

Reference Publications

Indigenous demand revocation of 1493 papal bull

National Catholic Reporter, Oct 27, 2000 by John L. Jr. Allen

It was scripted as a moment of high drama. In the fading twilight of Oct. 12, a spokesperson for a delegation of indigenous persons from the Americas approached a Swiss Guard in St. Peter's Square and handed him a document for the pope. It was a copy of the 1493 papal bull *Inter Caetera* urging that the "barbarous nations" of the New World "be overthrown and brought to the faith."

"On the part of indigenous persons throughout the world, we call on the pope to formally revoke this, which led to our subjugation in the name of Christianity," said Steve Newcomb, a member of the Shawnee and Lenape nations of North America. He asked the guard to inform the pope of their request, delivered on the 508th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean.

Then, as ears strained to pick up what could have been words of either defiance or understanding, the guard looked at the document, paused, and blankly replied: "Do you have an envelope?"

So it went for this quixotic band of nine native persons from Hawaii, Oregon and Puerto Rico, who made their way to Rome in mid-October. During their brief stay, Vatican officials were alternately elusive or befuddled in their dealings with this unusual pilgrimage.

The group sought to remind Catholic leaders of the record of conquest, disease and slavery in the Americas, sometimes justified in the name of Christianity. After contact with Spanish soldiers and missionaries in central Mexico, for example, the population plummeted from about 25 million in 1519 to about 1.9 million in 1580. In Haiti, where Columbus directed a military expedition against natives, the population fell from an estimated 3 million in 1496 to perhaps a few hundred in 1542.

"In the name of Christ, horrible things have been done," Said Naniki Reyes Ocasio of the Taino people in Puerto Rico. "We're offering the Vatican a chance to cleanse that, to say this is not what Jesus stood for."

Their effort dates back to 1992, when the Indigenous Law Center of Eugene, Ore., a research and advocacy group for native persons, wrote the pope asking that Inter Caetera be revoked. Since 1997, indigenous persons have gathered each Oct. 12 in Honolulu to burn copies of the bull.

Prompted in part by John Paul II's March 12 public apology for past wrongs of the church, the group traveled to Rome this year. Armed with a supportive letter from Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo of Honolulu, they hoped to meet with the pope.

In the end, they settled for a meeting with Msgr. Giampolo Crepaldi, undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, whom they described as sympathetic but noncommittal.

The apparent lack of impact left the group undaunted.

"We'll be back next year," said Eric Po'ohina from Hawaii's Kanaka Maoli people. "This is only the beginning."

Information on the Burn the Bulls campaign may be found at www.bullsburning.itgo.com/papbull.htm

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