
EARLY MISSIONARIES AND THE ENCOUNTER OF WORLDVIEWS



Solemnity of Christ the King
November 21, 2021

The news of Christ and the Kingdom of God has spread across the globe in many ways since the Apostles of the first century AD. In what is now known as Canada, the Gospel arrived with European missionaries who encountered the Indigenous peoples and spiritualities that existed with the Indigenous nations inhabiting their traditional territories.

The Mi'kmaq welcomed the settlers and taught them how to survive the harsh winters. Franciscan Récollets and Jesuit missionaries lived with the Mi'kmaw people they met in what is now the Maritimes and were welcomed by the highly respected **Grand Chief Membertou** and his people.

In 1610, a sacred alliance called **The Mi'kmaw Concordat** was formed between the Mi'kmaw Nation and the Holy See. As part of this alliance, Grand Chief Membertou and his family were baptized and practised Catholicism while maintaining cherished elements of their Mi'kmaw tradition. Even after the British expelled the French from the area, the Grand Council of the Mi'kmaq guided the people in continuing in their faith; they have remained both Mi'kmaw and Catholic ever since.

As Europeans moved inland, so did Jesuit and Récollet missionaries. The Huron-Wendat peoples around what is now known as Georgian Bay welcomed them and helped them to build their own mission, Sainte-Marie among the Hurons (now Martyrs' Shrine in Midland, Ontario).

The missionaries' work emphasized the mystery of Christ's incarnation and his presence in the peoples they encountered. Inculturation, or the idea that Christianity can be embodied in diverse cultures, means evangelization's aim is not to convert other cultures or nations to a single cultural expression but rather to allow cultures to develop their own unique expressions of Christ and his Gospel. Unfortunately, despite these good intentions, respect for Indigenous culture and spiritualities did not continue and is not consistently evident in historical accounts.

St. Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649) and his companions at the mission of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons learned the local language as they visited settlements near the mission. They and the first Huron lay pastoral worker, **Joseph Chiwatenhwa**, translated Catholic prayers and hymns for the community of Huron-Wendat Christians.

However, tensions were not far off as the French and English made alliances with Indigenous nations in their struggle for control of the fur trade. As more Europeans settled in the eastern parts of what is now Canada, the competition for furs and trade alliances grew violent. Both missionaries and Indigenous people were killed during the period of resulting conflicts, including the first Canadian martyrs, and the Sainte-Marie mission was abandoned.

The influx of European settlers and fur traders also brought diseases that severely affected many First Nations communities and would continue to do so for the following centuries. **St. Kateri Tekakwitha** was a Mohawk-Algonquin Christian who lost her family and much of her eyesight to a smallpox epidemic; she died of tuberculosis in 1680. For the last years of her life, she was a member of a small Mohawk religious community at the St. Francis Xavier mission, in present-day Kahnawake, Quebec, and was known for her strong faith.

European nations generally tried to remove the Indigenous Peoples they encountered so that Europeans could use Indigenous land and natural resources. In the case of the Spanish colonies, this often included the forcible enslavement of Indigenous people and the seizure of their property. This practice immediately became a polarizing issue addressed by Catholic popes, clergy, and academics.

Missionaries such as Dominican friar Antonio de Montesinos were also on the front lines of this protest against the abuse of Indigenous Peoples. In 1511, he preached an important sermon condemning the Spanish mistreatment of the Taino People (the group indigenous to the island known as Hispaniola). His strong words encouraged others to speak up as well. Throughout the 1500s, Dominicans Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolomé de las Casas wrote about the situation and petitioned the Pope and European rulers for intervention.

Vitoria was a Spanish theologian and philosopher who laid out some of the first principles concerning international law. In several of his works from the 1530s, he argued that, whether Christian or not, Indigenous Peoples have fundamental human rights, and Europeans could not seize their lands and possessions. This was in response to arguments proposed by Spanish colonists, who pointed to a regrettable statement from Pope Alexander VI in 1493. That statement, titled **Inter Caetera**, had been an attempt to prevent conflict between the Portuguese and the Spanish and to ensure the presence of missionaries during the period of European expansion in the New World. However, the means chosen by Alexander VI to resolve this conflict was unfortunately to “give, grant, and assign” to Spain all lands west of a predetermined point in the sea, without any mention of the legal rights of the Indigenous inhabitants. In addition to pointing to Inter Caetera, Spanish colonists claimed that Indigenous Peoples did not have rights to their land and property, either because they were not Christian, because their lands were “empty” and free to be discovered, or because they supposedly lacked the use of reason.

Against all this, Vitoria argued that the Indigenous Peoples had both public and private dominion over their traditional lands, and not accepting the Roman Catholic faith was not sufficient reason to deny them their property rights. He drew on the example of European heretics, whose land and liberty were still respected even though they were not believers. When Vitoria responded to arguments based on Inter Caetera, he concluded that the Pope did not have temporal authority over Indigenous lands, and thus, could not grant them to another nation. Neither did Spain have a claim to the land through discovery, because the lands were not empty, but rather already occupied by peoples with reason and their own beliefs and systems of governance. Vitoria strongly defended Indigenous Peoples' land rights saying, "the Spaniards... carried with them no right at all to occupy their countries."

In 1537, Pope Paul III issued a papal bull titled **Sublimis Deus** to officially contradict the above-mentioned damaging ideas about Indigenous Peoples, including the destructive notion that Indigenous Peoples were subhuman. Sublimis Deus affirmed Indigenous rights over their land, possessions, and liberty. It declared that they were fully human and therefore capable of knowing God, and it insisted that they should not be converted by force but "by the example of good and holy living." In this way, Sublimis Deus abrogated previous papal statements that had been used by colonists as justification for the abuse of Indigenous Peoples.

Sublimis Deus says, in part:

"that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the catholic faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it [...] notwithstanding whatever may have been or may be said to the contrary, the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it should be null and void and of no effect."

Unfortunately, this bull was unable to stop aggressive colonization and the race between competing European nations to take over the land and natural resources of the Americas. The settlers arriving in the north a century after Sublimis Deus still often approached the Indigenous Peoples they encountered as an obstruction that needed to be cleared away.

Despite all of this, the teaching of Paul III remains that of the Catholic Church, even if it has not always been recognized and respected. This was reinforced by Saint John Paul II during his visits to Canada in 1984 and in 1987: “Let me recall that, at the dawn of the Church’s presence in the New World, my predecessor Pope Paul III proclaimed in 1537 the rights of the native peoples of those times. He affirmed their dignity, defended their freedom and asserted that they could not be enslaved or deprived of their goods or ownership. That has always been the Church’s position. My presence among you today marks my reaffirmation and reassertion of that teaching.”

For Reflection

1. In the era of colonization, in what ways did Sublimis Deus from Pope Paul III affirm the rights of Indigenous Peoples? How did the impact of the missionaries differ from the vision and aims expressed in Sublimis Deus?
2. How might the message of Pope Paul III, reinforced by Pope John Paul II in 1984 and 1987, guide the Church towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples?