

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 11, 2010 at 8:48am

Happy Columbus Day

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This morning, protesters will gather at the foot of a statue to Christopher Columbus outside Washington D.C.'s Union Station. Some years they throw blood on the statue. They charge Columbus with bringing cruelty and slavery to the New World, and you can read, at Huffington Post this morning, a synopsis of the crimes the Columbus-haters accuse him of perpetrating.

But, Columbus also brought the Gospel with him to the New World. Yes, the good news of Jesus Christ was carried by men who shared all the prejudices, the violence, and the cruelty of late-fifteenth century Europeans. Columbus did not only bring Christ, he brought Christians, and those Christians often did unspeakably horrible things. Yet, despite this legacy of cruelty, there is another legacy, a legacy of those, especially Catholic priests, who defended the native peoples from the militaristic adventurers who made up most of Columbus's - and subsequent - crews.

Columbus Day was originally made a holiday out of deference to Italians who wanted to celebrate one of their own. But, in our own day, I think it is especially valuable to celebrate this holiday because it reminds Americans that the new world did not begin with the nasty Puritans who landed in the colder climes. As more and more immigrants come to the United States from Latin America, they bring with them a culture that cannot be understood or explained without reference to the Iberian Catholicism that Columbus brought to the New World. That Catholicism mixed with native culture in fascinating and fecund ways, certainly in ways that were more accepting of native culture than was found in the Protestant colonies that so shaped the development of U.S. culture.

I was shocked this morning to find the local elementary school filled with children heading to classes. Yes, they should be taught the whole truth about the crimes that were committed by Columbus and those who followed. But, they should also be taught that a culture grew out of the meeting of Catholic

Spaniards and Portugese, a culture that continues in the societies of our neighbors to the south. It may have been born in cruelty, but it has perdured with incredible beauty and profound familial ties that have enabled it to resist better than we in the U.S. the onslaught of an increasingly sterile consumer culture most notable for its conformism and its shallowness.

We need not celebrate everything Columbus did, nor whitewash the history of his doings, to celebrate the fact that with his "discovery" something genuinely new and humane and Christian came of it.

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