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Indigenous people hold a banner calling on Pope Francis to "rescind the doctrine," an apparent reference to the so-called Doctrine of Discovery, during a papal Mass at the National Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré July 28, 2022, in Quebec. (CNS/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



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Rome — March 30, 2023
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The Vatican on March 30 formally repudiated the "Doctrine of Discovery," officially declaring that an historic policy used to justify colonial exploitation is "not part of the teaching of the Catholic Church."

The rejection of the concept, which has been used to describe a collection of papal teachings dating back to the 15th century, comes after years of pressure from Indigenous groups and some government leaders, including Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"In no uncertain terms, the Church's magisterium upholds the respect due to every human being," states a two-page text released jointly by the Vatican's Dicasteries for Culture and Education and Promoting Integral Human Development. "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 declaration acknowledges that some scholars believe the basis of the doctrine is rooted in papal documents, but states that the bulls were "written in a specific historical period and linked to political questions, [and] have never been considered expressions of the Catholic faith."

At the same time, it states that the papal bulls "did not adequately reflect the equal dignity and rights of indigenous peoples" and that the they 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."

Canadian Cardinal Michael Czerny, who heads the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, told reporters on March 30 that "the 'Doctrine of Discovery' is an invention or creation of the U.S. Supreme Court in the 19th century" and that it was "unfortunate" that "a very strongly church related word is used by the U.S.

Supreme Court to name an idea or a historical process."

An 1823 U.S. Supreme Court decision, which has been cited as recently as 2005, pointed to the 15th century papal bulls, arguing that the "principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands."

Czerny, however, said the new Vatican statement makes clear that the principle is not a Catholic doctrine and that the 15th century papal bulls were no longer official Catholic teaching.

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When Pope Francis visited Canada last July to issue an apology for the Catholic Church's involvement in the country's 19th and 20th century residential schools, which stripped Indigenous peoples of their Native heritage and cultures, he repeatedly faced calls for formal rescission of the so-called doctrine.

Eight months later, Czerny said that the church's priority was to listen and to take seriously concerns raised by the Indigenous peoples.

"To take seriously, often means to take time," he told reporters.

In an article published in Vatican News, the church's official media platform, Portuguese Cardinal José Tolentino Calaca de Mendonca, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, said the March 30 Vatican note is "part of what we might call the architecture of reconciliation … the process whereby people commit to listening to each other, to speaking to each other and to growth in mutual understanding."

While the new note does not formally abrogate any formal papal bulls, it quotes a 1537 bull by Pope Paul III, which declares Native peoples should not be enslaved nor deprived of their personal liberty or property.

"Should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect," it states.

Czerny told reporters he was not aware of whether the Vatican's doctrinal office was involved in the drafting of the new declaration. He said no doctrinal matters are in question, as papal pulls are "an ad hoc response to an ad hoc problem."

Upon the declaration's release, bishops in both the United States and Canada praised the Vatican's note as a welcome step forward in the church's efforts to improve relations with Native and Indigenous peoples "who have experienced tremendous suffering because of the legacy of a colonizing mentality."

"As the Joint Statement points out, there were times when Christians, including ecclesiastical authorities, failed to fully oppose destructive and immoral actions of the competing colonial powers. In this regard, we too express deep sorrow and regret," said the U.S. bishops' statement.

The Canadian bishops also noted that plans are underway for a potential academic symposium, jointly organized by the U.S. bishops' conference and the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences for Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars "to further deepen historical understanding about the 'Doctrine of Discovery.' "

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