



St. Junípero Serra, O.F.M. (1713 – 1784)

Feast Day: July 1

Junípero Serra on November 24, 1713 was born in the village of Petra on the island of Majorca (Mallorca) off the Mediterranean coast of Spain. A few hours after birth, he was baptized in the village church. His baptismal name was Miguel Joseph Serra.

By age seven, Miguel was working the fields with his parents, helping cultivate wheat and beans, and tending the cattle. But he showed a special interest in visiting the local Franciscan friary at the church of San Bernardino within a block of the Serra family house. Attending the friars' primary school at the church, Miguel learned reading, writing, mathematics, Latin, religion and liturgical song, especially Gregorian chant. Gifted with a good voice, he eagerly took to vocal music. The friars sometimes let him join the community choir and sing at special church feasts. Miguel and his father Antonio often visited the friary for friendly chats with the Franciscans. At age 15, Miguel's parents enrolled him in a Franciscan school in the capital city, Palma de Majorca, where he studied philosophy. A year later, he became a novice in the Franciscan order.

On November 14, 1730, just shy of his 17th birthday, Serra entered the Alcantarine branch of the Friars Minor, a reform movement in the Order. The slight and frail Serra now embarked on his novitiate period, a rigorous year of preparation to become a full member of the Franciscan Order. He was given the religious name of Junípero in honor of Brother Juniper, who had been among the first Franciscans and was a companion of Saint Francis. The young Junípero, along with his fellow novices, vowed to scorn property and comfort, and to remain celibate. He still had seven years to go to become an ordained Catholic priest. He immersed himself in rigorous studies of logic, metaphysics, cosmology, and theology.

In 1737, Serra became a priest, and three years later earned an ecclesiastical license to teach philosophy at the Convento de San Francisco. Serra was considered intellectually brilliant by his peers. He received a doctorate in theology from the Lullian College (founded in the 14th century by Ramon Lull for the training of Franciscan missionaries) in Palma de Majorca, where he also occupied the Duns Scotus chair of philosophy until he joined the missionary College of San Fernando de Mexico in 1749.

In 1748, Serra, now 35, was assured a prestigious career as priest and scholar if he stayed in Majorca; but he set his sights firmly on pagan lands. After weathering some administrative obstacles, he received permission and set sail for Cádiz, the port of departure for Spain's colonies in the Americas.

Junípero Serra founded a mission in Baja California and the first nine of 21 Spanish missions in California from San Diego to San Francisco, in what was then Alta California in the Province of Las Californias, New Spain. He worked tirelessly with the American Indians there. He is said to have baptized more than 6,000 people and confirmed 5,000 in his lifetime.

Serra was beatified by Pope John Paul II (now Pope St. John Paul II) on September 25, 1988, in Vatican City. Pope Francis canonized Junípero Serra on September 23, 2015, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., during his first visit to the United States. Because of Serra's recorded acts of piety combined with his missionary efforts, he was granted the posthumous title Apostle of California.

[Compiled by Deacon Dave & Thérèse Ream, O.F.S., Revised July 2017]