

The Year of Discovery, Part One: The Americas before Columbus

You have already heard that 2020-21 has been designated a “**Year of Discovery**” for our Northern Great Lakes Synod. The goal is to learn more about our native American neighbors, the original inhabitants of the American continents, and to recognize the impact of the European “Doctrine of Discovery” on their history, and on the history of the United States of America.

I’ve found that a great starting point for this effort is a book by Charles Mann titled **1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus**, published in 2012 by Alfred A. Knopf. Mann’s goal is to describe the new understanding of civilization in the Americas before the coming of the Europeans, and the ways in which those civilizations were destroyed by disease, warfare, and the introduction of livestock from the old world. His book unravels the myth of a continent “empty of mankind and its works” that has prevailed in American history for 500 years. He calls this myth “Holmberg’s Mistake,” named for Allan R. Holmberg, who promoted the idea that primitive stone-age natives were sprinkled across the Americas for several millennia, waiting for Europeans to arrive and bring them culture and civilization. It is a myth that stretches back to the early days of the American republic, and was propagated by a series of American historians. This historical distortion also goes back to the Doctrine of Discovery, which began with a papal bull issued in 1493.

“In 1493, after Christopher Columbus’ fateful voyage, Pope Alexander VI issued the bull *Inter Caetera* which granted Ferdinand and Isabella “full and free power, authority, and jurisdiction of every kind,” over almost all of the Americas, save for a portion of modern-day Brazil and a few island outposts.”

This pronouncement from the papacy became the basis for international law, and for the definition of legal sovereignty in North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand. In US history, it was used as the basis for what is called the Marshall Trilogy, three Supreme Court rulings that define the relationship of the Native American nations to the United States and individual Americans.

Here are some of the interesting takeaways from Charles Mann’s **1491**:

1. The Americas were thickly populated before Columbus: in 1491, somewhere between 90 and 110 million people lived on the two American continents. This is more than the total population of Europe at that point in history. Cities in the Americas, including Aztecs, Incas, and the city of Cahokia in present day Illinois, were larger than London.
2. The American Indians engaged in a sophisticated agricultural society, which meant most of them lived in settled communities. Crops included squash, beans, peppers, tobacco, and the amazing crop maize (no one knows how it was domesticated from the wild teosinte) and in South America, potatoes and manioc. Maize is really the key to understanding the native American civilizations.
3. The Americas lacked large domesticated animals like the horse and oxen, and Indians never developed the wheel for use as a tool in agriculture or transportation (wheels were only used as children’s toys). Large European animals put the native Americans at an immediate disadvantage, and the rapid expansion of imported pigs (which became wild boars) disrupted much of the village based agriculture systems.
4. Finally, there is evidence that indigenous Americans have been in the New World for a much longer time than had been previously thought, perhaps since 30,000 B.C. That isolation from Europe and Asia meant that diseases brought by the first Europeans had a devastating effect, wiping out 80-90% of the inhabitants of North America by the year 1600. Smallpox was the worst of the diseases, but measles, influenza, plague, typhoid, and diphtheria all wreaked their havoc. When the English began to settle North America, they found a continent of empty settlements, regrown forests, and a population less than 1/10 of what it had been 100 years earlier.
5. As a result, those early English immigrants to New England and the rest of the eastern seaboard would say that it seemed like “God had miraculously cleared the continent” for their settlement. And the Doctrine of Discovery gave them the legal and theological justification for taking the land, and displacing the small remaining population. Many of them were converted by missionaries to Christianity, those who refused were driven out or killed. The pope’s decision settling a dispute between Spain and Portugal became the legal foundation for British and then United States relations with the native peoples of North America.

Next month: the “Discovery Doctrine” in the legal history of the United States. Stay tuned.