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Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Struggle Against Colonial Slavery

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In 1502, Bartolome de Las Casas (1484–1566) sailed to the Indies on the fleet of Commander Nicolas de Ovando, anchoring in the harbor of Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola. The crew called ashore for news, and were told: “Good news, good news! There is much gold! A nugget was found weighing so many pounds – and there is a war with the Indians, so there will be plenty of slaves!”[[1]](#footnote-1) From the moment of his arrival in the New World, Las Casas was confronted with evidence of the *conquistadores’* willingness and eagerness to exploit the new land, and especially its native people, in the service of what Christ called mammon. He would soon make it his life’s mission to convince the Spaniards of their Christian call to serve God rather than mammon, and to do so through serving the Indians, as peaceful ambassadors of the Gospel. He had much yet to learn, however, about the systemic character of the evils inflicted upon the various peoples of color by the Europeans, and even of his own complicity in the degradation of mankind which inevitably flowed from that service of mammon.

Christopher Columbus had set out from the court of the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella just three months after the final surrender of the Moors at Grenada, and the experience of the centuries-long *Reconquista* – a kind of holy war against the infidel – would provide a filter through which the Spanish Crown would come to view the struggles of Spain in the New World.[[2]](#footnote-2) During the struggle to take Grenada, the Catholic monarchs had succeeded in convincing the pope to grant them patronage over the ecclesiastical structures that would result from the conquest of the Moslem kingdom. The post-Columbian Bulls of Donation (*Inter Caetera*), issued in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI, went further, granting the Spanish monarchs rights to “bring under [their] sway” infidel lands in the New World, for the purpose of converting them to the Catholic faith, these lands being populated by peoples said to “believe in one God, the Creator in heaven, [who] seem sufficiently disposed to embrace the Catholic faith and be trained in good morals”.[[3]](#footnote-3) The interpretation of this text would come to be of signal importance to Las Casas. It clearly conferred upon the Crown a “religious and missionary vicariate”,[[4]](#footnote-4) but, as he would come to argue, it did not confer a right to wage war of conquest, nor to enslave the Indians. Rather, the pope had granted the Crown “overlordship of America (*dominum jurisdictionis*), but not material ownership (*domimium rerum*)”,[[5]](#footnote-5) meaning that the Americans were to retain their liberty – and property. The 1537 bull of Pope Paul III, *Sublimis Deus*, which forbade wars of conquest, would serve Las Casas as an important interpretive context for the earlier text, seeing as he could not take the latter as a corrective of the former.[[6]](#footnote-6) This, combined with his own experiential knowledge of the evils inflicted upon the natives through the conquest, would lead Las Casas to conclude that the pope could not possibly have been allowing such warring as part of the Donation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Bartolome served as a *doctrinero* (a salaried catechist) in Hispaniola from 1502 to 1506, having received minor orders and the tonsure before sailing to the New World.[[8]](#footnote-8) He farmed land owned by his father Pedro, a Santo Domingo merchant who had first come to the New World on Christopher Columbus’ second voyage. He also ran his own provisioning business, supplying discovery voyages to the mainland, as well as military expeditions undertaken by Ovando, now the new governor. Among these expeditions was the second Higuey campaign: the hunting down and capture of Cotubanama, the last remaining major chieftain on Hispaniola. Las Casas interceded to save the chief from impalement upon capture,[[9]](#footnote-9) and – as he was wont to do – befriended the Indian during his captive journey to Santo Domingo, to the court of Ovando, who had him hung. Las Casas gained a stark first-hand view of the atrocities perpetrated by the Spaniards against the much weaker natives. For his contribution to the expedition, Las Casas himself obtained a slave.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In 1506, Las Casas returned to Seville, and after ordination[[11]](#footnote-11) and the completion of his degree in canon law from Salamanca, he returned to Hispaniola in 1507, sailing with Diego Columbus – son of the explorer. In 1508, Diego granted Las Casas a *repartimiento[[12]](#footnote-12)* of laborers to work a tract of land on the banks of the Janique River in the inland area of Hispaniola.[[13]](#footnote-13) Las Casas was now an *encomendero*. In 1510, the Dominicans came to the island, led by a twenty-eight year-old superior, Pedro de Cordoba, who would come to be Bartolome’s spiritual guide over the next ten years.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Dominicans were highly critical of Spanish abuses of the natives, and on the Second Sunday of Advent in 1511, they elected the fiery Fray Anton Montesino to deliver a denunciation of the practice of holding Indians in *encomienda*, proclaiming that “natives must be freed or their holders had no hope of salvation”.[[15]](#footnote-15) The settlers were furious, and Governor Diego Columbus raised an objection to the royal court. The Dominicans were silenced by their Provincial, and threatened with expulsion. In the aftermath of this, Pedro de Cordoba sent Montesino to the court of Ferdinand, where he was able to secure passage in 1512 of the Laws of Burgos, a compromise which aimed to provide some protection for the Indians, but left the *encomienda* system intact.[[16]](#footnote-16) Padre Las Casas was denied absolution by one of the Dominicans at this time, because he was an *encomendero.* He disagreed with the friar’s judgment, as he considered himself a good *encomendero*, and not a cruel man at all,[[17]](#footnote-17) but he would soon have to ask himself if there really was any such thing as a good *encomendero*.

Las Casas left his catechetical position and his property in Hispaniola behind, and went to Cuba to work for its new governor, Diego Velasquez. Velasquez had begun the conquest of Cuba by hunting down the Indian chief Hautey, who had fled with his people from Spanish persecution in Hispaniola. In his *Brevisima*,[[18]](#footnote-18) Las Casas would tell the story of Hautey and his people dancing *Areytos* in supplication before a basket of jewels and gold, which they identified with the Christian God, and then of how Hautey was burnt alive by the *conquistadores* “merely because he fled from such iniquitous and cruel people, and defended himself against those who wished to kill and oppress him”, yet not before he pointedly told a Franciscan monk attempting a last-minute conversion of the chief that he did not want to go to heaven, “but rather to hell so as not to be where Spaniards were, nor to see such cruel people”.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Las Casas became chaplain to Velasquez’ commander-in-chief, Narvaez, who was charged with pacifying the island.[[20]](#footnote-20) Las Casas would go into villages ahead of the troops, baptize the children, and convince the natives to receive the Spaniards peaceably. This produced exceptional results for about two years, until the troops approached the town of Caonao, where two thousand natives sat in a meadow awaiting the Spaniards. Narvaez’ troops stopped to whet their swords on boulders in a nearby stream, and when they saw the host of natives waiting in the field, they lost their moral compass, and madly turned the meadow into a killing field, wantonly slaughtering the men, women, and children.[[21]](#footnote-21) Las Casas was “boiling with holy indignation”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Upon completing the pacification campaign, Velasquez granted a joint *repartimiento* of Indians for an agricultural and livestock enterprise on the banks of the Arimao River to Las Casas and a pious friend and fellow provisioner from Hispaniola, Pedro de la Rentería.[[23]](#footnote-23) The two managed this *encomienda* for about half a year, but Las Casas became increasingly horrified by the rapid degradation of the society, and the intense suffering of the Cuban natives, as the able-bodied were dragged off to the mines to be worked to death, the younger women taken to the cities for the pleasures of the Spaniards, and the children and elderly left in the villages, starving. Suicide became endemic among the Cubans, and the Spaniards starting bringing in slaves raided from the Bahamas to replace the dying workers.[[24]](#footnote-24)

As Las Casas prepared to preach on Pentecost of 1514, he began reflecting on Sirach 34:18-22, a passage denouncing the sacrificial offerings of the unjust. Combined with the lingering horror of the Caonao massacre, the on-going wholesale degradation of the Cuban population, and the Dominican witness against the *encomienda* system: “the blinders fell from his eyes and he saw that *everything* the Spaniards had done on the Indies from the beginning – all that brutal exploitation and decimation of innocent Indians, with no heed for their welfare or their conversion – was completely wrong and mortal sin besides”.[[25]](#footnote-25) With La Renteria’s consent, he renounced his *encomienda.* On the Feast of the Assumption, following in the footsteps of his Dominican friends, he preached damnation for those who enslaved the Indians.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Las Casas soon returned to Spain, with Anton Montesino, arriving in Seville in October 1515 to argue for revisions to the Laws of Burgos which would address the problematic *encomienda* system. He drew up a “community scheme”[[27]](#footnote-27) to replace the *encomienda* system, in which the Indians would be settled into villages around a Spanish town, and a small number of Spanish supervisors would share the profits of the work with the Indians. The acting regent, Cardinal Ximenez de Cisneros, appointed three Hieronymite friars as a reform commission, with instructions to implement Las Casas’ community scheme if feasible, though they came under the influence of colonialist interests, and they dismissed the plan as unworkable once in Hispaniola.[[28]](#footnote-28) Las Casas himself arrived back in Santo Domingo, where he denounced the trading in Indians captured during slaving raids on the Bahamas and the Spanish Main.[[29]](#footnote-29) He then returned again to Seville, to recruit Spanish farmers for putting a revised community scheme into practice: an integrated society of Indians and Spanish peasants would replace the *encomiendas* ruled by soldiers.[[30]](#footnote-30) Eventually, he obtained a land grant in Venezuela to found a colony where his ideas might be put into practice,[[31]](#footnote-31) but the program turned into a disaster, as his peasants deserted him to engage in slaving, and the Indians in his grant area rebelled due to other slaving activity, killing the staff Las Casas had left there.

Interpreting the disastrous results of his plans as a divine judgment upon him for his compromises with worldly powers,[[32]](#footnote-32) Las Casas, heeding the advice of a friar named Betanzos, entered the novitiate of the Dominicans in 1522, making his first profession in December 1523, sixteen years after his ordination to the priesthood. He undertook the four-year course of Dominican studies, and then made his solemn profession, after which he was sent by his superiors to establish a Dominican house at an outpost on the northern coast of Hispaniola, Puerto de Plata.[[33]](#footnote-33) Shortly thereafter, he began writing his *History of the Indies*. While Las Casas was at Puerto de Plata, Fray Anton Montesino and another friar were sent to the court of Charles V with several of Las Casas’ memorials on behalf of the Indians, leading to the enactment of an anti-slavery law in 1530. Las Casas, meanwhile, continued to preach in the strongest terms against the exploitation of the Indians, until he was finally called back to Santo Domingo and silenced for two years by government order, after having refused viaticum to a dying *encomendero*.

Back in the Old World, in 1534, Betanzos, the man who had convinced Las Casas to join the Dominicans, issued a defamation of the Indians declaring them condemned by God and incapable of receiving the Christian faith. He managed to get the anti-slavery ordinance rescinded – a serious blow to the efforts of Las Casas to protect the Indians.[[34]](#footnote-34) But at about this time, Spain sent a large force to Hispaniola under a captain named Barrionuevo to end a rebellion led by a chief known as Enriquillo, who had been eluding capture for fifteen years, building a guerrilla force in the island’s interior. Barrionuevo, rather than attacking, ventured inland with only Indian guides, and signed a peace agreement with Enriquillo. Las Casas seized the unusual opportunity to promote a peaceful evangelization, and having received permission from the Dominicans to secure the peace agreed upon by the military leaders, he journeyed to Enriquillo’s camp with another willing friar, where he established a friendship with the *Caciqe*, and began “baptizing the babies, marrying the couples, saying mass, hearing confessions”.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Upon returning to the monastery at Santo Domingo, Las Casas now drafted his work on the proper means of converting the heathen: *The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith*. In it, he demonstrated the futility of the oppressive conquest which the Spanish had inflicted upon the Indians, urging instead that right relationship between the natives and the Spaniards could only be achieved through a gentle mission of sharing the gift of Christian faith, which required a prior commitment to recognizing the full humanity of the Indians in brotherhood.

Las Casas attempted to lead an evangelizing mission into Peru in 1535, but his ill-fated craft beached in Nicaragua, from where he made his way to Mexico City, headquarters of his order’s Province of Santiago de Mexico. Las Casas was embraced when he arrived, and requested a transfer from the Santa Cruz Province of Hispaniola. While awaiting his transfer, he returned with his friars to Nicaragua to implement the ideas he had sketched out in *The Only Way*, but the settlers were openly hostile – they flogged their Indians for laziness if they spent time listening to the evangelizing of Las Casas and his men[[36]](#footnote-36)– and the situation became too dangerous for the Dominicans. So they retreated to Mexico City, where a 1536 ecclesiastical conference adopted missionary principles reflecting the tenets of Las Casas. A group of dissenting Franciscans sent an envoy to Rome to make their case against some of the adopted reforms, prompting the reformists to likewise send an envoy to the pope, armed with extensive documentation to support the decisions of the conference, including Las Casas’ *The Only Way*. Ultimately, this papal appeal resulted in the promulgation by Pope Paul III in mid- 1537 of the encyclical *Sublimus Deus*, which embraced the tenets of *The Only Way*: proclaiming all people capable of receiving the faith; prohibiting the deprivation of the liberty or property of the Indians as well as “all other people who may later be discovered by Christians “; and attributing the defamations that had been lodged against the Indians to the work of “satellites” of the “enemy of the human race”.[[37]](#footnote-37)

That same year, serving the Mexican province, Las Casas was sent to Guatemala as vicar for the Dominicans. Guatemala contained a notorious sector known as the “Land of War”, into which Las Casas ventured to put his evangelizing principles into practice. His program was so successful that the area would soon be renamed the “Land of True Peace” (Vera Paz), though Las Casas himself was called back to Mexico City in 1538, and named missions procurator at the Spanish court for the province. Las Casas would not sail for Spain until 1540, spending the intervening time writing his *History of the Indies*, and other works focused on either cataloging the horrors of Spanish conquest in the New World, such as the *Brevisima* - or refining his own ideas for proper governance and evangelization of the peoples therein.

Back in Spain, Las Casas succeeded in midwifing the passage of the “New Laws” for the Indies in 1542. Charles V had no interest in seeing the *encomienda* develop into a New World neo-feudalism.[[38]](#footnote-38) Officials lost their *encomiendas*, and the future enslavement of Indians was prohibited: Indians could not become the property of any private individual, but would be subjects of the Crown, thus effectively abolishing the inheritance of *encomiendas*. The settlers were outraged over the loss of their Indians. In Peru, they complained of being thus stripped of what little they had to show for their service to the Crown in conquering the land, while “others demanded payment for the slaves that were being taken from them, since they had bought them from the Crown Fifth and they bore the royal brand and mark”.[[39]](#footnote-39) The settlers revolted.

Las Casas was consecrated Bishop of Chiapa in 1544, a diocese which included the area now known as Land of True Peace. In New Spain as bishop, Las Casas again refused absolution to *encomenderos*, and he was resisted by both the settlers and his clergy, even having to face drawn swords at one point.[[40]](#footnote-40) And then, in late 1545, the Emperor revoked the statute prohibiting the inheritance of *encomiendas*. The New Laws, never fully enacted in the New World, were failing, just as his earlier efforts had failed. After struggling briefly in Mexico City against the secular powers of New Spain to reassert the spiritual and moral precedence of the Church there, he composed his Rules for Confessors, which demanded of penitents full restitution for everything taken from the Indians on account of the illegality and immorality of the *encomienda*, a claim which implicitly condemned the Spanish Crown for unjustly executing war against the Indians, stealing their property, causing their untimely deaths, and in the process facilitating the mortal sin of the Spanish *conquistadores*, subjects for whose good the Crown possessed responsibility before God. This dangerous and courageous broadside against the secular power was extraordinarily effective, as it “brought the machine of conquest itself to a grinding halt in 1550 while the Emperor Charles V pondered Las Casas’ charges of injustice” [[41]](#footnote-41) Being thus prepared to face charges of high treason for his accusations against the Crown, Las Casas crossed the ocean sea for the final time, returning to Spain.

Juan Gines de Sepulveda took up the task of challenging Las Casas in Spain. Las Casas first defended himself from charges of treason and blasphemy, and then the two men presented their cases concerning the legality of the conquest before a junta at Valladolid. Sepulveda defended the wars of conquest on four grounds: (1) that the Americans were barbarians and hence subject to enslavement (“natural slaves”, per Aristotle); (2) that they practiced evils (e.g. human sacrifice, cannibalism) contrary to natural and divine law, which demanded punishment; (3) that war was necessary to rescue innocent victims of their abominable sacrifices; and (4) that war was a legitimate means of spreading the faith.[[42]](#footnote-42) Las Casas argued for the freedom of the Gospel. Although the junta never returned a verdict, the practical outcome was determined by Las Casas’ witness: “Conquests were officially halted; Indian slavery was abolished once more (for the third time); the remaining New Laws were saved and strengthened”.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Las Casas resigned his bishopric, remaining in Spain for the remainder of his days: working on his writings, and functioning officially as “Universal Protector of All of the Indigenous in the Indies”.[[44]](#footnote-44) But one major episode of self-awakening remained for him. In 1552, while in Seville, he had recourse to the library of Columbus’ second son, Hernando. He was struck by the evidence of explorers’ cruelties against Africans, similar to those against which he had long defended the Indians. Las Casas himself had once suggested the importation of African slaves to alleviate the burdens faced by the Indians, and he saw now that it had taken him until his mid-sixties to understand the evil of African slavery, and to repent of his complicity.[[45]](#footnote-45) Las Casas died at eighty-two, his final letter seeking papal condemnation of conversion through conquest.[[46]](#footnote-46)

1. George Sanderlin, ed., *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Selection of His Writings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Helen Rand Parish, ed., *Bartolome de Las Casas: The Only Way* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pope Alexander VI, *Inter Caetera*, [Division of the Undiscovered World Between Spain and Portugal] (1493. Accessed February 24th, 2014, http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Alex06/alex06inter.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stafford Poole, “Iberian Catholicism Comes to the Americas,” in *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492-1776,* ed. Charles H. Lippy (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Manuel Jiménez Fonseca, "The Colonization of American Nature and the Early Development of International Law," *Journal of the History of International Law* 12.2 (2010): 215, *Legal Collection*. Web. 1 Feb. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Glen Carman, "On the Pope's Original Intent: Las Casas Reads the Papal Bulls of 1493." *Colonial Latin American Review* 7.2 (1998): 193, *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 1 Feb. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.,* 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David T. Orique, "Journey to the Headwaters: Bartolomé de Las Casas in a Comparative Context," *Catholic Historical Review* 95.1 (2009): 3, *Religion and Philosophy Collection*. Web. 1 Feb. 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Parish, Las Casas, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to Parish (*Las Casas*, 15), a registration exists in Rome of Las Casas’ ordination, on the first Ember Day in Lent, March 3, 1507 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A *repartimiento* was an allotment of Indians which represented the human capital of an *encomienda*, a Crown grant to collect tribute and forced labor. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Orique, "Journey”, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Parish, *Las Casas*, 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid.,* 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid., 1*6f [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. i.e. *Brevisima relacion de la destruicion de las Indias*, or *A Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Benjamin Keen, ed., *Latin American Civilization: History and Society, 1492 to the Present*, 5th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 75f. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Parish, *Las Casas*, 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid.,* 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. L. A. Dutto, *The Life of Bartolome de Las Casas and the First Leaves of American Ecclesiastical History* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1902), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Orique, "Journey”, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Parish, *Las Casas*, 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid.,* 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.,* 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Sanderlin, *Selection*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Parish, *Las Casas*, 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Sanderlin, *Selection*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Parish, *Las Casas*, 27f. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid.,* 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid.,* 30f. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid.,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ibid.,* 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Pope Paul III, *Sublimus Deus* (*On the Enslavement and Evangelization of Indians*), 1537. Accessed February 24th, 2014, http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul03/p3subli.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sanderlin, *Selection*, 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Francisco Lopez de Gomara, “Historia de las Indias,” Benjamin Keen, trans. in Benjamin Keen, ed., *Latin American Civilization: History and Society, 1492 to the Present*, 5th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 58f. The “Crown Fifth” refers to royal properties collected *via* a tithing system implemented by Spain. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Parish, *Las Casas*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Sanderlin, *Selection*, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Fonseca, *Colonization,* 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Parish, *Las Casas*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The title had been formally given to him by Cardinal Cisneros in 1516, when Cisneros was Regent. See also the corresponding decree assigning the powers of his office in L. A. Dutto, *The Life of Bartolome de Las Casas and the First Leaves of American Ecclesiastical History* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1902), 151f. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Parish, *Las Casas*, 48f. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Ibid.,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)