

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Junípero Serra

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 28

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IN BRIEF

Saint Junípero Serra

Franciscan from Majorca, missionary in Mexico and founder of the first missions of California.

Feast day	August 28, July 1 (United States)
Born	November 24, 1713, Petra, Majorca, Spain
Died	August 28, 1784, Mission Carmel, California
Canonized	September 23, 2015, by Pope Francis
Era	18th century
Patron saint of	California

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Junípero Serra

Saint Junípero Serra was an eighteenth-century Spanish Franciscan from the island of Majorca who gave thirty-five years of his life to the missions of the Americas. After working in Mexico, he founded the first Franciscan missions in California from 1769 onward, the origin of cities such as San Diego and Carmel. Regarded as the apostle of California, he was canonized by Pope Francis in 2015, in the first canonization ever held on U.S. soil. His memorial is celebrated on August 28, and on July 1 in the United States.

Who was Saint Junípero Serra?

Miguel José Serra was born on November 24, 1713, in Petra, on the island of Majorca, into a family of modest farmers. He entered the Franciscans in Palma in 1730 and took the name Junípero, in memory of Brother Juniper, one of the first companions of Saint Francis. A brilliant professor of philosophy and a doctor of theology, he gave up a university career to become a missionary.

Today his legacy is both honored and debated. The Church has recognized the holiness of his life, marked by prayer, poverty and zeal for the Gospel. But the Spanish mission system in which he took part also brought great suffering to the Native peoples of California, as their descendants remind us today.

Key dates

- **November 24, 1713**: Born in Petra, Majorca.
- **1730**: Enters the Franciscans in Palma.
- **1737**: Ordained a priest; he then teaches philosophy in Palma.
- **1749**: Leaves for New Spain (Mexico).
- **1750-1758**: Missionary in the Sierra Gorda.

- **1767**: Becomes president of the missions of Baja California.
- **1769**: Founds Mission San Diego, the first mission in Alta California.
- **1770**: Founds Mission San Carlos Borromeo, soon moved to Carmel.
- **August 28, 1784**: Dies at Mission Carmel.
- **September 25, 1988**: Beatified by Pope John Paul II.
- **September 23, 2015**: Canonized by Pope Francis in Washington, D.C.

From professor to missionary

In Palma, Junípero Serra was a respected professor. Among his students were Francisco Palóu and Juan Crespí, his future companions in the missions. Palóu would later write his biography.

At thirty-five, Serra chose to leave for the Americas. Once in Mexico, he is said to have insisted on walking from Veracruz to Mexico City; a leg injury he received on the way caused him pain for the rest of his life.

Attached to the missionary College of San Fernando in Mexico City, he left in 1750 for the Sierra Gorda, a mountainous region where the Pame people lived. He worked there for eight years, learned their language, developed agriculture and, with his fellow friars, built churches in a mixed Indigenous and baroque style. The five Franciscan missions of the Sierra Gorda are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He then spent nine years based in Mexico City, preaching parish missions throughout New Spain.

The apostle of California

In 1767, King Charles III expelled the Jesuits from Spanish territories. The Franciscans took over the missions of Baja California, and Serra became their president. In 1769 he joined the expedition heading north into Alta California,

and on July 16 he founded Mission San Diego. The following year he founded Mission San Carlos Borromeo at Monterey, soon moved to Carmel, which remained his headquarters until his death.

By 1784 he had founded or overseen the founding of nine missions, including San Gabriel, San Luis Obispo, San Francisco, San Juan Capistrano and Santa Clara. Tireless despite his bad leg, he traveled thousands of miles, baptizing and confirming, preaching and teaching.

In 1773 he also traveled to Mexico City to obtain from the viceroy a set of regulations that limited the power of the military over the missions and protected the Native people from soldiers' abuses. His motto, often quoted, is said to have been: "Always forward, never back."

His death at Carmel

Worn out, Junípero Serra died on August 28, 1784, at Mission Carmel, at the age of seventy, after receiving the sacraments. He was buried in the mission church, where his tomb still lies in the sanctuary of today's Carmel Mission Basilica. A statue of him represents California in the National Statuary Hall Collection at the U.S. Capitol in Washington.

A debated holiness

The canonization of Junípero Serra in 2015 drew strong protests from descendants of California's Native peoples. The missions were also places of coercion: baptized Native people had to live and work there, they were punished if they ran away, and their cultures were deeply disrupted. Diseases brought by Europeans devastated their populations. Serra's defenders point out that he stood up for Native people against soldiers and colonial authorities, and that he acted according to the ideas of his time.

In his canonization homily, Pope Francis stressed that Serra sought to defend the dignity of the Native peoples. A few months earlier, in Bolivia, the pope had asked forgiveness for the sins committed by members of the Church against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. The holiness recognized by the Church concerns the personal life of the missionary, his faith and his charity, not every aspect of the system in which he worked.

Why is Saint Junípero Serra the patron saint of California?

Serra founded the first missions of Alta California, and several of its great cities grew up around them. For this reason he is regarded as the apostle and patron of California. His story invites us to honor his self-giving while looking honestly at the wounds of evangelization and asking forgiveness.

Junípero Serra left everything, a professor's chair, his island and his family, to proclaim Christ at the edges of the known world. Despite pain and age, he never stopped moving forward. We can pray to him for missionaries, for the Native peoples of the Americas, for California, and for a proclamation of the Gospel that respects every culture. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Junípero Serra and the novena to Saint Junípero Serra.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Junípero Serra in art

- **The Franciscan habit**: he is shown in the gray or brown habit of the Franciscans, with a cord at the waist.
- **The cross**: statues often show him holding a cross raised high, the sign of his missionary preaching.
- **A California mission**: he is frequently pictured in front of a mission church with its bell tower.

Where to pray to Saint Junípero Serra

- **Carmel** (California): the Basilica of Mission San Carlos Borromeo, where he is buried.
- **San Diego** (California): Mission San Diego de Alcalá, the first he founded in California.
- **Petra** (Majorca, Spain): his childhood home and the Franciscan friary of his village.
- **Sierra Gorda** (Mexico): the mission of Jalpan and the other Franciscan missions.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Junípero Serra

Saint Junípero Serra, Franciscan from Majorca and missionary of California, left everything to proclaim the Gospel. Here is a prayer inspired by his life and by the motto attributed to him: "Always forward, never back."

Prayer to Saint Junípero Serra

Saint Junípero Serra, son of Saint Francis, you left your island, your family and your professor's chair to carry Christ to the ends of the earth. Give me a heart ready to go wherever God sends me.

You walked thousands of miles despite the pain in your leg. Help me to keep going through weariness and trials, without looking back.

You defended the Native people against the abuses of soldiers. Teach me to respect the dignity of every person and every people.

We also entrust to you the Native peoples of the Americas, with their wounds and their history. May the Church know how to listen to them, ask forgiveness and walk with them in truth.

Pray for missionaries, for California, and for all who proclaim the Gospel today. I also entrust to you this intention: (name it in silence).

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Junípero Serra died on August 28, 1784, the date of his memorial in the universal calendar; in the United States his memorial is celebrated on July 1. You can pray to him:

- for missionaries, especially those who have left their homeland;
- when setting out on a journey or beginning a new mission or ministry;
- when you are weary after a long commitment and need the strength to persevere;
- for healing and reconciliation between the Church and Native peoples;
- for the Church in California and in the western United States.

Always forward

The motto attributed to Serra can become a short prayer for difficult days: *"Lord, with Saint Junípero, help me always to go forward and never to turn back from following you."*

To pray with him at greater length, follow the novena to Saint Junípero Serra. You can also read the life of Saint Junípero Serra.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Junípero Serra

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Junípero Serra, Franciscan and missionary of California. It is not an official liturgical text. In the United States, where his memorial is celebrated on July 1, begin it on June 23. To finish it on August 28, the anniversary of his death and his memorial in the universal calendar, begin it on August 20. It can also be prayed at any time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry your prayer into daily life. You can pray it alone, with your family, or with a parish or school group.

Saint Junípero Serra's life brings together great generosity and a painful history. This novena invites you both to learn from his missionary zeal and perseverance, and to pray for healing and reconciliation with the Native peoples of California and of all the Americas. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off: in the spirit of his motto, keep going forward.



The cenotaph of Saint Junípero Serra at Carmel Mission.

Day 1: A humble childhood

The son of farmers in Majorca, born in 1713, Miguel José learned the faith in his family and from the Franciscans of his village of Petra. God often chooses the humble to do great things, and the faith passed on at home can carry a person to the ends of the earth.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the faith I received in the simplicity of my family.

Today: Pray for families who pass on the faith to their children.

Day 2: Taking the name of a little brother

When he entered the Franciscans, he took the name of Brother Juniper, a companion of Saint Francis known for his simplicity. He chose as his model not a great preacher, but a humble and joyful friar.

Prayer: Lord, give me the joy of the little ones and a simple heart.

Today: Give up the chance to put yourself forward.

Day 3: Putting knowledge at the service of others

As a brilliant professor, Serra trained students who later became his companions in the missions. Intelligence is a gift meant to be shared, not a possession to be guarded.

Prayer: Lord, may my talents serve your Kingdom and not my own glory.

Today: Freely share something you know with someone who needs it.

Day 4: Leaving everything

At thirty-five, he left his island and his family for the Americas, with no hope of returning. God's call can turn a whole life upside down, and it often asks us to let go of what is familiar and safe.

Prayer: Lord, make me ready to answer your call, even when it disturbs my plans.

Today: Pray for missionaries who have left their homes far behind.

Day 5: Learning the language of others

In the Sierra Gorda, he learned the language of the Pame people in order to speak to them of God. Proclaiming the Gospel begins with listening, and with respect for the people we hope to reach.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to listen before I speak.

Today: Listen carefully to someone very different from you.

Day 6: Going forward despite pain

His injured leg caused him pain all his life, yet he never stopped walking. Weakness does not prevent us from serving; sometimes it is the very place where God's strength shows itself.

Prayer: Lord, give me perseverance when my strength runs out.

Today: Offer to God a pain or a weariness of your day.

Day 7: Defending the weak

In 1773, he traveled all the way to Mexico City to obtain rules protecting the Native people from the abuses of soldiers. Love of neighbor sometimes means speaking up before the powerful.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to defend those who cannot defend themselves.

Today: Learn about the situation of an Indigenous people and pray for them.

Day 8: Acknowledging the wounds

The missions also caused suffering to the peoples of California. Truth and forgiveness are part of the Church's journey. Honoring a saint does not mean closing our eyes to the wounds of history.

Prayer: Lord, forgive the wrongs committed in your name, and heal the wounds of history.

Today: Ask forgiveness of someone you have hurt.

Day 9: Always forward

Until his death at Carmel in 1784, at the age of seventy and worn out by years of travel, Serra kept his eyes fixed on the goal. He received the sacraments and gave his life back to God in the mission he loved. The Christian life is a journey

toward God, and every day is a new step forward.

Prayer: Lord, keep me walking toward you, without looking back.

Today: Take a first concrete step toward a good project you have been putting off.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Junípero Serra, tireless missionary, present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you during this novena. Obtain for me the courage of the Gospel, respect for every person and perseverance to the end of the road. Pray for missionaries, for the Native peoples of the Americas and for all who seek to bring Christ to others. Amen.*

This novena is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer. You can also pray the prayer to Saint Junípero Serra.

PILGRIMAGE

Carmel Mission Basilica, Tomb of Saint Junípero Serra

Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo, in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, is the mission where Saint Junípero Serra lived the last fourteen years of his life and where he is buried. Founded in 1770, it was the headquarters of all the Franciscan missions of Alta California. Its church, raised to the rank of minor basilica, is one of the most venerated places in the Catholic history of California.

The center of the California missions

Saint Junípero Serra founded Mission San Carlos Borromeo on June 3, 1770, at Monterey, beside the Spanish presidio. In 1771 he moved it a few miles south, near the mouth of the Carmel River, away from the soldiers and close to farmland. From there he directed all the missions of Alta California. He died there on August 28, 1784, and was buried there.

The present stone church was built after his death, in the late 18th century, by his successor Fermín Francisco de Lasuén. Abandoned in the 19th century after Mexico secularized the missions, it fell into ruin before being restored beginning in the late 19th century and especially in the 20th. It was raised to the rank of minor basilica in 1960.

What to see

The grave of Saint Junípero Serra is in the floor of the sanctuary, in front of the altar, next to those of other Franciscans of the mission, including Juan Crespí and Fermín de Lasuén. In a neighboring building, a 20th-century bronze cenotaph shows the saint lying in repose, surrounded by his companions. The

mission museum displays objects from the mission era, and a reconstruction of the austere cell where the missionary lived can be seen. The gardens and the cemetery, where many Native Americans of the mission rest, invite quiet reflection.



The cenotaph of Saint Junípero Serra at Carmel.

Praying at Carmel Mission

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Junípero Serra. At his grave, a time of silence lets you pray for missionaries, for the Church in California, and for the Native peoples whose ancestors rest in the mission cemetery. The prayer to Saint Junípero Serra suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

The mission is in Carmel-by-the-Sea, south of Monterey, on California's central coast. The basilica is an active parish church; the museum and gardens are generally visited with an admission ticket. Masses are celebrated there regularly. Check with the parish or the mission's website for Mass and visiting times.

CREDITS

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