

Catholic Down To The Bootstraps

How Father Serra Was Beatified

By Anne Knight, from a 1998 issue of the *Los Angeles Lay Catholic Mission*

Fr. Serra's Cause for beatification and canonization as a saint in the Catholic Church was opened in 1934. Fr. Maynard Geiger, archivist at Old Mission Santa Barbara, the headquarters for the Serra Cause, completed much of the historical research. From 1941 to 1955 Geiger traveled in California, Mexico and Spain, compiling documentation for the Serra Cause and his biography, *The Life and Times of Fray Junipero Serra* (1959). Fr. Geiger died in 1977.

The Cause received its first vice-postulator with the appointment of Fr. Eric O'Brien in 1941. Fathers Geiger and O'Brien made several trips together for the Serra Cause. In 1945 Fr. O'Brien hired Kay Hardy to handle public relations for him while he toured California missions to gather evidence for the canonization process. Hardy got her offer upon finishing a novena to Fr. Serra requesting help getting work. "So ended up working for Fr. Serra after I asked him for a job!" said Carmelite Sister Francisca, OCD, (formerly Kay Hardy) [now in her nineties].

On the tour, conducted in the late 1940s, the two Franciscans questioned descendants of mission Indians and others who knew of Fr. Serra's life from their ancestors. Among the witnesses was Abel Espinosa, whose prayer that he would live long enough to testify for Fr. Serra was answered when, at 92, he provided testimony at the Carmel Mission. The trials were conducted with a "devil's advocate," Fr. Lucien Arvin. Fr. Arvin searched for negative evidence on Fr. Serra's character.

"I got a different approach to holiness when I worked for that cause," recalled Sr. Francesca. "It's not visions and high thoughts and all that sort of stuff. It's just good old theological virtues [faith, hope and charity], and they also go through the cardinal virtues [prudence, justice, restraint, and courage or fortitude]. They don't ask too much about this other stuff except way down the line." Besides demonstrating his widespread reputation for holiness, testimony obtained during the trials yielded an account of Fr. Serra bi-locating to cure a sick man, and several reports of him restoring ailing crops in various places.

Fr. O'Brien left for Rome in 1950, to compile the *Summarium*, written to present Fr. Serra to the Vatican's Sacred Congregation of the Cause of Saints. In his absence he asked Fr. Neil Moholy to serve to serve as his administrative assistant. Soon thereafter Sr. Francesca received her call to religious life. Fr. Moholy's reaction: "He practically collapsed and said, 'You're leaving me with all this work?'" In 1951 Sr. Francesca, then 33, entered the Carmelite Monastery in Carmel, Calif., and was its prioress for many years. "I've done whatever I could to help it [the Serra Cause] along from this end....He [Fr. Moholy] counted on the Carmelite [nuns'] prayers. He said, 'You get those girls working.'"

In 1954 Fr. O'Brien returned from Rome and had to resign as vice-postulator in 1958, due to the effects of a 1949 auto accident (nerve damage and aphasia). "He was such a fine homilist, and the fact that he couldn't make his words come out right was a real suffering to him," Sr. Francesca said.

Fr. Maholy, a professor of sacred theology at the Old Mission Santa Barbara Theological Seminary, was appointed as the second vice-postulator for the Serra Cause in 1958. "For many years he was quite ill," Br. Timothy Arthur, OFM, provincial archivist at the Santa Barbara Mission, said. "It's amazing that he kept on plugging away like he did." Br. Tim was Fr. Moholy's secretary during the last few years of his life. "Fr. Serra kept him going."

Fr. Maholy delivered lectures, made several television appearances and conducted a local television series. He also served on historical commissions, co-authored a book (*Junipero Serra: The Illustrated Story of the Franciscan Founder of California's Missions*, 1985), and convinced the federal government to issue a Serra stamp and a Serra medal.

Fr. Maholy remained steadfast in spiritual practices. Br. Tim described them: "He said the divine office every day in Latin; sometimes he said the Mass in Latin because he enjoyed it. He believed that everything in the Mass should be a sacred thing, and should be done with dignity and reverence. He had great respect for the Eucharist."

In 1986 the cure of Franciscan Sr. Mary Boniface Dyrda in 1960 was authenticated, as the miracle required for Fr. Serra's beatification, the most difficult step of the canonization process. Shortly before the Holy Father honored Fr. Serra at the Carmel Mission (Serra's burial site) during his 1987 visit to California, a chorus of public accusations against Fr. Serra and his Franciscan confreres erupted. The accusers alleged that early Franciscan missionaries were oppressors of California Indians. Fr. Maholy rebutted such charges. On September 25, 1988, Pope John Paul II beatified Fr. Serra in Rome.

From 1980 to 1998, Fr. Maholy visited twin sisters Cecelia and Mary Preissler, at their home in Garden Grove, Calif., on his travels. The Preisslers headed the Orange County Chapter of the Serra Cause. "Fr. Maholy was such a humble, dignified and traditional priest," Mary said. He always said his rosary and kept up with all the old traditions of the [Franciscan] order."

Catholic writer Lesley Payne met Fr. Maholy when she interviewed him for an April 1994 *Catholic World Report* article on controversies surrounding Fr. Serra's canonization ("An Artificial Storm"). "Fr. Maholy was an authentic Franciscan . . . jovial, filled with the love of Christ, devoted to the Church, theologically mature . . . a true brother of St. Francis," says Payne. "As a theology professor he represented the Bonaventurian tradition (Saint Bonaventure was, of course, a Franciscan). I began thinking that what the Church around here really needs is a Bonaventurian revival, perhaps with an orthodox college, similar to Thomas Aquinas College, to open that line of thought."

Another chapter in the saga of Fr. Junipero Serra closed with the death of Fr. Noel Francis Moholy, on September 4, 1998, in Santa Barbara, at age 82. Fr. Moholy was diagnosed with cancer two months before he died. A month before his death, Fr. Moholy made his last visit to Sr. Francisca in Carmel. "We both suspected it would be the last [visit]," she said. "It was very heartrending."

Msgr. Francis J. Weber, director of the Los Angeles Archdiocese archives at Mission San Fernando, reported, "When he got sick, I asked him if he was going to pray to Fr. Serra, and he said, 'No, that would be a conflict of interest.'"

Fr. Moholy's funeral was held on September 8, 1998, at the Santa Barbara Mission. Br. Timothy Arthur handled Fr. Moholy's affairs until Rome appointed a new vice-postulator [Fr. John Vaughn, OFM]. According to Br. Tim, who reported two cures under investigation at the time of Fr. Moholy's death, "I think there have been many [miracles through Fr. Serra's intercession] myself. It's just that a lot of them were never followed on, or there was never time to look into them."

Reflecting on Fr. Moholy's influence, Msgr. Weber, asserted, "Had it not been for Fr. Moholy, Serra would not have been beatified." Fr. Moholy, he said, carried the torch for the Serra Cause by himself for many years: "Other people talk but he was a doer He was a Catholic all the way down to the bootstraps. That was his whole orientation; nothing else mattered in life."

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December 1998. © by Jim Holman.
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