

Junipero Serra

Bl. Junipero Serra (1713-1784), Franciscan padre and founder of the Mission system that anchored Spain's colonization of California, was born Miguel Jose Serra in Petra on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca, the son of peasant farmers.

Bright, earnest, and deeply religious at an early age, he was schooled by Franciscans and sent to Lullian University in Mallorca's capital city of Palma, where he remained as a student, scholar, orator and professor of philosophy for 15 years. His given name, Miguel Jose, made way for the adopted name of Junipero, after Brother Juniper, a companion and ardent disciple of St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order. He was ordained a priest shortly before Christmas, 1737.

At the age of 36 (middle-aged by 18th century standards), Fr. Serra turned his back on the comfort and routine of academic life to answer a call for missionaries in the New World. In August, 1749, he set sail for Mexico accompanied by two of his university students -- Frs. Francisco Palou and Juan Crespi. Arriving in Vera Cruz, he set out on foot for Mexico City, site of the College of San Fernando, the hub of Franciscan activities in the New World. It was during this arduous trek, covering more than 260 miles, that Fr. Serra's left foot and leg became infected from an insect bite, leaving him permanently lame and causing him pain and suffering all his life.

"By the time that Serra arrived in the New World," writes Theodore Maynard in *The Long Road of Father Serra*, "the period of military conquest was considered over, except for occasional flurries, and the conquest had passed to a new agency, that of the missionaries. The missionaries of course had always accompanied every Spanish army, which looked upon itself as engaged in a crusade, but peace was now normal, and what remained to be done could be brought about more effectively (not to say more economically, an important consideration) by the cross than the sword."

Fr. Serra would remain in Mexico for almost 20 years, including a year as Prefect of Baja California, before undertaking the work for which he is remembered. The call came unexpectedly in 1769, when he was instructed to join dragoon captain Gaspar de Portola on an expedition to New California (what is today the state of California. Old California was then the Baja peninsula). The plan was to establish Missions at three strategic points -- San Diego, the Monterey Bay area, and the Santa Barbara Channel area -- each with a presidio or garrison for protection. Although small in size, these outposts would represent Spain's claim to the region if challenged by England, Russia or another imperial power.

San Diego was to be the rendezvous point from which Portola and a small band of soldiers were to head north to find Monterey Bay and secure its harbor. Four separate parties left Baja - two by land (a distance of about 400 miles) and two by sea. All reached San Diego -- but at a terrible price. Twenty-four men aboard one of the vessels died of scurvy or plague, while many others arrived sick and disabled. Most of the Indians who had joined the two land parties died or deserted. A relief ship carrying food and supplies from Baja was lost at sea. Fr. Serra, a member of the second land party, limped into San Diego suffering greatly from his swollen leg. Nevertheless, on July 16, 1769, sixteen days after his arrival, he founded the first of California's twenty-one Missions, San Diego de Alcalá.

The second Mission, San Carlos Borromeo, opened temporarily at Monterey, then permanently beside the Carmel River in 1771. Thereafter it became the headquarters of Mission operations in the state.

The third Mission (San Antonio de Padua) was not located in the Santa Barbara Channel area as originally planned, but near present-day King City in Monterey County in 1771. The "Channel" Mission, San Buenaventura, was finally built in 1782 -- the last of the nine Missions to be erected during Fr. Serra's lifetime.

Nine more Missions were built by his successor, Fr. Firmin Francisco de Lasuen, and three were founded after Fr. Lasuen's death. The 21st and last Mission, San Francisco Solano, was built in Sonoma in 1823. Linking all the Missions was the famed El Camino Real, the "King's" or "Royal" Highway running from Loreto in Baja, Calif., to San Francisco. In part, it is the route followed today by Highway 101.

The Mission system endured for 65 years, all of them laden with challenges. As James D. Hart writes in *A Companion to California*: "Conversion of members of the tribes who came to be called Mission Indians was slow; by 1774 the first five missions had baptized fewer than 500 infants and enrolled under 500 members, averaging fewer than 40 persons annually for each mission....But difficulties also came from poor supply lines, insufficient equipment and food, strained and bureaucratic relations with Mexico, and problems in converting and controlling the generally docile but sometimes hostile Indians."

Blessed with an even temper, good humor, and administrative skill, Fr. Serra was the glue that held the system together during its early years. Despite his austere habits (he used a board for a bed or slept on the ground) and small stature (his height is given as 5-ft., 2-in.), he was a tireless worker with an unshakable faith in his apostolic mission of saving souls, which he regarded as more important than "civilizing" the natives to make them good subjects of the King of Spain.

He fought hard to limit the military's authority over the padres' conduct of Mission life. He spoke out against a government plan that would have ended all ship-building in Baja and left the Missions entirely dependent on overland mule trains for their supplies. He vigorously opposed early efforts by Spanish authorities to convert the Missions into pueblos or villages, which he feared would reduce the authority of the padres and set in motion a break-up of what he considered a bucolic way of life centered on agriculture and cattle raising. The Mission Indians, he argued, were not yet ready for independent living or ownership of private property.

(Many observers take a less benevolent view of Mission life, especially in its later years. Carey McWilliams, writing in *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, calls post-1800 Mission existence "a nightmare for the Indians," a forced-labor system in which infractions of rules occasioned harsh punishment, and individual beliefs and tribal customs that conflicted with Christian religion were suppressed. Syphilis and measles also took a heavy toll of Indian life.)

By prevailing in his efforts to maintain the existing Mission system, Fr. Serra made possible its continued growth under his successor, Fr. Lasuen. As James D. Hart writes in *A Companion to California*:

"All missions controlled great landholdings (e.g., in 1822 Santa Barbara held nearly 122,000 acres with orchards, vineyards, many horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and swine). The missions themselves, usually built as a quadrangle, contained a church, workshops, living and dining quarters for priests, a library, and an infirmary with outbuildings for the Indian men (unmarried women were often locked in a dormitory), and an adjacent cemetery. The buildings were architecturally attractive, even though they rarely had skilled builders. They differed in design but all featured stuccoed adobe, tiled roofs, and covered arcades. Some contained a campanile, others a *campanario* (a wall with open insets for bells), Moorish-styled windows and pilasters and other adornments to enhance otherwise simple faces.

"By 1833 some 31,000 Indians still lived in such settings under a temporal and spiritual despotism, not always benevolent, controlled by only 60 padres and 300 soldiers. By that date almost 88,000 Indians had been baptized and over 24,000 had been married by Catholic ritual. That year the Mexican government, for political, economic and other reasons, decided that the Indians were to live an independent life...The lands were to be divided for common use and each Indian family was also to be given a small private plot."

By then, Fr. Serra had been dead for half a century and many of his fears about the fate of the Mission Indians were about to be realized.

Apparently worn out by his labors, Fr. Serra died in his sleep at the Carmel Mission on Aug. 28, 1784, at the age of 70. His body rests under the Mission altar alongside his Mallorca friend and former student, Fr. Crespi, who died two years earlier after a distinguished life as a priest and explorer. His other lifelong friend, Fr. Palou, went on to write an invaluable biography of Fr. Serra as well as an important history of the region, *Noticias de la Nuevo California*.

Fr. Serra was beatified by Pope John Paul II on Sept. 25, 1988.