

‘Doctrine of Discovery: Junípero Serra’

by Elizabeth Leung
Minister for Racial Justice

During his recent visit to the United States, Pope Francis pronounced the 18th century Spanish friar, Junípero Serra a “saint.” Serra built the first nine of a twenty-one missions system across California that served as religious and military outpost for assimilating Indigenous populations to European culture and Christianity. On the day of canonization Californian American Indians, descendants of the survivors of the mission system, led by the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation of the greater Monterey County on whose ancestral lands the Carmel Mission stands, called for a day of mourning, prayer and truth-telling.

Since early 2015, numerous Indigenous nations and Native American organizations, including the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation, Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, Acjachemen Nation: Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, California Association of Tribal Governments, the American Indian Movement and more, had called on the Pope to reverse the process of canonization, to no avail. In his speech for Serra’s canonization, the Pope said that “[i]t is difficult to judge the past by the criteria of the present.” I think The Atlantic rightly asked “Is the Pope trying to redeem colonialism?”

Junípero Serra has been both hailed and pilloried as the Columbus of California. In recent years many have come to understand the legacy of the 15th century Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus, who landed in the Caribbean, in a new light. Columbus enslaved and tortured Indigenous people in the quest for land and gold. People who support Serra’s canonization say that, unlike Columbus, Serra modeled his life on the gospel of love and actually protected the California Indians from the military authorities.

A common value and rationale underlies both of these stories and provides theological and legal support for brutal colonization like Columbus' in the 15th century, the violent evangelism of Serra's mission system in the 18th century, and the continuing dispossession of Indigenous peoples into the 21st century. It is the Christian Doctrine of Discovery and its legacy lives on in federal and international laws concerning the rights of Indigenous peoples.

The concept of discovery rested on the belief by Christian explorers that land throughout the Americas was empty prior to European arrival, and its inhabitants were less than human. For well-intentioned missionaries like Serra, their devotion to evangelization motivated them to convert native communities to Christianity in accordance with the values of European nations. But Serra's mission systems also resulted in the decimation of the Indigenous population. Such was the human cost of doing good with the backing of imperial power.

Serra's canonization also reinforces a U.S. conquest version of history that ignores the complex Mexican history of California. In the words of Jacqueline Hidalgo, a Professor of Latina/o Studies and Religion at Williams College, by elevating Serra the Pope effectively "doubly whitewashed colonial Christianity by smoothing over the crimes Serra and his fellow Franciscans committed in the name of the good and by promulgating a European immigrant as the saintly representative of a Spanish-speaking [Hispanic] population in the U.S. that is by no means exclusively European." Surely we can judge the present canonization according to the criteria of a just and intercultural vision that we seek for our future. Let us face our colonizing histories in this continent and refuse to wash over the injustices of the past which continue to echo today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Leung is Minister for Racial Justice.

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