



September 27, 2015

Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

"...Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!"

Numbers 11:29

Dear Friends;

Today's readings remind us that we share in the work of proclaiming the reign of God. The Spirit of God is not contained by us alone. This week Pope Francis canonized Padre Serra the first Hispanic saint of North America, who has been called the Apostle of California. He spent a major part of his life bringing Christ to the native peoples in the New World.

I want to speak about Serra today. There is a lot of conflict and much misinformation. One article seemed to lay the blame for all the evil that happened to native Californians on him. This is an unjust and unfair assessment. Much of what is blamed on Serra and the Spanish was actually committed during the American period.

Junípero was born in 1713 on Mallorca, an island of the east coast of Spain. He was given the name of Miquel Joseph Serre (in the Mallorcan language). He grew up in poverty in the town of Petra where he was educated by the Franciscans. When he became a Franciscan he took the name Junípero, after a companion of St Francis. Like many of the friars of his time he was a strict disciplinarian and practiced self-mortification. He was an accomplished academic and rose to the chair of theology at the Lullian University of Mallorca.

At middle age he decides he has a calling to do missionary work. And he arrived in Mexico in 1749. On his walk from Veracruz to Mexico City he was bitten by a venomous spider that caused him leg pain for the rest of his life. Before his mission to California he worked for eighteen years among the Pames Indians in the Sierra Gorda, Mexico and missionary trips almost as far south as the Yucatan. In 1768 he was sent to Baja California and the following year to Alta California (modern day State of California). For the next fifteen years he founded nine of the twenty-one missions along the Pacific coast. He was eager to win souls over for Christ. He personally baptized or confirmed six thousand natives. He died at Carmel Mission in 1784. It was recorded that six hundred Natives wept at his funeral and piled wild flowers on his funeral bier.

One of the unfounded charges against Serra and the missions is that they perpetuated genocide. This is absurd. The whole point of the missions was to integrate the native population as Christians and citizens of the Spanish Empire. For Serra, the importance of baptism of the Indians was, first, they were made brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Secondly, it bestowed on them civil rights. If we look at the Spanish colonial period numerous Indigenous people intermarried with the Spanish. These are the Mestizos that are all around California and Latin America. The native population was incorporated not eliminated. This was unthinkable in the Anglo-American colonies.

Under Spain and Mexico the Native California population (pre European contact 300,000) was reduced by 33 percent mostly by epidemics. The Natives had no resistance to European diseases. This terrible tragedy was exacerbated by close contact in the mission settlements. But there were no large massacres of the natives in Spanish California as there were in Anglo-America. Under American rule beginning in 1848 (long after the missions were in ruins) the loss of Native Californians was devastating. The first American governor of California stated the goal "It is inevitable that the Indian must go." Historian Gregory Orfalea states that 80 percent of the surviving Indigenous Californians were wiped out in the American period not by disease but by murder. This left only 30,000 by 1870.

The canonization of Padre Serra comes as the Hispanic population is exploding in North America. By making Serra a saint, Pope Francis is not erasing the memory of the Natives but acknowledging it. Most of these Hispanics are Mestizos, a blend of the Indigenous and Hispanic peoples. In an era of anti-Hispanic immigration the pope reminds us who was here first not only physically but also culturally and spiritually. Our calling as Christians is to be incorporated together, with all our rich diversity, into the one body of Christ, a people filled with the Spirit of God.

Peace,

Fr. Ron

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