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A new mission in California

Joe Ferullo | Aug. 28, 2009 NCR Today

The chain of missions he built stand like a jeweled necklace hugging the California coastline. Perhaps no one human being has done more to shape this state and give it an identity. But Fr. Junipero Serra faces one final mission: he has not yet been named a saint.

Pope John Paul II was sometimes criticized [1] for naming ?too many saints? during his long pontificate, but somehow Fr. Serra escaped his gaze, and the watchful eyes of several popes before him. All because Fr. Serra needs a second miracle.

As a fascinating article in today?s Los Angeles Times [2]notes, sainthood requires two bona-fide miracles be attributed to the candidate. Fr. Serra has one, and now the Franciscan in charge of advocating for his sainthood ? Fr. John Vaughn ? believes he has found his second. She is a 66 year old Panamanian artists named Sheila Lichacz, who has survived 14 brain surgeries, after being told time and again she was dying. She has prayed to Fr. Serra for strength and life.

Lichacz has traveled to Fr. Vaughn?s office at the mission Fr. Serra built in Santa Barbara, to relay her story and provide documentation. The case has now gone on to Rome

To be sure, Fr. Serra and his missions are controversial in historical circles: often Native Americans who lived and worked there were treated as not ?fully human,? according to Sister Kateri Mitchell, director of a Native American Catholic group, the Tekakwitha Conference.

But without him and his work, California would be a very different place: the cities of San Diego, Santa Monica, Santa Barbara, Santa Ynez, San Fernando, San Gabriel and more would not have those names, nor those missions. These places and buildings went on to become the first strands of fabric that bound California together and created something new.

That in and of itself is something of a miracle. But perhaps the moving story of a Panamanian artist who cheated death over and over will be the one that makes the difference.

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