

REWRITING OUR HISTORY: TOPPLING CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

If it is true that “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it” then I’d propose a corollary: “Those who revise the past are deemed responsible to correct it.” The saying is attributable to George Santayana, a Spanish born writer and Harvard philosopher. He firmly believed that **history repeats itself**—he’s in good company. He spent his childhood in Avila Spain, home to the famed St. Teresa, but came to the U.S. as an eight-year-old. He eventually made his way to Rome (he never married) and in his old age was cared for by the Irish nuns in their convent near the Colosseum. Philosophy aside, his **aphorisms** have staying power and this one is particularly relevant. What is the issue? Simply put, **Christopher Columbus** has gone from an explorer lauded for his role as the first European to reach the shores of the New World to racist imperialist who inflicted disease upon native Americans.

On June 10, while State Patrol troopers stood back, a **statue of Columbus** was ripped from its granite pedestal (with a noose tied around its neck!) on our State Capitol grounds. It was a gift from Minnesota’s Italian American community, during a time of **anti-Italian** bigotry. It was designed by Milan-born Carlo Brioschi, who moved to the Twin Cities in 1909 and who created the famed bronze doors of the Mayo Clinic. Ironically, the building at 908 University Ave. that housed his studio and showroom still stands. More than **20,000** attended the statue’s dedication in 1931— just a score of protesters toppled it and stomped upon its head. Only later did the governor say that there had to be consequences. Considering that Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan **praised the removal effort**, defense lawyers might just take this case for free! There will be **no consequences** for any involved; instead, historical truth has been indicted.

So, what is the truth? I am now reading **Carol Delaney’s** “Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem.” The Stanford University Anthropology professor emerita notes: “The dominant picture holds him responsible for everything that went wrong in the New World.” But he gave strict orders to his men to treat the natives with respect, though tragically during his long absences between voyages, they did not always heed his commands. After friendly contact with native Tainos on his first voyage, “the chief’s son was his interpreter and sailed back to Spain with him.” Columbus was horrified upon his return voyage to learn that 39 sailors left behind had been killed by the Arawaks. But Columbus **did not retaliate**— he sought the truth.

History is multi-faceted; simplistic evaluations rarely serve the truth. Claims of “genocide” due to the explorers carrying disease are misplaced, as it both implies intent and is anachronistic. New diseases were also brought to Europe from the Spaniards’ contact with the natives, though without intent. Yes, there were **excesses and harsh treatment** of some natives—that is a **fact**. **Bartolomé de las Casas** was a 16th-century Spanish Dominican priest, historian and missionary. He is lauded for having stood up against the evil treatment that some explorers inflicted upon the natives. But he also admired Columbus for his “sweetness and benignity” of character along with his deep Catholic faith. Delaney clarifies that Columbus **never owned slaves** and “fervently believed it was the duty of every Christian to try to save the souls of non- Christians.” It was this passion that “led him on a great adventure, an encounter such as the world has never seen.”

Bingo! That’s his **mortal sin**—in believing that he could bring Christ to those whom he encountered. Evangelization equates to colonization— that’s likely what your son or daughter is being taught in high school—surely in college. It is the same exact reason why a statue of **St. Junipero Serra** was removed from the U.S. Capitol rotunda (as I wrote about in a 2015 column) or why the painting of **Fr. Louis Hennepin**, the intrepid Belgian missionary, was moved to a Capitol side meeting room. Shhh, **don’t tell** the **Minneapolis City Council** members that the county in which they live is named after a priest. At this rate, all that will be left is a **dozen Snoopy** statues in the entire city! Attacks on Columbus aren’t new. The Ku Klux Klan mounted a **bigoted campaign** against Columbus in the 1920’s because he was a devout Catholic. They tried to get rid of Columbus Day. They failed—later generations might succeed.

When Pope Francis addressed the young people of Genoa in May 2017, he noted how a disciple of Christ needs the “virtue of a navigator,” pointing to the example of Columbus who faced “a great challenge” and showed “courage,” a trait essential to becoming a “good missionary.” Columbus was **neither a greedy imperialist nor**

a **ruthless adventurer**. We can **neither change history, nor erase it**. Rather than tear down statues and eliminate holidays, why not add a special day to honor the history (albeit often painful) of indigenous people and learn from historic misunderstanding so as to promote a healthier appreciation for the complexities of history.

- Food for thought: “To build may have to be the slow and laborious task of years. To destroy can be the thoughtless act of a single day.” **Sir Winston Churchill** (1874-1965)
- Revelations of past sexual abuse of minors by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick were revealed on June 20, 2018. On October 6, 2018, the Vatican undertook “a further thorough study of the entire documentation” and would “in due course, make known the conclusions of the matter.” He then was dismissed from the clerical state in early 2019. Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin indicated in February 2020 that he thought the report “would come out soon.” Transparency requires that this sad chapter be closed, so that healing may begin. The promised report is a critical component in this process.
- What am I doing instead of watching **Twins baseball**? Reading, taking evening rosary walks through the neighborhood and eating far fewer malted milk balls (my candy of choice while watching games) and generally feeling in much better shape!
- Join us **Monday June 29 at 7:30 a.m.** to celebrate Mass on the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul. Our bond of spiritual affinity with Saint Paul Outside the Walls enables the faithful to obtain a **plenary indulgence** on major Pauline feasts, provided the usual requirements are met. Those include confession (within a week), Holy Communion, prayers for the Pope’s intentions, and a spirit of detachment from all sin.
- Average in every way! A friend sent me a detailed spread sheet of all Archdiocesan priests, with sortable columns for age, year of ordination, etc. As a stats aficionado, I love it! I clicked atop the “age” column and it immediately calculated the “average age” of all priests, including decimals. The number looked eerily familiar, so I scrolled to see my name. My current age is just **.01 of a year** off from the average age of all priests, making me the **most average priest** in the entire Archdiocese. Do I get a prize?

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



Above:
October 12, 1931
Statue Dedication
Capitol Grounds

Right:
June 10, 2020
Protesters topple
Columbus Statue