

NO.69 SPRING 2006
BENE LEGERE
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Signed letter from Friar Junípero Serra

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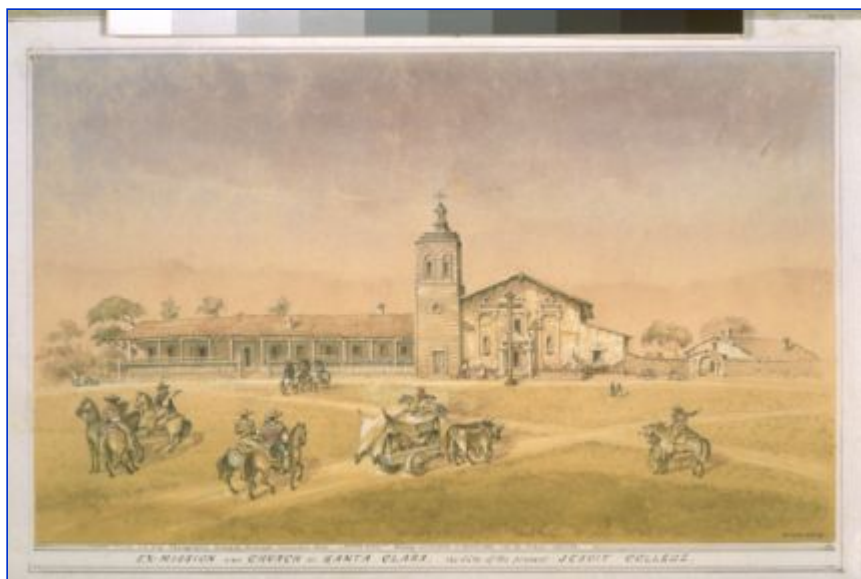
Junípero Serra (1713-1784) founded the first of California's missions in San Diego on behalf of the Franciscan order of the Catholic Church, and as part of the Spanish conquest and colonization of what today is California. He personally established eight other missions in the region from San Diego to Sonoma. This 1784 letter was written by Serra to the heads of seven California missions to inform them of the death of Father José Antonio de Murguía, the architect and head of Mission Santa Clara. Murguía died of typhoid fever, one of the diseases introduced by the Spaniards that decimated the Indian population. Serra asks that masses be said for the soul of Murguía, who had died just four days before the May 15, 1784 dedication of Mission Santa Clara.

Excerpt from the letter: "And in order that for our part we may help give him a swifter rest, I charge each and every one of Your Reverences to carry out as swiftly as possible the rites which from the beginning we mutually agreed to, which are twenty masses said by each priest and I suppose one sung with vigil in each Mission. Thus in each mission where this letter is received, I request that you lose not the soonest opportunity of sending it on to the following Mission."

This letter illustrates poignantly the depth of feeling among the small band of Spanish priests in California, isolated from their homeland by months of travel and thousands of miles: Father Serra despatched Father Palou from Mission Dolores to care for Father Murguía, and reminds the heads of the other missions that they have mutually agreed to say masses in case of the death of any of their number. Historical scholarship depends on documentary evidence like this letter and the multiple chains of deductions, large and small, that can be made from it.

--Charles Faulhaber, *Director of the Bancroft Library and Professor of Spanish*

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Ex-Mission and church of Santa Clara, 1842. Edward Vischer watercolor.

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