

Churches, indigenous groups protest canonization of missionary priest

by [Joanna Shenk](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

On one coast, in Washington, D.C., Pope Francis celebrated the canonization mass of Junípero Serra, a Spanish priest who led evangelization efforts in colonial California. At the same time in San Francisco, nearly 200 people gathered outside Mission Dolores for a ceremony to protest the canonization.

“We are here to celebrate our resistance and resilience,” said Wicahpiluta Candelaria of the Rumsen Ohlone–Apache people.

Candelaria organized the San Francisco event on September 23 along with community leader Corrina Gould of the Chochenyo Ohlone people and the group Indian People Organizing for Change. The three-hour interfaith ceremony included prayers, songs, chants, and storytelling from many traditions. Indigenous peoples spoke about the exploitation of their ancestors in the California missions in Serra’s time and other periods.

“There needs to be an understanding about the Doctrine of Discovery,” Gould said, referring to a legal concept in land rights, “and how this notion that we were ‘subhuman’ and ‘pagan’ led to genocide and colonization—5,000 people, some my direct ancestors, are buried in unmarked graves right here.”

Clergy from the United Church of Christ spoke about Christians’ complicity in this oppression.

In the months leading up to the canonization, indigenous groups and others challenged the decision by the Vatican, calling on Pope Francis to reverse it. Elias Castillo sent a copy of his book *A Cross of Thorns: The Enslavement of California’s Indians* by the Spanish Missions to the pope.

The book uses primary sources to cite the brutal treatment of indigenous peoples by Serra. In one instance, Serra sent three runaways to a military commanding officer in Monterey for punishment.

“I am sending them to you so that a period of exile, and two or three whippings which your Lordship may order applied to them on different days may serve, for them and for the rest, for a warning, may be of spiritual benefit to all,” Serra wrote.

Historical accounts of Serra, and his own writings, note his focus on the extreme mortification of the body. Castillo’s book describes how Serra saw his role as keeping the souls of Native Californians free of sin, which he believed was only possible within the confines of the missions.

Gould said of Serra: “He did exactly what the Catholic Church wanted him to do and exactly what the Spanish government wanted him to do. For me, he’s not a saint. He was a man of his times. He was nothing better than that. A saintly person would have been better than that.”

Historians have pointed to instances in which Serra protected Native peoples from the violence of the Spanish military. However, indigenous people argue that Serra played a role in founding the colonial system and that without the presence of Spanish imperial forces their ancestors would not have needed protection in the first place.

Part of what made that colonization possible was the Doctrine of Discovery, rooted in the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex*. In 1454 Pope Nicholas V authorized the king of Portugal “to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.”

Sarah Augustine, a professor of sociology at Heritage University on the Yakama Indian Reservation in the state of Washington, has worked to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery for many years. An indigenous woman, she has called for the doctrine to be repudiated in various forums, including the World Council of Churches, the United Nations, and her own denomination, the Mennonite Church USA.

“In our secular society it is hard to grasp that in lands colonized by Europe (North, Central and South America, Africa, parts of Asia, Australia and New Zealand), the land-tenure system is based upon a religious doctrine,” Augustine wrote in an e-

mail. “Whether the racist assumptions or motivations are currently held by decision makers is irrelevant. Racial superiority is enshrined in the law.”

The Doctrine of Discovery became a part of U.S. law in 1823 and was cited as recently as 2005 in the Supreme Court decision *City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation*. The justification for the ruling against the Oneida Nation was framed this way: “Under the ‘doctrine of discovery,’ fee title [ownership] to the lands occupied by Indians when the colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign—first the discovering European nation and later the original States and the United States.”

When asked to cite other present instances of indigenous land rights affected by the doctrine, Augustine wrote: “All examples of indigenous peoples affected by the doctrine are current. . . . There are no historical examples, no instances where land rights have been restored, or instances where the impact of the Doctrine of Discovery has somehow been lost to time.”

In recent years, some Christian groups have repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, including the Episcopal Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Methodist Church, and the World Council of Churches.

The Vatican has yet to make such a statement, although many Catholics are calling for it. The Loretto Community sent a packet of letters to Pope Francis from several Catholic groups in November 2013, asking him to “formally and publicly repudiate and rescind the *Dum Diversas* bull of 1452, and other related bulls.” In an interview, Libby Comeaux of the Loretto Community said that although Pope Francis has inspired many progressive Catholics, he seems to have a blind spot when it comes to evangelization. The case for Serra’s canonization was based, in large part, on prioritizing the value of evangelization over human kindness and compassion, she said.

“The Discovery era,” she said, “was connected to violent evangelization and the enslavement of indigenous peoples to mine the earth for resources.” The pope’s recent encyclical on the environment, which denounces resource extraction at the expense of the earth and of those who are most vulnerable, makes this inconsistency all the more glaring, Comeaux said.

In 2014 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious also called for the doctrine’s repudiation, as did the Romero Institute, a public policy and nonprofit law center focused on Native American issues, in 2015.

There has been no official response yet. In 2007, however, an archbishop who was then permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, Celestino Migliore, replied to correspondence from the Indigenous Law Project, according to the *National Catholic Reporter*. A few months earlier, representatives of the Law Project had presented the case for repudiation.

Migliore stated that successive papal bulls, such as one in 1537 forbidding the enslavement of indigenous peoples, annulled the Doctrine of Discovery and therefore no further action was required. “The refutation of this doctrine is therefore now under the competence of American politicians, legislators, lawyers and legal historians,” he wrote, according to the *NCR*.

Some observers point out that it is not likely that repudiation from the Vatican would change U.S. law. Others consider a statement of repudiation to be a way to tell the truth about the history of violence done to indigenous peoples.

“It is much easier to stand back, especially for those of us who benefit from the way things are,” Augustine said. “We, as people of faith, populate the only institutions on earth that can speak with moral authority.” —for the *Christian Century*

This article was edited to match the print version on October 13, 2015.