

The Catholic Venture of Christopher Columbus

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When writing to the people of the United States in 1895, Pope Leo XIII observed: *“The names newly given to so many of your towns and rivers and lakes teach and clearly witness how deeply your beginnings were marked with the footprints of the Catholic Church.”*

How true it is! For there are countless hundreds of cities, towns, and other

landmarks bearing the names of great saints of the Church that testify to the inestimable apostolic labors of her sons and daughters in America.

Although his “footprint” was not the first, of a mission-minded Catholic on these shores, the first lasting impress made on our soil was by the much-maligned and under-appreciated Christopher Columbus. We present here a brief rundown of the Catholic venture of this noble Genoan.

Pre-Columbian Ventures First, we confront the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the

discovery of America. For the very name “America” credits Amerigo Vespucci with the discovery of the continent. This was an error, of course, as the historians later realized. (But by the queer chance of their mistake it also happens that the entire Western Hemisphere, as a result, was inadvertently given the name of the great Saint Emeric of Hungary, who was Vespucci’s patron saint.)

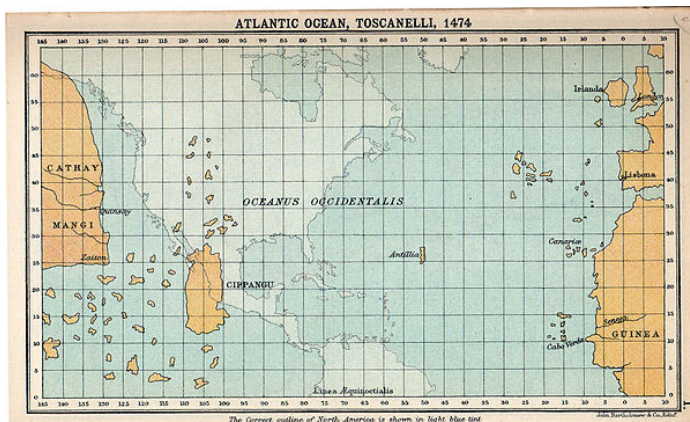
Later historians, eager perhaps to shadow the apostolic motives of Catholic explorers, insisted that the Vikings were the first to sail to our shores. Yet, they ignore the fact that when the pagan Norsemen discovered Iceland in the Eighth Century, there they found crosses, bells, sacred vessels, and other Catholic artifacts of Irish craftsmanship. Upon returning to Norway from their long voyages, these hardy sailors found that the idols of Scandinavia had been hurled to the dust. The king had embraced the true Faith and the whole people had renounced paganism. When the Nordics, therefore, set out again for their new-found lands, they brought Catholicism with them this time. Hence we learn that the Viking explorers Bjorn and Leif were Catholics, not pagans, and that after their discovery of the American shores, missionaries immediately offered to come here to preach the Gospel to the savage inhabitants.

But having mentioned that the Catholic Irish had preceded the Norsemen to Iceland, we must also note that likewise they were the earliest explorers of our Atlantic coast. In fact, it is recorded that Saint Brendan the Navigator, the patron saint of seamen, had sailed to the American continent in the sixth century, some two hundred years before the Vikings.

1492 and All That Now we come to the part with which more of us are familiar. On the second of August in the year 1492 three ships, the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* (Holy Mary¹), carrying one hundred and twenty men set sail from the shores of Spain. Their objective was twofold: to find a westerly route to the Far East, where they hoped to obtain a source of revenue to

rebuild their poor country so long ravaged by Moslem invaders; and most importantly to bring the true Faith of Christ to pagans of those distant lands. The leader of this brave band, of course, was Christopher Columbus, a native of Genoa, and the only Italian among this crew of Spaniards and Portuguese.

Columbus had begun sailing the seas as a boy of fourteen and over the years had acquired a notable skill in navigation and astronomy. He is said to have sailed as far as Guinea when he was sixteen years of age. For some time he and his brother had pondered the idea of reaching the East Indies by sailing westward, and it was the hope of executing this idea that brought Christopher to Portugal in 1471. He presented his plan to the King of Portugal, but meeting with no success he set off for Spain in 1485. Twice he petitioned King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella — *Los Reyes Católicos*² — to support his venture, but due to the influence of royal advisers who thought his plan absurd, he was politely dismissed.



Toscanelli's notions of the geography of the Atlantic Ocean, which directly influenced Columbus' plans for his first voyage.

Enter the Franciscans Dejected and practically reduced to begging, Columbus accepted the hospitality of a Franciscan monastery.³ The Prior, Father Juan Perez, happened to be the Queen's confessor and he took a strong interest in the extraordinarily zealous seafarer. (It was Father Perez who later was to celebrate the first Mass in America — on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.) This good priest had a friend at the

King's court, Louis de Santangel (who would be put in charge of all Church revenues for Columbus' design) and the two men were able to convince the Queen of the project's merit, particularly since the Church was prepared to help in financing the first expedition. We can clearly understand the Church's interest in the venture when we see the compelling argument that Columbus offered to explain its purpose: ". . . *To carry the Name and doctrine of Jesus Christ into regions so distant.*" Permission was obtained from the Catholic Kings and preparations were soon under way.

Christopher also presented his plan to Pope Alexander VI in a letter, hoping to secure missionaries to accompany him on the journey. He wrote: "*I trust that by God's help, I may spread the Holy Name and Gospel of Jesus Christ as widely as possible.*" The Pope granted his request on the second and other subsequent expeditions.

A Rough Voyage Knowing that a plenary indulgence would be gained by all who received Holy Communion on the Feast of Our Lady of the Angels, August 2nd, the courageous explorer-missioner chose that date for his departure. Every one of the crew approached the Communion rail that morning and, after invoking the protection of the Queen of Heaven, they set out for a historic destiny.

The men suffered considerably from the grueling experience of being many weeks at sea in the turbulence of unknown waters. Fear and uncertainty began to take hold of them. Two months passed and still there was no land to be seen. The crew grew all the more restless and insisted that their captain return back. Still confident, however, Columbus countered their fears with a proposition: if no land were sighted by the Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar, October 12th, he would reverse their course. This was a persuasive appeal even to these much frightened Iberian sailors, because the Feast commemorated the day on which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Saint James the Greater, Apostle of Spain, and reassured him that, in spite of his apparent failure

in that country, his work eventually would bring forth tremendous fruits for the Church. The men agreed to this offer, and as a reward for their faith, land was sighted — on the very day of the great Feast. Their total number of days at sea had been seventy-two — precisely the number of years that the Mother of God spent on earth.

The first act of Columbus upon setting foot on this new land was to set up the standard of the Cross and claim it in the Name of Jesus Christ. He gratefully named the first island he arrived at “San Salvador” (Holy Savior), by which it is still known today, despite the fact that the Masons succeeded for a time in having its name changed to Watling’s Island.



Columbus' First Voyage to San Salvador

After a brief rest he set sail again, and on Christmas Day he disembarked on the northern coast of what is now Haiti, establishing the first European settlement in the New World, which he called La Navidad (The Nativity). Columbus, by securing the friendship of the natives, was able to learn from them that a large island lay not far away, and that beyond it was a huge body of land. And so, leaving sixty of his men there, he started out on his return course to Spain, bringing with him the news of the existence of the American continent.

The “Spreading of Catholicism” The apostolic navigator was welcomed back to Spain with jubilation. His news was received enthusiastically by the Catholic Kings, not merely because it promised economic relief for their suffering

country, but primarily because they had learned that the natives of the new land were well disposed to receive the gift of Faith. The pious queen addressed Christopher with these words: *“The expenses we have incurred, and are about to incur for the Indian expeditions, have been well bestowed; for these will ensure a spreading of Catholicism.”* How well Queen Isabella had described the holy explorer when she had said that he would have boldly thrust himself upon a vast ocean *“to achieve a most signal thing for the sake of the Divine Glory.”*

Surely he was worthy of such praise, as is confirmed by his words to a friend upon his return: *“Immortal thanks should be rendered to God, Who had brought His labors such prosperous issues; that Jesus Christ rejoices and triumphs on earth no less than in heaven, at the approaching salvation of nations innumerable that were before hastening to destruction.”*

There were those who were unimpressed with the prospects of further voyages and who tried to dissuade the fatigued Columbus from undertaking further expeditions. Were they right, he wondered? How could he know what to do? The seafarer decided to make a spiritual retreat at the Franciscan Monastery. After imploring the help of the Blessed Mother, he emerged fortified with grace and determined to continue his apostolic explorations. And so in September of 1493, Christopher set sail again, this time in a vessel called *The Gracious Mary*, accompanied by thirteen ships and fifteen hundred men. And again, the Blessed Trinity was invoked for the protection of the journey, during which the Angelus faithfully was recited three times every day.

A new settlement was established on this expedition, and the first fortress in the New World was erected and named in honor of Saint Thomas the Apostle. It was also on this voyage that Columbus discovered a group of small islands south of San Salvador, which he called the Virgin Islands, in honor of the 11,010 virgins who were martyred with Saint Ursula at Cologne in 383.

The venerable missionary of the seas returned to Spain in 1496, but promptly launched out again in May of that year to explore the Canary Islands and others in that area. In July he came upon a very large body of land, which he named Trinidad (Trinity), and sailing westward from thence he at last landed on the mainland of South America.

In all, Christopher Columbus led four excursions from the shores of Spain to America. It was on his fourth expedition that his great apostolic career finally ended. After suffering tempests, shipwreck, grave illness and exhaustion, as well as mutiny from his own settlers, he was put on board a ship heading back to Spain, and there in his adopted homeland he died.

This courageous explorer deserves our highest admiration and praise not only for his discovery of our American continents, but for his unquenchable zeal in bringing the Catholic Faith to distant corners of the globe, that men might know the way to salvation.

Pope Leo XIII wrote in praise of Christopher Columbus: *“By his toil . . . hundreds of thousands of mortals have, from a state of blindness, been raised to the common level of the human race, reclaimed from savagery to gentleness and humanity, and, greatest of all, by the acquisition of those blessings of which Jesus Christ is the Author, they have been recalled from destruction to eternal life.”*

1 The full name of this flagship was “Holy Mary of the Immaculate Conception,” a most fitting name not only because Mary is the Star of the Sea (*Stella Maris*), but more significantly because it was to the Immaculate Conception that the United States was to be consecrated in the year 1846.

2 “The Catholic Monarchs” (or “Catholic Kings”), as the two were known.

3 It should be recalled that Columbus was a Third Order Franciscan, as were many other notables in history, including Dante and Saint Louis IX, of France.



Christopher Columbus' tomb in Seville Cathedral.
His remains are borne up by the kings of
Castile, Leon, Aragon and Navarre.