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Renouncing Doctrine of Discovery is "basic justice," says bishop

By Randy Boswell, Canwest News Service August 13, 2009 3:01 PM

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Bishop Mark MacDonald shows a favourite Ojibwa Hymnal at a news conference in 2007, where the Anglican Church of Canada announced his appointment as the church's first National Indigenous Bishop. MacDonald says formally renouncing the Doctrine of Discovery — the historic legal claim underlying the conquest of the New World by Anglo-Italian sailor John Cabot and other early European explorers — "is a matter of basic justice" for

the First Nations dispossessed by the arbitrary regal pronouncement.

Photograph by: Peter Redman, National Post

The Anglican Church of Canada's top aboriginal bishop says formally renouncing the Doctrine of Discovery — the historic legal claim underlying the conquest of the New World by Anglo-Italian sailor John Cabot and other early European explorers — "is a matter of basic justice" for the First Nations dispossessed by the arbitrary regal pronouncement.

National Indigenous Bishop Mark MacDonald, a U.S.-born cleric who was trained in Canada before becoming the Anglican Church's principal voice on native issues in 2007, was responding to news the U.S. arm of the church has renounced the doctrine and asked Queen Elizabeth — the titular head of the global Anglican community — to "disavow and repudiate" it publicly.

The resolution passed last month at an Episcopal convention in California could preview a similar proclamation by Anglican leaders in Canada when they gather next June in Nova Scotia for the church's triennial General Synod, Canwest News Service reported Wednesday

"I was at the (U.S.) convention and participated in some of the discussions and preparation of the final resolution," said MacDonald, who served for 10 years as the Episcopal Bishop of Diocese of Alaska. "It is very exciting."

He said the Anglican Church in Canada "is very interested in this issue" and a 2001 push to repudiate the doctrine was "well received" but not formally enacted at the time.

"The repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery is a matter of basic justice and the proof of our Gospel — whether we live it or just talk it," MacDonald said in an e-mail on Thursday. "The bold statement of the U.S. General Convention is an affirmation, inspiration, and a challenge to carry that work further."

MacDonald noted Anglicans in Canada have already effectively rejected the medieval doctrine through reconciliation efforts on the residential schools tragedy and a push towards indigenous "self-determination" within the church.

"We are working towards the implementation of the repudiation" in advance of any formal motion, he stated, noting the church's "special focus on calling for Canada's endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples."

He added: "The Anglican Church is going through a review of its structure and policies in light of the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery."

The U.S. resolution directed Episcopal Church officials to write to Queen Elizabeth and urge her to formally reject "the claimed validity of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery."

The resolution referred specifically to the charter King Henry VII granted Cabot before the Italian-born explorer sailed to North America in 1497. Probably the first European to reach the continent since the Vikings, Cabot landed that year in Newfoundland or Nova Scotia and claimed the future Canada — inhabited for millennia by a multitude of indigenous nations — for England.

Henry VII's charter had authorized Cabot to take possession of any "isles, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world they be, which before this time were unknown to all Christians."

Popes and monarchs throughout Europe espoused the Doctrine of Discovery at that time.

Among the many impacts of the European influx to the Americas during the centuries that followed was the disappearance of Newfoundland's indigenous Beothuk people by the early 1800s.

While highlighting Cabot's voyages to Canada, the Episcopal Church resolution also condemned the renewal of the Doctrine of Discovery in English royal charters granted in the 16th century to Sir Humphrey Gilbert, an early colonizer of Newfoundland, and Sir Walter Raleigh, founder of the Virginia colony in the U.S. southeast.

The doctrine "led to the colonizing dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands in North America and to the dehumanization and subjugation of non-Christian peoples," the U.S. resolution stated.

MacDonald's strong endorsement of the U.S. resolution follows a series of sympathetic statements on the subject by Canada's top Anglican official, Archbishop Fred Hiltz.

In his New Year's address in January, Hiltz stated: "Through the Doctrine of Discovery and the arrogance of our colonialism, we robbed people of their God-given dignity. It is time to make amends."

And this week in Port Elgin, Ont., where MacDonald and Hiltz are attending a "Sacred Circle" gathering of Canada's indigenous Anglicans, the archbishop again made reference to the doctrine as the root of historic injustices faced by aboriginal Canadians.

"In recent years," Hiltz said in his opening homily on Monday, "we've seen how the spirit of God has moved people to publicly repudiate doctrines of discovery . . . , to expose the arrogance of colonialism, and the inherent, flawed policies of assimilation, and the acknowledgement of our failures in hurting people in so many residential schools."

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Photograph by: Peter Redman, National Post

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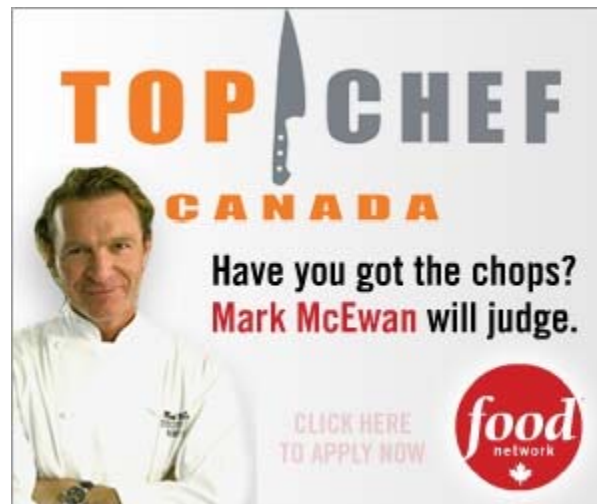
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