

# NEW YORK TIMES LIES ABOUT ST. SERRA AGAIN

On September 23, 2015, Pope Francis canonized Junípero Serra, the 18th century Spanish priest who courageously defended the human rights of Indians in North America.

A week later the *New York Times* maligned St. Serra in a front-page story by Laura M. Holson, "Sainthood of Serra Reopens Wounds in Colonialism in California." She said that "Historians agree that he [Serra] forced Native Americans to abandon their tribal culture and convert to Christianity, and that he had them whipped and imprisoned and sometimes worked or tortured to death."

This was a bald-face lie. As we will show, the newspaper's response to Bill Donohue's criticism was astoundingly unconvincing. Now this same accusation appears in a *New York Times* online opinion column by Elizabeth Bruenig, "American Catholics and Black Lives Matter."

Bruenig writes that Serra's "eager participation in the conquest of North America" included "torture, enslavement and murder of some of the Native Americans he intended to convert." Note that she embellishes the lies that Holson told.

On the same day that Holson's news story was published in the newspaper, September 30, 2015, Donohue emailed her the following: "You said that 'Historians agree' that Fr. Serra had Indians 'tortured to death.' I have done research on Serra and written about him, yet I know of no historian who makes such a claim. Please name them. I can name many who never made such a claim."

When Holson did not respond, Donohue contacted the "Corrections" section on October 1 asking for a correction; He also contacted the public editor.

"This is a serious issue: when a reporter blithely says that 'Historians agree,' readers take it that there is at least a consensus among historians about the subject. But such is not the case on this issue. The only persons given to such an accusation are radical activists, not professional scholars." Donohue even emailed a list of "the most authoritative books on Fr. Serra" and pointed out that not one of the authors whom he cited ever accused Serra of torture.

After a week went by, with no response, Donohue wrote the newspaper again and asked if someone could "name the historians who say Fr. Serra tortured Indians." Finally, he received a response from Gregory E. Brock, Senior Editor for Standards at the *New York Times*.

Brock said the editors had discussed Donohue's complaint but were waiting for Holson to return from Oregon (she was doing a story about a shooting) before contacting him. Fine. Then Brock got specific. His response is a gem.

"Certainly you have very strong views on this issue and have written extensively about it. But after many discussions, a review of past Times coverage and other resources, I agree with Ms. Holson's editors that 'historians' is accurate, and therefore no correction is required.

"At one point you sent us a list of books you considered to be 'the authoritative books on Fr. Serra.' Ms. Holson had already reviewed the writings of some of the historians you cited in that list.

"If I thought having an extended conversation on this would help, I would be happy to. But after re-reading your correspondence, I cannot think of anything we could do or say that would convince you that our coverage was fair and complete—or that the reference to 'historians' is accurate."

Brock ended by saying, "rest assured that your points have been thoroughly reviewed and a great deal of time has been put

into making this decision.”

Here is how Donohue responded.

“Thank you for taking my complaint seriously. I have just one question: Who are the ‘historians’ who claim that Fr. Serra tortured Indians?”

This was the end of the correspondence. They were caught in a lie and did not have the courage to admit it. And now they are smearing St. Serra again.

To read Donohue’s account of the saintly priest, “The Noble Legacy of Fr. Serra,” and the exchange that he had with the *Times* in 2015 visit our website, [catholicleague.org](http://catholicleague.org).

We sent this news release to the paper’s news and opinion editors.