Welcome and thank you so much for coming out this afternoon. My name is Mary Valdemar. Please let me tell you a little bit about myself and why I am here today. I am a Catholic Chicana who was Catholic Youth of the Year for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, where I had the opportunity to meet many clergy, leaders and true models of Catholic/Christian tenants including Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II. My journey as a Catholic youth brought me to work for Catholic Charities where I learned about serving my community and caring for the most vulnerable of our society as Christ would, on the streets of skid row alongside some of the bravest and loving nuns I have ever known. Since then, I have continuously worked with marginalized people especially Chicano & Indigenous communities. Although I believe that much good work is done within the church, today I am here as one of many Catholics who oppose the canonization of Serra.

As people of faith, I would like to ask us to start by remembering the foundation of our beliefs, the commandments that many of us learned as children, thou shall not steal, kill, covet or lie. Remember that we are called to honor our mothers & fathers which include all of our relatives and of course for us that means our ancestors. When I think of this, I can't help but be saddened by the lack of recognition & acknowledgement for how these same commandments were ignored when it came to the Indigenous people of this land. The contention that Serra is worthy of sainthood, demonstrates that the church is still unwilling to accept responsibility for its role in these sins against an entire culture. Well, it's time for us to hear confession. It's time to tell the truth.

The canonization of Serra, especially without the normal proof of miracles, is yet another dishonor to Indigenous people, many of whom practice the faith despite already knowing the true history firsthand from their own elders. The believers that suffered most and became Catholic, did so despite Serra and the mission system, not because of them. History is not unbiased and neither are mission historians. We know those in power control the version of history that is allowed to be told. I would challenge all to go to Mission Santa Barbara on Sunday. Go to the actual tribal members and hear firsthand the stories of their families & relatives. Go to them, with an open heart and
mind. Turning a blind eye to this issue, as the church has mistakenly done with other shameful skeletons, ultimately dishonors all of us as Catholics, as Christians and as decent, compassionate, loving human beings.

The argument I keep hearing from church officials is that we are judging Father Serra by today’s time period, and not his own. This argument fails to focus on the real point. It is not about judging a man based on any time period, past, present or future. The refusal to accept Sainthood for Serra is about holding ourselves as Catholics or Christians accountable to tell the truth about the Church’s past. It’s about correcting history and honoring the people amongst us who are the most “Christ-like”. When I think of saints, I think of Saint Francis, of Mother Teresa, of people I have known within the church who were the epitome of love, peace and truth no matter the time period they were from. The protection of the vulnerable should be the main consideration, and you don’t have to look hard to see how vulnerable native people were after losing their lives in such large numbers, losing their lands, losing their language, and even in many cases their entire identity. Many saints and godly people have been able to successfully evangelize and bring people to Christ without compromising the protection of the vulnerable. Father Serra is not one of them.

Many saintly and loving people of the Church would rather put their own life in jeopardy than to allow human beings to be whipped or suffer violence in the name of Christ. To me, the Indigenous people who suffered within the walls of the mission, are the real saints. They are the true Martyrs.

We can all help heal the wounds of the past by confessing the truth, but confession is not enough. We must also enact penance. We must show that we are sorry for those we harmed in action. For those of us who believe, whether Catholic or Christian or not, please join me in penance prayer:

Creator, help us honor our ancestors, our mothers, our fathers of this land by telling their truth, and offering blessings of healing, strength, compassion and love to those who have suffered or are still suffering. As penance for the wrongs that were done to the Indigenous people, we pray for the souls of those making decisions in the name of Christianity that you may enter their heart and fill them with empathy, understanding and accountability for any harm inflicted within the walls of the missions. We ask you to guide all beings to your will and not to their own desires, for all to seek justice, for those in pain to have peace and for your true servants to hear & heed our united prayers.