News
Q&As



Sr. Kateri Mitchell of the Sisters of St. Anne in 2014 (OSV News/CNS file photo/Nancy Wiechec)

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On March 30, the Vatican repudiated the "Doctrine of Discovery," a centuries-old legal and political construct by which European colonial powers, with the support of the Catholic Church's leaders, historically seized lands from Indigenous people.

After the Vatican's action, OSV News interviewed Sr. Kateri Mitchell, a member of the Sisters of St. Anne and the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, which spans portions of Ontario, Quebec and New York state. From 1998 to 2018, she was executive director of the Tekakwitha Conference, a nonprofit that fosters Indigenous Catholic life in the United States through an array of initiatives, including an annual North American gathering.

St. Kateri Tekakwitha, from whom both Mitchell and the Tekakwitha Conference take their names, was a Mohawk woman born in 1656 at Ossernenon (modern-day Auriesville, New York) to a Mohawk chief of the Turtle clan and a Catholic Algonquin-born mother. After witnessing leading men and women of the Mohawk Nation, or Kanien'kehá:ka, become outspoken Catholics, St. Kateri converted to the faith and migrated to join Mohawk relatives at an intentional Catholic village called Kahnawake. After a brief but heroic life of Christian witness, she died in 1680 at age 24 and was canonized in 2012.

Along with her response to the Vatican's March 30 announcement, Mitchell, a longtime Indigenous educator and pastoral minister who holds several advanced degrees, shared with OSV News her thoughts on key issues for Indigenous Catholics in North America.

***OSV News*: What were your thoughts on learning of the Vatican's March 30 repudiation of the "Doctrine of Discovery"?**

Mitchell: I found that it was timely, especially during the Lenten season, when there's a real call for all Catholics and Christians and, of course, the church, to reflect on reconciliation. I would say it's so in tune with not only that, but with this time of confession — confessing the hurt and really the sin of what took place back in the time when this "Doctrine of Discovery" was definitely practiced to the 100th

degree against our people.

It was a time of genocide, of just taking away what we have — our own dignity and the integrity that has been given by God to each and every human being, because we were not recognized
as human beings. And if you're not human ... well, they used the word "pagan," but I would go as far as saying [they regarded us] as another form of life, and that is animal.



Indigenous people hold a banner calling on Pope Francis to "rescind the doctrine," referring to the "Doctrine of Discovery," during a papal Mass at the National Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec in this July 28, 2022, file photo. (CNS/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)

And because of that, the "Doctrine of Discovery" of course led to the taking of our land and, eventually, our way of life. From that standpoint, you lose everything,

even your own humanity. The residential and boarding schools were really a domino effect of what took place in the 1400s.

So for the church to confess this was very timely, and for me, I related it to the sacrament of reconciliation. We've been on the journey of healing for so long, but now this healing is going to take a different dimension, which will be even richer. What many of our people have been longing for is for the universal Catholic Church to recognize the wrong that was done. It is time for a new creation, for resurrection for our people.

And this new birth is going to take a while because there is no timeline for healing. We as a people have now heard what we've wanted to hear and read what we've wanted to read for centuries. Now that it's taken place, it's calling us to action and deep personal reflection. It's time to say, "OK, the church has confessed this wrong that has been done to our people. Let us go forward."

What are some of the challenges with Indigenous Catholic vocations?

It's very different for us — especially, for instance, for a Mohawk man to come forth and say, "I want to become a priest," because inwardly and culturally, it's really the women's role in our specific tribe. It's the women who are our prayer leaders. Politically, it's usually the men [who are leaders], although now, many women are coming forward. But the women are prayer leaders, and that's very difficult for the Catholic clergy to understand.

We tried to even have Indigenous houses of formation for both males and females, and that didn't work out. And for those who have entered some religious congregations, and probably the priesthood also, it just hasn't worked out because I think the spirituality of all these different religious congregations are different.

Also, it's very difficult for those who are the one or two [Indigenous members] in a congregation. I know myself, I'm the only one in this part of my province [who is Indigenous]. It's not easy. I think what I had, and I can't speak for others, was the support from my parents and family, and that's what helped me to remain strong.

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Where are Indigenous Catholics at in the church today?

All over the board — or, more accurately [in Indigenous cultures], all over the circle. So many have been hurt. In some areas, with church leaders and those involved in ministry who serve on reservations or in the urban community, some are very sensitive in calling forth the gifts of the people, and others who come in [from the outside] want to do it their way. All right, we do need help, but you walk with us. I think it's the "walking with us" part that's still very difficult for a number of outside people who come in.

I'm just working to bring about greater awareness of Native people to the country and to the continent, an awareness that we're still here and have many struggles, but we are trying to rise above them. Despite the horror of the residential boarding schools, we survived and have been able to get an education — although, of course, not everyone did.

My great aunt didn't survive [a residential school in Ontario]. She drowned in a boating accident on the river with another student in 1913. The government didn't send her remains back because they would not pay for a lead casket, so they buried her on the grounds. Now, some of my relatives have made a trip there to investigate. They want to bring her home. [The experience] has caused a lot of my younger cousins to just shy away from the church.

A lot of young Indigenous Catholics are all over the board, as well. Some have been able to remain in the church and be practicing Catholics, and others have not.

The sexual abuse in the church shows that although as people of God, we are made in the image and likeness of God, we are not recognized as such; we're things rather than people. It's an ongoing view of being looked upon as property to be taken. We also have so many Indigenous women that are missing [due to sexual exploitation and unsolved murders], and I keep emphasizing that even among my sisters. But I think they're unaware that this is going on, because the [Indigenous] population is so few compared to other people of color. We don't make much noise, but a little noise is beginning to take place, and that will lead to a greater recognition of the injustices being done.

Change takes time on everybody's part. It is a new beginning for us, a new day, and it is up to us spiritually to have a new life within us.

Read this next: Q & A with Sr. Kateri Mitchell, part of the miracle attributed to St. Kateri Tekakwitha