

Honoring Christopher Columbus

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On this five hundredth anniversary of what we have always called the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, unprecedented attention is being focussed by historians, journalists, and public opinion samplers upon Columbus and what he did. Many are telling us that what Columbus did is not an event that should be honored _ that it was not even a real discovery at all, because there were people already in the Americas when he found them. They tell us that this five hundredth anniversary should be an occasion to condemn Columbus, not to praise him.

Let us begin, therefore, by defining the word "discovery" in the context of history. A discovery is made when an individual or a nation finds something or someone or some people or some places of special importance, not previously known to them. When any previously unknown people is first found by another people, that people may be said to have been discovered. People as well as places can be discovered. The fact that people live in places unknown to another people does not mean that they, and the places where they live, cannot be discovered.

No people from any other part of the world ever discovered Europe; but Europeans discovered all other parts of the world.

In all of history, only the Europeans and the Polynesians of the south Pacific have been true discoverers, sailing for the explicit purpose of finding new lands, trading with their people, and colonizing them. And of all discoverers Christopher Columbus was the greatest, because he accomplished the most against the highest odds.

Before Columbus' time all European voyages had followed coastlines, or crossed open seas to lands previously known or at least sighted by storm-driven ships. Only Columbus set off directly across a broad, unknown sea with no specific knowledge of how far it extended or what lay on the other side. To be sure, Columbus was convinced that he could reach Asia from Europe within the time during which the provisions he carried in his three ships would sustain his men. But he was wrong about that. If America had not existed—had not been in the way—Columbus would have had to turn back long before reaching his goal, or he and every man on his ships would have died.¹

But Columbus undertook his voyage with more evidence that he could complete it than his unfounded assumptions about the size of the world and the distance to Asia. For most of his professional life as a seaman he had ranged the eastern Atlantic, from West Africa to Iceland, in particular spending much time on Portugal's Atlantic islands. He had picked up reliable reports of strange vegetation and carved, hand-worked objects drifting in from the west, even of two bodies of men who were neither whites nor blacks. He had studied the wind patterns of the

Atlantic, noting that from the Canary Islands off the Atlantic coast of North Africa the winds (now called trades) mostly blow from east to west, while further north, on the coast of Portugal and northern Spain and France, the winds (now called prevailing westerlies) blow just as steadily from west to east. Therefore he could sail west with the trades and home with the westerlies, with the winds fair both ways. No other man of his time had thought of that.²

The vegetation and the carved objects and the bodies could not have floated all the way from Asia to Europe if they were as far apart as the experts claimed who believed the world to be larger than Columbus had calculated. He was sure—and he was right—that there was land to the west within reach of the sailing ships fifteenth-century Europe had. 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.³

It is for the boldness of his conception and his magnificent courage in laying his life on the line to carry it out that Christopher Columbus is most rightly honored. It was these qualities that Queen Isabel of Spain recognized in him, that caused her to override the cautious advice of counsellors doubtful that such an unprecedented enterprise could succeed. Isabel knew nothing of navigation and little of world geography, but she was a superb judge of men and women. It was to Columbus the man and to Columbus the devoted Catholic that she gave her support. She believed in him—believed that he could achieve the goal to which he was so passionately committed.⁴

She was right. He did achieve it. In his epochal voyage from August to October 1492, he did strike directly across the unknown Atlantic to reach the previously unknown shore beyond.

The day Columbus selected for departure reflected his profound Catholic faith and that of his crew. August 2, 1492 was the fiesta of Our Lady of Angels, patroness of the Franciscan monastery of La Rábida whose friars had supported Columbus and called for the realization of his dream from the beginning; and protector of the people of Palos, from which his ships would depart, when they were in danger at sea (as Pope Eugenius IV had proclaimed 55 years before). It was a day of thanksgiving for Our Lady's favors, and like all Spanish fiestas, a day of special celebration. Columbus scheduled his departure on the morrow of the fiesta, so that his men could join in thanksgiving and prayer with their families and relatives on the feast-day especially dear to them and to their people.⁵

When, after leaving the Canary Islands September 6, they had been out of sight of land for a full month—a longer voyage out of sight of land than any other in the history of the world up to that time—Columbus' men became frightened and angry. During most of the voyage the wind, often strong, had blown from astern or nearly so. How were they ever going to get back, beating against it? Columbus knew that further north the prevailing winds blew from the west, and planned to go north to

catch the westerlies before he returned. But his men knew nothing of world geography; all they knew was what they had seen, that in these strange and empty seas the winds almost always blew from the east or the northeast. On October 10 the men of the Santa Maria came to the verge of open mutiny.⁶ Columbus tells us in his Log how he answered them:

They [the crew] could stand it no longer. They grumbled and complained of the long voyage, and I reproached them for their lack of spirit, telling them that, for better or worse, they had to complete the enterprise on which the Catholic Sovereigns [Isabel and Fernando] had sent them. I cheered them on as best I could, telling them of all the honors and rewards they were about to receive. I also told the men 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.⁷

That last sentence summed up the heart and essence of the whole life and achievement of Christopher Columbus.

Upon the islands that he first discovered on the other side of the Atlantic, Columbus found native inhabitants, whom he called Indians, believing himself to be in "the Indies" of Asia. And here began the long and troubled story of Columbus' interaction with the native Americans.

Before going into the historical details of that interaction, it is essential to clear away the fog of idealization and special pleading that now surrounds so much talk about the American Indians. First of all we have to understand the situation that existed in the world of the Indian of the Caribbean and mid-America when Columbus arrived.

It seems to be true, as is so often repeated today, that when Columbus found them, the Indians inhabiting the Bahama Islands, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the great island the Spanish called Hispaniola (now divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic) were a gentle, happy, attractive people living peacefully in good ecological balance with their surroundings. They were known as Taino, or Arawaks.⁸

But they were not destined to remain in their Eden-like situation for long, even if Columbus and the Spanish had not come. Advancing steadily northward from the long chain of Caribbean islands called the Antilles was one of the most ferocious people in recorded history, the Caribs. They were savage conquerors who practiced cannibalism, not as an occasional cultic ritual, but as a regular diet. Captured prisoners were immediately eaten. Conquered peoples were systematically devoured. On every island they seized, the Caribs soon exterminated every Taino. On no island did the two tribes coexist.⁹

Across the island-studded Caribbean Sea lay Mexico. Though politically and

culturally advanced beyond most other Indian cultures—the Mexica had a large army, a well-developed governmental administration, a system of writing, and stone temples—their empire, which we call Aztec, carried out ritual human sacrifice on a scale far exceeding any recorded of any other people in the history of the world. The law of the Mexica empire required a thousand human sacrifices to the god Huitzilopochtli in every town with a temple, every year; there were 371 subject towns in the empire, and the majority had full-scale temples. There were many other sacrifices as well. The total number was at least 50,000 a year, probably much more. The early Mexican historian Ixtlilxochitl estimated that one out of every five children in Mexico was sacrificed. When in the year 1487 the immense new temple of Huitzilopochtli was dedicated in Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), more than 80,000 men were sacrificed, at fifteen seconds per man, for four days and four nights of almost unimaginable horror.¹⁰

It must be emphasized that there is no serious dispute about these facts and figures. All reputable and informed historians of pre-Columbian Mexico¹¹ accept their essential accuracy, though some prefer not to talk about them. These facts of history totally dispose of the romantic fantasy of a hemisphere full of peaceful, nature-loving Indians who threatened no one until the cruel white man came.

That the conversion of the people he found was a central purpose of Christopher Columbus is made unmistakably clear by an entry in his log book written November 6, when he was exploring the coast of Cuba. It is addressed directly to Isabel and Fernando:

I have to say, Most Serene Princes, that if devout religious persons know the Indian language well, all these people would soon become Christians. Thus I pray to Our Lord that Your Highnesses will appoint persons of great diligence in order to bring to the Church such great numbers of peoples, and that they will convert these peoples. . . . And after your days, for we are all mortal, you will leave your realms in a very tranquil state, free from heresy and wickedness, and you will be well received before the Eternal Creator.¹²

Columbus was entranced by the beauty and promise of the lands he had found, but greatly disappointed to find no gold anywhere but on Hispaniola, and only a little there. It is easy for us, with universally accepted paper money and a computerized banking system, to mock or scorn the Spanish search for gold. But gold was then the essence of wealth, the only universally acceptable medium of exchange, both for governments and individuals, throughout Europe and the Middle East. To pay for Columbus' expeditions it was necessary to find gold, for it would be many years before a profitable transatlantic trade in any other commodity could be developed—even apart from his greater hopes for giving his adopted country of Spain a large return on the investment made in him and his project.

Exploring these totally unknown coasts—it is worth taking a moment to attempt seriously to imagine the risks of taking a sailing ship along a coast where no large ship has ever gone before, where there are no buoys, no lighthouses, and no charts—Columbus and his men became so exhausted that on Christmas Eve of 1492, no one was left awake on *Santa Maria* but one sleepy cabin boy. With him at the wheel where he was never supposed to have been, the ship ran aground, and could not be freed. Columbus had to abandon her, and leave most of her crew behind in a fort made from her timbers.¹³

On the return voyage, the two surviving ships became separated, and barely survived. The final crisis came as Columbus was approaching the coast of Portugal through a furious storm on the evening of March 3, 1493. His little ship *Niña* was hurtling eastward under bare poles; the roaring northwest wind blew her solely by its pressure on her stern. Columbus' superb dead reckoning, and signs visible even in the tempest, warned him that he was approaching land. Just after sunset "the waves came from two directions, and the wind appeared to raise the ship in the air, with the water from the sky and the lightning in every direction."¹⁴ But the wind was tearing at the clouds as well as the waters, so that occasionally the full moon shone through. Between the moon and the lightning, at seven o'clock land was sighted dead ahead, high enough to mean cliffs. A rockbound lee shore in a near-hurricane for a ship driven before the wind means certain death if its course cannot be changed.

There is no more dramatic moment in all of maritime history. They had one sail left. Columbus and his men must get it up the mast without its being shredded as the others had been, and wear ship at a right angle to take the gale abeam. They must do it quickly, for the cliffs were close ahead. They must do it in the dark, except for the bursts of unearthly brilliance from the cloud-wracked moon and the lightning bolts. We may visualize Columbus on the thundering deck, directing the men at the halyards in the raising of the sail; then, as the wild wind caught it with a snap that set hearts racing, the Admiral going back to stand above the helmsman. The helmsman of a caravel could not see forward, and only a little of the sky; he steered by feel, and by orders from above. The slightest error in turning into the monster waves rolling up from behind would swamp the ship and sink it like a stone. They could not do it in trough or on crest, but only on the upward roll, when there was moonlight or lightning to show them their opportunity.¹⁵

The sail was drawing hard, adding its pressure to the pull on the helm. The tall Admiral, his once red hair bleached white by sun and strain, stood with feet braced, waiting for his moment. So far as he knew, his ship and men and they alone bore the secret of the greatest geographical discovery of all time. Their lives and its fate depended on what would happen in the next few minutes.

Niña made the turn flawlessly, and squared away on her new course. "God protected us until daylight," Columbus says, "but it was with infinite labor and fright."¹⁶

It is in this scene, above all, that we see the hero Columbus best, and understand why for five hundred years men of all races knowing of him honored him, before today's debunkers began their work.

Returning home to Spain to the wonder and admiration of his sovereigns and of all Christendom, Columbus was soon provided with a veritable armada of 17 ships and 1,500 men, departing from the port of Cádiz on his second voyage to America bedecked in flags and colors, with cannon firing and trumpets and harps playing.¹⁷ Everyone sensed that history had been made, that their world would never be the same again. As the famous writer and scholar Peter Martyr de Anglería, an Italian who had gone to live in Spain, said in a letter that month: "Now—O happy event!—under the auspices of my kings [Isabel and Fernando], there is becoming known that which from the beginning of creation had been hidden from us."¹⁸

Making his landfall this time further south, in the Antilles, Columbus encountered the cannibalistic Caribs and lost several of his men to them. Upon returning to Hispaniola he found that the men from wrecked *Santa Maria* whom he had left behind had broken discipline, attacked the Indians, and been massacred. Though later investigation established with reasonable clarity that the Spaniards were to blame, at the time—in view of the continuing difficulty of communication—no one could be sure, and many blamed the Indians. Columbus—by royal grant governor of all the lands he found—established a new and larger colony, and a fort in the gold-producing region of Hispaniola, selecting Pedro Margarit to command its garrison.¹⁹

Soon Columbus left for more exploration, without waiting to see how his men would behave on the island or even making it clear just how much authority his brother Bartholomew, who was put in command of the colony, had over it and especially over Margarit and his garrison of the distant fort in the gold-producing region. It was the first example of the unfortunate but hardly surprising fact that this great explorer much preferred being at sea to being ashore, that his immense talents did not include a capability for administration. Furthermore, he tended to be disliked by many Spanish because he was a foreigner, an Italian.²⁰

Exploring Cuba almost to its western tip and then beating his way slowly back against the trade winds, Columbus was absent from his new colony for no less than five months, which proved more than time enough for disaster. Pedro Margarit ravaged the countryside around his fort, extorting gold, food, and women. Bartholomew Columbus tried to stop him, but Margarit claimed he had independent authority from his brother. When Margarit had collected a considerable amount of gold he simply seized three of Columbus' ships and sailed back to Spain in them. When Columbus finally returned from his five months' voyage, he was prostrated by a severe fever; after recovering from that, he was crippled for weeks with arthritis.²¹

Sick, frustrated, angry, and unable to control the Spaniards on the island, Columbus blamed the Indians for his troubles and the very small production of gold. In

January 1495 he seized over a thousand Indians to make them slaves. There can be no excuse for this, but it is very important to remember that it was contrary to Spanish law and vigorously countermanded by Queen Isabel as soon as she found out about it. She declared firmly that no one had authorized her Admiral to treat "her subjects" in this manner, released the Indian captives who had been brought to Spain, and made clear her unalterable opposition to enslavement of the Indians. She then sent a former member of her household named Juan Aguado to investigate what Columbus was doing as governor of Hispaniola and report back to her.²²

Before Aguado could reach Hispaniola, full-scale war with its Indians had broken out because of Columbus' seizure of the slaves. The Spaniards easily won all military engagements with the Indians, demanded from them a tribute in gold too much for them to collect, and ravaged their lands and pursued them into the mountains when they did not collect it. Aguado's arrival forced Columbus to stop all of this, and he returned to Spain in June 1496.²³

In August 1497, sailing from Spain on his third voyage, Columbus discovered the American continental mainland in what is now Venezuela, and recognized for the first time that he had in fact discovered an "other world."²⁴ Arriving at Hispaniola a year later, he found the island in a state of rebellion and virtual anarchy, with the authority of his brother Bartholomew disregarded almost everywhere. The letters Columbus wrote to Queen Isabel about this problem demonstrated that he was incapable of resolving it; even in the writing of the letters, his mind kept wandering to new projects of exploration and colonization.²⁵

On Hispaniola, Columbus eventually agreed to grant each Spaniard a substantial tract of cultivated land with a number of Indians to till it.²⁶ This was the origin of the *repartimiento* or *encomienda* system, formalized into law on Hispaniola in 1503, which Bartholomew de Las Casas, the "apostle to the Indians," spent his life fighting, and which Isabel's grandson, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, was to struggle desperately and with only limited success to eliminate. If not quite slavery, the *repartimiento* system was certainly serfdom, imposed upon a people who had no custom or tradition of regular hard work on the land and would often die quickly if forced to do it.²⁷

However, by no means all or even most of the Indians lived and worked as *encomenderos*. Others worked in the mines, and although sometimes this was forced labor, a substantial number worked voluntarily there for pay. Others fled to the mountains where they long remained entirely free of the Spanish government. Many Indian women entered Spanish households, not only as servants and mistresses but as wives. The oft-denounced oppression existed, but so did good treatment and opportunity.²⁸

Finally deciding that Columbus was simply not competent to govern a colony, Isabel relieved him of that duty and sent Francisco de Bobadilla to replace him. Bobadilla arrived in Hispaniola in August 1500, put Columbus under arrest, seized

his papers and property, and sent him back to Spain in chains. When he arrived, Isabel had the chains removed at once; but she did not reinstate Columbus as governor, even when Bobadilla also began to abuse the Indians. A third governor, Nicholas de Ovando, was sent out in 1501 with orders to force Bobadilla to restore the property he had taken from Columbus.²⁹

In 1502 Columbus sailed on his fourth and last voyage. After surviving a hurricane with all four of his ships that sunk every ship but one of the returning flotilla carrying Bobadilla and his ill-gotten gains, Columbus reached the Central American mainland at Honduras, where he landed and took formal possession of this previously unknown coast for Spain. Through September he beat southward along the coasts of what are now Nicaragua and Costa Rica, hoping to find a strait which would be a sea approach to civilized Asia. All during the fall and on into the winter he explored the coasts of Panama, where the American continent is in fact at its narrowest—though it does not appear Columbus knew that—in the hope of finding the desired strait.³⁰

He carried on until Easter of 1503, when his ships were so riddled by holes made by the teredo or shipworm (previously unknown to European mariners) that he had to beach them on Jamaica. By the time he was finally rescued and returned to Spain, the great Queen Isabel was dying.³¹

Ten days after her death Columbus wrote to his son Diego:

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.³²

Columbus knew how much he owed Queen Isabel, and repaid her with these words of appreciation and devotion even as he knew that his own work was finished and his life nearly so. He died two years later, in near-poverty and already almost forgotten by the court.³³

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.

Within thirty to forty years the Indians of the Caribbean islands had disappeared as a distinct population, the greater part of them dying from diseases brought first by the white men, then by the black slaves they began to introduce. There were not nearly as many Caribbean natives as the Indians' champion Las Casas believed; modern researchers estimate a population of about 100,000 for Hispaniola when Columbus arrived, and substantially less than that for Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. The great population decline did not begin until 1508, after Columbus' death. Smallpox and malaria, the most deadly plagues in the history of Europe except for the Black Death, along with yellow fever from Africa, were the principal killers. In the state of medical knowledge of that time, there was no help for this mortality and no escape from it. The mingling of the peoples of the Old and New World, never before brought into contact with one another, carried this heavy and unavoidable price.³⁴

But ultimately the American Indians as well as the Europeans benefitted from Columbus' great discovery. An interracial culture developed in much of Latin America, notably in Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. Human sacrifice and cannibalism were ended, and the Indians were almost all converted to Christianity. Large-scale evangelization began with the arrival of a group of Franciscans in Hispaniola in 1500 and continued steadily from then on.³⁵ Though many Indians were long held in a state of virtual serfdom and some were forced contrary to law to work against their will for long periods of time in gold and silver mines, none were enslaved after the first colonial generation. Spanish law never recognized Indian slavery. And, back in Spain, a prolonged debate at the highest levels of Church and state finally convinced the highest authorities of both—the bishops and the King-Emperor Charles V—that the Indians had souls equal before God to the souls of white men, and rights equal before the law to the rights of any Spaniard.³⁶

Columbus was a flawed hero—as all men are flawed, including heroes—and his flaws are of a kind particularly offensive to today's culture. But he was nevertheless a hero, achieving in a manner unequalled in the history of exploration and the sea, changing history forever. For some strange reason heroism is almost anathema to our age, at least to many of its most vocal spokesmen. But heroes and the inspiration they give are essential to uplift men and women; without them, faceless mediocrity will soon descend into apathy and degradation. Heroes need not be perfect; indeed, given the fallen nature of man, none can be perfect. It is right to criticize their failings, but wrong to deny their greatness and the inspiration they can give.

Christopher Columbus *is* the discoverer of America, and by that discovery ultimately responsible for America's evangelization; and for this we should forever honor him.

ENDNOTES

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- 5 Manzano, *Cristóbal Colón*, pp. 397-400.
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- 11 See, for example, in addition to R. C. Padden cited above, Burr C. Brundage, *A Rain of Darts; the Mexican Aztecs* (Austin TX, 1972); C. A. Burland, *The Gods of Mexico* (London, 1967); Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed. *The Broken Spears; the Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston, 1962); Laurette Sejourné, *Burning Water; Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico* (New York, 1960); George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico* (Garden City NY, 1950).
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