

Father Junipero Serra's historic role

The Rev. Noel Francis Moholy, OFM, STD, speaks on Serra and the papal encyclicals, Populorum Progressio and Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, to a Schiller Institute conference.

The following speech was delivered by Father Moholy on March 27 in Cologne, West Germany, at the Schiller Institute's conference on a New World Economic Order.

The text that has been running through my mind during these deliberations is found in the Book of Psalms: "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who work; Unless the Lord guard the city, they watch in vain who tend the gates."

I imagine that your perusal of *Populorum Progressio* and of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* is quite akin to mine. So many conditions are presented, so many problems are accumulated, that you wonder how we can find a solution. You are perplexed, above all, when you point the question to yourself and say, "What can I do?"

I've been invited to show you what one man did, and the repercussions it had and still exerts on world history. Father Junipero Serra was a very happy Majorcan, professor of Sacred Theology, in the Balearic Islands off the coast of Spain. In the height of his fame at home, he suddenly decided to abandon all and to heed Christ's special invitation to go and preach the Gospel to those less blessed. And in the course of his activity in both Mexico and what is the territorial United States at present, he attained the height of sanctity. So much so, that the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of Saints is moving his cause, and John Paul II himself has approved the beatification, and from here I go to Rome to see if we can settle a date, which very likely may be Nov. 24, 1988, the 275th anniversary of his birth.

But in fulfilling his activity, he left an impact on Western history that illustrates the conflicts that have been emphasized here.

He was an unlikely candidate to perform such a task. In stature, he was five feet, two inches. Almost a midget. But his frame housed a strong heart. He was not a robust man. He was weak of health congenitally, and on top of that, in his very first journey to the New World, he made a pilgrimage on foot from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. In the course of that journey, his leg became infected, and for the rest of his life, it was a constant burden, but he never permitted it to become a hindrance.

In my dwelling with him now for some 35 to 40 years, the question I have asked myself most frequently is, "Why

did he ever stay in California?" They made his life all but unbearable, and he had three perfectly good and gentlemanly excuses to absent himself. He could have pleaded old age. He was 54 years old when he arrived in the area we now call the state of California. That was certainly not a young man in those days, and even in this day and age, we would hardly appoint a man of that age to be a pioneering missionary to enter a new territory. He could have pleaded that he had served his time. Missionaries in those days in Spain volunteered for a period of 10 years, and he had served 20 already in Mexico with distinction. He could have retired to Mexico or back to his native Majorca with dignity. He could have pleaded his poor health, and it certainly would have been considered valid.

But when he departed his homeland, which he loved dearly, he told his aging parents, "If you realized the dignity of the vocation upon which I am embarking, if you appreciate what the office of Apostolic Missionary is, you would urge me always to go forward, never to turn back. *Siempre adelante nunca atrás.*" That guided him for the rest of his life. He was a bulldog. Once he put his teeth to something, he clung to it. He would never say quit. He would never give up. In doing his duty as he saw it for God and his Church, he was performing a tremendous task and making a significant contribution and accomplishment for what we know as the Western world.

In 1769, when the California venture was launched, Spain was mistress of the largest empire in world history. She needed another few hundred miles as much as Russia needs another inch of territory. But California was the flank of her empire. She had laid claim to it 50 years after the discovery of America. In 1542 Juan Rodríguez Carrillo, standing under the Spanish flag, sailed along the coast of California, naming a few of the central points, and claiming it for the flag of Spain. But for some 200 years, it lay unattended. Spain had made a couple of exploratory sea voyages—nothing overland—and the coast of California was hardly touched. Suddenly, there appeared in Mexico the Inspector General from the King of Spain, Carlos III. Don José de Galvez was a Spaniard with vision and with all the information of the court of Spain. And to that court in Madrid had been coming reports from St. Petersburg that Russia was stalking across the top of the world and was looking for fur bases along the Pacific

slope.

Spain suddenly awakened and realized that her empire could be in jeopardy from this new enemy. It was bad enough to suffer from the piracy of the British, but now to have the Russian bear encroach could be serious. José de Galvez most likely had personal information, as well, because the ambassador in the court of St. Petersburg was his brother. He saw the opportunity to place his name in history by pushing for the colonization of California.

When he looked over the list of missionaries available to him, he selected Padre Junipero Serra despite the infirmities I mentioned, because he knew here he had a man who was a fighter and who would never give up. After they met personally in Baja California to lay the initial plans, he knew he had a winner. We look back now and acclaim this as a tremendous accomplishment, positively. But in the concrete, in the daily living, it was hard work, and it was difficult.

Four expeditions

Four expeditions were launched. Two came overland from Baja California, two came by sea, and they were to rendezvous at the present city of San Diego. When José Galvez and Junipero Serra sat down and plotted the occupation, they took the old maps and on those maps, they had the port of San Diego identified and the Bay of Monterey. So they said, "We'll put a mission in each one of those two places and one in between, roughly half way." When they rendezvoused at San Diego, what was supposed to be a day of joy and happiness was one of sadness. For all but one had died on one of the ships, and the rest were lying on the shore sick of the curse of those days for mariners—sick of the scurvy. The military commandant of the expedition went on to rediscover the Bay of Monterey in northern California, and he left Serra in the south to establish the first mission at San Diego. This was in July of 1769. When Portola [the military commandant] returned at the end of the year, he discovered that the supply ship had failed to come into San Diego from lower California. He was terrified. He surveyed the situation, and saw how low the provisions were, and he said, "The only thing left to do is to return to Mexico." And Serra said, "No! If you all go back, I shall stay here." Then the little fighter proposed to the commandant, "Let us pray to St. Joseph, to whom we entrusted this expedition, and see if he can bring the supply ship in." For nine days, the colony prayed. On the ninth day, the feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1770, Father Junipero Serra celebrated High Mass, he preached, and after the services, he went up on what we call Presidio Hill overlooking San Diego Bay, and there he prayed all day. Down below, the colonists were packing their things, because the next day they were to leave to return to Mexico. At three in the afternoon—we have the exact hour—they espied the sail of the *San Antonio* coming around the silver strand of San Diego, and immediately the climate changed, the atmosphere changed. California was saved—saved through the prayerful intervention of a little man known as



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its apostle, and the providential dispositions of a benign Creator who brought the vessel in.

During those first five years of occupation, the colony literally hung by a thread. At any time it could have been broken. It wouldn't have taken much for Spain to withdraw. But that is not taking into consideration the dynamo who was behind this. That little padre wouldn't give up. Here was the fulfillment of his life's dream, to be the first to penetrate a wilderness to bring the culture of Europe encasing the faith for which he'd give his life. He would not let it slip through his fingers. That dominated his whole life.

On the way up from Baja California to San Diego, he fell to the ground, unable to stand or to sit. When the military commandant came back and saw the condition of his leg—they feared it was cancerous—he said, "Padre, the only solution is to go back to Mission San Fernando, but you can't go on." And Serra said, "No! If I die on the road, I am going!" He called the veterinarian. He said, "What do you do when a mule has a bad leg." He said, "Father, I am not a physician. I am out here to take care of animals." Serra said, "What do you do to take care of a jackass?" He said, "I make a poultice." "Make a poultice and put it on my leg." Apparently it had a salutary effect, for the next morning he was able to stand for Mass and then to continue on to California.

Historians agree that had he given up, Spain would have given up, and California's history would have been changed. Now, that may seem just like a small country or land mass, but look at the implication for the empire. When Spain was speaking of the occupation of California, she was looking as far north as Alaska. During Serra's lifetime, a naval expedition sailed to Alaska and plotted spots where missions would likely be established. Serra wrote in one place, "There the

crosses stand. But there's no one to preach the Gospel to these poor people." When the Spaniards first beheld the wonder of San Francisco Bay, the largest landlocked harbor in the world, they went into ecstasy, and their writings describe it as a God-given wonder. One of the diarists said, "I think that all the ships of my king could be put in here. Wait a minute. I think that all the ships of the world could be housed in this harbor." When Serra beheld it, his reaction was, "If we are to go further, we'll have to take to boats." He envisioned missions as far north as Alaska, following his motto of "Always go forward, and never turn back."

Now, the significant event in American history is that the same Gospel and principles of civilization founded on the natural law and on God's revelation was being preached on the West Coast and on the East Coast. The way American history is usually written, and we had to learn it in school, was that we out in the West (I am a native of San Francisco) were sitting out there in teepees or something, waiting for the Easterners to come West and establish Congregational churches. Actually, the same idea—that man has his rights from the Creator—was being established on both coasts. It was going on during the same years. In the very year the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia, Serra was founding three missions, and doing the same thing they were doing on the East Coast, as far as the basic philosophy of life was concerned.

How did he go about it? Did he simply gather the natives and start reading a catechism to them, or something like that? No. They established a small colony, a basic habitation for the padres and soldiers. The Spanish method of colonization was a mere handful of soldiers penetrating the wilderness, and they relied on the padres to Christianize the Indians and thereby to win them simultaneously to Christ and to Spain. California was the most populous area of the United States in those days, as it is now. The estimates of the native population when Serra arrived is anything from a half million to a million inhabitants. They were attracted there because of the beautiful climate, and they didn't have to work. They are described by ethnologists and anthropologists, despite any aspersions on those sciences, as a "gathering and picking" people. They waited for the food to drop from the trees. They had a semblance of agriculture here or there, but nothing that we would call established farming.

No forced conversions

Serra moved into that area and, it may be difficult for you to believe, but he was in California two years before he baptized his first Indian. One family did bring in an infant in San Diego and just as he was ready to pour the saving waters over the brow of the little tot, the family panicked and ran off with the baby. He forbade the soldiers to pursue them. He said, "No, they'll come back. They'll come to us." Similarly, as he moved up the coast, he was most careful. "First," he said, "We must secure the permission of these people. Go to

Missions founded by Serra



their chief and ask for permission to build on their land. Explain what we are doing, that we come in peace. We come to bring them blessing." There was no enforced Christianization of any kind. I told you the population of California was estimated at anything from a half-million to a million. At the height of the mission period, only 30,000 were housed simultaneously in the missions. So there was no forced conversion. . . . In Serra's time, over 6,000 were baptized, and Serra personally brought over 5,000 of them to supernatural maturity in the Sacrament of Confirmation—to Christianize these people, to bring them the truth of the Gospel, and above all the riches of God's blessing in faith, hope, and charity, the supernatural life of the soul.

The soul is housed in a human body. And Serra was aghast when he first beheld them in the same mode of clothing they enjoyed in paradise without the fig leaves. He was hor-

rified that the males were running around like Adam. The females, he said, at least had the semblance of a skirt. So, literally, they had to start from scratch. They clothed these people, they fed them, they taught them agriculture, and at the height of the mission period they were instructing them in 53 trades. The idea of the mission system was to take the children of the family, house them at the mission—boys and girls in separate wings—and bring them together for religious services, for their meals, and then for their various occupations. The males would be taught agriculture and the 53 trades I mentioned. The girls and ladies would be taught weaving and other occupations and activities that appeal to the female sex, except to the modern feminists. As the children matured, and boy spotted girl and they got that glint in their eye, then they would come to the padre and asked to be married. The new couple would then be placed in a village adjacent to the mission, and there they would rear their children and bring them to the padres for further instruction and development.

This was the mode of occupation and the exemplification of *Populorum Progressio*. It is in anticipation of what both pontiffs had in mind—Paul VI and John Paul II—which illustrates the continuity of the Church's doctrine, and now, more maturely developed to fit our modern age. Padre Junipero Serra will be beatified, and eventually canonized, placed on the altars as our model, as our inspiration. He is amazingly relevant to our day and age. I can picture him, if he came back today, to be amazed at the size of our cities, at the so-called advance of our material accomplishments; he would be overwhelmed by the traffic on the freeways when it wasn't at a standstill, as it usually is in Los Angeles now. But I can see him rolling up his sleeves and saying, "Let's go to work." The year before he died, he was making his final tour of the missions where his faculty administering the Sacrament of Confirmation was of 10 years' duration. He was ready to expire that summer. So he decided to make a final tour of the missions, and the logical way to do that was to sail to San Diego, to avoid the overland trip, and then trek up overland on foot and on mule, visiting each mission and attending to the needs of the flock. When he looked at the map and realized the distance to be covered, he was aware of his weak leg, and conscious that he was not getting any younger, he wrote to Father Lausuen in San Diego and said, "I wish I could fly." So he would fit right at home in our new world, using what he had at hand.

But he would take us back to the same basic truths of which we are reminding ourselves here. To the same basic facts, the same basic realities the Holy Fathers are emphasizing, which goes back already to Christ. The point that Serra and I would remind you of right now is Christ's message: "Without me, you do nothing." We do more than remind you of what St. Paul says. We present to you Father Junipero Serra as exemplifying the reassurance, "I can do all things," but humbly, "in Him who strengthens me."

Father Serra and *Populorum Progressio*

by Nicholas F. Benton

Pope John Paul II's expected beatification of Father Junipero Serra (1713-85), the founder of the California missions, is not merely in recognition of the achievements of a past era, but confirms directly the urgent task confronting the nations of our planet today to conquer hunger and tyranny, and establish a just, new world economic order as outlined by Pope Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (*On the Development of Peoples*).

Paul VI may well have been thinking of Father Serra when he wrote *Populorum Progressio*. There is no better model for the kind of just and compassionate, development-oriented relationship between developed and undeveloped nations, between north and south, which Paul VI called for in his encyclical, than Serra and his great enterprise for the development of California.

Paul VI wrote, "The Catholic church has never failed to promote the human progress of peoples in whom she planted the Christian faith. Together with churches, the missionaries saw to the building of hospitals, infirmaries, schools, and universities in the region. And when they taught the native population the ways of getting the greatest advantage from their natural resources, they thereby often protected them against the greediness of foreigners" (*Populorum Progressio*, Paragraph 12).

He added, "The point at issue is the establishment of a human society in which everyone, regardless of race, religion or nationality, can live a truly human life free from bondage imposed on men and the forces of nature not sufficiently mastered" (*Populorum Progressio*, Paragraph 47), and admonished that "all men of good will who are aware that peace cannot be attained except through the development of civilization and increased resources" to act, urging, among other things, that "journalists take pains to bring to our attention both the projects for mutual assistance and the deplorable spectacle of so many miseries from which men readily turn away that their peace may not be disturbed" (*Populorum Progressio*, Paragraph 83).

The San Blas plan

Four steps were laid out in a meeting at San Blas, Mexico, in 1769, prior to the launching of Serra's mission. Planning to set foot on land no Spaniard had touched in almost 200 years, but confronted with the threat of Russian expansionism into the region, Father Serra and the military expedition