

FNS: DOCUMENT EXCERPT: The Doctrine of Discovery

Excerpt from "Inter Caetera," a Papal Bull (decree) sent from Pope Alexander VI, to the king and queen of Spain on May 4, 1493¹

Alexander, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to the illustrious sovereigns, our very dear son in Christ, Ferdinand, king, and our very dear daughter in Christ, Isabella, queen.... Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread.

We have indeed learned that you, who for a long time had intended to seek out and discover certain islands and mainlands remote and unknown ... chose our beloved son, Christopher Columbus ... whom you furnished with ships and men equipped for like designs, not without the greatest hardships, dangers, and expenses, to make diligent quest ... and they at length, with divine aid and with the utmost diligence ... discovered certain very remote islands and even mainlands that hitherto had not been discovered by others; wherein dwell very many peoples living in peace, and, as reported, going unclothed, and not eating flesh. Moreover ... these very peoples ... seem sufficiently disposed to embrace the Catholic faith and be trained in good morals.

And, in order that you may enter upon so great an undertaking with greater readiness and heartiness endowed with the benefit of our apostolic favor, we ... give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors ... all their [Native peoples'] dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdictions, and appurtenances, all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered.

We trust in Him from whom empires and governments and all good things proceed, that, should you, with the Lord's guidance, pursue this holy and praiseworthy undertaking, in a short while your hardships and endeavors will attain the most felicitous result, to the happiness and glory of all Christendom.... Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, in the year of the incarnation of our Lord one thousand four hundred and ninety-three, the fourth of May, and the first year of our pontificate.

Gratis by order of our most holy lord, the pope. Alexander VI

¹ "we" and "our" refers to the Pope and Catholic Church, while "you" refers to the king and queen and rest of the monarchy.

And the counter-point

Antonio Montesino was a Spanish Dominican friar who was a missionary on the island of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti). With the backing of his prior, Friar Pedro de Córdoba, and his Dominican community at Santo Domingo, Montesinos preached against the enslavement and harsh treatment of the Indigenous peoples of the Island. Montesinos' preaching led to Bartolomé de las Casas' conversion and his entering the Dominican Order. The following is an excerpt from a sermon preached by Montesino on 21 December 1511. Listing the injustices that the indigenous people were suffering at the hands of the Spanish colonists, Montesinos proclaimed that the Spanish on the island "are all in mortal sin and live and die in it, because of the cruelty and tyranny they practice among these innocent peoples." According to Bartolomé de las Casas, who was a witness, Montesinos asked those in attendance:

“Tell me by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dealt quietly and peacefully on their own lands? Wars in which you have destroyed such an infinite number of them by homicides and slaughters never heard of before. Why do you keep them so oppressed and exhausted, without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sicknesses they incur from the excessive labor you give them, and they die, or rather you kill them, in order to extract and acquire gold every day . . .”