

## BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS AND THE CRUSADE OF PEACE

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An event as splendid as the discovery of the New World soon became a nightmare of inhumanity. The exploitation of Indian labor exacted such a high price in Indian lives that fears whether the Indian race would survive were real. The man who set in motion the wheels of the struggle for Indian freedom was the Dominican ANTON DE MONTESINOS. In 1511 he delivered a sermon which angered the Spanish conquerors and had repercussions in Spain: „Tell me, what right have you to enslave those who lived at peace on their own territories, killing them cruelly with methods never before heard of? How can you oppress them and not care to feed or cure them, how can you work them to death to satisfy your greed? And why don't you look after their spiritual health so that they should come to know God, that they should be baptized, and that they should hear Mass and keep the holy days? Aren't they human beings? Have they no rational soul?<sup>1</sup>“ This sermon was followed by protests and threats to send the friars back to Spain. The issue was referred to Spain and on December 27, 1512, the first code of Indian legislation, the laws of Burgos, was promulgated, which were to determine Indian policy for the next thirty years<sup>2</sup>.

Indians were to be settled in villages near the homes of their lords in huts. While the laws insisted on the proper religious instruction and forbade the use of Indians as carriers, they stipulated that the Indians were obliged to mine gold for 5 months a year and then rest for 40 days. The Indians were permitted to perform their ceremonial dances on Sundays and feast days. They were to be properly fed and clothed and the sons of caciques were to be educated by the Franciscans. Women who were more than four months pregnant were not to work in the mines. In 1513 these laws were amended whereby Indian children were to be allowed to learn trades. Most importantly, Indians were obliged to give nine months service to their Spanish masters. During the remaining months, they could work on their own farms. To be sure, these laws contained the seeds of exploitation and the assumption of Indian inferiority. Yet, its purpose was to protect the Indian, convert him to Christianity and to assimilate him to Spanish ways.

This then was the context in which BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS (1474—1566) was catapulted onto the stage of history as a major actor. Confessing that he, too, owned Indians and was interested only in profit,

<sup>1</sup> LAS CASAS, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. and trans. by A. M. COLLARD (New York, 1971) bk. 3, ch. 4.

<sup>2</sup> LEWIS HANKE, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America*, (Boston, 1965) pp. 23—25.



he grew increasingly self-critical and became firmly convinced that not only were Spanish policies inhumane but that he must preach against them. Conversion is not easy to explain rationally. Blinded by the avarice of the day, he was put on the road to self-awareness by the teachings of the Dominicans, the scriptures, and, most of all, by the sufferings of the Indians. The moment of truth came in 1514 when he read Ecclesiasticus: „He that sacrificeth of a thing wrongfully gotten, his offering is ridiculous: and the gifts of unjust men are not accepted.“ This self-awareness brought for him freedom and a commitment to defend the values which he thought represented the truth.

Returning to Spain, he managed to convince the royal officials of the urgency of the Indian problem. Three Jeronymite friars were sent in 1517 to conduct an official inquiry into the treatment of the Indians and to discover whether there were Indians who could live by themselves<sup>3</sup>. The results of the inquiry did more harm than good. For its conclusions would clearly justify the continued enslavement of Indians. The evidence was also contradictory. Some said that the Indians were steeped in vice and would only work for large rewards. Others claimed that they could not use freedom because they had no desire for wealth and thereby would not work. The general conclusion was that freedom would cause the Indians to lapse into drunkenness and idleness. For their part, the colonists did not understand that the Indians had a culture of their own and that the revolts and alleged idleness took place because they were deprived of all those things that a human being held dear — family, home, religion, and language. For the colonists, to be civilized was to be Spanish.

LAS CASAS was expectedly indignant. He accused the friars of taking sides with the colonists and even leveled charges of bias against the judges. To escape arrest he had to return to Spain where he won favor of the advisers of CHARLES V. In 1519, through the efforts of LAS CASAS, Judge RODRIGO DE FIGUEROA was sent to make further inquiries and was instructed to grant the Indians their freedom. Three villages of free Indians were set up, food and tools were provided, and a priest and an administrator were assigned to each village to instruct and educate the Indians. Again the conclusion was that the Indians were more interested in eating than in working. A final experiment was tried in Cuba in 1526. All Indians without encomenderos were freed and twelve Indian children were to be sent to Spain to be educated. It was expected that they would return to work among their own people. This, too, failed. The incompetence of the royal officials and an Indian uprising in 1528 were clearly factors that contributed to the failure of this experiment. But, more fundamentally, why should the Indians want to live like Spaniards? After all, they had experienced only cruelty and

<sup>3</sup> LAS CASAS, *Tears of the Indians* and *The Life of Las Casas* by ARTHUR HELPS (Mass., 1970), pp. 37—54.



hardship from them. In the Cuban experiment, FRANCISCO GUERRERO, who was put in charge of indoctrinating the Indians, seized the wife of an Indian and ordered some Indians to be his servants. And this was not unusual. At any rate, the conclusion of Spaniards at the failure of these experiments was that the Indians were inferior to Spaniards and justified the perpetuation of the master-slave system.

Notwithstanding this setback, LAS CASAS turned his attention to colonization as a solution to the Indian problem. This was not new. COLUMBUS had recommended in 1493 that farmers be sent to Española. For the first colonizers were ex-convicts and soldiers who were not likely to be the most disposed to humanitarian policies. The objective of the colonization by farmers was to expose the Indians to peaceful Spanish farmers who would conceivably make conversion to Christianity and the acceptance of a Spanish way of life more attractive. This plan received support from the Dominican superior, PEDRO DE CORDOBA, who confided to LAS CASAS about the contradictions between the peaceful activities of the missionaries and the rapacity of the encomenderos which was indeed the reality of the Indians. He asked LAS CASAS to plead with the king to give them land in Northern Venezuela where they could create a truly peaceful community, in which all laymen would be denied entry. LAS CASAS was successful in obtaining permission for his own plan. Every farmer who undertook the journey to Espanola was offered free passage, food for a year, land, tools, and free medicine. Also, all profits from their lands were to become hereditary. The idea was to establish in some ways a new focus of relationship between Indians and Spaniards. Henceforth, work would not be degrading and something to run away from, but something creative, where Indians and Spaniards, working together in the fields and sharing responsibilities, would produce a more meaningful, Christian society.

Such a laudable scheme was spoilt from the very beginning when LAS CASAS suggested that each Spanish resident be allowed to import a dozen negro slaves. To prevent the genocide of the Indian race, LAS CASAS felt that negroes would be better able to withstand work in the mines. For this, LAS CASAS has been criticized as the one who introduced negro slavery in the New World<sup>4</sup>. It is truly difficult to overlook the irony of this suggestion coming from the Apostle of peace. But it must be made clear that negro slavery did not originate in the New World. There were negro slaves in Spain and Portugal and, for that matter, in the New World before LAS CASAS recommended this policy. So, although LAS CASAS must have drawn on experience of negro slavery in Spain and in the New World, he did not foresee the horrors of negro slavery on the sugar plantations. When he realized its cruelty,

<sup>4</sup> S. ZAVALA, "¿Las Casas esclavista?" *Cuadernos americanos*, 2 (1944), pp. 149—154; LAS CASAS, *Historia de las Indias*, bk. 3, h. 129.



he was genuine in his sorrow: „This advice to allow negro slaves to be brought to these lands was given by the cleric, Las Casas, without considering the injustice with which the Portuguese take them and make them slaves. After realizing the truth about this, he would not have given this advice for anything in the world. For he always held that they had been made slaves unjustly and tyrannically, just as the Indians.“

LAS CASAS and LUIS DE BERRIO then began to recruit volunteers for the New World. Recruitment was not easy. Some feudal lords ordered them to leave their towns because the plan threatened their hold over their peasants. A few secretly signed up. The motivation of these men attests to the persistence of the feudal system in Spain and its oppressive nature: „Sir, none of us wants to go to the Indies for want of means here, for each of us has a hundred thousand maravedis of land and more, but we are going to leave our children in a free land under royal jurisdiction.“ Only a handful were recruited. In addition, dissension arose between LAS CASAS and BERRIO, causing LAS CASAS to drop the project. Berrio set off alone and recruited some 207 vagabonds who set sail in 1520. When they reached Santo Domingo, they all fell ill, many of whom died. Thus the first attempt ended in frustration but LAS CASAS remained convinced that colonization could work for he felt that the common people were ready to emigrate. To assist him in the peaceful colonization, he proposed to engage fifty Spaniards who would carry a new message of peace to the Indians and protect them from other Spaniards. As an incentive to the king, he offered to give a tribute of 15,000 ducats after three years of its settlement and that this tribute would increase gradually. The plan received only lukewarm support when it was presented to the Council of the Indies. Undaunted, he took his plan to the king's preachers, who were convinced of the need to redress the wrongs done to the Indians and formed a lobby of their own. Everyday they met to discuss Indian affairs and effectively argued for more humane policies. Despite great opposition, the king granted approval to the colonization plan of LAS CASAS on May 19, 1520. In addition, the king gave LAS CASAS letters to all the notables in the New World, recommending their assistance in the project. When LAS CASAS and his farmers arrived in Puerto Rico, they learned to their amazement that conditions in the proposed colonizing site of Northern Venezuela were critical. The Indians who resided there were apparently disturbed by the rapacity of the Spaniards in the island of Cubagua and, in their anger, destroyed the Dominican monastery, killing the friars in the process. LAS CASAS left his settlers in Puerto Rico and went to Espanola, hoping to persuade the Spaniards from undertaking a campaign of reprisal. Forced to compromise, he agreed to allow the Spaniards to trade with the Indians and to make war against those Indians whom LAS CASAS had certified were cannibals. The Spaniards were clearly not interested in contributing to the success of the colonization. They



were more concerned about ensuring a constant supply of Indian slaves and preserving access to the pearl fishery at Cubagua. Worse followed. On returning to Puerto Rico, LAS CASAS found that the settlers he had brought from Spain had enlisted with certain pirates who attacked and pillaged Indian villages. There is the tendency among men of high ideals to expect others to be capable of similar ideals and sacrifice. His hopes almost shattered, he continued to the settlement with a few persons he had hired. With the assistance of the Franciscans in Cumana, he began his small settlement. But the idea of peacefully colonizing the Indians could not succeed as long as the elements of a hostile perspective were close. The Spaniards at Cubagua enticed the Indians with wine to capture them. LAS CASAS protested furiously to the authorities in Cubagua, but to no effect. With some hesitation, he left for Espanola to deliver his protests against the Cubaguans. In the meantime, the Indians, who had not yet had time to understand the motives of the settlement, attacked the settlement, killing the Franciscans<sup>5</sup>.

Utterly demoralized as his high hopes for the colonization were now dashed, LAS CASAS with an obvious note of resignation analyzed his efforts in this way: „Perhaps his own merits did not warrant his involvement as leader of the struggle for the Indians. Perhaps the Indians are by the profound judgment of God ordained to be destroyed as other races. Perhaps the Spaniards will not be saved from their wickedness committed against these peoples and will fall.“ In his despair, he was received in the Dominican convent of Española and became a Dominican friar. For eight years he remained in seclusion in the convent rethinking his ideas, writing, and generally harnessing his spiritual energies. Much had taken place in those years. Mexico, Peru, and Nicaragua were conquered and the Indians continued to be treated like slaves. Indeed, the more promising economic prospects of these regions made the plight of the Indians worse. For it was often true that the greater the demand for cheap labor in the New World, the less humane were the Spaniards. In 1530 LAS CASAS set out for Mexico, Guatemala and Nicaragua, criticizing the authorities whenever he found the Indians unjustly treated. He composed a treatise entitled, *De unico vocationis modo*, in which he declared that it was immoral to wage war against the Indians because they were infidels and that the only way to win the Indians to Christianity was by peaceful means. Implicitly critical of mass conversions, he felt that understanding the faith was vitally important to conversion. He contended that the methods used by the early apostles were peace and love and the essential spirit of the teachings of Jesus was peace. Therefore war was the negation of Christianity. To be sure, the colonists accused him of being unrealistic and urged him to try his method. LAS CASAS then decided to test his thesis in a province in Guatemala called Tuzulut-

<sup>5</sup> LAS CASAS, *Tears of the Indians*, pp. 55—160.



lan, which Spaniards had called the Land of War, owing to the intractable nature of the Indians and the difficulties of the terrain<sup>6</sup>. There was influential support for this project. On May 2, 1537, the Governor agreed not to place the Indians under an *encomendero* if LAS CASAS and his monks could win over them to the Crown by peaceful means. No Spaniard except the Governor was to be allowed in that territory for five years. Pope PAUL III then issued a brief to the effect that those who enslaved Indians and deprived them of their goods would be excommunicated. Encouraged by these gestures of good will, LAS CASAS put his plan into operation. Translating the major doctrines of the Church into the Indian language and setting it to music, he recruited four Indian merchants who often traded with the hostile Indians. They learned the song by heart and then went alone to meet the Indian chief, singing the verses for eight nights. The Indians desired to know more. The merchants replied that only the friars could instruct them, describing the friars as men who had no desire for gold or women but praised God night and day. The chief sent his brother to visit these friars and to invite them back to their village. The mission was very successful as both the chief and his brother were converted to Christianity. A church was built and the chief himself began to instruct his subjects in the Christian faith. LAS CASAS then went into the Land of War and observed the success of his plan. Even the most convinced of men need some success to nourish their hopes, to support their view that there is meaning and progress in history. With his morale boosted, he organized a Christian settlement of five hundred inhabitants out of the isolated groups of Indian families. The Indians were reluctant to leave the places they were born. But LAS CASAS felt that the idea of community was important to religious and political life. He added that in such a community perfect freedom was necessary. In 1539 LAS CASAS went to Spain to recruit priests for the diocese of Guatemala. The king was high in his praise of this settlement which was renamed the Land of True Peace.

While in Spain, LAS CASAS wrote a memorial at the behest of a Council which was to meet in 1542. In it he said that the essential brutalization of the Indians lay in the system whereby the Indians had four masters, namely, the king, their chiefs, the *encomenderos*, and their overseer, each of whom exacted his pound of flesh from the Indians. LAS CASAS was not the only concerned ecclesiastic at the court of the emperor. The Franciscan, JACOBO DA TASTERA, and the Dominicans, JUAN DE TORRES and PEDRO DE ANGULO, were also pleading for the Indians. On Nov. 20, 1542, CHARLES V issued the New Laws which were definitely in favor of the Indians. According to these laws, all Indians were free persons and subjects of the Crown. Any excessive hardship against them was to be punished. Indians were not to be ens-

<sup>6</sup> *IBID.*, 98—231; HANKE, *op. cit.*, pp. 72—82.



laved and large encomiendas were to be reduced in size. Encomenderos who mistreated their Indians were to give up their encomiendas. No viceroy, governor, audiencia, discoverer or other person had the power to grant Indians in encomienda. On the death of the encomendero the land was to revert to the Crown. All Indians held by royal officials and the clergy were to be handed over to the Crown immediately.

This was undoubtedly one of the happiest moments of his life. To add to his glory, he was appointed bishop of Cuzco which he declined. However, he accepted the office of bishop of Chiapa which included jurisdiction over the Land of True Peace and returned to the New World in 1544. A model of simplicity in his new office, his glory was brief. Assailed by the colonists for his pro-Indian leanings, he was forced to excommunicate several and incurred their hostility to such a degree that he had to flee to Nicaragua.

The opposition to the New Laws was so great that a delegation was sent to Spain to urge its suspension. They argued that it was the colonists who were the backbone of the New World. Even the Dominicans supported the stand of the colonists, thereby accepting the encomienda as the means of Christianizing the Indians. The Franciscans assured the king that everything was being done for the Indians and that no undue harm was done to them. The result was that article 35 which „abolished the encomienda upon the death of its holder“ was repealed. The truth was that both the colonists and ecclesiastics had too great a vested interest in the perpetuation of the status quo. The disestablishment of the encomienda would have undermined the privileged position of both groups. The success of the colonists did not put an end to their criticism of LAS CASAS. They called him devil and anti-Christ. When he approached Mexico City to attend a synod meeting, the authorities asked him to delay his visit because of the bitter resentment of the colonists. The declarations of that synod showed that, if the repeal of important sections of the New Laws had disappointed him, he had certainly not submitted in his struggle for the Indians. It affirmed that Indians had just dominion over their possessions, that the supreme jurisdiction in the Indies was given by the pope to the king of Spain for the conversion of the Indians, not for the profit of Spain, that therefore the pope did not intend that the lords of the Indians be deprived of their positions, and that the king of Spain had to provide the expenses for the conversion of the Indians. When this synod was over, he summoned another meeting which adopted a more radical proposal condemning Indian slavery and calling on the colonists to liberate their Indians. LAS CASAS returned to Spain in 1547. Frustration continued to attend him. Some Indians had attacked his mission at the Land of True Peace, burned the homes, and killed thirty of the friars. There are times when it seems that the man who seeks to bring harmony to the reality of a suffering world simply tilts at wind-mills. What can explain the resilience of LAS CASAS in the face of



such disappointment? Insight into the basic goodness of man and true nature of Christianity is accompanied at the same time by an inner action. When a man reaches such a stage, there is an integration of thought and action. This self-awareness implies an untiring commitment to truth. For such a man there is no shading of ideals, no disillusionment, no letting up in the struggle for justice.

Returning to Spain at the age of 73, LAS CASAS was to find no rest. This time his opponent was the learned and scholarly, Dr. JUAN GINES DE SEPULVEDA, professor at the University of Salamanca and historiographer to CHARLES V, who had written a treatise called, *Democrates secundus*, in which he said that both the pope and the king of Spain had the right to subdue the Indians by war<sup>7</sup>. The Council of the Indies and the universities of Salamanca and Alcala voted against its publication. Turning to Rome, SEPULVEDA was able to get a summary of his work published in Rome in 1550. The thesis of this book excited the colonists and was the center of a great controversy. Replying to the seemingly current European criticism of the Spanish conquest and treatment of the Indians, SEPULVEDA argued that the pope had spiritual and temporal power over the world, that men who were in error should be recalled to the truth whether they liked it or not, and that more could be accomplished in a month of conquest than in a hundred years of preaching. This book was prohibited in Spain but the demand for it grew, especially among the colonists. As the controversy raged, CHARLES V convoked a commission of learned men at Valladolid in 1550 to hear the views of SEPULVEDA and LAS CASAS on the conquest of the Indies. SEPULVEDA held that the conquest was valid because of the sins of the Indians, their barbaric nature, the priority of subduing them before preaching the gospel, and to protect the weaker Indians. How can one explain this justification of the inferiority of a race by an outstanding philosopher? Rationalism is in itself related to a social context. It is a mode, not an end and often responds to social pressure, articulating the prejudices of a group. For three days LAS CASAS, now in his seventy-sixth year, read from his work, the *Historia apologetica*, passionately reiterating his views that the Indian was a civilized human being, that the Spaniards had no power to take away their lands, and that Christianity could only be preached by peaceful means. His conclusion was a tour de force. The learned SEPULVEDA, he said, really placed the rights of Spaniards on their superiority in arms which was simply tyranny. The principal responsibility was to spread the faith, not to gain riches.

Such a debate could not be conclusive. SEPULVEDA became a hero of the colonists but his books were not published. The publication on the other hand of the works of LAS CASAS was a victory of sorts for huma-

<sup>7</sup> HANKE, „La controversia entre Las Casas y Sepúlveda en Valladolid 1550—1“, *Revista de la Universidad Católica Bolivariana* 8 (1942) pp. 125—137.



nity. For it suggests support for the notion that Indians had a right to human dignity, that all the peoples of the world were human beings, that no nation existed which could not be converted to humane institutions. LAS CASAS retired to the Dominican convent at Valladolid, where he worked on his monumental work, the *History of the Indies*.

He continued to be active. When PHILLIP II became king in 1555 and there was the prospect that the encomienda would be restored to the colonists in perpetuity, LAS CASAS again resumed the struggle, causing the plan to be abandoned. He corresponded with his friends in the New World frequently, soliciting information and giving advice. In 1564, at the age of 93, he wrote a memorial on Peru in which he criticized the heavy exaction of tribute from the Indians which deprived the Indians of their goods and freedom. Two years later, in response to a request by the Dominicans of Guatemala, he left his monastery and went to Madrid to plead with success for the restoration of the audiencia in Guatemala. While in Madrid, he fell ill and died in July, 1566, fighting to the very end for a cause that occupied the major portion of his life. Transformed by his awareness of man's inhumanity to man and convinced of his mission, he committed his life totally to establishing a New World of love and peace.