



Journey to the Sun: Junipero Serra's Dream and the Founding of California

Gregory Orfalea

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The fascinating narrative of the remarkable life of Junípero Serra, the intrepid priest who led Spain and the Catholic Church into California in the 1700s and became a key figure in the making of the American West.

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In the year 1749, at the age of thirty-six, Junípero Serra left his position as a highly regarded priest in Spain for the turbulent and dangerous New World, knowing he would never return. The Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church both sought expansion in Mexico—the former in search of gold, the latter seeking souls—as well as entry into the mysterious land to the north called “California.”

Serra’s mission: to spread Christianity in this unknown world by building churches wherever possible and by converting the native peoples to the Word of God. It was an undertaking that seemed impossible, given the vast distances, the challenges of the unforgiving landscape, and the danger posed by resistant native tribes. Such a journey would require bottomless physical stamina, indomitable psychic strength, and, above all, the deepest faith. Serra, a diminutive man with a stout heart, possessed all of these attributes, as well as an innate humility that allowed him to see the humanity in native people whom the West viewed as savages.

By his death at age seventy-one, Serra had traveled more than 14,000 miles on land and sea through the New World—much of that distance on a chronically infected and painful foot—baptized and confirmed 6,000 Indians, and founded nine of California’s twenty-one missions, with his followers establishing the rest. The names of these missions ring through the history of California— San Diego, San Jose, San Juan Capistrano, Santa Clara, and San Francisco—and served as the epicenters of the arrival of Western civilization, where millions more would follow, creating the California we know today.

An impoverished son, an inspired priest, and a potent political force, Serra was a complex man who stood at the historic crossroads between Native Americans, the often brutal Spanish soldiers, and the dictates of the Catholic Church, which still practiced punishment by flogging. In this uncertain, violent atmosphere, Serra sought to protect the indigenous peoples from abuse and to bring them the rituals and spiritual comfort of the Church even as the microbes carried by Europeans threatened their existence.

Beginning with Serra’s boyhood on the isolated island of Mallorca, venturing into the final days of the Spanish Inquisition, revealing the thriving grandeur of Mexico City, and finally journeying up the untouched California coast, Gregory Orfalea’s magisterial biography is a rich epic that cuts new ground in our understanding of the origins of the United States.

Combining biography, European history, knowledge of Catholic doctrine, and anthropology, *Journey to the Sun* brings original research and perspective to America’s creation story. Orfalea’s poetic and incisive recounting of Serra’s life shows how one man changed the future of California and in so doing affected the future of our nation.

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