

U.S.

To Some in California, Founder of Church Missions Is Far From Saint

By CAROL POGASH JAN. 21, 2015

SAN FRANCISCO — For generations, fourth graders in California’s schools, often with a parent’s touch, built models of church missions out of poster board or sugar cubes to celebrate the Rev. Junipero Serra and the religious communities he established along the West Coast in the late 1700s.

Last week, Pope Francis announced plans to canonize Father Serra, putting “the evangelizer of the West in the United States” closer to sainthood.

These days, the pious preacher who once walked much of what is now California, bringing Christianity to the American Indians, is viewed in less benevolent terms.

Prominent Native Americans see Father Serra as far from saintly. Their reaction is as visceral as a dispute over occupied territory in the Middle East. Indian historians and authors blame Father Serra for the suppression of their culture and the premature deaths at the missions of thousands of their ancestors.

“I had high hopes for this pope, who has been making some very pro-social-justice statements,” said Deborah A. Miranda, an Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Indian and an American literature professor at Washington and Lee

University in Lexington, Va.

“Serra did not just bring us Christianity. He imposed it, giving us no choice in the matter. He did incalculable damage to a whole culture,” Ms. Miranda, the author of “**Bad Indians**,” said of her ancestors and what she called “the mission mythology.”

“If he is elevated to sainthood,” said Nicole Lim, the executive director of the **California Indian Museum and Cultural Center** in Santa Rosa, “then he should be held responsible for the brutal and deadly treatment of native people.” Ms. Lim, a Pomo Indian, runs a website for students that she said aimed to correct the misinformation.

Born in Majorca in 1713, Father Serra joined the Franciscan order in 1730. He became an eminent theological professor before relinquishing his comfortable life to evangelize in the Americas. From 1769 to 1835, 90,000 Indians were baptized along the West Coast, from San Diego to San Francisco. Once baptized, they were not allowed to leave the missions, and those who did escape were rounded up by soldiers and returned.

The Indians were forced to shed their languages, dress, religion, food and marriage customs. Thousands died from exposure to European diseases to which they had no immunity. Of the approximately 310,000 Indians in 1769 in what is now California, only one-sixth remained a hundred years later, according to a University of California historian.

Native Americans have complained about not only the cultural sabotage but also what they call the romanticization of the missions’ true history by schools, churches and the news media.

They were especially upset when, in 1986, the Catholic Diocese of Monterey, Calif., where Father Serra is buried at the Carmel Mission, released a report that found no evidence of Indian mistreatment. While diocesan researchers released statements from historians and clergy, no Indians were

interviewed.

Historians have since done more research. Steven W. Hackel, a history professor at the University of California, Riverside, and author of “Junipero Serra: California’s Founding Father,” said that Father Serra “was a man of his age” who considered Indians incapable of governing themselves or, for example, selecting a spouse.

The Franciscans made those decisions for the Indians, Mr. Hackel said. “They were forced to stay or were brought back by soldiers,” he said. “The Indians felt it was a coercive, disruptive form of slavery. The Franciscans saw it in a different light.”

Albert Camarillo, an American history professor at Stanford, said many Catholics saw “thousands of Indians who were Christianized and ‘civilized’ ” as a history of “benevolence, kindness and altruism.” Many Indians see “colonization characterized by the brutal treatment of native people, of forced labor and racial oppression,” he said, adding that the canonization of Father Serra would not put the debate to rest.

Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of San Francisco, who credited Father Serra with bringing “Christianity to this part of the world,” said he understood why Indians were upset, acknowledging the whippings and coercive environment. But missionaries also taught school and farming, he said.

Throughout history, a more powerful civilization “will dominate and seek to transform the weaker one,” Archbishop Cordileone said. “European powers were going to discover this continent and settle here. Were the indigenous people better off with the missionaries or without the missionaries? I would say they were better off with the missionaries.”

Mission Dolores, in San Francisco’s Mission District, was founded by Father Serra in 1776. Made of adobe and wood, the simple, white church abuts a garden and cemetery of slanting tombstones of people with Spanish and

Irish names. In the middle of the courtyard is a statue of a pensive Father Serra. On a recent day, two cousins, both Ohlone Indians and Catholics, sat nearby in the shade of an olive tree. Andrew Galvan, a historian and the mission's curator, and Vincent Medina, his younger cousin and assistant, offered contrasting views of Father Serra.

Mr. Galvan said he might be the only Indian in California who was ecstatic about the prospect of sainthood for Father Serra. Mr. Medina, on the other hand, said he was angry that a pope he admires would elevate someone responsible for what Mr. Medina called atrocities.

The two agree on the facts: More than 5,700 Indians, many of whom died prematurely, are buried at the mission. In one unmarked trench are the remains of 363 Indians who contracted measles from the Europeans and died within three days of one another in 1806. All are buried under what is now church offices, a school and a parking lot. The only indicator of their deaths at the mission is one thin, wooden gravestone the cousins installed.

"If I know what happened to my ancestors, how can I be devoted to Junipero Serra?" Mr. Galvan asked. "I know that because of colonialism, the traditional ways of my ancestors are gone."

And yet, he said, "my family first became Christian" at the mission. Mr. Galvan acknowledged that cruelty had been meted out there, citing a letter in which Father Serra ordered whips for disobedient Indians. But Father Serra, he said, remains "my inspiration."

Mr. Medina was less forgiving. "Father Serra could have gone against the policy of the church and advocated for Indian people," he said. Canonizing "the leader of the disastrous, genocidal California mission system is a way that the church further legitimizes the pain and suffering of Ohlone and countless other California Indians." Canonization would only deepen the divide between Native Americans and the Roman Catholic Church, he said.

When he gives tours, Mr. Medina tells students to “imagine walking home from school, and people have taken the things you care about and make you change your name, your religion and your language.” He spares them the more brutal information, such as how girls and unmarried women were pulled from their families and forced to sleep in tight quarters until they were married off.

Many missions do not like to address the Indian issue and are even hostile toward Indian visitors, Mr. Galvan said.

Robert M. Senkewicz, a history professor at Santa Clara University, said the history of the missions had been somewhat distorted.

“These were largely Indian communities,” said Mr. Senkewicz, a co-author of “California, Indians and the Transformation of a Missionary,” to be published next month. “The way contemporary missions are presented, the Indians are absent.”

Ms. Lim, the Indian museum director, agreed that the history was inaccurate. “It saddens me. It angers me,” she said. “When I hear the pope has done this, it makes me think that people aren’t ready to accept the truth we have. It’s disheartening.”

Correction: January 21, 2015

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the surname of the priest who is to be canonized. He is the Rev. Junipero Serra, not Sierra.

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