

## **Communities Healing Together** Damian Costello and Randy Kritkauskay

For many Catholics, a pilgrimage to Saint Kateri Tekakwitha's Shrine at Kahnawake involves prayer and a search for healing an individual's illness or affliction. Or, it involves an expression of gratitude for an answered prayer. Recent developments suggest that it might now be appropriate to visit the site to express gratitude for steps the Church has recently taken to answer a prayer for collective healing of a long-standing wound that plagued Indigenous communities for centuries, and for new theological developments that align with Saint Kateri's status as a patron saint of the environment.

On March 30, 2023, the Vatican repudiated a series of documents collectively known as "The Doctrine of Discovery" which emerged 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 those lands by Christian nations. The 2023 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.'" Many Native communities across North America and their allies took the Vatican statement as a step toward collective healing and as an opportunity to move forward together.

The Church has more work to do, such as addressing the issue of compensation associated with Catholic administration of boarding schools which operated a part of U.S. and Canadian assimilation programs. Still the Vatican repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery is a real sign of hope and is an example for us as we work together to untangle the colonial legacy in our own communities.

It is significant that the Vatican repudiation reverses the usual historical narrative about the Catholic Church impacting Indigenous communities, but not being impacted by them. Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery reveals how Indigenous peoples are reshaping the Catholic Church. They dynamically engaged with Catholic spirituality and called Church leadership to live up to its own core values. The Church responded. We can celebrate the fact that Indigenous peoples have contributed to the rebirth of one of the world's major religions and to healing one long-standing wound that has afflicted its body.

There has been another seismic shift in the Catholic Church, Pope Francis's 2015 issuance of an encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. Inspired in part by the teachings of Saint Francis, but also by teachings and advocacy of Indigenous communities around the globe, *Laudato Si'* is a call for all humanity to embrace indigenous values of sharing wealth and for respecting Mother Earth.

There is cause for celebration.

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