AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF HISTORIC PROPORTIONS

This January while we busily welcomed students to study early California history, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, announced the coming official canonization ceremony for Father Junipero Serra. This announcement immediately generated interest and discussion. For some it generated new visits to the Mission since it is the only mission with a chapel still standing where Father Serra once celebrated mass.

With this global announcement came about an awareness that we as a “community of caretakers” are about to experience something special and need to prepare for change. This announcement led us to launch our Hope for the Pope campaign to attract the attention of the Holy Father to visit the Mission San Juan Capistrano during his visit to the United States. It also launched an effort to save the Father Serra statue in the nation’s US Congressional and Capitol building where it has been one of two representing the state of California since 1931.

To work on behalf of a site founded by someone who is still relevant some 300 years after his birth is challenging. From where I sit there is no denying that Father Serra’s contributions to the founding of this mission, and the eventual state of California, are significant, worth celebrating and recognizing both locally and nationally.

However, this new chapter in the Mission’s history requires us to responsibly study and discern what the records say, and to seek input from experts on how to recognize a founder whose legacy dots the coastal edges of our California with its mission towns and yet is the target of criticism by some. For me, Father Serra’s unintended impact was to iconically knit together California. His legacy is still best understood as serving as the deliverer of the Catholic faith here to the West, the framer of a state, and ultimately, the recorder of the indigenous people’s Catholic sacraments of baptisms, marriages and deaths – records today that are critical to the process of those seeking documentation that their history is indeed true.

While the missions are a reflection of the past, they are also a place for looking forward. Each day, as people sign our Hope for the Pope petition or send emails asking that the Father Serra statue remain in place, I am inspired.

It is said that those who shape history don’t always get the acclaim they deserve. Those helping with the petition and statue are saving history. Due to Father Serra, the missions are in the news and being talked about today, subsequently generating interest and care for early California landmarks that might otherwise be forgotten.

So, for all of this we say “thank you” to Father Serra, for giving us this mission system, and for being a person of great ambition, zeal, and optimism, traits we can still learn from. As we celebrate, we can also develop a better appreciation for what 18th century life meant to the people who lived here then, and do our best to sensitively deliver a site that appropriately celebrates those who were here before Serra.

See you on the path,

Mechelle Lawrence Adams
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