



Inter caetera
(1493)

Inter caetera ("Among Other Works") was a legal document issued in Latin by Pope Alexander VI following Columbus's first voyage to the Americas. The document grants the king and queen of Spain possession of the lands Columbus has encountered, as well as any other non-Christian lands the Spanish might yet encounter west of a line that Alexander draws north-south through the Atlantic Ocean. (Portugal, which was conducting explorations and claiming territories east of Alexander's line, was unhappy with the line's location; a year after Inter caetera was issued, Portugal negotiated a treaty with Spain that moved the line farther west.) In granting the Spanish possession of the lands they encounter, Alexander also grants them authority over the people living in those lands, with the understanding that the Spanish will Christianize them.

Alexander, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to the illustrious sovereigns, our very dear son in Christ, Ferdinand, king, and our very dear daughter in Christ, Isabella, queen of Castile, Leon, Aragon, Sicily, and Granada: Health and apostolic benediction.

Among other works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished of our heart, this assuredly ranks highest: that in our times especially, the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.

Wherefore inasmuch as by the favor of divine clemency, we, though of insufficient merits, have been called to this Holy See of Peter, recognizing that as true Catholic kings and princes (such as we have known you always to be and as your illustrious deeds, already known to almost the whole world, declare), you not only eagerly desire but with every effort, zeal, and diligence, without regard to hardships, expenses, dangers, with the shedding even of your blood, are laboring to that end; recognizing also that you have long since dedicated to this purpose your whole soul and all your endeavors, as witnessed in these times with so much glory to the Divine Name in your recovery of the kingdom of Granada from the yoke of the Saracens—we therefore are rightly led, and hold it as our duty, to grant you, even of our own accord and in your favor, those things whereby, with effort each day more hearty, you may be enabled, for the honor of God himself and the spread of the Christian rule, to carry forward your holy and praiseworthy purpose so pleasing to immortal God.

We have indeed learned that you, who for a long time had intended to seek out and discover certain islands and mainlands, remote and unknown and not hitherto discovered by others, to the end that you might bring to the worship of our Redeemer and the profession of the Catholic faith their residents and inhabitants, having been up to the present time greatly engaged in the siege and recovery of the kingdom itself of Granada, were unable to accomplish this holy and praiseworthy purpose. But the said kingdom having at length been regained, as was pleasing to the Lord, you, with the wish to fulfill your desire, chose our beloved son, Christopher Columbus, a man assuredly worthy and of the highest recommendations and fitted for so great an undertaking, whom you furnished with ships and men equipped for like designs, not without the greatest hardships, dangers, and expenses, to make diligent quest for these remote and unknown

mainlands and islands through the sea, where hitherto no one had sailed. And they at length, with divine aid and with the utmost diligence sailing in the ocean sea, discovered certain very remote islands, and even mainlands, that hitherto had not been discovered by others, wherein dwell very many peoples living in peace and, as reported, going unclothed and not eating flesh.

Moreover, as your aforesaid envoys are of opinion, these very peoples living in the said islands and countries believe in one God, the Creator in heaven, and seem sufficiently disposed to embrace the Catholic faith and be trained in good morals. And it is hoped that, were they instructed, the name of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, would easily be introduced into the said countries and islands. Also, on one of the chief of these aforesaid islands, the said Christopher has already caused to be put together and built a fortress fairly equipped, wherein he has stationed as garrison certain Christians, companions of his, who are to make search for other remote and unknown islands and mainlands. In the islands and countries already discovered are found gold, spices, and very many other precious things of divers kinds and qualities. Wherefore, as becomes Catholic kings and princes, after earnest consideration of all matters, especially of the rise and spread of the Catholic faith, as was the fashion of your ancestors, kings of renowned memory, you have purposed, with the favor of divine clemency, to bring under your sway the said mainlands and islands, with their residents and inhabitants, and to bring them to the Catholic faith.

Hence, heartily commending in the Lord this your holy and praiseworthy purpose, and desirous that it be duly accomplished and that the name of our Savior be carried into those regions, we exhort you very earnestly in the Lord and, by your reception of holy baptism, whereby you are bound to our apostolic commands, and by the bowels of the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, enjoin strictly that inasmuch as with eager zeal for the true faith you design to equip and dispatch this expedition, you purpose also, as is your duty, to lead the peoples dwelling in those islands and countries to embrace the Christian religion; nor at any time let dangers or hardships deter you therefrom, with the stout hope and trust in your hearts that Almighty God will further your undertakings.

And in order that you may enter upon so great an undertaking with greater readiness and heartiness, endowed with the benefit of our apostolic favor, we, of our own accord—not at your instance, nor the request of anyone else in your regard, but of our own sole largess and certain knowledge and out of the fullness of our apostolic power—by the authority of Almighty God, conferred upon us in blessed Peter, and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ, which we hold on earth, do by tenor of these presents, should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains, give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, forever—together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdictions, and appurtenances—all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered, towards the west and south, by drawing and establishing a line from the Arctic pole (namely, the north) to the Antarctic pole (namely, the south), no matter whether the said mainlands and islands are found and to be found in the direction of India or towards any other quarter; the said line to be distant one hundred leagues towards the west and south from any of the islands commonly known as the Azores and Cape Verde. With this proviso, however: that none of the islands and mainlands, found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered, beyond that said line towards the west and south, be in the actual possession of any Christian

king or prince up to the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ just past, from which the present year one thousand four hundred and ninety-three begins. [...]

Moreover, we command you, in virtue of holy obedience, that employing all due diligence in the premises, as you also promise—nor do we doubt your compliance therein, in accordance with your loyalty and royal greatness of spirit—you should appoint to the aforesaid mainlands and islands worthy, God-fearing, learned, skilled, and experienced men, in order to instruct the aforesaid inhabitants and residents in the Catholic faith and train them in good morals. [...] We trust in Him from whom empires, and governments, and all good things proceed that should you, with the Lord’s guidance, pursue this holy and praiseworthy undertaking, in a short while your hardships and endeavors will attain the most felicitous result, to the happiness and glory of all Christendom. [...]

Let no one, therefore, infringe or with rash boldness contravene this our recommendation, exhortation, requisition, gift, grant, assignment, constitution, deputation, decree, mandate, prohibition, and will. Should anyone presume to attempt this, be it known to him that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter’s, in the year of the incarnation of our Lord one thousand four hundred and ninety-three, the fourth of May, and the first year of our pontificate.

Source: Frances Gardiner Davenport, ed., *European Treaties Bearing on the History of the United States and Its Dependencies to 1648* (Washington DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1917), 75-78, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwvvsx>. Licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Zero 1.0 Universal Public Domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Additional paragraph and sentence breaks inserted. Punctuation emended for readability. The capitalizing of religious terms reproduces the usage of Davenport’s translation.

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