

Daily Homily
St. Junipero Serra, Priest
Optional Memorial
13 Week in Ordinary Time
1 July 2020
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Today's saint has recently come under fire. He is a victim to misunderstanding and prejudice. Two sins that in his lifetime he vehemently opposed regarding the indigenous people of our nation. Two of his statues in the past two weeks have been violently torn down from their secular public places of honor and sacrilegiously defaced in California. All of this in a national move to remove images of historic figures that have come up wanting as they are judged in the light of our current standards. Somehow, today's standards also includes the acceptance to express Anti-Catholic sentiment, to destroy public property, to spread hate rhetoric toward a Catholic missionary without any consequence. All of this, even as the California Catholic bishops have tried to shed light on the story of Fray Junipero Serra, and why our Catholic family reveres him as a person close to God, in the saintly halls of Heaven.

The Los Angeles Archbishop, Jose Gomez, has asked Catholics to fast and pray today for the intercession of St. Junipero Serra to end all racial prejudice and to have "a new awareness of what it means that all men and women are created equal as children of God." Gomez goes on to say, "I understand the deep pain being expressed by some native peoples in California. But I also believe Fray Junipero is a saint for our times, the spiritual founder of Los Angeles, a champion of human rights, and this country's first Hispanic saint... I rely on his intercession in my ministry, and I am inspired by his desire to bring God's tender mercy to every person."

St. Junipero is known for spreading the Gospel in the New World during the 18th Century. A Franciscan priest, he came from Spain to Mexico and traveled on foot up what is now the California coast. He established missions along the way that are now well known as San Diego, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara to name a few. However, some have come to debate Junipero's tactics in converting individuals and tribes as well as accusing him of interfering with culture and customs of the times. However, the California bishops have clearly stated that the original intent of the missions was not to impose the Christian faith but rather to propose the faith to indigenous peoples.

Archbishop Gomez states, "Historical memory is the soul of every nation. What we remember about our past and how we remember it defines our national identity – the kind of people we want to be, the values and principles we want to live by. But history is complicated. The facts matter, distinctions need to be made, and the truth counts. We cannot learn history's lessons or heal old wounds unless we understand what really happened, how it happened and why."

Either way, Gomez is at peace, if the state debate over this national figure, the Apostles to California, is not honored. There is a public hearing in the city of Ventura over the removal of the saint's statue in other parts of the state. He welcomes the conversation and the opportunity for dialogue. He says, "elected officials cannot abdicate their responsibilities by turning these decisions over to small groups of protesters, allowing them to vandalize public monuments. This is not how a great democracy should function. Allowing the free expression of public opinion is important. So is upholding the rule of law and ensuring that decisions we reach as a society are based on genuine dialogue and the search for truth and the common good."

Archbishop Gomez goes on to explain that people who abuse the saint's good name do not know the quality of his character or the actual historical record. Decades in the making, activists have tried to attach to Serra's name, all the abuses committed against California's indigenous people that in truth happened long after the humble friar died. Genocidal war and the abuse and enslavement of tribes took place in 1851. The saint died in 1784. The Church reveres his character as saintly and a model for Christianity today in that he lived and worked alongside native peoples, defended their humanity, and protested crimes against them. He celebrated their creativity and knowledge, he learned their language and their ancient customs and ways. He was a Franciscan and so came among the people as a person of peace and as a person of faith. When canonizing Fray Junipero in 2015 upon his visit to the United States, Pope Francis called him, "one of the founding fathers of the United States." This saint recognized in the human person, not a difference that divides or makes one subservient to another, but rather an equality, a dignity, and a freedom under God that has defined the birth of our nation.

We know that a faith imposed is no faith at all and would never last. We know that if Serra had forced our faith on any group or individual, the faith would have died. An authentic relationship with Jesus, however, would last the trial of time. Catholicism has thrived in our country despite the historicity of our nation to oppose the Catholic faith, suppress it even in not so subtle ways in the past and in subtle ways in our current times. All groups and activists should know that the violent means to express their ideologies have no roots and no foundation. Their voice may be the loudest and most dramatic – and media worthy – for a time, but will come to nothing in the end. How they call out their victims, such as Fray Junipero, is a reflection back on their quality of character, their values, and their myopic sense of human dignity.

We pray for the saints to intercede for us, to grant us the wisdom and understanding we need, to walk this time of unrest and instability with a sense of God's grace and with a sense of unity as a human family.

Saint Junipero Serra, pray for us!

All quotes from Archbishop Jose Gomez, *Angelus*, in the column "Voices," Archdiocese of Los Angeles, June 29, 2020. To read the full "Letter to the Faithful," link is below.

<https://angelusnews.com/voices/letter-to-the-faithful-for-the-memorial-of-st-junipero-serra/>