



Amah Mutsun Tribal Band of Costanoan/Ohlone Indians

*Historically known as "San Juan Bautista Band and San Juan Band" Indians of California*

PO Box 5272 | Galt, CA 95622

February 24, 2015

His Holiness Pope Francis  
Casa de Marta  
Vatican City Rome  
00120  
Italy

Re: Open Letter to Pope Francis,

Your Holiness, Pope Francis,

My name is Valentin Lopez and I am the Chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. Our historic and continuous Tribe is comprised of the documented descendants of the indigenous peoples taken to Missions San Juan Bautista and Santa Cruz in the state of California, United States of America. Our Amah Mutsun Tribe is not a federally recognized Tribe. The Federal Government of the United States does not acknowledge our Tribe nor does it provide assistance to our members. We are writing this letter to voice our disbelief and objection to your intent to canonize Franciscan Friar Junipero Serra.

When you were first selected Pope our Amah Mutsun Tribal Council discussed your selection on a number of occasions and we were very optimistic. We were hopeful that you would understand the plight of the indigenous descendant and how they have been ignored and marginalized by society. We applauded your words of peace, justice, truth, and dignity. We were also optimistic that you would understand how our people need to recover from generations of oppression and pain. Your decision to canonize Fr. Serra is a clear message that our reality of poverty, suicide, depression, substance abuse, and many other ills will continue to impact the lives of our members for many more years and perhaps many more generations.

Because we believed your papacy would be different we wrote you two letters dated August 29, 2013 and April 25, 2014. In these letters we introduced our Tribe and described our pre-contact history. We also described our ancestor's experiences at the mission. I told you of how many of our female ancestors were tied together by their thumbs and forced to march to the missions. Once there they were considered the property of the mission. It's estimated that life expectancy was less than two years at some missions. I also discussed how our current Tribal members continue to suffer from the impact of cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, which is otherwise known as historic trauma. This trauma resulted from the generations of physical and emotional brutality as well as the attempted cultural and spiritual genocide of all California native people. Our ancestors endured this brutality not only during mission times but this legacy continued during the Mexican and American periods. Historic trauma also results from the fact that from mission times to the present our legitimate past and our humanity as indigenous people have never been truly acknowledged by any governmental or religious organization.

The two letters we sent were accompanied by letters from Dr. Donna Schindler, psychiatrist, and Bishop Francis Quinn, Bishop Emeritus of Sacramento California. Dr. Schindler's letters discussed historic trauma and explained how our members continue to suffer today because of our tragic history starting with the brutalities our ancestors suffered at the missions. Bishop Quinn's letter, dated May 7, 2014, stated that although the "language of these letters is sometimes very intense, I support the basic message." In both letters we requested that you offer a mass of reconciliation to the Indigenous people of California, as that would be an important step in our efforts to find healing from our historic trauma.

When you announced recently that you would canonize Fr. Junipero Serra we were in absolute disbelief. It is incomprehensible for us to think that you would canonize a person who is ultimately responsible for the death of approximately 100,000 California Indians and the complete extermination of many Native tribes, cultures and languages. The brutality of Fr. Serra is well documented in his own writings. On July 31, 1775 Fr. Serra wrote a letter to Spanish Governor Fernando de Rivera y Moncado requesting that he punish four Indians for attempting to run away from San Carlos de Borromeo de Carmelo mission. Fr. Serra wrote, "I am sending them to you so that a period of exile, and two or three whippings which Your Lordship may order applied to them on different days may serve, for them and for all the rest, for a warning, may be of spiritual benefit to all; and this last is the prime motive for our work. If Your Lordship does not have shackles, with your permission they may be sent from here. I think that the punishment should last one month." On July 7, 1780 Fr. Serra wrote a letter to Governor Felipe de Neve to explain his policy of whipping Indians, "That the spiritual fathers [priests] should punish their sons, the Indians, by blows appears to be as old as the conquest of these kingdoms." This violence, intimidation and terror which was sponsored and ordered by Fr. Serra clearly set the policy and foundation for all future brutal acts at the missions. Obviously, Fr. Serra's standard for violence against the Indians was the same standard as that used in the conquest of all of the Americas.

There were many horrendous and documented events during the mission period in California. For example, in 1809 a Commander of the Spanish military ordered Spanish soldiers to massacre 200 women and children who refused to continue to march to Mission San Juan Bautista. These women and children were cut into pieces with sabers while the commander ordered that their remains be scattered on the ground; this event is documented. After this atrocity "the priests swore all of the soldiers to secrecy." While some will argue that Junipero Serra himself was not directly responsible for this massacre, there is no dispute that he is responsible for creating the system that allowed these types of inhumane and depraved events to occur. Furthermore, to remove him from the consequences of the missions would be the same as removing the leaders of terrorist groups, or military aggressors who acted in the name of religion of any era, including the terrorist groups of today, from the actions of their followers.

Following your announcement that you were going to canonize Serra, I reflected on what I believed to be the definition of a "Saint." I have always thought that the Catholic Church considered someone a saint only when that person followed Jesus Christ and lived his/her life according to Christ's teaching. Frankly, I see no similarities between Serra and Jesus Christ. The latter never used military enforcers or corporal punishment to get people to follow his teaching, nor did he use beatings and whippings. Jesus Christ never considered people to be property or turn them into slaves. Jesus Christ never considered anyone to be a heathen, a pagan, or a savage. At no time did Jesus Christ ever say that a man had no soul, nor did Jesus Christ ever teach that the end results justified the means.

We often hear that the times were much different when Fr. Serra first came to California and that we cannot use today's standards to judge his actions. The Amah Mutsun completely agrees. The Catholic Church should not use today's standards to judge Fr. Serra. Instead, the Catholic Church should judge Fr. Serra against the times and the words that Jesus Christ spoke when he was on earth; over 1,750 years before the time of Serra. Serra should have known that to follow Jesus Christ's footsteps meant that he needed to have understanding and love for others and that no one could or should ever be forced to accept Jesus Christ. We read that Jesus came in peace and he was often attacked. Fr. Serra came in the name of Jesus, but yet he brought soldiers and was prepared to attack. How Fr. Serra is worthy of public veneration based upon actions most people would consider to be evil is unfathomable.

Many of Serra's actions were acceptable to the Catholic Church based on the Diversas Bull of 1452 and other related bulls. These bulls, which promoted the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian nations, specifically granted the Pope's blessing "to capture, vanquish, and subdue the Saracens, pagans, and other enemies of Christ and put them into perpetual slavery and take all their possessions and their property." In 1493 Pope Alexander VI issued a law granting Spain's dominion over all lands that Columbus had located.

On October 23, 2013 the Religious Sisters of Charity wrote to you and asked you to publicly repudiate and rescind the Diversas Bull of 1452, the Caetera Bull of 1493, and other related bulls. To date, the Catholic Church has refused to do this. How could the Catholic Church remove the words and life of Jesus Christ to define sainthood and replace the definition of sainthood with papal bulls that sanctioned Christian enslavement, power and Spain's dominion over all lands that Columbus had located? The Amah Mutsun have no doubt that Serra's canonization is based on these papal bulls and not the words and actions of Jesus Christ. We join the Sisters of Charity in asking you, Holy Father, to repudiate and rescind the Bulls referenced above.

We must add that until these bulls are rescinded we can only conclude that the Catholic Church considers many of our ancestors, current members and future descendants to be the enemies of Christ. We do not believe Jesus Christ believes us to be his enemy; we'd like the church to explain this paradox.

On August 29, 2013, tribal leaders from four mission tribes, Rudy Ortega, Tribal Administrator and Tribal Spiritual Leader, Tataviam Tribe, Mel Vernon, Captain, Mission San Luis Rey Tribe, Ray Hernandez, Chumash, and our Amah Mutsun Tribe, and Dr. Schindler met with Bishop Gerald Wilkerson of San Fernando Pastoral Region and Bishop Edward Clark, Regional Bishop, Archdiocese of Los Angeles. At these meetings we told them of the need for the church to tell the truth regarding Fr. Serra and the Mission period. We also made them aware of the impact of historic trauma on our members. Following this meeting we sent the Bishops a letter, dated May 30, 2013, documenting the 12 points we discussed at our meeting. We offered specific recommendations on how the church could help our tribal members heal from our historic trauma. We also offered to help the church establish positive relationships with the descendants of the Indians taken to the mission. We ended the letter by saying we look forward to working with the Bishops. No response to this letter was ever received.

On December 20, 2013, we met with Mr. Ned Dolejsi, Executive Director, California Catholic Conference. At our meeting we shared with him our letter to Bishops Wilkerson and Clark. We also requested that Dr. Schindler and I be allowed to speak at the next quarterly all Bishops Conference to inform the attendees that there are surviving tribes from the mission period and that the truth needs to be told regarding the history of the California missions. Shortly after our meeting Mr. Dolejsi notified Dr. Schindler that our request was denied. This denial reinforced what we've believed for generations, the Catholic Church does not acknowledge our Tribes or our humanity.

On December 11, 2012, Bishop Garcia of the Monterey Diocese held a mass of reconciliation for the indigenous peoples and their descendents taken to Mission San Juan Bautista. At this mass Bishop Garcia apologized for events of the past that were hurtful and expressed "a desire for a new relationship that promotes common spiritual growth, honesty, mutual respect and a desire to forgive and be forgiven for past wrongs." Prior to this mass our Tribal Council decided that we should "acknowledge" this apology versus to "accept" the apology. We felt that for the apology to be sincere it had to be followed up by specific actions that demonstrated the church's sincerity. When you announced that you were going to canonize Serra we realized that although Bishop Garcia apologized, the church does not understand our history, nor does it understand the great pain and suffering it has caused.

On September 14, 1987, Pope John Paul stated in a speech that was directed to indigenous peoples that "The early encounter between your traditional cultures and the European way of life was an event of such significance and change that it profoundly influences your collective life even today. That encounter was a harsh and painful reality for your peoples." He then added "At the same time, in order to be objective, history must record the deeply positive aspects of your people's encounter with the culture that came from Europe. Among these positive aspects, I wish to recall the work of the many missionaries who strenuously defended the rights of the original inhabitants of this land. They established missions throughout this southwestern part of the United States."

As the Chairman of the Amah Mutsun I can honestly say we fail to recognize any "positive aspects" of our cultural oppression, physical decimation and destruction of our traditional societies. We do not believe that the missions worked to improve our living conditions. Instead we were enslaved, beaten, raped, and in many cases had life expectancies of less than two years? Do the positive aspects of the mission system include its long term legacy: tribal poverty, suicide, physical abuse, substance abuse, identity issues, not to mention the church's denial of our humanity, our culture and our spirituality? Do the positive aspects of the mission system include the church continuing to hold land that was traditionally the land of our ancestors while most current day descendants of those taken to the missions have no tribal land?

In the year 2000, Pope John Paul II issued a diverse apology on behalf of the Catholic Church. In his apology Pope John Paul said, "Whenever the truth has been suppressed by governments and their agencies or even by Christian communities, the wrongs done to the indigenous peoples need to be honestly acknowledged...The Church expresses deep regret and asks forgiveness where her children have been or still are party to these wrongs...The past cannot be undone, but honest recognition of past

injustices can lead to measures and attitudes that will help to rectify the damaging effects for both the indigenous community and the wider society."

The Amah Mutsun assert that the truth of Fr. Serra's destruction of our Tribal culture, spirituality, and lives continues to be intentionally suppressed and never honestly acknowledged by the Catholic Church. Interestingly, Pope John Paul also said, "An excuse is worse and more terrible than a lie, for an excuse is a lie [that is] guarded." The Amah Mutsun believe that for Fr. Junipero Serra to be canonized, the Catholic Church must create an excuse for his brutal actions and for the devastating mission system that he created.

Speaking on behalf of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, we would like you to know that should you go forward with your announced intentions to canonize Serra, please know that we rescind the request we made in our letters to you for a mass of reconciliation. The canonization of Serra will be a clear message to our Tribe that the church does not care about our true history or our historic trauma. Furthermore, please know that if Fr. Serra is canonized, the Amah Mutsun reject the diverse apology offered by Pope John Paul to all indigenous people as our Tribe can only conclude that his apology, which was an apology ostensibly on behalf of the catholic church, was meaningless and insincere.

A book titled *A Cross of Thorns, The Enslavement of California's Indians by the Spanish Missions*, by author Elias Castillo, will be released soon. The book is the result of more than six years of research and study of original documents including eyewitness accounts by early travelers, records kept by the friars, and historic letters by church and government authorities in Alta California and Mexico. *A Cross of Thorns* describes the brutality of Serra and the dark and violent reality of mission life. Castillo wrote, "Even a fellow Franciscan, Fr. Antonio de la Concepcion Horra, wrote in 1799 that The treatment of the Indians is the most cruel I have ever read in history. For the slightest things they receive heavy floggings, are shackled, and put in the stocks, and treated with so much cruelty that they are kept whole days without a drink of water." In 1820, the last Spanish Padre Presidente of the missions, Father Mariano Payeras, worriedly wrote his superior in Mexico City that they, "had to come up with an alibi when people started asking where all the Indians had gone. Unless they had an excuse, the Franciscans would be subjected to scorn and scandal. Wrote Payeras: All we have done to the Indians is consecrate them, baptize them and bury them." It is also our belief that in addition to canonizing Serra based on Bulls, you are also basing his canonization on the alibi created by the Franciscans and not the reality of his actions. The publisher of this book, Linden Publishing Inc., provided the enclosed copy of *A Cross of Thorns*; we hope that by reading this book you will have a new understanding of Fr. Serra and the California Missions.

It's important for you to know that our Amah Mutsun Creation story tells us that Creator very specifically selected our people to live on the lands of our traditional tribal territory that we know as Popouloutchum. Creator unambiguously gave our Tribe the responsibility of taking care of Mother Earth and all living things. This is true for all Native American tribes. Our people worked hard to please Creator and to fulfill our obligations. At first contact with Europeans our Tribe, as all other tribes of California, were already civilized; we actively managed the landscape, we were subject to authority, and we had laws. We had a well-developed and sophisticated culture and we were very spiritual. All of our songs were prayer songs and all of our dances were prayer dances. Our people continually prayed so

that they lived their life with their heart, mind, body and soul. They prayed for balance in their life, their family and their world. They prayed for their relationship with Mother Earth, with other human beings and with Creator.

Father Boscana, a Franciscan Scholar, and mission priest, who wrote of the Indians near San Juan Capistrano stated that "the Indians of California may be compared to a species of monkeys." He was incorrect. Our ancestors were not monkeys, they were not pagan, they were not heathens, and they were not savages. Our members believe that Creator will harshly judge those responsible for the events at the missions that led to the death of so many of our ancestors and the destruction of our culture. This particularly includes Fr. Serra, who you now intend to canonize.

The Amah Mutsun again ask, Holy Father, that if you choose to go forward with the naming of Junipero Serra as a Saint, that before doing so you rescind Pope John Paul's apology to Native Americans. At the very least, please rescind his apology to the Amah Mutsun. In addition, should you go forward with your plans to canonize Junipero Serra we rescind our request that you offer a mass of reconciliation to the descendants of those taken to the California missions. The Amah Mutsun would consider that apology as being the same as knocking someone down and then apologizing by saying, "I'm sorry I knocked you down, now let me kick you." To this we must say, "No thank you."

In this letter, we have talked about the need for healing. We are well aware, however, that it is important not only for our Tribe to heal, it is important for all perpetrators to heal. This includes the Catholic Church, and other governments and individuals who have caused harm and loss to the California Indians. There can be no doubt that our efforts to begin to work on this healing were clearly rejected by the Catholic Church.

The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band sends this letter with our hope and prayers that you will reevaluate your decision to canonize Junipero Serra and that you reevaluate the Church's relationship with the descendants of all California Indians taken to the missions.

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Valentin Lopez, Chairman  
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