

JUNIPERO SERRA AND HIS WITNESS FOR TODAY

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St. Paul once wrote that “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, [then] we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:17-19).

Those are strong words for a happy gathering like this one, on a beautiful day, on a vacation island like Mallorca, in a year dedicated to the virtue of faith. But they’re exactly the right words to begin our discussion today. Francis of Assisi was not a man known for his dissembling about the Gospel. And Junipero Serra, his spiritual son, had the same burning zeal in all things related to Jesus Christ. The key question facing every Christian in every age *isn’t* whether the Christian faith is socially useful, or consoles us when we’re sad, or makes us nicer people. The key question is whether our faith is *true*.

If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead – and I don’t mean “metaphorically” rise, as a kind of shared emotional experience of the Apostles; but rise in his crucified body, glorified by his Father – then we’re misleading ourselves with a fairytale. But if he *did* rise, then the Gospel is true. And then all of creation, and the eternity of every living man and woman, depends on Christ’s Good News being preached. So in the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (28:19-20), he’s not merely offering an invitation. He’s also binding a commission, a mandate, to every one of his disciples.

Francis of Assisi heard the Gospel, and believed, and acted on it. Junipero Serra heard the Gospel, and believed, and acted on it. And now for us, the whole point of the Year of Faith boils down to the same questions: Do we really believe; and if we do, then what are we going to do about it?

This year marks the third centenary of the birth of Father Serra. He was an extraordinary man. I don’t think we can properly measure him unless we divide his story into three parts. So first, I’ll talk about the world he was born into, and what he achieved in it. Second, I’ll talk about the kind of world we face today. And finally, I’ll talk about whether and how Serra has any continuing importance for the Church in a very different age.

The context of a person’s life helps to shape its course. And so it was with Serra. We know Mallorca today as a very pleasant tourist destination. Hannibal knew it as a source of warriors; slingers who could kill a man with a stone or a dart at more than 300 yards.

Mallorca was fought over by Carthage, Rome, the Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs and finally Christian Spain. Serra was born in 1713 into a world without electricity or modern medicine, primitive communications and transportation, and a maximum average lifespan of about 50. For most people, life was brief and hard. Death couldn’t be ignored; it was an everyday reality. The

high water mark of Muslim invasion in Europe had been reached and turned back just 30 years before at the Battle of Vienna. The Great Powers, both Catholic and Protestant, were now locked in a struggle for colonies and souls in Asia and the New World. At the same time, Europe was experiencing an explosion of wealth, discovery and human knowledge without precedent in history. The backdrop of Serra's life thus had the texture of intense religious and political competition, and huge economic expansion. So he really did live at a pivotal moment in the history of our Church and culture.

Serra's life story is well known. But a few details are worth remembering here. He was born Miguel Joseph Serra in the Mallorcan town of Petra. He entered the Franciscans as a teenager and took the name "Junipero," after the early friend and companion of St. Francis. Serra had a supple, inquisitive, brilliant mind combined with tremendous personal energy. He became an accomplished theologian and philosopher. He had a successful career as a university lecturer and scholar until the age of 36, when he felt a calling to the missions and left for Mexico.

Early in his Mexican service Serra suffered a leg wound, probably a snake or insect bite, that pained him for the rest of his life. But he still walked thousands of miles in his mission work with the native peoples of Baja and Alta California. He founded Mission San Diego de Alcalá – the first mission in the modern state of California – in 1769 at the ripe old age of 56. He went on to found eight more California missions personally. He also developed the system that would eventually include 21 California missions spanning hundreds of miles and many thousands of native converts to the Catholic faith.

In his years of mission leadership, he fought many times with military and political leaders in New Spain who sought to abuse or exploit the Indian population. He could be a demanding father to his native converts, but he was fierce in defending their dignity from the colonial authorities. He also had remarkable organizational skills. He was a shrewd manager of the missions' material resources. He identified and cultivated his own successor years in advance. And he introduced products like grapes, lemons, oranges, sheep and cattle that later became key to the state's agricultural economy. He died in 1784, at the age of 70, at the Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel. Today both state and federal authorities in the United States honor his memory for the impact he had on the development of modern California.

Serra's life can be summed up in the qualities that set him apart. First, he had *humility*. As an adult, Serra was a respected man of learning; a revered and comfortable university professor. He put all that aside -- in a century when 36 was middle aged -- for a life of uncertainty and hardship on the other side of the world. That's humility. Second, he was a man of *audacity*. I almost said "courage," and Serra certainly had courage. But courage is too small a word. Serra had courage married to imagination, confidence and ambition; an ambition for God, not for personal glory. That's audacity. That's the kind of courage that transforms lives and history. He also had *foresight* in his planning, *endurance* in making those plans happen, *political skill* in dealing with authority, and superior *leadership ability* with a very limited mix of people and resources under brutally difficult conditions. That's a kind of genius.

He also had one other quality that animated all the others: a zealous *Franciscan faith*. But we'll come back to that later. Meanwhile I want to turn to the second part of our task in measuring

Serra the man. And that requires us to understand the pastoral terrain we face as Christians right now, today. We should probably start by realizing that some of the same civil authorities that once happily honored Father Serra with statues in Golden Gate Park and the U.S. Capitol building now work even harder to restrict the freedom of American religious communities, force the Church out of public debate, and impose same-sex “marriage” as the law. Father Serra gave his life to the task of bringing the Gospel to the New World. But the “new world” we actually have in A.D. 2013 is alien to almost anything Serra could have imagined.

Blessed Pope John Paul II saw the outline of our new “new world” more than 30 years ago. And following his lead, the Church has been calling Catholics to the work of a “new evangelization” ever since. But there’s a natural human tendency to attach magic powers to slogans, which then replace serious thought and effort -- as if saying the slogan, or talking about it, actually makes mission work happen. In practice, the words “new evangelization” are overused and underthought. Unless we reconfigure our lives to understanding and acting on it, the “new evangelization” is just another pious intention – well meaning, but ultimately infertile.

Today – just as in Father Serra’s time -- all evangelization begins with two questions: *Why* should we do it? And *how* should we do it? The “why” has two answers: First, as we’ve already seen, Jesus commands it. We can’t call ourselves Christians and not be missionaries. We need to be active witnesses of our faith. Second, the stakes are real. The blood and brutal suffering of Jesus on the cross were the cost required for our redemption. Christ bought us at a very high price. We needed to be saved *from* something terrible. We needed to be ransomed *from* an Evil One bent on our destruction. Which means that evil is more than just a metaphor; more than just the sum of our human moral or psychological deficiencies; but rather something real and conscious and murderous.

Baptism involves us in a struggle for the soul of the world, whether we choose to see the struggle or not. And the world today makes it very easy to delude ourselves. The hard and social sciences have weakened man’s ability to believe by exalting the material world and *implying* that human knowledge alone can explain reality – but without actually disproving anything about God or the supernatural. Yet people still suffer and die. And because they suffer and die, they hunger ultimately for a higher, comprehensive meaning to their lives. Which means they still can be, and still need to be, reached by the Word of God.

The “how” of a new evangelization, or *any* evangelization, needs to begin with our own repentance and conversion. That hasn’t changed since Father Serra walked the Camino Real, the trail that linked California’s missions. We can’t give what we don’t have. As individuals, we control very little in life; but we do control what we do with our hearts. We can at least make ourselves available to God as his agents. Personal conversion is the essential first step. It immediately affects the people around us.

The “how” also requires us to understand the real human terrain we’re called to convert.

Christian Smith, Notre Dame’s distinguished social researcher, suggests that the *de facto* dominant religion among American teenagers today is “moralistic therapeutic deism.”ⁱ And he frames the creed of this new religion in this way:

First, a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. Second, God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and most world religions. Third, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Fourth, God doesn't need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he's needed to fix a problem. And fifth, good people go to heaven when they die.

Teen religion largely derives from the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, and it flows naturally from what the parents of these teens actually practice. Old patterns of religious faith among many adults have faded into a kind of vague "spirituality," which then shapes the world into which American adolescents are socialized.

For many young people, the moralistic part of "moralistic therapeutic deism" simply means being pleasant and responsible, working on "self-improvement," taking care of one's health and doing one's best to succeed. "Therapeutic" means focusing on feeling good and happy, being secure and at peace. It's about subjective well-being and getting along amiably with other persons. And "deism" means that God exists – he created our world – but he's not particularly involved in our affairs, especially when we don't want him around. He's available to meet *our* needs. He's not demanding on us, but we can be demanding on him.

Obviously very little of this has anything to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ or the faith of the martyrs. And that's a problem.

In practice, American society now breeds a kind of radical self-focus and practical atheism – not by refuting faith in God, but by rendering God irrelevant to people's needs and urgencies of the moment. As Christopher Lasch saw in *The Culture of Narcissism*, consumer culture tends to create weak personalities dependent on group behavior and approval, and therefore more susceptible to advertising and product consumption.ⁱⁱ The hard and social sciences replace the clergy as a source of guidance and meaning. And social media and mass entertainment abolish solitude and personal reflection.

So in an age of massive self-absorption, the result is that real individuality and self-mastery are withering. Why? Because the communities that root and shape an individual in distinctive moral codes and histories – in other words, our families, Churches, synagogues and fraternal organizations – can't compete with the noise and flash of consumer society.

Here's what that means for all of us as believers. A "new" evangelization must start with the sober knowledge that much of the once-Christian developed world, and even many self-described Christians, are in fact pagan. Christian faith is not a habit. It's not a useful moral code. It's not an exercise in nostalgia. It's a restlessness, a consuming fire in the heart to experience the love of Jesus Christ and then share it with others -- *or it's nothing at all*. Mastering the new social and demographic data that describe today's world, and the new communications tools to reach it, are vitally important for the Church. But nothing can be accomplished if we lack faith and zeal ourselves. We – and that means you and I -- are the means God uses to change the world. The material tools are secondary. People, *not* things, are decisive.

That brings us to the third and final part in measuring the life of Father Serra. I said a few moments ago that Junipero Serra had one particular quality -- a deep and zealous Franciscan faith -- that unified and animated all his other gifts. Serra was a loyal son of St. Francis, and in the second book of *The Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano we read this description of the 13th century man who sought to live the Gospel without gloss or compromise, and who shaped Serra's life:

"In these last times, a new evangelist, like one of the rivers of paradise, has poured out the streams of the Gospel in a holy flood over the whole world. [Francis] preached the way of the Son of God and the teaching of truth in his deeds. In him and through him an unexpected joy and a holy newness came into the world. A shoot of the ancient religion suddenly renewed the old and decrepit. A new spirit was placed in the hearts of the elect, and a holy anointing has been poured out in their midst" (89).

Elsewhere Thomas of Celano writes:

"The brothers who lived with [Francis] knew that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips. He was always with Jesus: Jesus in his heart, Jesus in his mouth, Jesus in his ears, Jesus in his eyes, Jesus in his hands. He bore Jesus always in his whole body . . . Often as he walked along a road, thinking and singing of Jesus, he would forget his destination and start inviting all the elements to praise Jesus" (115).

The heart of every fresh work of evangelization is this kind of ardor; a passionate faith that can only come from seeking out and giving ourselves entirely to Jesus Christ, no matter what the cost. Just as Francis was raised up in his time to preach the Gospel with new passion in new kinds of ways, so Junipero Serra followed the same path, with the same unshakeable faith, to preach Jesus Christ to new souls, on a new continent, in a new world.

A friend once warned me that the Second Law of Thermodynamics applies just as surely in our personal and communal spiritual lives as it does in science. He was right. Even the most heated outburst of energy immediately begins to cool. Everything moves toward "average." Boredom triumphs. Even the Gospel can go flat -- which led the great Christian philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, to remark that "Our greatest foe [as believers] is boredom with the truth." The Word of God remains young and alive only to the degree that you and I live it zealously ourselves and share it generously with others.

I began my talk today with a passage from St. Paul because the theme of this conference -- "*Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel*" (9:16) -- comes from the same First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. The irony, the glory and the joy of faith in Jesus Christ is that the more we give it away to others, the stronger it grows, and the more we have for ourselves to feed our own hearts. George Bernard Shaw once said that "When I was young, I observed that nine out of every ten things I did were failures, so I did ten times more work." Shaw was never a friend of Christianity, but that just makes me happier in borrowing his words. Young or old, we need to live our faith as Junipero Serra did -- all in, 100 percent, holding nothing back, with charity, endurance, passion and hope. That kind of faith changes lives and remakes the world.

Junipero Serra heard the Gospel, and believed, and acted on it. Today, here, beginning *now*, God calls us to the privilege of doing the same.

ⁱ See Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005

ⁱⁱ See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1979