

# The Father of California

*Blessed Junípero Serra*

*by Sister Maria Philomena, M.I.C.M.*

*For I trust that God will give me the strength to reach San Diego, as He has given me the strength to come so far. In case He does not, I will conform myself to His most holy will. Even though I should die on the way, I shall not turn back. They can bury me wherever they wish and I shall gladly be left among the pagans, if it be the will of God.*

So wrote Blessed Junípero Serra in 1769, as he was on the journey which was to begin his most famous life's work. Father Serra was at last entering *new* missionary territory. Now he would not only be maintaining missions, he would be founding them. It would seem to men that the previous fifty-four years of the life of this humble, zealous friar had been merely a preparation for the work he was about to begin.

Known to the world, at least to those in the world who know him,\* as the "Father of California," Blessed Junípero Serra was born in Majorca,† the largest of the Balearic Islands, which are found off the eastern coast of Spain in the western Mediterranean. Under Moorish rule from the seventh till the thirteenth centuries, they were liberated from the Moslem yoke by James I and became part of the Kingdom of Aragon in 1349. Later, they merged with the kingdom of Castile under the "Catholic Kings," Ferdinand and Isabella, and have been under Spanish rule ever since. With a climate more temperate

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\* This may seem unbelievable, but, as of last year and within a few miles of Mission San Diego, there were residents who knew nothing either of the mission or the life of Father Serra, to say nothing of his religious / historical importance to the metropolis in which they lived. They certainly couldn't give directions.

† Or *Mallorca*, either way, pronounced Mah-YOR-kah.

than Hawaii, its own Catalan dialect, and a long tradition of Catholicity, this little farming and fishing island has been hailed by travelers as “the Enchanted Isle.”

On November 24, 1713, there was born to Antonio and Margarita Serra their third child, the first to live past infancy. (A daughter, Juana Maria, would also survive.) Within a few hours, at the parish Church of San Pedro, the boy was baptized Miguel José. Later, husband and wife would make the short pilgrimage to the shrine of Nuestra Señora de Bon Any (Our Lady of the Good Year) and consecrate Miguel to her. Fifty-nine years later, this same little boy would write the following entry in the baptismal register of Mission San Carlos Borromeo, September 3, 1782: “I solemnly baptized a girl about thirteen years old, the daughter of pagans, and gave her the name ‘Maria de Buen Ano.’ This is the title by which Most Holy Mary is known in my beloved homeland.” (*Buen Ano* is the Spanish equivalent to the Majorcan *Bon Any*.)

### Vocation in the Making

Little is known about Miguel’s childhood. Raised by devout parents, both Third Order Franciscans, he shared in the family chores, participated in the Church year (Holy Mass, feast days, processions, etc.), and, though sickly, he was not pampered or lazy, but self-sacrificing, used to hard work, and determined

to do God’s will. All these factors combined to make the frail child, still of extremely diminutive height, good material to be an *alter Christus* (“another Christ”).

At the age of fifteen, Miguel went to the Majorcan capital, Palma, to be tutored for three months by the canon of the cathedral in studies supplementary to those supplied by the friars’ school in Petra, where he had learned Latin and acquired skill at Gregorian Chant. His schooling and the pious nurturing of his parents led the boy to conceive a strong desire to enter into the Franciscan Order, but, at fifteen, he was still too young. The tutoring was to pass time, test his vocation, and prepare Miguel to enroll as a student of philosophy at the Convent\* of San Francisco, where there was a school to prepare students for the priesthood, as well as for secular professions.

### Novitiate and Profession

At the age of sixteen, Miguel José Serra officially applied to Fray Antonio Perello Morgues, the local provincial, for admission to the novitiate. Less than five feet tall and having a delicate frame, the boy was taken by the provincial for a twelve- or thirteen-year-old, and told to wait. When both the canon who had been Miguel’s tutor and some Franciscans pleaded his cause, Fray Antonio reconsidered and permitted the young man to enter the Convento de Jesus



de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles, just outside the walls of Palma. On September 14, 1730, he received the pale blue (almost gray) Alcantarian habit of the Observant branch of the Friars Minor. This habit was a woolen, ankle-length habit with a cowl, a cord with three knots (for the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience), a woolen cape for cold weather, and simple leather or hempen sandals. Fray Serra himself writes about his **novitiate**:

“In the novitiate, I was almost always ill and so small of stature that I was unable to reach the lectern, nor could I help my fellow novices in the necessary chores of the novitiate. Therefore, the Father Master of Novices employed me solely in serving Mass daily. However, with my profes-

sion, I gained health and strength and grew to medium size [about 5’2”]. I attribute all this to my profession, for which I gave infinite thanks to God.”

At their profession, the brothers could choose to replace their baptismal name with that of a special patron saint. Miguel chose Blessed Brother Juniper, the “holy fool” who was one of Saint Francis of Assisi’s early followers, known for “his guileless simplicity and celestial mirth.” It is probable that he grew to love Blessed Juniper by reading about him in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, which was part of the required novitiate reading. Fray Serra also acquired special devotion to two other Franciscans: Saint Francis Solano (“the Apostle of South America”) and Saint Bernardine of Siena (“the Apostle of Italy”). Miguel’s devotion to these three fellow Franciscans was crowned by a special devotion to Our Lady, especially under the title *La Purissima Concepcion* (the Immaculate Conception), a title which was to owe its dogmatic definition of 1854 largely to the thirteenth-century efforts of another Franciscan, Blessed Duns Scotus.

On September 15, 1731, one year after his entrance, Miguel made his profession and took his new name:

“I, Fray Junípero Serra, vow and promise to Almighty God, to the ever blessed Virgin Mary, to Blessed Father Francis, to all the saints, and to you, Father, to observe for the

4 *Brother Juniper, the disciple of St. Francis after whom Serra was named. The Little Flowers of St. Francis tell how he allowed a poor man to take his habit.*

## GLOSSARY

Some of the Catholic language we use in our articles is sometimes unknown to non-Catholics or Catholics who don't routinely read about the matters discussed here. For them, we provide this small list of terms. Each term here is in **bold print** the first time it appears in the article.

**Breviary, -ies** – From the Latin word for “abridgment,” this is a book (or small set of two, three, or four books) which contains all the prayers necessary for the reciting of the Divine Office.

**Divine Office** – The public (non-Eucharistic) prayer of the Church. It is chanted in choir by monks and nuns, and recited privately or publicly by others, such as parish priests, who are bound under sin to pray the Divine Office. It consists of Psalms, hymns, antiphons, and other prayers recited according to set formulas which vary based on the day of the week, season of the year, and feast day on the calendar of the saints. The Divine Office is divided up into various sections (called Canonical Hours), which are sung or recited at certain times of the day. In the traditional Roman Rite, the hours are named thus: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.

**Easter Duty** – The serious obligation upon all Catholics to go to confession and receive Holy Communion once a year during the Lent and Easter seasons. The exact time during which the duty must be performed varies in different places. At present, the period for Easter duty in the United States is Ash Wednesday to Trinity Sunday.

**Faculties** – In the generic sense, a faculty is any power. In the specific sense of “canonical faculties,” they are the permissions from the Church for deacons, priests, and bishops to use the powers they have by virtue of their ordination. Therefore, we speak of the faculty to hear confessions, to preach, and to confirm.

**Fray** – Spanish word for *friar*, which is a term applied to members of certain semi-monastic religious institutes such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Carmelites, and Mercederians. Friar simply means “brother.” All male members of these institutes are called friars, whether they are priests or lay brothers. It comes from the Latin *frater* and is a cognate of the French *frère*.

**Friary** – The place where friars live. (Franciscans also call them convents.)

**Guardian** – The superior of a Franciscan friary or convent.

**Novitiate** – The period of formation (training) in a religious order or congregation, after which the brother or sister is admitted to vows. In certain societies, it is preceded by a postulancy. Church law requires all religious institutes to have one year of novitiate, but allows them to have a two-year novitiate.



*Santiago de Jalpan in the Sierra Gorda*



whole span of my life the rule of the Friars Minor confirmed by His Holiness, Pope Honorius III, by living in obedience, without property, and in chastity.”

“With the pronouncement of these words, Serra was a Franciscan for life. He vowed himself to be one of the trees in the forest of Saint Francis, striving for the hardiness and resilience of the juniper tree, undaunted by the worldly winds of adversity.”\* This day, when he gave himself completely to God, was the greatest of his

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\* *Junípero Serra — The Illustrated Story of the Franciscan Founder of California’s Missions*, Don De Nevi, Ed.D. and Noel Francis Moholy, S.T.D., O.F.M., Harper and Row Publishers, 1985, page 18.

life. Franciscans have the custom to renew their vows on April 16, the day their Order was given papal approbation, regardless of the date of their profession. No matter where he might be, Fray Junípero always celebrated this day with great solemnity.

### Priest and Professor

“Leaving the novitiate house at the Convent of Jesus, Junípero moved to the Convent of San Francisco within the city walls. Here, in the center of medieval Palma close to cathedral and sea, he would spend the next eighteen years, first as a student and then as a professor of philosophy and theology. Ahead of him now were six years of study, three in philosophy and three in theology, before he could become a priest.”† An excellent student, Fray Junípero had no trouble with his studies. He was ordained deacon, along with thirty-three others, on March 17, 1736, and two days later was given permission to preach. Fray Serra was not yet twenty-four when the rest of his group were ordained a year later, in May. He had to wait till Advent of that year (1737), when he had reached the canonical age to be ordained. He then had a two-year wait until, on February 21, 1739, he received **faculties** to hear confessions.

Fray Junípero Serra was made the librarian of the monastery for a year,

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† *Ibid*, page 20.

then was assigned to teach philosophy. In his first three-year class were two young friars who would follow their teacher to the New World and become almost as famous as he. Both men were natives of Palma and had chosen to keep their baptismal names upon their professions: Fray Juan Crespi (the diarist, explorer, and naturalist of the Portolá expedition) and Fray Francisco Palóu (Fray Serra's special friend and later biographer). While teaching, Fray Junípero himself pursued graduate studies in theology at the Ramón Lull University and received his doctorate in sacred theology in 1742. In 1743, not only was he invited to preach the Corpus Christi sermon at the cathedral (an honor not accorded to everyone), but he was also unanimously chosen to fill one of the two Duns Scotus chairs of sacred theology within the Lullian University.

During the next six years, Fray Serra's name became well known. The sermons that he preached all over the island were his first active missionary efforts. The good friar "never lost the ability to touch his hearers, simplifying difficult theological concepts to make them understandable to all."\* Probably his most famous sermon, which one critic thought was "worthy of being printed in letters of gold," was given on the feast of Blessed Ramón Lull,

January 25, 1749.

### **The Heart of a Missionary**

Around 1748, the zealous preacher felt the desire to be a missionary in the New World, in which there was a renewed interest at this time. While some thought of the land across the Atlantic exclusively in terms of gold and riches, the Franciscan thought only of souls. Some time later, he would reveal his missionary impulse: "I have had no other motive but to revive in my soul those intense longings which I have had since my novitiate when I read the lives of the saints. These longings have become somewhat deadened because of the preoccupation I had with studies." For the present, though, he held his peace and prayed to do God's will. However, word leaked out — probably from a superior Fray Serra confided in — and several other friars became enthusiastic about the American missions. Rumors ran rampant, and when Fray Francisco Palóu told his teacher that he, too, wished to go on this mission, Fray Junípero responded: "I am the one who intends to make this long journey, and I have been sorrowful because I would have no companion for so long a journey; but I would not on that account turn back from my purpose. I have just finished making two novenas to the Most Pure Conception of Mary, Most Holy, and to Saint Francis Solano, asking them to bestir the heart of someone to go with me, if it were the will of God..."

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\* Ibid, page 24.

The two friars promised each other to make their resolution known to nobody but their superiors. They sent a letter to the general of the Indies, Fray Matias de Velasco, in Madrid, asking permission for the two of them to become missionaries.

In Mexico City there was an Apostolic College, San Fernando, founded in 1734 for the purpose of training missionaries for the Indian missions. About the time Fray Palóu and Fray Serra sent their letter, an official representative from the College of San Fernando had arrived in Spain for the purpose of recruiting thirty-three candidates for the missions. The response the Majorcans received was rather discouraging: The names of Serra and Palóu would be remembered in case there were any unexpected vacancies. Because of past refusals from certain Majorcan superiors to provide missionaries, recruiters had formed the habit of looking elsewhere. This being the case, the contingent of thirty-three had already been found and were gathering in Cádiz, Spain, waiting to sail.

Fray Serra went to Petra to give a Holy Week mission. Both he and Fray Palóu prayed to do God's will. When five of the thirty-three chosen friars changed their minds upon seeing the Atlantic and reflecting on the long voyage ahead, permission was sent to the two Majorcans to join the group. The letter of permission, Fray

Francisco notes, was "lost somewhere between the friary's portal and the cell I inhabited." A second letter was sent by special envoy when the authorities received no reply to the first, and Fray Palóu went to Petra to tell Fray Serra the good news. Reporting on his teacher's reaction, Palóu wrote: "The fact was for him a source of greater joy and happiness than if he had received a royal decree naming him to some bishopric." Both men still kept the matter secret from the general public. After Easter Sunday and one last pilgrimage to Nuestra Señora de Bon Any, Fray Junípero bade his parents goodbye, but without telling them how much of a goodbye it really was. He would, before embarking from Cádiz, write them a letter of explanation.

### Atlantic Crossing

On Low Sunday, April 13, 1749, the missionaries bade their brethren at San Francisco a tearful farewell. Fray Serra made a public confession of his faults and showed his humility and affection by kissing the feet of all the friars present, including the novices. The Father **Guardian** gave them his blessing, and the two went aboard a cargo ship that would take them to Malaga, where they would catch another boat to Cádiz. Fray Junípero Serra was thirty-five years old and Fray Francisco Palóu was twenty-six.

This voyage, the first on the open

seas for the two Majorcans, lasted fifteen days. What could have been something of a retreat turned into a continuous battle with the English captain, who perhaps had been indulging in too much grog. Don DeNevi and Fr. Francis Moly describe the trip, drawing from the authoritative biography by Fray Palóu:



“According to Palóu, the Englishman was ‘an obstinate heretic’ who had dabbled in theology. Despite the language barrier, he continually insisted on arguing religion; the two Franciscans scarcely had time alone enough to recite the **Divine Office**. Musty Bible in hand, the provocative sea captain argued his views, never realizing that Serra was an expert in sacred theology with five years’ experience examining doctoral candidates... In response to the captain’s passion for argument, Serra would quote chapter and verse from memory, suggesting the man look up the corresponding pages in the Bible. When this became too embarrassing for the captain, he replied that the pages must be missing. The captain became so irate that he threatened

to throw Junípero and Francisco overboard and proceed directly to London. Palóu considered the threat serious. Serra had to remind the sour, cantankerous fellow that if he did not deliver the friars safely to Malaga, there would be international repercussions. ‘Our king would demand indemnity from your king, and you will pay with your head.’ One evening, the man became so furious he pulled his dagger and placed it at Serra’s throat, ‘apparently with the intention of taking his life.’ But the anger subsided, and the bully withdrew the knife and stalked off, leaving a torrent of abuse in his wake.”\*

Fray Palóu, far more worried than his companion, spent a sleepless night, but they arrived safely in Malaga the following morning and in Cádiz two weeks later.

Four months were spent in Cádiz

\* Ibid, page 31.



waiting for all the papers, plans, and supplies to be gathered. There were still several vacancies in the band of missionary candidates, so upon Fray Junípero's request, three more Majorcans were added to the roster: Fathers Juan Crespí, Rafael Verger (who would become the superior at the College of San Fernando), and Guillermo Vicens. When everything was finally ready, on August 30, 1749, thirty-one Franciscans and a number of Dominicans set sail for Mexico — first stop: Puerto Rico!

Before they left, Fray Serra sent a letter for his parents to a fellow friar, Fray Francisco Serra (apparently no close relative), who was to read it to the family. Filial love and tenderness, as well as strong determination to do God's will, marked the letter of this son whom they would not see again this side of Heaven.

Although the Atlantic crossing was a quick, uneventful one for those days, it was by no means comfortable.

On board, there was very little space and less water; for, fearing that the water supply would give out in the October heat, the captain rationed the water to one small glassful per meal. Even with the generosity of a Majorcan sailor on board, the friars suffered from this circumstance. Fray Palóu recalled that, when a fellow-passenger asked Fray Serra about how he fared, he replied: "It does not bother me at all... I have discovered an excellent remedy against thirst, and that is to eat less and talk less, and so save my saliva." However, this did not prevent the mortified religious to exclaim at the end of the voyage, "Sometimes I would have drunk from the dirtiest puddle in the street; for a sip of water I would have done anything."\*

Since Fray Serra was never sea-

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\* *The Long Road of Father Serra*, Theodore Maynard, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc, 1954, page 48.

sick, he said Mass every day, unless the waves were too high. As he made himself available to everyone, his priestly heart had plenty of opportunity to spend itself, especially in hearing confessions.

### **Puerto Rico**

On the Feast of Saint Luke, October eighteenth, the weary, thirsty missionaries arrived at the port of San Juan, Puerto Rico, where there was an eighteen-day layover for supplies. The captain was supposed to supply them with provisions during this time, but upon arrival, he went back on the agreement and told the missionaries they would have to fend for themselves. He was so tightfisted, he did not even give them any chocolate! (Chocolate — a Spanish staple — and snuff tobacco were two provisions that even the very ascetic Fray Serra found it difficult to be without.) They probably fared better with the new arrangement, though, since the people took the friars to their hearts and provided for them generously.

That San Juan was as good a place as any to begin their apostolic work was apparently Fray Junípero's impression, for without taking any time to rest, he announced: "Tomorrow, for the comfort of the inhabitants, we shall begin a mission which will last as long as our ship remains in port. I invite all to come tomorrow night to the cathedral, where it will commence."

During the mission, which consisted of sermons, processions, and other spiritual exercises, the hardest work was to hear all the confessions, which sometimes lasted from three in the morning until midnight. Here, as elsewhere, Fray Serra showed his selfless zeal and charity. He also shows his humility, in deeming his sermons to be of no worth, while praising the sermons of the other friars enthusiastically: "Mine were chaff; theirs, gold and grain; mine, cold as snow; theirs, warm and ardent as fire; mine were dark as night; theirs, clear and cheerful as day."

At the end of the eighteen days, having said Mass on the Feast of All Saints, the friars embarked on the month-long journey ahead through the islands and reefs of the Caribbean. On December second, a great storm arose and raged for two days. All thought they would perish. Throughout the nights of terror, Fray Junípero was very calm. When Palóu asked if he wasn't afraid, Fray Serra replied that he was; but when he thought about why he had come, his fears were allayed. Upon someone's suggestion, all the religious wrote the name of the saint in whom they had the most confidence, and placed the slips in a bowl (Fray Serra wrote the name of Saint Francis Solano, and Fray Palóu that of Saint Michael). A name was drawn, everyone looked: *Viva Santa Barbara!* The storm calmed down and they were able to

continue towards Vera Cruz. It was on December fourth, the feast of Saint Barbara, and also the day of Saint Francis Xavier's burial, that they so narrowly avoided shipwreck.

The ocean-weary mission band arrived at Vera Cruz on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. "The ship was leaking and without a mainmast, and the officers assured [the friars] that they could not have kept at sea a single day longer."\* When the friars gathered for the Mass and sermon of thanksgiving (part of the promise to Saint Barbara for her intercession), the sermon was entrusted to Fray Serra's "insignificant self," as he said. Fray Palóu, however, writes that his sermon was most inspiring, narrating the wonders of God's protection over their entire trip.

Vera Cruz was the gateway to Spanish territory in the Americas. *El Camino Real*, the King's highway, formed a cross, running inland two hundred fifty miles to Mexico City (the intersection of the cross), then another two hundred miles south-southwest to the Pacific (at Acapulco), with the other branch running north and south from Santa Fe (now in New Mexico) over a thousand miles into Central America. (Blessed Junípero Serra would later be partially responsible for another branch of *El Camino Real*, north along the Pacific Coast.) Right now, however, Mexico

City was the friars' goal: over two hundred miles of a dirt path leading "through tropical forests, over arid plains and high plateaus, and across formidable mountains, with volcanoes, lakes and perennial snow." Fray Serra and another friar decided to walk this unfamiliar trail in strict accordance with the Franciscan Rule, which stated that a friar "must not ride on horseback unless compelled by manifest necessity or infirmity." The rest of the group came under the exceptions because they were either ill or verging on illness.

### Down Mexico Way

With only their **breviaries** (for the recitation of the **Divine Office**), the two friars set out with complete trust in Divine Providence. They would beg their food and lodging from Indian and Spanish families along the way *por amor de Dios* — "for the love of God." For fifteen days they walked, averaging fifteen miles a day. Later, Fray Serra would tell of several incidents from this trip. He told of someone coming along, from a great distance and at just the right time, to show them where to ford a river in their path. The same stranger provided the friars with shelter that night, after which they discovered ice on the road from a cold rain. The missionaries felt sure they would have died if not for the man's timely generosity in answer to their prayer. Another time, just when the friars

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\* Ibid, page 54.

thought they would faint from heat and exhaustion, a man on horseback came by and gave them a few pomegranates which provided them with the strength to continue.

There was only one serious complication on their whole trip, but its effects would be felt for the rest of Fray Junípero's life. "His left foot became swollen, and he was bothered by a burning itch, which he blamed on a mosquito bite. One evening, upon arriving at a small farm, he could barely walk or stand. His condition was so bad that he was forced to remain at the farm for an additional day. Half asleep in the night, he unconsciously rubbed the swollen foot, and in the morning, it was raw and bleeding. Palóu later identified the mosquito that stung Serra as the *zancudo*, a variety of Mexican mosquito whose sting can be fierce. Without the proper rest and medication, there can be serious complications. In Serra's case, the result was an affliction that tormented him for the rest of his life."<sup>\*</sup>

A hobbling Fray Junípero and his companion finally arrived in Mexico City on December thirty-first. They fittingly began the new year by celebrating Mass at the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. They then traveled the last four-and-a-half miles to the College of San Fernando, where they were reunited with the other

<sup>\*</sup> *Junípero Serra — The Illustrated Story of the Franciscan Founder of California's Missions*, page 43.



friars. On the quiet college grounds, surrounded by one hundred fourteen missionary friars, the group was supposed to spend a year of spiritual preparation, not unlike a second novitiate, before being assigned to the various missions in Central America.

Fray Junípero immediately showed his religious zeal. Giving himself only one day's rest, he immediately fell in with the community routine, even asking to be allowed to stay with the novices (a request only partly fulfilled). Following the monastic Hours of Divine Office, "from midnight until two in the morning, the entire community chanted Matins and Lauds, said the litany, and spent an hour in meditation. A brief rest was then taken until around five when the new day began with Prime

## A LETTER HOME

*This is the only complete letter from the first thirty-five years of Blessed Junípero Serra's life. Today it is kept in the Capuchin Convent (monastery) in Barcelona.*

“Most Dear Friend in Jesus Christ, Father Francisco Serra,

“Words cannot express the feelings of my heart as I bid you farewell nor can I properly repeat to you my request that you be the consolation of my parents to sustain them in their sorrow. I wish I could communicate to them the great joy that fills my heart. If I could do this, then surely they would always encourage me to go forward and never turn back. Let them remember that the office of an apostolic preacher, especially in its spiritual exercise, is the greatest calling to which they could wish me to be chosen.

“Since they are advanced in years, let them recall that life is uncertain and, in fact, may be very brief. If they compare it with eternity, they will clearly realize that it cannot be but more than an instant...

“Tell them that I shall ever feel the loss of not being able to be near them as heretofore to console them, but since first things must come first and before all else, the first thing to do is to fulfill the will of God. It was for the love of God that I left them and if I, for the love of God and with the aid of His grace, had the strength of will to do so, it will be to the point that they too, for the love of God, be content to be deprived of my company...

“Now is not the time to muse or fret over the happenings of life but rather to be conformed entirely to the will of God, striving to prepare themselves for a happy death, which of all things of life is our principal concern. If we attain that, it matters little if we lose all the rest. But if we do not attain that, nothing else will be of any value.

“Let them rejoice that they have a son who is a priest, though an unworthy one and a sinner, who daily in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass prays for them with all the fervor of his soul and on many days applies the Mass for them alone, so that the Lord may aid them; that they may not lack their daily bread, that He alone may give them patience in their trials, resignation to His holy will, peace and union with everyone, courage to fight the temptations of the evil one, and last of all, when it is God's will, a tranquil death in His holy grace. If I, by the grace of God, succeed in becoming a good religious, my prayers will become more efficacious, and they in consequence will be the gainers...I recall the occasion when my father was so ill that Extreme Unction was administered to him. I, being a religious, was home at the time, and thinking he was going to die, we two being alone, he said to me: ‘My son, let me charge you to be a good religious of your Father, Saint Francis.’

“Now, dear father, be assured that those words are as fresh in my memory as when they proceeded from your lips. Realize, too, that in order to become a good religious, I have set out on this course. So do not be disconsolate when I am carrying out your will, which is one with the will of God. I know, too, that

my mother has never ceased to commend me to God in order that I may be a

good religious. Now, dear mother mine, if perhaps God has set me in this course as the result of your prayers, be content with what God disposes and ever say in life's tribulations: 'Blessed be God. May His holy will be done.'

"Good-by, my dear father! Farewell, dear mother of mine! Good-by, my beloved brother-in-law. Take good care of little Mike [his nephew, then eight years old, who would also join the Franciscans] and see to it that he becomes a good Christian and a studious pupil and that the two girls grow up as good Christians. Trust to God that your uncle may yet be of some service to you. Good-by and farewell!

"From this house of the Holy Mission in this city of Cadiz, August 20, 1749.

"Your cordial friend in Christ,  
"Fray Junípero Serra  
"Most unworthy priest"

preceded the siesta. The remainder of the day was occupied with Vespers, more studies, Compline, a litany, another hour of meditation until supper was served at seven, then more chanting followed by bed at eight. Seclusion of the friars was strictly observed... Recreation was taken in common on the patios or, when feasible, in walks outside the city. All wore habits of gray wool, woven from unbleached white and black fleeces... Here, then, were formed the missionary minds whose influence would one day be felt from Mexico to northern California. The goal of the training for apostolic missionaries was to become conditioned to privation, fatigue, and penance for the love of God and the sanctification of themselves and their neighbors. But even the best of them would not find it easy on the frontier. In later years, Serra would write from distant California that to the mission should come only those who were ready for extreme fatigue and misery; on that score he could offer them abundance."\*

### Sierra Gorda

When Fray Junípero and his companions had been at the college for less than six months, the college guardian, Fray Velasco found himself forced to seek for volunteer missionaries from the college. The field of labor was the Sierra Gorda missions, a half-

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\*Ibid, pages 45-46.

and the other canonical hours, private Masses, and the Mass for the whole community. Only at the conclusion of these Masses was a light breakfast of a roll and chocolate eaten... After this followed classes in the languages of Mexico's Indian tribes, on methods of organizing and maintaining missions, or on theology. A noonday meal and a visit to the Blessed Sacrament

*Don Gaspar de Portolá, the first Spanish governor of California.*

moon of outposts in the rugged Sierra Gorda, one hundred fifty miles north of Mexico City, in the heart of the Sierra Madre mountain range. Fray Serra immediately volunteered, and with him several dozen others. A half dozen were chosen, including Fray Junípero and Fray Francisco Palóu. As before in Majorca, there were those in Mexico City who didn't want to send Fray Serra away after having heard him preach, but Fray Velasco knew what he was doing. He even tried to appoint Fray Junípero as the president (prefect) of the Sierra Gorda mission, but Fray Serra, pleading his inexperience, talked him out of it. At last, in 1750, Fray Junípero Serra was going to the missions, and in the role he liked best: as a simple friar under obedience.

There were five missions in the Sierra Gordas (which district is sometimes called the Switzerland of Mexico), the main one being in Jalpan, founded in 1744. Here, in 1750, Fray Serra, with Fray Palóu as assistant, started his missionary labors among the Pame Indians. At the time Fray Junípero took over the adobe mission buildings roofed with cane, there were fewer than a thousand baptized Indians, and not one of them was making even his **Easter duty**. The Pames were not as fierce as the Apaches, but less friendly than the various Mexican Indians. They "liked to prowl around the mountains like animals," and had

none of the habits of civilization. The padres immediately set to work learning the language, and within a couple of months had translated the basic prayers and a catechism into the Indians' language. With much prayer, example, instruction, and hard work, by the time Fray Serra was recalled to Mexico City eight years later, the Jalpan mission could boast of a large stone church, which took seven years to build, and could hold the entire congregation. And Jalpan was not the only Sierra Gorda mission under Fr. Serra's guidance to build a stone church. More importantly, the Indians were practicing the Faith. The former savages reasoned, "If the good padre needs to go to confession, who am I to abstain?" To show how thoroughly they had given up their idolatry, the Pames gave their pagan goddess Cachum, "mother of the sun," to the good padre.\*

The Pames were being civilized, too, farming their own plots of land, trading their wares (such as sisal rope and fine palm mats) for cotton to spin and weave for clothing. They could sing the Mass (apparently more enjoyable for them than for any outside listener!) and the children per-

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\* Fray Junípero Serra was made a commissary of the Inquisition for all of New Spain in 1752. Idolatry was strictly forbidden, but no one was ever forced to become a Catholic. The willing presentation of the idol shows how deeply Fray Serra had won their confidence.





formed plays about the Christ Child. Fray Serra had “used every means and method his apostolic zeal suggested...to install in the neophytes a great and tender devotion...[to] Our Lord, the Most Holy Virgin...to the Most Holy Patriarch Saint Joseph, to Our Seraphic Father Saint Francis and to [the other] saints.”\*

### Mexico City Again

On September 26, 1758, Fray Junípero returned to San Fernando, expecting to be sent to the new mission field of San Sabá (Texas), to work

\* *Palóu's Life of Fray Junípero Serra*, pages 29-31, cited in *Junípero Serra — The Illustrated Story of the Franciscan Founder of California's Missions*, page 43.

among the Comanche, replacing (with Fray Palóu) two missionaries recently martyred. Politics changed plans, however, and Fray Serra had to offer up his disappointment. For the next nine years he dedicated himself to the college and its preaching apostolate, while Fray Palóu was sent back to the Sierra Gorda as president.

The preaching apostolate of San Fernando College was no soft job. The college was a home base for several missions, some quite far away (as much as twenty days distant). Our missionary made his rounds among them, spending up to three months in one place. These missionary journeys

*Continued on page 41. . .*

*Top: Founding of Mission San Carlos Borromeo*