

A portrait of Saint Junípero Serra, a Franciscan friar, depicted from the chest up. He has a serious expression and is wearing a brown, textured habit. The background is dark and textured.

Portrait of Saint Junípero Serra ,  
copied by Fr. Jose Mosqueda  
from a mid-18th century painting.  
Oil on canvas, ca. 1900.

## Missionary Disciple: The Spirituality of Saint Junípero Serra

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**W**hen the Pope announced the canonization of Junípero Serra in January 2015, it sparked a lot of activity: controversy, research, and preparations for the canonization that occurred in September of that year. Being an historian and also in archeology school at the time, I began to get a lot of phone calls, particularly related to the controversy of Junípero Serra. So I began to do some research and reading of his biographies and diaries, and decided on a particular course that I would take that maybe could contribute something new to our knowledge of Serra.

I realized that no one talks about the fact that Serra was a Franciscan friar. For me that is very significant, not only because of my own vocational choice in life, but also because the Franciscan tradition that Serra would have inherited is a particular view and vision of the world. I'd like to talk today about his spirituality and pastoral practice without concentrating so much on the

controversy surrounding him. I'd like to talk about what motivated him, how he saw the world, and what kind of actions he took, in the midst of a good deal of conflict and an entirely new situation. I'd like to talk about him as a missionary disciple.

First of all, we know that he was a Franciscan friar, and at the heart of the Franciscan life is this quotation from Chapter 6 of the *Rule of St. Francis* (there's only 12 chapters, the shortest rule in the Church): "Instead as pilgrims and strangers in this world, who serve the Lord in poverty and humility, let them go begging for alms with full trust. Nor should they feel ashamed, since the Lord made himself poor for us in this world." Serra's a journeyman, he's a traveler, as we all are in our life, in our history, in our society, in the world in which we live. Serra renews this commitment to his Franciscan way of life every year; he professes, again, his solemn profession in the Order of Friars Minor. This was certainly key to his identity and to his practice. When I talk about the spirituality and his vision, you'll see these elements come through very clearly.

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## Lifelong Conflict with Civil Authorities

Serra embarked on his trip to the New World when he was 36 years old and came to California in 1768, when he was 56. He died 16 years later, in 1784. Though Serra spent the smallest part of his life in the California missions, that's what he's most known for. Yet his formative influence came from Mallorca and the Sierra Gordas. Let's look closely at the first two periods and their formative influence on him. Each one of these periods saw Serra in conflict with the civil authorities.

Serra spent 36 years, the majority of his life, in Mallorca, an island off the coast of Spain. He was born in 1713, the year of the end of the War of the Spanish Succession. The Bourbons took over from the Habsburgs the island of Mallorca. Mallorca was an occupied land. It was a colonized land. The implementation of the Bourbon regime in Mallorca was oppressive. The new regime dissembled all local power structures and replaced the language of *mallorquí* with Spanish. Only those who spoke Castilian could testify and work in the court system, and the young men were conscripted. So Serra, in his youth, knew what it means to be colonized. That's an important step in how he's going to approach his own action and activities in California. He was not foreign in his own experience to the oppression that comes with colonization. Perhaps this places him in a more sympathetic, understanding position to the people who are colonized by a military force.

He was accepted into the Franciscans in 1730 and ordained a priest in 1737. He was a very learned man. He taught in the Lullian University at Palma Mallorca.

In 1749, he set out for the New World with his great friend Francisco Palóu, and arrived in Mexico City which was his home monastery, and missioned in that territory north of Mexico City called the Sierra Gordas for eight years. That, also, would be formative for what he would do in the California missions. Then he was called back to Mexico City as a novice master, a former of young Franciscans, young missionaries, and he was a teacher and a preacher there from 1758 to 1767.

As *presidente* of those missions just north of Mex-

ico City, he ran into the local civil policies of the governor José de Escandón, who implemented what he called the "rancho system." There's a conflict here between the rancho system and the presidio mission system, two different ways of looking at colonization. The controversy there centers around Tancama Valley near Jalpan in the Sierra Gorda missions; Escandón fostered the colonization of that valley, where the native Mexicans were living. He gave the property to the colonists, who then enslaved the Indians in that period. He wanted to integrate those natives into Spanish society immediately. The natives went

to Serra to protest against the loss of their property. Serra and the natives of Tancama Valley took the case to the viceroy, and they

won. The colonists must leave, because the property and rights belonged to the natives.

This same issue will happen repeatedly with the governors of California, with whom Serra will have continual conflicts. He's always dealing with the civil authorities and the political consequences of colonization, and he's always dealing with what the handbooks refer to as those who are suffering, the *miserables*. He knows and sees the poor and the consequences of the systems in which he lives. So Serra's very familiar with the force of the colonizing project and the experience of the natives underneath it. All this is very well documented, but very little referred to from his point of view.

## Serra's Relationship with Native Peoples

Following are four examples that illustrate Serra's experience with this sort of conflict and how he approaches his encounters with the native peoples.

The first one comes from his diary, moving from Baja California to Alta California. He started the trip in March 1769 and concluded in San Diego, July 1769, with the foundation of the mission on July 15. This is a direct quote from his wonderful diary, which a lot of people don't pay attention to, but Serra's feeling for life comes through. The entry is dated April 7, 1769:

"I walked all day, only stopping briefly at noon to have a bite to eat and rest for a while. As night was falling, I arrived at the spot called El Cardón, where I slept



**Fr. Joseph Chinnici, OFM, delivered this presentation to Serrans at the Serra Rally in Phoenix on February 18, 2017.**

under the stars.”

Now, Baja California was completely Christianized in terms of the Native Americans. Serra had yet to meet what he refers to as a “gentile,” which is an unbaptized Native American. He continues:

“There I met about 10 families – men, women, boys and girls. When I asked them why they were there, they told me with great sadness that they were from Mission Guadalupe, up the road. Because there was not enough food, the padre was forced to send them back to the mountains to look for food. It was very hard on them, especially seeing the children suffer and hearing them cry. I felt very sorry for them. A pot of good *atole* was made for the women and children from some corn that was in a pouch. The process was repeated and a second pot of *atole* was given to the men, which was of some consolation to them.”

So he’s feeding people coming to him, and that’s a major attraction of the mission system – production of food in times of famine.

“I went to lie down and rest after the long day’s journey, and the Indians went off to pray together. They ended by singing a tender hymn about the love of God, which had come to them through the generosity of these pilgrims and strangers.”

Our second example takes us to Mission San

Diego. Mission San Diego was founded in 1769 but there was a revolt there in 1775, and one of the friars, Luis Jaime, was killed. The tribe revolted because of the mistreatment of the Native Americans by the military colonists, particularly issues of abuse, raping the women of the tribe. Of course, the mission was associated with these activities because they were part of the colonizing issue. One other person besides Luis Jaime was also killed. The leaders of the revolt were captured. What was Serra’s reaction? (This is a capital crime under Spanish law, and you know what happens with capital crimes.) He appealed to the Viceroy Antonio Maria de Bucareli y Ursua on Dec. 15, 1775:

“One of the most important things I requested of the *visitador* general at the beginning of these conquests is if the Indians were

to kill me, whether they be gentiles or Christians, they should be forgiven. And I request the same of *nuestra excellencia*. With respect to San Diego, let the murderer live, so that he can be saved, which is the purpose for our coming here, and the reason for forgiving him. What kind of God do we want to teach him about? Help him to understand with some moderate punishment that he is being pardoned in accordance with our law, which orders us to forgive him for his offenses, and to prepare him not for his death, but for eternal life.”

What is Serra’s law? The Gospel law: Forgive your enemies. Be kind to those who injure you. It’s a simple as that. And he’s arguing for forgiveness for this particular Native American, who has killed his own confrere. In fact, the viceroy listens to Serra’s appeal, and the two Indians involved are given exile but not capital punishment.

On Feb. 26, 1777, he wrote to Fr. Francisco Pangua, his guardian in Mexico City, describing the native peoples: “They are in places one cannot visit without walking a long distance and sometimes going on hands and feet, but I put my trust in the Lord, who created them.” This gets to the heart of his conviction. He sees them as objects of God’s creative activity, before he even gets there. These are human beings, made in the image of God. That’s the tradition he inherits. They’re not bap-

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tized, they do not belong to the Spanish Empire, they have no social status; they are the poor as he understands it. And yet he sees them as people, like himself, created by God. That's the starting point. Not only has God created them, but redeemed them with the most precious blood of his Son. They're already redeemed. He wants to tell them about the gift of Jesus Christ. God will bring them into the fold in the manner and at the time that he will be pleased to do so.

Throughout his life he sees himself as an instrument of God, not one who accomplishes the work. It's like St. Paul – he's given the grace of participating in God's work in the world. It's not his work, it's God's work, and he is trying to prepare the way. And if it happens in God's time, it will happen, and they will come. This is a whole attitude that suffuses his writings and his activities.

The third example is related to property. When Mission Santa Clara was founded in 1771, the civil authorities wanted to found a pueblo (eventually it would become the city of San Jose, California) and they founded it so that it bled over into mission property. The colonists began to take over mission property, which belonged, to Serra's mind, and according to the laws governing colonization, to the Native Americans. So, friars and Serra and the civil authorities got involved in this long, protracted controversy over property rights. It sounds much like what happened in the Sierra Gorda missions, or what happened in Mallorca.

Citing the Laws of the Indies, which reads, "No lands may be given to the Spaniards to the prejudice of the Indians, and any such lands, once taken, must be returned," Serra wrote in 1782:

"The governor (*it was Don Felipe de Neve, who was a disciple of José de Escandón in the Sierra Gordas*), about a year after Mission Santa Clara was founded, made up his mind to start a pueblo on the other side of the river to be composed of *gente de razón* (*people of reason, citizens*), just as if the Indians did not have use of reason, too." He sees the Indians also as *gente de razón*, not just the Spanish colonizers.

In trying to negotiate and to inject into the society in which he lives the roots of the Christian Gospel, and the roots and virtues of his Franciscan life, the object is to try to place charity and mercy where there is little charity and mercy. The object is to invite people to the Gospel – not to force them to convert, which is forbidden, both by the Gospel and by the laws.

Serra is part of this whole Spanish colonial project. There's no question about that. And he follows the laws of the Spanish colonial project, the Laws of the Indies. He also participates in the disciplinary actions of the Spanish colonial project, and the mission project. But, he also stands with the Native Americans. So he finds himself, civilly and socially, in a very conflictual situation, caught between the poor and the colonizing project. We have to think of him as a real person. Not simply in relationship to the Native Americans, but also in relationship to the colonizing project. He is embedded culturally in an economic, military and political system. He can't avoid that. That's not the question. (Welcome to the world – everybody is in that situation.) The question is, what do you do with that situation and what kind of life do you try to live with the things that are under your control or for which you are responsible?

### **The Path to Canonization: Testimonies**

Serra died in 1784. His tomb was opened in 1882, a little less than 100 years later. The Cause was opened in 1934, and I understand that's when Serra International was founded and probably that's why you have the name you have, although at that time very little was known about Junípero Serra in terms of his history and activities. A lot of research was done in the period following, and there were notarized interviews with the descendants of the colonizers and the Native Americans between 1943 and 1948. He was declared Venerable by John Paul II, Blessed in 1988, and declared a saint Sept. 23, 2015. I was in various positions during the time and actually privileged to be at all three events.

I want to read you a couple of things that are not public, that came up with the Cause. These particular two were done in 1943. They are verbatim, notarized reports from the descendants of Native Americans and colonists, and they tell how Serra was viewed for over 150 years.

"I, Jesse de Carli, was born at Carmel, and have lived here in this neighborhood all my life. My father, Cristiano Macado, was caretaker at San Carlos Mission for 30 years. I knew all the old residents of Carmel, Monterrey, when I was young. Among them was an old Indian woman called Vieja Chepa, who had been a little girl when Father Serra was alive. She believed Father Serra was a saint. And the younger generation took over this belief. My own people used to pray a novena to Padre

Serra. I believe it was before Christmas.”

So the cult of his holiness developed very rapidly. A second testimony:

“I, Joseph Hitchcock, was born in Carmel Valley, 1881, and have lived here most of my life. My father’s family here dates back to my grandfather who came with Commodore Sloat, 1846. My mother’s family came in 1866. My father’s mother belonged to the Indians who were descendants of those from Padre Serra’s day. My grandparents and others of their age used to talk about Padre Serra, and so did the old Indians that I knew. All these persons regarded Padre Serra as a saint. This was the local tradition here. The local Indians about 45 years ago had the custom of invoking Serra’s help in fishing by placing offerings at a rock called El Viejo, at the mouth of the Carmel River. The people here used to pray to Padre Serra, because they had the same confidence in him as they had in other saints.”

The testimony is almost unanimous in this period when it was collected. That kind of witness will change dramatically in the 1960s for other reasons. But this is the oral testimony of generations from the time of his death to 1960. We need to pay attention to that as impacting the controversy.

### Serra as Missionary Disciple

These are Pope Francis’ descriptions of what it means to be a missionary disciple:

“A disciple of Christ knows that the Lord has loved us first. A disciple of Christ is moved by endless desire to show mercy. A disciple of Christ gets involved by word and deed in people’s lives. A disciple of Christ is supportive and stands by people at every step of the way. A disciple of Christ is faithful, however imperfect or incomplete the work. A disciple of Christ is always concerned with the fruit of actions in a particular situation – ‘How can I bring a little bit more good here?’ And a disciple of Christ is filled with joy.”

Serra is canonized because I think he represents a disciple of Christ in all of those dimensions. He is an exemplar for the Church, for us, of holiness. And this is how the pope describes it in *Evangelii Gaudium*. There’s a vision here of our evangelizing activity and our work as Friars Minor, or priests, or Serrans.

### The Franciscan Roots of Serra’s Spirituality

From his Franciscan tradition, Serra inherits first the biblical and covenantal understanding of who God is. This is very important. What is our image of God? We can have an image of God as a judge. We emphasize God’s justice, justice in sorting out the world. Serra will interpret justice as God being just to oneself. This is the Franciscan tradition. God’s just to God’s goodness. God is just when God acts with integrity toward God’s own mercy. God is just to God’s very self when God remains faithful, even in the midst of sin. So, justice has a spiritual, theological content from his point of view. And this is the biblical and covenantal tradition that talks about the mercy, the graciousness, the justice, the gentleness of God.

We can also see God as an accountant, and there are many other images that are out there, marking down us, and all the things we do wrong. That would certainly keep God busy, but that’s not the way Serra sees God.

We’re fortunate to now have four sermons delivered by Serra in Mallorca in the middle of a famine. Ten thousand people died in the city of famine and plague in 1744, I believe. Serra’s four sermons are a commentary on Psalm 34: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” So these sermons were pronounced to people in the midst of great suffering. In them, he describes the rungs of the ladder that leads to God.

The first rung of the ladder: *God is gentle in the words God calls us to life*. He created them. That’s the first word of God: “I create you out of nothing.” Gives you a personality, a soul, a spirit. Whether you’re a Christian or a non-Christian, you’re a creature of God. And God is so merciful and gentle as to allow us to be. God is gentle in his call. He also uses the example of Jesus calling forth Lazarus: “Come forth, Lazarus!” God is gentle and merciful in calling Lazarus to eternal life and giving him risen life.

From the beginning to the end, he has an experience of God as gentle, merciful, a gift-giver. “God is most liberal,” as the Franciscan tradition would say. *God is gentle in the law God orders us to observe*. He does a great meditation there on the Torah and the Beatitudes, and the comment of Jesus, “My yoke is easy and my burden light. Come follow me.” His image of God is that of a loving parent, father and mother. We’ll see this come through very clearly: raising up children to the fullness of their life.

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God, in giving us the Law, teaches us what it means to be human, what it means to be alive, what it means to be whole. *God is gentle in the sufferings God sends us.* And he uses here the Psalm quotation: “With your rod and your staff you comfort me.” The Lord disciplines those whom he loves.

He describes God as a doctor. The doctor diagnoses the problem with difficulty and sometimes has to excise the vice. And the sufferings that are given to people are given to discipline them into God’s goodness and health. So he sees suffering as gifts for our health. A very difficult concept but definitely very spiritual.

*God is gentle in his pardoning.* Here he describes the difference between the civil system in terms of a capital crime and the Gospel system. He quotes Psalm 103: “As the father has compassion on his children, so we have compassion on each other. God has compassion on us... God knows of what we are made.” And what are we made of? Dust. What do you expect from dust? What does God expect from dust? But God fills dust with God’s spirit. God knows that of which we are made. You know that of which your children are made. You know what I’m made of and what you’re made of. And yet God has blessed us with goodness and mercy and called us into being, dust creatures that we are.

*God is gentle in the delights of the glory which God rewards us.* Here he describes “the eternal weight of glory and risen life.” It’s an image of God that suffuses his missionary activity.

### **The Franciscan Masters**

Serra was trained by the Franciscan masters. This is all over his writings. He was educated both as a novice and in theology at the university in Palma, where in the cathedral are the bones of Ramon Llull. Ramon Llull was a 13th-century layman, completely dedicated to missionary activity, training particularly people in languages. He was a nobleman who hired a Muslim slave to teach him Arabic, which he used in his work to convert the Muslims in Tunis and to spread the Christian message; he realized he had to learn their language, to be with them and to accompany them.

Llull wrote a very famous spiritual book called *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*. The lover is Jesus and the lover was asked, “What is your wealth?” The lover replies, “The poverty I bear for my beloved.” In other words, love generates the Lord’s embrace of the poor human condition.

“And what is your rest?”

“The suffering I endure for love’s sake.” It’s like a mother caring for her child. You don’t really weigh the sacrifice; it’s irrelevant. You look at the motivation of getting up in the middle of the night, which is love, care, concern,

compassion. It’s as simple as that.

“And who is your doctor?”

“The trust I have in our beloved.”

In other words, Jesus on the cross will go to any extent to love you and me, to cure us of our ills, to take all of our sins unto himself and forgive them. The action of Jesus on the cross is an action of love and compassion.

“And who is your teacher?”

And the beloved answers, “The signs which created beings give of his beloved.”

Look around. Look at creation. Look at the beautiful trees and the flowers. Look at the weather, the rain that we have now in California. We need water. It’s provided. These are signs of God’s bountifulness.

Like *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved*, he sees his relationship with God in terms of a personal dialogue. And he reads Saint Bonaventure very carefully:

“All that is needed,” he writes to one of his friars, “is to read a bit from San Bonaventura’s book or library on the crucified Christ.” Now, Bonaventure imagines Jesus on the cross as Augustine imagines it – as a book. Read what the book says. The book says, “I love you.” The book says, “I forgive you.” The book says, “I love you unto the end.” The book says, “You’re my friend.” Greater love than this no one has. “I give up my life for my friend.” This is the Gospel he wants to give to the Native Americans.

Also, Serra celebrates from Bonaventure the presence of God in all things. The following is an excerpt from his diary on June 2, 1769:

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“It seems that the thorns and rocks of California have disappeared, since these enormous mountains are almost entirely of pure soil. But there are flowers in abundance, and beautiful ones, as I have already mentioned. Nothing should be wanting in that direction. When we came to our stopping place we met the queen of the flowers, the rose of castile.”

So we imagine him sitting down at night, with a candle, writing in his diary. Now, this is a fellow who has walked all day; he’s tired, and wonders, where is God’s consolation? In a rose.

“While I write this, I have in front of me a cutting from a rose tree with three roses in full bloom, others opening out, and more than six unpetaled. Blessed is he who created them.” For you. For me. For little Junípero as he goes along the way, to provide for him a little sweetness, a little consolation.

### Friars Birthing the Church

Serra writes to the Viceroy Teodoro de Croix on August 22, 1778, “In reference to the care we take of our converts, let me tell you: they are our children, for none except we has birthed them in Christ. The result is, we look upon them as a father looks upon his family. We shower all our love and care upon them.”

The father does discipline his children, but the father only gives discipline out of love. And how is a father? Protective. Gentle. Merciful. Just towards the object of his love. This is his image of God.

He writes to his fellow Franciscan missionary Fermín Lasuén: “But in the midst of all my troubles, I am happy, because children are born amidst pain.” Now he’s describing himself as a mother. “We all have our share of hardships. In reference to these missions it is true to say the wails of mothers” – that’s the friars – “went up to heaven as their children were being offered in sacrifice.” It means, here are some more children for God. Here are some more disciples of Christ as we baptize them or confirm them. The image is that of a giver inviting people into life. “‘Be consoled, be consoled,’ says the Lord our God.”

And then even in suffering, this is his advice in 1778 to Father Figuer, one of the friars who’s afraid he’s going to be killed. “You should not feel upset on account

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of the present difficulties. They are sources of merit in the sight of our God. You might even call them presents or tokens. Whom the Lord loves, he chastises. This is the lot that befalls the elect. It’s the money with which heaven is bought. Man is only able to do a little bit in his life. In addition, while dealing with your own poverty, you earned a wealth of merits when you assisted those poor, starving people who were in dire need of food. Your actions distinguish you from others who have full granaries. Our Lord said to the widow who came to the well and tossed in two small copper coins that were worth a penny, ‘Whatever situation you are in, the small offering is rewarded

way beyond its merit.’ It’s like the little cup of water given to the poor. And what does that receive? ‘Come, enter into the joy of your master. Come, re-

ceive the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning. Never be afraid of small actions done out of charity. They receive the complete generosity and liberality of God.’”

This kind of vision of life is what Serra brought to the California missions. He found himself in this situation of conflict, and yet he moved forward because of faith, because of his commitment to action out of the mercy and gentleness of God. This is what moved him. He’s trained in a very profound spiritual, theological, and social tradition in the Church. He does not mind bearing poverty for those he loves. He loves the Native Americans and they testify that they love him. It’s really as simple as that.

If we want to know what moved Serra, the Franciscan tradition moved him. It’s a distinct spiritual and theological tradition in the Church. It’s a missionary tradition, and these are its component parts, as outlined in *Evangelii Gaudium* 24:

We know that the Lord has loved us first. We’re moved by endless desire to show mercy. We get involved by word and deed in people’s lives. We’re supportive in standing by people every step of the way. We’re faithful, however imperfect or incomplete our work. We’re always concerned with the fruit of actions, small or great, in any given situation. We are filled with joy.” Not a bad profile for today’s world and the one in which we live. ☪

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