



Where Justice and Truth Meet

November 2015

“As Dominican women we claim our power to nurture mutual relationships that offer healing and courage to a broken world. Vulnerable ourselves, we choose to stand with the poor, to accompany those on the margins, and to work toward systems that promote life.”

Together – Birthing Anew, Chapter 2014

Doctrine of Discovery

The 2014 General Assembly of the Leadership Council of Women Religious passed a Resolution asking Pope Francis to formally repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. The resolution also encouraged LCWR members to study this issue and follow up with the general membership. The purpose of this article is to begin to provide the Sisters and Associates of the Springfield Dominicans with information on this topic. Future issues will expand on this and suggest further action.

Introduction: Ever since the Emperor Constantine decreed Christianity as the official religion of the empire in the 4th century, the interests of the church and state were equated, and the Catholic Church actively tried to spread Christianity throughout the world. This has had consequences throughout history, going beyond trying to convert people spiritually, to also establishing control over their lands.

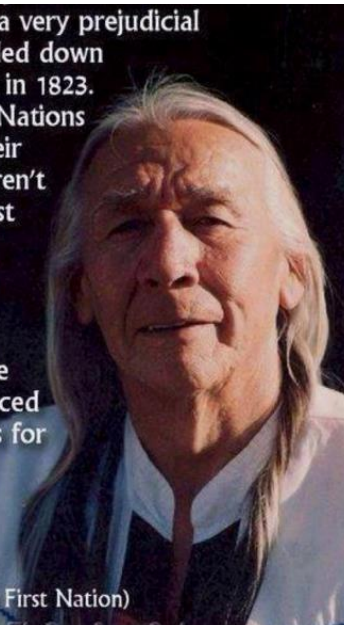
What is the Doctrine of Discovery?

The Doctrine of Discovery stemmed from a series of papal bulls, or decrees, that gave Christian explorers the right (theologically and legally) to lay claim to any land that was not inhabited by Christians and was available to be “discovered.” If its inhabitants could be converted, they might be spared. If not, they could be enslaved or killed.

- The 1452 papal bull *Dum Diversas*, authorized Portuguese King Alfonso "to invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Saracens and pagans... and other enemies of Christ."
- A follow-up decree in 1454 also directed that the land and possessions of these people be taken away and that non-Christians be "reduced to perpetual slavery."
- The 1493 *Inter Cetera* papal bull decreed that "barbarous nations be overthrown" and those nations

"I would like to quote a very prejudicial doctrine that was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1823. It said that the Indian Nations do not have title to their lands because they weren't Christians. That the first Christian Nations to discover an area of heathen lands has the absolute title. This doctrine should be withdrawn and renounced to establish a new basis for relationship between indigenous peoples and other peoples of the world."

~Floyd Westerman (Lakota First Nation)



those nations "discovered" be subjugated and reduced to the Catholic faith "to propagate the Christian religion."

Subsequent bulls in the 1500's and 1600's tried to retract and remedy the decrees of the 1400's. By this time, however, the ideas and intent of these papal bulls were deeply rooted, became the foundation for legal decisions, and came to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery. This led to

the conquest of non-Christian lands and people in every corner of the world.

Why does it matter?

Repercussions from the Doctrine of Discovery still negatively affect millions of Indigenous peoples. In nearly every case of western colonization, civilizing the Native peoples, often by force, has led to a decimation of native

cultures and peoples. In addition, the discoverer also gained sovereign governmental rights over the native peoples and their governments, which restricted tribal international political relationships and trade. This transfer of political, commercial, and property rights was accomplished without the knowledge or the consent of the Indian people.

In the U.S. these papal bulls became the foundation for legal decisions regarding land taken from American Indians. Forced removals such as the Trail of Tears, the seizure of natural “resources,” the destruction of traditional languages and cultures, the sterilization of Indian women, and the disruption of Indigenous communities are examples of implementation of the concepts of “discovery” and “dominance.”

Even in the 21st century, the Doctrine of Discovery, either explicitly or implicitly, is still used to disenfranchise, displace, and ultimately devastate Indigenous peoples around the world. As recently as 2005, a U.S. Supreme Court justice cited the Doctrine of Discovery in a land-claim ruling against the Oneidas, one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee.



Our Personal Connection

Sr. Barbara Ann Bogenschutz ministers with the Native Americans at Our Lady of the Sioux parish in Oglala, South Dakota. A recent project at the parish was the renewal of their prayer circle. Sr. Barbara Ann writes in her most recent newsletter:

“A project on the back burner for a long time was to clean, prime and paint the prayer circle. The Medicine Wheel is a symbol sacred to the Lakota people, whose culture teaches *mitakuye oyasin* which means ‘we are all related.’

Terry, our maintenance man, helped me prime and paint this sacred circle. The medicine Wheel colors are black, red, yellow and white – for the four races of people in the world. This combination of colors is used



in much of their art work and crafts. It is not unusual to see people walk to the church property just to walk the Prayer Circle and then go on their way. We hope to plant some more perennial plants and have pavers put down for a walkway from the sidewalk to the Prayer Circle. The pavers will have names engraved on them. We will share more on this project as it takes shape.”

Paris 2015 and Counting...

Libby Comeaux, a Loretto community co-member and lawyer working on awareness of the Doctrine of Discovery, suggests that the Doctrine of Discovery set up the very problems that Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical *Laudato Sí* aims to solve. Hoping to address many of these issues, the [United Nations Conference on Climate Change](http://www.un.org/en/conferencesandmeetings/cop21/) (COP21) begins at the end of this month (November 30 – December 11) in Paris. The stakes are high: the aim is to reach, for the first time, a universal, legally binding agreement that will enable us to combat climate change effectively and boost transition towards resilient, low-carbon societies and economies.

Join us in study and prayer in preparation for the conference. Fact sheets and prayer materials as well as other resources are available at <http://paris2015andcounting.org/>

Creator God, we thank you that you have called us to share in your creation. We see glimpses of your renewal and new birth in your cleansing rains and fields ripe for harvest. Bless us as we listen obediently to you, to our neighbor, and to Earth herself, and work to recover what we have lost. Amen.

