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CHAPTER 21

Junípero Serra: From Mallorcan Preacher and Teacher to California Missionary

Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz

As the founder and first president of the mission system in the Spanish province of Alta California, Junípero Serra is closely identified with California. Statues of him can be found at each of California’s twenty-one missions and in places as diverse as Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and in front of the Ventura Courthouse. His name is attached to a mountain peak, various schools, and countless streets and thoroughfares. For instance, if one drives to San Francisco from the south, one fairly direct route to the city will take the traveler on Interstate Highway 280, formally named the Junípero Serra Freeway. Upon arriving in the city, one way to get downtown is via Junípero Serra Boulevard. Such “name branding” would imply that Serra lived his entire life in California, but in reality he spent only the last quarter of his life there. Indeed, he lived in the Americas for only half of his seventy years. His first thirty-five years were spent on the largest of the Balearic Islands, Mallorca. Serra lived the first fifteen years of his life in the small village of Petra on the island’s western side. He entered the Franciscan Order at the age of sixteen and then for almost two decades he resided in an academic environment, first as a student, and then as an eminent teacher and preacher. In this essay we consider how the lesser-known first half of his life influenced the very public and much-studied fifteen years he later spent in Alta California.

Serra’s desire to become a missionary originated in Mallorca but there is no record of his having come into contact with any Franciscan who had been a missionary in America before he volunteered to leave his native island. The values that led him abroad were ones he had acquired at home. There is every indication that these values persisted during the nineteen years he spent in the Americas before he set foot in Alta California in 1769. After he arrived at the
Colegio de San Fernando in Mexico City on January 1, 1750, he did not undergo extensive training in New World missionary methods and procedures. The Colegio had undertaken the recruiting expedition to Spain in which Serra had enlisted because it was desperately short of manpower and needed fresh men to staff its missions in the Sierra Gorda. Scarcely six months after his arrival, Serra was out in the field. He spent the next eight years ministering to already-evangelized native communities in the Sierra Gorda. For another eight years he was engaged in domestic missions to already-evangelized Spanish-speaking communities in various parts of New Spain, such as Oaxaca. He never seems to have immersed himself in the rich body of missionary writings, such as memoirs, handbooks, or analyses of indigenous religions that the Franciscans and other religious orders had produced in the New World since the middle of the sixteenth century. Indeed, his voluminous writings are noticeable for the relative infrequency with which they cite such material. We believe that the core of Serra’s basic missionary methods largely stemmed from his experiences in the first half of his life, as a Mallorcan villager who became a highly successful priest and academic.1

There were at least three major ways in which his Mallorcan background influenced the manner in which Serra organized his missionary enterprise in California.2 First, he was born in 1713, the year of the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of Spanish Succession and formalized the Bourbon presence on the Spanish throne. Like many other areas of Spain that had ties to Aragon, Mallorca, which had favored the Habsburgs, was on the losing side of that conflict. The Bourbon army took forcible possession of the island shortly after the end of the war and it maintained a strong and continuous presence there for decades after that. In the 1720s soldiers looking for resisters invaded churches, and in the late 1740s the army rounded up a number of young men in the cap-

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1 On the training programs for future missionaries in the Apostolic Colleges of New Spain, see David Rex Galindo, “Propaganda Fide: Training Franciscan Missionaries in New Spain” (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 2010). Serra was aware of the great missionary writings and had access to them. In 1779, he loaned Governor Neve a copy of Torquemada’s Monarquia Indiana. See Serra to Felipe de Neve, September 17, 1779, in Junípero Serra, Writings of Junípero Serra, 4 vols., ed. Antonine Tibesar (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1955), vol. 3: 374. But these types of works were rarely cited in his writings.

2 We have dealt with these three major issues—the military, the Inquisition, and agriculture—in Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, “What They Brought: The Alta California Franciscans before 1769,” in Alta California: Peoples in Motion, Identities in Formation, 1769–1850, Western Histories 2, ed. Steven W. Hackel (Berkeley: Published for Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West by University of California Press, Berkeley, and Huntington Library, San Marino, 2010), 17–46.
ital of Palma where Serra lived. These men were sent off to fight in the Italian theater of the War of Austrian Succession. Serra left for the New World in 1749 with tremendous skepticism about the army. At least some of the ferocity of his continuous quarrels with various military officers in Alta California resulted from those memories.

Second, like many areas of Spain, Mallorca was an active participant in the Inquisition and Inquisition activities intensified on the island at the end of the seventeenth century. In 1691 three *conversos* were burned alive in Palma, and two *autos-da-fe* were held there in the 1720s. The targets were members of the Jewish community whose conversions to Christianity were suspected of being less than genuine. This group was allowed to live only in certain parts of the city, and pressure against them persisted throughout the time that Serra was on Mallorca. He himself was an investigator for the Inquisition, although most of his activities appear to have involved reading theological tracts for their orthodoxy.

The Mallorcan Inquisition inculcated a sensibility of suspicion about the sincerity of conversions. Serra carried those suspicions with him to California where he applied them to Indian converts. He had a great suspicion of baptized Indians when they were off by themselves away from the watchful eyes of the mission authorities for he feared that they were, in their own way, secret Judaizantes, practicing their own rituals. This suspicion strengthened his desire to ensure that the normal pattern of mission life in Alta California was the *reducción*, in which Indians were congregated together and in which Indian freedom of movement was severely limited.

Third, Mallorca was an agricultural island but the success of this endeavor was extremely fragile. Sustained hunger was never more than one drought away and the last few years of Serra’s stay on Mallorca were in fact marked by severe drought. This experience gave him a deep practical sense of what was needed if the missions were to become self-sustaining agricultural enterprises. Indeed, in Alta California’s early years he cautioned his fellow missionaries against baptizing too many people too quickly, before the missions had developed to the point where they would be able to feed the new Christians. A large part of his 1773 memorandum to the viceroy when he visited Mexico City concerned the details of keeping the supply chain between Mexico and Alta California open and free.

In addition to these large forces, there was another important aspect of Serra’s Mallorcan experience that throws additional light on the way in which his homeland continued to affect him after he crossed the Atlantic. This was his teaching and preaching. During his time in Palma, Serra generally resided at the church of San Francisco. He taught a three-year course in philosophy from 1740 to 1743. At this time he was also involved in graduate studies in theology. In 1743, he
became a professor of theology but never taught the philosophy course again. One of his students kept extensive notes from the philosophy course, so we have an idea of what and how he taught. In addition, an approbation of a 1749 funeral sermon that he and another faculty member composed is also extant.

In addition, while he was a university professor, Serra regularly engaged in preaching, both in the city of Palma and in various villages throughout the island. Four Lenten homilies that he preached at a convent of Poor Clares in Palma in 1744 have survived. Considered as a whole, this body of writings and notes is markedly different from the massive amount of correspondence and reports Serra composed when he was engaged in missionary work. They help us fill out the picture of the man and offer examples of the intellectual and religious currents that helped to shape his missionary strategy.

Taken as a whole, Serra’s writings reveal that he was a widely read individual. The funeral sermon he was assessing in the 1749 essay rested on the classical myth of the phoenix. The essay in which he evaluates the sermon was replete with classical allusions. Serra and his co-author quoted from Vergil, Seneca, Plutarch, and Quintilian. Serra apparently liked Vergil, whose emphasis in the Aeneid on pietas and duty made him one of the Medieval Church’s most favored classical authors. And, Serra ended his philosophy course in 1743 with a quotation from that epic poem.

The course Serra was assigned to teach was a standard survey course of scholastic philosophy, which was grounded on the thought of Aristotle, whom the medieval scholastics termed simply “the philosopher.” In the Middle Ages, Aristotle was interpreted somewhat differently by the Dominicans, who followed the synthesis of Thomas Aquinas in emphasizing the philosophical analysis of the intellect, and the Franciscans, who tended to follow Bonaventure and Scotus in focusing on an analysis of the will.

3 The Santa Bárbara Mission Archive-Library contains a typescript of the student’s notes from the first year (“Logic”) and part of the second year (“Physics”). See Junípero Serra, “Compendium Scoticum” (Palma de Mallorca, 1743), Junípero Serra Collection, no. 34, Santa Bárbara Mission Archive-Library. The original is in Mallorca.
5 Junípero Serra, “Four Sermons” (Palma de Mallorca, 1744), Junípero Serra Collection, no. 15, Santa Bárbara Mission Archive-Library. These Catalan sermons were translated into Spanish in Bartolomé Font Obrador, El apóstol de California, sus albores ([Palma de Mallorca]: Dirección General de Cultura, 1989). In our translations of parts of the sermons into English for this essay, we used the texts in both languages.
On the first day of class, as a good teacher, Serra established a relationship with students. He told them something about himself—specifically that he was a student of Scotus and that he himself was very happy that the influence of Scotus’s ideas appeared to be increasing within the Church.

One of those ideas was a notion that Scotus championed, that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been conceived without original sin. This idea of the Immaculate Conception had not yet been officially adopted as doctrine by the Church, but Serra told his students that it was gaining greater acceptance and advancing toward official recognition. This was standard Franciscan practice in Mallorca. Indeed, part of the vow formula that Serra recited as a young Franciscan in 1731 contained an oath to defend the concept of the Immaculate Conception.

Having given this more personal introduction, Serra turned to the traditional course he had been assigned. He immediately plunged into the first topic of his logic presentation, “De operationis intellectus,” a consideration of the way in which intellect works. Serra developed the course around the dialectical style that would have been familiar to any student in a Franciscan scholastic philosophy course in Europe. The content was also quite traditional, and the authorities he most often cited were Aristotle, Scotus, and Aquinas. When we remember that Serra was working on his advanced theology studies at the same time he was teaching this course, its standard nature comes as no surprise. Serra was directing his intellectual energies elsewhere during these three years.

His sermons were replete with citations from various sources. As would be expected, he quoted liberally from the Jewish and Christian scriptures. A number of Church fathers, including Saints Augustine, Jerome, John Chrysostom, and Gregory the Great, made their way into the sermons. In addition, Saint Francis, Saint Bonaventure, Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda, and others from the Franciscan tradition were quoted. But Serra did not ignore the secular world. For example, the very first person quoted in the first sermon was the well-known former king of Aragón, Alfonso the Wise. Aristotle, with whom Serra was very familiar from his philosophy studies, was also cited. Towards the end of the fourth sermon, Serra extensively paraphrased a section of the Old Digest from the legal code of Justinian.

These writings set the stage for Serra’s activity as a missionary. First, they demonstrate that Serra was able to integrate the religious, classical, and political worlds. When he arrived in Alta California in 1769, he had also become very familiar with the missionary worlds of the Sierra Gorda, where he worked in the 1750s, and was for a time president of the five Franciscan missions there. He was also quite familiar with the parish life of many locations in colonial
Mexico, where he preached in the 1760s. Much of the assurance he demonstrated in his relations with Spanish officers in Alta California (some would and did call his assurance arrogance) stemmed, we believe, from his sense of self as being more educated, more well-rounded, and possessing a broader intellectual and cultural background than his adversaries.7

Second, the style of his preaching seems to have oscillated between two extremes. On the one hand, much of his public preaching tended to be dramatic and extravagant. Perhaps to compensate for not being very tall, which, as he reported to his friend Francisco Palóu, bothered and even embarrassed him as a young Franciscan, he developed a boisterous and theatrical pulpit persona. Palóu reported that during a sermon in Mexico City in the 1760s Serra took out a chain and began to flog himself with it. He had developed the roots of his theatrical approach in Mallorca. He began his third Lenten sermon in 1744 by constructing a vivid and imaginative description:

A full and vibrant trumpet call ought to resound in this church today before I begin my sermon, for I am going to issue a public call and publish a royal decree. Congratulate yourselves a thousand times over, you happy vassals of that Monarch who continues, more and more, to demonstrate his great good will toward you and who loves you so tenderly. “That the Lord is good.”

My public call is about the grand price of a coin with which on this very day you all ought to make yourselves rich. And what is this coin of such a high price? Christians, this coin is made up of the pains and labors which the Lord sends us in this life.

In 1747, as Serra was giving what Palóu diplomatically described as a “very fervent” sermon in the Mallorcan village of Selva, one woman got up in the middle of it and denounced it as just a lot of yelling and screaming. Serra took solace in his conviction that she was possessed by the devil!8

Yet the overall tone of the 1744 sermons was significantly different. Serra spoke at times as if he were in a classroom. All of the sermons required his listeners to compare and contrast a number of concepts. In the first sermon he told the sisters and the other listeners that God speaks to people with two kinds of voices: “interior voices in our hearts” and “exterior voices to our ears, through his ministers.” In the same sermon he asked them to ponder that the

7 On Governor Felipe de Neve’s attitude toward Serra, see Edwin Beilharz, Felipe de Neve, *First Governor of California* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1971), 51–52, 134.
human person consists of two parts: "an inferior or sentient part, which he shares with irrational creatures," and "a superior or rational part, which he shares with the angels." In the second sermon he declared that "the yoke of the divine law" was very soft and gentle in two complementary respects: "first in its intrinsic nature and, second, because of various extrinsic circumstances," such as the nature of God, the example of Christ, the presence of divine grace, and the hope of heavenly glory. In the third sermon, he stated that the trials and tribulations people suffer in this life are actually quite gentle in two senses: a priori, because "sufferings come from the paternal and infinite love that the Lord has for us," and a posteriori, "because of the eternal and heavenly prize they allow us to reach." And in the fourth sermon, Serra argued that God's mercy was boundless both intensively and extensively. "In terms of its intention," he stated, it was boundless "because of the intense and intrinsic affection with which he [God] pardons us." The divine mercy was extensive, on the other hand, "because of the great multitude of sins which God's mercy reaches." In the same sermon, he quoted Saint Anthony of Padua to the effect that God's mercy is his greatest virtue, since it is infinite. But Serra wondered aloud, how can the saint say that? Are not all of God's virtues infinite by definition? To explain this seeming contradiction, Serra put on his best academic hat. Here we must, he told his listeners, "make a distinction." One wonders if his listeners were taking notes through all of this!

These extremes of intense emotion and academic complexity marked Serra's tenure as mission president. His emotion was often directed at soldiers or military officials. During one meeting in August 1775, for instance, Serra became very agitated with military commander Fernando de Rivera y Moncada's refusal to provide the number of soldiers that Serra mistakenly thought the viceroy had ordered for the founding of a mission along the Santa Bárbara Channel. Serra was so angry that he banged the table with his hand and started shouting at the commander. Serra also privately confessed to a fellow missionary in 1779 that he was so irritated with Governor Felipe de Neve that he was unable to sleep at night and that talking to the governor before Mass so upset him that it was only with great difficulty that he was able to celebrate the sacrament with the reverence and equanimity it deserved. But even his fellow missionaries could become exasperated with what they regarded as his petulance and high-handedness. In 1775, responding to many such com-

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plaints, the guardian of the Colegio de San Fernando in Mexico City issued a decree severely limiting Serra’s power over his fellow missionaries. Serra’s successor, Fermín Francisco de Lasuén, was much more even-tempered and exhibited greater diplomatic skills in dealing with Spanish authorities than Serra did. Lasuén’s appointment was probably made with these very qualities in mind.11

Serra’s ability to employ somewhat obscure academic distinctions was also part of his missionary strategy. This was one of his most constant tactics in his seemingly endless struggles with Neve. One set of disagreements revolved around the mission inventories. Neve asked for them to be forwarded to him so that he could use them in preparing his reports to the Commander General of the Interior Provinces, Teodoro de Croix, whose headquarters were in Sonora. According to Neve, Serra agreed to do this “directly” (en derechura). But then it turned out that Serra had meant “directly,” not in the sense of “right away,” but in the sense that he would send the material “straight” to the viceroy.12 As was typical in the Spanish empire, this dispute generated an enormous correspondence at various levels of the colonial bureaucracy. When Serra was finally ordered by Croix to turn the material over to the governor, Serra gamely protested that he had never really been explicitly ordered to hand over the inventories, and thus the implication in Croix’s order that he had not complied with legitimate orders was erroneous. He said he would be happy to obey, except that the documents he would need to comply with this order had already been sent to Mexico City. And, he was sorry to have to add, there was also a serious shortage of paper in the missions, and thus he was not sure that he had anything to write the reports on! He insisted, however implausibly, that he was anxious to fulfill these orders and would do so just as soon as was humanly possible.13

A similar situation occurred around the sacrament of confirmation. This sacrament was normally administered by a bishop, but, in remote areas such as a mission territory, in which a bishop did not reside, the Vatican often delegated the authority to administer this sacrament to the chief missionary of the area. The Jesuits received such authority in Baja California, and the Franciscans in Alta California routinely applied for this privilege for themselves in the early 1770s. The Vatican granted this request in 1774. Serra received the authorization to administer the sacrament in 1778 in a document from the Colegio de de

12 Beilharz, Neve, 176, fn. 12.
13 Ibid., 49–55; Serra to Teodoro de Croix, April 28, 1782, in Serra, Writings of Junípero Serra, 3: 125–35.
San Fernando in Mexico City, and he soon started doing so at various missions. When Neve found out, he demanded to see the document entitling Serra to administer confirmations. He claimed that he needed to see, not the document sent to Serra by his superiors in Mexico City, but the document originally sent from Madrid to Mexico City. This document was, of course, at the Colegio in Mexico City. The normal voluminous correspondence ensued and Serra was ultimately ordered by the commander general’s office in Sonora to cease administering confirmation. He replied that he had already asked that the document in question be sent to him from Mexico City, so that should take care of everything. The authorities were not pleased and demanded that Serra give Neve the documents he possessed on this matter, so that Neve could send them to Sonora for inspection. Serra had already anticipated this request and replied that he had already sent those documents on to Mexico City so that they could be sent from there to Sonora. He disingenuously claimed that he had done this so that the documents could get to Sonora faster!\(^{14}\)

Neither of these controversies was really about the matters at hand. As for the inventories, the military was stationed at each of the California missions, so Neve and his officers had a fairly good idea of the state of each of those institutions. As for confirmation, it was, in the ecclesiastical jargon of the day, not a sacrament that was “necessary for salvation,” so Serra was not animated by saving more Indian souls. Both controversies were about power and precedence in California and Serra’s background in academic philosophy and theology had made him an adept player in the game of colonial bureaucracy. Serra proved over and over that he was more than willing to use his expertise to try to increase the power of the missions.

Third, the content of the 1744 sermons offers important clues into how Serra conceived the beginning stages of the missionary enterprise. Indeed, of all the Mallorcan writings that have survived, the sermons undoubtedly offer the deepest insight into Serra’s own views. Whereas he was constrained in the philosophy class by the traditional nature of the course, and in the approbation document by the text of the funeral sermon itself, in the sermons he was able to choose his own theme, develop it as he saw fit, and offer his own interpretation of the relationship between God and humanity. This interpretation informed his missionary activity.

Serra preached five sermons at the convent. The first three appear to have survived more or less entirely, and a large part of the fourth appears to have sur-

\(^{14}\) Beilharz, Neve, 55–61; Geiger, The Life and Times of Fray Junípero Serra, O.F.M., 2: 159–70.
vived as well. The fifth is lost. The audience consisted of the cloistered sisters and members of the public who were able to attend in the more public area of the convent church. The overarching theme of the sermons was taken from a verse from Psalm 34: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” When he spoke, Serra quoted the verse from the Latin Vulgate: *Gustate, et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus.* Then he played with the Latin word that is usually translated into English as “good”—*suavis*. He announced that his theme was going to be God’s *suavidat*—a Catalan word meaning “softness,” or “mildness,” and connoting “gentleness” or “sweetness.” Then, picking up on the beginning of the verse (“taste”) Serra introduced the word *dulzura* (sweetness) as a virtual synonym for *suavidat*. At the beginning of the first sermon, Serra told his audience that the five sermons would be devoted to different ways in which this *suavidat* of God is manifest: in the words with which He calls people, in His law that He orders them to observe, in the sufferings He sends them, in the mercy with which He pardons them, and in the glory with which He will reward them.

The basic theme of the sermons is the sweetness, gentleness, and accessibility of God. Serra insisted that God could be directly experienced by human beings, and that this experience was like coming across a type of hitherto-unknown culinary delicacy: “Those who do not know anything about this sweetness and do not taste it do not have any appetite for it. But someone who has tried it just once finds that he has an increasing appetite for it and finds it very soothing.” This notion, that the encounter with God would awaken in people aspects of themselves they had not before experienced, informed his missionary strategy. In California, this notion was at the root of his insistence that missions should be located near Indian villages, that native peoples should have the opportunity to visit the priests informally, and that priests should be allowed to act as the primary agents of contact with local indigenous villages. For the task of embodying God’s sweetness and gentleness was one for which the missionary was uniquely equipped. In 1770, after a few short weeks at Monterey Bay, Serra complained, “I have barely been able to find time to meet the gentiles who live at some distance from here, even though they have come to see us a number of times. They very humbly and generously have given us some of their food.” For Serra, these informal contacts were crucial if he were going to be able to introduce the native peoples to the “sweetness” of the Lord.

The theme of Serra’s third sermon is especially relevant, given that coercion and armed force directed against native peoples were always indispensable
elements of the mission enterprise. The third sermon concerns “the pains and labors which the Lord sends us in this life,” and the “punishments” He sometimes metes out. In part of the sermon, Serra was at pains to insist that it was not always legitimate to regard peoples’ suffering as simply a punishment that God was visiting on those who deserve it. This was a reference to well-known events. A plague in the middle of the seventeenth century had wiped out almost twenty percent of Mallorca’s population. Indeed, a few months after Serra finished these sermons, another plague claimed ten thousand victims on the island.16

The overall thrust of the sermon was Serra’s insistence that what people often regard as punishment might better be regarded as a gift from God. The reason was that, if God punishes people, He does so with the intent to make them better and bring them closer to their eternal salvation. In this sense, God is very much like a responsible parent, in whom “love and strictness are in harmony.” Serra continued:

It is precisely because the father loves him [his son] that he teaches him to obey. When he misbehaves, the father scolds and punishes him so that the son can correct his mistakes. Because he does not want his son to turn out wrong, he takes him out to the field to teach him to work. So that he might be able to defend himself, the father teaches him how to use weapons and he takes great care that the son will not use them in any inappropriate way. The father continuously watches over his son’s life and health. When he appears to be depressed, the father perks him up, counsels him, and helps him. Finally he makes him heir of all he possesses. In this way, even though it might seem at first glance that the son is his father’s slave, it becomes clear that he is his father’s deeply beloved son. The Divine Father behaves in a similar way with men, who are his own sons.

When this analogy was transported to the Americas, it had the inevitable effect of infantilizing the native peoples.

Serra also used other analogies to drive home the same point. He asked his listeners if they would want a doctor who told them everything was fine, or a doctor who would occasionally have to hurt them to cure them of their infirmities. The answer to this rhetorical question was obvious. He also compared punishments to what happens when a glassblower exercises his craft. There is

fire and destruction, but the final result is definitely a thing of beauty. What Serra never grasped was that these analogies, which seemed harmless and even self-evident in one cultural context, would have quite a different effect when they were transported to other cultural contexts. However, he was not the only eighteenth-century European who did not grasp these issues. Indeed, the Europe from which Serra came regarded the human inhabitants and the natural features of the Americas much more negatively than had been the case a century earlier.17

Junípero Serra and his contemporaries regarded his California achievements as the greatest in his life. His first biographer, Francisco Palóu, devoted three-quarters of the biography to Serra's life after he arrived in Alta California in 1769. Such an emphasis is surely correct, and the identification of Serra with California is justified. But Serra came to California as a mature and developed individual. To understand fully what he tried to do in California, we need to understand the intellectual and religious views he brought to that region. His experiences in Mallorca for the first thirty-five years of his life provide, we think, an indispensable foundation for understanding his achievements, his struggles, and his challenges in Alta California.