



Bl. Junípero Serra

BORN 1713; DIED 1784
PRIEST AND MISSIONARY
FEAST DAY: JULY 1

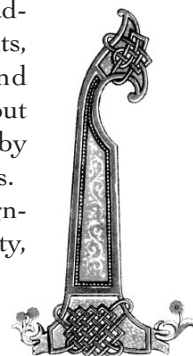
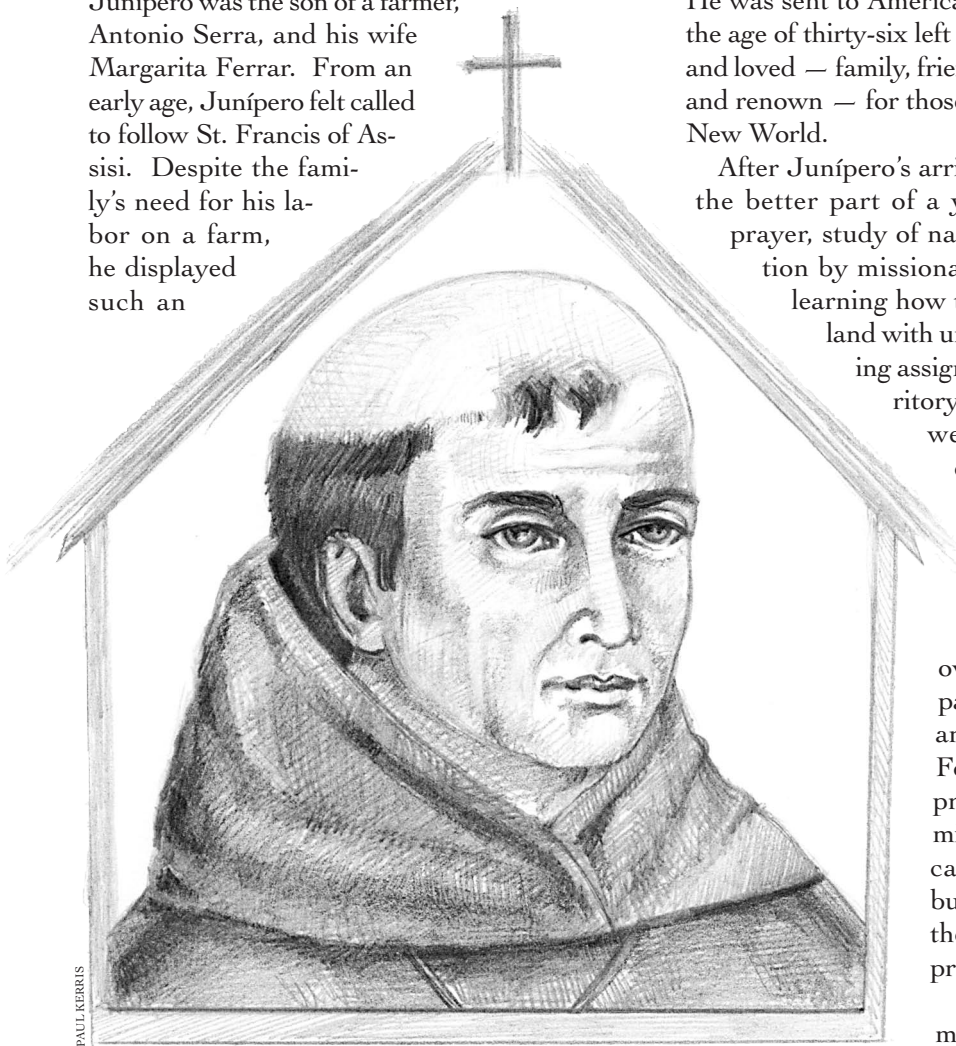
JALTHOUGH MANY SAINTS discover God's plan for them early, others seem to find their way much more slowly. Such a saint was Bl. Junípero Serra, who was in his mid-thirties when he left his comfortable life as a university professor, and in his mid-fifties when he began the last stage of his missionary work, the evangelization of California.

Born in the village of Petra on the island of Mallorca southeast of Spain, Junípero was the son of a farmer, Antonio Serra, and his wife Margarita Ferrar. From an early age, Junípero felt called to follow St. Francis of Assisi. Despite the family's need for his labor on a farm, he displayed such an

eagerness to learn that they allowed him to pursue his studies at a nearby Franciscan church and convent. He joined the Franciscan Order just before his seventeenth birthday and, after several years of study, became a professor of philosophy at the University of Palma de Mallorca. Some time between 1737 and 1739 he was ordained a priest, and following this earned a doctorate in theology and obtained a professorship in that discipline. He became renowned as a homilist and orator and, for a time, he reveled in the intellectual attractions of academic life. Eventually, however, he realized that pride in his accomplishments had nearly derailed his true calling. He was sent to America as a missionary, and at the age of thirty-six left everything that he knew and loved — family, friends, an illustrious career, and renown — for those who needed him in the New World.

After Junípero's arrival in Mexico, he spent the better part of a year in preparation — prayer, study of native languages, instruction by missionaries already there, and learning how to farm in an unfamiliar land with unfamiliar crops. Following assignment to the mission territory of Sierra Gorda northwest of Mexico City, he especially learned how to use preexisting religious beliefs to teach about the One True God and how to adapt the Indians' own religious rituals and pageantry to the doctrines and feasts of the Church. For the next nine years he preached, catechized, administered the sacraments, cared for the sick, and built churches throughout the territory, sustained by prayer and zeal for souls.

Junípero's next assignment was in Mexico City,





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as novice master and filling various administrative offices. During this period, he preached throughout the area around Mexico City as well, building on a foundation of an ever-more penitential and austere way of life. In 1767, the government of Spain expelled the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) from all parts of its empire, including Mexico. Franciscans filled their vacant posts and, at age fifty-four, he took over the position of president of the missions in Lower (Baja) California.

Not much more than a year later, the Spanish took possession of Upper (Alta) California (this was before the United States was formed) and Junípero accompanied Spanish troops to found the first mission in Upper California, San Diego de Alcalá, at the age of fifty-six. In this way he began the work for which he is best-known, the evangelization of California. The next year, he established the mission of San Carlos Borromeo del Rio Carmelo much further north, in Monterey, choosing this as his administrative base. Over the following eleven years, he founded seven more missions — San Antonio

de Padua and San Gabriel Archangel in 1771, San Luis Obispo de Tolosa in 1772, San Francisco de Asis and San Juan Capistrano in 1776, Santa Clara de Asis in 1777, and San Buenaventura in 1782. From San Diego to San Francisco, these missions spanned a distance of several hundred miles. (Twenty-one missions in all were founded by him and his successors.)

Junípero’s long experience in Mexico had developed in him the heart of a shepherd as well as an administrator, and he often came into conflict with the Spanish authorities, both military and civil, over the mistreatment of the Indians whom he was evangelizing. His approach was a strong contrast to the brutality of the Spanish government (and can also be contrasted with “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” policy of the U.S. government in a later age). He himself baptized some six thousand Indians during this period, and created the physical as well as religious nucleus for the subsequent development of California, where the names of God’s Holy Ones mark every part of the landscape and whose capital is named for the Blessed Sacrament.

