



Why Saint Junípero Serra Matters Today

The upcoming canonization of Blessed Junípero Serra in Washington, D.C. — the first ever to take place on American soil — has generated, as I'm sure you know, a good deal of controversy. For his defenders, Padre Serra was an intrepid evangelist and a model of Gospel living, while for his detractors, he was a shameless advocate of an oppressive colonial system that resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Indians. Even many who typically back Pope Francis see this canonization as a rare faux pas for the Argentine Pontiff. What should we make of all this?

It might first be wise to rehearse some of the basic facts of Serra's life. He was born in 1713 on the beautiful island of Mallorca off of the Spanish coast, and as a very young man,

where the Indians were taught the principles of agriculture and animal husbandry, which enabled them to move beyond a merely nomadic lifestyle. I find it fascinating, by

he joined a particularly severe branch of the Franciscan order. He quickly became a star in the community, recognized for his impressive intellectual gifts and his profound spirituality. After many years of study, he earned his doctorate in philosophy and commenced a teaching career, which culminated in his receiving the Duns Scotus Chair of philosophy. But when Padre Serra was thirty-six, he resolved to abandon his relatively comfortable life and promising career and become a missionary in the New World. He undertook this mission out of a sincere and deeply-felt desire to save souls, knowing full well that he would likely never return to his homeland. After spending a few years in Mexico City doing administrative work, he realized his dream to work with the native peoples of New Spain, first in Mexico and then in what was then called Baja California (Lower California). When he was around fifty years old, he was asked by his superiors to lead a missionary endeavor in Alta California, more or less the present day state of California. With the help of a small band of Franciscan brothers and under the protection of the Spanish government, he established a series of missions along the Pacific coast, from San Diego to San Francisco. He died in 17

Much of the disagreement regarding Junípero Serra hinges upon the interpretation of the mission project that he undertook. Though it is certainly true that the Imperial Spanish authorities had an interest in establishing a strong Spanish presence along the Pacific coast in order to block the intrusion of Russian settlers in the region, there is no doubt that Serra's first intention in setting up the missions was to evangelize the native peoples. What fired his heart above all was the prospect of announcing the Good News of Jesus Christ to those who had never before heard it, and there is no question that his missions provided the institutional framework for that proclamation.

Moreover, the missions were places

the way, that there was nothing even vaguely analogous to these missions on the other side of the continent. Though by our standards they treated the native people in a rather patronizing manner, the Spanish evangelized and instructed the Indians, whereas the British settlers in the American colonies more or less pushed them out of the way.

Critics of Serra's project claim that Indians were compelled to join the missions, essentially as a slave labor force, and were baptized against their will. The consensus of responsible historians, however, is that both of these charges are false. In fact, the vast majority of the Indians recognized the advantage of living in connection with the missions, and only about 10% of those who had come to missions opted to leave. To be sure, those who left were hunted down and, upon their return, were sometimes subjected to corporal punishment. Indeed, there is real evidence that Padre Serra countenanced such violence: in one of his letters, he speaks of the need to punish wayward Indians the way a parent would chastise a recalcitrant child, and in another document, he authorizes the purchase of shackles for the mission in San Diego. Certainly from our more enlightened perspective, we would recognize such behavior as morally wrong, and it is no good trying to whitewash the historical record so as to present Serra as blameless.

Having acknowledged this, however, it is most important to note that the lion's share of the evidence we have strongly indicates that Serra was a steadfast friend to the native peoples, frequently defending them against the violence and prejudice of the Spanish civil authorities. Very much in the spirit of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the great sixteenth-century defender of the Indians, Serra insisted, again and again, upon the rights and prerogatives of the native tribes. In one case, he spoke out against the execution of an Indian who had killed one of Serra's own friends and colleagues, arguing that the whole point of his mission was to save life, not to take it. As Archbishop Jose Gomez has argued, this represents one of the first principled arguments against capital punishment ever to appear in Western culture.

One might ask why Pope Francis – who certainly knows all of the controversy surrounding Padre Serra – wants to push ahead with this canonization. He does so, I would speculate, for two reasons. First, he understands that declaring someone a saint is not to declare him or her morally flawless, nor is it to countenance every institution with which the saint was associated. Secondly and more importantly, he sees Junípero Serra as someone who, with extraordinary moral courage, went to the periphery of the society of his time in order to announce Jesus Christ. Serra could have pursued a very respectable career in the comfortable halls of European academy; but he opted to go, at great personal cost, to the margins – and this makes him an extraordinary model of a Pope Francis style missionary.

Was Padre Serra perfect? By no means. Was he a saint? Absolutely.



St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Feast day: Oct. 1

St. Teresa of Ávila

Feast day: Oct. 15

► Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, also known as Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, entered a Carmelite convent in France at the age of 15. Through her "little way" of love, prayer, and sacrifice, Saint Thérèse became known for her great holiness. Her book, *The Story of a Soul*, is the autobiography of her life. She died of tuberculosis when she was 24.

Saint Teresa of Avila, who lived in 16th century Spain, was also a Carmelite nun. She was a great reformer of her age. She was so displeased with the lax lifestyle of her convent that she founded a new reformed convent, called the Discalced Carmelites. Saint Teresa was a contemplative and mystic, and received great raptures and visions. The artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini portrayed one of her mystical experiences in a famous sculpture titled "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" in Rome's Santa Maria della Vittoria.

Can you tell them apart? Take the quiz!

- 1 Which saint is known as the Little Flower?
- 2 Which saint was a friend of Saint John of the Cross?
- 3 Which saint was a spoiled child before she entered the convent?
- 4 Which saint is a Doctor of the Church?

Answers:

- 1 Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus – She saw herself as the "little flower" of Jesus.
- 2 Saint Teresa of Avila – Saint John was also a Spanish mystic and Carmelite.
- 3 Saint Thérèse of Lisieux – She was the youngest daughter and very beautiful.
- 4 Both! Saint Teresa of Avila was named Doctor of the Church in 1970, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux in 1997. They are two of only three female Doctors of the Church – the other is Saint Catherine of Siena.