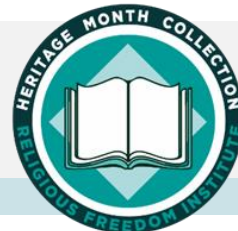


Junípero Serra

2024



“We put ourselves out for the good of these poor people, and in doing so, work no harm to others. Nor do we undertake the work for any low or unworthy motive . . . I feel sure that everyone knows that we love them.”

Junípero Serra to Governor Felipe de Neve (Letters dated April 18, 1780 and Jan 7, 1780)



Junípero Serra as a young Franciscan priest

Miguel José Serra was born on November 24, 1713, in Petra, Majorca, in the Kingdom of Spain. His parents had Miguel José baptized in the Roman Catholic Rite on the day of his birth. An intelligent and pious youth, he entered the novitiate of the Franciscan Order just two months before his seventeenth birthday. The novitiate is a period when an individual enters a monastery or convent in an attempt to discern God’s calling on one’s life. During this time of formation, the individual will often assume a religious name in place of, or in addition to his or her given name. Miguel José took the name “Junípero,” and it was under this name that he would take a solemn vow to the Franciscan Order and later become a priest. It was this same name that is now synonymous with the early history of the state of California (USA).

He earned a doctorate in theology at Lullian University in Majorca, and was eventually made a theology professor there. In a short time, he was elevated to the Duns Scotus Chair—a position of great prestige at the university. However, Junípero sensed another calling that would soon take him from the classrooms of Spain to the frontier of the Americas. On April 13, 1749, Father Junípero Serra boarded a ship to North America.

He arrived in Mexico eight months later and walked nearly 250 miles to Mexico City. A leg injury suffered along the way would afflict him for the rest of his life. At times, he would require the use of a stretcher to simply move around. Despite the physical challenge, Junípero’s life was marked by a commitment to and zeal for one’s calling—whatever the circumstances. An example of this was a letter he wrote in 1769 to his superior in Mexico City. The intent of the letter was to warn Franciscans who sought to come to California of the many hardships they would likely endure. At the end of the letter, he wrote of a guiding principle by which he lived and one that inspired countless others since—“But to a willing heart all is sweet, *amanti suave est.*”ⁱ

After just six short months in Mexico City, Junípero volunteered to travel north to the missions of Sierra Gorda to serve the Pame Indians. He learned the Pame language to instruct the indigenous people in the faith he held dear. But his work was not limited to evangelization, because he knew his faith required him to concern himself with both body and soul. Through his hard work and innovative mind, the mission began to prosper. He introduced domestic animals, new agricultural techniques, and new commercial activities. He also defended Indian rights against non-native settlers in a protracted contest over the valley of Tanacama.”ⁱⁱ

In 1767, he received an appointment for what is now California. His appointment came at a difficult time. The Spanish *encomienda* system was exported to California around the same time alongside other controversial practices. For many years, he was required to navigate these new challenges while attempting to serve the spiritual and physical needs of the indigenous people of the area.ⁱⁱⁱ By his own admission and those of his biographers, the results were not perfect. Nevertheless, his social and economic ideas would contribute to the blueprint eventually used to create modern California. What was also apparent was his affection for the people connected to his mission. In a letter to the Viceroy Teodoro de Croix, he confirmed of the indigenous people that “we look upon them as a father looks upon his family. We shower all our love and care upon them.”^{iv} Despite the tension with the Spanish authorities, the general affection of the indigenous people for Junípero seemed to be genuine, often manifested in small gestures. In 1777, he wrote to Viceroy Antonio María de Bucareli y Ursúa how moved he was by the goodwill of the Chumash” who “came to my assistance, linking me on both sides by the arms to get me over the steep muddy hills.”^v

This bond is perhaps what motivated him to earlier make the difficult journey back to Mexico City in 1772 to protest the atrocities being committed against the indigenous people of California. His presentation of 32 articles intended to protect the missions and the native people who converted to Catholicism have sometimes been referred to as the first attempt to secure a “Bill of Rights.”



A statue of Junípero Serra represents California in National Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol

Father Junípero died on August 28, 1784, at the age of 70. Today, he is known as the Apostle of California and the United States’ first Hispanic saint. His life is an example of the difficulties of navigating complex social questions while living out one’s faith in the public square. But for Junípero, that was exactly the point. One’s faith is not merely a private affair. It is meant to be lived out for all to see, to be used to help those in need, and to highlight injustice and point the way to a better future. In 1749, a young Junípero Serra declared a simple proclamation that eventually became his motto. “Always forward! Never turn back!”^{vi}

Key Questions

1. Father Junípero Serra often spoke of his own shortcomings. How do we evaluate historical figures when they sometimes fail to live up to their own high standards?
2. Junípero Serra endured in his work despite severe physical challenges. Can you think of other historic figures who served others despite physical trials that may have sidelined some people?

Sources

ⁱ www.ncregister.com/blog/quotes-from-the-indomitable-st-junipero-serra

ⁱⁱ www.usccb.org/offices/general-secretariat/saint-junipero-serra

ⁱⁱⁱ Senkewicz, R. M. (2010). The Representation of Junípero Serra in California History.

^{iv} www.ncregister.com/blog/quotes-from-the-indomitable-st-junipero-serra

^v www.ncregister.com/blog/quotes-from-the-indomitable-st-junipero-serra

^{vi} www.sfarchdiocese.org/junipero-serra-classroom/