

# THE TRUE STORY OF

# "The Great Gift of the Christian Faith to the Peoples of This Continent"

"I would like to begin with words of thanksgiving and praise to God for the great gift of the Christian faith to the peoples of this continent."



—Pope Benedict XVI, in a speech to Latin American bishops at Aparecida, Brazil, May 13, 2007



**1** Columbus' "discovery" of what came to be called the Americas fueled the development of capitalism in Europe. Indigenous people who survived the armies and diseases of the Europeans were forced to work in tomb-like conditions mining gold that spurred the growth of capitalism. Later slaves from Africa were exploited on the plantations and in the mines of the "new world." Karl Marx wrote in *Capital*: "The colonial system ripened, like a hot-house, trade and navigation. The 'societies Monopolia' of Luther [early monopolies] were powerful levers for concentration of capital. The colonies secured a market for the budding manufactures, and, through the monopoly of the market, an increased accumulation. The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder, floated back to the mother-country and were there turned into capital."

El Potosi, silver mine, Bolivia. From a seventeenth century engraving.



Spanish campaign of genocide against the population of Hispanola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic) as illustrated by Fray Bartolome de las Casas.

**2** Christianity came to the "new world" as a weapon of conquest. Backed by guns and swords, Christian missionaries established systems that incorporated existing indigenous community organization to serve exploitation by European capital.



Aztecs dying of smallpox (Aztec drawing transcribed by Fray Sahaguns, "The Florintine Codex").

**3** Many people in the Americas adopted "the great gift of the Christian faith" at the point of a gun or sword. Others turned themselves in to missionaries to be baptized, and accepted the rule of the colonizers and the church. The story of why people submitted to Christianity is yet a further indictment of the role of religion: The Europeans had developed immunities to the diseases they brought, diseases that spread very quickly among the peoples of the Americas who had not been exposed to them. In his book *Disease, Depopulation, and Culture Change in Northwestern New Spain, 1518-1764*, anthropologist Daniel Reff explains: "The Jesuits came well prepared with a belief system to explain why native people suffered from disease. The thrust of the Jesuit explanation was that the natives were being punished for their belief in false gods and for listening to the Jesuits' arch rivals, the *hechiceros* [shamans — Revolution]. This message carried great weight inasmuch as the Jesuits generally went unscathed during epidemics, while native priests and shamans suffered along with other native peoples." Fearing the "god" who brought all this disease and death, indigenous peoples in many cases fled to Christian missions to be converted, hoping for protection from the Christians' supposedly more powerful god. And so, through a combination of the *conquistadors'* swords, guns, and disease, and the myth of Christianity, the peoples of the Americas were enslaved in both literal and mental chains.

**4** The "great underlying harmony" brought by "Christian culture" (as a component of the enslavement by capitalism) manifests today in the teeming shantytowns, the landless peasants, and all the inequality and oppression that stamps Latin America today.



Ten miles from Brazil's capital, shantytown Estrutural in Brasilia has dirt roads and open sewers.

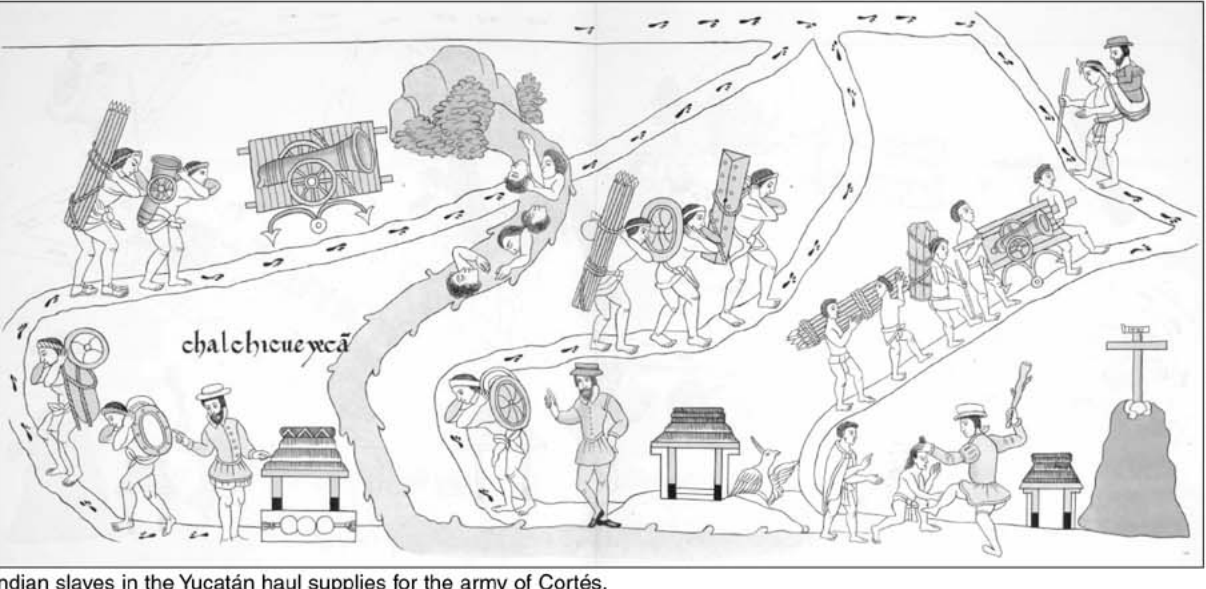
From the encounter between that faith and the indigenous peoples, there has emerged the rich Christian culture of this Continent, expressed in art, music, literature, and above all, in the religious traditions and in the peoples' whole way of being, united as they are by a shared history and a shared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



Pope, Brazil, 2007



New World slaves manufacturing sugar for export to Europe, from a seventeenth century book *Historia Antipodum*.



Indian slaves in the Yucatan haul supplies for the army of Cortés.

**Karl Marx wrote with bitter irony, "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."**  
—Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 31