

Statue of controversial missionary Junipero Serra could get booted from U.S. Capitol

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Junipero Serra, the 18th-century Franciscan missionary who's set to be declared a saint later this year despite protests from Native American groups, could lose his place of honor in the U.S. Capitol if a California lawmaker has his way.

State Sen. Ricardo Lara, an openly gay Los Angeles Democrat, wants to replace a bronze statue of Serra with a monument honoring the late Sally Ride, the nation's first female astronaut. Lara said Ride would become "the first member of the LGBT community" to be honored in Statuary Hall.

Each state is allowed two statues to represent local heroes; California's other statue is of former President Ronald Reagan, who joined the collection in 2009, replacing a monument to itinerant preacher Thomas Starr King. The statues of King and Serra were added in 1931.

"Dr. Sally Ride is a California native, American hero and stratospheric trailblazer who devoted her life to pushing the limits of space and inspiring young girls to succeed in math and science careers," Lara said in a statement. "She is the embodiment of the American dream."

The move follows controversy over Serra's legacy as the founder of the California mission system. His sharpest critics say he was part of an imperial conquest that beat and enslaved Native Americans, raped women, and destroyed their culture by forcing them to abandon their traditional language, diet, dress, and other customs and rites.

Lara's statement makes little mention of Serra's divisive legacy; he told the *Los Angeles Times* that Serra was a "controversial figure," but his bill is about honoring Ride and "recognizing the invaluable contributions of an accomplished Californian

and American pioneer.”

Lara’s bill would relocate the Serra statue to the California Capitol in Sacramento, where visitors “can enjoy it and be reminded of his significant historical impact upon our state.”

Catholic leaders have largely defended Serra’s legacy, even as they acknowledge the questions.

“He lived in a very difficult time and he did the best he could under very difficult circumstances,” Edward Benioff, who oversees evangelism for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, told the local NBC affiliate.

Pope Francis has hailed him as an icon of the church’s missionary focus.

Monsignor Francis J. Weber, a former archivist at the San Fernando Mission in Mission Hills, Calif., defended Serra’s work, saying he tried to separate the missionary and military aspect of the Spanish colonization. He taught natives in their own language and walked to Mexico City to secure a bill of rights for the natives.

The criticism of Serra, Weber said, is really criticism of the Catholic Church’s evangelism efforts.

“It was the first contact that the Europeans made with the Native Americans,” Weber told Catholic News Agency. “California today is what he started it out to be. Things have progressed a lot in 200 years, but he set the foundation.”