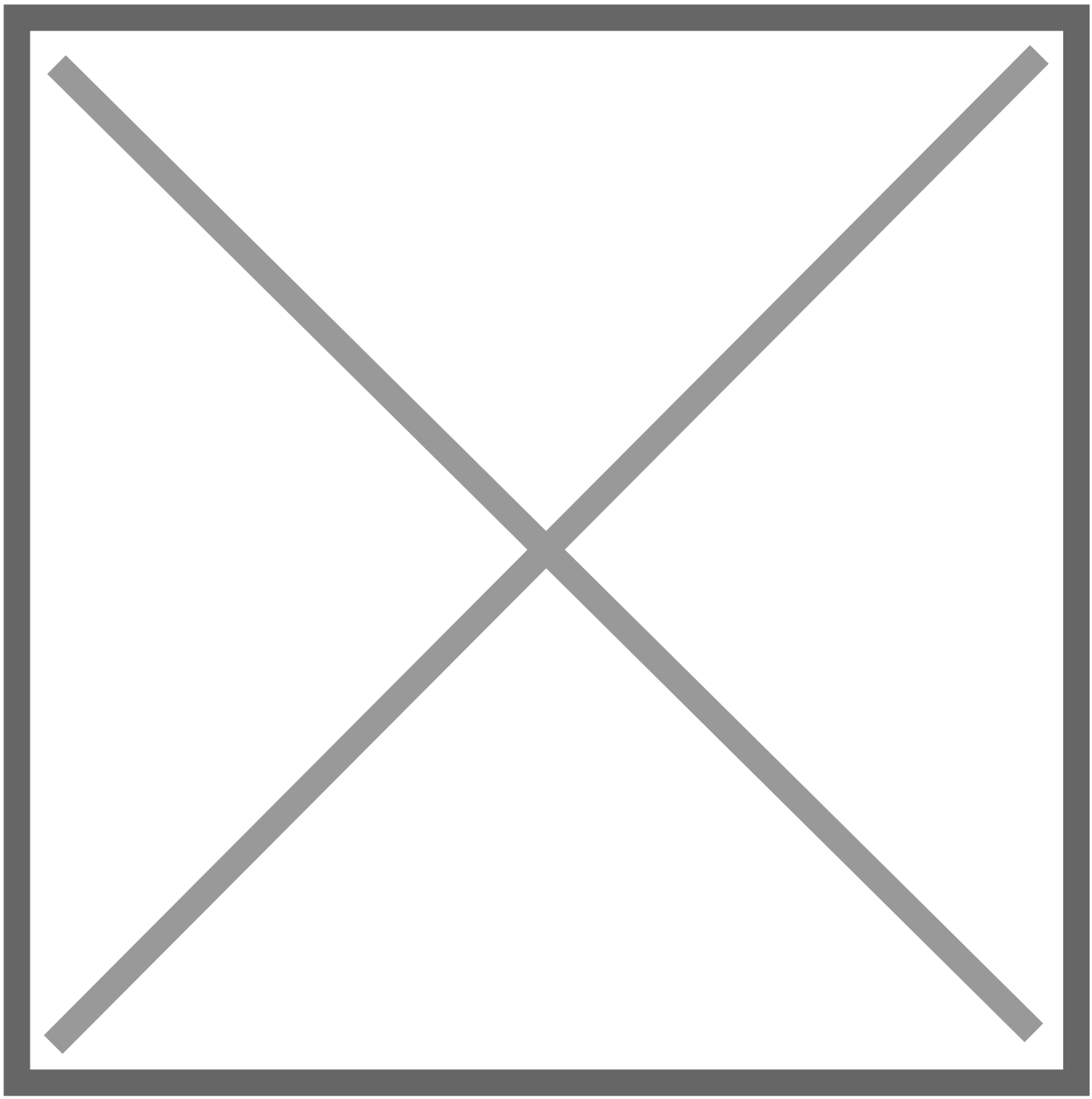
News



Chief Tony Alexis, whose Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation helps run an annual pilgrimage to Alberta's Lac Ste. Anne, is pictured July 21, 2019. Indigenous leaders and scholars joined with Roman Catholic bishops and scholars in Edmonton May 26-29, 2026, for a "knowledge-sharing symposium" about the "Doctrine of Discovery" and its enduring negative impact on Indigenous peoples, particularly in North America. (OSV News/Grandin Media/Lincoln Ho)

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As the Indigenous people of Canada and the United States continue to fight for self-governance and for control of their traditional territories, many of them point to the Catholic Church and the "Doctrine of Discovery" as being a prime cause for loss of their full rights.

The foundations of the "Doctrine of Discovery" usually are traced to papal documents from the 15th century but also include later philosophical and political positions and legal rulings asserting that ownership of or sovereignty over land passed automatically to European colonizers by virtue of their having "discovered" it, irrespective of the presence of Indigenous occupants.

"I have thought of the 'Doctrine of Discovery' as gum underneath my shoes — wherever I go, it is there — and I thought one day, I am going to change my shoes and wear our moccasins and, dang it, there is gum there, too," said Grand Chief Edward John of the Tl'azt'en Nation in British Columbia, a lawyer.

John was one of the Indigenous leaders and scholars who joined with Roman Catholic bishops and scholars in Edmonton May 26-29 for a "knowledge-sharing symposium" about the "Doctrine of Discovery" and its enduring negative impact on Indigenous peoples, particularly in North America.

The gathering at St. Joseph Seminary sought to build on a 2023 statement from the Vatican that affirmed that the Catholic Church formally "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 statement was released by the Vatican dicasteries for Culture and Education and for Promoting Integral Human Development, which co-sponsored the Edmonton meeting along with the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and sent a representative to the gathering.

The Vatican's 2023 statement said papal texts that seemed to support the idea that Christian colonizers could claim the land of non-Christian Indigenous people "have never been considered expressions of the Catholic faith."

Half of the 40 participants in Edmonton were Indigenous leaders and scholars from Canada and the U.S. The gathering also included bishops from Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand.

Archbishop Donald Bolen of Regina, Saskatchewan, one of the main organizers of the gathering, said they invited participants whose research, study or activism is motivated by the "pursuit of justice," and he hoped the symposium would advance "the current search for right relationships and justice."

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Since participants had a diversity of viewpoints about the formulation of the "Doctrine of Discovery" and the Church's complicity in the oppression of Indigenous peoples, he said he expected an interesting and "rigorous conversation and, hopefully, mutual learning," dialogue and the identification of areas where they could work together for the common good.

Chief Wilton Littlechild, a well-known expert on Canadian law and treaty rights and another main organizer of the symposium, told participants the "Doctrine of Discovery" is still being used today to deny Indigenous people their rights and sovereignty.

The chief said that when he served on Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the commissioners heard people talk repeatedly about the "Doctrine

of Discovery" and how it was at the root of their communities' loss of land and self-determination and the exploitation that followed, including through the establishment of residential schools.

Calling participants "the international experts, the knowledge keepers, the knowledge holders" on Indigenous life and the "Doctrine of Discovery," he said was grateful they agreed to embrace "the old-time way" of gathering the learned and wise so they could learn from each other.

In a video message, Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, asked participants to fight a temptation "to read with historical selectivity" by focusing only on elements that affirm their position.

"It is a temptation for Church leaders seeking to defend and justify the Church," he said, and "a temptation for historians and legal scholars looking to put forward a particular argument; and it is a temptation for those working to address the injustices experienced by Indigenous Peoples as a result of colonization."

Perhaps the best-known presenter at the symposium was Steven Newcomb, a Shawnee-Lenape scholar and author of "Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery."

Newcomb spoke about "the original free and independent existence of our nations and peoples extending back to the beginning of time," and the "stark contrast" with "the system of domination that was brought by ship across the ocean and imposed on everyone and everything."

The colonizers' claims of dominion and domination were supported by the "Doctrine of Discovery," he said, and the "grandfather" of that ideology was the papal teaching contained particularly in three bulls from the 15th century: Pope Nicholas V's Dum Diversas (1452) and Romanus Pontifex (1455), and Pope Alexander VI's Inter Caetera (1493). The documents, Newcomb said, gave colonizing powers control over the land and people they "discovered."

Saying it was not enough for Vatican offices to claim those documents are not Church teaching, Newcomb called repeatedly for Pope Leo XIV to explicitly "revoke" the 1493 document.

Douglas Lind, a professor at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, argued that what commonly is called the "Doctrine of Discovery" was never one, elaborated policy, but that multiple ideas and policies could be identified in expressions of the attitude from the time of the papal documents through to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1823 that enshrined it in U.S. law. The "papal theory of discovery" was just one of those, he said, and was not the most developed nor the one that had the most lasting influence since colonizing nations did not want to be constrained by Vatican limits on their power.

Sarah Augustine, a Pueblo (Tewa) descendant and executive director of the U.S.-based Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, argued that the existence of various definitions of the "Doctrine of Discovery" did not mean that the concept did not have a strong and lasting legacy.

Nuances in how the theory was articulated do not change the impact on Indigenous peoples who were dominated and subjugated by Europeans, she said.

The question today, Augustine said, is "who benefits from these systems of domination?"

The "Doctrine of Discovery" is not simply "an abstract concept that we can digest and break down," she said, but one that continues to impact the lives of Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas as they seek to reclaim their territories, return to self-governance, teach their languages and protect the land and the water from mining and drilling.

"The 'Doctrine of Discovery' created a logic, a paradigm for creating law and policy that exists to this day," she said, and continues to create categories of winners and losers, rich and poor.

At the end of the meeting, participants promised to continue meeting — online and in person — and to educate their local communities about the "Doctrine of Discovery" and the ongoing harm it causes. Several participants also urged a greater focus on spirituality, faith, community, solidarity and encounter as paths forward.