

Father Pedro Font Describes His Search for New Converts Among the Yuma Indians, 1775

. . . Finally, these people as a rule are gentle, gay, and happy. Like simpletons who have never seen anything, they marveled as if everything they saw was a wonder to them, and with their impertinent curiosity they made themselves troublesome and tiresome, and even nuisances, for they wearied us by coming to the tents and examining everything. They liked to hear the mules bray, and especially some burros which came in the expedition, for before the other expedition they had never seen any of these animals. Since the burros sing and bray longer and harder than the mules, when they heard them they imitated them in their way with great noise and hullabaloo.

As a conclusion to all that I have said, since I have been somewhat prolix in speaking of the Yumas and their customs, I wish to note down a question or reflection which many times came to me in this journey, in view of the ignorance, infelicity, and misery in which live the Indians whom I saw on all the journey as far as the port of San Francisco. For it is true that the Yumas undoubtedly may be reputed as the most fortunate, rich, and prosperous of them all, since at least they have plenty to eat, and live on their lands, and suffer fewer inconveniences. But the rest, whom I saw farther inland, are in constant warfare between the different villages, as a consequence of which they live in continual alarm, and go about like Cain, fugitive and wandering, possessed by fear and in dread at every step. Moreover, it seems as if they have hanging over them the curse which God put upon Nebuchadnezzar, like beasts eating the grass of the fields, and living on herbs and grass seeds, with a little game from deer, hare, ground squirrels, mice, and other vermin.

On this assumption, and since the Apostles asked Christ that question concerning the man who was blind from his birth: *Rabbi quis peccavit, hic aut parentes ejus, ut caecus nasceretur?*¹ I might inquire what sin was committed by these Indians and their ancestors that they should grow up in those remote lands of the north with such infelicity and unhappiness, in such nakedness and misery, and above all with such blind ignorance of everything that they do not even know the transitory conveniences of the earth in order to obtain them; nor much less, as it appeared to me from what I was able to learn from them, do they have any knowledge of the existence of God, but live like beasts, without making use of reason or discourse, and being distinguished from beasts only by possessing the bodily or human form, but not by their deeds.

And this same question, and all the rest which I have said, is applicable to many other tribes who inhabit the unknown lands of the Arctic and Antarctic regions and other parts of the earth. But I know that the answer is, *Neque hic peccavit, neque parentes ejus, sed ut manifestentur opera dei in illo.*² And so, since God created them, His Divine Majesty knows the high purposes for which He wished them to be born to such misery, or that they should live so blind, and it does not belong to us to try to inquire into such high secrets, *for Judicia Dei abyssus multa.*³

But, considering that the mercy of God is infinite, and that so far as it is His part, He wishes that all men should be saved, and should come to the knowledge of the eternal truths, as

¹ “And his disciples asked Him: ‘Rabbi, who hath sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind!’” (John, IX, 2).

² “Jesus answered: ‘Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him’” (John, IX, 3).

³ “Thy justice is as the mountains of God: thy judgments are a great deep” (Psalm, XXXV, 7).

says the Apostle St. Paul, *Qui omnes homines vult salvos fieri, et ad agnitionem veritatis venire;*⁴ therefore, I cannot do less than piously surmise, in favor of those poor Indians, that God must have some special providence hidden from our curiosity, to the end that they may be saved, and that not all of them shall be damned. For, as the theologians say, if there should be a man in the forest without knowledge of God and entirely remote from possibility of acquiring the necessary instruction, God would make use of His angels to give him the necessary knowledge, for eternal salvation. And that man *in sylvis*⁵ whom the theologians assume as an hypothesis, is typified without doubt by some of the Indians whom I saw, and by others who must be farther inland and whom I have not seen. For if God has permitted those people to live for so many hundreds and even thousands of years in such ignorance and blindness that they hardly know themselves, or, as I believe, that they are rational beings, what can we infer, especially in view of a God so merciful that *Misericordia ejus superexaltat judicium?*⁶

Shall we think that God created these men merely to condemn them to Inferno, after passing in this world a life so miserable as that which they live? By no means! Shall we say that the Devil is more powerful than God, and rules so many souls who live in the shades of a negative infidelity, and that God shall not communicate to them some light, in order that they may be freed from his tyrannical and eternal powers? Even less. Well, then, we must believe that God has some hidden means for saving those souls whom at such cost He redeemed by His most precious blood, an opinion which can be supported by the text of the prophet Joel, chap. 2, verse 32: *Et erit omnis qui invocaverit nomen domini salvus erit quia in monte Sion et in Jerusalem erit salvation, sicut dixit dominus.*⁷ . . .

Questions to Consider:

1. What were Father Pedro Font's motives in working among the Indians?
2. How does Father Font's description portray the Indians they were working with?

SOURCE: *Font's Complete Diary: A Chronicle of the Founding of San Francisco*, trans, and ed, Herbert Eugene Bolton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933), pp. 109-112.

⁴ "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (First Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy, II, 3-4).

⁵ "In the forest."

⁶ "And mercy exalteth itself above judgment" (Epistle of St. James the Apostle, II, 13).

⁷ "And it shall come to pass, that every one that shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be salvation, as the Lord hath said" (The Prophecy of Joel, II, 32).