

“Kathy Coffey has given us a book of American saints for the era of Pope Francis. Where her title metaphor focuses on the American penchant for exploring frontiers, the book’s saints—some canonized, others simply recognized—made me also think of Francis’ metaphor of going out to the streets of our world. The saints Coffey covers, in brief readable chapters, are all ‘gutsy realists’—a memorable phrase used to describe Sr. Dorothy Stang. And all wonderfully human, warts and all. I learned about saints I’d never known, and learned more about others I thought I knew. In the end the book made me think of all the saints among us in this country—so much good news to counter all the bad news that fills our headlines and our heads.”

—John F. Kane  
Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies  
Regis University

“Uh-oh. Here comes marching in a book that won’t ever again let us say, ‘But the saints aren’t anything like us.’ Read, if you dare, about the courageous, cantankerous, saintly people who lived in America in their time, but changed the world for all time.”

—Kathy McGovern, author of  
the weekly Scripture column *The Story and You*

“Kudos to Kathy Coffey for this collection of ‘open, sociable, normal, happy companions,’ just the kind of saints Pope Francis says we need. In her characteristically engaging and entertaining prose, Coffey helps us entertain the notion that the path toward sainthood is the very ground on which we stand. Be prepared for the spaciousness that emerges in these stories, both in the vast terrain of landscape these men and women traversed and in their very souls. It is in these wide open places that God enters, grace abounds, and lives are transformed in love.”

—Mary Stommes, editor of *Give Us This Day*

# **When the Saints Came Marching In**

Exploring the Frontiers of Grace in America

*Kathy Coffey*



**LITURGICAL PRESS**  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Coffey, Kathy.

When the saints came marching in : exploring the frontiers of grace in America / by Kathy Coffey.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-8146-3718-0 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3743-2 (ebook)

1. Christian saints—United States—Biography. 2. Christian biography—United States. 3. United States—Church history. I. Title.

BX4659.U6C64 2015

282.092'273—dc23

[B]

2014027642

For my grandson, Henry Joseph  
May you walk always among heroes such as these



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# Introduction

True holiness is completely unself-conscious. You wouldn't have the slightest awareness of its existence in you. Besides you will not care, for even the ambition to be holy will have dropped as you live from moment to moment a life made full and happy and transparent through awareness.

— Anthony de Mello

The starting point is always the goodness of God. God's creative genius peopled the fresh terrain of the United States with remarkable women and men. They lived in our country; they walked its paths. They climbed our hills and mountains, sailed our seas, heard our birdsong, looked for stars in our vast skies. They smelled the rain falling on our prairies and forests. Junípero Serra, a Franciscan, and Kateri Tekakwitha, a Native American, would've found all outdoors a temple. Eating our food, speaking or learning our language, they worked hard, laughed long, and prayed often.

We in the United States are fortunate to brush elbows with many saints who grew and flourished here. As we

explore their stories, it's intriguing to imagine them sitting down together at a heavenly banquet, unbounded by the usual human constraints. Their shared values, hopes, beliefs, and actions are strong membranes connecting them beyond time and space. Joining them are their companions, families, and all the marvelous people who unfortunately couldn't fit into this book.

Elizabeth Ann Seton and Pierre Toussaint exchange news about their parish, St. Peter's in New York City; she thanks him for donations to the orphanage staffed by her sisters. Katharine Drexel and John Neumann chat about their hometown, Philadelphia. Marianne Cope, the first to admit alcoholics to the hospital at a time when they were jailed instead, thanks Bill W., Dr. Bob, and Sr. Mary Ignatia for founding Alcoholics Anonymous. Martin Luther King Jr. and Cesar Chavez discuss with Henry David Thoreau his essay, "On Civil Disobedience." He preferred jail to paying a tax that would finance the Mexican War and extend slavery; his stance on resisting injustice underlay their movements. Rose Hawthorne Lathrop and Elizabeth Ann Seton compare notes on their shared experiences of being widowed, converting to Catholicism when it was most unpopular, losing a child, and constantly caring for the sick. Frances Cabrini and John Neumann discuss immigration with contemporary experts and marvel that the issues of their day still have not been resolved. Thea Bowman and Katharine Drexel roll their eyes about black women being denied admission to religious communities in the early

1900s. Sister Mary Luke Tobin and Rachel Carson measure women's progress in the arenas they pioneered: church and science. Dorothy Day and Helen and Cesar Chavez reminisce about their visits to each other, and Day's imprisonment in 1973 for picketing several California vineyards. Dorothy Stang and the sisters martyred in Liberia talk with Jean Donovan, Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, and Dorothy Kazel about the ties that bound them so closely to their people, they couldn't leave their missions even when their lives were endangered.

Those who've had only a nodding acquaintance with hunger and thirst cannot fully appreciate the feast described in Isaiah 25:4-6, covered with rich foods and fine wines. To add a conversation with this cast of characters would make it a five-star banquet indeed!

No book on the North American saints would be complete without mentioning the splendid depiction on the tapestries at the Los Angeles Cathedral. There, Serra and Seton rub elbows with Peter, Mary Magdalene, and Thomas More. They take their place in that great company that focuses all its attention and energies on the altar, the Christ before them. From both sides of the cathedral they press forward, intent on one goal.

Their visible engagement would be tarnished by comparing it to any other crowd, pushing into a sale, a sports event, or a concert. Their hands are often folded in concentration; their eyes light with anticipation of an unfolding feast. None of the saints are actively doing anything else,

for now they have set aside their exhausting work with the poor, their academic achievements, their reforms and foundations. Only one goal matters: what Thomas Merton calls “a communion with God’s own light and truth.”<sup>1</sup>

The documentary *Divining the Human* shows the process of creating the tapestries. In a juxtaposition of earthly and heavenly, the music of “Pange Lingua” and “Veni Creator Spiritus” drifts over hard hats and scaffolds, clanking metal and the freeway’s roar. Lead artist John Nava, a committee of liturgists, those who lay cement or tile, drill, sew hems, install lighting; these too are all part of the communion of saints. Mingled in with the saints depicted on the walls are ordinary citizens of Los Angeles: a little boy in tennis shoes, a girl in jeans, a businessman in a suit. Indeed, ordinary Californians were the models for the saints, and they reflect on what that meant: “Their qualities aren’t unattainable or magical.” “Becoming a saint is a long process, not just ‘Bingo!’” “The Communion of Saints says, ‘I belong.’” The saints on the tapestries mirror the assembly, which may explain why some of the first viewers got goose bumps. They were seeing themselves. Underlying the art are the biblical phrases, “See, God’s dwelling is among mortals. God will dwell with them. They will be God’s people and God will be with them.” Small and insignificant as humans sometimes seem, they are nonetheless precious, transcendent saints-in-the-making.

Lest anyone consider them superheroes, let’s remember that saintly people walk with all the longing and limitation,

reluctance and resistance of ordinary human beings. They share (and have documented in their letters and journals) the failures, fears and frustrations, effervescent joys, and stinging pains of all humanity. Looking *way* back in church history, the fifth-century Council of Carthage insisted that saints remain sinners who rely on God's mercy. If not, they'd be too distant to imitate. And isn't that the point?

A question that arises naturally in this context is, what makes North Americans unique in the larger communion of saints? It must be said first that European encroachment came at the terrible price of decimating native Americans who had first explored these lakes and canyons, mountains, and shores. Typical of our nation's settlement and growth was a fluidity, vitality, and sense of possibility previously unknown in Europe. Historian Daniel Boorstin comments, "By the early 19th century, in crowded, pre-empted Europe, 'No Trespassing' signs were everywhere; control by government covered the map. America offered a sharp contrast."<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning, communities existed before government. Passengers on the Mayflower ship or wagon trains headed West had to create their own systems of order to protect and help each other. Private initiative cleared the fields, raised the barns, and dragged the wagons uphill. The needs of the new country presented a "vast opportunity free of ancient walls between classes, neighborhoods and nationalities."<sup>3</sup>

Advancement wasn't determined by guild, the unearned privilege of aristocracy, or the ruling monopoly, but by hard work, perseverance, skill, and dumb luck. From

its beginnings, the country was a hospitable environment for holiness. New England especially showed “reforming effervescence” for multiple causes: tax and prison reform, abolition, education, women’s rights.<sup>4</sup> “Seldom has such a large proportion of citizens been so alert to measure the community against its best possibilities.” So when Elizabeth Seton’s Sisters of Charity took over orphanages sunk in debt, filled with neglected and mistreated children, they not only stood squarely within the American tradition. They naturally invited others to join them in the enterprise.

The frontier has always been vital to the North American experience. Before the first European settlers hovered the potential of the unknown, the gleam of possibilities to explore. *The Great Gatsby* concludes with these lines as the narrator looks at the eastern shore: “Gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees . . . had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath . . . face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”<sup>5</sup>

Old World nations knew clearly defined boundaries. But the sense of geography in the new country was vague at best. “The map of America was full of blank places that had to be filled.”<sup>6</sup> This unique mix of hope and illusion became fertile ground. On the frontier comes the freedom to break with the past, pushing beyond the boundaries.

Few clucking rulers murmured, “It can’t be done.” Call it, if you will, less of a “wet blanket effect.” Americans often seem happiest when on the move, and this was certainly true of John Neumann or Frances Cabrini—who began as immigrants, and served their new country by difficult journeys through it.

For all these reasons, this book broadens the idea of frontier to unexplored realms of holiness. As Joan Chittister and Rowan Williams write in *Uncommon Gratitude*, “The saint is someone who starts a chain reaction of new perception in the world, who reinforces, even among those who don’t or can’t yet believe, the confidence that there’s more to us all than we have suspected. . . . They keep the doors of vision open when everything and everyone seems to want to close them.”<sup>7</sup> They fit General Dwight Eisenhower’s description of the ideal soldier, who “must have a darn strong tinge of imagination—I am continuously astounded by the utter lack of imaginative thinking . . .”<sup>8</sup>

The focus here is on the “explorers” in many realms: civil rights, science, education, health care. In the North American context, the quote from Revelation 21:5, “Behold, I make all things new,” takes on richer meaning. The people profiled here went into what some would term North America’s “hellholes”: the raw frontier, the leper colony, the squalid slum. There they brought the vigorous, transforming energy of the resurrection.

God promises the people, “Sing and rejoice, daughter Zion! Now, I am coming to dwell in your midst” (Zech

2:14). While God dwelled among humans most brilliantly as Christ, God comes again and again in different ways, responding to the people's needs at specific times. Through the faces, intelligence, souls, hands, hearts, and feet of those profiled in this book, God is so passionately enamored of human beings, that God chooses to dwell with them over and over.

Seeing things askew with humanity, God doesn't send some spectacular intervention of special effects. Instead, "The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts . . . [but] babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity but is still expecting good-will to become incarnate in each human life."<sup>9</sup>

And so a baby was born to the Bowman family in Mississippi, to the Judge family in New York, the Chavez family in Arizona. With a tiny infant began a new act, a stunningly new development, a frontier that had never before been explored. Not only did these pioneers make unique contributions to the American scene; they also kept reinventing themselves. Eventually, they crafted their lives into such works of art that people around them noticed, and commented.

Consequently, any book such as this compiles the work of previous scholars who have worked far longer and in much greater depth on their subjects. But as artist Michael O'Neill McGrath wrote, quoting St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of writers, we all simply rearrange the flowers



given us by those who came before, into new and different bouquets.<sup>10</sup>

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

As you begin, explore your own notions of holiness by describing someone you consider whole, human, fully alive, sensitive to God's action in his or her life—but *not* perfect.

## Junípero Serra

As happens so often when we stop to regard God's work, there is nothing to do but wonder and thank God.

—Mollie Rogers, *Foundress of Maryknoll Sisters*

A common blessing given by parents to their children in Mallorca at the time Miguel Serra grew up there was “May God make a saint of you.”<sup>1</sup> In Fr. Serra's case, it happened—by a long, uncharted path. The story of a boy from a small island in the Mediterranean, who founded the long chain of California missions, may have begun when he admired the beauty of creation: almond trees flowering, glimpses of blue sea, olive orchards he'd harvest with his father.

Later he would study the medieval Franciscan philosopher Duns Scotus, who delighted in God creating the world and becoming human not to somehow offset sin, but because of God's generous, outreaching nature. Scotus also believed that God created individuals by name, delighting in their individuality. That philosophy would

later play out in Serra's respect for the Native Americans he'd meet across the sea.

After joining the Franciscan community, Serra chose the religious name "Junípero," or clown of God, after one of St. Francis's first companions, a man filled with laughter, glee, and pranks. It seems an odd choice for a serious, academic sort, but perhaps he remembered Francis's comment, "Would . . . that I had a forest of such Junipers!"<sup>2</sup>

By 1742, Serra had been ordained, studied hard, and received his doctorate at age twenty-nine. He was a popular professor, retreat director, and preacher who emphasized God's expansive mercy. But he began to see warning signs all over his island: the Spanish army constantly conscripting his students for their war machine, a depressed economy, crop failures due to drought, widespread starvation. Like many people of his time, Junípero had always been eager to become a missionary. When he heard a call to go to the New World, he seized the chance, despite being considered "older," at age thirty-five. In an odd arrangement, the Spanish government paid the priests' expenses, helping to cement their settlements in Mexico and California, warding off encroaching Russian settlement.<sup>3</sup>

Serra didn't have the heart to tell his parents and sister he would probably never see them again, so he said goodbye in a letter sent through a relative. Usually articulate, he admitted, "Friend of my heart, I lack words to tell you how much sorrow I feel in leaving you. . . . I wish I could share with them [his parents] the great joy that fills

my heart. Surely then they would encourage me to move forward and never turn back.”<sup>4</sup> He traveled with Fr. Palou, his friend, former student, and later biographer.

Serra’s ninety-nine-day voyage there would occur two hundred years after the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas called attention to Spanish atrocities among the native peoples. The first conquistadors massacred the natives or forced them into brutal enslavement. De Las Casas had the audacity to suggest that genocide might not make the Christian faith attractive to “Indians,” and that, indeed, they should be treated well. His influence led to abolishing slavery and eventually to slightly more humane treatment, recognizing the humanity of native tribes. Paltry as it may seem now, it was advanced compared to the colonial British treatment of slaves.

Serra would spend his first nineteen years in the New World around Mexico City and Oaxaca. There he was introduced to the debate that raged throughout the eighteenth century between friars and government authorities about the native populations. Some thought the friars infantilized the natives, whereas the Franciscans simply wanted to protect them.<sup>5</sup> (Understandable when some Spanish soldiers were nicknamed “Exterminators.”) The natives caught in the middle of the debate were oddly voiceless.

Serra also began practices there that he’d continue as president of the missions in California: learning languages and utilizing hands-on rituals like washing feet and Christmas pageants, building beautiful churches and pitching

in on construction. As Kenan Osborne, OFM, says, a key element of Franciscan life is “getting your hands dirty with good cheer.”<sup>6</sup>

He finally left for California in 1767 at fifty-four, an age by which most people of his day had retired. After expelling the Jesuits, the Spanish King Carlos ordered Franciscans to establish missions in Alta California. The king’s representative sent them to Monterey first, where they were told to name the first mission for the king. (St. Francis could wait until they found the legendary, foggy harbor.) On his way, Serra, walking always with a painful ulcerated foot, the result of a snakebite in Mexico, had his first encounter with natives who had not been in previous contact with any missions. In northern Baja, his writing is filled with reverent wonder for their unashamed nakedness, grace, vitality, and charm. Unique for his time, Junípero also acknowledged that the country was *theirs*. He offered them figs; they gave him fish.<sup>7</sup>

Because two parties were sent by land and two by sea, both arduous routes, there was great joy when they met in San Diego. The ships’ crews were dying from scurvy and lack of fresh water; the first “mission” established there was more an outdoor hospital. Their misery was soon compounded by an attack of the Kumeyaay tribe. The Spanish defense was a display of firearms that the natives had never seen, and that became a fairly easy way of conquering California. Serra intervened so that members of the tribe were *not* punished for their attack.

While Serra's writing delights in the smell of sea, the discovery of fresh water and roses, even jokes about the natives wanting his ragged gray habit (because clothing was highly prized),<sup>8</sup> he must have also seen how unrealistic was his dream of native peoples gladly presenting themselves for baptism. A culture based on personal freedom and individuality was reluctant to embrace the missions' highly organized communal living. Despite his relentless optimism, Junípero may have gradually come to recognize that a man nailed to a cross had little appeal to a buoyant, happy people whose abundant resources met most of their needs. Coastal Californians formed the oldest habitation in North America, dating from 11,200 BC, due to a moderate climate, skilled fishing and hunting, and clever cooking of plants, seeds, and nuts.<sup>9</sup>

After San Diego, Serra plunged ahead by sea to Monterey. He said his first Mass there beneath an oak tree revered by legend as the one where a Carmelite had landed in 1602. That first priest, Antonio de la Ascension, had laid down the rules: the religious, not the military, were in charge. As an issue never fully resolved, it remained a constant battle for Serra. But in the initial celebration, he led the singing of "Salve Regina," and displayed a statue of the Virgin Mary he had brought on mule for one thousand miles, who would dazzle the natives and accompany him as he founded Carmel mission five miles south, further from military intrusion. There, they cut down magnificent Monterey cypresses to build the new church and headquarters in 1770.

At the next, San Antonio mission, Serra hung a bell from a tree, and rang it long and loud. Despite his flair for drama, even he must have grinned ruefully when no one responded to his call, "Come." But before Serra's death in 1784, this mission would have the largest population, the first irrigation system in California, an orchestra introduced by a musical Spanish friar, and grapevines that outlasted any other mission's.

Few now know how precarious the California venture was, with the constant possibility of abandoning the whole attempt. So many Spaniards sickened or died, it was hard to see how the natives would ever want to become like them. Because their food supplies came by unreliable ships, the Spanish were much less healthy than the natives who ate the abundant game and fish of the area. (The missions would eventually introduce oranges, olives, and almonds, now staples of the California diet.)<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Serra remarked to his superiors that the natives were better Christians than the Spanish soldiers who constantly raped, murdered, and flogged the indigenous people, creating angry resentment about their presence. These atrocities caused Serra to worry that the natives whom he believed were "gentle sheep" could turn into "tigers and lions."<sup>11</sup> One young friar condemned the Spanish violence and pointed to its logical conclusion: "There is not a single mission where all the gentiles have not been scandalized . . . [and] many times on the point of coming here to kill us all."<sup>12</sup>

One example of the tension: Serra's relationship with the arrogant Captain Fages became so venomous that even while journeying through wilderness, they would not speak to each other, and communicated only by letters. (The same leader made an excellent point: that Serra should stop baptizing people until he had enough to feed them.)<sup>13</sup> The enterprise "teetered constantly on the edge of starvation."<sup>14</sup> Supply ships either sank or were delayed, so food was often lost or spoiled.

Finally, in desperation, Junípero made the painful trip to Mexico City to plead his case before the viceroy of New Spain. Getting a surprisingly warm reception by the unusually enlightened ruler Bucareli, Serra laid out a thirty-two-point plan that has been called "the first significant body of laws to govern early California." Forthrightly, he defended the rights of indigenous women, whom few others recognized as even human. He even asked, unless the behavior of Spanish soldiers improved, "what business have we . . . in such a place?"<sup>15</sup>

It's hard to criticize one who so quickly condemned himself. He recognized the inherent contradictions of his ministry—needing more Spanish soldiers for defense, at the same time knowing they'd prey on native women. In one dark mood, he even pointed out that despite innumerable blunders, right can come from wrong. No one then had any idea how diseases introduced by the Spaniards would decimate the native population. During Serra's era, natives died at a rate 50 percent higher than in their years



before contact with Europeans. One scholar points out the great paradox of the missions: they brought both protection and exposure.<sup>16</sup>

Many have pointed out that Serra had the unique blend of qualities that could keep the California missions afloat in distress. If nothing else, he had staying power, remaining when many others despaired, left, or went crazy. Carmel became his base, and he eventually founded nine missions, leaving it to his successors to establish the rest of the twenty-one. He wanted to bring people eternal life, at great personal cost, unaware they might have been quite happy without his version.

Toward the end of his time on earth, Serra became more reflective, perhaps questioning whether he had fulfilled his life's purpose, wondering how history might judge him. The jury may still be out on that one—and how could he ever have predicted the startling growth of Los Angeles, San Diego, or San Francisco? It's probably inevitable that *someone* would've discovered and exploited the indigenous cultures of California, and, hard as it is to believe, the Spanish were better than some colonizers. After their two hundred years of conquest, half the native population remained, whereas in areas conquered by British and Americans, it dwindled to 6 percent.

Like most human beings, Junípero was complex. As he himself wrote of his experience, "I am quite aware of the enormous difference there is between reading about it and actually going through it."<sup>17</sup> One has to admire the

dedication of a 5-foot-tall, 110-pound man with a badly infected foot and lower leg who *walked* 1,000 miles of his 9,000-mile journey. Indeed, when Californians were asked what statue should represent their state in Congress, they unanimously chose Serra.

To judge his religious belief and practice by contemporary standards is anachronistic. Simply because Serra is a controversial figure doesn't mean he can't be a saintly pioneer. His paternalism toward the Indians may have been pragmatic: outside the missions, they'd be thrown into the ranches as slave laborers. Nothing in his writing reflects anything but goodwill toward native peoples, protectiveness of them, and the wonder that stirred when he first met them in 1769.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

It's good that this book begins with a saint who was so clearly imperfect, as all that follow will be. It's hard to evaluate Serra from another historical time, but given all you've read in this chapter, is it easier to sympathize with him? Why or why not?

If you could've joined Serra in his reflections toward the end of his life, how might you answer his question on how history would judge him? What would you name as his finest legacy?

**Further Readings**

Donna Genet, *Father Junípero Serra: Founder of California Missions* (Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1996).

Gregory Orfalea, *Journey to the Sun: Junípero Serra's Dream and the Founding of California* (New York: Scribner, 2014).