## Modified From: Junipero Serra left mark in ways that weren’t saintly, many say, SF Chronicle, 9/19/15

Junipero Serra, a Franciscan friar who was one of the founders of California, has been a symbol in the West for more than 200 years. He is hailed as one of the fathers of modern California, but there is another side. Many American Indian people believe he helped destroy native culture.

On Wednesday, Pope Francis will proclaim him a Roman Catholic saint, someone with a place in heaven, a man to be venerated. He will be America’s first Hispanic saint....

## Serra founded nine of the 21 Catholic missions on the western edge of California connected by El Camino Real, along what scholar Steven Hackel called “the spine of the state.” The missions were a key part of a system designed to bring Christianity to the native peoples and a new way of life centered around farming and ranching.

## But the missions had fatal consequences that Serra had not foreseen. The Indian people had little immunity to European diseases, and they sickened and died in the missions by the thousands. By the end of Spanish and Mexican rule, in 1846, the native population was half what it had been when Serra first saw California.

Serra was determined. He thought he knew what was best for the “gentiles,” as he called unbaptized Indians. Indians who came to the missions were rewarded at first, but once they joined, they could not leave. They were required to work, to till the new fields. They were to become farmers.

If they disobeyed the padres, they were treated harshly, either flogged or locked up. The punishment was common in the 18th century in European society, but completely unknown in native California.

In the missions, they were kept close together, in unsanitary conditions. About 80,000 Indians were baptized by the missionaries. By 1834, at the end of the mission period, 60,000 mission Indians had died.

“Father Serra had many imperfections,” said Kevin Starr, a professor at the University of Southern California and one of the state’s leading historians. “Perhaps the pope is trying to teach us something — that all humans have imperfections but can still be saintly.

“All the great heroes of history were flawed, and so are saints. St. Olaf, who brought Christianity to Scandinavia, was a warrior saint. So was St. Stephen, who converted Hungary.”

And so, Starr thinks, was Serra. “You should not judge people solely by their imperfections,” he said.