

Primary Documents

Writings of Father Junípero Serra

Translated by Rose Marie Beebe, Santa Clara University

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Document One: Serra Meets the Native People, 1768

Serra arrived in Mexico from Mallorca, Spain in 1749 and served in central Mexico until 1767. With the expulsion of the Jesuits from Mexico, the Baja California missions were turned over to the Franciscan Order and Serra was named president. Shortly thereafter he was given the order to establish missions in Alta California (present day California). He journeyed through Baja California, and as he approached Alta California, he encountered his first “non-catechized,” natives, that is natives who had not yet been evangelized. Serra had long dreamed of this moment—it was the reason he left Spain. The excerpts below capture Serra’s excitement and amazement in his first missionary encounter.

In the document non-Christian Natives are referred to as “gentiles.” In the closing excerpt Serra’s problem with his legs stemmed from an insect bite he had sustained on his way to Mexico City in 1749.

From Serra’s Travel Diary

May 15. Since candles had already arrived on the pack train, two priests and I celebrated Mass in succession. For me, it was a day of great consolation. Soon after the Masses were said, while I was quiet with my thoughts in the small hut that was my dwelling place, they alerted me that the gentiles were approaching and that they were close. I praised God, kissed the ground, and gave thanks to Our Lord for granting me this opportunity to be among the gentiles in their land, after longing for this for so many years. I quickly went out and there saw twelve gentiles, all of them grown men, with the exception of one boy who was about ten years old and another who was about sixteen years old. I saw what I could hardly believe when I would read about it or when I would be told about it, which was that the gentiles were totally naked, like Adam in paradise before the fall. That is how they went about and that is how they presented themselves to us. We interacted with them for quite some time and not once did they show any sign of embarrassment seeing that we were clothed and they were not. I placed my hands on the head of each gentile, one at a time, as a sign of affection. I filled both of their hands with overripe figs, which they immediately began to eat. We received a gift from them and with signs we showed them how much we appreciated it. The gift was a net full of roasted mescal and four beautiful fish, which were more than medium size. Unfortunately, the poor people had not thought to clean the fish beforehand or even to salt them, so the cook

said the fish were not any good. Padre Campa also gave them his raisins, the Senor Gobernador gave them tobacco leaves, and all the soldiers received them warmly and gave them food to eat. With the help of the interpreter, I let them know that a Padre was already there, in that very spot, and his name was Padre Miguel. I told them that they and other people they know should come and visit him. They also should let it be known that there is no reason for fear or mistrust. The Padre would be their friend and those men, the soldiers who were standing next to the Padre, would be very good to them and would cause them no harm. I told them that if they were in need, they should not steal the cattle that were grazing in the fields but rather come and ask the Padres and he would always give them what he could. It seems that they understood very well what I had explained and they made signs to that effect, all of which led me to believe that it would not be long before they allowed themselves to be gathered together in the apostolic and evangelical net. And this is what happened, as I shall explain later. According to the Senor-Gobernador, the person who came with them as their chief held that position by acclaim or will of his people, but from this day forward, he was officially appointing him chief in the name of the king.

That same afternoon, although I was sad to have to leave the Indians and their new minister who would be staying there, I set out with the Senor Gobernador and his retinue. After traveling for three hours or so, we stopped at a post halfway between the mission and our next stop. There was some grass for the animals, but no water.

May 17. I said Mass there even though I was already having a hard time standing because my left foot was very inflamed. I have been suffering for over a year now. Now the wounds are inflamed and the swelling has gone halfway up my leg. This is why I was lying in bed during the time we stayed here. I feared that before long I would have to follow behind the expedition on a stretcher. In the meantime, the Senor Gobernador and his people went about arranging the loads and determining the shortcuts. They also allowed the animals that had arrived last time to rest and rover in this place, which provided what was needed.

Document Two: Serra Responds to the Revolt and Destruction of Mission San Diego, 1775

In November, 1775, the neophytes at Mission San Diego, six years after its founding, revolted, destroying the mission, and killing missionary Father Luis Jayme. Though greatly upset, in a letter to the Governor, Serra urged mercy for the killers, articulating his vision of his mission in California. His role was to bring "eternal life," not death. To the native peoples.

Letter to Antonio Maria de Bucareli y Ursua, December 15, 1775

Long Live Jesus, Mary, Joseph
Muy Venerado Senor mio Excelentisimo,

Being as we are in the valley of tears, not all news and events can be favorable. And so, I cannot avoid reporting to Vuestra Excelencia the tragic news I have just received regarding the total destruction of Mission San Diego and the death of Padre Lector Fray Luis Jayme (the main priest of the two religious ministers there) at the hands of the gentiles and Christian neophytes who rebelled. It happened on November 5 at about one or two o'clock in the morning. According to what I have been told, gentiles from forty rancherias joined together and, after ransacking the church, set fire to it. And then they proceeded to the granary, the Padres' house, the soldiers' guardhouse, and the rest of the buildings.

They killed a carpenter from Guadalajara and a blacksmith from Tepic. They shot with arrows four soldiers-- the only ones who were guarding the mission. And even though two of them were badly wounded, they now are completely recovered.

The other religious, named Padre Fray Vicente Fuster, apart from being frightened, was only injured on his shoulder, which was hit by a rock. He was in pain for a few days. Immediately after that sad night, he headed for the presidio with the few people who were still alive. The Christian Indians who had remained loyal carried the dead and gravely injured on their shoulders. He has written to me from the presidio asking me to tell him what he should do.

I received this news day before yesterday at nine o'clock in the evening. Captian Comandante Don Fernando came to inform me in person and also brought letters....

With regard to the loss of San Diego, a number of thoughts have occurred to me. But since complaining about what happened in the past does not change anything, I will let it all go. But it will again suggest to Vuestra Excelencia what I mentioned in a previous letter, which is, with conquests of this nature, the place where soldiers are most important is at the missions. In many places presidios might be very beneficial and very necessary, but from here I can only comment on what I see.

Mission San Diego is about two leagues from the presidio, but it is situated in such a way that by day, everything that goes on at the mission can be seen from the

presidio. And the gunshot that is fired each morning to signal the changing of the guard can usually be heard at the mission. And while the entire mission was ablaze, with flames shooting high into the sky from one or two in the morning until dawn, and gunshots being fired during that entire time, those at the presidio did not see or hear anything. They say it was because of the way the wind was blowing.

And with just two men who were firing shots during that entire time, many lives that would have been lost without that defense were saved. But after the Padre has been killed, the mission has burned down, and its many, beautiful ornaments, sacred vessels, images, and baptismal, marriage, and burial records have been destroyed, along with the furnishings for the sacristy, the house, and the farm implements, it is now that the forces from the two presidios are joining together to set things right.

Since the circumstances surrounding this tragedy are so similar to what happened at Mission San Saba (to where I was assigned, having been called from the Sierra Gorda for that purpose, I was ready to set out from our colegio as quickly as possible), God willing, the results will not be the same. Before reestablishing the mission, they wanted the presidios to join together to apprehend the guilty parties responsible for the burning of the mission and the death of the Padres, and punish them. The Indians they were pursuing rose up again and were further enraged. I ended up not going to that mission. Up to this day I do not know if the mission has been reestablished or not.

The soldiers are there in the presidio and the Indians are back to their gentile way of being.

Senor Excelentisimo: One of the most important things I requested of the Ilustrisimo Visitador General at the beginning of these conquests was that, if the Indians were to kill me, whether they be gentiles or Christians, they should be forgiven. And I request the same of Vuestra Excelencia. And I was negligent in not requesting this sooner. Seeing a formal decree from Vuestra Excelencia regarding this matter would be of great consolation to me during the time of the Lord Our God sees fit to add to my advanced years of life. It would also be a consolation to the other religious who are here now and those who will come in the future.

It is only right, for as long as the missionary is alive, the soldiers should guard and watch over him as God would guard the apple of his eye. And I will not refuse such a favor for myself. But if they have already killed the missionary, what are we going to gain with military campaigns?

I am saying, so that others are not killed, guard them better than you guarded the deceased. And let the murderer live so he can be saved, which is the purpose of our coming here and the reason for forgiving him. Help him to understand, with some moderate punishment, that he is being pardoned in accordance with our law, which orders us to forgive offenses and to prepare him, not for his death, but for eternal life.

Document Three: Serra's Death. 1884

Fray Francisco Palóu was Serra's good friend and colleague. He wrote the first biography of Serra. Below he records the last days of Serra's life.

Excerpt from Fray Francisco Palóu, "Exemplary Death of Venerable Padre Junípero"

At about ten o'clock in the morning on the feast day of San Agustin, the officers from the frigate came to visit him--Captain and Comandante Don Jose Canizares, whom Su Paternidad knew very well, ever since the first expedition in 1769-- and the Royal Chaplain, don Cristobal Diaz, whom he had also met in this port in 1779. He gave them an extraordinary welcome by ordering the solemn ringing of the bells in their honor. He stood up and warmly embraced them, as if he were not ill, and engaged in the customary formalities of respect that a religious would afford such officers. After they sat down, Su Paternidad returned to his equipal. They had not seen one another since 1779. They told he Padre all about their voyages to Peru.

After listening to their stories, he said: "Well, Senores, after so much time that has passed since we last saw one another, and after all of your travels, I thank you for coming to this port from so far away to throw a bit of earth on top of me." When the men, and everyone else who was present heard this, we were all surprised. There he was, seated on his small chair made of reeds, answering every question, his mind as sharp as ever. As they tried to hold back the tears, which they could not control, they told him: "No, Padre, we trust in God that He will make you well so you can continue the conquest." The Servant of God (who, if he did not have a revelation regarding the hour of his death, at the very least had to say that he expected it would be soon) told them: "Yes, yes, do me that favor and show me some compassion by tossing a bit of earth on me, for which I would be most grateful." He then looked me straight in the eye said: "for now, I wish to be buried in the church, very close to Padre Fray Juan Crespi, because when the stone church is built, they will toss me wherever they want..."

A bit later...

He sat down on the chair by the table, picked up his *diurnal*, and began to pray. As soon as he was finished, I told him it was already past one o'clock in the afternoon and asked him if he would like to have a cup of broth. He said yes and took it. After giving thanks, he said: "Well, we must now rest." He walked on his own to the small room where he had his bed, which was more like a bench, After taking off only his mantle, he lay down on the boards that were covered with the blanket and his holy cross, as described above, so he could rest. We all thought he was going to sleep, since he had not slept at all during the entire night. The gentlemen went out to eat. I was a bit worried, so a short time later I returned to his room and went over to his bed to see if he was sleeping. I found him exactly as we had left him just a short while before, but now he was asleep in the Lord. He showed no signs of having

struggled. The only evidence of death was that his breathing had stopped, but it really did seem like he was sleeping. We piously believe that he went to sleep in the Lord a little before two o'clock in the afternoon on the feast day of San Agustin in the year 1784, and that he would be receiving his heavenly reward for his apostolic labors.

His life of toilsome work ended when he was seventy years, nine months, and four days old. He was a layperson for sixteen years, nine months, and twenty-one days. He was a religious for fifty-three years, eleven months, and thirteen days, of which he spent thirty-five years and thirteen days as an apostolic missionary. During this time he performed the glorious deeds that we have already seen, in which his merits were greater than his accomplishments. His life was one of continuous activity. He was always occupied in virtuous and holy work and in extraordinary heroic deeds-- all for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. And for someone who worked with such zeal for these souls, how much harder would he work for the salvation of his own soul? There is much I could say about this, but it requires more time and must be done calmly. If God grants me this, and if it is His most holy will, which will serve to edify by example.