



CARMEL MISSION BASILICA stands today as a monument to the great “Missionary of the Cross” who left his home and the comforts of a conventional life to come to our Western wilderness to preach the Gospel of Christ and to teach California’s Native Americans. This man was Padre Junípero Serra of the Order of Franciscan Friars.

Junípero Serra was born in Petra, Isla del Mallorca, on November 24, 1713. At the age of 17 he received the Franciscan habit, and in the year 1749 embarked for the missions of Mexico. Padre Serra was named Presidente of the Missions of Lower and Upper California in the year 1767. He set out by foot from Loreto in Lower California, came north to San Diego and established the Mission there in 1769. Arriving by ship at Monterey on June 3, 1770, Padre Serra founded the Mission of San Carlos Borromeo. While many factors affected his decision to leave Monterey and establish the mission at Carmel, the main reason was because many native people lived throughout the Carmel and surrounding areas.

This new location near the Carmel river provided a fresh water source and good soil which were lacking in Monterey. On August 24, 1771 Padre Serra erected a second mission cross and established the new mission. The first Church and dwellings were made of wood and enclosed by a palisade of poles. Few provisions were available during the early years. The Padres depended mostly on the native people for food supplies. Later, local crops became sufficient, and the temporary buildings were replaced with adobe structures.

The native people who joined the Mission as neophytes provided the labor for agricultural production and for most of the construction projects. Over 4,000 were baptized from 1770 to 1836. Padre Serra also founded eight other missions during his presidency. He often made long journeys on foot to confer the Sacrament of Confirmation on the neophytes. On January 1, 1782, Padre Juan Crespi, friend and co-worker, passed to his reward. Padre Serra had now reached his 71st year and was in ill health. He sent for his life-long friend, Francisco Palóu, who prepared him for death. Junípero Serra died on August 28, 1784, and at his request was buried beside Padre Crespi in the sanctuary of the Basilica.

Soon after, Padre Lasuén was elected Presidente. It was he who, in 1793, undertook the construction of the present stone church. It was built with native limestone quarried from the nearby Santa Lucia Mountains and erected on the site of the original adobe chapel. The interior walls curve inward as they rise. The ceiling follows the sweep of the walls, forming a beautiful catenary arch. The tower is of Moorish design and holds nine bells. Originally the walls were covered by a lime plaster made from burnt seashells, and the floor was covered with burnt tile. The church was four years in construction and was dedicated in 1797. Padre Lopez, a young Franciscan, died the same year and was buried within the sanctuary.

Under Padre Fermin Lasuén the Mission reached the height of its prosperity. In 1794, the native people population reached 927, and the crops were abundant. On June 28, 1803, Padre Lasuén died and was laid to rest beside Padre Serra. Throughout the church are interred over 200 native people and Spaniards, among them Governor Jose Romeo and the Commandante Hermenegildo Sal. In 1821, a mortuary chapel was added to the church structure, which is now our Lady of Bethlehem Chapel.

By the year 1823 the native people population had dwindled to 381. Their lack of natural immunity to European diseases caused many illnesses and deaths. In 1833 Padre Jose Real took charge of Carmel Mission. In 1834, the Mission was secularized; that is, the church was changed in status to a conventional parish. The mission lands were absorbed by the Hispanic settlers, and the native people were dispersed. Destruction of the mission way of life was completed in 1836. Padre Real moved his residence to Monterey and only occasionally held services at the Mission.



Gradually the church and the quadrangle fell into ruin. The United States took control of California in 1846. After a decision by the U.S. Lands Commission in 1859, title to the Mission property was returned to Bishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany and his successors by President James Buchanan. It was not until 1884 that Father Angelo Casanova undertook the work of saving this historic landmark. A wooden roof was put on the Mission which, although saving the structure, was not in keeping with the original architectural style of the church. In 1924 Father Ramón Mastres restored the first room of the old quadrangle. The beautiful bronze and travertine cenotaph built by noted local artist Jo Mora was dedicated in 1924 and is located in the center of what is now called the convent. Behind the glass in the same room are found many of Padre Serra's personal belongings.

New Era:

The new era of rebuilding began in 1931 when Msgr. Philip Scher, pastor of the Presidio Church in Monterey, appointed a multi-talented Harry Downie to be curator in charge of mission restoration. Two years later, as Bishop of Monterey-Fresno, Bishop Scher raised Carmel Mission to the status of an independent parish. Then in 1961 the Mission was honored and designated as a Minor Basilica by Pope John XXIII.

In 1985, Pope John Paul II declared Junípero Serra venerable, and in 1988 he was beatified in recognition of his heroic virtues. In September 1987, The Pope visited the Carmel Mission as part of his tour of the United States. Pope Francis canonized Saint Junípero Serra on September 23, 2015 at the National Shrine in Washington, D.C. Today, the Mission's and its historic church is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the United States for visitors from all over the world.