

# Unfair to Pope

According to a Reuters story of May 14, "Outraged Indian leaders said on Monday they were offended by Pope Benedict's 'arrogant and disrespectful' comments" regarding the indigenous people of the Americas becoming Christian.

A quick look at the pope's words, however, reveals such charges to be unfounded. The pontiff said:

"From the encounter between that [Christian] faith and the indigenous peoples, there has emerged the rich Christian culture of this Continent, expressed in art, music, literature, and above all, in the religious traditions and in the peoples' whole way of being, united as they are by a shared history and a shared creed that give rise to a great underlying harmony, despite the diversity of cultures and languages...

"Yet what did the acceptance of the Christian faith mean for the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean? For them, it meant knowing and welcoming Christ, the unknown God whom their ancestors were seeking, without realizing it, in their rich religious traditions. Christ is the Saviour for whom they were silently longing."

Perhaps what is driving this resentment of the pope is the lingering charge that the Catholic Church is somehow responsible for the death of indigenous people. As Reuters reports: "Millions of tribal Indians are believed to have died as a result of European colonization backed by the Church since Columbus landed in the Americas in 1492, through slaughter, disease or enslavement."

Leaving aside the dubiousness of Reuters' charge ("are believed to have died...") it is interesting to note how the Church is blamed for the actions of all European settlers. The reader would be led to believe that because Church leaders did

not condemn colonization in its entirety, the Church is responsible for every atrocity committed by every European in the New World.

What's more, the vast number of those Indians who died were the victims of disease. Faulting the Church because the Indians lacked the immune systems to fight smallpox is absolutely absurd.

To be sure, many Indians suffered after colonization. However, a great many were killed or enslaved by rival tribes in the time before the arrival of the Europeans. Those looking to blame the Church for all of the suffering of the indigenous people of the Americas have to come up with something more concrete than what Reuters is offering.