



Sublimis Deus (1537)

Sublimis Deus (“The Sublime God”) was a bull—a kind of legal document—issued in Latin by Pope Paul III. Paul issued the bull after Catholic priests working in Spain’s American colonies protested to him that the Spanish were waging unjust wars on indigenous peoples and enslaving them. According to the priests, one pretext Spanish colonists gave to justify these actions was that the indigenous were subhuman. In response, Sublimis Deus declared that indigenous Americans were human beings, whose rights to liberty and property were not to be violated. The Spanish government, resenting the pope’s interference, placed political pressure on Paul to revoke the bull. There is ambiguity as to whether or not Paul formally did that; but he certainly revoked a related document that decreed excommunication for those who enslaved indigenous Americans, and thus he rendered the bull toothless.

Paul, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to all the Christian faithful to whom these presents will come: Greetings and apostolic blessing.

The sublime God so loved the human race that he made man^a not only to be, like other creatures, partakers of the good, but to be capable even of attaining to the inaccessible and invisible Supreme Good and beholding him face to face. And because man, according to the testimony of the holy scriptures, is created that he may reach eternal life and happiness, and because no one could reach eternal life and happiness except through the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, it must follow that man is fitted by condition and nature to receive the Christian faith, and that anyone to whom human nature has been allotted is capable of receiving the faith. For surely no one could be so foolish as to believe that an end can be obtained by someone lacking the means to obtain it.

Hence he who is the Truth, who can neither deceive nor be deceived, when he appointed the preachers of the faith to the preacher’s office, spoke to them these familiar words: *Go teach all nations*. He said *all*, without exception, for all are capable of instruction in the faith. Observing this with malevolent eye, the enemy of the whole human race—who opposes every good work that it might fail—devised a means, heretofore unheard of, to prevent the word of God from being preached for the saving of the nations. He stirred up certain minions of his, who, eager to do his desire, presume to assert that the western and southern Indians, and other nations who in these times have come to our knowledge, should be treated as brute beasts and subjugated to us on the pretext that they are without the Catholic faith. And indeed they have reduced them to servitude, laying such afflictions on them as they would scarcely lay on their beasts of burden.

Unworthy though we are, it has been granted to us to officiate on earth in the stead of our Lord; and with all striving, we seek to bring into his fold those sheep of his flock, commended to us,

^a *As a general (but not absolute) rule, the English words man and men are used in this translation to represent the Latin words homo and homines, while English human is used to represent Latin humanus. The translation thus echoes the dominant conventions of English usage in the 1500s, when the bull was written. (This makes the translation consistent with public-domain translations of other Latin documents included in the Empire and American Religion archive.)*

who are yet outside the fold. Considering the Indians to be true men, who not only are capable of the Christian faith but (so we are informed) run to the faith most readily, and desiring to provide suitable remedies for them, we do therefore declare that the aforesaid Indians, as well as all other nations that should hereafter come to the knowledge of Christians, though they be outside the Christian faith, are not to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their goods, but may use and command and enjoy their liberty and right of possession freely and lawfully, and are not to be reduced to servitude; that anything which shall be done otherwise is null and void, without force or consequence; and that the aforesaid Indians and other nations are to be invited to the Christian faith by the preaching of the word of God and the example of a good life. Also, that copies of this letter, signed by the hand of a notary public and confirmed by the seal of an ecclesiastical authority, are to be credited alike as the original. These things we do decree and declare by apostolic authority, notwithstanding any prior communication whatsoever to the contrary.

Given at Rome in the year of our Lord one thousand five hundred and thirty-seven, on the fourth nones^b of June, in the third year of our pontificate.

^b Nones are a feature of the ancient Roman calendar, along with the slightly more familiar ides (as in “the ides of March”). The fourth nones of June is equivalent to June 2.

Source: Cárlos Gutierrez, *Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas: Sus tiempos y su apostolado* (Madrid: Imprenta de Fortanet, 1878), 425-429, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433082409123>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Compared to the printing of the bull’s Latin text that appears in Pius Onyemechi Adiele, *The Popes, the Catholic Church and the Transatlantic Enslavement of Black Africans 1418-1839* (Hildesheim, Ger.: Georg Olms Verlag, 2017), 529-530. The formula translated into English as *servant of the servants of God* and the sentence that begins *And indeed they have reduced them to servitude...* are missing in Gutierrez’s printing of the Latin text. The letter’s year of issue is spelled out formally here, as in Gutierrez, whereas it appears in more compact form in Adiele.

Translated into English by John-Charles Duffy and Benjamin Phillips. Annotated by John-Charles Duffy.



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