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FATHER LUCIANO OSUNA, A PRIEST AMONG THE INDIANS

He was barefooted, unwashed, uncombed...

By Father John Dwyer, printed June 10, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

Without any doubt the priest of the old Grass Valley Diocese with the most unusual life style, and the most difficult mission of all was Father Luciano Osuna, a native of Guadalajara, Mexico.

Bishop O'Connell, in a letter to Rome in 1869, tells the story of Father Osuna's arrival. Shortly after his coming as Vicar Apostolic in 1861, Bishop O'Connell became aware that his Vicariate contained many American Indians scattered throughout the territory. After consulting Archbishop Alemany, who had a similar problem, and with the archbishop's consent and promise of equal support, Bishop O'Connell was able to obtain a seminarian volunteer from the Archbishop of Guadalajara in the person of Luciano Osuna.

This young man arrived in San Francisco at the end of 1862 and on New Year's Day in 1863 the exiled Bishop of Sonora, Mexico, Pedro Losa, conferred the Tonsure and minor orders on Luciano Osuna in St Francis Church in San Francisco. Three days later Luciano was ordained a subdeacon, and on the feast of Epiphany he was made a deacon. Priesthood was conferred on him by the archbishop on January 11, 1863.

The main problem with Father Osuna's assignment was that it covered both dioceses. The Indians were indeed scattered but the principal concentrations were in Sonoma and Napa counties in the archdiocese, and in Lake – Mendocino through which the diocesan boundary ran, but most of these two counties was in the Marysville Vicariate. Evidently, Bishop O'Connell was the ordinary to whom Father Osuna was subject. His principal place of residence in the early years seems to have been Mendocino (City) where at times he was an assistant, filled in as pastor at times, but gradually became more involved with his Indian parishioners and less and less was seen in Mendocino.

We have evidence, for example, that in the summer of 1873 he made a missionary journey which included visits to the Indians near Stockton, Mokelumne, Knights Ferry, Ukiah and Cloverdale. It was his intention to visit the Indians near Covelo in upper Mendocino County before the winter of that year.

A letter from him written on August 29, 1872, describes his life style to some degree. "I have been with the Indians most of the time; they are sick and hungry and so I am hungry with them.

We have no place to live, nothing to do to work for our living. They had good crops but we have nothing to eat. As winter is nigh we must take hold of every chance, lest by some neglect some of these little ones perish, obliged to pass the winter with the rain upon their heads, and with empty stomachs.”

Father Osuna did indeed visit the Indian reservation called Round Valley in Mendocino County, under the care of a new Indian agent, a Methodist minister named J.L. Burchard. Father Osuna and the first Indian agent, J.L. Gibson, had gotten along well, but the new agent brought with him some prejudices which were to work against Father Osuna’s free and easy ways with the Indians. Evidently when Father Osuna arrived at the reservation he went directly to their cabins without any formality or permissions. The new agent would insist on these formalities.

Father Osuna was very much pro Indian and a champion of their rights. On one occasion he wrote: Every day I am convinced more of the necessity of caring for the Indians, much more because the Indians have become the prey of all, and they have no one to offer a friendly hand.” The priest adopted so much the Indian way of life that he taught the men even in the “sweat houses” where they spent the night, thus keeping them awake, according to his accusers, and preventing them from doing their best work on the following day.



Flickr: Daleberts

The Native Americans of California

When the Indian agent was unable to prevent the priest from visiting and teaching the Indians he had him arrested, even accused him of insanity and eventually was able to ban him from visiting the Round Valley Reservation. During the period of arrests and trips to the commander of the military post and to the Justice of the Peace in Ukiah, these men wrote letters to Archbishop Alemany recommending how the archbishop might resolve the conflict. The

descriptions of Father Osuna by the accusing Indian agent reads: "He was barefooted, unwashed, uncombed, torn robe, cow manure and mud between his toes and on his feet."

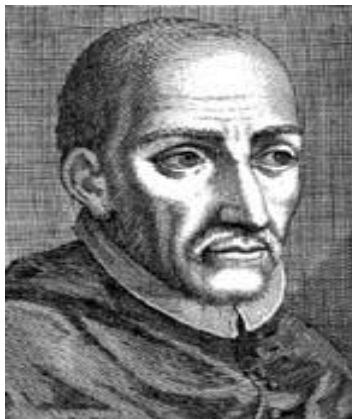
The Justice of Peace in his letter wrote: "Here and elsewhere Father Luciano is very much esteemed. His present personal condition of dress etc. might not commend him to strangers."

Bishop O'Connell's reaction to the treatment of Father Osuna by the Indian agent is a classic. "In order to give over the Indians to Christianity, Padre Osuna conforms to their mode of living. He goes without shoes and wears sandals; therefore he is insane! He eats, drinks and sleeps after the fashion of the Indians; therefore he is insane! I wonder what our feather bed officer would say if he saw St John the Baptist in the desert or on the banks of the Jordan. No doubt he would pronounce him insane and a fit subject for Stockton lunatic asylum."

After Father Osuna was finally banned from visiting the reservation, the archbishop and Bishop O'Connell did two things. They appealed the case to Washington through the offices of the Catholic Commissioner for Indian Missions and requested permission to build a Catholic chapel and rectory on the reservation to serve not only the Indians within its confines but those as well who lived outside. The latter request was denied on May 14, 1875.

As a result the bishops, using Pious Fund monies, bought 160 acres of land at Big Valley in Lake County for \$5,000 and there constructed a chapel, rectory and barns and appointed Father Osuna the director of a very unique program for the Indians which differed totally in concept from the approach of the Franciscan padres who founded California's Mission system.

St Turibius Mission was surrounded by many Indian cabins and the ranch employed more than 100 Indians who were self-supporting and independent. Father Osuna administered this dream of his until 1879 when he returned to Mexico after 17 years missionary endeavors in Northern California. Perhaps someday a student of Sociology will study in depth his unique solution to Christianizing and developing the Indians into self-reliant individuals, an experiment which was certainly different from any previously tried program in the West. Father Luciano Osuna certainly carved out a unique niche in the development of the Church in northern California.



Saint Turibius