Opinion



by Mary Ann McGivern

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The Doctrine of Discovery, Pope Alexander VI's papal bull, permits any Christian coming upon land inhabited by non-Christians to claim it all. It was published on May 4, 1493, and on May 7, 2018, representatives from the Confederacy of Haudenosaunee, the Assembly of First Nations Canada, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Yakima nation visited the Vatican to request a retraction.

Apparently, they were well received, in that members of the Dicastery on Human Development extended the meeting from three to four and a half hours. The delegations had seven points:

1. They wanted a full retraction of all the papal bulls that have been interpreted or used to disenfranchise indigenous peoples.

2. The United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia all have used the Doctrine of Discovery to buttress their legal systems. The delegation asks the Vatican to notify these nations that the church does not support its use.

3. The delegates ask for a meeting with the Holy See to develop a process of retracting, removing, dismantling and rejecting all use of case law that relies on the Doctrine of Discovery.

4. They ask for assistance in seeking relief from the impact of the Marshall Trilogy (U.S. Supreme Court rulings that justify the Doctrine of Discovery) and in establishing diplomatic relations to secure rightful indigenous ownership.

5. They ask for freedom to travel the original territories of these Indian nations.

6. They ask for church support for United Nations observer status for these Indian nations.

7. They ask that the church and indigenous peoples establish a forum to protect the natural world, including meeting the challenge of climate change and addressing the destruction of key elements like clean water, which is a human right.

Then last August, the Haudenosaunee held a gathering at Onondaga Lake, including academics, attorneys and religious leaders from as far away as Chile to discuss the Doctrine of Discovery. Since 1984 tribal members have worked to oppose this doctrine.

[Mary Ann McGivern, a Sister of Loretto, works with people who have felony convictions and advocates for criminal justice. She lived at a Catholic Worker house for 28 years. She has been a public radio commentator and written plays and a cookbook. She lives in St. Louis.]

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