

Gomez: Truth of saint's ministry is his respect, loving care of indigenous

LOS ANGELES (CNS) – Los Angeles Archbishop Jose H. Gomez has asked Catholics of the archdiocese to invoke the intercession of St. Junipero Serra “for this nation that he helped to found.”

He also urged prayers especially for “an end to racial prejudice and a new awareness of what it means that all men and women are created equal as children of God.”

“In this hour of trial in our nation, when once again we are confronting America’s shameful legacy of racism, I invite you to join me in observing St. Junipero’s feast day, July 1, as a day of prayer, fasting and charity,” Archbishop Gomez said in an open letter to Catholics.

The letter appears as his June 29 column “Voices” in English and Spanish in Angelus, <https://angelusnews.com>, the online news platform of the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

He addressed the recent controversies in California surrounding public monuments to St. Junipero Serra, “the Apostle of California.” On June 19 a statue of the saint in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park was toppled and desecrated. Archbishop Gomez also said a Serra statue in the plaza outside the archdiocese’s first church, Nuestra Senora Reina de los Angeles, in downtown Los Angeles also was torn down.

“Up and down the state, there is growing debate about removing Serra memorials from public lands,” he wrote. “Ventura officials have announced that they will hold a public hearing July 7 to debate whether to take down his statue from in front of Ventura City Hall.

“Faced with the possibility of vandalism, we are taking increased security precautions at the historic missions located in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Unfortunately, we will probably have to relocate some statues to our beloved saint or risk their desecration,” Archbishop Gomez wrote.

He said these developments sadden him. “I have been thinking and writing about Junipero Serra for many years now.”

“I understand the deep pain being expressed by some native peoples in California. But I also believe Fray Junipero is a saint for our times, the spiritual founder of Los Angeles, a champion of human rights, and this country’s first Hispanic saint,” the archbishop said, noting that he was “privileged” to concelebrate the Spanish Franciscan’s canonization Mass with Pope Francis in 2015 during the pontiff’s pastoral visit to Washington.

“I rely on his intercession in my ministry, and I am inspired by his desire to bring God’s tender mercy to every person,” the archbishop added.

Known for spreading the Gospel in the New World during the 18th century, the Franciscan priest landed in Mexico, then made his way on foot up the coast of Mexico and to California, where he established a chain of missions that are now the names of well-known cities such as San Diego, San Francisco and Santa Barbara.

He was the first president of the California mission system, and personally founded nine of the state’s 21 missions. It is estimated that during his ministry, St. Junipero Serra baptized about 6,000 native people.

In 2015, some people objected to the canonization of the Spaniard, like critics did of his beatification in 1988, because of questions raised about how Father Serra allegedly treated the native peoples of California and about the impact of Spanish colonization on native peoples throughout the

Americas.

“The exploitation of America’s first peoples, the destruction of their ancient civilizations, is a historic tragedy,” Archbishop Gomez wrote. “Crimes committed against their ancestors continue to shape the lives and futures of native peoples today. Generations have passed and our country still has not done enough to make things right.”

In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, “we have worked hard to atone for past errors and wrongs and to find the path forward together,” he said. “We honor the contributions that native peoples made to building the church in Southern California and we cherish their gifts in the mission of the church today.”

Archbishop Gomez said over the years he has “come to understand how the image of Father Serra and the missions evokes painful memories for some people,” and for that reason, he said, he feels the protests in California and around the country over historical monuments are important.

“Historical memory is the soul of every nation. What we remember about our past and how we remember it defines our national identity – the kind of people we want to be, the values and principles we want to live by,” he said.

“But history is complicated. The facts matter, distinctions need to be made and the truth counts,” he explained. “We cannot learn history’s lessons or heal old wounds unless we understand what really happened, how it happened and why.”

Archbishop Gomez said U.S. society might reach a consensus on not honoring Sr. Junipero Serra or other figures from the past, but “elected officials cannot abdicate their responsibilities by turning these decisions over to small groups of protesters, allowing them to vandalize public monuments.”

“This is not how a great democracy should function,” he said.

“Allowing the free expression of public opinion is important,” Archbishop Gomez added. “So is upholding the rule of law and ensuring that decisions we reach as a society are based on genuine dialogue and the search for truth and the common good.”

He praised the city of Ventura for planning a public hearing and how it is approaching the debate by involving civil authorities and indigenous leaders, and representatives of the Catholic Church and the community at large. This could be “a model for thoughtful and respectful discourse,” he said.

Those who are attacking St. Junipero Serra’s good name and vandalizing memorials to him “do not know his true character or the actual historical record,” Archbishop Gomez said, adding that decades ago activists started “‘revising’ history to make Junipero the focus of all the abuses committed against California’s indigenous peoples.”

“But the crimes and abuses that our saint is blamed for – slanders that are spread widely today over the internet and sometimes repeated by public figures – actually happened long after his death,” he said, noting that a genocidal war waged against the Native Americans took place in 1851, and the saint died in 1784.

“The real St. Junipero fought a colonial system where natives were regarded as ‘barbarians’ and ‘savages’ whose only value was to serve the appetites of the white man,” Archbishop Gomez said, yet in online petitions today the saint “is compared to Adolph Hitler, his missions compared to concentration camps.” No serious historian would accept this, he added.

The saint lived and worked alongside native peoples, defended their humanity and protested crimes against them; he celebrated their creativity and knowledge; and he learned their languages and their ancient customs and ways, the archbishop said.

"I like to think that his deep reverence for creation was influenced by his conversations and observations among this land's first peoples," Archbishop Gomez said, He also said the saint "did not impose Christianity, he proposed it."

"Pope Francis called Junipero "one of the founding fathers of the United States. He recognized that the saint's witness anticipated the great spirit of human equality and liberty under God that has come to define the American project."