was published; it set in motion the case for sainthood.

In the first half of the 20th century, the pace quickened, as multi-volume books on Serra appeared. In 1937, *Time* magazine raised the issue, asking plainly, "Sainthood for Serra?" In the next decade, a tribunal to assess Serra's contributions was established.

In 1959, Geiger's huge two-volume biography was published. Hundreds of descendants from mission days were interviewed, including those whose Indian ancestors knew Serra. Letters and other documents pertaining to this period were collected over three decades, making the case for Serra's canonization practically air-tight. Indeed, the burden is on those to explain why he *doesn't* qualify for sainthood.

A total of 21 missions were established by the missionaries, nine of them under the tenure of Serra; he personally founded six missions. He baptized more than 6,000 Indians, and confirmed over 5,000; some 100,000 were baptized overall during the mission period. Impressive as these numbers are, it was his personal characteristics that made him so special.

"To the Indian," Orfalea writes, "he [Serra] was loving, enthusiastic, and spiritually and physically devoted." His devotion was motivated by his embrace of Christianity and his strong sense of justice. To put it another way, his love for the Indians was no mere platitude. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" was routinely put into practice; he knew no other way. But it was his humility, coupled with his merciful behavior, that distinguished him from all the other missionaries.

What happens when we are wronged? What comes easiest? Now flip it: What is more difficult than to forgive and pardon injustice? This is where Serra shines.

How many times did Serra defend the Indians, even when they were wrong? How many times did he confront the Spanish authorities, pleading with them to act justly? He was so hated by some soldiers that just before he left Mexico for California, they poisoned his altar wine. They especially hated it when he upbraided them for taking land that did not belong to them: the Indians, Serra reminded them, were "in their own country."

Even after the San Diego rampage, Serra proved merciful. To be sure, he was beside himself when Mission San Diego was burned and one of his priest friends was killed, but he still didn't give in to vengeance. He wrote to Bucareli imploring him not to execute the nine Indians who were being held in custody for the rebellion. Regarding those Indians who resorted to violence, he said, "let him live so that he can be saved, for that is the purpose of our coming here and its sole justification."

Serra went beyond even this, saying that "in case the Indians, whether pagans or Christians, would kill me, they should be pardoned." This was not made in jest. He insisted that his request be honored as quickly as possible, and even declared, "I want to see a formal decree" on this matter.

Father Serra deserves to be made a saint. He gave his life in service to the Lord, battled injustice, and inspired everyone who worked with him to be a better Christian. That Saint Serra will now inspire people all over the world is a certainty, and a great testimony to his noble legacy.

Notes

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