

Repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery

April 2023 – On March 30, 2023, the **Vatican released a statement** repudiating the atrocities inflicted on indigenous peoples by European colonizers. This action came eight months after Pope Francis' July 2022 visit to Canada where he met with indigenous communities. For years, indigenous communities and those in solidarity with them have been urging the Vatican to refute the *Doctrine of Discovery*, a series of 15th century papal documents (bulls) that granted Europeans the right to seize lands and enslave native peoples in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

While this was a welcome move, it does not go far enough. In *Indigenous activists share mixed feelings on Vatican repudiation of Doctrine of Discovery*, Catholic News Service reports on reactions to the statement from indigenous leaders. They note that the statement does not explicitly repudiate the *Doctrine of Discovery* and downplays the Church's role and the need to address the doctrine's ongoing impact.

“They haven’t even begun to come to terms with the true nature of what we’re actually talking about.” *Steven Newcomb*

At the same time, *a Vatican News article* stresses that the *Doctrine of Discovery* was never part of Catholic teaching. The papal bulls were documents written in a specific political context and they addressed political issues, not Church doctrine. Imperial powers manipulated the documents in order to justify their own expansionist ambitions.

Nevertheless, **Arizona State University law professor Robert Miller**, who is Eastern Shawnee, said that “what the church did is an important worldwide educational moment, but it doesn’t change the law in any country. It doesn’t change titles to land anywhere.” He noted that it will take far more than a papal refutation of several six-hundred-year-old documents to make significant changes in the lives of indigenous peoples.