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## Indigenous leaders hope Vatican's repudiation of oppressive colonial concepts leads to real change

**'Reconciliation is a buzzword. But how it impacts current policy is really what's at stake here'**

[Nicole Winfield](#) · The Associated Press · Posted: Mar 30, 2023 6:57 AM EDT | Last Updated: March 30



*Sarain Fox, right, and Chelsea Brunelle of the Batchewana First Nation unfurled a banner reading 'Rescind the Doctrine' outside the mass presided over by Pope Francis at the National Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec on July 28, 2022. (John Locher/The Associated Press)*

The Vatican's formal repudiation of colonial-era concepts that legitimized the seizure of Indigenous lands marked a symbolic step forward on Thursday, but its impact on modern policy will be the true measure of change, say Indigenous leaders.

The Doctrine of Discovery, a set of theories backed by 15th-century papal bulls, continues to form the foundation of some property law today.

A [Vatican statement](#) said the 15th-century papal bulls, or decrees, "did not adequately reflect the equal dignity and rights of Indigenous peoples" and have never been considered expressions of the Catholic faith.

"On the surface it sounds good, it looks good ... but there has to be a fundamental change in attitudes, behaviour, laws and policies from that statement," Ernie Daniels, the former chief of Long Plain First Nation in Manitoba, said in an interview on Thursday.

- [Vatican's disavowal of Doctrine of Discovery a good step but 'fundamental change' still needed: Manitoba elder](#)

Daniels, who was part of the delegation that met with Pope Francis in Rome last year and then again during the pontiff's 2022 visit to Canada, said that institutions around the world still espouse colonial attitudes toward Indigenous people. "There's still a mentality out there — they want to assimilate, decimate, terminate, eradicate Indigenous people."



*Ernie Daniels, a residential school survivor and the former chief of Long Plain First Nation in Manitoba, said that the Vatican's statement must lead to fundamental change. (Trevor Brine/CBC)*

Ghislain Picard, a longtime Innu leader and the regional chief of the Assembly of First Nations for Quebec and Labrador, said the news was a welcome development.

"Many of those pioneers and those who were involved in that work in the last 25 years must be applauding this development," he said.

But Picard said the move is mostly symbolic and it's yet to be seen if it will affect policy in Canada.

***WATCH | A former MMIWG inquiry chief on the 'important step':***

### **Marion Buller on Catholic Church's repudiation of Doctrine of Discovery**

1 day ago

Duration 2:49

Catholic Church repudiating concepts that justified Indigenous oppression 'an important step,' said Marion Buller, who was the chief commissioner for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls from 2016 to 2019.

"The Vatican seems to be washing its hands of its role in the whole colonization of our lands, and to me it would be so simple to just accept the fact that they played a role," he said.

"Reconciliation is a buzzword. But how it impacts current policy is really what's at stake here."

### **Manipulated for political purposes**

The Vatican said the documents had been "manipulated" for political purposes by colonial powers "to justify immoral acts against Indigenous peoples that were carried out, at times, without opposition from ecclesial authorities."

The statement, from the Vatican's development and education offices, said it was right to "recognize these errors," acknowledge the terrible effects of colonial-era assimilation policies on Indigenous people and ask for their forgiveness.



*Ghislain Picard, an Innu leader and regional chief of the Assembly of First Nations for Quebec and Labrador, said the Vatican's news on Thursday was a welcome development. (Ivanoh Demers/Radio-Canada)*

The statement was a response to decades of demands from Indigenous people for the Vatican to formally rescind the papal bulls that provided the Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms the religious backing to expand their territories in Africa and the Americas for the sake of spreading Christianity.

Those decrees underpin the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal concept coined in an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court decision that has come to be understood as meaning that ownership and sovereignty over land passed to Europeans because they "discovered" it.

It was cited as recently as a 2005 U.S. Supreme Court decision involving the Oneida Indian Nation written by the late justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

During Pope Francis's visit to Canada last year, during which he apologized to Indigenous people for the residential school system that forcibly removed Indigenous children from their homes, he was met with demands for a formal repudiation of the papal bulls.

*Two Indigenous women unfurled a banner at the altar of the National Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré on July 29 that read, "Rescind the Doctrine," in bright red and black letters. The protesters were escorted away and the mass proceeded without incident — although the women later marched the banner out of the basilica and draped it on the railing.*

In the statement, the Vatican said: "In no uncertain terms, the Church's magisterium upholds the respect due to every human being. The Catholic Church therefore 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.'"

### **Root cause of a 'broken' relationship**

Phil Fontaine, a former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada who was part of the delegation that met with Francis at the Vatican before his Canadian trip and then accompanied him throughout, said the statement was "wonderful," resolved an outstanding issue and now puts the matter to civil authorities to revise property laws that cite the doctrine.



*Phil Fontaine, a former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada, is shown outside of St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in March 2022. (Gregorio Borgia/The Associated Press)*

"The Holy Father promised that upon his return to Rome, they would begin work on a statement which was designed to allay the fears and concerns of many survivors and others concerned about the relationship between their Catholic Church and our people, and he did as he said he would do," Fontaine told The Associated Press.

"The church has done one thing, as it said it would do, for the Holy Father. Now the ball is in the court of governments, the United States and in Canada — but particularly in the United States, where the doctrine is embedded in the law," he said.

Michèle Audette, an Innu senator who was one of the five commissioners responsible for conducting the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, said when she heard the news, she was in disbelief.



*Michèle Audette, a former commissioner for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, said she was in disbelief after hearing the Vatican's statement on the Doctrine of Discovery. (John Woods/The Canadian Press)*

"It's big," she said in an interview on *CBC Daybreak*. "That doctrine made sure we did not exist or were even recognized.... It's one of the root causes of why the relationship is so broken."

Konrad Sioui, the former grand chief of the Huron-Wendat Nation, said he had long hoped the Vatican would repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.

"This news is something we've been waiting for," he said. "This answer of the church today gives us all the hope we need because we've been deprived of our lands through this very [doctrine]."

### **Repudiating Doctrine of Discovery 'warms my heart' but there's more to be done, says Sol Mamakwa**

1 day ago

Duration 5:32

NDP MPP Sol Mamakwa called on Pope Francis to repudiate the 15th-century decrees known as the Doctrine of Discovery when the two met last summer. Mamakwa says the move is a positive step forward, with clear language recognizing the harm done to Indigenous people. He's calling on governments and other institutions to respect Indigenous land rights.

"It's about time," said Sol Mamakwa, an NDP member of the Ontario Legislature, an Anishinaabe and a member of Kingfisher Lake First Nation. He called the Doctrine of Discovery "one of the most racist, colonial systems that are there."

"It's really, really important that we put this in action," Mamakwa said, and one example would be to release all residential school records held by the Catholic Church and the federal government.

The Métis National Council said the Vatican's statement of repudiation signals "a renewed commitment by the Catholic Church to walking together in a good way." The council said it is taking time to fully understand the statement's "nuances and potential implications, so that they can inform our collective next steps forward."

In June 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission — which was formed as a means of reckoning with the devastating legacy of forced assimilation and abuse left by the residential school system in Canada — issued its 94 calls to action. The [49th](#) called on all faith groups to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples. Since then, many religious denominations and faith groups in Canada have done that.

### **Three papal bulls still in place**

The Vatican offered no evidence that the three 15th-century papal bulls (*Dum Diversas* in 1452, *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455 and *Inter Caetera* in 1493) had themselves been formally abrogated, rescinded or rejected, as Vatican officials have often said. But it cited a subsequent bull, *Sublimis Deus* in 1537, that reaffirmed that Indigenous people shouldn't be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, and were not to be enslaved.

It was significant that the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery came during the pontificate of history's first Latin American pope. Before his trip to Canada, the Argentinian-born Francis had apologized to Indigenous people in Bolivia in 2015 for the crimes of the colonial-era conquest of the Americas.

- [Vatican's disavowal of Doctrine of Discovery a good step but 'fundamental change' still needed: Manitoba elder](#)
- [Pope Francis asks for 'forgiveness in the name of the church' for abuses at residential schools](#)

Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Vatican's culture office, said the statement was a reflection of the Vatican's dialogue with Indigenous people.

"This note is part of what we might call the architecture of reconciliation and also the product of the art of reconciliation, the process whereby people commit to listening to each other, to speaking to each other and to growth in mutual understanding," he said in a statement.