

Vatican Repudiates ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’ Used as Justification for Colonization

Indigenous communities have long called on the Vatican rescind the concept, which had been used over the centuries to seize land from people in the Americas, Africa and elsewhere.

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Pope Francis meeting with Indigenous leaders during his trip in Canada, last year. Ian Willms for The New York Times

The Vatican formally repudiated on Thursday the “Doctrine of Discovery,” a legal concept based on 15th-century papal documents that European colonial powers used to legitimize the seizure and exploitation of Indigenous lands in Africa and the Americas, among other places.

The decision comes after decades of demands from Indigenous people to rescind the doctrine, which was used for centuries to “expropriate Indigenous lands and facilitate their transfer to colonizing or dominating nations,” according to one [United Nations](#) forum.

The Roman Catholic Church “repudiates those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of Indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’” a joint statement from the Vatican’s development and education offices said. The doctrine is “not part of the teaching of the Catholic Church,” it said, and the documents in question “have never been considered expressions of the Catholic faith.”

Demands that the doctrine be discredited grew last summer when Pope Francis, the first pope from Latin America, visited Canada to apologize to Indigenous communities for the church’s [role in the country’s notorious residential school system](#), where thousands of Indigenous children were physically and sexually abused, and in some cases, died. Suspected unmarked graves are still being found.

The Vatican said that the text, issued eight months after the pope’s “penitential journey to Canada,” reaffirmed the church’s “rejection of the colonizing mentality.”

In Canada, the pope and other Vatican officials were “confronted by Indigenous leaders who insisted that the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ remains an issue of contention,” said the Rev. David McCallum, a Jesuit priest who has been working with Indigenous people in the United States.

Those conversations and reassessment led to Thursday’s statement, he said, adding that some people had been waiting for decades “for papal attention” to the issue.

“It’s not so much about the legal implications, which scholars understand are very complex,” he said. “But it’s about the rejection of the mind-set that gave rise to the colonial impulse and even to the missionary impulse of those times.”

He added, “That’s really what’s being repudiated, and it’s a big step, it acknowledges that Indigenous voices have been heard, it acknowledges the evil that was done.”

In past centuries, the rulers of Spain, Portugal and other countries used the papal bulls, or official decrees, to justify their seizure of Indigenous lands in Africa and the Americas, saying that they were spreading Christianity.

Robert J. Miller, a professor at Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University, called the doctrine "one of the earliest forms of international law," that went on to influence the first U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1823 regarding the "Indian nation and the rights of Indigenous peoples in the United States." That ruling — which cited the doctrine — became a ["legal claim"](#) for the expropriation of Indigenous lands.

"So it's time for that hypocrisy to be exposed and done away with as much as we can," he said.

The Vatican statement said colonial powers had "manipulated" the content of the papal documents "to justify immoral acts against Indigenous peoples that were carried out, at times, without opposition from ecclesial authorities."

It was only right, the Vatican said, "to recognize these errors, acknowledge the terrible effects of assimilation policies and the pain experienced by Indigenous peoples, and ask for pardon."

Indigenous groups in Canada say that while the theories of racial superiority that underlie the doctrine have long been discredited, the concept continued to surface in legal disputes over land.

Some opponents of the doctrine had a chance to deliver their message to Pope Francis during his visit to Canada, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, [his office said](#).

Just before Francis led a Mass during the visit, Sarain Fox, an Anishinaabe activist and filmmaker, and her cousin unfurled a banner with the words "Rescind the Doctrine" in a demonstration at the Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré basilica near Quebec City.



Sarain Fox, right, and Chelsea Brunelle demonstrating at the Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré basilica near Quebec City last July. John Locher/Associated Press

“I’ve done a lot of really important activism, but this one felt especially meaningful because my family — all the harm that’s been caused, all of the songs that have been lost, the teachings, the language — they are a direct result of that institution, and quite frankly, of the Doctrine of Discovery,” Ms. Fox said.

Ms. Fox, of the Batchewana First Nation in Northern Ontario, said that she was still coming to grips with her feelings on Thursday, but that she felt more at ease now that the Vatican acknowledged the “truth in the history as we know it.”

She added, “My hope is that my children live in a world where they’re not fighting for their truth, like I’ve had to.”

Francis’s apology last year was not the first time he admitted the church’s shortcomings when it came to Indigenous communities. In 2015, while in Bolivia, [he apologized](#) for the “grave sins” that were “committed against the native people of America in the name of God.”

Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City, the secretary for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement Thursday that admitted past shortcomings of those church authorities who had not fully opposed the “immoral actions” of colonial powers. But he added that “the centuries of history at issue are complex,” and that there existed “various legal and political interpretations” of the term “Doctrine of Discovery” that merited further study.

In its response to the Vatican statement, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops noted that over the centuries the church and pope had issued numerous statements upholding “the rights and freedoms of Indigenous Peoples,” specifically a 1537 decree issued by Paul III, *Sublimis Deus*, which it said “upheld the rights and freedoms of Indigenous Peoples.”

But [scholars have pointed out](#) that barely a year later, the pope issued another decree that effectively nullified *Sublimis Deus*.

Philip P. Arnold, a professor of religious studies at Syracuse University and the founding director of [Skä·noñh — Great Law of Peace Center](#), said that while the document was a “good first step,” the Vatican still had not “owned up to a worldview” underpinning the [doctrine](#), which upheld the superiority of Christianity.

“It’s not just a legalistic formulation that we’re trying to get clarity on, it’s a worldview that is set in motion during the age of discovery, that we’re still having to cope with in these urgent times of climate change and so on,” he said.

“There is not much of an emphasis on self-reflection” on how that worldview “is still active in the church,” he said.

He said that it was “heartening” to see the document as “the highest-level statement from the Vatican to date, “but much more needs to be done.”

The announcement is likely to open fresh debate in many places.

Cody Groat, an assistant professor in history and Indigenous studies at Western University in London, Ontario, and a member of the Six Nations of the Grand River, said it might spark discussions on Indigenous sovereignty, for instance.

“This is not just going to be something that shapes what happens in Canada,” said Professor Groat, who is Mohawk and whose grandparents attended the [Mohawk Institute Residential School](#).

“It will call out the structural systems that have been imposed saying that we were not sovereign peoples, we do not have independent nations,” he said, “just because they weren’t inherently associated with Christianity.”

Professor Miller said the repudiation would not change property law in Canada or the United States. “But still, it’s a wonderful thing,” with lessons “on what colonization was and what it did,” he said.

Vjosa Isai contributed reporting.