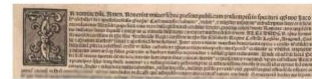


Truth-telling Toward Reconciliation #1

The Doctrine of Discovery, Sept 18, 2022

Each Sunday during our Land Acknowledgement we commit ourselves to the necessary truth-telling that must be part of our journey toward reconciliation. Augustine's Social Justice Team wants to help to meet that commitment. So, about once a month, a member of the Social Justice Team will present a short report after the Land Acknowledgement called "Truth Telling Toward Reconciliation." Our plan is to get the presentation into the following week's AugustZine, with references and links to the articles and books and websites that we used.

Today is the first of these presentations and its focus is the Doctrine of Discovery. You likely heard references to the Doctrine of Discovery during the Pope's visit at the end of July, particularly from those people who are calling on the Pope to revoke it. This doctrine dates all the way back to 1493, when the Pope at the time, Alexander VI, issued a series of decrees, called Papal Bulls. This was during what's often been called the Age of Discovery, and, according to these decrees, Portugal and Spain were entitled to "power, authority and jurisdiction of every kind" over any non-Christian lands that their explorers might "discover." Officially, the intent of the decrees was to convert Indigenous peoples to Catholicism, but what they were really about was conquest and domination. England very quickly joined the race to explore, "discover," and colonize, and by 1496, King Henry VII was sending John Cabot to "find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatever part of the world placed, which before this time were



"...invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans...to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery and to take away all their possessions and property." 1452 from Pope Nicholas V to King Alfonso V of Portugal.

unknown to all Christians." Which was to say, as long as the Spaniards and Portuguese hadn't already claimed a certain location, it was theirs for the English to take. Not very long after, Jacques Cartier set out too, this time for France, whose bottom line was the same as the others: unless the places they found were populated or claimed by Christians, they would be understood to be *Terra Nullius* – 'empty lands.'

Because time is limited this morning, I'll jump right to why this doctrine all the way from the 15th century deserves our attention today. What's probably already clear is that the entire project of colonizing and settling North America was based on this Doctrine of Discovery. What's less obvious perhaps – and can be hard to wrap our heads around – is that our current political, legal, and economic structures continue to rely on the Doctrine of Discovery, more or less every day. Until very recently, for instance, the doctrine still carried so much legal weight that it influenced rulings of Canada's Supreme Court, and even now, every time a provincial or federal government leases Crown land to private mining

or oil companies, for example, without prior and informed Indigenous consent, we're seeing that same Doctrine of Discovery in action.



More recently, thankfully, significant shifts have happened. The United Church of Canada repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery ten years ago, and in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report said that Canada, instead of relying on the Doctrine of Discovery, should renew or establish treaties in ways that recognize Indigenous laws and traditions. Our Supreme Court's most recent rulings now say much the same. Just last year, Parliament passed into Canadian law, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, often called UNDRIP, which has, as one of its central principles, the right of Indigenous Peoples to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or their territories. All of this is to say that there's a crucial and growing understanding that Turtle Island is not and never was *Terra Nullius*, and this truth is increasingly being recognized by Canada's political, legal and some religious institutions. For that, we can all be thankful.

Sources:

[United Church of Canada website on Doctrine of Discovery](#) Included in this website are numerous links for further reading, as well as two fine videos.

[Why Pope Francis faces calls to revoke the Doctrine of Discovery](#) (Globe and Mail) This is described as an abridged trip through 500 years of papal and legal history to understand why Pope Francis faces calls to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery, which underpins Europe's heist of the Americas and a mass dispossession of Indigenous peoples that remains foundational to Canadian sovereignty

[The Upstander Project](#) has a website on the Doctrine, with multiple links for further reading.

[Yours, Mine, Ours: Unravelling the Doctrine of Discovery](#). This is a book of essays by over 40 Indigenous and Settler authors, who "wrestle with what it might mean to Christians across North America [to repudiate the Doctrine], and what it entails for relationships with host peoples and host lands". One of the contributors is Stan McKay. [Available at CMU Bookstore](#).