

# Ambiguous history paints multifaceted portrait

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to find a shorter water route to the Orient and to prove that the world was round.

In the process, Columbus claimed the New World for Christianity and became a hero.

But while acknowledging Columbus' very real achievement, historians have called into questions some parts of the Columbus narrative.

First, the date he first reached land in the Western Hemisphere was Oct. 23, not Oct. 12. The discrepancy stems from Columbus' use of the Julian calendar instead of the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced in 1582.

Columbus' actual name was Cristoforo Colombo, and he preferred to be called by the Spanish surname Colon. He may have been Italian, for documents show that he grew up in Genoa, but no clear records have been found to show exactly where — or even when — he was born.

When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean in 1492, he "discovered" lands that were already populated. Further, Viking sailors are believed to have landed in North America several hundred years before Columbus' voyage.

Indeed, some historians speculate that on a voyage to Iceland in 1476-77 Columbus heard stories about the Viking voyages.

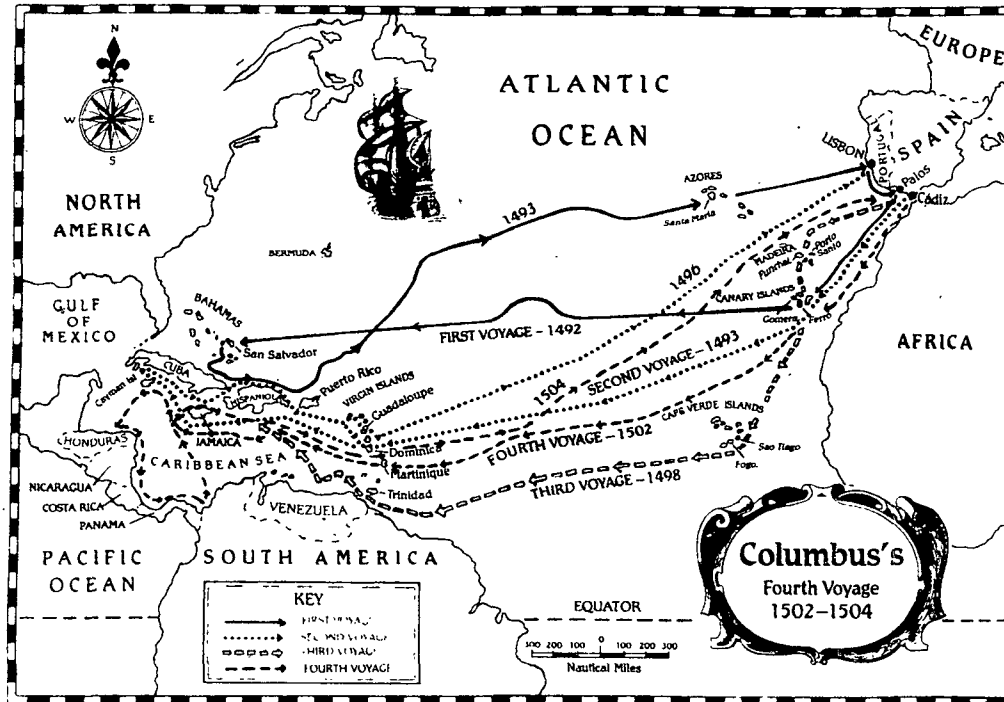
At the time Columbus set sail for the Western Hemisphere, educated Europeans had accepted for centuries the belief that the world was round. In fact, Columbus grossly underestimated the size of the Earth.

Columbus did, indeed, stake a claim for Christianity in the lands he reached, naming the first island where he landed San Salvador — although disputes exist as to which island this was. He also brought priests with him on subsequent voyages to help with the conversion of the "Indians."

But the log and diary entries from Columbus' four voyages to the Western Hemisphere show that he was constantly searching for gold and — though he regarded the natives as worthy of conversion — he also believed that "they ought to make good and skilled servants."

He also observed, "The Indians of this island ... are its riches, for it is they who dig and produce the bread and other food for the Christians and get the gold from the mines ... and perform all the services and labor of men and of draft animals."

Even in his own time, Columbus was regarded as both a hero and a figure of failure. His achievement stunned his fellow Europeans, and Spain conferred



upon him the titles Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy of the lands he claimed for Spain.

Yet he proved such a poor governor of the island colonies — spending his time exploring — that he was arrested and sent back to Spain in chains in 1500. He lost his entire fleet on his fourth voyage to the West in 1502.

Columbus died in relative obscurity in 1506, still not realizing what he had found. Even his grave site is uncertain.

As John Dyson observed in his 1991 book, *Columbus: For Gold, God and Glory*, "A whirlwind of controversy pursued him beyond the grave and continues to this day."

The American Catholic bishops were aware of the ambiguities surrounding Columbus and the quinquennial when they prepared their 1990 pastoral letter on the quinquennial, *Heritage and Hope: Evangelization in America*.

"Much has been written on the motivations and character of Columbus that reveals the workings of a complex man whose journeys to America were motivated by forces ranging from self-interest to piety," the bishops wrote. "In him, as in the whole experience of the encounter between Europeans and the people's of the Americas, diverse motivations were at work."

The bishops further observed, "The exploitation and eventual extermination of the Arawaks that followed Columbus' landing, encouraged in no small part by his own reports, was inexcusable."

Yet, they added, "The effort to portray the history of the encounter (between Europeans and Native Americans) in which only the violence and exploitation of the native people were

present is not an accurate interpretation of the past.

Chief among the positive consequences of the encounter, the bishops wrote, was the introduction of Christianity, "with its power of humanization and salvation, dignity and fraternity, justice and love."

In accessing Columbus, Dyson wrote, "He was at bottom a simple seafarer of unusual curiosity, vision and ambition, but of indifferent education, questionable leadership qualities and no administrative ability."

"He was a very complex man," Russell Shaw, public relations director for the Knights of Columbus, observed in a recent telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from his Washington, D.C., office. "He was a good man in many ways, a most unusual man. He had a vision and he pursued that vision."

"It's extraordinarily difficult for people in a highly secularized society like ours to understand him," Shaw continued. "He was a man of the late Middle Ages."

Shaw pointed out that Columbus' historical achievements and even his character are being overlooked by critics. These critics seem more intent on using Columbus as a means to attack capitalism, "Euro-centrism" and the mistreatment of Native Americans, he said.

Consequently, Shaw said, many of Columbus' critics are unfairly judging him by 20th century criteria and sensitivities, and not as a man of his day.

Even in his own day, Columbus' reputation was overshadowed by other explorers, John Noble Wilford observed in his 1991 book, *The Mysterious*

## History of Columbus.

As Columbus' reputation began to reemerge from obscurity, Wilford wrote, he was treated not as a man or a historical figure, but "as a myth and symbol. He came to epitomize the explorer and the discoverer, the man of vision and audacity, the hero who overcame opposition and adversity to change history."

In the United States, Wilford wrote, Columbus became an object of legend and as a symbol of American achievement. It was in this climate that the Knights of Columbus formed in 1882, using Columbus to symbolize the Catholic role in the growth of the United States.

Wilford observed that the Knights' literature described Columbus as "a prophet and a seer, an instrument of Divine Providence, a mystic of the highest order."

But because he had become such a prominent symbol of American achievement, Wilford noted, he provided a handy target when that achievement came into question.

"The Columbus of 1992 is the post-colonial and demythologized Columbus," Wilford wrote. "He has been stripped of the symbolic cloak of optimism and exposed as a human being whose flaws were many and of reverberating consequence."

Yes, Columbus did have flaws and the native Americans did suffer a great deal at European hands in the wake of Columbus, Shaw acknowledged. But that should not mean that Columbus is to be held accountable for what others did — or that the Knights should change their name, he added.

"George Washington was a slave owner who had illegitimate children," Shaw remarked. "Should Washington, D.C., change its name?"

Despite his own personal failings — and the tragic consequences of some encounters between Europeans and Native Americans — Columbus remains a man to be respected, Dyson observed.

"It was Columbus alone who had the vision and strength of purpose to follow his project for so many years," Dyson wrote. "It took seamanship and courage of quite another order to turn the bows of a ship deliberately toward an unknown horizon."

"The glory of Columbus, as Victor Hugo notes, lies not in his having arrived but in having weighed anchor," Dyson concluded. "This was the spirit that unveiled the Americas."

## Pope to visit Latin America to face challenges, overcome past

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II's 12th voyage to Latin America is an attempt to face the challenges of the future while overcoming the ghosts of the past.

The aims of the Oct. 9-14 trip to the Dominican Republic are to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Catholicism's arrival and to help Latin American bishops set strategies for a new evangelization of the region.

This new evangelization includes tackling the region's social problems and the widespread convert-making by sects and Protestant churches.

It involves refining the church's position on liberation theology and basic church communities. Both are

innovative Latin American ways of meeting the social and evangelizing challenges of the modern world, but have sparked debate as to whether they are too politically oriented.

Most of the pre-trip arguing, however, has focused on the controversies of the initial evangelization and its ties to Spanish and Portuguese colonialism.

The main event of the pope's 56th trip outside Italy is the Oct. 12 opening of the Fourth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in the Dominican capital of Santo Domingo. The meeting, scheduled to end Oct. 28, was called to draft plans for the new evangelization of a region

where most people are nominally Catholic.

The opening date was purposefully chosen because it marks the 500th anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World, the event that made evangelization possible. Santo Domingo was specifically chosen because it was the first diocese established in the Americas.

For the pope, the date and place are positive symbols that should stimulate pastoral planning. The pope often has separated evangelization and colonization, saying that the purpose of the church is to commemorate the anniversary of Catholicism's arrival.

Early evangelization had its good and bad points, but there were "more lights than shadows," the pope has emphasized.

"The pope is not going to celebrate the discovery of America," said Joaquin Navarro-Valls, Vatican spokesman.

The pope will commemorate a "unique event" that opened a "vast territory that is now Catholic," said Navarro-Valls.

On the pope's schedule are separate meetings Oct. 13 with Indians and blacks, the two groups suffering most under colonialism. Each group will be given a special papal message about the 500th anniversary.