**CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS**

**Third Order of St Francis**

By [Ben Broussard](http://www.returntoorder.org/author/ben-broussard/)

As the sun set, the Salve Regina hymn rang out across the Atlantic. Ninety men stood on the decks of three boats, led in prayer by Christopher Columbus, the foreign captain they had come to trust. They had kept the same ritual of evening prayers since they left Spain months ago, but tonight was different.

Tomorrow would be the Feast of Our Lady of the Pillar, Spain’s great patroness. Columbus had promised his men that had they not spotted land by her feast day, he would order the ships to turn back, a promise he intended to keep. He knew Our Lady would not abandon the enterprise he had worked so hard to bring about. The signs that they were near land were increasing by the day.

As Columbus climbed the steps to his cabin, his gaze fell instinctively to the western horizon. Off in the distance, he caught sight of a light, like a candle rising and falling on the waves. Quickly, he called another man, who confirmed the sighting. The crews on all three ships were alerted, each man was on deck, peering out for signs of land nearby. At 2 a.m., the cry came out, “Tierra!” Land! The excitement of the crew was such that they hardly noticed the many hours it took to navigate the treacherous reef that surrounded their new destination.

As Columbus knelt on the beach to give thanks, the following prayer rose from his lips: “O Lord, eternal and omnipotent God, by your holy word you have created the heavens, the earth, and the sea. May your name be blessed and glorified. Praised be your majesty. You have deigned that, by means of your unworthy servant, your sacred name should be acknowledged and made known in this new quarter of the world.”1

**San Salvador**

The above prayer, recited in Latin and the first spoken in the Americas, was followed by the chanting of the Credo, the Te Deum, and many other prayers in thanksgiving. As the banners were unfurled, the admiral solemnly proclaimed, “In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ…” He proceeded to claim the new land for his sovereigns, but not before first claiming it for his Divine Master, giving it the name San Salvador (Holy Saviour).

The details in the above account of the first landfall of Europeans in the Americas are rather unknown in modern times. Historians have typically shied away from the Catholic aspects of Columbus’ journeys, either making passing mention or ignoring them entirely. Yet a reading of the writings of Columbus himself, along with the testimonies of his contemporaries, shows that the Catholic spirit permeated all aspects of life and was central to the mission of exploration.

While a detailed retelling of the events of 1492 and afterward is far beyond the scope of this article, we will examine the Catholic inspirations for the discovery, which are essential to understanding Columbus himself. Contrary to the opinion of many modern historians, and far from being a minor aberration, Columbus’ militant Catholic faith was the source of his greatness and influenced his every action.

**Catholic Piety**

All evidence shows Columbus was a man of deep devotion who took his faith extremely seriously. One of his contemporaries, Bartolome de las Casas, described him as a man of righteousness and deep piety: “He observed the fasts of the Church most faithfully, confessed and made communion often, read the Divine Office like a churchman, hated blasphemy and profane swearing, and was most devoted to Our Lady and to the Seraphic Father St. Francis. . .”2

These two devotions had many manifestations. The full name of Columbus’ flagship on the first voyage was Santa Maria de la Inmaculada Concepción (Holy Mary of the Immaculate Conception). During the return of the first voyage, when the ships were in danger of sinking, Columbus and his men vowed a pilgrimage to the first Marian church they came to, which they fulfilled in the Azores two weeks later. Upon his return to Spain, Columbus made a pilgrimage to the monastery of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Extremadura as a solemn act of thanksgiving.

As a Third Order Franciscan, Columbus was often seen wearing the Franciscan habit, particularly when in the presence of clergy or nobility. His close personal association with the Franciscans was instrumental in securing contacts in the royal court, and provided much needed encouragement when it seemed the enterprise would never get the support it required. His son Diego remained in the care of the Franciscans at the monastery of La Rabida near Palos during the first voyage, where the friars took charge of his education. Upon his return to Spain, Columbus spent the summer of 1493 at La Rabida, preparing spiritually for the second voyage later that year.

After Columbus’ death, his second son Fernando would write of his father’s piety:
“In matters of religion he was so strict that for fasting and saying all the canonical offices he might have been taken for a member of a religious Order. And when he had to write anything, he would not try the pen without first writing these words, ‘Jesus cum Maria sit nobis in via.’”3

This inscription is found in the majority of Columbus’ letters still extant. The literal meaning, “May Jesus with Mary be with us on the way” is a fitting prayer for an explorer, and could rightly be considered his motto.

*Notes:*
1. Irving, Washington. A history of the life and voyages of Christopher Columbus. Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1828. 237.
2. Grant, George. The Last Crusader. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1992. 85.
3. Columbus, Ferdinand. The life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by his son Ferdinand. 1. Madrid: 1892. 14-15.