COMPENDIUM #65

HOW THE VATICAN CONDONED SLAVERY

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> *An Examination of Papal Decrees, Colonial Plantations, and Centuries of Institutional Sanction in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.*

The Vatican's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade is not a matter of rumor or exaggeration. It is a matter of record written in papal decrees, preserved in colonial archives, and reflected in the lived experience of millions of Africans whose lives were torn apart under systems the Church helped legitimize. For centuries, the Vatican positioned itself as the moral compass of the Christian world, yet when confronted with the brutality of slavery, it did not stand against it. Instead it shaped it, sanctioned it, and benefited from it.

In the 15th century, the Church made a decision that would echo across continents. Papal bulls such as Dum Diversas and Romanus Pontifex granted Christian rulers permission to invade foreign lands capture non Christians, and reduce them to perpetual servitude. These documents were not theological abstractions; they were operational licenses. They provided the moral and legal justification European powers needed to begin the systematic enslavement of Africans.

As European empires expanded, Catholic orders followed. Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and others established missions and plantations across Brazil, the Caribbean, and parts of Africa. They preached salvation while participating in economies built on forced labor. In Brazil, Jesuit plantations were worked by enslaved Africans whose labor enriched the order. In the Caribbean, Catholic institutions owned, bought, and sold human beings. Baptism was offered, but freedom was not. The Church converted enslaved Africans while denying them the equality it claimed God bestowed on all souls. This contradiction was not incidental — it was structural.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Vatican remained largely silent as slavery expanded. Catholic clergy continued to own enslaved people, and Church institutions profited from slave-based economies. The theology of universal human dignity was bent to accommodate economic reality. Africans were souls to be saved, but bodies to be exploited. The Church's moral authority did not challenge the system; it adapted to it.

When abolition movements gained momentum in the 19th century, the Vatican responded cautiously. In 1839 Pope Gregory XVI issued In Supremo Apostolatus, condemning the slave trade but pointedly avoiding a condemnation of slave ownership. Catholic slaveholders in the Americas interpreted the document as permission to continue owning enslaved people. The Vatican did not order Catholic institutions to free those they held in bondage. It did not demand reparations. It did not confront the economic structures that had enriched the Church for centuries. The institution protected itself first, its victims last.

In the 20th century, the Vatican began to speak of human dignity and universal brotherhood, but these statements were abstract and carefully detached from the Church's own history. Official narratives

softened the past, minimizing or omitting the Church's direct involvement in slavery. The papal bulls that authorized enslavement were rarely mentioned. The plantations run by Catholic orders were quietly forgotten. The enslaved Africans who lived and died under Catholic control were left unnamed.

In the 21st century, the Vatican expresses regret for "suffering" and "injustice," but it still avoids acknowledging its institutional role in the slave trade. It does not confront the fact that its decrees helped launch the transatlantic slave system. It does not account for the wealth accumulated through forced labor. It does not name the victims or the perpetrators within its own ranks. Silence remains the strategy a refusal to face the full weight of history.

The truth is clear: the Vatican blessed slavery, participated in it, profited from it, and has never fully reckoned with its actions. This is not an attack on Catholic believers, who had no control over these decisions. It is an examination of an institution that wielded immense power and used it in ways that inflicted profound harm.

History does not disappear because an institution chooses not to speak of it. The record stands. The suffering stands with it.

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