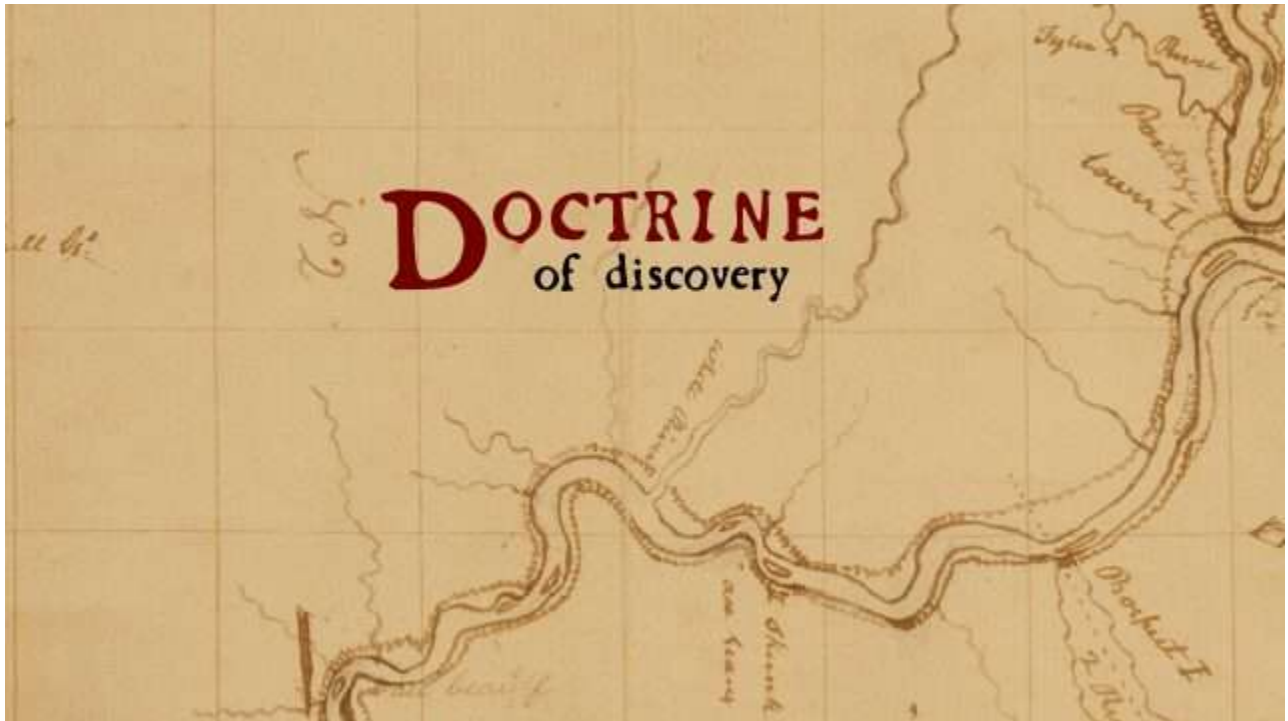


# The Doctrine of Re-Discovery

<https://montpelierbridge.org/2023/05/the-doctrine-of-re-discovery/>

By Damian Costello

May 2, 2023



This might be the most important news development this spring that you didn't hear: On March 30, the Vatican issued a statement repudiating a series of documents collectively known as "The Doctrine of Discovery," a step that Vermont Native communities welcomed as a "bold opening for continued dialogue toward both dismantling oppression and enabling a better future for all." And it's another step forward in creating the Doctrine of Re-Discovery.

The Doctrine of Discovery stems from negotiations between European political and religious institutions during the early stage of European colonialism in the 15th and 16th centuries. At its center was the idea that non-Christian peoples had possession of but not dominion over land, thus justifying appropriation of it by Christian polities.

The Vatican statement explains that as a result of "a renewed dialogue with indigenous peoples, especially with those who profess the Catholic Faith," the Vatican better understands the value of Indigenous cultures and the suffering

caused by colonialism. “The Catholic Church therefore repudiates those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political ‘doctrine of discovery.’”

Eleven representatives of Vermont Native communities and their allies took the Vatican statement as a promising sign as evidenced in this statement organized by Atowi Project. “The worldwide recognition by Catholic leaders that these decrees were unjust and immoral is an important step towards equity and racial equality.”

“This is an important milestone for Native people everywhere. It is an opportunity to acknowledge the pains of the past and move forward together,” said Rich Holschuh, chair of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs.

Yet as with all things related to our colonial past, the Vatican statement is not an end but an important step in the process. The Church certainly has more work to do, such as addressing the issue of compensation associated with the fact that Catholics administered a sizable percentage of boarding schools within the U.S. and Canadian assimilation programs, and thus directly responsible for much of the abuse and cultural genocide.

Still, as the Atowi statement says, the Vatican repudiation of the doctrine is a real sign of hope and an example for us as we work to untangle the colonial legacy in our own communities, something that the state of Vermont continues this week. On April 26, Gov. Phil Scott issued his fifth consecutive Executive Order making May 1–7 Abenaki Recognition and Heritage Week.

One of the signees [*of the Atowi statement*], enrolled Citizen Potawatomi Nation tribal member and author of “Without Reservation,” Randy Kritkauský, expanded on it in ways I didn’t expect. Rather than talk about how the Vatican statement impacts Indigenous peoples, he emphasized how Indigenous peoples are shaping the Catholic Church.

“This is revolutionary,” Kritkauský told me. “Indigenous peoples, many of whom dynamically engaged with Catholic spirituality called church leadership to live up to its own core values. Let’s celebrate the fact that we as Indigenous peoples have contributed, in our own small way, to the rebirth of one of the world’s major religions.”

Kritkauský, who is not Catholic, connected the Vatican repudiation with another recent seismic shift in the Catholic Church. “Part of this rebirth is the church’s

relationship to the Earth. Indigenous peoples were an important influence on the writing of Laudato Si’.”

Pope Francis’s 2015 Encyclical, Laudato Si’, re-framed the Catholic Church’s relationship with the natural world. “Clearly the Pope reminded the church that humanity doesn’t have dominion over the Earth to do what we want with it. But he didn’t stop with saying that we have a moral responsibility to steward the Earth as if it’s an object we possess, he implored us to act.

“The Pope’s message is deeply Indigenous: that we are relatives to the Earth and all beings that call her home, making what St. Francis said 1,000 years ago the standard for the whole Church.”

“You mean this is something like discovering that we don’t possess the Earth, but that the Earth possesses us?” I asked. “Sounds like a doctrine of re-discovery.” Kritkausky agreed. “Re-discovery, that is the essence of the continual revitalization and resilience that lies at the heart of traditional indigenous spirituality. To me, the repudiation and Laudato Si’ indicate that despite all the complications, the same spirit is now active in the Catholic Church and Christianity as well.”

It took me a bit to connect the dots; these are connections that I — and no one I’m familiar with — have made in discussions about the Doctrine of Discovery. Indigenous resilience and revitalization are breathing their power into the church. And the state of Vermont as well.

When I asked what it meant for the challenges facing Indigenous peoples going forward, Kritkausky smiled. “This is the beautiful irony. The repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and Laudato Si’ provide moral grounding for putting Mother Earth and the Indigenous people who protect her above profits.” “This time,” Kritkausky explained, “The Church is on our side.”