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PRESS RELEASE

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MCK issues Statement on Doctrine of Discovery - Repudiation falls short of action

For immediate release

(Kahnawake – 17, Onerahtókha/April 2023) The Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke (MCK) Ratitsénhaienhs wish to express their dismay with the recent announcement by Pope Francis repudiating the *Doctrine of Discovery* (“the Doctrine”).

Primarily, the announcement falls short of true and meaningful reconciliation that colonial governments purport to be making with Indigenous Peoples. Rather than take substantive action by formally rescinding the papal bulls (declarations) that found the doctrine of discovery, the Vatican chose instead to only take symbolic action by merely issuing a general statement “repudiating” the “concept” of the doctrine. In addition, the Vatican’s statement emphasized that the papal bulls were “manipulated for political purposes by competing colonial powers” therefore minimizing and disregarding the role that it knowingly played in the colonization of Indigenous lands.

The *Doctrine*, instituted by the Vatican in the 15th century, provided religious and legal authority for colonial conquest, and was used to justify the taking of Indigenous lands, lives and resources in the Americas and Africa. It was based on the notion that Indigenous Peoples were “less than” their European counterparts and considered sub-human. Several hundred years later, this doctrine continues to exist through serving as the principals and foundations of generations of legislation and policy governments have imposed on the original lands and Peoples they were taken from. In fact, the application of the doctrine of discovery continues to manifests itself in Canadian law today. For example, the ongoing application of the *Indian Act* and of the legal tests developed by Courts forcing Indigenous Peoples to prove the existence of limited aboriginal rights as subject to ultimate Crown title and federal and provincial authority over lands and resources.

The Pope’s repudiation of the *Doctrine* is simply an attempt to disassociate the Vatican from what occurred in the past, and neglects to take into account the intricate relationship between church and state, and European domination of lands globally, coming with not only the blessing but also the explicit direction of the Pope. Correcting such atrocities requires action. True reconciliation can only come with real action and honesty.

“Although a step in the right direction, the Vatican’s Repudiation of the *Doctrine of Discovery* fails to meet our expectation of what it means to take accountability for their actions,” said Ohén:ton Í:iente ne Ratitsénhaienhs (Grand Chief) Kahsennenhawe Sky-Deer. “The Pope needs to rescind the papal bulls that founded the *Doctrine* and start a dialogue with the First Peoples of Turtle Island. Further, he needs to call upon state governments that used (and continue to use) the *Doctrine* in an effort to colonize Indigenous Peoples and their lands, to recognize the impact it had on our people, culture and lands, and take the necessary steps to change it.”

“The Vatican, Canada and the United States of America need to be held accountable for the actions of the past,” said Ratsénhaienhs Ross Montour. “There’s an opportunity here to open meaningful dialogue with those who wrongfully subjugated our people for the last six hundred (600) years. We believe that rescinding the *Doctrine* would send a clear message that the Pope is sincere in reconciling the issues of the past with our people. More importantly, state governments need to work with us to meaningfully address the archaic and unjust constitutional, legislative and policy based instruments that the *Doctrine* was used as a foundation for, many of which continue to be instituted in this current day.”

A letter regarding the rescinding of *the Doctrine* has been sent to Pope Francis, [which can be read here](#).