

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MISSION PERIOD

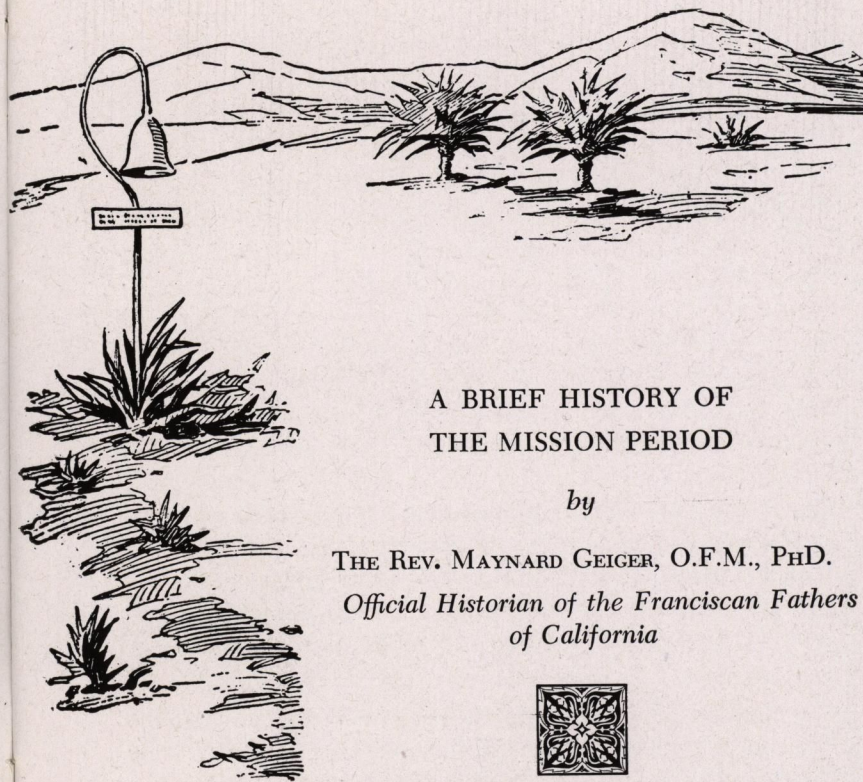


by Maynard Geiger, O.F.M., Ph.D.





PADRE JUNIPERO SERRA, O.F.M.



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THE MISSION PERIOD

*by*

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To Spain, the fruitful mother of Catholic colonies, California owes its early development. Its effectual occupation—in 1769—was accompanied by a purposeful plan. New Spain, or Mexico, became Spanish through its conquest by Cortés in 1519. Step by step conquistador and padre made their way ever northward into Sinaloa, Sonora, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Cabrillo sailed along the California coast in 1542 while Vizcaíno revisited the same shore in 1602. Then followed a long period of silence until 1769. For a century and a half, California was a neglected but not a forgotten land. It was only when rivalry and competition for its possession by another power became manifest, that California's future course of history became definite. The neglected territory became the object of widespread activity and long-range enterprise.

Charles III sent an able visitor-general to Mexico in the person of José de Gálvez. Within the vice-royalty of New Spain, he effected wide political and economic changes. His vision, however, was not limited to the confines of Mexico as they existed in that day. Russia, whose rule extended from eastern Europe across the steppes of Asia to Alaska, was extending her power and influence along

the Pacific coast of North America. If California was to become Spanish and not Russian, decisive action had to be taken. The occupation of California became primarily a measure of defense. Gálvez was energetic and foresighted. San Diego and Monterey were to be colonized and fortified. To insure the peaceful conquest of California and to make the natives effectively loyal to Spain, they were to be Christianized and civilized. Gálvez called upon the services of a great missionary order who had made of New Spain a veritable Kingdom of St. Francis. The Franciscans responded to his call. Fray Junípero Serra was entrusted with the task of organizing the mission system for Alta California.

Preparations were made for the occupation of California by land and by sea. Overland went Governor Portolá and Captain Rivera, as well as the missionaries Junípero Serra and Juan Crespi. The harbor of San Diego was reached in May, 1769, and on July 16 of the same year, the first humble church to form the chain of California missions was founded. Governor Portolá and his party in the company of Fray Juan Crespi traveled north in search of Monterey while Fr. Serra remained at San Diego. The result of this expedition was the discovery of the San Francisco Bay. The party had failed to identify Monterey Bay. Portolá then returned to San Diego where he arrived in January, 1770.



At San Diego a picture of distress and disappointment greeted his eyes. Disease had been rampant, the Indians were unresponsive, nay, even treacherous, while food supplies were on the point of depletion. The supply-ship *San Antonio*, long overdue, had failed to appear in the harbor. Portolá entertained serious thoughts. He was responsible for the lives of those who accompanied the expedition. Was it not insane after all to meet inevitable death far from a base of supplies? Would it not be better to return to Mexico? He decided to abandon California. After speaking with Father Serra, Portolá set March 19 as the ultimate date for awaiting the *San Antonio*. After that the expedition would leave San Diego. But Father Serra was no so minded. Should every Spaniard depart, he alone with Fr. Crespi would stay in California. He came to convert the Indians and he would not be easily turned away from his enterprise. Father Serra realized the gravity of the situation and had recourse to prayer. He started a novena in honor of St. Joseph in which the governor and the party joined. On the evening of March 19, a sail was descried on the horizon. It was the *San Antonio*! California, whose fate had hung in the balance, was saved for Spain and Christianity.

Documentary evidence concerning the founding and development of California's world-famous missions, is detailed and comprehensive. It is sufficient to state that under the guiding hand of Father Serra, between 1769 and

1782, nine missions were founded in the following order: San Diego, San Carlos Borromeo, San Antonio, San Gabriel, San Luis Obispo, San Francisco, San Juan Capistrano, Santa Clara, and San Buenaventura. The twelve remaining missions were established between 1786 and 1823. The tenth mission, "The Queen of the Missions," was Santa Barbara; the last of the chain of twenty-one was San Francisco Solano, near Sonoma.

The occupation of California was one thing; its effective development and peaceful penetration was another. This latter was primarily a task of the Franciscan friars. The Indians had to be approached in a friendly manner, else the initial toil connected with the occupation might be lost and the desired conversion of the Indians might be frustrated. The approach was made and the Indians were won over to the padres.

The aborigines of California belonged to the lowest rung of civilization. The greater part belonged to that group of peoples classified by anthropologists as nomads or marginal peoples, who live by hunting, fishing and seed-gathering, in a pre-agricultural stage. They were preliterate for they had no written literature. In the realm of morals, depravity was widespread. A host of superstitions and pagan ceremonies accompanied their unregenerate mode of life. A substantial problem that presented itself to the missionaries, lay in the fact that these coastal Indians had no common language; in fact, the languages



they spoke were not even related, for instance, as are Spanish and Italian. Rather, they formed distinct linguistic stocks. From San Francisco to beyond Monterey, Costanoan was spoken; Salinan was the language of San Luis Obispo and part of Monterey County; the natives of Santa Barbara and Ventura spoke Chumashan. Shoshonean held sway from Los Angeles to the Colorado, while the Indians of the San Diego area employed Yuman. Within each linguistic stock there was a diversity of languages and dialects. When the Indians from the various rancherias arrived at the missions, it became necessary to give them a common language, if practical methods of communication were to be available. So the Indians learned the musical tongue of old Castile. Wherever possible the padres learned the principal languages of the natives who in turn aided the missionaries as interpreters.

In the main, the padres found the Indians of California tractable and the spiritual conquest of the territory was accompanied by little bloodshed. While the work of conversion was necessarily toilsome, the methods employed were simple and paternal. The friars attracted the Indians to the missions by means of gifts and benign treatment. The spiritual purpose of the padres' presence was emphasized and with patient solicitude the truths of Christianity were gradually unfolded. To the children of the waste and woodland, the padres explained in simple language and gentle tone, new ideas and obligations in respect to the salvation of their souls. For these untutored

minds, language was supplemented by painting and music as well as by the colorful symbolism of the Catholic ritual. A moderate discipline was imposed on the mission Indians, founded on a blend of strictness and prudence.

Life at the missions took on the aspect of benevolent paternalism. Unbiased historians agree that the communal life led by the mission Indians was the only practical way to bring about a mode of life at once Christian and civilized. A review of a day's routine at any of the missions will serve to show the balance and sanity employed by the missionaries in educating their charges along the path of civilization.

The mission bell called the adults to Divine service at sunrise. One of the fathers celebrated Holy Mass while another recited with the Indians the accustomed prayers and the *doctrina*. These services terminated with the *Alabado* or hymn of praise. Breakfast, consisting of *atole*, or gruel of corn, followed. After the morning meal, work was assigned to the men and the women. The men were employed in the fields, the pastures and the workshops. The women, under the guidance of matrons, employed their time with needlework and handicraft. Thus the Indians occupied themselves till noon when the principal meal of the day, consisting of *pozole* (gruel), meat, vegetables in season were served. Two hours were allowed for this dinner and a period of relaxation. Work continued in the afternoon from two to five o'clock. Religious exercises together with instruction followed at five, while sup-



per was served at six. The entire evening was free for recreation and diversion. At night the girls and unmarried women were taken to separate quarters in charge of a matron, usually the wife of the *mayordomo*.

The Indians fully participated in the services of the Church. They composed the choir which sang at High Mass. This choir was supplemented by instrumental music. The notes for the singers were written in white, yellow, red, and black to indicate the parts to be sung by groups in four-voice renditions. A copy of this clever method of notation is extant in the museum of old Mission Santa Barbara. Christmas and the Epiphany were occasions for the Indians to present dramatically the mysteries of the liturgical season. The devotion of the Stations of the Cross, pre-eminently a Franciscan devotion, was practiced at all the missions. Processions, a favorite ceremony of the natives, were frequent. The solemn observance of Corpus Christi was always a moving and impressive event for the natives. The total spiritual fruit of all the California missions is recorded at 98,055 baptisms, 5,000 of which must be accounted for baptisms of Spaniards, while there were altogether 28,040 marriages. The largest number of Christian Indians living at the missions in a single year was realized in 1821, when the padres counted 21,196 missionized Indians.

Though religion formed the focal point of interest in Indian mission life, whatever contributed to the better-

ment of the Indians' social and economic condition was sedulously fostered. Agriculture formed the very basis of the missions' economic life. In a few years the Indians passed from lower nomadism to an agricultural state, a process which many another tribe, uninfluenced by missionary culture, never experienced in the span of many centuries. Land was cleared, grain was planted, irrigation ditches were constructed, crops were harvested, produce was threshed, gathered and picked. It should be remembered that the agricultural produce of the missions sustained the communities: Indians, padres and soldiers. Truly, the missions became the first agricultural colleges of California. The missions became the granaries of the territory, the beneficent store-houses that fed and clothed the multitudes. The difficulties attending this agricultural development can be best appreciated by realizing that the Indians had to be made not only willing to work, but had to be instructed in the manner of working, for an organized agricultural life was as new to them as their religion.

Between the years 1783 and 1832 the twenty-one missions of California produced 4,137,625 bushels of wheat, barley, corn, beans, peas and lentils. Among the fruits grown at the missions may be enumerated apricots, citrons, dates, figs, grapes, lemons, limes, melons, olives, oranges, peaches, pears, plums, and pomegranates. Thus in the matter of diet alone the Indians of California experienced a transformation they could not have imagined in their wildest dreams.







Closely allied to agriculture was stock-raising. California became a huge cattle ranch. Each mission had its quota of cattle, sheep, pigs, horses and mules. Since pasture-land was plentiful, the domestic animals increased rapidly. Plentiful meat was provided for the Indians' tables, while hides and tallow were used commercially. The early California rodeos and sheep-shearing time must have been impressive sights, at a time when the land under mission tutelage served the people so well and so bounteously. In 1819 Mission San Carlos had 3,000 head of cattle, while Mission San Luis Rey in 1832 boasted 27,500 head. Eleven other missions at various times counted over 10,000 head of cattle.

Besides being profitably engaged in agriculture and stock-raising, the Indians were taught about fifty trades in the mission work-shops. Tanners and weavers, carpenters and tile-makers, stone-cutters and wheel-wrights spent the passing hours in useful and honest toil. The Indians received no pay for their labor but from the produce of the missions' fields and shops they obtained the answer to their every need and want. Here Christian socialism found its true expression. The missionaries likewise, received their sustenance from the missions, but no more. The Franciscan friars were not the owners of the missions. These belonged to the Indians; the friars represented them as trustees. Neither individually nor in a corporate manner could the friars, by virtue of the rule of life, own anything.

Manual labor at the missions was insisted upon, while the opportunity to learn reading and writing was gladly given to those Indians willing and eager to learn. In this matter the padres followed a line of solid reasoning. "Had the Fathers," writes the learned Franciscan historian of the missions, "insisted that the savages, who applied for admission, and who had not yet learned to wear clothes, must learn to read and write, their chances of obtaining converts would have been very slender; for that required extra mental exertion, which the Indian hated more than manual labor. It was difficult enough, as it was, to make him learn the bare rudiments of religion, and pictures had to be employed to help him acquire even that much." Moreover, compulsory book-learning "would have been unwise for another reason. The white population, over which the Fathers could exercise no control, cared not for 'education' so called. The governors themselves failed to convince the majority of its necessity. It would have been imprudent to compel the Indians to trouble themselves with something the *gente de razon* declared to be quite useless."

The California mission system as handled by the Franciscans has not escaped the unfavorable criticism of certain writers. But if one recalls the missions' *raison d'etre*, namely, to convert and civilize the natives effectively, to produce loyal subjects for Spain and faithful Christians for the Church, it is difficult to conceive what other prac-



tical method could have been employed. Charles Lummis has described the mission system as it developed as "the most just, humane and equitable system ever devised for the aboriginal people." John Steven McGroarty declares that "the story of the conception, foundation, the rise and fall of the Franciscan mission establishments in California is at once the most unique, colorful and romantic story in the annals of human history, and one of the most important."

In summing up the positive benefits of the mission period, it should be borne in mind that if the friars accomplished nothing more than the spiritual regeneration of the natives, their labors would not have been in vain. "Why came the cowed and sandaled missionaries to California?" queries Fr. Engelhardt. Straightway he answers: "They came as messengers of Christ and their message was the Gospel of Christ . . . they came for the souls of the natives, not for the lands of the savages."

Yet they accomplished a great deal more. Lummis recounts the general blessings of the mission period in the following words: "This historical and impregnable fact is disquieting to thoughtful Americans, that in fifty-four years Spain had converted about 100,000 of these Indians from savagery to Christianity, had built twenty-one costly and beautiful temples for them to worship in—and the best of those Indian churches could not be replaced today

for \$100,000—had given them schools and industrial schools . . . had taught them to build good houses, to be good carpenters, masons, plasterers, blacksmiths, soapmakers, tanners, shoemakers, cooks, brickmakers, spinners, weavers, saddlers, shepherds, cowboys, vineyardists, fruitgrowers, millers, wagon-makers and so on."

Finally there obtained, as a result of this spiritual and material activity, a peace and tranquility that made of California a true Arcadia. For most of this Spain had her missionaries to thank. The Indian, whether he fully realized it or not, enjoyed the blessings of a Christian civilization and an economic security that millions today would be glad to accept if they had the opportunity. The padres reaped the rewards they sowed, in the affection of their neophytes and the benedictions of posterity.

The significance of the Franciscan missionary enterprise in early California has fortunately not been lost sight of. Though some of the missions became ruins, though the Indians were dispersed, the flocks scattered and the lands seized, the memory of the mission days and the devoted Franciscan friars forms the richest cultural heritage of the people of this great modern State. Today the missions, whether renovated or in ruins, whether in the heart of a throbbing city or isolated in the countryside, are the attraction of tourists from the world over. Visitors and students of art and architecture admire not only



their dignity and graceful charm but their choice locations. Picturesque Santa Barbara, undimmed in strength or beauty, despite repeated earthquakes; San Juan Capistrano, a ruin that is more like a jewel; meditative San Luis Rey; San Antonio, with the modesty of a violet, hidden away in the folds of the hills; sleepy San Gabriel; La Purisima reviving its one-time splendor; Carmelo, favorite haunt of the poets and the sepulchre of Serra; Dolores, dwarfed but comfortable in the heart of a thriving city—these are the cradles of Christianity and civilization in California; these are the hearths and the homes of the aborigines who were led to God and the saving benefits of European culture; these are the monuments which even today inspire, thrill, and motivate men in every walk of life.

In a most concrete manner the mission buildings have influenced the architecture of the West. In so doing they speak a language more eloquent than words. Again imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. These missions have made the people of California mission-minded. Men of all faiths have made every effort to fittingly preserve these precious monuments of the past. Historians, poets, and novelists, artists, and song-writers, find in the missions and mission lore a perennial theme of inspiration. Pilgrimages and visits to these shrines, singly and collectively, are today a common event. For the missions are the padres' footprints on the sands of time.

Well has the poet-laureate of our State written:

"Here are their footprints in the desert sands  
That time still treasures from its wreck and loss.  
And here is memory of their tireless hands—  
The brown-robed wanderers of the Cross.

The sea remembers and the hills still know  
The olden trails their sandaled footsteps trod  
Who swung Christ's fragrant censers, long ago,  
And wrought in beauty as they dreamed of God."

It has been correctly stated that to travel by train or highway from San Francisco to San Diego is like reciting or hearing recited the litany of the Saints. The early friars, keeping their spiritual purpose in mind, named the paths they trod in honor of the blessed in Heaven. Topography became overnight hagiography. The mountains and the valleys, the arroyos and the canyons, bays and islands henceforth resounded with *Santo* and *Santa*. Thus it may be truly said that the King's Highway, or the *El Camino Real*, was paved with the names of Saints. California today reverences that religious feeling expressed of yore by preserving the nomenclature hallowed by apostolic men.

The *Camino Real* of Spanish days became the Coast Highway of today. Over it roar things of might and power.



As a gentle reminder of a more placid age, mission bells have been erected along its course, symbols of yore flanking the creation of the present. The *Camino Real* is a concrete chain binding together and making more accessible the historic missions of the past.

Again the poet-laureate declares:

"We will take the road together through the  
morning's golden glow,  
And we'll dream of those who trod it in the  
mellowed long ago;  
We will stop at the missions where the sleeping  
padres lay,  
And bend a knee above them for their souls'  
sake to pray.

\* \* \*

Old Conquistadores, O brown priests and all,  
Give us your ghosts for company when night  
begins to fall;  
There's many a road to travel, but it's this  
road today  
With the breath of God about us on the  
King's Highway."

The personality of Fray Junípero Serra remains the dominant one of the mission era. This saintly genius has truly reaped the reward of immortal fame. A large statue of Serra adorns his native Majorca; his likeness appears in Golden Gate Park, along the shores of Monterey, and in the heart of bustling Los Angeles. Nay, he stands among the Nation's immortals in the Capitol at Washington. The State of California saw fit to honor Serra in 1934, which it officially designated as Serra Year and termed August 28 as Serra Day. Significant, too, was the news from Rome that the cause of Serra was officially opened and a vice-postulator appointed to collect and examine Serra's writings. All hope that the process will eventually lead Serra to the honors of the altar. Serra sleeps amidst the loveliness of Carmel, but his spirit is still a vital force to missionary and layman. His prestige and his name increase with the passing of the years.

It is a far cry from adobe missions to skyscrapers, from the humble aqueducts of the friars to Boulder Dam. There is an infinite difference between the footsore journeyings of Serra and the space-destroying flight of the airplane. The crude technique of the Indian artisan and the meticulous *eclat* of Hollywood are separated by a wide chasm. Nearly two centuries before the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, Fr. Serra built a bridge that led to eternity



over which walked to happiness, with quickened pace, the feet of nearly 100,000 aborigines; and it was he who pointed out the beauties of the Golden Gate of Heaven's door. Whatever added blessings we moderns enjoy in the way of comfort or convenience, it was Franciscan devotion to a sacred cause that gave impetus to those first humble beginnings from which emerged our modern civilization in California.

