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The miracle searcher

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A Santa Ana native waits patiently in Mission Santa Barbara for news of a miracle wrought by a Spanish missionary dead for more than 200 years. A miracle strong enough to persuade the Vatican to proclaim a new saint.

John Vaughn, 82, has dedicated the past 13 years to the cause of his fellow Franciscan, Junipero Serra, the 18th-century mission-building monk. Sainthood would spread word of the "Apostle of California" around the globe.

"He'd be a saint for all the world, not just California," Vaughn said.

Vaughn is vice-postulator, a kind of campaign manager, for the cause of Serra's sainthood. By some counts, Serra has more streets, schools, mountains and parks named after him than any other Californian. His statue represents California in the U.S. Capitol.

In a way, all of Vaughn's life seemed to point to this role promoting Serra.

Vaughn grew up on Washington Street in Santa Ana and recalls working in a local market, making tortillas to ship to troops during World War II.

"I also helped with the tamales, and along the way I learned a lot of Spanish," he said.

Choosing a monastic life

Asked if he could remember first hearing the story of Junipero Serra, Vaughn gave a wry smile.

"Like everyone else in California," he said. "In school. You learn about Junipero Serra and the missions. They still do."

But the story of how Serra built the first nine of 21 missions in California stuck with him. He was an altar boy and would attend picnics at Mission San Juan Capistrano, home of the only surviving chapel where Serra performed Catholic rites.

"We drove almost every day on streets built over the old El Camino Real," Vaughn said, naming the path followed by Serra that linked the missions to each other.

After St. Joseph's elementary school and Willard Junior High School, Vaughn found himself drawn to the simple life extolled by St. Francis of Assisi. He began taking the steps that would lead to his joining the Franciscan order in 1955.

Vaughn has lived, taught and prayed throughout California and Mexico, and worked 14 years in Rome. From 1979 to 1991, Vaughn was minister general for the Franciscan order, its worldwide leader. His religious life came full circle in 1998 when he took on the job of promoting the cause of Serra, the figure so important to his childhood.

A slow process

Serra died in 1784, but the campaign to have him declared a saint didn't get started until the early 1930s. Then it languished for a half century. According to the book "Making Saints" by Kenneth Woodward, Pope John Paul II asked Vatican officials in the mid-1980s to look for candidates outside of Europe in order to diversify the roster of saints. Serra's previously moribund candidacy was pulled out and moved swiftly. He was declared venerable in 1985 and beatified (declared blessed) in 1988.

All that was left was proof of one more miracle, and Serra could be canonized – made a saint of the Roman Catholic Church.

But as Serra's cause rose, so did the volume of his critics. Some Indian groups said he was complicit in the subjugation of tribes at the missions. This was no small matter in a country where 2 million Indians count themselves as Catholics. The drive for sainthood slowed. Noel Moholy, the vigorous vice-postulator for 30 years, died in 1998. Pope John Paul II, seen in some circles as a Serra supporter, died in 2005.

Terry Ruscin, a former San Diego advertising executive who lives in Hendersonville, N.C., edits a newsletter called *Siempre Adelante!* that advocates Serra's cause. Ruscin said the momentum for sainthood has waned since Moholy's death.

"(Moholy) was an ardent lobbyist, and lobbying is a key factor in saintly causes," Ruscin said. "I believe, had Father Moholy lived another 10 years, Blessed Serra would have been canonized by now."

Vaughn said expectations perhaps ran too high for a swift Serra sainthood. "This idea of a fast track, maybe it's true," Vaughn said. "But I don't know about it. We're waiting for the miracle."

It's Vaughn's job to scour for evidence of that miracle, usually an unexplainable medical cure, that can be attributed to someone seeking Serra's intercession with God.

"I don't think at this point, we have a good case," Vaughn said. "A couple of times a year there are reports. But it can't just be a miracle because someone says it is. It has to stand up in a court in Rome."

It's a challenge, but one that Vaughn says his faith leads him to believe can be overcome.

"Not everything can be explained," Vaughn said. "There are still miracles."