

# How the Doctrine of Discovery & Domination is at Work Today

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An explainer on how Catholics can address this system of domination and begin the process of repair and reconciliation.



**CALL TO ACTION**  
Inspire Catholics, Transform Church



## Overview

The papal bulls that shaped the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination.

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## The Impacts

How these papal bulls were codified into our civil law.

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## Theological Impacts

How these systems of domination changed Catholic theology—and why that's harmful.

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## Exploring Complicity

How do we turn inward and acknowledge our complicity without falling into shame?

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## Next Steps

Actions you, your communities, and the Catholic Church can take.

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## Reflection Questions

A list of contemplative questions for you to deepen your study.

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## Resources

A brief list of books, films, and podcasts. This list is an ongoing project.

## ABOUT

Developed by **Call To Action's Indigenous Solidarity Collective**, this explainer is meant to serve as a resource for those new to the difficult yet necessary work of justice and reconciliation for Indigenous Peoples. We designed this explainer to pair with books and films on the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination, including Steven Newcomb's *The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code*. We included reflection questions and resources to deepen your study.

Use this resource in your parishes, intentional or eucharistic communities, classrooms, or among friends and family.

### **About Call To Action:**

Established in 1978, [Call To Action](#) is a progressive Catholic organization committed to reforming the Catholic Church and renewing Catholic communities across North America. Anti-racism and anti-oppression initiatives are at the core of CTA's mission.

### **About the Indigenous Solidarity Collective:**

A Call To Action working group established in 2022, the Indigenous Solidarity Collective addresses the Catholic Church's historical and current role in colonialization. Goals include educating Catholics about the importance of collective responsibility for violence against Indigenous Peoples; lobbying the hierarchy and political leaders; and building relationships with Indigenous groups so that we may be in solidarity with their activism and leadership.

**To become involved in [CTA's Indigenous Solidarity Collective](#), email: [indigenous-solidarity@cta-usa.org](mailto:indigenous-solidarity@cta-usa.org).**



**The Catholic hierarchy and its agents repeated patterns of domination and dehumanization for centuries, imposing them upon Original Free Nations and Indigenous Peoples.**

# What is the Doctrine of Discovery & Domination?

The Doctrine of Discovery and Domination is a set of legal principles and decisions that validated and imposed white Christian supremacy over Indigenous Peoples of Africa, the Americas, and their homelands. Two 15th-century popes and [their papal bulls](#) created the foundation of the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination: Pope Nicolas V and his [1452 bull "Dum Diversas"](#) and [1455 bull "Romanus Pontifex"](#) and Pope Alexander VI and his [1493 bull "Inter Caetera."](#)

The first of these papal bulls, "Dum Diversas," [instructed and permitted the Portuguese crown](#), King Alfonso, to "invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans" and other non-Christians, take their land and belongings, and "reduce" them to perpetual slavery. The 1455 bull "Romanus Pontifex" extended dominion over discovered lands to Catholic European nations and sanctified the seizure of non-Christian lands and non-Christian peoples in Africa and the New World. The [1493 papal bull "Inter Caetera"](#) was notable for its unabashed call to claim lands, not even occupied, from those who weren't Christian. Alexander declared the Spanish crown was free to claim

any land not owned or inhabited by Christians, granting Europeans complete sovereignty over the so-called New World. The Law of Nations was delineated by one Christian nation not having the right to establish dominion over lands already dominated by another Christian nation. Imperialism and the Atlantic slave trade also rolled out of this, with ongoing ramifications, in terms of inequality and deprivation of the goods of the Earth, occurring today.

Through these papal bulls, the Vatican permitted European monarchies and their agents to take control and spread the faith through violent means, including confinement and enslavement, on the false theological basis that "the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself." The Catholic hierarchy and its agents repeated these patterns of domination and dehumanization for centuries, imposing them upon Original Free Nations and Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous leaders like Steven Newcomb and Birgil Kills Straight claim the Vatican has been unwilling to engage with these papal bulls and the ways they perpetuated harm and violence.



Pope Francis has offered support for the rights of Indigenous Peoples along with [apologies to Original Free Nations in his address](#) to the 2nd World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia in 2015. Francis spoke of the wisdom of Indigenous cultures and our common “fraternity, determination, commitment, a thirst for justice.” He conveyed his desire “to see the Church opening her doors to all of you, embracing you, accompanying you and establishing in each diocese, in every justice and peace commission, a genuine, ongoing and serious cooperation.” Francis also asked bishops and lay Catholics alike to “deepen this encounter” with those who struggle daily for food, housing, land, and work, which he called “sacred rights.”

Francis admitted that “many grave sins were committed against the Native Peoples of America in the name of God” and apologized “for crimes committed against the Native Peoples during the so-called conquest of America.” He repeated Pope John Paul II’s request for “forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters.” Indigenous Peoples say that these statements may open a door for dialogue and true reconciliation, but a process to address these systems of domination has yet to occur.

Although Vatican leaders are now familiar with the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination, the Vatican remains reluctant to fully revoke the theologies and policies the Catholic Church promulgated over the centuries. In March 2023, [the Vatican repudiated](#) the Doctrine of

Discovery, referencing the “mindset” of the Catholic hierarchy during the early modern period; however, the Vatican stopped short of accepting responsibility for its role in domination and dehumanization and exploring how these patterns continue today.

The dehumanization, stealing of land and goods, and the destruction of lives, livelihoods, and cultures have had far-reaching consequences. In response to the Vatican’s repudiation, [Newcomb wrote](#): “Today Indigenous nations and Peoples live with the psychological and other forms of wreckage brought about by the fifteenth-century Vatican documents issued by various popes. ... The number of potential questions regarding all of the torment and abuse and suffering caused by the legacy of those documents is staggering.”

## The Vatican has yet to:

- **explicitly revoke** these papal documents;
- **acknowledge the harm** and implications of what they have done;
- **remedy** how the hierarchy continues to support and accommodate domination systems
- **concretely make amends** for the ongoing ramifications of these systems
- **establish ongoing discussion** with Indigenous leaders who have called for this for decades, including at and after the 1993 Parliament of World Religions.

# What are the lasting impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery & Domination?

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Important issues such as land and water sovereignty, the well-being of people and our common life support systems, and mental and physical health outcomes have all been endangered due to the systems of domination that dehumanized some groups and bestowed land, income, and legitimacy on others. Although these papal documents were issued more than 500 years ago, the Doctrine of Discovery continues to extract resources from stolen land and deprive Indigenous Peoples and Original Free Nations of their livelihoods. As Yoko Kopacã, leader of the Indigenous communities settling the Ibirama-Laklãnõ region of Brazil, [recently said](#): "We are not defenders of nature; we are nature defending itself."

Following centuries of colonization and genocide, settlers and settler governments continue to extract resources from stolen land for private profit. Both religious and secular domination systems extended "Christendom" over the Americas, and the U.S. government proceeded to grant European-American settlers land ownership; impose and then violate treaties with Indigenous Peoples; and corral them into less desirable areas. Life on the reservation is harsh; settler governments often left Indigenous residents without food, clean water, health care, and the ability to support themselves, all of which these governments promised.

State and federal governments codified the Doctrine of Discovery and Domina-

**Life on the reservation is harsh; settler governments often left Indigenous residents without food, clean water, and health care, all of which they promised.**





tion into real estate, land, and water rights law as well as civil Native American law. A recent case is the 2005 Supreme Court decision [Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation](#), which the Oneida Indian Nation lost in an 8-1 decision. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg ruled that "the tribe cannot unilaterally revive its ancient sovereignty." Her ruling cited the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination and the 1823 case [Johnson v. McIntosh](#). According to Steven Newcomb, these Supreme Court rulings illustrate how [both Christian and secular governments failed to protect](#) the land or resources for the public good.

These ongoing systems of domination and extraction also play a major role in Indigenous People's current circumstances, from a shortage of land, food, and employment to poor mental and physical health outcomes. [Indian Health Services reports](#) that Indigenous Americans have the highest suicide rate and one of the highest addiction rates among all ethnic and racial groups. Indigenous Americans also experience worse physical and mental health outcomes overall.

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**We are not  
defenders of  
nature; we are  
nature  
defending itself.**

— **Indigenous leader  
Yoko Kopacã**



Photo of Navajo Nation.  
Credit: Inkknife via CC BY-SA 2.0.



# Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation

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Justice Ginsburg's ruling in this 2005 case cited the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination and *Johnson v. McIntosh*:

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The Indians were admitted to be the rightful occupants of the soil, with a legal as well as just claim to retain possession of it, and to use it according to their own discretion; but their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations, were necessarily diminished, and . . . Discovery (by Europeans) gave exclusive title to those who made it (their discovery).

[T]he different Nations of Europe . . . Asserted the ultimate dominion to be in themselves; and claimed and exercised, as a consequence of this ultimate dominion, a power to grant the soil, while yet in possession of the natives.

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# What about the lasting theological impacts?

Our Church has promoted and continues to promote damaging theologies that undermine the spiritual health and mental well-being of not only Indigenous People but of all people. For centuries, the Catholic Church taught that Indigenous Peoples lacked souls and were in dire need of conversion. Many Church leaders have continued to fear that Indigenous traditions are somehow evil. As Indigenous advocate Sarah Augustine told Call To Action [in a presentation in May 2023](#): "There is only one side in this world—the side of creation and life. The other logic is doomed to fail."

In his [encyclical \*Laudato Si\*](#), on the care of creation, Pope Francis stated: "Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's

image and given dominion over the Earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures." There is no better example of the Catholic Church's claim that Christendom maintains absolute domination over non-Christians than the claims found in the papal bulls of Pope Nicholas V. In "Dum Diversas," he exhorted King Alfonso of Portugal to subdue all "enemies of Christ," reduce their persons to perpetual slavery," and strip them of their possessions and property. The papal bulls of this period contain the same language of domination and dehumanization, emphasizing domination, subjection, reduction, and subjugation, and we must learn and be attentive to how this mislabeling continues to be justified.

Tracing patterns and effects of domination, in collaboration and dialogue with those who have suffered, is our responsibility and the Vatican's. Theology that supports or allows for ongoing domination by any party over another is the complete opposite of Jesus' teachings on love, humility, and compassion. Jesus preached against the dangers of self-righteous authorities that lack all humility and purport to be superior to all others. Indeed, in the Magnificat, Mary declares that she will give birth to the one who will lift up the lowly and turn an unjust world upside down. We are supposed to be Jesus' hands and feet, completing this work on Earth.



# Exploring our complicity in this colonial legacy.

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It may be difficult for us to understand and acknowledge our role in this colonial legacy and see how we, our families, our churches, or those with whom we identify have concretely benefited over generations while others have been deprived. All Indigenous People are facing real oppression and ongoing harm. Many Indigenous People are living under the poverty level because their land and the ability to support and sustain themselves have been stripped away. Meanwhile, many of us and our ancestors may have benefited from these domination systems, such as receiving or inheriting land and its resources.

It can be hard to acknowledge privilege when so many, across large regions, are facing increasing difficulty just surviving. If our families are relatively new to the United States or Canada, we might feel disconnected from this legacy. Those of us who are descended from colonized or oppressed peoples may especially find it difficult to share this dual role, as post-colonial scho-

lar Leila Ahmed puts it, of the oppressed and the oppressor. But we cannot remain willfully ignorant or, worse yet, willfully defiant. We must walk with our brothers and sisters in creating new, just systems and processes.

We follow the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." We may not be personally responsible for the atrocities committed by the Catholic Church or our governments, but we are part of this world and dialogue today. Often, when we assume responsibility for their long-lasting impacts, we experience guilt and shame. While shame is an unproductive emotion, guilt can be a blessing. It can be a powerful motivator, for it compels you to take steps to act and move toward change. Holding and examining this guilt within ourselves is our first step in moving toward wholeness—the wholeness of our spirit as well as our communities. We can begin by listening to those harmed and letting them speak for

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**In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.**  
—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

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themselves. We can look for commonalities of values in our religious traditions with those of Original Free Nations. Are we willing to look for ways forward, together, and work toward repair?

Both individuals and faith groups are listening for calls to action. People are speaking up as Catholic institutions close and their properties are disbursed. Some Catholics have shared housing with Indigenous families or have bequeathed their homes to Indigenous People. Some Catholic parishes and institutions are engaging in the "real rent movement" or implementing a self-imposed tax: If they buy, sell, or lease, they provide a percentage that goes to the Indigenous Peoples who were displaced. Other Catholic institutions provide direct funding to those seeking self-determination.

## More about the work of Steven Newcomb & Birgil Kills Straight.

Indigenous leaders Steven Newcomb and Birgil Kills Straight began speaking to the [Parliament of World Religions](#) over 30 years ago about the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination, educating many. They also helped organize and produce [a Doctrine of Discovery and Christian Domination website](#).

Newcomb and Kills Straight have made multiple trips to the Vatican to meet with representatives over the last three papacies, and recently met with Pope Francis.

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**We are not God.  
The Earth was  
here before us  
and it has been  
given to us.**

— **Pope Francis**



Photo courtesy of Steven Newcomb.

# What are some next steps in addressing wider Church responsibility?

Our Catholic tradition translates “sin” as “missing the mark.” True conversion or “metanoia” is being willing to turn around and go another direction. How do we help our Church do that? How do we convince the Vatican to take deeper action and shift from domination systems?

Indigenous leaders who have been addressing this issue for decades tell us that the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination has yet to be addressed openly and explicitly, with their involvement. The Catholic Church needs to identify the exact patterns of domination that were set into motion and take responsibility for depriving Original Free Nations of their land, culture, lives, and livelihoods in ways that cannot be set aside with brief and general apologies.

Indigenous People ask us to take the time and make the commitment to go to the heart of the matter: to the places and ways that systems of domination and extraction, hierarchy/supremacy, and destruction continue to cause damage today. They have proposed to Vatican leaders an international conference of Indigenous leaders; ongoing dialogue specifically focused on the themes of domination and dehumanization; and a

detailed examination of the dominating language found in the papal bulls. The Church might then explicitly revoke these papal documents; acknowledge the harm and implications of what they have done; look for and eliminate how it continues to support and accommodate domination systems; and concretely make amends for the ongoing ramifications of these systems.

This work is about the liberation of nations and peoples from systems of domination. It is about restoration and healing for all, in equal dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and nations. It is about taking action in understanding their love, mission, and spiritual connection to the land, their languages and culture, with their tradition of true and good stewardship, and their original free and independent existence as nations extending back before a Western notion of time. The process should balance power structurally and collectively and seek to impact laws and policies in the Church that do not perpetuate domination or cause imbalance. We have to dismantle these so we can all embrace our full humanity, and seek transformation in mutuality, as equals and co-searchers for justice.





# Reflection Questions

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*As you begin this journey to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination, the following questions will deepen your study and contemplation. We invite you to spend time with each question, and remind you that this process is a lifelong one.*

- What questions are you sitting with as you enter this process of learning about the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination, and the Catholic Church's involvement in shaping this doctrine?
- How do you see systems of domination operating in our society and our Church today? Where do you see intersections or overlapping actors?
- Who have been helpful teachers (Indigenous People in your community, online or on social media, or non-Indigenous People) who provide or amplify the voices and perspectives of Indigenous People?
- How have you and your family benefited from land that originally belonged to Indigenous People?
- How can you use your own resources to support Original Free Nations and dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination?
- What actions can you take individually to grow in respect, solidarity, and right relationship with the Indigenous Peoples of the land you currently are settled upon?
- What actions can you ask your family, community, or parish to take to help counter domination systems and bring about healing and right relationship?
- How can we as Catholics fulfill our mission to promote and enable the dignity of all, including the people of Original Free Nations, their land, the care and well-being of the Earth, and all beings who live here?



# Further Resources

Below is a list of resources on the Doctrine of Discovery and Domination and land back initiatives. These resources will enhance your efforts to learn accountability to Indigenous Peoples. To contribute to this list, please contact Christopher at [christopher@cta-usa.org](mailto:christopher@cta-usa.org).

## Books

[\*Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery\*](#) by Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah

[\*Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Discovery\*](#) by Steven Newcomb

[\*The Land is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery\*](#) by Sarah Augustine

[\*Reconciliation Manifesto\*](#) by Arthur Manuel, with a forward by Naomi Klein

[\*Living Resistance: An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day\*](#) by Kaitlin B. Curtice

## Films

[\*The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code\*](#) produced by Steven Newcomb

[\*Hesapa\*](#), a Landback film from the NDN Collective

## Podcast

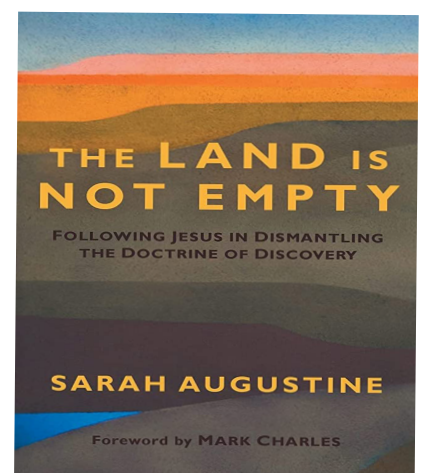
[Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Podcast](#) available on Apple and Spotify

## Other Resources

[Original Free Nations](#)

[Indigenous Law Institute](#)

[Nuns and Nones Land Justice Series](#)



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## Connect with Call To Action

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