

Opinion: Junipero Serra wasn't Calif.'s founding father

By Joe Mathews

Could sainthood be bad for Junipero Serra's reputation?

Serra has long been a singular figure in California, hailed as the state's "founding father" for the Catholic mission system he started in the 18th century. Schools, parks, and one of the state's most beautiful stretches of freeway (I-280 from Daly City to San Jose) are named for him. California schoolchildren are still taught his story.



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Pope Francis will canonize Serra this month – making him one more saint in a church with thousands of them.

Could sainthood transform Serra into a more explicitly religious figure – and, in time, a lesser one? California is a secular and diverse place, where the story of an evangelizing colonizer like Serra shouldn't wear well. And California has long been a place that forgets its saints, even those whose names grace our cities. Ask yourself: Do you know anything at all about the saints honored by Santa Barbara, San Diego, or San Luis Obispo?

At the very least, Serra's canonization should make clear that

we needn't treat the man as a secular founding father of California. As I reread accounts of Serra's life recently, his religious devotion stood out as his defining trait. Steven Hackel's terrific biography portrays an almost supernaturally religious man with a relentless focus on evangelizing up and down California, despite health problems that made travel very painful. He spent nearly every day trying to save souls – establishing nine missions in California and baptizing 6,000 Indians.

But – for all the power of his faith – it's also fair to say that Serra's work as an administrator and builder was a failure. His mission system was supposed to serve Indians, but it was a disaster for them. In the mission system, native Californians lost culture, communities, food sources – and lives. Tens of thousands of Indians died in the mission system, mostly from disease.

For all his religious fervor, when it came to temporal matters Serra was – to put it charitably – out of touch, ignoring the miseries of others. He made little effort to understand the culture or customs of the Indians. And he was no democrat. When Gov. Felipe de Neve, who wrote that Serra treated the Indians worse than slaves, sought to establish local governance and elections in the missions, Serra blocked him.

“He knows how to feign compliance in matters put before him, as well as how to avoid it,” one Spanish governor complained of Serra.

And, contrary to popular mythology, Serra did not found the state. The real impact of his mission work was to clear away much of native California so that future Californians had a freer hand to do as they wished. The state of California that we live in today began long after Serra's death with the Gold Rush, and was re-founded by waves of wealth and migration, driven by oil, mining, war, aerospace, weather, and the lure of our cheap, high-quality higher education. The most

important network of institutions in California history is our system of public universities, not the missions that were preserved by generations after his death.

Serra's new sainthood, and the controversy over it, is good for today's California, and we should thank Pope Francis for both. The controversy, in particular, suggests that we might move to a more mature understanding of the mission period, and that we might eventually recognize that Serra, even as he receives a sacred promotion, deserves a demotion in our secular histories.

One positive sign: An effort is under way to replace the statue of Serra in the U.S. Capitol – each state gets to have two statues in the Capitol (our other one is of Reagan) – with a far more admirable and representative figure, the late astronaut Sally Ride, the first American woman in space. Sexual politics are helping drive this – Ride was gay – but the best case for replacing Serra with her is that she embodies the secret of California's success: our faith in science. (I also suspect Reagan is destined to be supplanted by a more politically correct secular saint, like Cesar Chavez or Steve Jobs).

Legislation to make the switch from Serra to Ride was shelved this summer – in deference to the pope's visit this month – but it should be revived before too long. Perhaps after Gov. Jerry Brown, who once studied to be a priest and has opposed the switch, leaves office in 2018.

Serra may deserve his reward from his Catholic employer, but we don't need to keep honoring him as a hero for all Californians. Here's praying that his sainthood proves to be a moment for us to correct the record. This state had no founding father. We had founding impulses. We had greed. We had ambition. We had crazy dreams.

And now we have a saint. Let's leave it at that.

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