Junípero Serra's brutal story in spotlight as pope prepares for canonisation

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Many have condemned decision to elevate 18th-century missionary to sainthood after violence suffered by Native Americans he was said to be protecting

Generations of American schoolchildren have been taught to think of Father Junípero Serra as California’s benevolent founding father, a humble Franciscan monk who left a life of comfort and plenty on the island of Mallorca to travel to the farthest reaches of the New World and protect the natives from the worst abuses of the Spanish imperial army. Under Serra’s leadership, tens of thousands of Native Americans across Alta California, as the region was then known, were absorbed into Catholic missions – places said by one particularly rapturous myth-maker in the 19th century to be filled with “song, laughter, good food, beautiful languor, and mystical adoration of the Christ”.

What this rosy-eyed view omits is that these natives were brutalized – beaten, pressed into forced labour and infected with diseases to which they had no resistance – and the attempt to integrate them into the empire was a miserable failure. The journalist and historian Carey McWilliams wrote almost 70 years ago the missions could be better conceived as “a series of picturesque charnel houses”.

A statue of Junípero Serra stands outside the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel in San Gabriel, California. Photograph: Mario Anzuoni/Reuters
Little wonder, then, that Pope Francis’s decision to elevate Serra to sainthood during his visit to Washington this week has revived longstanding controversies and enraged representatives of California’s last surviving Native American populations. There have been protests outside some of California’s most heavily visited Missions, petitions, open letters written both to the pope and to California’s political leaders, and even an attempt by members of the state legislature to have Serra replaced as one of California’s two representative figures in Washington’s National Statuary Hall. Natives travelled to California and Washington this week to protest against Serra’s elevation in person.

Opponents point out that, from the time Serra arrived in 1769, the native population was ravaged by European diseases, including syphilis spread by marauding Spanish soldiers. Indians brought into the missions were not allowed to leave, and if they tried they were shackled and severely beaten.

They were used as forced labour to build out the Mission’s farming projects. They were fed atrociously, separated from close family members and packed into tight living quarters that often became miasmas of disease and death.

When the Native Americans rebelled, which they did on at least two occasions, their rebellions were put down in brutal fashion. When Native American women were caught trying to abort babies conceived through rape, the mission fathers had them beaten for days on end, clamped them in irons, had their heads shaved and forced them to stand at the church altar every Sunday carrying a painted wooden child in their arms.

Passions are riding high on both sides. While Serra’s critics say he was responsible for the near-eradication of California’s native peoples, the state's governor, Jerry Brown, has defended him as “a very courageous man”, an innovator and a pioneer, and vowed that his statue will stay in Washington “until the end of time”.

In many ways, the issue is reminiscent of the Vatican’s campaign a few years ago to canonise Pius XII, the wartime pope accused in many quarters of failing to stand up to the Nazis and helping in their rise to power, but defended in others as a holy man who did his part to save many hundreds of thousands of Jews.

The push to canonise Pius XII (now on hold) came in the wake of a 1998 papal document that sought to atone for the church’s silence in the face of the Holocaust. Likewise, Serra’s sainthood follows an apology issued by Pope Francis in Bolivia this summer for the “grave sins … committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God”.

That, however, has only further raised the hackles of Serra critics, who say the apology means nothing if the Vatican simultaneously seeks to canonise a person exemplifying the actions for which the apology was issued. “Apologies that aren’t followed by a change of behaviour, in general, don’t carry a lot of weight,” Deborah Miranda of Washington and Lee University, who is of California Native American descent, said in a recent magazine interview.

Even mainstream Catholics have been surprised that Pope Francis has championed Serra without going through the usual four-step review process, including verification of two miracles. Serra has been credited with only one.

The cause of his sainthood, which was first proposed in 1930, was long ago assumed to have stalled because of the controversies surrounding his legacy.

But Francis, as the first Latin American pope, has an obvious interest in creating a role model for Latinos in the United States and the rest of the American continent – an interest echoed by the state of California, which can now look forward to a global wave of Serra-related
tourism. The pope also appears to have an interesting theological take on Serra’s imperfections. Kevin Starr, widely regarded as California’s pre-eminent state historian, summarised the Vatican’s view this way: “Saints do not have to be perfect. Nobody is perfect. Sanctity is just another mode of imperfection.”

In other words, it is enough to state that the good outweighs the bad. José Gómez, the first Latino archbishop of Los Angeles and an enthusiastic Serra champion, wrote recently: “Whatever human faults he may have had and whatever mistakes he may have made, there is no questioning that he lived a life of sacrifice and self-denial.”

Gómez also argued that we cannot judge 18th-century behaviour by 21st-century standards – a form of historical relativism that the Serra critics find particularly galling. John Cornwell, a British journalist turned academic who has written extensively about the Vatican, including an acclaimed book about Pius XII, said the argument also clouded the important question of whether Serra was an appropriate exemplar for today’s faithful. “For those who argue that we should not judge the values of the past by those of the present,” Cornwell told the Guardian, “one could, and should, object that it’s important to learn the lessons of history.”

To Native Americans like Valentin Lopez, the chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band based in Sacramento, those lessons are not complicated. Serra, in his view, was part of a colonial enterprise whose goal was the complete subjugation of California’s native peoples. The mission system he set up was based on coercion, punishment and indifference to Indian suffering, against which his expressions of piety were no more than window-dressing. “It’s amazing to me this is even a debate,” Lopez told the Guardian. “There is no debate – it’s like debating the pros and cons of the genocide of the Jewish people in world war two. The only reason this is not treated as a black and white issue is because of the lies that the church and the state of California have perpetuated from the time of the missions.”

Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 bestselling novel Ramona set the tone for a mythologised history of the Missions, giving the impression Spanish colonialism had been an idyll for settlers and Native Americans alike and that the natives only suffered after the gringos began arriving. Even the most ardent Catholic historians now accept this is flat-out wrong.

A flurry of recent Serra scholarship, however, suggests the politics of the Spanish conquest were complicated. Missions were established with much greater success and lesser suffering in other parts of the American continent – particularly by the Jesuits. Serra’s mandate only arose because the Vatican temporarily disbanded the Jesuits in 1767, and many of the mistakes he and the Franciscans made were the result of inexperience, according to Professor Starr. “The perspective of Franciscans and Dominicans of that era was: God will punish us for the way we treat the Indians, so we’ve got to protect them as some kind of atonement,” Starr told the Guardian. “Serra knew he couldn’t keep California a Franciscan mission protectorate forever. He hoped that by the time Spaniards came in large numbers, Native Americans would be educated and competent to deal with it. That was the dream, but the dream never came true.”

The biggest philosophical divide among serious historians is whether Serra’s initiative was worth undertaking in the first place. Catholic scholars – including Professor Starr – tend to take an indulgent view of the church’s evangelizing mission, while Native American advocates like Lopez view the imposition of Catholicism as a violation of the Indians’ longstanding
spiritual traditions, just as the Spanish conquest disrupted and violated their way of life more generally.

The Vatican would like to believe that Serra and the missionaries were somehow separate from the Spanish colonial enterprise, and that the army’s abuses should not in any way be laid at Serra’s door. Pope Francis said in May that Serra was one of a generation of missionaries “who … defended the indigenous peoples against abuses by the colonisers”.

Most historians, however, dismiss that interpretation as fanciful. While it’s true that Serra was often at odds with military commanders in the region, he travelled to the New World at the behest and direction of the same Spanish crown in command of the army. He couldn’t be against the colonisers, because he was one himself.

“The church and the army were partners,” Lopez said. “Junípero Serra’s own handwriting details the cruelties. His policy was to enslave the Indians – he didn’t let them leave the missions. You can’t blame that on Spanish soldiers.”

Out of deference to the papal visit, the push to have Serra’s statue in Washington replaced with the late astronaut Sally Ride – championed by LGBT advocacy groups as well as fans of space exploration – has been deferred until after Francis is back in Rome. But the sponsors of the measure, including a Latino state senator from Los Angeles and the speaker of the state assembly, have vowed to reintroduce it thereafter – paving the way for yet more showdowns over Serra in the foreseeable future.
The pope intends to declare Father Junipero Serra a saint at a Mass celebrated at the National Shrine in Washington on Sept 23 during his U.S. visit. The Franciscan missionary built a series of missions along the Pacific coast in the latter 18th century, in what is now California, to spread the faith among Native Americans there. Without addressing specific accusations, Francis praised Serra’s missionary zeal and said the priest defended the indigenous peoples against abuses by the colonizers.

He was one of the founding fathers of the United States, a saintly example of the Church’s universality and special patron of the Hispanic people of the country, the Argentine-born pope said in the homily at a Mass in Rome’s Pontifical North American College. A statue of Junípero Serra stands outside the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel in San Gabriel, California. Photograph: Mario Anzuoni/Reuters. Andrew Gumbel in Los Angeles. Under Serra’s leadership, tens of thousands of Native Americans across Alta California, as the region was then known, were absorbed into Catholic missions places said by one particularly rapturous mythmaker in the 19th century to be filled with song, laughter, good food, beautiful languor, and mystical adoration of the Christ. What this rosy-eyed view omits is that these natives were brutalized beaten, pressed into forced labour and infected with diseases to which they had no resistance and the attempt to integrate them into the empire was a miserable failure.