

In early April, 2023, Vermont Native Communities issued a formal joint statement in support of the Vatican's recent repudiation of the "Doctrine of Discovery". The "Doctrine of Discovery" was a set of pronouncements by the Catholic Church in the 15th century that were used as religious justification for European conquerors to take over lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples. In their Statement, Vermont Native communities explain the present-day significance of rescinding what has long been used to conjure legal fictions for justifying the dispossession of Native Americans of their sovereignty. The full text of the statement follows.

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Vermont Native Communities Support the Vatican's Repudiation of the "Doctrine of Discovery"

Long-awaited opportunity to move forward after 500+ years of cultural annihilation

Ndakinna/Vermont (April 4, 2023) – On March 30, 2023, [a joint statement](#) from Roman Catholic Church leaders formally acknowledged and took accountability for “the terrible effects” of more than 560 years of assimilation policies and the resulting “pain experienced by indigenous people.”

A series of historical decrees from the Vatican, collectively known as the “Doctrine of Discovery,” became the foundation for European colonization of Indigenous peoples and entered into Western legal concepts foundational to private property and racial privilege concepts, still cited today in courts of law. This response from the Church has been adamantly requested by Native communities for many decades and comes at a time of reckoning with the process of reconciliation.

“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. “This is an ongoing story that has been enacted in many different ways - specific to people and place - and we are all called to answer in kind, here and now. We recognize and embrace our responsibilities to this Land and to All of Our Relations, and we commit to enabling better futures with all who are here today.”

Eleven supporting representatives — drawn from Native communities and allies within what is now known as the State of Vermont, a portion of the traditional homelands of the Abenaki and Mohican Peoples — offer their affirmation in accord with this significant statement of acknowledgment and accountability. The group stands together with all of those who have suffered and “were manipulated for political purposes by

competing colonial powers in order to justify immoral acts against indigenous peoples that were carried out, at times, without opposition from ecclesiastical authorities.”

Papal documents making up the “Doctrine of Discovery” date back to 1452, and became a foundational basis of law in the United States and elsewhere. Their derivatives have been cited by the Supreme Court as recently as 2005 in cases adjudicating and severing Indigenous land relationships. The worldwide recognition by Catholic leaders that these decrees were unjust and immoral is an important step towards equity and racial equality. The Vermont Native communities welcome this bold opening for continued dialogue toward both dismantling oppression and enabling a better future for all.

Affirmants include:

Chief Joanne Crawford, Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi
Chief Shirly Hook, Koasek Traditional Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation
Chief Donald Stevens, Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation
Chief Roger Longtoe Sheehan, Elnu Abenaki Tribe
Tribal Council Members, Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation
Doug Bent, Director - White Pine Association
Richard Holschuh, Co-Director - Atowi Project
Melody Walker Mackin, Co-Director – Atowi Project
Randy Kritkauskys, President - Ecologia, Citizen Potawatomi Nation
Patrick Lamphere, Board President - Alnôbaiwi
Vera Longtoe Sheehan, Executive Director - Vermont Abenaki Artists Association

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