

# Catholic News Agency

## Abolishing Columbus Day will advance division and faulty history

By Eugene F. Rivers, III \*

December 02, 2016

Baltimore has spent the last year trying to heal from the wounds of division. But now a divisive proposal threatens to create more disunity. Councilman Brandon Scott's proposal to eliminate Columbus Day is just what Baltimore doesn't need: more division, less healing. Worse, the proposal itself is based on the kind of stereotypes that should never be the cause for legislative action.

Scholars like Professor Carol Delaney, formerly of Brown and Stanford universities, argue that Columbus is the subject of terrible and unfair slander. Professor Delaney writes in her authoritative biography of the explorer: "...he is blamed for all the calamities that befell [the New] World. The 'presentist' perspective that dominates the contemporary view, even among some academics, holds him responsible for consequences he did not intend, expect, or endorse."

Delaney also noted in a 2014 interview: "Columbus has become a symbol for everything that went wrong. But the more I read of his own writings and that of his contemporaries, my understanding of him totally changed. His relations with the natives tended to be benign."

"Columbus strictly told the crew not to do things like maraud or rape, and instead to treat the native people with respect. There are many examples in his writings where he gave instructions to this effect. Most of the time when injustices occurred, Columbus wasn't even there," she notes. Columbus was not perfect. None of us are. But he was hardly the monstrous caricature being used to assassinate his holiday.

None of this denies the fact that the consequences of colonization of what is now North America had deplorable consequences for Native Americans. Nor does it compensate for their treatment by Europeans, which was often reprehensible.

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However, attacks on Columbus and Columbus Day were originated by the very group that has historically led racist attacks on blacks. These attacks were created in the 1920s by the Ku Klux Klan as part of a targeted assault on Italians, Catholics, and the Catholic charitable group the Knights of Columbus.

We must not forget that, in addition to African Americans, the Klan hated Catholics and Jews as well. And they had a particular hatred for the Knights of Columbus. Not only was this a Catholic group, but it was a group that stood publicly – at its highest levels – with the African American community. During World War I, it was the only charitable group to run centers serving the troops at home and in Europe that had as its policy not to draw the color line.

Long before advocacy for African Americans was popular, back in 1924, the Knights of Columbus commissioned and published NAACP co-founder W.E.B. DuBois' book *The Gift of Black Folk*. It published this book because African Americans had been excluded from American history, and the Knights of Columbus wanted to correct that injustice – four decades before the Civil Rights Movement!

In 1924, the same year the Knights of Columbus published the DuBois book, the Klan disrupted their Columbus Day party in Pennsylvania by burning a fiery cross. The same year, the Klan magazine ran an article entitled: "Columbus Day, a Papal Fraud." In the 1920s, the Klan also tried to suppress celebration of the holiday at the state level.

When, a decade later, Columbus Day became a federal holiday, it was Catholics – Italian Americans and groups like the Knights of Columbus – who pushed for it. Why? Because – as they had done for African Americans with DuBois – they wanted to ensure a place of honor for immigrants and Catholics in the history of the United States.

Baltimore needs unity. It needs healing. It needs honest dialogue. There is a long list of problems to solve in Baltimore: high crime, high poverty rates, unemployment, fatherless children, mistrust of police, failing schools, drug abuse, etc. The city's politicians should devote their time to addressing these issues in innovative and effective ways rather than to initiatives that can only be divisive.

It is inspiring that the students of City Neighbors High School suggested celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day, as the Baltimore Sun reports. It is fitting that, just as the culture of Italians, Catholics and African Americans is celebrated nationally, the culture of Native Americans should be also. But, to celebrate one cultural group does not require that we denigrate another. We

should not disrespect the cultural heroes of another ethnic group. Rather than renaming Columbus Day, why not add another holiday, Indigenous Peoples Day, to the City of Baltimore's calendar in honor of Native Americans?

Baltimore is the country's first Catholic diocese. It has a thriving Little Italy and strong immigrant community. It is the place where the founder of the Knights of Columbus was ordained a priest nearly a century and a half ago. The city should not follow a path blazed by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s to insult and marginalize Catholics. Instead the city can celebrate the legacy of marginalized people such as African Americans and Native Americans, just as it celebrates those who have defended them.

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*\* Catholic News Agency columns are opinion and do not necessarily express the perspective of the agency.*

# Ⓞ House bill an affront to history, Columbus, truth

By: Dr. Rita DeFrance • April 28, 2017 • Updated: Today at 4:05 am

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The Colorado Legislature stands on the brink of embracing "fake history." Rep. Joe Salazar's Bill 17-1327 to suppress Columbus Day is an affront not just to Italian-Americans and Catholics, but to history itself.

It takes Columbus' words and exploration out of context. It rewrites history in a crude, misleading and false way. Salazar's ad hominem attack on Columbus recapitulates the easy - and utterly unfair - tactic of blaming the first explorer to come to America in the 15th century for everything negative that came after him.

Modern scholars of Columbus have shown just how unfair it is to portray him this

way. For instance, Stanford professor Carol Delaney, who wrote a 2011 biography of the explorer, writes that Columbus "is blamed for all the calamities that befell (the New) World. The "presentist" perspective that dominates the contemporary view, even among some academics, holds him responsible for consequences he did not intend, expect, or endorse."

Delaney has also noted that "Columbus has become a symbol for everything that went wrong. But the more I read of his own writings and that of his contemporaries, my understanding of him totally changed. His relations with the natives tended to be benign."

By contrast, Salazar's slanderous bill bases its "facts" on the writings of Bartolome de las Casas. Delaney is hardly the only modern scholar who finds de las Casas problematic. She writes: "Las Casas is remembered only for his defense of the Indians; what is forgotten is that he owned slaves and operated encomiendas, while Columbus, who never owned slaves, is reviled and blamed for everything that went wrong in the Indies."

Professor Philip Wayne Powell's book "Tree of Hate" has also clearly shown the hyperbole of de las Casas. Powell writes: "With his pen, Las Casas destroyed more Indians than all his countrymen could possibly have killed." He noted that if every Spaniard in the New World for the first 50 years after Columbus "had killed (a Native American) a day and three on Sunday, it would have taken a generation to do the job attributed to him by his compatriots."

Delaney further complicates de las Casas' narrative, noting: "Columbus strictly told the crew not to do things like maraud or rape, and instead to treat the native people with respect. There are many examples in his writings where he gave instructions to this effect. Most of the time when injustices occurred, Columbus wasn't even there."

It would be bad enough if the bill just got the history wrong. But, as Powell notes, "de las Casas' exaggeration was greatly responsible for creation of the somber picture of Spanish action in America . The libels of de las Casas and the political use to which they were put (by Spain's enemies), mark the beginnings of propaganda in our epoch."

That propaganda is known as the Black Legend - a view that sees all things Spanish or Hispanic through a negative lens of violence and sexual misconduct. It is propaganda

that continues to afflict those of Hispanic descent today in the popular imagination. Giving such propaganda the Legislature's stamp of approval sends exactly the wrong message.

There is another issue too. The animus against Columbus and Columbus Day was originally championed - in Colorado and nationwide - by the Ku Klux Klan, whose anger at Columbus stemmed from his Catholicism.

The facts are these: Columbus was a man ahead of his time, he was a fearless explorer, he is unfairly maligned for actions he never took and for the actions of others who came later, and this bill perpetuates "fake history" and propaganda.

Rather than using this false narrative to divide our state, Rep. Salazar should check the facts, focus on real issues affecting Coloradans, and apologize to Italian Americans, Catholics and Hispanics, who suffer terribly when libels like those underlying this bill are given credence.

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Rita Defrange is president of the Columbus Day Parade Committee and a member of the Denver chapter of the Order of the Sons of Italy.





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# Critics of Columbus Day get history wrong, scholar says

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Christopher Columbus. Credit: Gurgen Bakhshetyan / Shutterstock.

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By Kevin Jones

Denver, Colo., May 2, 2017 / 05:24 pm (CNA)-

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The historical legacy of Christopher Columbus is tarred by bad history in the quest to change Columbus Day, according to a researcher who has focused on Columbus' religious motives for exploration.

"They're blaming Columbus for the things he didn't do. It was mostly the people who came after, the settlers," Prof. Carol Delaney told CNA April 25. "I just think he's been terribly maligned."

"I think a lot of people don't know anything much, really about Columbus," said Delaney, an anthropology professor emerita at Stanford University and the author of the 2011 book "Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem."

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2K She said Columbus initially had a favorable impression of many of the Native Americans he met and instructed the men under his command not to abuse them but to trade with them. At one point Columbus hung some of his own men who had committed crimes against the Indians.

“When I read his own writings and the documents of those who knew him, he seemed to be very much on the side of the Indians,” Delaney said, noting that Columbus adopted the son of a Native American leader he had befriended.

Columbus is again in the news in Colorado, which in 1907 became the first U.S. state to make Columbus Day an official holiday.

Now, one Colorado legislator aims to repeal Columbus Day as a state holiday.

State Rep. Joe Salazar’s 2017 bill charges that Columbus’ voyage “triggered one of history’s greatest slave trades” and created “a level of inhumanity towards indigenous peoples that still exists.”

The bill excerpts three paragraphs from the writings of Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish Dominican friar born in 1484 who became the first Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico and advocated for indigenous Americans. He wrote strong polemics against Spanish abuses.

Bishop De las Casas depicted the Spaniards as “acting like ravening beasts, killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before.” De las Casas claimed that the native population of Hispaniola was reduced to 200 people from 3 million.

He said the Spanish killed “such an infinite number of souls” due to lust for gold caused by “their insatiable greed and ambition.” He charged that the Spanish attacked towns and did not spare children, the elderly or pregnant women. He said they stabbed and dismembered them “as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house” and made bets on how efficiently they could kill.

Salazar’s bill describes these as “Columbus’ acts of inhumanity.”

Delaney, however, emphasized that the acts of the colonists need to be distinguished from those of Columbus.

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Bishop De las Casas' own view on Columbus is more complex, she said. Other scholars have noted that Las Casas admired Columbus and said he and Spain had a providential role in "opening the doors of the Ocean Sea." The bishop thought Columbus was treated unjustly by the Spanish monarchs after he was accused of mismanagement.

De las Casas himself is not above criticism. He owned indigenous people as slaves before changing his mind on their mistreatment. At one point he suggested to the Pope that black Africans be enslaved as an alternative to enslaving Native Americans.

Among the critics of the Colorado bill are the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternity founded in 1882, which takes its name from the explorer who brought Christianity to the New World. Columbus was a widely admired Catholic at a time when American Catholics were marginalized.

"Scholars have long shown that de las Casas was prone to hyperbole and exaggeration, and the bill does not take into account recent scholarship on de las Casas or Columbus," the Knights said in an email to members.

"The legacy and accomplishments of Christopher Columbus deserve to be celebrated. He was a man ahead of his time and a fearless explorer and brilliant navigator whose daring discovery changed the course of history," the group continued. "Columbus has frequently been falsely blamed for the actions of those who came after him and is the victim of horrific slanders concerning his conduct."

Isaac Cuevas, a spokesman for the Knights of Columbus, was even more forceful, connecting the move against Columbus Day to a dark period in Colorado's past.

"Nearly a century ago, the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado targeted Catholics including Italian-Americans. One of the Klan's tactics throughout the United States was the denigration of Christopher Columbus and the attempted suppression of the holiday in his honor," he said.

Cuevas said that a committee hearing on the bill was "tinged with offensive anti-Catholic overtones." He charged that the bill "takes us back to what the Klan outlined in the 1920s in order to promote ethnic and religious resentment and marginalize and intimidate people with different religious beliefs and ethnic backgrounds."

Rep. Salazar put forward a bill in previous years against the Christopher Columbus holiday. His 2016 bill to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous People's Day was defeated in the state legislature.

"After speaking with the American Indian community and other communities, they were saying, 'We actually never really wanted a day -

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this isn't what this is about. This is about removing a state holiday about a man who engaged in genocide against our people," Salazar told the Colorado Statesman newspaper recently.

Columbus Day drew particular controversy in Colorado on the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World. Organizers of Denver's 1992 Columbus Day parade canceled it at the last minute due to threats from radical activists with the American Indian Movement.

Columbus has been a major figure for Catholics in America, especially Italian-Americans, who saw his pioneering voyage from Europe as a way of validating their presence in a sometimes hostile majority-Protestant country. The Knights of Columbus, the largest Catholic fraternal organization in the world, took his name, his voyage and his faith as an inspiration.

At one point in the nineteenth century there were even proposals to push for the voyager's canonization.

In 1892, the quadricennial of Columbus' first voyage, Leo XIII authored an encyclical that reflected on Columbus' desire to spread Catholic Christianity. The Pope stressed how Columbus' Catholic faith motivated his voyage and supported him amid his setbacks.

Under pressure from some Native American activists and their allies, some U.S. localities have dropped observances of Columbus Day, while others have added observances intended to recognize those who lived in the Americas before Columbus sailed.

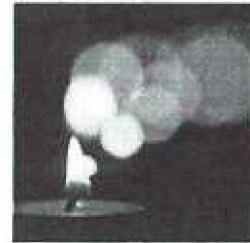
Delaney acknowledged that some Native Americans were sent to Spain as slaves or conscripted into hard labor at the time Columbus had responsibility for the region, but she attributed this mistreatment to his substitutes acting in his absence.

She thinks Columbus Day should be continued, even if the indigenous peoples of America also deserve recognition.

For her, Columbus' handling of the killings of his crew showed restraint. After his ship the Santa Maria ran aground on his first voyage, he left 39 men on a Caribbean island with firm orders not to go marauding, not to kidnap or rape women, and always trade for food and gold.

"When they returned on the second voyage, they found all of the settlers

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had been killed," she said. The priest on that voyage wanted to attack the locals and kill all of their people in revenge, but Columbus strongly refused to make such a move.

She noted the explorer's relationship with a Native American leader on Hispaniola, a Taino chief named Guacanagari. Columbus had very good relations with him and adopted one of his sons. That son took the name of Columbus' natural son, Diego, and accompanied Columbus on his final three voyages.

Columbus on his second return voyage took six Indians back to Spain, but not as slaves.

"He took them because they wanted to go," Delaney said.

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## **POLL SHOWS MAJORITY OF AMERICANS – INCLUDING CALIFORNIANS – IN FAVOR OF COLUMBUS DAY**

12/21/2016

### **K OF C-MARIST POLL REVEALS BROAD POPULARITY OF EXPLORER**

LOS ANGELES, CALIF. – Most Americans – including a majority of Californians – have a positive view of Christopher Columbus and support the holiday in his honor, according to a recent Marist poll commissioned by the Knights of Columbus.

By more than two to one, most Americans (62 percent) expressed a favorable opinion of Columbus himself. Only 29 percent view him unfavorably.

When asked whether they think it is a good idea to have a holiday named for Columbus, 55 percent of respondents nationwide said yes, only 37 percent said no.

In California, where the City of Los Angeles is considering changes to its Columbus Day observance, 57 percent of respondents view Columbus positively and only 29 percent view him negatively. In addition, by a wide margin, most Californians support the current Columbus Day holiday (53 percent to 38 percent).

"The Knights of Columbus joins a majority of Californians in celebrating Columbus Day and opposing unfair efforts to erase his holiday," said California Deputy Supreme Knight Sonny Santa Ines. "As new scholarship on Columbus shows, this man has been slandered and unfairly blamed for everything that occurred after he arrived on this continent. He was a man ahead of his time, and policy decisions should not be based on a mythology that does not square with the facts."

The survey of 1,005 adults was conducted Dec. 1-9, 2016, by the Marist Poll and sponsored by the Knights of Columbus. Adults 18 years of age and older residing in the continental United States were interviewed on either landline or mobile phones using live interviewers. Results are statistically significant within  $\pm 3.1$  percentage points. The error margin increases for cross-tabulations.

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