Apostle to California, Witness to Holiness

Junípero Serra
In anticipation of the Apostolic Journey of Pope Francis to the United States and the canonization of Blessed Junípero Serra, a “Day of Reflection” was hosted at the Pontifical North American College in Rome on May 2, 2015, organized by the Pontifical Commission for Latin America with the support of the Knights of Columbus. The Day of Reflection was graced by the participation of His Holiness Pope Francis who celebrated Mass to conclude the meeting.

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Selections from the Day of Reflection
on
Junípero Serra
Apostle to California, Witness to Holiness

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Junípero Serra:
Historical Summary and Biographical Outline

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Our Lady of Guadalupe,
Mother and Guide of Fra Junípero Serra

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In a letter to the Holy Father dated December 12, 2014, the Minister General of the Franciscans, Father Michael Perry, after briefly describing the life of Junípero Serra, in particular his missionary activity, and listing the missions founded by him in Alta California, presented the Blessed One “as a religious man exemplary for his spirit of humility, penitence, boundless generosity towards the poor, strong during suffering, obedient to his Superiors and loyal to the Teachings of the Church, as ardent missionary, zealous preacher, courageous proponent of the Christian faith, tireless evangelizer and true apostle of the Indios,” hoping that his possible canonization would highlight “the beneficent work of the Church through the missionary apostolate.”

We find in these words a picture that is connected directly to and follows closely the content of the first biographical work on Junípero Serra, written by his companion and brother, Francisco Palou, also from Majorca. Father Palou was a disciple of Father Serra in Palma of Majorca and then his companion in the missions of Mexico and California. Started right after the death of Father Junípero, it was the first published book written in Alta California, printed in Mexico City in 1787 with the title Relación histórica de la vida y apostólicas tareas del venerable padre fray Junípero Serra y de las misiones que fundó en la California Septentrional y nuevos establecimientos de Monterey. Authentic eyewitness of the events that he describes, Father Palou recounts the apostolic zeal and the missionary activity of Father Serra, who is presented as a zealous missionary, tireless founder and greater evangelizer, highlighting among other things his extraordinary capacity for government and his great closeness and love for the natives.

Father Palou’s biography, besides being a tribute of great admiration and brotherly feeling of devotion and respect from an affectionate disciple and mission companion, also clarifies a decisive point on the significance of Serra’s evangelizing activity. He had lived the last few years of his life in constant tension with the governor of Alta California, Felipe de Neve, a modern and liberal colonial official, for whom the Catholic missions were anachronistic institutions that delayed the civilian development of the Spanish Empire, by slowing down
the subjection and assimilation of the native people, especially in relation to their potential contributory capacity. De Neve tried to limit the influence of the Franciscan missions in California and downgrade the prestige of the missionaries on the natives. Father Palóu, in his biography, disputes this utilitarian policy, demonstrating that the Blessed One was an unbiased missionary and a zealous evangelizer, driven by pure evangelical ideals, who did authentic work of social, religious and cultural promotion of the natives, respecting and defending their nature and tradition.

However, the opinion on the missionary activity in Mexico and California has not always been based on serious documentary research and actual analysis of the facts. Starting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and even more so after the 1960s, various authors attempted an ideological view of the evangelizing activity of the Catholic missionaries, basically making these same missionaries guilty of the consistent and rapid reduction of the indigenous populations of California, considering the conversions of the natives forced and criticizing the use of corporal punishment.

Among these writers must be mentioned John S. Hittel, who was rigidly liberal and strongly adverse to Catholicism and presented Father Serra as someone who “did not know anything about science and philosophy who threw all the nations into turmoil a few hundred years ago”; 2 Hubert H. Bancroft, who while praising the Franciscan monk, noted however that “his mistakes were those connected to his habit” and highlighted “his absolute right to beat his neophytes for even the slightest guilt regarding faith” ; 3 and Sherburne F. Cook, who spoke of systematic and forced conversions of natives by the missionaries and the use of corporal punishment. 4 Also to be mentioned are Carey McWilliams, who even compared the missions to a type of prison camp; 5 Jack D. Forbes, 6 Florence Shipek, 7 and Robert Jackson, 8 writers who among other things attributed to the missionary activity the demographic decline and cultural marginalization of many groups of Native Americans.

There were several authoritative responses, based on rich documentary research and constantly referring to concrete factors, to these unjustified and superficial accusations. Great historical attention was dedicated to Father Serra by his religious brother, Zephyrin Engelhardt, archivist of the Friars Minor of California in Santa Barbara, who between 1908 and 1915 published four volumes on The Missions and Missionaries of California, 9 in which he disputed
the anti-Catholic prejudice of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century historians and considered the missionary activity of Father Junípero and the missionaries toward the natives heroic and impartial. His successor in Santa Barbara was Father Maynard Geiger, who in 1959 published a monumental, two-volume biography of Father Serra, confirming with solid documentation the positive opinions on him and his missionary work.\textsuperscript{10}

A decisive event for a correct historical interpretation of the evangelizing activity of Father Serra was the organization in December 1984 in Chicago of a convention promoted by the \textit{American Catholic Historical Association} and the \textit{Conference of Latin American Historians}, the documents of which were published the following year. The real value of the initiative was that it clarified historically the real scope of the action of Father Serra and Franciscan missionaries in the California of the time. The so-called \textit{Rapporto Serra} \textit{[Serra Report]} of 1986, the nucleus of which was composed of the interviews of eight important historians and anthropologists, represented a decisive step in the clarification. In short, the conclusion of the \textit{Rapporto} was: “Everyone, even though starting from diversified positions historically, agreed on the fact that Father Serra not only did not abuse the Indians, with whom he had direct relations, but rather tried to defend them from the Spanish political and military authorities, avoiding the risks of a suppression of the culture which existed before the arrival of the Europeans.”\textsuperscript{11} Faced with these statements, the publication which appeared in 1987 titled \textit{The Missions of California: A Legacy of Genocide}, which includes arbitrary and obvious manipulations of many documentary facts, appears prejudicial and completely unreliable as history.\textsuperscript{12}

In conclusion, the more objective historiography basically agrees in considering Father Serra an exceptional person, endowed with great apostolic dynamism, certainly a man of his times, but also capable of looking to the future, solely driven by the desire to bring Christ to the native people, respecting and defending their identity and culture in harmony with the joy and light of the Gospel.

Recently, at the time of the announcement of the upcoming canonization of Junípero Serra, journalistic arguments reappeared of an ideological nature, which again suggested old, historically obsolete accusations, ignoring the real importance of the Blessed One in the human and religious promotion of the natives and in the founding of the missions in modern California. In reality, as Robert Senkewicz, Professor of History at Santa Clara University, recently
stated: “Serra and the Franciscans were concerned by the fact that the Spanish conquistadors dominated the Indians in an oppressive manner. They were worried that the Spanish land owners, the miners and the soldiers would gather them up to take them to their deaths. That is why they founded the missions as a safe place to convert and protect the Indians.”13

Ultimately — and this is the conclusion of the serious contemporary historiography — Father Serra and his missionaries were in no way persecutors and oppressors of the Native Americans, but their protectors and defenders. William Doino Jr. states: “Serra and the Franciscans baptized thousands of Indians into the faith and, contrary to what the critics claim, many Native Americans embraced the truth of Christianity, because it freed them from the cruel pagan practices, raising their human dignity. What is often forgotten in the debate are the squalid conditions in which the natives lived before the Westerners imposed their Christianity. Kidnappings, rapes, torture and even human sacrifices were carried out by many indigenous tribes, and it was in fact the missionaries who put an end to these inhuman practices.”14

After this broad introduction of an historical nature, we can move on to the biographical lines of Father Serra, tracing the characteristic elements of his missionary apostolate, his itinerary toward sanctity and especially his topicality in today’s Church and society.15

His life can be divided into two periods. He spent the first 35 years on the island of Majorca where he was born, and the remaining 35 in Mexico and California where he died. He was born in Petra on November 24, 1713, of Antonio and Margarita Ferrer Fornés and was baptized that same day with the names Miquel Josep. Two years later, on May 26, 1715, he was confirmed. During his early years, he attended the school attached to the Franciscan monastery of San Bernardino in Petra where he learned the catechism and prayers. He also learned to read and write, gaining a good knowledge of Latin and, since he had a good voice, he also excelled in singing. At the same time, he helped his family in the fields.

Among the Franciscans of Petra, young Serra felt the vocation to a religious life develop and mature, inspired by the life of the monks, and maybe spurred by the examples of two great Franciscans, Juan Capistrano and Jaime de la Marca, who were canonized during those years, in 1724 and 1726, respectively. In March
1730, now 17 years old, he was accompanied by his father to Palma of Majorca, where on September 14, 1730, he put on the habit of the Friars Minor, starting the novitiate year in the monastery of Santa María de los Ángeles. At that time, he was given the new religious name of Junípero, or Juniper, one of the first companions of St. Francis, of whom the saint is alleged to have said — as the Fioretti states: — “I wish to God that I had an entire forest of such junipers.”

Once the novitiate year ended, Father Junípero made his religious profession on September 15, 1731. The following years, from 1732 to 1737, the young monk lived in the San Francisco de Palma monastery, where he completed his religious training and studied philosophy and theology. In December 1737 he was ordained a priest; on March 19, 1738, he was granted the right to preach and the following year, on February 21, 1739, also the right to hear confessions. Three years later, in 1742, he earned his doctorate in theology. The period from 1740 to 1749 was marked for Father Junípero by intense apostolic labor, with periods of preaching and hearing confessions, but also with teaching activity at the Lulliana University of Palma of Majorca, where he taught philosophy from 1740 to 1743 and theology from 1744 to 1749. Besides being admired for his knowledge, he was also appreciated for his preaching skills, achieving copious spiritual results, especially during Advent and Lent.

Around the end of 1748, he was inspired to conduct missionary work in the New World. Maybe this call was caused also by the revelations of the Conceptionist nun, María de Jesús de Ágreda, who had prophesied that “the Indians simply seeing the Franciscans, would be converted.” He kept his decisions secret until his brother and disciple, Francisco Palóu, confided in him that he had the same vocation. After his preaching during Lent in his native country, on April 8, 1749, Serra took his leave of his elderly parents, whom he would never see again, and from his relatives, without however revealing his imminent departure for Mexico. Five days later, on April 13, Serra left his Palma community of St. Francis and with Palóu boarded a ship for Malaga, reaching Cadiz on May 7, 1749. From here, he wrote the last letter to his parents; his father died four years later, in 1753, and his mother the following year.

The stopover in Cadiz lasted around four months, and Father Serra, with 18 Franciscans, was not able to board the ship, significantly called Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe), until August 29, 1749. On September 8, he reached the Canary Islands and on October 18 he landed at San Juan de Puerto
Rico, where he stayed for two weeks. He resumed the voyage on November 2, and only on December 7, after various hardships and dangers due to the bad conditions of the seas, did the Guadalupe drop anchor in the Mexican port of Veracruz. The trip continued on foot to Mexico City, where the monks arrived on January 1, 1750, and were welcomed into the monastery of San Fernando which, by grant of Philip V, had become in 1733 the Seminario de Propaganda Fide (Seminary for the Propagation of the Faith). Here the missionaries — called Fernandinos — received intense training and preparation for the new apostolic field, especially learning the languages, habits and customs of the natives. From here they left to evangelize Mexico, then known as Nueva España (New Spain) which, in addition to contemporary Mexico, included also the current U.S. states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

After five months of preparation, Father Serra was sent with his companion Francisco Palóu to Sierra Gorda, a mountainous and isolated region north of Mexico City, which was his first missionary field, reaching the capital of Jalpan on June 16, 1750. Having learned the Pame language from an indigenous governor, he started to preach to the Indios in their dialect, into which he also translated the catechism and the ordinary prayers. In Sierra Gorda, Father Serra devoted himself for eight years to the evangelization of the Pames, taking care of their Christian and human education, this last being provided through new types of artisan and agricultural work. He was also able to start the construction of a church at Santiago de Jalpan, which still exists today and was taken as the model for another four churches in the nearby missions. Father Junípero had to assume the presidency of the missions around the middle of 1751, performing an intense work of evangelization until September 1758.

In that year, he was sent by his superiors to restore the mission of San Saba in Texas, which had been destroyed shortly before by the Comanche Indians, but the project was abandoned because it was considered too risky by the Spanish authorities. He therefore stayed for 10 years, from 1758 to 1768, in Mexico City, in the apostolic college of San Fernando, where he served as teacher of the novices from 1761 to 1764. Furthermore, he preached in the working-class missions of various Mexican dioceses, and between 1758 and 1767 he managed to travel over 4,000 kilometers, despite his age and a permanently injured leg.

Starting in the 1750s, the strong opposition of the various European governments against the Jesuits became more brutal, which led in the following years to their suppression, ordered by Clement XIV with the bull Dominus ac
Redemptor noster on July 21, 1773. Before that date, various governments had ordered their expulsion, and in particular in 1759 the Jesuits were expelled from Portugal and its colonies, in 1764 from France, in 1767 from the Kingdom of Naples, and also from Spain, where there were 2,800 priests, and from the colonies of the Spanish crown in America, where 2,200 Jesuits were active as missionaries. As regards the northern border, their missions were entrusted to the Franciscans, the Augustinians and the Dominicans, which the Spanish government considered more flexible and less threatening than the Jesuits.

In this context, the missions of Baja California, which had been founded a century earlier by the Jesuit missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino — another great evangelizer who was born in Val di Non-Trentino on August 10, 1645, died in the Sonora region of Mexico on March 15, 1711, and whose cause of beatification is being considered — were assigned to the Franciscans, with Father Serra as superior and administrator. On July 16, 1767, he left with 14 companions from Mexico City and reached Baja California on April 1, 1768. Here, in the area of Velicata, inhabited by the Cochimi Indians, he was able to found his first mission on May 14 north of Baja California, which he called San Fernando de Velicata. In the following days, he baptized the first Cochimi Indian, to whom he gave the name Francisco, in honor of Francis of Assisi.

From Baja California, Father Junípero Serra went in the following months to Alta California, taking with him every type of object and tool, which would serve not only for the catechism and the administration of the sacraments, but also for agriculture, construction of houses and craftsmanship. In the following years, from 1769 to 1782, despite numerous problems stemming especially from the Spanish governors, Father Serra founded nine missions in Alta California, some of which still exist, following the path which in many sections runs north to south along the coast of California, a path which in later years was called, and is still known today, by the name Camino Real.

The founding of the missions took place according to an established ritual. In the first place, as president of the missionaries, Father Serra chose a suitable place, normally in an area easily accessible to the Indians who lived in the surrounding areas. On the appointed date, the missionaries raised a large cross, from which a procession left for the site designated for the celebration of the Mass, during which the first stone of the mission was also laid. In the days following, the construction began, starting with the church and then the rooms — originally huts and later built with masonry — set up for the monks and also
the natives to live in. There were a whole series of skilled labor shops where the handcrafted work took place and the agricultural labor was planned. We know that during the construction phases Father Serra usually had a small hut prepared for himself near the cross, where he withdrew to pray, devoting many hours also to meeting with the natives.

Normally, there was a master mason and a blacksmith with the missionaries, who were involved in building the mission but also had the task of teaching their respective trade to the natives. Particular attention to the natives was devoted first of all from the religious point of view, with the administration of the sacraments and the teaching of the prayers and the catechism, but also from the human and professional point of view, providing them with the knowledge and tools to learn Spanish, equipment and seeds to work in the fields, means and techniques for raising cattle and for other numerous agricultural and artisanal activities. As regards the titles of the missions, since they were Franciscan missionaries, names were used which referred directly to the history and saints of the Franciscan Order. It was a common custom, used also by the missionaries of the other religious orders for their own saints.

It is worth at this point to provide just a bare list of the new establishments created by Junípero Serra in Alta California with the dates they were founded. They are the missions of San Diego de Alcalá, founded on July 16, 1769; San Carlos Borromeo of Monterey, later transferred close to the Carmel River, the first stone of which was laid on June 3, 1770; San Antonio de Padua, which was founded on July 14, 1771; San Gabriel Arcángel, which was then merged into the mission of Santa María de los Ángeles — currently the city of Los Angeles — which began on September 8, 1771; San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, started on September 1, 1772; San Francisco de Asís which was founded on August 1, 1776; San Juan Capistrano, with the first stone being laid on November 1, 1776; Santa Clara de Asís, found on January 7, 1777; and finally, the mission of San Buenaventura, which was started with the laying of the first stone on March 31, 1782, when Father Serra was close to his seventieth year.

I consider it appropriate to make a brief mention of two particular episodes which occurred during this period. The first refers to the destruction and rebuilding of the San Diego mission. Soon after it was established, a group of around 20 Kumeyaay Indians, taking advantage of the small number of soldiers and showing particular interest in the clothes and fabrics of the Spanish, attacked
the mission and set it on fire, causing very serious damage to the building and also loss of human life. A missionary was killed, Father Jayme, and there were also deaths among the Indians. In the days that followed, the Spanish soldiers managed to capture those responsible and they were sentenced to death. At this point, Father Serra intervened and managed at first to have the capital punishment suspended and then, realizing the real repentance of the Indians, intervened directly with the Viceroy, Don Antonio María de Bucareli y Ursúa, to eventually achieve freedom for them all.  

Another episode refers to the continuous interference in the internal affairs of the missions by the commander of Alta California, the Catalán Pedro Fages. He caused numerous problems for Father Serra with his excessive behavior regarding the consistency of the missions of the military garrison, the storage and distribution of the food provisions and the areas of authority between soldiers and missionaries. To resolve these problems, Father Junípero went personally to Mexico City, undertaking a 2,000-kilometer trip despite being 70 years old and in ill health. He delivered to the Viceroy a memorandum with 32 specific requests focused on four points: one, greater procurement and resupply of men and means for Alta California; two, urgent need for qualified labor for the missions; three, clarity in the responsibilities between soldiers and missionaries; and lastly, a limit on the military power relative to the missions and improvement in the behavior of the soldiers. For the Indians, he asked that they not be left to the mercy of the soldiers, and that they not be able to punish the natives without the permission of the missionaries. Father Serra’s requests were approved in full by the Viceroy, thus giving legal value to the memorandum, which can be considered a charter ante litteram of the rights of the natives, around 200 years before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10, 1948). It is a charter of the rights of the American Indians which was fully recognized as such by John Paul II in his speech in Phoenix on September 14, 1987, when he declared that “the protection of these peoples from exploitation has always been a concern of the Church.”

These are just two episodes that clearly show how groundless and false the accusations are of mistreatment or even genocide of the natives by the missionaries.

After the establishment of San Buenaventura, Father Serra retired in July 1784 to the quiet of Carmel of the Monterey mission. He often discussed with his old disciple and companion, Father Palóu, the problems of the mission, but dedicated most of his time to prayer and preparation for the impending meeting
with God. Assisted by Father Palóu and the other brothers, and having received the last rites, Father Junípero Serra died with a reputation of sanctity in the early afternoon of August 28, 1784. For various reasons, the start of the beatification process had to be postponed until 1943. After having verified the virtues heroically practiced, the continuous and uninterrupted reputation of sanctity and the frequency of miracles and signs, Father Serra was officially declared Blessed in St. Peter’s Square by John Paul II on September 25, 1988.

I would like to end this brief report by including some statements of John Paul II referring specifically to the missionary activity and sanctity of Father Junípero Serra. On September 17, 1987, the pope visited the tomb of the holy missionary in the Carmel Mission Basilica of San Carlos Borromeo in Monterey. On that occasion he designated Father Serra as “Apostle of California” destined to “have a permanent influence on the spiritual heritage of this land and its people, regardless of their religion.” The Holy Father continued: “Father Serra was a man convinced of the mission of the Church, granted it by Christ himself, to evangelize the world [...]. He not only took the Gospel to the Native Americans, but as a person who lived the Gospel he also became their defender and their champion. At the age of seventy, he traveled from Carmel to Mexico City to intercede on their behalf with the viceroy — a trip that brought him close to death twice — and presented his Representación, today famous, with his ‘declaration of the rights’ [of the natives], which focused on the improvement of all the missionary activity in California, and particularly the physical and spiritual well-being of the Native Americans.”

About three months before the beatification, on July 8, 1988, John Paul II received a group of bishops from the United States of America on an ad limina visit at the Vatican. He talked on that occasion about his visit the previous year to California, and added, “In less than three months some of us will be here again for his beatification, with which the Church officially proclaims him worthy of honor and imitation by all.” And he concluded: “Like Father Serra and his Franciscan brothers, we are also called to be evangelizers, and actively participate in the mission of the Church to make disciples of all men.” This is a very clear and decisive affirmation, which validates and confirms the great topicality of Father Junípero.

In accordance with the long process started by these words of John Paul II, in September 2015 Pope Francis will add Blessed Junípero Serra to the roll of
canonized saints. This is the official recognition of his sanctity, publicly sanctioned and rendered valid and effective for the Universal Church. It means placing a guiding light on the candelabrum so that it can create light for all those who are in the Church’s house and for the entire world. It means offering the missionaries and all of us an example of a zealous apostle and a great evangelizer. He is an intercessor in the eyes of God and a protector and defender of numerous ethnic groups, still marginalized and oppressed today. In the final analysis, his canonization must be considered the conclusion of a path that geographically started on the Island of Majorca and ended in California, and chronologically encompassed 70 years on earth. But it is also a path on which the canonization exceeds and overcomes chronological limits and geographical spaces, and can be considered as an authentic, elevated and supernatural Camino Real.

NOTES

1 Montereyensis in California, *Canonizationis Beati Iuniperi Serra, Sacerdotis professi ex Ordine Fratrum Minorum (1713-1784), Positio super Canonizatione*, Rome 2015 [hereinafter: Positio], p. XIII.


8 *Ivi*, n. 33.

9 *Ivi*, p. 781-782.


11 *Positio*, 786.

12 *Ivi*.


15 The following biographical lines are based on the *Biographia* included in the *Positio*, 733-947.


18 *Positio*, 637.

19 *Positio*, 640.

20 *Positio*, 642.
Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother and Guide of Fra Junípero Serra
Carl A. Anderson

America is today the Christian continent. From Alaska to Argentina, a unique set of circumstances has converged to create a continent whose most strikingly unifying feature is its common Christian roots. How this came to be might be described as the providential convergence of three elements:

First, and most important, was the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531. This event attracted millions of native peoples to the Catholic faith. Her apparition provided a model of evangelization that would transform the missionary effort in this New World. Evangelization would not seek substitution but a new inculturation that affirmed the dignity of the native peoples. This model of an inculturated evangelization ignited the successful evangelization of the Western Hemisphere.

Second, was the tireless work of missionaries, who encountered — and overcame — innumerable challenges in their attempts to attract the native peoples to the Gospel.

Third, were the successive waves of immigrants, who came to this continent — most often from Europe — bringing with them a Catholic faith that would strengthen and sustain the faith in America.

As we consider the canonization of Blessed Junípero Serra, we see that his priestly ministry embodied aspects of all three of these building blocks of evangelization in America.

In December 1531, Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to St. Juan Diego and turned the tide in the evangelization of New World.

Prior to her apparition, the Spanish missionaries had had very little success in converting the native peoples of Mexico. The Spanish had won the war for Mexico against the Aztecs, with the help of those tribes tired of Aztec domination. But the Spanish had not won over the hearts and minds of the native peoples to the Christian faith.

Native peoples and missionaries alike were demoralized — the native peoples
by the abrupt destruction of their civilization, and the missionaries because of the resistance they encountered to the Gospel, not only from the native peoples, but also — at times — from their fellow Europeans in Mexico.

The Franciscan Bishop of Mexico City, Juan de Zumárraga, faced a problem of enormous magnitude. Named Protector of the Indians by the King of Spain, he took that title seriously. But he was forced to confront a situation in Mexico City that had deteriorated under the rule of the civil authorities known as the First Audience. The exploitation of the native peoples by the civilian government brought it into direct conflict with Bishop Zumárraga.

In a letter to the King of Spain, Zumárraga described a situation of such severity that he concluded: “If God does not provide the remedy from his hand, this land is about to be lost.”

As we know, God did provide an answer, and, from his own hand, left a gift in the bishop’s hands. In the words of St. John Paul II in Ecclesia in America:

The appearance of Mary to the native Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac in 1531 had a decisive effect on evangelization. Its influence greatly overflows the boundaries of Mexico, spreading to the whole Continent. America, which historically has been, and still is, a melting-pot of peoples, has recognized in the mestiza face of the Virgin of Tepeyac, “in Blessed Mary of Guadalupe, an impressive example of a perfectly inculturated evangelization.” Consequently, not only in Central and South America, but in North America as well, the Virgin of Guadalupe is venerated as Queen of all America. (11)

When Our Lady appeared, she changed the entire course of history in the Western Hemisphere — opening up the opportunity to make it truly a “New World.”

She appeared as “perfectly inculturated,” and thus was especially able to help heal and transcend the clash of civilizations occurring at that time in Mexico. Also key to the momentous change she produced was her message. Her message of inculturation was not limited only to the image of her mestiza face. It was contained in her words of tenderness, love, reconciliation and forgiveness. Thus, the message of Our Lady of Guadalupe is that for evangelization to be successful, it must also be “inculturated” and that requires respect, not exploitation; reconciliation, not domination.
To Juan Diego, who was concerned about his uncle’s illness, she famously said:

Do not fear this or any other sickness nor any sharp and hurtful thing. Am I not here? I who have the honor to be your mother? Are you not in my shadow and under my protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything more?

Mary herself had come to the native people as mother and protector — and she had said that it was her honor to do so. Is it likely that any of those missionaries such as Father Serra who evangelized the native people in her name and under her banner would ignore this miraculous reality?

Beyond these words spoken to Juan Diego and the healing of his uncle Juan Bernardino, she left her message — in the rich symbolism of the codex — embedded within the image she left on the tilma of Juan Diego.

She then assured Juan Diego that his uncle had already been healed.

So her first miracle — besides the apparition itself — was not her famous image. It was the healing of a Native American, Juan Bernardino.

Not only was Zumárraga’s prayer answered, but the result exceeded any expectations he might have had, and fundamentally altered the future of the continent as millions converted to Christianity.

So profound was her effect, that scholar Philip Jenkins in his book *The Next Christendom* has suggested that “December 12, 2031 ... will unquestionably be commemorated with a vast celebration of Mexican and Chicano Catholic identity, both north and south of the Rio Grande [and] might in fact come to be seen as America’s true and proper Quincentennial.”

Missionaries were often caught between two worlds — both of which could be very dangerous for them. Nowhere in popular imagination has this been more clearly captured than in the Robert De Niro film *The Mission*, written by Robert Bolt.

Spanish missionaries to the New World — from the earliest days — faced, to varying degrees, the dilemma that Bishop Zumárraga had faced in Mexico City. They often occupied a space between the worlds of the uncatechized native peoples and the civil government, which sometimes acted in unchristian ways.
Either world — and sometimes both — could threaten their life or reject their mission. Mission territories — remote, disconnected and often without infrastructure — required not only a certain commitment, but a certain type of committed person. Especially in the more remote regions, the deserts and jungles that made up the fringes of the Spanish empire, the one constant would be hardship.

Mission work was not easy. It was not for the faint of heart, or those of little faith.

Just over 200 years after the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Father Serra, at age 35, boarded a ship to the New World at the end of August 1749. He would die in California 35 years later.

What brought Father Serra from the relative comfort of Spain, where he was a respected academic and professor, to a life of hardship, sacrifice and itinerant preaching in the New World?

*Our Lady of Guadalupe* brought Junípero Serra. Not just in a pious sense, or metaphorically, or in terms of his vocational calling, but literally.

The ship on which he travelled from Cadiz, Spain, to Puerto Rico, and then to Veracruz was named the *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*.²

When he disembarked in Veracruz, he walked to Mexico City. He arrived on December 31, 1749, and spent his first night in Mexico City at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.³

The next morning was filled with powerful symbolism. It was New Year’s Day, and that morning he celebrated Mass at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, not only ringing in the New Year, but inaugurating the new mission that would guide the rest of his life.⁴

Father Serra had long been known for his Marian devotion, and that certainly continued in the New World.

Before he came to California, Father Serra was placed in charge of the missions of Baja California, among them, Mission Guadalupe. There, he followed in the footsteps of Father Eusebio Kino, who is reported to have unfurled the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe at that location to great effect as he evangelized the native peoples.⁵
As he approached Mission Guadalupe in Baja California, Father Serra came upon a group of indigenous people who told him “with great sadness that they were from Mission Guadalupe.” Because of a lack of food at the mission, the padre there had sent them out to forage. Serra writes: “I felt very sorry for them.” From his own supplies he had porridge made for them, and further told them that additional supplies were en route. 

Even before he came to Baja California, Father Serra’s life of service reflected not a sense of superiority, but of humility in front of the native peoples.

In the Sierra Gorda missions in Mexico, to which he was assigned prior to his time in Baja California, Father Serra began the practice of washing the feet of the Indians. He defended their land interests from Spanish encroachment and learned their language.

Perhaps the most important influence of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Father Serra was in his fundamental attitude toward the native peoples. Our Lady came as the Mother. Father Junípero Serra understood his vocation as a father in both a spiritual and a material sense. Historians agree that he saw his role in many ways as a parental one.

Some might say that his paternalism was dismissive of the cultures he encountered. But the native population that he encountered had no real possibility of understanding what the future held in store for them as the Spanish Empire and other Europeans advanced throughout North America. To treat them as if they could deal with the advances of European settlement on their own terms would simply lead to their mass destruction — as it did in other places on the continent.

Serra’s relationship with Our Lady of Guadalupe has another important dimension as well. Serra had stopped to celebrate his first New Year’s Day in the New World at her shrine. He could not have missed the fact that she was mestiza.

A man devoted to the Blessed Mother, who in her New World image had distinctly Native rather than European features, was not surprisingly devoted to those whom he had left everything to serve — the native peoples.

While some Spaniards referred to them as “barbarians,” or “savages,” or “wild Indians,” as Rose Marie Beebe and Robert Senkewicz point out, “In his choice of words, as in so much else, Serra’s primary frame of reference was religious.”
And so, his typical term for the native peoples was “gentiles.” In other words, he saw them first and foremost as souls to be saved.

Perhaps the repeated use of the term “gentiles” reflects also an identification on his part with the first Apostle to the Gentiles, St. Paul, who was called to leave his own people to evangelize those whom his own people looked down upon. We can see in Father Serra a missionary who, like St. Paul, poured out his own life “like a libation” for the people he was called to serve.

That point was driven home when he described his first encounter with non-Christian Native Americans. He was in Baja California at that time, and those he encountered were wearing no clothing. After praising God for allowing him to be among the “pagans in their own land,” he described their lack of clothing like this: “Then I saw ... that they go about entirely naked like Adam in paradise before the fall.10

There is a well-known episode in Father Serra’s relationship with the native people that beautifully reflects his own sense of mission to those he came to New Spain to serve. In a letter to the Spanish Viceroy urging that the death sentence given to an Indian convicted of murder be lifted, he wrote this:

And let the murderer live so he can be saved, which is the purpose of our coming here and the reason for forgiving him. Help him understand with some moderate punishment, that he is being pardoned in accordance with our law, which orders us to forgive offenses and to prepare him, not for his death, but for his eternal life.11

As presidente of the missions, Serra’s role was much like that of his fellow Franciscan Juan de Zumárraga, with many of the powers of a bishop. Like Zumárraga, too, he sometimes came into conflict with the civil authorities, especially over the rights of the native peoples.

Not surprisingly, when Serra died on August 28, 1784, native peoples and Spaniards alike mourned his passing. For generations, and even into the last century, he was known by many Native Americans as “el santo.”12

So, it is all the more ironic that Father Serra today is blamed by some for, literally, the very things he fought against in the treatment of the native peoples.

Ironic too is that we know of the abuses that the native peoples suffered in California under Spanish rule in no small part because of what Serra and his fellow missionaries wrote.
So how is it that today some see Serra as controversial?

In some ways, Serra’s record — and that of Spain more generally — is a victim of the missionaries’ conscientious desire to speak out against abuses and atrocities. That prophetic voice of conscience has cost them dearly in the history books.

Historian Philip Wayne Powell writes of this irony: “Spanish atrocities were severely castigated by highly articulate, fearless and powerless clergy, and by others who reported to the Crown, [which was] consistently willing to listen, to legislate against, and to punish such criminality. Such restraints were either absent, or were present but barely discernable in the records of other European overseas empire builders until very recent times.13

Bishop Zumárraga had to contend with the abuses of the First Audience, and Father Serra with Pedro Fages, whose men — despite assurances given to Serra — raped and abused the Native Californians.

Like Zumárraga, Serra wrote about the abuses and sought to stop them. When Serra’s pleas to replace Fages were not addressed, he walked from California to Mexico City to confront the Viceroy and demand, among other things, that Fages be removed and additional protections be provided to the native peoples.

Precisely because friars and the Spanish monarchy subjected their enterprises in New Spain to such a degree of introspection and moral clarity, other colonizing nations — who were much less introspective, and whose legacy regarding native peoples often showed a shocking disregard for them — seized upon these reports to blacken the name of Spain.

This propaganda war against Spain has come to be known by historians as “the Black Legend.” Historian Philip Wayne Powell defines the Black Legend as follows:

The basic premise of the Black Legend is that Spaniards have shown themselves, historically, to be uniquely cruel, bigoted, tyrannical, obscurantist, lazy, fanatical, greedy, and treacherous; that is, that they differ so much from other peoples in these traits that Spaniards and Spanish history must be viewed and understood in terms not ordinarily used in describing and interpreting other peoples.14
As Robert Senkewicz and Rose Marie Beebe point out in their detailed biography of Father Serra, he consciously saw his role, in part, as providing the native peoples with a better option with the missionaries at the missions, rather than having them under the control of the military or settlers.

And yet, despite this, the Black Legend has created an environment in which Father Serra is accused of things that exist nowhere in the historical record.

For instance, as Serra biographer Gregory Orfalea has explained in discussing the attacks on Serra concerning the decline of the native population:

The “criminals” in this enterprise were not the Spanish, but the Americans. The indigenous population at the time of European contact (225,000) declined 33% (to 150,000) under Spanish and Mexican rule. Under American rule (from 1848 on), when most of the missions were in ruin, sold off or closed, the Indian population plummeted, to 30,000 in 1870 — an 80% drop. Either figure is tragic, but there is no mistaking who the major culprit was.\(^{15}\)

Significantly, the decline in the population that did occur under Spanish and Mexican rule occurred for the most part — after Serra’s death.\(^{16}\)

Father Serra deserves to be judged on the basis of facts, not stereotypes or prejudice. Especially is this the case for people who can only render such a judgment by judging Serra’s culture, beliefs and faith inferior to their own “modern” secular culture.

But those who keep an open mind on Father Serra are often surprised. As Gregory Orfalea recently wrote in the Los Angeles Times:

I spent 12 years researching Serra’s complex story. When I started, I assumed I would find an Indian tragedy that belonged on his doorstep. But I came to the conclusion that the missions were not places of unrelieved misery, and that in most things, Serra was exemplary.\(^{17}\)

Orfalea goes on to point out that: “Time and again, Serra insisted the Spanish were not in California for gold or land, but the good of the indigenous people.”\(^{18}\)

But, the “Black Legend,” as Prof. Powell notes, results in “our fastening upon Spaniards all opprobrium as ‘Indian-killers,’ and ‘gold seekers.’”\(^{19}\)
Gold did lead to the extermination of the native peoples in California, but it was not Spanish lust for it.

Independent of Mexico in 1848, California’s Gold Rush of 1849 helped usher in a new era of rule in California with the result that the native population collapsed. Not simply because of disease, but because of programs of extermination.

Spain had banned slavery of the native people very early in its journey to the New World as fundamentally incompatible with its mission of evangelization and conversion. But California, now a state, “introduced the indenturing of Indians to whites” by early 1850. Indians were kidnapped, and Gregory Orfalea goes so far as to call the clearing of Indians from the gold mining areas “genocide.”

The U.S. Army killed hundreds of Indians at the Clear Lake Massacre in May of 1850. And the state’s Governor Peter Burnett noted: “It is inevitable that the Indian must go.” He also said: “That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races, until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected.”

With 120,000 post-Gold Rush deaths, almost 50,000 of which were due to murder, the Indian population in the new State of California collapsed almost completely.

Gone was the harmony between European and Indian, which was reflected in the face portrayed on the tilma of St. Juan Diego and for which Father Serra had devoted his life. So too were the missions, which had been taken from the Catholic Church.

Today, in keeping with the Black Legend, few Americans know of the atrocities committed in California. To again quote Professor Powell: “A belief common among Englishmen, and one which we inherit, is that the English would have treated American Indians in more humane fashion than did the Spaniards. There is not a shred of evidence to uphold this comparative view, and, on the contrary, much to disprove it.”

Now, we might say that the Black Legend is providing the context for the new rewriting of history — this time to diminish the legacy of Hispanic Catholic culture in North America on the occasion of the canonization of Junípero Serra.
The uncritical embrace of such untruths and mythology continues to have real world consequences. Duke University professor Walter Mignolo, has persuasively argued:

Racism dies hard, and the specter of the black legend is alive and well, contributing to diminishing Spaniards in Europe, marginalizing “Latinos” in South America, and criminalizing Latinos and Latinas in the United States.\textsuperscript{27}

The fact is, that freed from the defects of a historiography tainted by the Black Legend, Father Serra’s legacy is stunning.

Real good can come from the controversy about Father Serra’s canonization. It should be viewed in a positive light for two reasons. First, there is sometimes an incorrect tendency to view saints as two-dimensional, perfect specimens of humanity rather than as human beings who were heroic in aspects of their life, but also had to face their own limits and imperfections. I think all of us can take heart that saints were and are actual human beings who lived real lives in which the good they did far eclipsed their limitations and imperfections.

Second, the unfounded myths about Father Serra, some of which reflect things that happened 100 years after his arrival in the New World, allow us a chance to reflect critically on the history of California and give its Spanish period a proper — and justly superior — place to what immediately followed it.

Father Serra created an environment he hoped would protect the native peoples from the abuses of colonization that he feared might otherwise befall them, and he stood up to the abuses he saw. He died surrounded by the people he loved and who loved him in return.

At the beginning of these remarks, I stated that the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe provided a model of evangelization that would transform the missionary effort in the New World. Evangelization would not seek substitution of indigenous culture but a new inculturation that affirmed the dignity of the native peoples. This model of an inculturated evangelization ignited the successful evangelization of the Western Hemisphere. I think it is evident that the life and priestly ministry of Blessed Junípero Serra precisely reflected this style of an inculturated evangelization.
Due to the vision and courage of our Holy Father, with the canonization of Blessed Junípero, every Catholic around the world will be able to call Serra what the native people who gathered around him at his death pronounced more than 200 years ago — *el santo*. And for this, there is every reason for Catholics in the United States to be grateful.
NOTES


3 Hackel 79.

4 Hackel 79.


8 Beebe and Senkewicz 57 ff.

9 Beebe and Senkewicz 170.

10 Beebe and Senkewicz 173.

11 Beebe and Senkewicz 329.


14 Powell 11.


16 Beebe and Senkewicz 224.

17 Orfalea, “Sainthood and Serra.”

18 Orfalea, “Sainthood and Serra.”

19 Powell 19.

20 Orfalea, “Journey” 339.


22 Orfalea, “Journey” 339.


24 Orfalea, “Journey” 339.


26 Powell 16.