

## The past is a very living thing: Try not to forget it

Joan Chittister | Apr. 24, 2009 From Where I Stand

Here's a quiz for you: What are *Dum Diversas*, *Romanus Pontifex* and *Inter Caetera* and what do they have to do with us -- to governments, to churches and synagogues and temples and mosques -- and the Vatican?

Answer: I didn't know either. Then I got a handwritten copy of a letter from an Indian grandmother that not only answered the original question but made me think of a lot of other questions, as well.

The letter reads:

"I am Grandmother Beatrice Long-Visitor Holy Dance. I am from the Oglala Lakota Nation. My original homelands are the Black Hills of South Dakota.

I want to speak to the issue of "Healing Our Relations."

We believe our ancestral ways of prayer, peacemaking and healing are needed today. We still rely on the teachings of our ancestors for our survival.

We the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers were brought together by a common vision:

1. To form a global alliance of prayer.
2. (For) education and healing for Mother Earth and all her children.
3. To protect our lands and cultures upon which our peoples depend.

Unfortunately, relationships between national-states and tribal peoples in the Americas, Africa and Oceania rests on the foundation of the "doctrine of conquest" or the "doctrine of discovery." These governmental doctrines can be traced directly to the following Papal Bulls -- *Dum Diversis*, June 18, 1452; *Romanus Pontifex*, January 8, 1455; *Inter Caetera*, May 4, 1493.

These papal bulls gave dominion to European nations over lands that our tribal nations have occupied for thousands of years. They also laid the basis for the European "Age of Discovery" that resulted in the outright theft of entire continents from our indigenous people world wide.

It has been over 500 years since these papal bulls were written, yet they remain the spiritual, legal and moral foundation for exercising jurisdiction over tribal people by nation states today.

Our tribal nations must still live with the denial of our right to be treated as equal participants in the world community of nations. In other words, our people are still struggling for the right to live on earth and practice our cultural and spiritual traditions as our ancestors did.

As a very concerned Grandmother, I'm asking Pope Benedict the XVI, a servant of God, to remove these Papal Bulls. An act like this would create a global healing of all the injustices suffered by

indigenous people all over the world.

It could also bring healing to those who committed these injustices.

The question, of course, is, is the charge true? Unfortunately, yes. "Roman Pontifex," written by Pope Nicholas V to King Alonso of Portugal is clear and unequivocal. The decree reads:

"We weighing all and singular the premises with due meditation, and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso -- 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?"

More than true, the content is also shocking. The shock that comes with knowing that it was a Papal Bull that authorized both conquest and slavery in the New World for hundreds of years is, at very least, part of what such a letter is meant to teach us today: "No decision should be made," the Native Americans tell us, "that does not take into account its affect on the next 10 generations." What we do today, in other words, has something to do with what life will be like 500 years from now.

Papal Bulls promulgated in the 15th century still shape the way peoples live and think and relate to one another five centuries later. It is a lesson begging to be learned in many arenas and in every institution as well as in this particular case itself.

The ways women were defined by religious traditions, including our own, centuries ago, affect us still. The fact that women were labeled as witches from the 16th to 18th centuries influences social systems to this day.

The decision this government makes now about the treatment of torture and the moral responsibility of its agents will also affect the standing of the United States in centuries to come.

The propensity of U.S. governments to demand from others what we do not intend to do ourselves is key to the moral valuation of this nation in years to come. We call others to submit to international tribunals, to denuclearize their weapons systems, to hold soldiers and agents to the international rules of war but we do not do it ourselves. We denied the "I was only following orders" defense to German prison guards after the Second World War, but we are not demanding the same from our agents. We refuse nuclear weapons to most nations but not to those of our own choosing. We created War Crimes Tribunals to prosecute axis agents in the 1950s but will not now submit ourselves to the same court of international justice.

The church, too, is making decisions that may well define the future of the church for ages to come.

Rome, for instance, chooses not to instigate "apostolic visitations" of dioceses in which, as the Archbishop of Dublin, Dairmud Martin, just reported, "thousands of clerical pedophilia cases" in Ireland alone have been documented. See: [Ireland archbishop admits child abuse report 'will shock us all'](#) [1]

But it is launching visitations of U.S. congregations of women religious to investigate a "quality of life" that has reached out to heal every level of society.

The simple reason given for such a serious move is that religious congregations are now experiencing a

downturn in the numbers of younger applicants. Also true -- as is the decline in seminarians, incidentally. But also common at transition points throughout history and hardly immoral under any circumstances.

Religious communities of women were small when they came to this country over 150 years ago. Now the cycle is starting again at this new time, in this new way. For the sake of the future, this is no time to block the work of the Spirit.

From where I stand, the voices of the Grandmothers is a clear and demanding one. We must repent the sinful effects of past decisions of both church and state on the lives of people everywhere. Most of all, we must certainly not go on making them.

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[1] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/10/child-abuse-catholic-church-ireland>