

Take a deep breath and study the real Christopher Columbus

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Christopher Columbus would be dismayed, confused, embarrassed and angry watching Americans, particularly the young, turn against him for reasons that would make no sense to him.

Columbus viewed himself as the discoverer of a New World who suffered years of ridicule seeking to finance a watery path westward to Japan and China. He saw himself as sailor, explorer, merchant, and missionary — to him, all noble pursuits and honorable attributes. But not only today, he also suffered defeat in his own time. He had no political skill and even his own young priest, wanting his governor's job, turned against him, forcing the admiral's return to Spain in chains in 1500. Despite his sailing also to South America and Central America, the new continents were named for another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, not Columbus.

Americans have waxed and waned in their admiration for Columbus. The Puritans and Virginians at our founding had little use for him, since he was a devout Roman Catholic, although the then English King James' mother was a Catholic, but she too was despised by the American English.

A terrible anti-Italian pogrom was unleashed across the U.S., running on for about 30 years, beginning with the New Orleans lynching of 11 Italian Americans in 1891 (go figure, New Orleans was basically a Catholic City, but French and Spanish). This New Orleans lynching led to the rise of the Catholic Knights of Columbus formally organizing in 1892 which also sought to protect Catholics in general with economic and legal assistance. The Knights needed a Catholic saint to rally around and chose Christopher Columbus who had already been long venerated by both Italian and Spanish Catholics (he is NOT a canonized Catholic saint — note that most American Catholics are of Italian, Spanish, Irish and French descent — the Hispanic Americans are just now beginning to see some anti-Catholic persecution).

The 400th year of Columbus' discovery of the Bahamas on Oct. 12, 1492, encouraged the new Knights to push for a national holiday for Columbus. President Harrison took up the pledge and in sympathy many states started local holidays for Columbus and raised statues and named cities, schools and streets after him.

In 1921 the Klu Klux Klan entered the fray to oppose all Columbus Day activity, along with lobbying against Catholic education in general, and against Italians/Irish in police departments and politics. The Klu Klux Klan tore down a few Columbus statues. The KKK lobbied the state of Oregon both to prevent Columbus Day and to prevent Catholic education, but lost in the Supreme Court June 1, 1925, by unanimous decision (Pierce vs The Society of Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary) overturning a "State Schools Only" Oregon statute; this court decision pretty much ended the Klan's public campaign against Catholics and Columbus Day, although the Klan made one more virulent anti-Catholic effort in the 1928 Al Smith for president campaign. Democrat President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made the

national Columbus Day holiday official in 1937; President Roosevelt was Dutch, and certainly neither Catholic nor Italian.

Columbus was born in 1451 in a village near Genoa, Italy, to a poor family; his father sold cheese products door-to-door and wove cloth. He was named Cristoffa Corombo which in Latin is Criophorous Columbus, thus Christopher Columbus. At age 10 he headed to sea; by age 20 he had sailed to Africa, Greece, England, Ireland and Iceland. He was very tall at 6 feet with reddish hair and gray/green eyes; today he is assumed to have some Viking blood.

He knew the old Chinese and Viking stories of lands to the west of Europe and of course he knew of the powerful trade with Japan and China to the east. He understood well the Atlantic Ocean trade winds, probably through studies in Portugal. When Constantinople fell under Muslim control, all of Europe had to pay more for what they now viewed as essential oriental products. Columbus among others began a search for a better route to China, bypassing Turkey. He was mostly unique in being willing to sail west. He also was helped by a miscalculation in the distance, thinking he could make it from the Canary Islands to China in only 3-4 weeks. But he could not raise the finances even though spending almost 20 years trying in Portugal, Italy, France, England and finally Spain.

Even though he was born in Italy, Columbus' major language was Spanish, plus the Spanish court of Ferdinand and Isabella (probably "really" ruled by Isabella) needed money (because of the Muslim wars and the loss of Jewish taxes), and after about 10 years of lobbying, took on the Columbus risk, sending out three small ships from the Canaries, hoping for huge financial gain. On the verge of mutiny, the crew sighted land just in time, for Columbus, as they were into week six of an expected three-week trip.

Despite all his later troubles, Columbus insisted he had arrived in China or India until his dying day. He went back and forth to Europe three more times. Ironically, he died famous, but obscure. The following- on Spanish marched into the New World in a rush, mostly looking for gold and silver, pushing the religious Columbus aside.

Columbus proclaimed all the lands and peoples he discovered in the names of the royal court of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, and the pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Even though he was named local governor, others ruled as he traveled about on his missionary journeys and return trips to Spain and trips to the Mainland. His government was harsh, although even-handed between indigenous peoples and the Spanish, both treated with equal harshness. But not so with Columbus successors; almost immediately from 1505 unspeakable treatment of the indigenous peoples followed as the Spanish stumbled onto unexpected great quantities of silver and gold.

The Caribes sailed away to the mainland, but the Tainos were exterminated, 50% by disease and the other 50% by mining conditions and war. The original Columbus intent to convert the indigenous peoples was totally ignored.

Christopher Columbus himself wrote of the Taino peoples in a report to Isabella: “They traded with us and gave us everything they had, with good will. They took great delight in pleasing us. They are very gentle and without knowledge of evil; nor do they murder or steal. Your Highness may believe that in all the world there can be no better people. They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing.”

Modern American hostility to Christopher Columbus may have many of the old elements, but is also stoked by the 1980 book of Howard

Zinn, “A Peoples History of the United States,” Harper Collins. Professor Zinn was one of the organizers of the extremist Vietnam era “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee” — think the Berkeley and other riots of the 1960s, sit-ins, and several University bombings. The professor is particularly virulent about Christopher Columbus leaning heavily on the priest above mentioned, Father Bartolome del las Casas, whose writing against Columbus himself is otherwise unsubstantiated and in fact who said about Columbus, “ I knew Christopher Columbus well, and he was an honorable man.”

The Zinn book was vigorously opposed by historian Arthur Schlesinger and others, but despite all that, has had major impact as a school textbook, with over 3 million copies sold. Note that the accusation that Christopher Columbus deliberately brought the Taino disease (mostly smallpox) is nonsense. Louis Pasteur was not born until 1822, and he brought the first knowledge to Europeans of bacteria and virus transmission; the Spanish indeed brought novel, deadly disease to the Bahamas, but it was innocent and accidental. Their own recent losses to the plague in Europe were of course evidence they had had no treatments, even for themselves.

The accusation against Columbus of African slavery is also false. African slavery did not come to the Bahamas until 1623 (1619 to Virginia) but “that” is long after Columbus was dead. African slaves were brought by the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English, but not the Americans. The Spanish did enslave the Caribbean Taino peoples, but after Columbus was fired as governor. Apparently, also, Zinn finds the Columbus devoutness to Roman Catholicism distasteful.

There is no rational reason to justify or explain the expulsion of Christopher Columbus from the American lexicon of heroes. He of

course remains a hero to Italian Americans and many Hispanic Americans. He took enormous risk to sail so far west in 1492. Most of us probably forget that President John Kennedy was a leader of the Knights of Columbus and a fervent Christopher Columbus supporter. Note that both the Spanish and Italian governments have recently filed formal diplomatic protests against our current destruction of Christopher Columbus.

Even though one of “those” rascal Frenchmen, I say, too, Preserve and Restore Christopher Columbus.

Editorial assistance from lay Father Reginald Armstrong.

History taken from Wikipedia (essays on Christopher Columbus, the History of Slavery, Louis Pasteur and Father Bartolome), the Vatican Library sources, the Catholic Encyclopedia New Advent sources, the Knights of Columbus web page and the book by Thomas Cahill, “Heretics and Heroes,” Doubleday, 2013, pp 40-67.