

Spanish Missions in California

SPAIN'S INDIAN POLICIES

New Spain lacked the manpower for the settlement of its remote and unprofitable northern frontiers. When the colonization of these areas finally came, it was largely through an ingenious plan intended to transform the Indians into colonists by the use of that remarkable institution, the Spanish mission.

The Spanish attitudes toward the Indians grew from an interesting blend of religious, economic, military, and political motives. The Indians were officially regarded not only as subjects of the Spanish monarchy with rights to its protections, but also as human beings with souls to be saved. Their Most Catholic Majesties, the Spanish monarchs, made frequent references to their duty of Christianization, and the missionaries were untiring in their efforts to carry it out. There were others, however, who were primarily interested in the Indians because they could be made to labor for the profit of their conquerors. In return for the salvation of their souls, the Indians were required to contribute the labor of their bodies.

The mission was not only a church but also an agricultural *pueblo*, or town, in which hundreds or even thousands of Indians were concentrated. There were cultivated fields, gardens, orchards, and vineyards, often fenced with nearly impenetrable hedges of prickly pear, and watered from irrigation ditches with stone dams. At a little distance, each mission had its *rancho*, and eventually, large herds of cattle.

Father Junípero, the first and most famous of the missionaries in Alta California, was a Spanish farmer's son, born in the village of Petra on the island of Majorca in 1713. The family name Serra is the Catalonian form of the Castilian word *sierra*. As father-president of Alta California, Serra founded the province's first nine missions. Throughout his life he was a vigorous, hard driving man, never turning back from a task he had begun, always demanding the full measure of work from others as well as from himself. In physical stature, Serra was short, not more than 5 feet 2 or 3 inches in height—but in courage and determination, he was a giant.

Following Serra's death in 1784 his longtime companion Francisco Palou served briefly as father-president. The following year Fermín Francisco de Lasuén became head of the Alta California missions and served as father-president from 1785 to 1803. It was Lasuén who supervised the building of the beautiful churches, several of which are extant, that replaced the rude structures of Serra's time. Under Lasuén each mission developed into a kind of polytechnical school, teaching the Indians to do fine leather work, operate tile factories and carpentry shops, and even do mural painting.

The best evidence of how the Indians felt about the missions would be the testimony of the Indians themselves, and unfortunately very few of them had any opportunity to get their testimony into the historical record. One who did was Victoria, an Indian girl who grew up in the Mission of San Gabriel and later married...

Nevertheless, it is clear that Victoria regarded life in the mission as a life of misery, humiliation, and terror. The alliance of the padres and the soldiers, she told her husband bitterly, had turned even Indian chieftains like her own father into humble, confused, awkward, and shamefaced men. She could not entirely understand why her people, the Gabrielino, who had once given good accounts of themselves in occasional battles with neighboring tribes, had offered so little resistance to the Spaniards; however, she remembered how the soldiers, armed with muskets, had come to her village when she was 6 years old and taken its people to the mission.

The most revealing evidence of the impact of the missions on the California Indians was recorded in the mission registers. There one finds a terrifying death rate, caused primarily by diseases for which the Indians lacked immunity. Confinement within the adobe walls of the missions also deprived the Indians of the degree of sanitation they had enjoyed in their own villages from their *temescals* and their practice of occasionally burning their old dwellings and building new ones. Concentration of Indians in large numbers at the mission, the changes in diet, and the imposition of an alien discipline and regimentation all contributed to the high death rate. The mission registers also revealed a surprising variation in experience from mission to mission. Indians at the Santa Cruz mission, for example, survived an average of 8 ½ years after conversion, while those at San Luis Obispo survived more than twice as long. The infant mortality rate, also erratic, was generally high: more than half the Indians born in the missions died before their fifth birthday. During the entire mission period, the native population from San Francisco Bay to San Diego fell from 72,000 to 18,000—a decline of over 75 percent.