



# MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

## DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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### *Know the Past to Understand the Present*

*Fr. Augustine Hilander, OP*



Dear Mission Friends:

When I traveled to Puerto Rico for the first time in April, it was clear to me why one of its mottos is the *Isle of Enchantment*. The tropical character of the island awakens the senses. The days are sunny, humid, and verdant. Waves from the nearby beach crash softly against the reef and return gently to the shore, creating tidal pools of warm water. When falling asleep, the welcome night noises of birds, insects, and the local frog, called the *coquí* after the sound it makes, snuff out the traffic, horns, and sirens of the convent's urban neighborhood.

The lesser-known motto for Puerto Rico is *John Is His Name*, translated from the original Latin, *Joannes est nomen eius*, referencing the Gospel of Luke 1 at the naming of St. John the Baptist.



*Bronze statue in Puerto Rican plaza depicting the 3 races on the island: Taino, African, and Spanish.*

When the angel Gabriel appeared to the elderly Zechariah to tell him that his wife Elizabeth (Mary's cousin), also elderly and assumed to be barren, was to have a son and that "he shall call his name John," Zechariah was in disbelief for a moment and so the angel struck him dumb. When the baby was born and they brought him to the temple to be circumcised, the family and friends assumed he would be named after his father, but Elizabeth said, "Not so, he shall be called John." Zechariah concurred, writing on a tablet, "His name is John," and suddenly he could speak again.

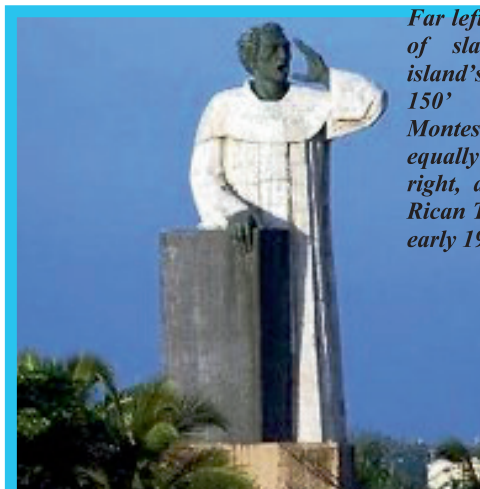
A few months later, John's cousin Jesus was born, also after the angel Gabriel had prophesied his birth to his mother-to-be, Mary. After the cousins grew up, John, who had become a baptist, would go before Jesus and proclaim his coming, "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared,...to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins."

And when Christopher Columbus landed on what we know as Puerto Rico in 1493, he named the island San Juan Bautista as it was one of the first to have a Spanish settlement with strong Christian values, making the people "ready for the Lord" and preparing the way for more. When Ponce de León arrived in the early 1500s in search of rumored gold and the mythical Fountain of Youth, he founded a Spanish colony and called it *Puerto Rico* (Rich Port), but somehow in the 1520s the names were switched, the island becoming Puerto Rico and the colony within becoming San Juan. He did find gold, became wealthy, and was appointed the first governor. After his death, his remains would be—and are still—enshrined in a tomb in the Cathedral of San Juan. **The early history of the colonization of the island, however, is anything but Christian.**



Its history exposes the injustice of enslaving the local population, the Taino, into mining gold, which St. John the Baptist, who “turned the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,” would surely have preached against. Indeed, our earliest Dominican preaching in the “New World” recalls that of St. John. In 1510, the first four Dominican friars arrived on the island of Hispaniola (today divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic), coming in peace to proclaim the Gospel message and to serve the spiritual needs of both indigenous inhabitants and Spanish settlers.

**Yet after more than a year of observing cruel atrocities by fellow Europeans in their conquest over the indigenous and their land, these Dominicans were compelled to rethink their peaceful evangelization efforts and were forced into aggressive admonishment.** In Hispaniola in December of 1511, Padre Antón de Montesinos delivered his now-famous homily denouncing the Spaniards who were committing violent injustices toward the indigenous, including physical enslavement, exploitation, and spiritual demoralization.



*Far left, artist's rendition of slaves mining the island's gold; middle, 150' high statue of Montesinos giving his equally mighty sermon; right, assimilated Puerto Rican Taino family in the early 1900s.*



Opening with the words of St. John as prophesied by Isaiah, he set in motion the long-time struggle of Dominicans for the rights of the native peoples of the Americas. “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord*” (John 1:23). Crying out against the atrocities toward the native population, he proclaimed, “This voice declares that you are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? **On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dealt quietly and peacefully on their own lands?...** Are these indigenous not human? Do they not have rational souls? Are they not our brothers and sisters?...How can you lie in such profound and lethargic slumber? You who hold Indian slaves will henceforth be denied absolution in the confessional.” Montesinos went on to establish in Puerto Rico the oldest church still standing, the first library, and one of the first schools there taught by Dominican friars.

Puerto Rico remained a key conquest of the Spanish Empire in the Americas through the end of the Spanish–American War in 1898, when United States’ troops invaded it and raised the U.S. flag. The early 1900s were marked by the struggle to obtain democratic freedom from the U.S., which was largely successful: The United States pulled out its military rule and the island established its own government within the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution; its people were declared U.S. citizens in 1917; and their own constitution was drafted and approved in 1952 when the territory was formally recognized as a commonwealth of the United States.

Today all branches of our Dominican family are represented in Puerto Rico. There are two convents of friars with six to nine each. Besides preaching at parish Masses, they teach at the *Universidad Central de Bayamón* (UCB), in other local universities, grammar and high schools, and at the Shrine of St. Martin de Porres, which provides an opportunity for weekly preaching on current topics of the faith and morality. Our Fr. Carmen Mele, O.P. works at the *Casa de Predicación*, a retreat and conference center that can house more than 90 people. The preaching and teaching that go on there educate and form lay people in the faith.





Fr. Mark Francis Manzano, O.P., a Western Dominican friar, agreed to go to Puerto Rico last year when the Central Province needed help from the other US provinces. He is campus minister at UCB. I was there during the feast of St. Catherine of Siena and the students and faculty provided the beautiful music for the Mass. The campus ministry office is still recovering from the effects of Hurricane Maria but its staff has been able to start moving back in. Fr. Mark Francis is also the Dominican vocation director for the island. He has been making various items to give to students and possible vocation candidates. I took home a precious home-made holy card of St. Catherine with a prayer on the back.

The Dominicans in Yauco, in the southern half of the island, have a large parish with many missions and also a school. All the buildings were heavily impacted by the earthquakes which hit there at the beginning of 2020. The friars' convent has finally been repaired and they will be able to move back in next year, once it is furnished.

Our Dominican nuns and sisters preach through their devotion and work. The nuns in Manatí, founded by Sr. Teresa Maria de Jesús Ortega Pardo, are an international congregation dedicated to prayer for the success of the preaching of the Gospel.



They gave me a few works on St. Catherine of Siena that I brought back to our Dominican nuns in Menlo Park. The Dominican Sisters of Fátima actively promote the rosary for peace in their intimate chapel reminiscent of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and in their outdoor rosary shrine similar to Fátima, Portugal. This southern portion of Puerto Rico where they live was especially impacted by the earthquakes but thankfully their many mango trees still bear an abundance of fruit which they enjoy sharing.

Dominican laity is also very active on the island, sharing the Gospel through their lives and witness. The Dominicans in Puerto Rico are keeping alive that voice of St. John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness by continuing to preach and teach the faith and God's justice in this island nation.

In Christ's peace,  
Fr. Augustine Hilander, O.P.

**SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico--** Historians and anthropologists believe that up to 60,000 Tainos lived in Puerto Rico at the time the island was "discovered," but they were soon forced into hard labor and succumbed to mining-related deaths, outbreaks of infectious diseases brought from Europe, or genocide. In the 2010 census, some 42,000 of the 3.7 million people now living on the island identified themselves as at least partially Taino.

Dozens of activists marched Saturday through the historic part of Puerto Rico's capital, some wearing traditional Taino clothing as they banged on drums and blew on conch shells to demand that the U.S. territory's government eradicate symbols of oppression from colonial times, starting by removing the numerous statues, street names, and plazas named after explorers Christopher Columbus and Juan Ponce de Leon, and even the remains of the latter.

"These statues represent all that history of violence, of invasion, of looting, of theft, of murder," said one activist. "These are crimes against humanity." *Akansas Gazette* 7/12/20

*Top left, Friars in Bayamón, including our Frs. Hilander, Manzano, and Mele; top middle, Fr. Hilander with laity in Yauco; below, Fr. Manzano with students and staff in UCB chapel.*



**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.**  
(Luke 4:18)

*Upcoming Mission Appeals*

- Sept. 2-3 St. John the Baptist, San Lorenzo, CA  
*Fr. Dominic DeMaio and Fr. Serge Propst*
- Sept. 9-10 St. Mary, Salinas, CA  
*Fr. Michael Fones*

Summarized from *NPR*, March 30, 2023

The "Doctrine of Discovery" refers to a series of three papal decrees from the 1400s that were implemented to justify Europe's colonial conquests and subsequent seizure of indigenous peoples' land, livelihoods, culture, and freedom. Invoked as a legal and religious standing by Europeans who "discovered" new lands by violently seizing them from their native people, the Doctrine has finally and officially been repudiated by the Vatican.

The decrees--Pope Nicholas V's *Dum diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455); and Pope Alexander VI's *Inter caetera* (1493)--authorized colonial powers to seize lands and subjugate non-Christians in Africa and the "New World." The decrees were actually legally nullified by the Vatican by the late 1530s, 30 to 40 years after they were first issued, but the nullification was too late--the impact of colonialism was so destructive; the harm done to the natives' identity and culture by decades of subjugation and forced assimilation so irreparable; and the mindset of European superiority so embedded that any opposing decree was meaningless.

In fact, what began as a religious decree in the 1400s then became the basis for a legal concept in the U.S., when the Doctrine of Discovery was invoked in an 1823 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that indigenous people had only rights of occupancy, not ownership, over lands they had long lived on. The land, then, was open for the taking. As a result of this being written into the American property law, it was actually considered a precedent as recent as a 2005 case in upstate New York, involving the Oneida Indian Nation.

Last year, the Pope personally apologized for the Church's role in contributing to years of indigenous suffering. He also apologized to indigenous peoples for the systemic abuse inflicted upon their children at Catholic-run residential schools in Canada. But advocates have long called on the Church to issue a formal repudiation of the doctrine, saying personal apologies fell short, given the magnitude of the policy's effects. And so in March the Vatican finally declared that "the Catholic Church... repudiates those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political 'Doctrine of Discovery.'" The Pope reiterated his words from his visit to Canada last year: "Never again can the Christian community allow itself to be infected by the idea that one culture is superior to others, or that it is legitimate to employ ways of coercing others."

The Church also said it stands with the indigenous and strongly supports the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which must protect indigenous rights as well as improve living conditions and development in a way that respects everyone's identity, language and culture. The official repudiation of the Decree is about the rejection of the mindset of cultural or racial superiority that gave rise to the colonial impulse and even to the missionary impulse of those times which allowed for the subjection of a people and the obliteration of their human dignity. To put it concisely, it acknowledges the evil that was done.

**Incredibly, Juan Ginés de Sepulveda's teachings, as espoused below, were sanctioned by the king and queen of Spain. He famously debated Las Casas, whose message of the Gospel—that of the essential dignity of all people and the ensuing responsibility to confront individuals and social structures that oppress and discriminate against others—was, of course, in direct opposition.**

#### *On the Reasons for the Just War among the Indians (1547)*

The man rules over the woman, the father over his children. That is to say, the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. This same relationship exists among men, there being some who by nature are masters and others who by nature are slaves. Those who are dimwitted and mentally lazy, although they may be physically strong enough to fulfill all the necessary tasks, are by nature slaves. It is just and useful that it be this way. "He who is stupid will serve the wise man."

And so it is with the barbarous and inhumane peoples [the Indians] who have no civil life and peaceful customs. It will always be just and in conformity with natural law that such



(Reasons continued)

people submit to the rule of more cultured and humane princes and nations.

Thanks to their virtues and the practical wisdom of their laws, the latter can destroy barbarism and educate these [inferior] people. It is with perfect right the Spaniards rule over these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in wisdom, intelligence, virtue, and humanitas are as inferior to the Spaniards as infants to adults and women to men. There is as much difference between them as there is between cruel, wild peoples and the most merciful of peoples, that is to say, between apes and men.

...And who can ignore the other virtues of our people, their fortitude, their humanity, their love of justice and religion? More than any other country, [Spain] hates and detests depraved individuals, even those who have certain of the virtues that are common to nearly all classes of our people, like courage and the martial spirit. And I would like to emphasize the absence of gluttony and lasciviousness among the Spaniards. How deeply rooted is the Christian religion in the souls of the Spaniards? After the sacking of Rome [in 1527], there was scarcely a single Spaniard among those who died from the plague who did not order all the goods he had stolen from the Roman citizens returned in his last will and testament.... And what will I say of the gentleness and humanity of our soldiers, who even in battle, after the attainment of victory, expressed great concern and care in saving the greatest possible number of the conquered?

Now compare these natural qualities of judgment, talent, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those of these pitiful men [the Indians], in whom you will scarcely find any vestiges of humanness. These people possess neither science nor even an alphabet, nor do they preserve any monuments of their history, nor do they have written laws, but barbarous institutions and customs. In regard to their virtues, how much restraint or gentleness are you to expect of men who are devoted to all kinds of intemperate acts and abominable lewdness, including the eating of human flesh? And you must realize that prior to the arrival of the Christians, they did not live in that peaceful kingdom of Saturn that the poets imagine, but on the contrary, they made war against one another continually and fiercely, with such fury that victory was of no meaning if they did not satiate their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies .... Such are, in short, the character and customs of these barbarous, uncultivated, and inhumane little men. We know that they were thus before the coming of the Spaniards.