

Vatican Rejects Doctrine of Discovery

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Screenshot from Pope Francis's apology to First Nations Peoples on July 25, 2022.

By Native News Online Staff March 30, 2023

In a landmark statement made today, the Vatican formally repudiated a centuries-old theory of church decrees that endorsed the forceful seizing of Native lands and near-total destruction of Indigenous peoples.

The decrees, or “papal bulls,” underpin “The Doctrine of Discovery,” a legal concept created in a 1823 U.S. Supreme Court decision that justified the forceful seizing of Native land by European colonizers under the guise that colonizers “discovered” the land.

In a joint statement issued by the Vatican’s development and education departments, the Catholic Church repudiated “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.’”

The Doctrine of Discovery “is not a part of the teaching of the Catholic Church,” according to the statement, which acknowledges the sufferings of Indigenous people “due to the expropriation of their lands ... as well as the policies of forced assimilation, promoted by the governmental authorities of the time, intended to eliminate their indigenous cultures.”

The statement comes after decades of advocacy from Indigenous communities for the church to formally retract the numerous papal bulls that backed the expansion of Christianity at the cost of Native land and lives.

Notably, the Catholic church played a major role in what is now known as the “[Boarding School Era](#),” a period between 1869 and the 1960s in which hundreds of thousands of Native children across the U.S. and Canada were forcibly removed from their homes to attend residential boarding schools. The schools were operated by the Federal government and, often, the Catholic Church. Children at the schools often suffered horrific physical and sexual abuse and neglect. A federal probe led by Secretary of Interior Deb Haaland has reported more than 500 students died at the schools.

During the Pope's 2022 official visit to Canada, [he issued an official apology to the First Nations Peoples](#) for the Catholic Church’s role in Canada’s “catastrophic” policy of Indigenous residential schools.

The Vatican repudiates 'Doctrine of Discovery,' which was used to justify colonialism

March 30, 2023 1:38 PM ET By [Bill Chappell](#)

<https://www.npr.org/2023/03/30/1167056438/vatican-doctrine-of-discovery-colonialism-indigenous>



People protest as Pope Francis meets young people and elders at Nakasuk Elementary School Square in Iqaluit, Canada, last July. The Vatican on Thursday formally repudiated the "Doctrine of Discovery." The theory is backed by 15th century papal decrees that legitimized the colonial-era seizure of Native lands and form the basis of some property laws today. Gregorio Borgia/AP

Nearly 500 years after papal decrees were used to rationalize Europe's colonial conquests, the Vatican repudiated those decrees on Thursday, saying the "Doctrine of Discovery" that was used to justify snuffing out Indigenous people's culture and livelihoods is not part of the Catholic faith.

The doctrine was invoked as a legal and religious standing by Europeans who "discovered" new lands and violently seized it from people who had been living there for generations. It has been cited in different arenas for centuries, including by the U.S. Supreme Court — as early as 1823 and [as recently as 2005](#).

"The statement repudiates the very mindsets and worldview that gave rise to the original papal bulls," the Rev. David McCallum, executive director of the Program for Discerning Leadership based in Rome, told NPR.

"It renounces the mindset of cultural or racial superiority which allowed for that objectification or subjection of people, and strongly condemns any attitudes or actions that threaten or damage the dignity of the human person."

Here's a brief guide to the Discovery Doctrine, and why the Vatican's move is historic:

The doctrine came from papal "bulls" in the 15th century

The doctrine was laid out in a series of papal "bulls," or decrees; the first one was issued in 1452. They authorized colonial powers such as Spain and Portugal to seize lands and subjugate people in Africa and the "New World," as long as people on the lands were not Christians.

Scholars widely note three bulls: Pope Nicholas V's *Dum diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455); and Pope Alexander VI's *Inter caetera* (1493).

Later popes revoked the decrees, but the damage was done

The papal bulls "were not considered valid just 30 to 40 years after they were first issued. They were in fact abrogated legally and nullified by the Vatican by the late 1530s," McCallum told NPR.

The Vatican's nullification was too late to stop the destructive impact of colonialism, McCallum said, noting that European expansion was fueled by a "sort of missionary sense that the Western monarchies had a right to go to these new lands and to take from them their resources and if necessary to put down people, including enslaving them."

The doctrine made its way into the U.S. legal system

"Back in the in the 19th century, it was used as a precedent which gave people a sense of title to land that had not been owned with an official title in deed," McCallum said.

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So what began as a religious decree in the 1400s then became the basis for a legal concept in the U.S., when the Doctrine of Discovery was invoked in [an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court ruling](#) that Indigenous people had only rights of "occupancy," not ownership, over lands they had long lived on. The land, then, was open for the taking.



[Book Reviews 'Our History Is The Future' Puts Standing Rock In Broader Native American Story](#)

"As a result of this being written into the American property law, it was actually considered a precedent," McCallum said, including citations as recent as a [2005 case in upstate New York](#), involving the Oneida Indian Nation.

Indigenous groups have long sought the repudiation

Indigenous advocates have previously called on the Catholic Church to issue a formal repudiation of the doctrine, saying personal apologies fell short, given the magnitude of the policy's effects.

Last year, the pope stunned observers when he personally [apologized to Taylor Behn-Tsakoza](#), a youth delegate with the Assembly of First Nations who lives in British Columbia, for the Catholic Church's role contributing to years of suffering.

Behn-Tsakoza welcomed the pope's action. But she also noted the irreparable harm done to her culture by centuries of subjugation and to families like her own by decades of forced assimilation — and she called on Francis to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery.

Months later, the pope apologized to Indigenous peoples for the systemic abuse inflicted upon Native children at Catholic-run residential schools. But he [stopped short](#) of formally rescinding the doctrine.

What did the Vatican say about the doctrine?

Invoking the Christian mandate to respect the dignity of every human being, [the Vatican said](#) on Thursday, "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.' "

The Church also said it stands with Indigenous peoples now and strongly supports the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which it says can help protect Indigenous rights as well as improving living conditions and development "in a way that respects their identity, language and culture."

The Vatican also invoked the pope's words from his [visit to Canada](#) last year: "Never again can the Christian community allow itself to be infected by the idea that one culture is superior to others, or that it is legitimate to employ ways of coercing others."

Priests welcome the Vatican statement

"What was significant today is the way that the statement repudiates the very mindsets and worldview that gave rise to the original papal bulls," McCallum said. "It renounces the mindset of cultural or racial superiority which allowed for that objectification or subjection of people, and strongly condemns any attitudes or actions that threaten or damage the dignity of the human person."

Bishop Douglas Lucia of the Diocese of Syracuse, N.Y., said he believes the statement will lead to more dialogue.

"The call 'to walk side by side' is especially poignant in this land of the Onondaga and Haudenosaunee where there exists the 'Two Row Wampum,' " Lucia told NPR via email. "It is a 1613 agreement of how the Haudenosaunee would treat the new settlers on their land based on friendship, peace, and forever."

With the Vatican taking a formal stance, Lucia added, the Christian community can acknowledge its own failings and work with Indigenous peoples to embody that 1613 agreement.

[News/Indigenous Rights](#)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/30/vatican-rejects-doctrine-of-discovery-justifying-colonialism>

Vatican rejects ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ justifying colonialism

After decades of demands by Indigenous people, Vatican ‘repudiates’ theories that backed colonial-era seizure of lands.



Calls to rescind the Doctrine of Discovery grew louder last year when Pope Francis made a trip to Canada to apologise for the Catholic Church's role in abuses at so-called residential schools [File: Guglielmo Mangiapane/Reuters]

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The Vatican has rejected the “Doctrine of Discovery”, a 15th-century concept laid out in so-called “papal bulls” that were used to justify European Christian colonialists’ seizure of Indigenous lands in Africa and the Americas.

In a statement on Thursday, the Vatican’s development and education office said the theory ([PDF](#)) – which still informs government policies and laws today – was not part of the Catholic Church’s teachings.

It said the papal bulls were “manipulated for political purposes by competing colonial powers in order to justify immoral acts against Indigenous peoples that were carried out, at times, without opposition from ecclesiastical authorities”.

“In no uncertain terms, the Church’s magisterium upholds the respect due to every human being,” the [statement](#) reads. “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’.”

For decades, Indigenous leaders and community advocates had urged the Catholic Church to rescind the Doctrine of Discovery, which stated that European colonialists could claim any territory not yet “discovered” by Christians.

The papal bulls played a key role in the European conquest of Africa and the Americas, and their effects are still felt by Indigenous people.

Calls to rescind the Doctrine of Discovery grew louder last year when Pope Francis made a trip to Canada [during which he apologised](#) for the Catholic Church’s role in widespread abuses that took place at so-called residential schools.

Between the late 1800s and 1990s, more than 150,000 Inuit, First Nation and Metis children across Canada were taken from their families and communities and obligated to attend the forced-assimilation institutions, which were rife with physical, psychological and sexual violence.

The Haudenosaunee External Relations Committee said at the time of the pope's residential school apology that [more action was needed](#) from the church – notably, the revocation of the papal bulls.

“An apology to Indigenous Peoples without action are just empty words. The Vatican must revoke these Papal Bulls and stand up for Indigenous Peoples' rights to their lands in courts, legislatures and elsewhere in the world,” the committee said in a July 2022 statement.

Indigenous leaders welcomed Thursday's Vatican statement, even though it continued to take some distance from acknowledging actual culpability.

Phil Fontaine, a former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada who was part of the delegation that met with Pope Francis at the Vatican before last year's trip and then accompanied him throughout, said the statement was “wonderful”.

He said it resolved an outstanding issue and now put the matter to civil authorities to revise property laws that cite the doctrine.

“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 news agency.

“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.

“Today's news on the Vatican's formal repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery is the result of hard work and advocacy on the part of Indigenous leadership and communities,” Canadian Justice Minister David Lametti wrote on Twitter. “A doctrine that should have never existed. This is another step forward.”

The Doctrine of Discovery was cited as recently as a 2005 US Supreme Court decision involving the Oneida Indian Nation and written by the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

On Thursday, the Vatican offered no evidence that the three 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 papal bull, Sublimis Deus in 1537, that reaffirmed that Indigenous peoples should not be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, and were not to be enslaved.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, the Canadian Jesuit whose office co-authored the statement, stressed that the original papal bulls had long ago been abrogated and that the use of the term “doctrine” — which in this case is a legal term, not a religious one — had led to centuries of confusion about the church's role.

The original papal bulls, he said, “are being treated as if they were teaching, magisterial or doctrinal documents, and they are an ad hoc political move. And I think to solemnly repudiate an ad hoc political move is to generate more confusion than clarity”.

He stressed that the statement was not just about setting the historical record straight, but “to discover, identify, analyse and try to overcome what we can only call the enduring effects of colonialism today”.

[Michele 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 in Canada, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that the announcement left her in disbelief.

“It's big,” she [said in an interview](#) on CBC Daybreak. “That doctrine made sure we did not exist or were even recognised ... It's one of the root causes of why the relationship is so broken.”

Source: Al Jazeera, The Associated Press

Vatican formally rejects ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ after Indigenous calls

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<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/vatican-formally-rejects-doctrine-of-discovery-after-indigenous-calls>

VATICAN CITY (AP) — *The Vatican on Thursday responded to Indigenous demands and formally repudiated the “Doctrine of Discovery,” the theories backed by 15th-century “papal bulls” that legitimized the colonial-era seizure of Native lands and form the basis of some property laws today.*

A Vatican statement said the 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.

The statement, from the Vatican’s development and education offices, marked a historic recognition of the Vatican’s own complicity in colonial-era abuses committed by European powers. It was issued under history’s first Latin American pontiff, who was [hospitalized Thursday](#) with a respiratory infection, exactly one year after Francis met at the Vatican with Indigenous leaders from Canada who raised the issue.

On Thursday, these Indigenous leaders welcomed the statement as a first good step, even though it didn’t address the rescinding of the bulls themselves and continued to take distance from acknowledging actual Vatican culpability in abuses. The statement said the papal documents had been “manipulated” for political purposes by competing colonial powers “to justify immoral acts against Indigenous peoples that were carried out, at times, without opposition from ecclesial authorities.”

It said it was right to “recognize these errors,” acknowledge the terrible effects of colonial-era assimilation policies on Indigenous peoples and ask for their forgiveness.

The statement was a response to decades of Indigenous demands 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.

[READ MORE: Pope’s apology to Indigenous peoples for abuse at residential schools insufficient, Canada says](#)

Those decrees underpin the “Doctrine of Discovery,” a legal concept coined in a 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 Supreme Court decision involving the Oneida Indian Nation written by the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

During Pope Francis’ 2022 visit to Canada, [where he apologized to Indigenous peoples](#) for the residential school system that forcibly removed Native 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.

Before that, Michelle Schenandoah of the Oneida Nation had called for the Vatican to rescind the papal bulls when she delivered the closing remarks of the First Nations delegation that met with Francis during a weeklong visit last year by Native groups from Canada. On Thursday, she called the Vatican statement “another step in the right direction,” but noted that it didn’t mention the rescinding of the bulls themselves.

“I think what this does is it really puts the responsibility on nation states such as the United States, to look at its use of the Doctrine of Discovery,” she said in an interview from Syracuse, New York, where she is a professor of Indigenous law at Syracuse University’s College of Law. “This goes beyond land. It really has created generation upon generation of genocidal policies directed towards Indigenous peoples. And I think that it’s time for these governments to take full accountability for their actions.”

In the statement, the Vatican said: “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.’”

[READ MORE: What are the next steps for Black reparations in San Francisco?](#)

Phil Fontaine, a former national chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada who was also part of the First Nations delegation that met with Francis at the Vatican, 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.

“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 told The Associated Press.

The Vatican offered no evidence that the three 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 peoples shouldn’t be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, and were not to be enslaved.

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The original bulls, he said, “are being treated as if they were teaching, magisterial or doctrinal documents, and they are an ad hoc political move. And I think to solemnly repudiate an ad hoc political move is to generate more confusion than clarity.”

He stressed that the statement wasn’t just about setting the historical record straight, but “to discover, identify, analyze and try to overcome what we can only call the enduring effects of colonialism today.”

It was significant that the repudiation of the “Doctrine of Discovery” came during the pontificate of history’s first Latin American pope. Even before the Canadian trip, the Argentine pope had apologized to Native peoples in Bolivia in 2015 for the crimes of the colonial-era conquest of the Americas.

Felix Hoehn, a property and administrative law professor at the University of Saskatchewan, said the Vatican statement would have no legal bearing on land claims in Canada today, but would have symbolic value.

“The most that any papal repudiation of the doctrine (or the bulls, for that matter) can do in relation to Canadian law is to apply pressure on the Supreme Court of Canada to renounce the doctrine as part of Canadian law,” he said.

Beyond that, though, is the hope that the statement could show that the Catholic Church wants to be an ally with Indigenous peoples as they fight for their human rights and their land, and to protect it, said the Rev. David McCallum, an American Jesuit who has worked with Indigenous peoples in the Syracuse area and was consulted during the drafting of the statement.

“So now for the church to not only acknowledge the damage, but also to repudiate the whole mindset of cultural superiority, of racial superiority to, in a sense, renounce that whole way of thinking and say that forever forward the church wants to be an active ally in protecting Indigenous human rights along with all human rights, I think it’s a big statement,” he said.

Rob Gillies contributed to this report from Toronto.