

October 12 & 13, 2019
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time / Columbus Day

All Saints Parish, Syracuse
Fr. Fred Daley

Doctrine of Discovery

A few years ago when our Father Andy was preaching on Columbus Day he shared this story about his fellow Jesuit Father Dan Berrigan. According to Fr. Andy, Fr. Dan was fond of saying: "If I ever win the Lottery and come into millions of dollars, I will buy a very large ship, fill it with Native Americans and sale off on a journey... to discover Spain!"

Here at All Saints, since our beginning we have joined with others throughout our community in reflecting through homilies, book studies, guest speakers, programs and other forums on confronting the sin of racism, often guided by our Stewards of Justice + Peace Taskforce, and we've come to recognize that racism – embedded in slavery, segregation, discrimination and white-supremacy – is America's original sin.

On this Columbus Day weekend, I would invite us to reflect on the sobering truth that America's original sin of racism was birthed through a horrendous sin of Christianity – specifically of the Roman Catholic Church.

On January 8, 1455 Pope Nicholas V issued a Papal Bull *Romanus Pontifex* ordering Spain and ultimately all of Europe to:

"Invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Muslims and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ whatsoever placed, their kingdoms... possessions and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery ... to convert them to use and profit, and to possess their lands, harbors, and seas... ."

This Papal Bull, and others that followed, ultimately became the International Law that authorized and regulated 600 years of colonization of much of the world and is known today as *The Doctrine of Discovery*. This doctrine – which is yet to be clearly repudiated by the Church – is to this day the operating principle in many countries and governs U.S. Indian Law. In fact, it has been cited as recently as 2005 in the Decision "City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York."

Sisters and brothers, it goes without saying that *The Doctrine of Discovery* and its almost unimaginable consequences, go against everything Jesus stood for. In today's Gospel, Jesus healed the ten lepers, who kept their distance, because they were excluded, marginalized from the community; and the Samaritan – the only one to thank Jesus – was even more of an outsider because Samaritans were considered inferior heretics. These lepers were looked upon in the same way that the European Colonialists looked upon indigenous people throughout the "new world" ...not so unlike the way the victims of the AIDS epidemic in the early '80s were looked upon.... Such thinking is the basis of colonialism and neocolonialism and today's rebirth of nationalism.

And it also goes without saying, that our Country will never become whole and free from racism until we own this sin of our past and make reparations for it....

On this Columbus Day weekend, let's look at the issue from a local perspective:

Syracuse and the property we occupy here at 1340 Lancaster Avenue is located on the land that belonged to the Haudenosaunee People made up of tribes that occupied this part of the Americas for thousands of years prior to Columbus' arrival. The Onondaga Nation – one of the six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy – inhabited the land we now call Onondaga County. In 1779 these original people were systematically murdered and their crops and villages burned. Small groups of Onondagas fled and survived the attempted genocide and today the Onondaga Nation resides near the Town of Lafayette. The 2010 Census counted 468 people living on the Nation – keepers of the fire for the longhouse: maintaining the ancient spiritual rituals, family-life and communal farming practices of their ancestors.

Sisters and brothers, in light of this American history – that most of us were never taught... [*rather weren't we taught: "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue..." and discovered the "New World" and all live happily ever after...?*] – there has been a movement nationally and locally to end our celebration of "Columbus Day" and begin an annual celebration of "Indigenous Peoples" or "Native Americans Day." Since 1990, 178 U.S. cities and six states have stopped observing Columbus Day.

On top of this, many recent studies have shown that Columbus was in reality a ... pretty bad dude: treating the Native Americans as animals, enslaving them and cruelly torturing them to such an extent that ultimately – at the command of Isabella and Ferdinand – he was ordered back to Spain in chains!

Columbus himself, in his diaries, describes his first interactions with native people:

"They do not bear arms and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They would make fine servants. With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."

In Syracuse and Onondaga County, the issue of doing away with Columbus Day and replacing it with Indigenous Peoples Day was brought before the Syracuse City School in 2017 and has been tabled for further study and discussion. The County Legislature has also been approached.

Sounds like a no-brainer, right? Well we know the old saying: 'To the extent that we don't know our history, we are bound to repeat it.'

Between 1876 and 1930, 5 million Italians migrated to the U.S. to escape poverty and tyranny in their old country. They followed the "old immigrants" – from England, Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia and they were immediately stigmatized by predominately white, Protestant, Western European people in the U.S. The historian, Andrew Rolle wrote "the Italian-Americans were often portrayed as short of stature, dark in complexion, cruel and shifty." Newspapers focused on their "foreign-ness" and "Catholic-ness." One of the largest mass lynchings in the U.S. occurred in 1891 when 11 Sicilian immigrants were lynched, after a city policeman was killed — *even though the 11 men had been found to be innocent... before the lynchings!*

Where did Columbus Day come from? The first official commemoration of Columbus Day occurred in 1892 just a year after that New Orleans lynching. Many Italian-Americans felt that having a strong well-known Italian like Columbus as a national hero would lessen the discrimination and violent treatment of their people. It was declared a Federal Holiday in 1937 at a very low point in America's

history relating to Italians and Catholic people. It was out of pride and gratitude to the Syracuse Community that a group of Italian-Americans first decided to raise funds to erect a monument to Columbus in front of our Catholic Cathedral.

It is so important for us to step back and reflect on our history as we observe what is happening to the newest round of immigrants and refugees entering our nation... The same old cycle: ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hatred, and hatred leads to violence....

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Sisters and brothers, I think this issue of Columbus Day and all the meanings behind it is a teachable moment for us as disciples of Jesus, Americans and citizens of Syracuse. Instead of getting sucked up in the divisiveness and polarization that saturates our landscape these days, what might we do differently?

First: There is good news: this last year Mayor Ben Walsh asked Interfaith Works to guide the community of Syracuse through dialogue groups focused on this issue. Each dialogue group included Native Americans, Italian Americans, historians, political leaders and other citizens and met for six sessions. I was honored to be in one of the first groups. The goal of this initiative was to work together towards *common ground*. The results of the discussions have just recently been collated and given to the Mayor, who is now working to discern an appropriate response.

Secondly: We need to join with Indigenous People and others in calling upon the Catholic Church to repudiate The Doctrine of Discovery...The Episcopal Church did so in 2009, The World Council of Churches in 2012. Our Catholic Church has yet to do so. Pursuing this may be a worthy initiative for our Stewards of Justice + Peace.

Third: we need to support work to change Federal and State laws that are rooted in *The Doctrine of Discovery* and continue to oppress Native and Indigenous Peoples anywhere.

Fourth, like numbers of major institutions nationally, we need to own our past behavior with regard to Native Americans and work together to ask for reconciliation. In addition, like Le Moyne, Syracuse University, ESF, OCC and other local institutions we can commit ourselves to begin our gatherings – as we did this morning – by recognizing and honoring the fact that the territory that we occupy, the land on which we live and worship, has belonged to the Native People for millennia and to express our humble gratitude for their care of Creation. I ask you, assembled here today, to express affirmation for our Parish to continue to make such an opening statement ...

[spontaneous, sustained applause...]

We'll take that as affirmation!

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I'd like to close with words attributed to Suquamish Chief Seattle in the 1800s – in responding to a proposal by the United States Government to purchase Tribal land:

“Every part of the Earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, the sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect are all holy in the memory and experience of my people.

“We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our own veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the dew in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man all belong to same them family...

“Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the children of the earth.

“One thing we know: our God is also your God. The earth is precious to God and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator.

“We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother’s heartbeat. So, if we sell you our land: love it as we have loved it. Care for it, as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children and love it, as God loves it.”

Amen!