

latimes.com

Junipero Serra needs just one more miracle

To be named a saint, the founder of California's missions has to be credited with a final marvel. One possibility: an artist who is still alive after losing a third of her skull in 14 brain surgeries.

By Steve Chawkins

August 28, 2009

Reporting from Santa Barbara

In a basement at Old Mission Santa Barbara, a filing cabinet is thick with claims of miracles that didn't make the grade.

A man falls off his horse and, thanks to Junipero Serra, he gets up unscathed. A woman visits Serra's tomb in Carmel and something stirs her deeply, changing the course of her life. An alcoholic gives up drinking and credits Serra for seeing him through.

They all believed their experiences to be miraculous -- but none was deemed the miracle needed to lift Serra into sainthood, a goal church officials announced 75 years ago today, the 225th anniversary of his death.

Serra, the revered and reviled Franciscan priest who founded California's missions, has one officially recognized miracle to his name. A nun in St. Louis was healed of lupus after praying to him, leading to Serra's beatification in 1987.

But sainthood requires a second miracle, defined by the church as an event that cannot be explained by science but can be attributed to the candidate's intercession from beyond the grave.

Two years ago, Serra advocates thought they had found one. A Denver woman who had prayed to Serra delivered a healthy baby, despite a dire prognosis. The case went to Rome, but physicians for the Vatican concluded it was not a miracle.

Now there's another possibility. Sheila E. Lichacz, a Panamanian artist, has survived 14 brain surgeries for tumors called meningiomas, after being told time and again that she was dying. One-third of her skull was removed in surgery and replaced with acrylic plates. But they too were removed after causing life-threatening infections.

Now a large part of her brain is covered not by bone or plates, but only by flesh.

Yet at 66, she is exuberant and stylish. On a recent trip to Santa Barbara to confer with priests about her medical history, she wore a brilliant blue pantsuit with matching hat and turban, heavy

silver chains and a black leather belt of her own design studded with 13 silver crucifixes. Her words tumble out in a cascade of religious fervor.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" asks Lichacz, who still has four benign tumors in her head. "Have you? Brain surgery for 45 years? Blessed Junipero -- that poor man, he needs me. He gave it all, I'm telling you, and -- I'm not bragging -- I'm giving it all too."

Whether her story will reach the Vatican is an open question. The process of discerning miracles is grindingly meticulous and has become even more demanding as science explains once-mysterious phenomena.

Serra's top advocate is Father John Vaughn, a Franciscan priest who lives at the mission. Ten years ago, he was appointed Vice Postulator for the Serra Cause -- the fourth in a succession of priests charged with ushering Serra to sainthood.

"I felt honored; I felt humbled," says Vaughn, who, as former minister general of the Order of Friars Minor, led the world's 16,000 Franciscan monks for 12 years. "I guess I felt terrified too."

In his brown robe and rope belt, Vaughn walks slowly through the gardens and down the cool, 189-year-old corridors of Mission Santa Barbara. Now 81 and a stroke survivor, he is keenly aware that his job might outlast him. It took 755 years, after all, to canonize St. Bede.

In Serra's case, much of the heavy lifting has been done. Roman Catholic scholars spent 14 years scouring letters, diaries, church documents, biographies and accounts of those who knew him. They conducted research in 125 libraries. At hearings in California, they took testimony from about 50 descendants of the Indians who toiled at Serra's missions and the Spanish soldiers who guarded them.

Twice Serra's body was exhumed, as prescribed by church tradition, to ensure that he was still in his resting place. Hundreds of shavings from his bones were removed as relics to aid the faithful.

"All the groundwork has been laid," Vaughn said, leading a visitor into the mission's archives. On a wall, part of an embroidered vestment worn by Serra was displayed in a frame. In the vault, a death register written in Serra's bold hand told somber stories of early Santa Barbara; its first entry was for a child named Maria Antonia -- possibly the daughter of a Spanish soldier and an Indian mother -- who died Dec. 22, 1782.

On the shelves, volume after volume -- some 10,000 pages in all -- constitute the *transumptum*, the complete record of the case for Serra's sainthood.

Santa Barbara was one of nine missions he founded before his death in 1784. Serra, a native of Majorca, the largest island of Spain, evangelized for years in remote regions of Mexico. Seeking to convert as many Native Americans as possible, he hobbled through uncharted California on a painfully ulcerated leg, walking thousands of miles to establish religious communities. At one point, he walked back to Mexico to lobby for a decree barring soldiers from sexually abusing native women.

Yet in his missions, flogging and shackling were common punishments. Indians who left were pursued and brought back -- sometimes to die from European diseases that ran rampant.

The missions "almost failed to recognize inhabitants of this continent as being fully human," said Sister Kateri Mitchell, director of the Tekakwitha Conference, a Native American Catholic group.

Vaughn, who says that saints "are not perfect, but holy," has heard it all before. "You can't judge a 17th or 18th century figure by 21st century rules. How many of our Founding Fathers owned slaves?"

That argument has sparked dissent.

"Sainthood requires that Serra's experiences -- especially those with the California Indians -- transcend time and place," writes James A. Sandos, scholar of the Mission era at the University of Redlands. "Sainthood means that his is a universal example for all Catholics to follow."

In 1985, Pope John Paul II found that Serra had lived a life of "heroic virtue" and declared him "venerable." That triggered the hunt for two miracles -- one for beatification and one for sainthood.

The first was the healing of the St. Louis nun. Gravely ill in 1960, Sister Mary Boniface Dyrda knew nothing of Serra when a chaplain from California urged her to pray to him. Decades later, her recovery was evaluated by panels of physicians in St. Louis and Rome, and weighed by the 32 cardinals and bishops of the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints. In 1987, Pope John Paul II proclaimed the healing miraculous. Serra was beatified and made "Blessed Junipero Serra."

The final miracle has been elusive.

At one point, Serra advocates pinned their hopes on a Riverside County man with terminal pancreatic cancer. Inspired by the priest's image in a stained-glass window, he sought Serra's aid. He lived six years but died of a heart ailment before he could testify.

Then in 2007, the Denver woman's case looked promising. Suffering complications in pregnancy, she was told her baby would be severely disabled. The child was born healthy, but a Vatican medical review concluded the healing could have been natural.

Lichacz, the Panamanian artist, said she had no knowledge of Serra when she first felt his healing presence nearly 30 years ago.

She has always been deeply religious. Many of her paintings play on images such as the clay vessels at Cana, where Jesus is said to have turned water into wine. One work is on permanent display at Jerusalem's Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre; others have been exhibited at Harvard and the Smithsonian. Before beginning a canvas, Lichacz inscribes it in chalk with the letters

AMDG, for *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, or "to the greater glory of God."

Studying at a Catholic college in Texas, she was diagnosed at 21 with the first of her meningiomas.

Since then, her life has been punctuated by surgical procedures, severe headaches and the possibility of blindness and sudden death.

In 1979, she was in San Diego for a neurological exam. The evening before, she and her husband, John, a U.S. Air Force major now retired, prayed at Serra's Mission San Diego de Alcalá.

"We both went through an ethereal experience," says Lichacz. "Something was calming us down so we could face what we had to face."

Sixteen years later, the couple flew from their part-time home in Miami to San Diego for another consultation. On that trip, they visited Serra's mission at San Juan Capistrano.

"I saw his statue and for some reason I put my hands on his feet," recalls Lichacz. "I looked at him and said, 'Please take care of me.' And may God be my witness, I started walking back to the car and it was as if I was levitating. I didn't feel the ground. That's when I realized it was Junipero."

In the twilight hush of a chapel at Mission Santa Barbara, she slowly draws a cherished possession from her purse.

It's a quarter-sized gold locket bearing the red wax seal of the Franciscans. Inside is a grayish-brown fleck, a Serra bone chip given to her by a monk in Santa Barbara.

"He suffered so much," she whispers. "He's a saint. I know he's a saint."

A pamphlet promoting Serra's cause quotes an unidentified neurosurgeon expressing amazement that after so many surgeries, Lichacz "never suffered any neurological deficits nor psychological trauma . . . If this is not a miracle, then it must be proof that faith heals everything and makes one stronger."

If physicians consulted by Vaughn agree that science cannot explain Lichacz's relatively good health, he may have a tribunal take her testimony and scrutinize her medical records.

Then, the case would be sent to the Vatican, where the pope will have the last word.

Church officials won't speculate on the outcome for Lichacz.

"It's up to God," said Vaughn, "and other people."

Copyright © 2011, [Los Angeles Times](#)

