

Just and True

Justice means we give others what is due them. Disagreement need not skew a reasonable evaluation of others; justice demands we strive for objectivity so we can honor what is honorable in our fellow humanity.

Justice has stumbled in the streets, as mobs morph from demanding fair treatment of African Americans to destroying honorable signposts of our history.

On this Feast Day of St. Junipero Serra—the Apostle of California—I just witnessed his statue being lassoed, toppled, and smashed by protesters in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Not only have the bullied become the bullies, they now seek to edit American history by destroying any symbol that disturbs them.

We must insist on justice. Irrational and ignorant vandalism have no place in a just culture. Justice demands we give our forefathers their due, whether we agree with their legacy or not.

The mob ruled Franciscan Serra a bigot for bringing Christianity to California in the mid-18th century. He trekked on foot from Mexico City to San Francisco and established missions along the way to serve the native peoples. (Many of the missions are still active churches where I have fasted and prayed for California.) Over 6000 persons were baptized into the Church through his efforts. Did he enslave native Americans of the West Coast, as the mob insists?

Absolutely not. Though no-one today would advocate for the two-pronged advance of evangelization and Spanish political conquest, Serra disdained the latter. Backbreaking travel and labor—supported by an ulcerated leg—were eclipsed by his biggest conflict, the interference by the Spanish military state on his efforts to convert and disciple native peoples.

Various biographies clarify: the sword that pierced Serra's heart was military cruelty of his sheep. Like a good shepherd, he constantly fought Spanish officials for freedom from arbitrary and cruel acts upon his people. He succeeded at ensuring that the presidios, or military barracks, were stationed as far from the missions as possible.

To be sure, he labored in a flawed system that lanced him more deeply than any cross-cultural challenge. Pierced, he loved his people well, pouring out the heart of Jesus for California. Perhaps many oppose him because they at core oppose the Gospel. But one cannot dispute his heroic sacrifice, and how his self-giving laid the basis for California's thriving, diverse Christian culture.

To deface him is to act as unjustly as the arbitrary violence imposed on native Californians by the Spanish military in Serra's day.