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Should Catholics Celebrate Columbus Day?

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More than five hundred years afterwards, some are starting to question whether we should be celebrating the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus.

Of course, it seems only natural and fitting that Columbus Day should be a holiday for Americans. But, in recent decades, commentators have shed more light on the dark side of his discoveries—the violence against the native tribes, the forced slavery, and the diseases the European explorers brought with them. Instead of being seen as a cultural hero, Columbus has been recast as a villain in a story of exploitation and conquest.

For Catholics the question is twofold: Was Christopher Columbus ever a hero of the faith? And should we still celebrate him given what we now know about the atrocities unleashed by his discovery?

A world war with Islam

Christopher Columbus, we were taught in school, boldly set sail westward in search of a sea route to Asia, where he hoped to find spices and gold. Instead, he ended up discovering the Americas in what could be described as one of the most successful failures in history. This much is true. But the bigger story—the real reason and motive behind his epic voyages—has been left out of most textbooks.



When Columbus set out for the East Indies in 1492, Europe was in the midst of a thousand-year world war that began when Muslim forces overran the three Christian cities of Damascus, Jerusalem, and Alexandria in the mid-600's. The crusades, launched in 1096, had been a well-intentioned but poorly-executed attempt to retaliate against Islam and recover the Holy Land.

The last real crusade had ended in 1272 but Catholic and Muslim forces continued their centuries-long struggle for control over Spain. It's no coincidence that 1492 also marks the year that the last Muslim holdouts were ejected from the Iberian Peninsula.

Once the battle for Spain had ended, Europeans returned their attention to the East. Both the Portuguese and Spanish monarchs, with the support and urging of the papacy, were determined to strike a decisive blow against Islam. Instead of another battle by land, the plan was to find a sea route to the East Indies, cutting out the Muslim middlemen in the spice trade and forging an alliance with the legendary Prester John, a priest-king believed to be the ruler of a powerful kingdom in the East.

Certainly, the monarchs and the explorers they funded hoped to enlarge their personal wealth and prestige in the process, but the two objectives were not as incompatible as they might seem: the new revenues flowing into European coffers could be used to fund a new, final crusade to Jerusalem.

While the Portuguese sent Vasco da Gama around the coast of Africa, the Spanish backed Columbus in his bid to find a direct route across the ocean. Like da Gama, Columbus saw his mission as part of a broader religious drama. In his letters, Columbus described his vision of the eventual defeat of Islam, expressing hope that the revenues generated from his trip could be used to serve Christendom: "I have already petitioned Your Highness to see that all the profits of this, my enterprise, should be spent on the conquest of Jerusalem," Columbus wrote.

A man of faith amid failure

Columbus certainly was eyeing worldly rewards for his efforts. He insisted on being named Admiral of the Ocean, receiving a tenth of all profits, and being appointed the governor of the lands he discovered.

But he was also a man of deep faith. Catholic historian Warren Carroll sees significance in the departure date Columbus chose for his first westward voyage: August 3, 1492, the day after the fiesta of Our Lady of Angels, the patroness of the Franciscan monastery that had lent moral support to his bold plan and Palos, the area from which he would set sail, according to Carroll.

“He was convinced that God had chosen him to reach that land, hidden from the Western world for ages, which the Roman philosopher Seneca had once prophesied would be revealed. His discovery would bring the Catholic Faith, to which he was devoted, to the people who lived in that land,” Carroll writes.

Columbus never lost that sense that he was on a mission for God. When his men started to grumble on his first voyage, Columbus told them that it was “useless to complain, for I had started out to find the Indies and would continue until I had accomplished that mission, with the help of Our Lord.” Columbus was known to sometimes wear the Franciscan habit, and would open all his correspondence with the Sign of the Cross, referring to himself as “Christbearer.” His high view of the faith was evident in a letter he wrote to his son Diego after the death of the Spanish Queen Isabel, who had sponsored his voyages:

The most important thing is to commend lovingly and with much devotion the soul of the Queen our lady, to God. Her life was always Catholic and holy, and prompt in all things in His holy service. Because of this we should believe that she is in holy glory, and beyond the cares of this harsh and weary world.

Columbus lived at a time when biblical places were still situated on medieval maps—and he took the claims of pious geographers seriously. He believed he had found the approach to the Garden of Eden when he ventured up the Orinoco River in present-day Venezuela and that the gold-mines of Solomon were hidden somewhere on Hispaniola, the island home to Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

To be sure, the nobility of his intentions were somewhat marred by brutalities as well. Some were committed by his men without authorization. In fact, one of the earliest atrocities occurred entirely in his absence. After his first voyage, Columbus had left a small garrison on Hispaniola. Upon his return, he learned that the men had become restive and launched an attack on the Indians, ending with the slaughter of the Spanish.

But after continued troubles with the island, Columbus took it out on the native peoples, enslaving a thousand of them—an act that Carroll says is inexcusable. But overall, the historian concludes that Columbus was not the oppressive colonialist revisionists make him out to be:

From this record it should be clear that, despite occasional lashing out at the Indians, Columbus was never their systematic oppressor, but simply unable to control the Spaniards on land who were supposed to be under his command. If he had only been willing to confine himself to what he did so superlatively well—sailing and exploring—few if any could have traduced his memory. But because he insisted on remaining governor of the lands he had discovered, his reputation was blackened by the atrocities that occurred during the period when he still had final responsibility for their governance. But it is Columbus the discoverer and explorer whom we truly celebrate and honor, not Columbus the civil governor. His personal influence on the ultimate fate of the Indians of the Caribbean was slight; in no significant way did he change what their history would have been without him, once the discovery was made. (See “Honoring Christopher Columbus,” in the summer 1992 issue of *Faith and Reason*, available on [EWTN](#).)

A legacy of evangelization

Columbus never made it to the East Indies and he never played the role that he had imagined for himself in the war between Christendom and Islam. He nonetheless has had a lasting, positive impact on the faith as significant, if not

more than what he had envisioned. His discoveries not only paved the way for the evangelization of Latin America but also brought an end to the cannibalism of the Caribs and the tradition of human sacrifices among the Aztecs. Today, Latin America is home to 39 percent of the world's Catholics and has two of the five countries with the most Catholics, Brazil and Mexico.

The discoveries also came at a pivotal moment for the Church itself. Within a quarter of a century of the first voyage to America, Catholicism would face its greatest crisis of faith since the Arian heresy: the Protestant Reformation.

“Columbus threw open America at the time when a great storm was about to break over the Church. As far, therefore, as it is lawful for man to divine from events the ways of Divine Providence, he seemed to have truly been born, by a singular provision of God, to remedy those losses which were awaiting the Catholic Church on the side of Europe,” Pope Leo XIII wrote in [an encyclical](#) to mark the 400th anniversary of the 1492 discoveries.

Columbus, to be sure, was no saint, as Leo XII himself noted. But the pope saw the “impress” of divine virtue in the “excellent power of mind and spirit” exhibited by Columbus. He concludes that Columbus is a hero whom Catholics should celebrate:

For Columbus is ours; since if a little consideration be given to the particular reason of his design in exploring the ‘mare tenebrosum,’ and also the manner in which he endeavored to execute the design, it is indubitable that the Catholic faith was the strongest motive for the inception and prosecution of the design; so that for this reason also the whole human race owes not a little to the Church.

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