

Padre Serra and Cancel Culture

By Fr. Dave Heney

Serra brought Christianity to a world largely inhabited by Indians, along with Spanish settlers and soldiers. Today, compassion for Indians drives some of the antagonism toward his legacy and sometimes even with violence. Ironically, their compassion is the legacy of 2000 years of ...Christianity!

Before Jesus, all ancient cultures were founded on power, and the goodness of conquering a weaker foe. In those violent days, you would never think of helping an old man being beaten by others. Christians brought a new way. They saw Jesus, the Son of God and completely innocent victim, violently crucified. That meant no one can ever inflict violence on an innocent person, ever. 2000 years later this compassion for the weak and vulnerable is now worldwide.



The Church has always suffered whenever it forgot that lesson in its long 2000 year history. Serra is a great example of getting it right, and often against the all-powerful Spanish rulers and culture of his time. Many today do not know the truth about Padre Serra. Here is the real story...

Spain claimed California in the 1500's, just like many powerful countries claimed lands despite people already there. Two hundred years later they sought to quickly secure it when Russians began moving down the coast. They needed the Indians help. However, for 250 years Spain saw countless East Coast Indians die from disease and did not want that for the California Indians.

What was the Spanish Plan?

The latest in 18th century medical knowledge held that hard work, regular nutrition, and rigorous discipline was the cure. That was how Spaniards lived, and they did not die as often from disease, and had become a powerful empire.

Spain developed a new "Mission" system that was neither a town or a military fort, but a large farm and manufacturing program run by Franciscan priests to (a) secure the land for Spain, (b) to

invite Indians to convert, and (c) to protect them from disease. Indians would have regular meals and lodging, learn woodcrafts, clothes making, and modern farming and cattle breeding.

Unlike the British, Serra affirmed Indians had rights since they were "Children of God." Priests followed St. Francis who taught that conversions happen mainly by showing a good example ...and never by force.

Serra never forced Indians to join his Missions or be baptized. In Catholicism all baptisms *must be voluntary or they are invalid!* The one or two Franciscans at each place also needed Indians to freely choose joining the Mission or not. Some tribes joined very quickly, others more slowly.

Padre Serra goes to California

The Church sent Serra, a PH.D and professor of philosophy, to save souls, not spread Spanish conquest. Yet, on the day he arrived he was bitten by an insect and the wound never healed. The man famous for walking up and down the California coast walked with a very painful limp!

Unlike today, 18th Century Spanish culture also affirmed the goodness of corporal punishment for their children, for Indians who joined the missions, and even self-inflicted on themselves. *This is may be the hardest to understand today.* However, Franciscans could never punish in anger, but only to help a person, whether Spanish or Indian, correct a bad or harmful behavior.

Soldiers were not so kind. Most injustices came to Indians *not* living in the Missions, and became far worse after the Mission era ended, and even a full *genocide* during the brutal early American

era. In his time Serra always protected Indians from soldiers. He fought constantly with Governors for their safety and security, even walking from San Diego to Mexico City to protest a cruel official. He even pleaded for the lives of two Indians guilty of the murder of his close friend.

Why people are made saints is often because they *rise above* their culture. Serra certainly did.

Indians did not often distinguish the missions from the cruel officials and soldiers and so at times rebelled against both. However, Serra sincerely sought only to teach our long 2000 year Christian legacy of non-violence and compassion for the weak to both Indians and Spaniards. Sometimes he won and sometimes the forces of violence did, whether from Spaniards or Indians. His legacy lasted. Over 600 Indians came to pray at his funeral in 1784. He is now rightfully considered a founder of California.



What is the Cancel Culture Today?

Recently, some new political groups now forcefully and even violently block or *cancel* speakers, websites, or events they do not like, or even just because they make them feel bad. There is no respectful dialogue or intelligent conversation at all. *It is the raw use of power to silence others.*

Worse still, they seek to erase whole periods of American history that they find offensive, by forcefully removing statues, changing school textbooks, or threatening anyone who does not comply with their views. This is tragically similar to the Nazi book burning in the 1930's.

It was the Spanish-born American Philosopher George Santayana who said in 1905, *"If you do not remember history ...you are condemned to repeat it."* Canceling history and not learning from past mistakes means they will recur again.

Padre Serra, a follower of St. Francis, and often alone against a powerful Spanish culture, always sought the way of non-violence and peaceful

persuasion, learning another's language and culture, fostering intelligent dialogue, and always showing good behavior and respect. After all, he was also a learned Philosophy professor!

We can learn from his history, and how he fought the injustices that soldiers often inflicted on Indians. *Canceling* that history means their violence will repeat ...just as we see now in the violent demonstrations in our city streets and colleges today.

How do you face opposition?

Whenever you meet people with a different view, take the time to patiently learn their "language" and their values and goals. Learn *why* they hold those views and seek possible areas of agreement. Treat everyone with respect even if no agreement is ever reached. Of course, never use force or fear, but never allow violence against yourself either.

History is an important teacher. Even every Mass begins with a *Penitential Rite*, where you reflect on your past mistakes ...*precisely to learn and grow from them, and not be forever condemned by them...as a Cancel Culture promotes.*

A Cancel Culture denies your mind the stimulus of new ideas and other points of view. It staggers human imagination. A *Cancel Culture* condemns you to never learn or grow in wisdom.

This is an important time to never accept the silencing of your voice or forgetting the lessons from our past history, both good and bad.

Most especially, you can learn from the non-violent example of Our Lord and the early Church that faced an enormously cruel and violent Roman Empire. Their example of love changed hearts and souls then, and can today as well, and in a way that respects the freedom and goodness inherent in every human being.

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