

# Franciscan Missions in Alta California

CALLEY HART

The Franciscan mission system in Alta California was developed as a way for both the Catholic Church to spread the word of God and the Spanish Crown to assert possession of California. Franciscan missionaries hoped to spread Catholicism and convert the 'heathen' natives to a Catholic peasant class. These missionaries were encouraged by Spain, who hoped to claim Alta California with a minimum amount of capital and labor. Franciscan missionaries sought to bring California's native people civilization, agriculture, and a generally 'better' way of life. However, the indigenous people were in no need of Spanish help; they already possessed complex political structures, a creation mythology belief system, multiple languages, and abundant natural resources which eliminated a need for organized agriculture. Yet these missions came to dominate the cultural history of California, bringing diseases and drastic lifestyle changes that nearly completely decimated the indigenous people. Between 1770 and 1900 the native population in the California in the mission areas declined from about 310,000 to 20,000.<sup>i</sup> The killing of the native people and their culture was minimized for decades by European scholars and more specifically the Catholic Church, but the truth can no longer be ignored. Despite good intentions, the missionaries brought nothing but hardships to the people of California and thousands died as a direct result of the creation of the mission system.

## *Romanticizing the Missions*

Since their founding, the missions of Alta California were seen in a romantic light by the innocent and primarily European observer. There is the easily conjured vision of a perfect community, "where friars kept the Indians working in the mission fields, tried to protect their charges from the nefarious influences of outsiders,"<sup>ii</sup> which much of the initial literature and historiography on the topic does little to dispute and in fact encourages. The motivation behind the Franciscans and their domination of the native population was not malicious, as the friars believed they were doing a service to God and the heathens, bringing religion to an area in desperate need of it. This made it much easier for

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<sup>i</sup> Alison Lake, *Colonial Rosary: The Spanish and Indian Missions of California* (Athens OH: Ohio UP, 2006) 165.

<sup>ii</sup> Erick Langer, "Missions and the Frontier Economy: The Case of the Franciscan Missions among the Chiriguano, 1845-1930" in *The New Latin American Mission History*, ed. Robert H. Jackson and Erick Langer, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 49.

early historians to look only at the intentions of the missionaries, and to see the establishment of the missions as the beginning of the history of California. A creation myth of sorts developed around the birth of California – the members of the Roman Catholic Church who initially wrote about the missions spoke of the creation of a civilization out of the wilderness, and other European scholars were quick to take the word of these clerical historians.<sup>iii</sup> For many reasons this myth of benevolence has been hard to dispel, in large part due to the adoration and canonization of Father Junípero Serra.

Junípero Serra was widely known within New Spain as a man completely devoted to God, who routinely punished himself to bring the word of God to those around him. This devotion put Serra on his path to sainthood, and that devotion as well as his commitment to bringing God to the native people left those who met Serra deeply impressed with his religious fervor. When Father Serra began the leadership of the Alta California missions, he was already a relatively old fifty-four years of age, and plagued with a bad leg that caused a perpetual limp.<sup>iv</sup> Relentless in his dedication to God, his injury did not distract him from his work as a missionary. On the journey north to the untouched (by Europeans) land of California, Serra held himself to an absolutely grueling schedule and very high standards. “Serra preferred to spend his time at missions where work could be done and plans discussed, even if he had to punish himself and his party on the road.”<sup>v</sup> Father Serra gave himself completely to the missions; he believed he was helping the indigenous people, and had the best of intentions as he worked his way towards San Diego.

Known in the Catholic Church and much of the Catholic world as the founder of California, Junípero Serra was a veritable superstar as far as missionaries were concerned. He worked tirelessly to convert natives to Christianity, and even in his lifetime his disciples and colleagues referred to him as saintly, always concerned for the wellbeing of his converts.<sup>vi</sup> It is easy to see how and why Serra is cast in a flattering light; he worked alongside his converts in the fields, covered hundreds of miles on foot even when he was seventy years old and in poor health, and encouraged others to follow his example.<sup>vii</sup> However, even with all of his ‘good’ deeds, Serra does not escape controversy. Although he did so with the best of intentions, Serra founded a chain of missions that depended upon the labor of the indigenous people and their indoctrination. He subjugated thousands of natives to a life far worse than the lives they had previously led without the Catholic Church. Serra was designated a candidate for sainthood in 1934 and in 1988. After acknowledging that there had been maltreatment of the indigenous people during Serra’s time,

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<sup>iii</sup> Rupert and Jeannette Costo, *The Missions of California: A Legacy of Genocide* (San Francisco: The Indian Historian Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>iv</sup> Lake, 59.

<sup>v</sup> Harry Crosby, “El Camino Real to Alta California” in *Some Reminiscences about Fray Junípero Serra*, ed. Msgr. Francis J. Weber, 40 (Santa Barbara, CA: Kimberly Press, 1985).

<sup>vi</sup> Costo, 2.

<sup>vii</sup> Lake, 59.

Pope John Paul II “upheld Serra as a great man who genuinely intended to protect the Indians from the soldiers” and canonized Junípero Serra.<sup>viii</sup> As Serra was made a saint, many cold hard facts about the brutalities of the mission system were pushed to the side and minimized, much to the detriment of the indigenous peoples of California.

Initial accounts and histories of the missions were written not by scholarly historians, but instead by Catholic missionaries who clearly had a skewed perception of the realities of missions. *Las Noticias de Nueva California* (Historical Memoirs of New California), the first written history of Alta California, was written by Father Francisco Palóu. Not only was Palóu a missionary in the California missions, he was also the close friend and colleague of Father Serra.<sup>ix</sup> In addition to writing the first comprehensive history of California he also wrote the biography of Serra, both of which recount the mission culture’s history from a very Hispanocentric view. His biography remains to this day the basic text for those interested in Serra’s life, and Palóu’s writings heavily influence much of the early and especially pro-Catholic literature. To understand the extent of the positive light in which Palóu portrays Serra, one should read an excerpt from the biography

The zeal of this Seraphic and apostolic Junípero was indeed so holy and ardent that neither his grave and habitual ailments, nor the inconveniences connected with his long and continuous journeys, nor the rough obstacles of the primitive roads, nor the lack of necessary food, nor the barbarity of the wild and savage inhabitants, could restrain him in the course of his apostolic enterprises.<sup>x</sup>

The adoration so many had for Father Serra meant a huge gap in questioning the effects the missions of Alta California had upon the native population.

The realities of the Franciscan missions were much different than the older historiography would suggest. The native people of California were absolutely exploited for the benefit of the Church, the Spanish, and the individual missionaries themselves. Those who are trying to revise the historiography of California missions such as Rupert and Jeanette Henry Costo and Robert Jackson concentrate not on the intentions, motives, and views of the missionaries towards the mission population, but instead on the actual effects the missions had upon the Native Californians.<sup>xi</sup> Jackson’s work focuses upon the indigenous people, taking their stories and demographic details to create a more accurate account of the mission system. Instead of placing the Californians in the background of the mission history, Jackson seeks to interpret the changes brought by the Franciscans from the perspective of the native people, who became the

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<sup>viii</sup> Lake, 59.

<sup>ix</sup> Lake, 192.

<sup>x</sup> Palóu, Francisco, *Life of Fray Junípero Serra*, trans. Maynard J. Geiger, O.F.M., Ph.D., xxiii (Washington, D.C.: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1955).

<sup>xi</sup> Langer, “Missions and the Frontier Economy: The Case of the Franciscan Missions among the Chiriguano, 1845-1930,” 50.

central players and in the end were most affected by the missions. The Costos believe that “when inaccuracy – due perhaps to ignorance or poor scholarships – turns to arrogance, bigotry, falsifications, such is not to be tolerated.”<sup>xii</sup> These effects are hard to ignore and impossible to deny. The indigenous people had no need for the European settlers or missionaries, and the missions killed many more natives than they helped.

The view that the missions were positive holds true only from the perspective of European settlers, who reaped the benefits of having an already established system of roads and agriculture which was familiar to them. These benefits were “bought at the price of native mission captivity, enforced labor, extraordinary punishment, imprisonment for offenses not before known, and finally, the genocide of a whole people.”<sup>xiii</sup> There is no excuse and certainly no reason the Spanish had to mistreat an entire culture, regardless of how many benefits the Europeans could have reaped.

### *For God and Spain: A Brief Mission History*

The Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit orders of the Catholic faith were all used by Spain and the Church as a way of converting and educating non-Catholics throughout the world, while expanding the frontiers of New Spain and South America. Before the Franciscan missions in Alta California, the mission system had already played a key role in dominating large indigenous populations throughout Central and South America.<sup>xiv</sup> All of the orders established various missions throughout the New World and the Jesuit order, or the Society of Jesus, was initially favored by the Crown and seen as a cornerstone of Spanish society. However, in 1767 the Jesuits were abruptly expelled by Charles III due to rumors of corruption, and replaced by the Franciscan order.<sup>xv</sup> The order of St. Francis of Assisi, more commonly known as the Franciscan order, looks to Jesus Christ and St. Francis as models of selflessness, suffering, and humility. Jesuits, who have a more military-like structure, had focused upon converting the native population on both the Baja peninsula and mainland New Spain. The Jesuit missions were well established in Baja California, and although there had been military expeditions to Alta California, there had never been a call for any sort of settlement or missions. With the expulsion of the Jesuit order and an edict to expand north to Alta California, the Franciscans were called upon to become an even greater Catholic force in the Spanish New World.

Unlike the British form of colonization that is so familiar to the average American, Spain’s efforts at colonizing California did not involve sending masses of settlers to the new Spanish lands to lay claim for the mother country. The Crown had a strong foothold in what is now Mexico when it spread northward, off the Baja California peninsula and into

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<sup>xii</sup> Costo, 6.

<sup>xiii</sup> Costo, 3.

<sup>xiv</sup> Lake, 22.

<sup>xv</sup> Crosby, “El Camino Real to Alta California,” 37.

Alta California. The decision to send envoys to California was made after word reached Charles III that the Russians in Alaska were moving south with an eye towards California, and the decision was made to fortify and defend the ports in San Diego and Monterey.<sup>xvi</sup> Spain wanted to ensure a strong presence on the west coast of North America without having to expend vast amounts of money. The missions were founded “with the intent of controlling the indigenous populations on the coast with minimal expenditure of royal funds.”<sup>xvii</sup> Spain hoped that through the subjugation of the native people, they would be able to not only gain control of large sections of the New World, but also increase the amount of capital flowing back to the mother country. A series of fiscal and military measures taken by royal officials in New Spain, collectively known as the Bourbon reforms, attempted to “improve colonial defenses, streamline and improve administration, and reduce costs, while at the same time producing additional revenues that could be remitted directly to Spain.”<sup>xviii</sup> These reforms protected the enormously profitable metal mines in New Spain (present day Mexico) by creating a considerable distance from the Russians to the north and ushered in a new era of Spanish colonization.

Although the Bourbon reforms required a minimum amount of spending, the threat of invasion by the Russians from the north or even the English from the east required some capital to fortify and protect Spanish interests. José de Gálvez, the inspector general (*visitador general*) of New Spain, proposed creating self-sufficient missions and presidios in Alta California which would need very little in the way of reinforcements or supplies being delivered from New Spain, thus reducing the costs these outposts would have required of the Spanish government.<sup>xix</sup> These Spanish bases would be most effective only if they were strong enough to fend off other European powers as well as rebellions and retaliation from the indigenous people of California. Costly military bases could be maintained for a short period of time, but the ultimate plan for control of Alta California depended upon the Franciscans, who were counted upon to convert the natives and cultivate the land, thereby creating a self-sustained economy.<sup>xx</sup> Spain had neither the manpower nor the will to use entirely military force, which is why the missions were so critical to the success of Spain. Royal support was intentionally kept to a minimum, which created a huge dependence upon the labor of the native population within the missions. Under the control and watchful eye of Franciscan missionaries, the native people who lived within the missions helped with the food and other necessities for those within the missions

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<sup>xvi</sup> Felix Riesenber III, *The Golden Road* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962), 22.

<sup>xvii</sup> Paul Farnsworth and Robert H. Jackson, “Cultural, Economic, and Demographic Change in the Missions of Alta California: The Case of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad” in *The New Latin American Mission History*, ed. Robert H. Jackson and Erick Langer, 109 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>xviii</sup> Edward Castillo and Robert H. Jackson, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 26.

<sup>xix</sup> Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>xx</sup> Riesenber III, 38.

as well as soldiers in the presidios and other settlers as well, all while being indoctrinated in the Catholic faith.

The path Father Junípero Serra followed to create the first Franciscan missions still exists in a modified form today – known as *el Camino Real*, it followed much the same path that US 101, the Pacific Coast Highway, follows today. Just as in its modern incarnation it connects many of the major cities of California, *el Camino Real* connected the missions and presidios of Alta California. Spanish for “The King’s Highway” or “The Royal Road” this trail was extremely useful to the Spanish Crown, as it allowed goods to flow from capitals and centers of commerce to the presidios and missions, which was necessary as these were Spain’s primary ways of settling and stabilizing uneasy frontiers.<sup>xxi</sup> The first two missions were established in the same place and time as the first presidios as a conscious effort to ensure the success of both ventures. San Diego and Monterey were strategically important ports along the California coastline, and as such were the location of these first permanent settlements. The two presidio/mission areas were connected along *el Camino Real*, with the ultimate goal being to have a mission within a day’s journey all the way from San Diego and Monterey. Four presidio districts were eventually established – San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, San Francisco – with missions nearby, and as years passed more missions were added to connect all of the missions and presidios together.<sup>xxii</sup> This apparently idyllic network is easily imagined as a dusty path along which a weary traveler would find a welcome place to rest. Radiating missions out from central presidios worked just as planned, allowing for relatively easy contact from one mission to the next.

Franciscans controlled the missions in Alta California until secularization, after the missions were turned over to the Mexican government. The Franciscan order established its first mission in New Spain in 1524, and was best known for the string of eighteen missions they founded along the coast of California. Friars with missionary experience from the College of San Fernando in Mexico City were selected to take over and create California missions.<sup>xxiii</sup> Though almost entirely of Spanish descent, these men had already been exposed to the missionary culture in New Spain, which gave them the advantage of experience dealing with native people. Franciscans were highly educated and the *Fernandinos* (a nickname given to those who attended the College of San Fernando) were especially equipped to deal with the tasks which were required at a mission. They knew the crafts of husbandry, weaving, carpentry, and masonry, as well as how to teach religion.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Franciscans brought a goal of subsistence level agriculture to support the needs of the missionaries, natives, soldiers and settlers.<sup>xxv</sup> Perhaps the most influential, powerful, and impressive Franciscan friar was a man

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<sup>xxi</sup> Crosby, “El Camino Real to Alta California,” 39.

<sup>xxii</sup> Lightfoot, 55.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Crosby, “El Camino Real to Alta California,” 37.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Riesenber, 38.

<sup>xxv</sup> Langer, “Missions and the Frontier Economy: The Case of the Franciscan Missions among the Chiriguano, 1845-1930” 63.

named Junípero Serra, who was the designated leader of the effort to bring Franciscan missions into Alta California.

Designed not only as a way for the Spanish Crown to maintain control of the region, the missions allowed the Franciscans to be deeply committed to enriching the lives of the natives with Catholicism. The Crown used missions to bring to California settlers and colonization, both political and civilizing agents of the state.<sup>xxvi</sup> At the same time the Franciscans used Spanish support to finance and protect their missions. "The cornerstone of the missionary enterprise in Alta California was a directed enculturation program designed to transform the population of pagan Native Californians into a peasant class of Hispanicized laborers."<sup>xxvii</sup> The missions aimed to be entirely self-sufficient, as the food and monetary support from Spain were unpredictable at best and non-existent at worst. Independent and self-reliant agrarian communities, the mission complexes could contain and support anywhere from five hundred to twelve hundred Native neophytes.<sup>xxviii</sup> For the most part, the missions succeeded in being relatively autonomous; each was built with the same basic structure and framework that Father Serra had established—depending entirely on the back breaking labor of the converts.

This is not to say that the natives were disinterested in what the Spanish had, they were intensely curious as to what the men in 'long robes' (friars) had to offer. When the Spanish first entered an area, the natives would often cooperate by showing the foreigners where fresh water was, providing food, and generally helping the Spanish explorers. However, these actions should not be interpreted as the natives giving gifts to the Spaniards, "The Indians were demonstrating the bounty of their lands and their ability to manage them, and they expected compensation for what they were ready to offer the Spaniards."<sup>xxix</sup> In short, the indigenous people were more than willing to welcome the Spaniards into the trading system that was already in place across much of California. They expected to be treated as equals and, as such, assumed that they would be given autonomy from the missionaries. However, this was not to be the case and it soon became obvious that the Spanish hoped to assimilate the native Californians to a Hispanic way of life.

### ***Good Intentions and Horrible Consequences***

Franciscans believed that by bringing Catholicism and European values to the indigenous Californians they were helping the native people, but instead of helping, the Spanish hurt the native people. It has been assumed for many years that the changes made by the friars to Europeanize California benefited the Spanish settlers and also enhanced the lives of the native people. The friars and almost all Europeans

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<sup>xxvi</sup> Lake, 51.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Lightfoot, 59.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Lightfoot, 55.

<sup>xxix</sup> Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 44.

believed that their way of doing things was infinitely better than anything the 'savages' had to offer, disregarding the fact that the indigenous people had grown up on the land and had far greater knowledge of it. Spaniards believed their way of life was superior – from language, to religion, to crop raising techniques. The system of agriculture and farming that developed in and around the missions by the friars made it seem as if more food was available, but the farming style merely made the food more obvious to European eyes. Indigenous people were intimately familiar with their surroundings, and were not the primitive savages that were once so easily portrayed by historians. Native Californians knew which plants were edible, where to find animals and fish, how to use the waterways (both for food and for transportation), and had knowledge of mineral deposits where they could get material to make tools.<sup>xxx</sup> A complex and advanced series of tribes, communities, and family units made up the majority of the pre-Spanish California civilizations, and the relationships between them all was much more intricate and multifaceted than was often assumed by the Franciscan friars. These native communities knew where to find their food, and were able to share information and pass down the knowledge. Though organized agriculture did not exist as in the conventional European sense, the missionaries the natives rarely lacked for sustenance; the California region had food that was readily available as long as one knew where to look for it.

The culture and society of the native people of California had much to offer the Spanish, but the missionaries immediately assumed cultural superiority and failed to comprehend the knowledge the indigenous people had. Unlike almost everywhere else in the world, California had abundant existing resources which could support large populations. California was one of the most densely settled parts of North American, and the native Californians had a society which "permitted the intensive collection and exploitation of indigenous plants and animals. They dispersed their settlements and occupied more sites seasonally."<sup>xxxi</sup> There was extensive knowledge on what food grew where and at what time of year, and they would move their settlements temporarily or send people to collect that food accordingly. The foods and resources which tribes could not gather themselves, as well as various luxury goods such as beads, were often obtained through elaborate trade networks and exchange systems.<sup>xxxii</sup> This trade between tribes is all the more impressive because the variety of languages was staggering – there were five main language groups and virtually hundreds of dialects.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Native Californians had no need for the 'benefits' brought to them by the Spanish; they were an advanced culture with knowledge of growth patterns, food storage, and trade.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Rupert Costo, "The Indians before Invasion" in *The Missions of California: A Legacy of Genocide*, ed. Rupert and Jeannette Henry Costo, 16 (San Francisco: The Indian Historian Press, 1987).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Hackel, 18.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Hackel, 20.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Lake, 9.

Along with God and Bibles, the Franciscans believed they brought a better life to those natives who resided within the folds of the mission. Agriculture is often seen as a key development brought by Europeans to the New World, but the Californians had little need of such a highly structured source of food. "It is probably no exaggeration to say that the California Indians, taken as a whole, had something like 500 kinds of plant and animal foods to use."<sup>xxxiv</sup> Missionaries could not comprehend such a wide variety of food was readily available, especially because some of the food was not easily recognizable by European eyes. The natives knew where to look not only for their food supply, but to satisfy most other needs as well, and often found the European style of farming the land ineffective. Plants and animals were used for medicinal purposes as well as food, the indigenous Californians traded with their neighbors for both luxury goods and necessities, and had the structure in place to produce and accumulate surpluses of all of these things which allowed them to exist in times of scarcity.<sup>xxxv</sup> Spaniards brought nothing to the table the indigenous people of Alta California were in need of and many natives recognized that although the Spanish had an unusual appearance, they did not offer anything fundamentally different than what was already available, even as the missionaries considered them child-like savages.

Spaniards especially thought the indigenous people had no knowledge of agriculture, which could not have been further from the truth. Rather, the indigenous people of California had a completely different style of agriculture, much less formal than that to which the friars were accustomed. The Franciscans mistakenly assumed that because there were no clearly plowed or cleared fields the natives had no knowledge of plant husbandry. All of the food that the missionaries believed was "natural" was in fact carefully cultivated by the natives, and specifically designed to provide the tribes with a variety of food, with species capable of withstanding various weather conditions, to ensure that there was enough of a food supply regardless of the amount of rain that fell.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The native people had an infinitely better understanding of the natural surroundings, yet the Spanish insisted upon their own method, to the detriment of both the indigenous people and the missionaries who lived amongst them. Crops introduced by the Spanish were not nearly as able to handle changing weather patterns, as all the European plants needed an average amount of rainfall.<sup>xxxvii</sup> When the average was either exceeded or fell short, the missions would not have enough to feed all of the inhabitants. Though the agricultural style of the Spanish was not as ideal for the erratic weather patterns of Alta California, it was often the lure of food and shelter that tricked the

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<sup>xxxiv</sup> Albert B. Elsasser and Robert F. Heizer, *The Natural World of the California Indians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 83.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Hackel, 26.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Florence Connolly Shipek, "Saints or Oppressors: The Franciscan Missionaries of California" in *The Missions of California: A Legacy of Genocide*, ed. Rupert and Jeannette Henry Costo, 35 (San Francisco: The Indian Historian Press).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Shipek, "Saints or Oppressors: The Franciscan Missionaries of California," 34.

indigenous people into the missions, creating a false faith in the ability of missionaries to produce food.

While missions did not have enough of a food supply to support all of the neophytes during a season of poor growing weather, it was the initial availability of food that served as a major impetus for the native people to move into the mission. Also, the unrest and friction which resulted from the culture clash between the Spanish and the native Californians made many natives wary of where their next meal would come from.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The Spanish promised food, and had soldiers who defended the missions with guns and superior weaponry. Many of those natives who migrated to the missions were those who felt most vulnerable, in the case of Mission San Carlos, more than 70 percent of those who were baptized were either very young or very old, or were unmarried women; these are the segments of a population that are least likely to be able to weather sustained political upheavals.<sup>xxxix</sup> The missionaries were able to recognize that it was not the need for God initially bringing these converts into the mission, but the promise of gifts and more importantly food. For this reason, most missionaries considered agriculture and building shelters to be primary aims of the mission, if they could not provide the converts with food and other necessities, they would quickly revert to their old way of life.

Once the native people were inside the missions, the friars could begin to focus on converting them to Catholicism. Concepts such as a religion are often seen as touchstones upon which a complex society can be based, and Europeans believed they were doing a favor to the heathen indigenous people by bringing them this aspect of a highly advanced society. The natives had no need for a Catholic God; prior to any contact by the Spanish, the Californians already had a spiritual belief system that included a creation mythology, in which one god (or more) was responsible for the creation of earth and all of its inhabitants.<sup>xl</sup> Catholicism brought little that was fundamentally new or different to explain the creation of the world to the indigenous people, though the friars may have believed that bringing God into the native's lives would make them better people.

Various rites and ceremonies accompanied the religious beliefs of the native people, and several missionaries did recognize these rituals as having religious connotations and meanings. In San Luis Rey, one missionary who recorded his thoughts on the indigenous people, saw that they had "an idea of a rational soul, which they call *chamson*, and believe that when they die this goes below to *tolmar*, where all come together and live forever in much happiness. With this they have, however, no idea of reward or punishment."<sup>xli</sup> The missionaries minimized the belief system of the natives, relegating it to a realm of silly notions, not recognizing the importance that many tribes and

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<sup>xxxviii</sup> Castillo and Jackson, 75.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Hackel, 67.

<sup>xl</sup> Lake, 15.

<sup>xli</sup> Lake, 16.

families placed upon it. This hurt the natives even more, because instead of merely ignoring the belief system, the missionaries chose to acknowledge them to diminish its substance and ridicule the religion of the native's ancestors.

Despite numerous attempts by the Catholic missionaries to undermine the importance and value the natives placed upon their set of beliefs, the majority of the mission residents held strong to various aspects of their traditional belief system as well as their old way of life. This was made possible by a continued contact between natives within the mission and those who remained outside, such as when the friars would occasionally let their converts leave the mission during times of hardship in order to gather food. "What the Franciscans viewed as a necessity in times of shortfall was in all likelihood seen by the Indians as an affirmation that the missions represented a blending of old and new practices."<sup>xlii</sup> While the indigenous people saw no problem with blending aspects of Catholicism with their own belief system, the missionaries saw it as a huge problem, one which they were constantly trying to correct. Missionaries separated the natives from their former lives as much as possible. There was a huge difficulty in convincing natives to completely accept Catholicism, and this was made even more difficult because the natives associated Christianity and the Catholic Church with all of the aspects they disliked about mission life in general.<sup>xliii</sup> Many were willing to experiment with Christianity, but for most it seemed to be more of a fleeting fancy or lark than any actual acceptance of or belief in the white man's God.

Even with the hopes of protection from the Franciscan missionaries and the soldiers assigned to each of the missions from the corresponding presidios, the natives were rarely happy living in the mission environment. In conjunction with this, few friars cared about the happiness and feelings of their converts. Although it varied by person, almost all of the native population in the missions felt some sort of nostalgia for their former way of life. Certainly this homesickness was not a prominent factor in every neophyte's life; those who were brought up within the mission environment likely knew little else, while those who had experienced life before the Spanish doubtless had varying degrees of nostalgia.<sup>xliv</sup> Homesickness is such a basic human feeling, yet the friars rarely recorded the neophytes' feelings towards their old way of life. There are many instances in which it is noted the neophytes would look for any reason to return to the country, yet this desire is never linked by the missionaries to the very human feeling of homesickness. This is perhaps emblematic of the exchanges between many of the friars and their converts: because the Spanish believed themselves innately better

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<sup>xlii</sup> Hackel, 84.

<sup>xliii</sup> Hackel, 170.

<sup>xliv</sup> Sherburne F. Cook, "The Conflict Between the California Indian and White Civilization" in *Spanish Borderlands Sourcebooks: Native American Perspectives on the Hispanic Colonization of Alta California*, ed. Edward D. Castillo, 118 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991).

than the indigenous people of California, there was little recognition that the natives could suffer from the same human emotions as Europeans.

There existed an enormous lack of understanding between the missionaries and the converts. Almost all the friars believed the actions taken by the Catholic Church would lift the natives out of their cultural backwardness, and practically refused to acknowledge any of the travesties or wrong-doings associated with the Church. One of the most obvious examples of this pattern of behavior revolves around drinking milk. In times of hunger, there was almost always enough milk available to the inhabitants of the missions, and the Franciscan friars encouraged, and even forced, their neophytes to drink it. However, while humans are among the only mammals capable of drinking milk into and through adulthood, not all have this ability. Europeans are among the few ethnicities with the correct enzymes to digest milk; the indigenous people of the Americas, for the most part, are unable to digest milk past infancy, which actually contributed to the dysentery and even the death of some converts in the missions.<sup>xlv</sup> The native people not only disliked the taste of the milk, but also suspected that it was a cause of sickness, which riddled the missionaries. This is just one of many examples of the missionaries trying, but failing, to help the natives, in their own misguided way.

Despite all of the Franciscans best hopes and goals, they hurt the native groups more than they helped. The indigenous Californians often neither needed nor wanted anything the Spanish had to offer, and even those who lived within the mission frequently expressed, through varying degrees of violence and anger, extreme dissatisfaction with the friars and the control they had over all of the neophytes' lives within the mission. In trying to force the native people to give up their culture, the friars succeeded in making many enemies within the ranks of their converts. There are several examples of very violent expressions of this hatred the native people felt towards the Spanish priests, and it must be noted that much of this hatred was directed at those friars who abused their rights as leaders.

Though there are not many primary accounts of life inside the mission from native Californians, there are enough to make clear that the missions were often an unhappy place to be. Lorenzo Asisara, a native who lived in Mission Santa Cruz recounted,

The Spanish priests were very cruel with the Indians ... they kept them poorly fed, ill clothed, and they made them work like slaves. I managed to experience some of that cruel life. The priests did not practice what they preached at the pulpit.<sup>xlvi</sup>

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<sup>xlv</sup> Shipek, "The Conflict Between the California Indian and White Civilization," 184.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Lorenzo Asisara, "Lorenzo Asisara and José María Amador's Accounts of the Death of Father Andrés Quintana" in *Californio Voices: The Oral Memoirs of José María Amador and Lorenzo Asisara*, trans. and ed. Gregorio Mora-Torres, 95 (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2005).

Those missionaries with bad intentions literally treated the converts as dirt, but even missionaries with the best of intentions often caused extreme harm – they had been raised and brought up during the Inquisition, and as such did not shy away from mortifying “the flesh for the soul’s ultimate deliverance from evil.”<sup>xlvii</sup> Whips and other forms of corporal punishment were common, and created irreparable rifts between converts and missionaries. As violence begat more violence, the converts retaliated against the Franciscans.

Father Andrés Quintana of Mission Santa Cruz is an example of this retaliation. He was believed to have died of natural causes in 1812, but later it became known that several of his converts had killed him. Not only did the converts kill Quintana, they also mutilated him in such a way – crushing and removing off his testicles while he was still alive – that suggests they were possibly angry at him for his interference with or punishment of sexual practices and behavior inside the mission.<sup>xlviii</sup> Lorenzo Asisara, whose father was one of the men who conspired to kill Quintana, remembered Father Quintana asking of his murderers “‘What have I done to you, my sons, that you may want to kill me?’ ‘Because you have made a metal whip,’” was the reply.<sup>xlix</sup> The metal whip was likely the proverbial straw that broke the camels back; Quintana had treated his ‘children’ horribly over the course of many years, and his converts had developed an absolute hatred towards him, and showed this hatred in. This case is an extreme one, but it accurately reflects the hatred that could build up within the native people towards the missionaries. In wanting to help their converts, the missionaries were cruel and violent. In the end, their malice likely had an opposite result than what the friars had hoped for; that is, to drive more native people out of the missions than into them.

While the abuse by the Franciscans was horrible and created an air of innate sadness within the native people, perhaps even more critical is the huge demographic collapse which occurred among those converts who lived in the mission. Almost all modern Americans are aware that the Europeans brought disease with them to the New World, which swept through native populations as large scale fatal epidemics. While there were several large epidemics that spread throughout Alta California, with deadly consequences for the indigenous people, these epidemics were relatively small because Alta California was so isolated from much of the rest of the European settlements.<sup>1</sup> Relatively few settlers meant fewer European germs which could be passed to the native Californians. Although the blame for these epidemics lies with the Spanish, it was not something intentional, whereas the most important factors leading to the collapse of whole civilizations were almost directly controlled by the missionaries. During the epidemics that did occur, very few missionaries encouraged medical attention, believing that outbreaks

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<sup>xlvii</sup> Riesenbergs, 50.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Hackel, 212.

<sup>xlix</sup> Mora-Torres, 85.

<sup>1</sup> Castillo and Jackson, 41.

were punishments from God and that mortal suffering prepared converts for a better life in heaven.<sup>ii</sup> These attitudes did not win the friars many fans among the native populations, and leaves the missions very much to blame for the deaths – epidemics can be hard to stop but any sort of medical treatment would have been a vast improvement over the complete lack of care the natives received.

Another factor the Spanish could have been proactive in treating was the generally poor living conditions and environment in which the indigenous people spent the majority of their lives, which led to the deaths of countless neophytes. The living quarters of the natives living within the missions were extraordinarily cramped and unsanitary, which made it much easier to spread disease. Also, as previously mentioned, the quantity of food available for the missions varied depending upon the quality of the harvest season, and malnutrition was a major reason for not only reduced immunity amongst the converts, but also to reduced fertility amongst the women in the missions.<sup>iii</sup> Another cause of lower rates of fertility was the stress placed upon women who struggled with conceiving and carrying a baby to term. Intentional abortions appear to have been common, although many of the Franciscans considered miscarriages to be comparable or the same as abortions, thus punishing them equally, so it is difficult to tell how many abortions were intentional. In either case, “the response by missionaries to apparent or real instances of provoked abortion contributed to the humiliation of Indian women, raised levels of stress, and only exacerbated the social conditions that led women to abort in the first place.”<sup>iiii</sup> The birthrates in the missions were considerably lower than is normal for an average population, for reasons beyond malnutrition. Just as the missionaries repressed the former religious beliefs and native culture of the converts, they also denied access to traditional child-care and birthing knowledge, which had devastating effects.

The population of native Californians dropped from approximately 310,000 when the missionaries first arrived to 20,000 at the start of the twentieth century.<sup>liv</sup> Though a large part of this can be blamed on the European diseases, it was also the lifestyle that was encouraged by the friars inside the missions. The discouragement of traditional healing practices, the cramped and unsanitary conditions, the lack of medical care, drastic changes in diet and location, and poor communication between the native people and the Europeans were all factors. The Spanish were both increasing the mortality rate and decreasing the birth rate. In this way, they were effectively killing those people they had hoped to convert and bring under the light of God.

Though the Spanish missionaries believed they were serving God’s will by converting the native ‘heathens’ into God-fearing Catholics and Hispanic style laborers to increase Spain’s power, any amount of success that could be claimed is quickly outweighed by horrible damage

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<sup>ii</sup> Castillo and Jackson, 42.

<sup>iii</sup> Castillo and Jackson, 45.

<sup>iiii</sup> Castillo and Jackson, 44.

<sup>liv</sup> Lake, 165.

done to the native people. This damage was minimized for so long to enhance the image of the Franciscans, specifically the reputation of Junípero Serra. Serra himself was undoubtedly a good man, but the mission system he created in California caused irreparable harm to the indigenous people he had hoped to help. Much of the truth about the missions was pushed out of the way to clear the path to his sainthood, and though he may not have been to blame himself, it was his followers who created the romantic historiography that is only now being slowly changed to more accurately reflect the truth. The mission system killed more of the native population than one can possibly imagine. An entire culture was completely decimated by the Europeans, and though the tribes of California have attempted to retain as much of their traditional way of life as possible, what has been lost will never be regained. The Franciscans came to Alta California to make the lives of the indigenous people more complete and culturally superior, but instead through abuse, disease, malnutrition and cruelty they destroyed an astoundingly complex and advanced culture.

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