

WHY FR. SERRA DESERVES TO BE CANONIZED

Bill Donohue

This article is adapted from Bill Donohue's longer piece, "The Noble Legacy of Father Serra." To read the full text, click [here](#).

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.

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). He had but one goal: to facilitate eternal salvation for the Indians of North America.

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 other practices, convinced them that changes had to be made.

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.

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.

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.

Was it Violence that Decimated the Indians?

No. What killed most of the Indians were diseases contracted from the Spaniards. According to author James A. 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 microbes into what demographers call 'virgin soil.' The resulting wildfire-like contagion, called 'virgin soil epidemics,' decimated unprotected American Indians populations." Professor Gregory Orfalea is no doubt correct to maintain that it is doubtful if Serra ever understood the ramifications of this biological catastrophe.

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.

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."

There is also something hypocritical about using 21st century moral standards to evaluate 18th century practices. Abortion-on-demand is a reality today and that is barbaric.

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.

Were the Indians Treated as Slaves?

No. The historical record 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.

It is also 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."

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.

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.

"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."

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.

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.

Serra was so merciful that he said, "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.