

BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS: A MAN OF ACTION

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## INTRODUCTION

The *centavo* (one-cent piece) of Guatemala bears the image of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, thereby according him the recognition and honor granted to almost no other Spaniard--*heroe nacional*. The story of the discovery and conquest of the New World is a subject of controversy and debate to this day, with interpretations running from one extreme to the other. Some see a noble cause in the *conquista*, in which men, motivated by the Great Commission, sought to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to a people living in darkness. Others, calling it, as the people of Guatemala do, an *invasión*, see it as the height of human depravity and injustice, in which the Spaniards inflicted great harm and destruction upon their weaker fellow human beings for the sole purpose of pecuniary gain. The reality is no doubt to be found somewhere between, albeit with individual cases on both sides of the spectrum.

A fascinating and important character in this episode of human history is Bartolomé de las Casas. As in the variety of interpretations with respect to the *conquista* itself, Las Casas has been construed and judged in diverse ways, both favorably and harshly. For the people of Guatemala he is called the *Procurador de los Indios* (Protector of

the Indians), and the *Apóstol a los Indios* (Jones, 122): One who labored tirelessly for more than fifty years as an advocate for the rights of the Native Americans (Jenks, 12). Others condemn him as a bumbling, oftentimes self-serving, naive cleric; besides being the person principally responsible for the introduction of the African slave trade into the Americas (Tibesar, 773). Again, the reality must lie somewhere between those extremes. The fact that he wrote both history and polemical tracts leave him open to criticism from many sides (Pennington, 149). In all instances, his life and work, as imperfect as they may have been, serve as a significant example of dedication to the cause of the gospel. At the same time, it is important to remember that he was a man of his times, and we do him an injustice if we judge him according to today's criteria regarding human rights, individual freedom and political correctness.

That Las Casas is an important historical figure for today is attested to by the flurry of books, articles, opinions and indeed, lives dedicated to studying his place in the *conquista* that have come forth since the 1950's. There is no sign that interest in Las Casas is subsiding, as new books, with varying interpretations, continue to appear up to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the most recent literature is: *¿Quién era Bartolomé de las Casas?* By Pedro Borges (Madrid: Pialp. 1990); *Bartolomé de las Casas: Dominikaner--Bischof--Verteidiger der Indios*. By Thomas Eggensperger and Ulrich Engel (Mainz-Weisenau: Matthias-Grüewald-Verlag GmbH., 1991); *Las Casas: In search of the Poor of*

To the question of who was Bartolomé de las Casas, this paper proposes that, while he is usually depicted as a great writer, typically portrayed at desk with pen in hand, Las Casas was much more than that: He was a man of action--a man who, caught up in the current of the times, was determined to act out his theories and ideas. Gustavo Gutiérrez rightly states that it would be an "arrogance of the modern spirit" to consider Las Casas as a man "ahead of his times," for he was one of many like-minded individuals who spoke out against the abuses of his nation. Though the world situation changes, the temptations of the past remain and that is why it is important to study history (Gutiérrez, 8). While many scholars were (and still are) happy to write out their theories and histories in the safety of the halls of academia, Las Casas, while maintaining a high level of academic accomplishment, was never tempted to do so. His ideas were always attached to concrete situations, and he was often ready to take the lead in carrying them out. In this respect, as in many others, one sees striking similarities between Las Casas and Martin Luther, each confronting their own challenges and issues.

#### EARLY LIFE OF LAS CASAS:

In actuality, even though many extensive biographies of Las Casas have been written, we know little of the details

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*Jesus Christ*. By Gustavo Gutiérrez (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993). In addition, Helen Rand Parish has a major, definitive biography of Las Casas due out this year.

of his life, except from the bits and pieces that can be gleaned from his own writings (Hanke 1952, 3). He was born in 1474 in Seville to a family of minor nobility<sup>2</sup> (MacNutt, 3). Since he often times referred to himself as *licenciado*,<sup>3</sup> it is generally assumed that he graduated from the University of Salamanca with a degree in Law, although there is no hint of his aspirations to do great things for God or country. To give us a sense of the historical setting into which Las Casas was placed, David Jenks observes:

And while his (Las Casas') future is still uncertain, we may notice a little child, by name Inigo, who is playing with his elder brothers and sisters. His home is in the Basque province of Guipuzcoa, and he is to go, when he is old enough to read, to be a page in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. He may be dreaming even now of military glory, but certainly not of becoming the founder of a Religious Order. He is one day to be known throughout the world as S. Ignatius Loyola. And far off in Eisenach of Saxony an obscure lad was settling down to his arduous studies, equally unaware of what lay before him, and a good deal more concerned with present means to get well fed than with dreams of any defiance of the Pope who ruled in Rome. The name of Martin Luther was also to become of world-wide reputation, and to be as much adored and hated as that of the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jenks, 16).

Such were the contemporaries of Las Casas, with whom he would have to vie for a place in history.

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<sup>2</sup>Gustavo Gutiérrez lists Las Casas' birth year as 1484, but since all other authors agree on the date of 1474, and due to the fact that Gutiérrez offers no argument for a revision of this date, it is assumed that it was a printer's errata.

<sup>3</sup>The *licenciatura* degree in modern-day Latin countries is something between our bachelor's and master's degrees.

Upon graduation from Salamanca<sup>4</sup> Las Casas returned to Seville where he had many opportunities to learn first-hand about the amazing discoveries of *Cristóbal Colón*, for when Las Casas was nineteen years of age the Discover himself arrived in Seville. He recounted how he saw with his own eyes the seven Indians who survived the trip to Spain, along with beautifully colorful parrots, articles of gold and precious stones, as well as the most impressive item, a ball as large as a jug which bounced and bounced higher and longer than anything he had ever seen before (Fernandez, 68-9).

In 1494 Las Casas' father, Pedro, along with three uncles, took part in Columbus' second voyage to the New World.<sup>5</sup> When his father and uncles returned from this voyage in 1498, they brought back three hundred Indians as slaves. One, a young boy, had been given by Columbus to his good friend and faithful shipmate Pedro de las Casas. This slave was in turn given to Bartolomé and became his constant companion. Las Casas later said he was impressed by his good qualities (Fernandez, 69), which might help us under-

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<sup>4</sup>Henry Raup Wagner casts doubt upon the belief that Las Casas graduated from the University of Salamanca. There is no mention of him in the official records of the University. However, other witnesses, such as Remesal, closer temporally to the sources, state it as fact. Wagner does admit that the erudition of Las Casas indicates he was well-educated, and Salamanca would have been a logical choice for someone of his social class from Seville (Wagner 4, note 11).

<sup>5</sup>One of Las Casas' uncles supposedly served as a witness to the notary who certified, while standing on the beaches of Hispaniola, that they had indeed arrived at India.

stand his life-long sympathy to the Native Americans. Yet one is also struck by the change that would have to take place in the thinking of the one-time slave owner before he could become their devoted advocate. By 1500 Queen Isabella became incensed by the audacity of Columbus in taking *her* subjects as slaves, and ordered their return immediately. Las Casas' companion was one of the twenty-one who had survived, and was sent back to the Indies.

On what basis did the queen assert that the Native Americans were her subjects? On the fourth of May, 1493, Pope Alexander VI published the bull *Inter Cetera*, which granted concessions to the Spanish and Portuguese to navigate, exercise imperial jurisdiction, and bring the gospel to whomever would be found to inhabit those lands (Malo, 58). This bull was to be the center of much debate in the future, but based upon the concession of the pope, the Spaniards felt a divine right to impose themselves upon the Indians. Under the pretext of saving souls, Columbus advised his men that the more "cannibals" they could enslave, the better for the Indians's own salvation, and the better for the prosperity of them and Spain. Although the queen had urged him to await a determination with respect to the possibility of taking hostile Indians as slaves, Columbus proceeded, but was later unequivocally rebuffed (MacNutt, 25).

## LAS CASAS THE SLAVE OWNER

In 1501 or early 1502, Pedro de las Casas set sail again for *Española* with Fray Nicolás de Ovando, who had been named to replace Columbus. Because of his knowledge of Latin and the tonsure that he had received in 1501, Bartolomé accompanied them as a *doctrinero*, to promote the Christianization of the natives. Upon disembarking in Hispaniola the new arrivals found the colonizing Spaniards in a very happy mood, for two reasons: They had recently discovered new gold mines, and the Higüey Indians had revolted, giving them just cause to capture and enslave them for work in the new mines. Evidently, based upon his vivid description of the course of events, Las Casas participated in the ensuing campaign to subdue them (Fernandez, 70).

One of the most intriguing stories that Las Casas would later recount is that of execution of a *cacique* who had dared to take up arms against the Spaniards:

While he was in the midst of the flames, tied to a stake, a certain Franciscan Friar of great piety and virtue, took it upon himself to speak to him of God and our religion, and so explain to him some articles of the Catholic faith, of which he had never heard a word before, promising him eternal life if he would believe, and threatening him with eternal torment if he continued obstinate in his infidelity. Hatüey, reflecting on the matter, as much as the place and the condition in which he was would permit, asked the friar that instructed him, whether the gate of heaven was open to the Spaniards; and being answered that those who were good men might hope for entrance there, the *cacique*, without any further deliberation, told him he had no mind to go to heaven, for fear of meeting with such cruel and wicked company as they were, but would much rather choose hell, where he

might be delivered from the troublesome sight of such kind of people (from Las Casas' *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias*, quoted in Jenks, 19).

In spite of the fact that Las Casas witnessed a great deal of abuse and cruelty, it seems that he was most deeply involved in the administration of his father's estates for several years. Interestingly, Las Casas took a trip to Rome, about which we know little, in 1507. He was scandalized, however, by the debauchery and licentiousness that he witnessed there under Pope Julius II during the Festival of Flutes.<sup>6</sup> He returned to *Española* and in 1510 was ordained as a priest, probably by the Dominican, Fray Pedro de Córdoba, who perhaps had been given authority to do so by the Pope. Though Las Casas said his first mass in that year, it appears that little else changed, and he balanced his time between his duties as an administrator of his father's estates and those of a cleric (Wagner, 6). He had his slaves, and there is no evidence of him having been outrageously shocked (Jenks, 20).

In 1513 Las Casas became a full-fledged *encomendero* when he was granted a *repartimiento* of Indians and large land holdings on the island of Cuba. And although he probably treated his Indians more humanely than the norm, at one time some Dominican monks refused to grant him absolution upon hearing that he owned Indian slaves. Las Casas contin-

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<sup>6</sup>Luther, equally scandalized by what he saw, made his pilgrimage to Rome in 1510.

ued to hold his slaves, however, and his estate prospered. Soon he was exporting cotton, sugar and beef. It can also be safely said he gave little attention to religious issues. However, principally the Dominicans, but also others, were outraged at the treatment and annihilation that the Indians were suffering under Spanish exploitation, and in 1514 Las Casas too had a change of heart and determined to join the cause (Fernandez, 73).

#### THE "CONVERSION EXPERIENCE"

The so-called "conversion" experience of Las Casas took place as he was preparing a sermon to the Spaniards to be delivered at Espiritu Santo on Pentecost, June 4, 1514. He was searching for a text when his eyes happened across these words of Ecclesiasticus:

He that sacrificeth of a thing wrongfully gotten, his offering is ridiculous; and the gifts of unjust men are not accepted. The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the wicked; neither is He pacified for sin by the multitude of sacrifices. Whoso bringeth an offering of the goods of the poor doeth as one that killeth the son before his father's eyes. The bread of the needy is their life: he that defraudeth him thereof is a man of blood. He that taketh away his neighbour's living slayeth him; and he that defraudeth the labourer of his hire is a bloodshedder (Jenks, 21).

Las Casas knew he could no longer live the contradiction. He remembered how he was denied absolution for being a slave owner; but even worse, he remembered how he had granted absolution to many an *encomendero* to his discredit--and to their damnation. He remembered the scenes he had witnessed

time and again, scenes of hungry, persecuted, tortured, dying and dead natives. He made up his mind that he too would preach against these abuses and the unjust tyranny that fostered the cruelty taking place. But to do so he first needed to free his own slaves, which he did. Because of the time needed in carrying out that resolve in a responsible manner, Las Casas delayed the preaching of his first sermon against the enslavement of the Indians until August. But his preaching was to no avail: No *encomenderos* were moved to give up their slaves (Wagner, 12-13).

Eventually Las Casas knew that only by appealing to the King could something be done, and in 1515 he set out to do just that. Fearing that the local governor, Diego Velásquez, or others might try to stop him, he told everyone that he was going to go to Paris for study. In Hispaniola he informed his friend and confessor Pedro de Córdoba of his plans. Pedro, in turn warned him: "Father, you will not lose your labors, for God will take them into good account, but be assured that while the King lives you will not succeed in what you and I desire." He was not to be dispirited, however, and in September of 1515 he set sail for his native land (Wagner, 13).

Las Casas, through a great deal of perseverance and political maneuvering was able to gain an audience with Ferdinand. The story of what he went through to finally reach the king is one of intrigue and corruption. At one

point when Las Casas was waiting in court for some news, the king's personal secretary, Lope Conchillos tried to seduce him. He eventually was allowed to make his case to the king concerning the abuses and inhumane cruelties taking place in the Indies. His point was that the barbarousness of the conquest was leading to the damnation of both the Indians and the Spaniards who participated in such atrocities (Fernandez, 75). The king, however, was slow to reply. There were other pressing matters. What news Las Casas finally received was bad. Whether he was uttering the true position of the king or not, we do not know, but the Minister to the Indies, John Rodriguez, informed him that the death of the Indians meant nothing to him or the king (Fernandez, 74).

#### THE UTOPIAN IDEAL

Perhaps "pressed on every side, but not crushed . . . perplexed, but not in despair" Las Casas continued to search for alternative, more humane ways in which the great endeavor to the Indies could be carried out. He realized that any plan or strategy would have to result in some kind of economic gain for the crown in order to be accepted. At any rate something had to be done, and done quickly, to prevent the complete extermination of the Native Americans. He first came up with what Henry Wagner calls the "community scheme." It called for the peaceful settlement of the Indies by Spanish peasants, who would go to the New World

with the idea of developing a sustainable agriculture. His plan was developed to the most minute detail, in which every aspect of life, work, organization, police, administration, was laid out. It was to take place first in Cuba, and then it could be implemented in other of the islands. Wagner calls it "a perfect example of total regimentation in a typically Spanish style of town planning" (20). In this proposal the Indians would be forced to labor for the settlers, but under more humane conditions in which they would enjoy the possibility of managing their own small farm. It was in this proposal that Las Casas mentions the possibility of allowing each family of settlers to utilize a few black slaves.<sup>7</sup> He asserted that the Indians could more easily be evangelized under such circumstances, and, he hastened to add, the revenues gained for the crown would increase four-fold (Wagner, 23). The plan was doomed to failure, however, when almost no willing peasant-settlers could be found.

#### THE HIERONYMITE MISSION

Las Casas continued his struggles undaunted. The arguments and presentation of memorials did not go completely unheeded, and in 1516 what has been called the "Hieronymite Mission" set sail for the Indies. The Hieronymites had been commissioned to investigate the abuses

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<sup>7</sup>Actually there is evidence that large numbers of black African slaves were being taken to Hispaniola to work in the gold mines as early as 1503 to replace the Indians who were near extinction (Jenks, 28).

against the Indians, to free all illegally held slaves, and to generally provide for the just treatment of the Natives.

However, before they even set out, the representatives of the colonists began to frequent the society of Hieronymites and slander Las Casas as a troublesome meddler. Las Casas had been given the position as legal advocate for the Indians, but his credibility was so badly damaged that the Hieronymites refused to even let him board their ships. Las Casas made the voyage, however, on another vessel. As would be expected, his attempts to carry out his role as advocate for the Indians were frustrated. Clear violations of law were taking place, yet his protests fell upon deaf ears. He again realized the vanity of continuing in his post and returned to Spain in 1517.

Perhaps the Hieronymites did not meet up to Las Casas' expectations in the carrying out of their assignments, but other sources indicate that they did implement reform at least partially, and that some relief of the suffering of the Indians was realized (Wagner, 33). Their mission was terminated, however, in 1520.

Las Casas, upon return to Spain, kept up the fight for Indian causes. The next episode, however, would be one in which he would suffer degradation and, it seems, for a time, demoralization. It is referred to as the "Cumaná fiasco" (Wagner, 60).

## CUMANA FIASCO

About the time that Las Casas returned to Spain, news broke about a new city discovered on the *tierra firme*, with streets of stone, large buildings, organized government, and most intriguingly, gold and precious gems!<sup>8</sup> Las Casas, upon hearing about these apparently more civilized Native Americans, and thinking that there must be more such cities located in other areas, speculated that the north coast of present day South America would be the logical place to try anew his peaceful settlement scheme. In making his case for such an endeavor, one is struck by the argumentation that he uses. Again, it is mainly for the purpose of economic gain for all involved that the settlement should take place peacefully. Of course he mentions that Christianization of the barbarians would be a happy result, however it is more a commercial endeavor than religious campaign (Wagner, 48). But this plan was doomed to failure.

Las Casas wrote and reworked his plan several times. He debated and argued with officials tirelessly to gain approval to settle this basically unexplored area by peaceful means. There were two missions in the area, a Franciscan at Cumaná, and the other a Dominican at Chiribichi. These were to provide the initial base of operations. Finally Las Casas won a *capitulación* on December 12, 1519,

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<sup>8</sup>This no doubt is the city of Tikal, the ancient Mayan cultural center located in the Yucatán peninsula. The Mayan civilization was already well on its way to decline by this time.

at a meeting attended by Charles V, to attempt the peaceful settlement and conversion of the North Coast of South America (called *tierra firme*). He had ambitious plans, again written out to the most minute detail, but also plans that were not entirely realistic. Yet in December of 1520, after months of preparation, the group was ready to set sail. From the beginning, things only went from bad to worse. In the *capitulación* he was granted a much smaller piece of territory than requested. Then only five of the twenty-one friars who were to accompany him stayed at their post, the rest having deserted the cause. The fifty peaceful settlers who were to be sent with the missionary team could not be found, so instead seventy proscribed political agitators were sent. The financial support was almost nil. When they were only getting started, the two missions were devastated by storm and the raids of Carib Indians. While Las Casas was trying to reorganize the embarkation from Hispaniola, his second in command, Francisco de Soto, betrayed the cause and went off in another ship with some of the crew in search of slaves. Also, other slave hunters were stepping up operations in the territory to be settled by Las Casas and company, only increasing Indian resolve to fight back. De Soto was killed by the Indians, who fought hard and burned the mission at Cumaná to the ground. The plan never really had a chance at success (Fernandez 79-82).

Las Casas escaped and returned to Hispaniola humiliated and dejected. He was the object of scorn and ridicule, and was blamed for leading many innocent and naive settlers to their deaths. What hurt the most, no doubt, was the growing conviction he saw among the Spaniards that the only way to subdue the Indians was by force and cruelty (Fernandez, 82). While Las Casas maintained that the whole matter became a fiasco as a result of the slave hunters' illegal incursions into the territory of his mission, the official account insists that the Indians attacked and killed the settlers without provocation (Wagner, 65).

#### THE SECOND CONVERSION

Demoralized and disgraced as he was, Las Casas was not without sympathizers, and was able to seek refuge among both the Franciscans and Dominicans. This was, however, an important time of transition for the padre, who had been acting more as a civilian official than a minister of the gospel. Francis MacNutt describes Las Casas' spiritual and emotional condition:

The clear thinking and high resolution which had carried him through so many trials seemed at this time to fail him; nor indeed is there just cause for wonder, for there is a limit to human powers of endurance, and if ever a man was overtaken by a dark hour, Las Casas was he (MacNutt, 176).

The events of the Cumaná episode, along with the deep spiritual searching that it caused him, moved Las Casas to realize that another approach to the insanity he was witnessing must be taken. In what has been called his "second conver-

sion" (Fernandez, 83), Las Casas decided to join the Dominican order in 1523, and in 1524 placed himself under orders that would be incompatible with his political impulses. He and his fellow Dominicans would continue to denounce, but political action was now outside his realm.

As a monk Las Casas began to pass his time in study: He was especially interested in the works of Thomas Aquinas, the foremost theologian for the Dominicans. The knowledge gained would prove to be extremely helpful in later life as he gathered in stores of canonical and philosophical knowledge (MacNutt, 177). He did, of course, continue to actively take part in efforts to protect the Indians. One interesting account involves a legendary Indian *cacique* by the name of Enriquillo (little Enrique). For years the chief had been leading a sort of rebel movement of escaped Indians in the mountains. Several expeditions of Spanish soldiers set out to capture him, dead or alive, but were either outmaneuvered or out-fought. Finally Las Casas went to the mountains, and after a month's stay was able to convince Enriquillo to surrender peacefully, which took place to the amazement and joy of all (Jenks, 30). Las Casas also did not hesitate to denounce the enslavement of the Indians from the pulpit, urging all *encomenderos* to free their slaves. He often found himself in trouble because of his outspokenness. We remember, he was now under orders, which meant he would submit to his superior. He once persuaded a dying

*encomendero* to free his slaves as *reparación*, which the man did. This enraged some of the Spanish officials who complained to Las Casas' supervisor and urged that he be confined to the monastery of Santo Domingo (Fernandez, 86).

The reputation and esteem of Las Casas continued to grow, however, and he was sent on journeys to other monasteries as a visitor and official envoy of the order. In 1535 he was accompanying his friend Fray Tomás de Berlanga to Panamá, whereupon he heard of the immense wealth that was being extorted from the Natives of Peru. He would later refer to the riches of Peru as the "destruction of Spain."

From Panamá Las Casas traveled through Nicaragua, where he noted a total disregard for the Indian population. About twenty-seven thousand Indians had been sent to Peru as slaves, and another thirty-thousand to Panamá. For him the most troubling aspect was the total lack of concern for mission work among them. He and a few friars made a humble attempt to begin some catechization but soon ran into conflict with the Spaniards, who flogged their slaves for taking time out to attend the monks' classes (Wagner, 83). It was during this time that Las Casas again wrote to the king for permission to seek the peaceful Christianization of the Indians (Fernandez, 87). Meanwhile, when Las Casas condemned Governor Rodrigo de Conteras' slave raids into the interior from the pulpit, he again found himself under

attack. In 1535 he and his little band were called to Guatemala (Wagner, 85).

#### LAND OF WAR CHANGED TO LAND OF PEACE

In Guatemala Las Casas and other like-minded clerics found a more suitable and favorable place in which to put their ideas into practice. Bishop Francisco Marroquín had already learned the Quiché language, was teaching it to all the friars, and would later produce a Quiché catechism. Fray Luis Cáncer was able to speak the Nahuatl language. Although it did not precede the efforts of Las Casas in his next energetic mission endeavor, Pope Paul III published the bull *Sublimis Deus*, in 1537, in which it was proclaimed that the Indians were rational beings, with the free will, liberty and ability to receive the faith (Jenks 34). Las Casas, for his part, was already acting upon that premise, and in Guatemala was able to test it in the region then known as Tuzulutlán--Land of War. This was a region to the north and east of Santiago (now Antigua) where the most stubborn and resistant Indians were to be found. It had never been possible for the soldiers to subdue this area: Now Las Casas and his retinue would get their chance. Wagner provides this summary of the strategy:

To start their work, the friars devised an ingenious stratagem. They composed some verses in the Quiché tongue, reciting the creation of the world, the fall of man, his banishment from paradise, the life and miracles of Christ, His death and resurrection and the ascent into heaven, and how He was to come again to judge men and punish the bad and reward the good. All this was very long, and

Remesal alleges the stanzas were the first ever invented in that Indian Language. Next Casas found four Indian merchants who traveled frequently to Zacapulas and Quiché; and these men, who were Christians, were carefully taught the religious poetry, which was even set to music so they could sing it to the accompaniment of native instruments. In addition, Casas supplied them with an extra stock of Spanish trinkets, which were sure to delight their Indian customers.

On this preliminary entry, the merchants went no farther than Zacapulas, the town of a cacique on the border between Guatemala and the start of the Land of War. Their sacred concert was a great success; in all, they sang and answered questions for eight evenings, after which the chief sent his brother back with them to invite the friars to come to his town. Fray Luís (sic) Cáncer was sent; and at Zacapulas a church was built, and the chief was converted and baptized Juan. Thereupon, a missionary friar visited the district, especially the cacique's other towns, and then reported back to the waiting Dominicans in Santiago at the end of October. Left unshepherded, Chief Juan now demonstrated the strength of his new beliefs by refusing to permit sacrifices of birds and other animals at fiestas for the marriage of his brother with the daughter of the cacique of Cobán (Wagner, 90-91).

Thus the peaceful Christianization of this territory today known as the departments of Alta and Baja Verapaz began.

Whereas the Spanish *adelantado*, Pedro de Alvarado, had been able to subdue the Indians only by cruelty, which included branding, these monks were able to carry out a peaceful transition based upon the word.

#### ANOTHER APPEAL BEFORE CHARLES V

Las Casas had now been away from his homeland for two decades. For several years he had wanted to return to Spain to make a direct appeal to Charles V, whom he knew to be an honest man, to effect pro-Indian legislation at the level of

the Council of the Indies. He again returned to Spain, and in 1540 he was able to win several favorable *cédulas* on behalf of the Indians. He was also able to gain approval of his thesis by the University of Salamanca, that Indians should be baptized only after sufficient instruction and that baptism should be done according to the prescribed ritual, in opposition to the Franciscan practice of baptizing anyone without many questions or concern for the content of the catechism (Fernandez, 92).

#### BISHOP OF CHIAPA

Las Casas was offered several important and coveted offices in Spain, but turned them down. When he was called to be bishop of Chiapa, however, in 1544, the draw to return to that area proved to be too strong. He couldn't resist the chance to be involved directly in the peaceful mission work that was already taking place, and that would receive new impetus under the *cédulas* issued by Charles V (Fernandez, 97). At that time, there were actually many Indians slaves in Seville, a matter Las Casas wished to settle before departure. His insistence that they be freed was met by much resistance and hostility, but the *Nuevas Leyes* instituted by Charles were clear. Once this matter was settled, to the chagrin of many influential families, Las Casas could set sail for Chiapa to accomplish the same (MacNutt, 219).

Las Casas' bishopric, however, was to be fraught with struggle and frustration, for the Spaniards in his bishopric were slow to accept the directives of the Emperor. It was characteristic at this time that many orders, directives and rulings from Spain or Pope were not obeyed by the colonizers. More often than not, the carrying out of any directive of a controversial nature would be "delayed" until an appeal could be made, in which conditions more favorable to the Spaniards were often conceded. Las Casas kept up the fight, but in three years' time, at the age of seventy-three, he was on his way back to Spain (Jenks, 38).

#### RETURN TO SPAIN AND THE GREAT DEBATE

In Spain Las Casas made his residence at the Dominican house in Valladolid. This was a prime location for him, since the Council of the Indies met there regularly, and he would have many opportunities to continue his advocacy on behalf of the rights of the natives. He was received well by Prince Philip, who issued several *cédulas* in support of Las Casas and condemning the actions of several of his opponents in the New World. Las Casas, meanwhile, dedicated himself to organizing and dispatching a number of missionaries to Chiapa (Fernandez, 107-8).

It was in 1550 that Las Casas participated in one of the great debates of the period. There were several issues under constant study during the time of the *conquista*. The discovery of the New World opened up totally new questions

and issues for the scholars, theologians and rulers. Times were changing rapidly, and world views disrupted. There was a whole new set of problems and challenges to be faced, and many of the older answers to life's questions were found to be inadequate to the new situation. One issue was the meaning of the papal bull *inter cetera*. On the one hand, some argued that it gave all rights to Spain to govern and otherwise do as she wished in the newly discovered lands. Others argued that it gave the basic right to Spain to Christianize the native peoples, by force if necessary. Still others felt that the bull was meant solely to give Spain the responsibility to Christianize the territories under her jurisdiction, but only by peaceable means. Few would argue the Pope's right to issue such a statement, however. The question really revolved around its interpretation and meaning.

The other principal question concerned the rights of Native Americans to live in freedom and decide for themselves what would be their faith (Pennington, 159). This is where Aristotle comes into the picture, for his ideas regarding the nature of the various races of men would be invoked to justify the forcible takeover of the newly discovered territories.

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda was a highly regarded scholar, well versed in the philosophy of Aristotle. It was a bold step for Las Casas to take on the task of debating him, but

Las Casas knew the future of the Native Americans was at stake. Sepúlveda had just returned from Italy where he had been able to publish an up-to-date version of Aristotle's *Politics*. When the scholar Sepúlveda began to write about the nature of the Indians, he was under the heavy influence of Aristotle's philosophy, including the concept that some men are slaves by nature.<sup>9</sup> This was to be the subject of the great debate between him and Las Casas (Hanke 1959, 39).

Sepúlveda's presentation lasted merely a couple of hours. His argument for why it was just, and indeed obligatory, to wage war against the Natives is summarized by Hanke as follows:

1. For the gravity of the sins which the Indians had committed, especially their idolatries and their sins against nature.
2. On account of the rudeness of their natures, which obliged them to serve persons having a more refined nature, such as the Spaniards.
3. In order to spread the faith, which would be more easily accomplished by the prior subjugation of the natives.
4. To protect the weak among the natives themselves (Hanke 1959, 41).

The following excerpt from Sepúlveda is enlightening:

Compare then those blessings enjoyed by Spaniards of prudence, genius, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those the *homunculi*

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<sup>9</sup>A popular summary of Sepúlveda's position was published in dialogue form, and circulated widely in the couple of years before the actual debate. In it, Sepúlveda, the calm Socrates-type philosopher discusses the issue with Leopoldo, "a German considerably tainted with Lutheran errors," who at first believes the conquest of the Americas to be unjust. The philosopher, however, is finally able to convince Leopoldo of the complete justice of the wars against the Indians, and indeed, the obligation that the king had to wage them (Hanke 1959, 40).

(little men) in whom you will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity, who not only possess no science but who also lack letters and preserve no monument of their history except certain paintings. Neither do they have written laws, but barbaric institutions and customs. They do not even have private property (Hanke 1959, 47).

Again, if we are going to judge Las Casas according to his time, we must afford Sepúlveda the same courtesy.

Las Casas responded by speaking to the issue for five days, until the judges finally convinced him that they understood his points and were able to adjourn the meeting.

His arguments had been well thought out, having been first put down in writing in the Monastery of Santo Domingo in Santiago, Guatemala in 1534 (Rand Parish, 34). It was there that he composed *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem* (The Only Way to Draw All People to the True Religion).<sup>10</sup> However, Las Casas's defense of the Indians was not purely theological, but depended especially upon canon law, which he cited at length. Of course the issues of the past were based upon a different set of circumstances, and Las Casas had to show how previous declarations related to the new situation (Pennington, 156). Another factor that worked to Las Casas' benefit was his long association with the New World. He had almost fifty years of experience to rely upon. He was able to paint a favorable picture of the Indians, their customs and culture. Since

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<sup>10</sup>Helen Rand Parish asserts that this document was the primary influence, "point by point," in the Papal bull *sublimis Deus* published in 1537 (4).

1527 he had been working on *Historia Apologética*, an anthropological study of the Indian peoples which he had only recently completed. In this study he was able to show that the Indians were indeed rational beings, they compared favorably with other civilizations of the past, and that they in fact had even satisfied Aristotle's criteria regarding the good life (Rand Parish, 54). Such was Aristotle's influence that Las Casas felt compelled to defend the Indians according to his philosophy.

A clear-cut decision regarding the debate would never appear. Perhaps Charles V was too involved in other matters to give the issue serious attention. By the same token, an unequivocal acceptance of the Lascasian position would have provoked a great deal of turmoil, perhaps even rebellion, in the New World. Generally, it can be said that future decisions regarding the disposition of the new Spanish territories were more based upon Las Casas' point of view than on Sepúlveda's. In fact, Sepúlveda was prohibited from publishing his treatise, *Democrates*, for many years. Yet, as is often the case, theory and practice were many times quite different, as Henke states: ". . . the detailed explanation of the benefits conferred on Indians by Spanish rule also showed that the spirit of Sepúlveda partially triumphed . . . ." (97).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The use of Aristotle to justify the enslavement of fellow human beings was common in the United States as well. Henke states that a "school of anthropologists developed in the United

## WRITING AND MISSION ORGANIZATION

In the years that followed this debate, Las Casas dedicated himself to the publishing of a flurry of his tracts and treatises,<sup>12</sup> thereby availing himself to the means of communication that had already been so effectively utilized by Martin Luther. He continued his efforts to organize, prepare and send like-minded missionaries to the New World, becoming a sort of Wilhelm Loehe of his time. In addition, he put together the revised versions of several of his most important works,<sup>13</sup> the principal being his *Apologética Historia*<sup>14</sup> and the *Historia General*<sup>15</sup> Only a few

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States before the Civil War which was committed to showing that the Negro 'was no real human being, but a domestic animal.' One of the prominent members of this group, which cited Aristotle's natural slavery ideas as justification, was Glidden, who held that 'there is no such thing as a common human nature . . . . White men and red men, yellow men and black men, have no more original relationship to each other than the bears of the pole to the tigers of Africa . . . . The blacks do not belong to the same creation as the whites. . . . Their organization dooms them to slavery, and precludes them from improvement'" (Henke, 102).

<sup>12</sup>An original of one of Las Casas' tracts is to be found in the library of Thomas Jefferson, who also possessed copies of many others of his writings (Wagner xxii).

<sup>13</sup>One of Las Casas' most important historical contributions was that he left for us his transcript of the journal of Christopher Columbus, copied in his own hand, the only extant version (Wagner, 292).

<sup>14</sup>The full title of this work is *Apologética Historia sumaria quanto a las cualidades, dispusición, descripción, cielo y suelo destas tierras, y condiciones naturales, policías, repúblicas, maneras de vivir e costumbres de las gentes destas Indias occidentales, y meridionales, cuyo imperio soberano pertenece á los Reyes de Castilla* (Summary of Apologetic History regarding the qualities, disposition, description, skies and ground of these lands, and natural, political, government conditions, ways of living and customs of the people of these lands,

days before his death Las Casas wrote the following, no doubt his last literary production. It shows his character, and the conviction and commitment to which he had dedicated his life:

For the goodness and mercy of God chose to elect me as His minister, despite my want of merit, to strive and labour for the infinite peoples, the possessors and owners of those kingdoms of the countries we call the Indies, against the burdens, evils, and injuries such as were never seen or heard of, which we Spaniards brought upon them, contrary to all right and justice; and to restore them to their pristine liberty, of which they were unjustly despoiled; and to save them from the violent death which they still suffer, just as for the same cause, thousands of leagues of country have been depopulated, many in my own presence. I have laboured at the Court of the Castilian sovereigns, coming and going between the Indies and Spain many times during the fifty years since 1514, animated only by God and by compassion at beholding the destruction of such multitudes of rational, humble, most kind, and most simple men, all well adapted to accept our Holy Catholic Faith and moral doctrine, and to live honestly. God is witness that I have advanced no other reason. Hence I state my positive belief, for I believe that Holy Roman Church, which is the rule and measure of our faith, must and does hold that the Spaniards' conduct towards those peoples, of the rightful kings and nobles and other infinite properties, which they accomplished with such accursed cruelties--has been contrary to the most strictly immaculate law of Jesus Christ and contrary to

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the West Indies and surrounding [territories], whose imperial authority belongs to the Kings of Castile). It is a comprehensive anthropological description of Native American life and ways containing 237 chapters, plus an introduction and epilogue (Wagner, 286).

<sup>15</sup>This massive work has earned the title of Historian for Las Casas. It is more than 1119 folios in three volumes. Las Casas asked that its publication be delayed for at least forty years after his death. It actually took more than three centuries before it was published, probably due to the negative light in which it cast the Spanish nation (Wagner, 292).

natural right. I has brought great infamy on the name of Jesus Christ and of the Christian religion, entirely hindering the spread of the faith and irreparably injuring the souls and bodies of those innocent peoples. I believe that because of these impious and ignominious acts, perpetrated unjustly, tyrannously, and barbarously upon them, God will visit His wrath and ire upon Spain for her share, great or small, in the blood-stained riches, obtained by theft and usurpation, accompanied by such slaughter and annihilation of those peoples, unless she does much penance (quoted in MacNutt, 305-6).

On July 18, 1566 Las Casas lay on his death bed. The great reformer Martin Luther was already gone, as was Ignatius Loyola and Charles V. It was reported that "as Las Casas lay dying, with the deathbed candle in his hand, he asked all who attended him to continue to protect the Indians and he swore to the truth of all that he had said or written in their defense, assuring the attendants that he could have said and written much more (Fernandez, 113-116).

#### LAS CASAS: A MAN OF ACTION

Who, then, was Fray Bartolomé de las Casas? Because of the tumultuous times in which he lived and the clearly stated position on which he stood, he was viewed in his time with both contempt and dying devotion, depending upon one's perspective at that time. History has played many tricks on his reputation, as it has with those of other great men.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>For a summary of interpretations of Las Casas up to 1970, see Benjamin Keen's "Approaches to Las Casas: 1535 to 1970." In *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work*, edited by Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), 3-66.

Some historians have even volunteered that his writings were not his at all, but merely forgeries designed to discredit the honor of Spain (Keen, 13).<sup>17</sup> To this day the debate continues. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian Liberation Theologian has dedicated the last twenty years of his life to the study of Las Casas (Gutiérrez, xviii). He sees him in a very positive light, not as the "first to promote a Theology of Liberation," but one who fought hard principally against the corrupt political and economic systems that were to cause the unjust destruction of a people. Other scholars have also seen him in a favorable light, such as Thomas Eggensperger and Ulrich Engel in their 1991 publication *Bartolomé de las Casas: Dominikaner--Bischof--Verteidiger der Indios*<sup>18</sup>, who propose him more overtly as a precursor to the modern-day Liberation Theologians (Stevens-Arroyo, 335). Yet he still has his detractors, such as the Franciscan Pedro Borges, who views Las Casas as a theorist with utopian ideas, but with little interest in carrying them out, and "prototypical of those priests who should never become bish-

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<sup>17</sup>Such was the position of Saaveda Fajardo, who could not believe that a bishop of the Holy Church could write such lies about the Spaniards. This is an obviously baseless charge, but was to be repeated. Later, during the period of Rationalism, with its skeptical historical-critical method, doubt was cast upon what Las Casas wrote, or even if he wrote it. Whereas Las Casas' writings had previously been published in English as anti-Spanish propaganda, English Enlightenment historians began to understand the Spanish conquest in a better light and tended to view the North American Indians unfavorably (Keen, 20)

<sup>18</sup>Mainz-Weisenau: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag GmbH.

ops."<sup>19</sup> In other words, he was a man of words but of little action (Stevens-Arroyo, 336).

In this paper, however, I have attempted to show the opposite to be the reality. It is true that Las Casas wrote prolifically. Henry Wagner lists more than seventy works in his critical bibliography (297), and additional documents have been located since its publication. As has been stated above, he is usually depicted in the study, pen in hand. However, little has been said in this study about those writings, for my intent has been to show the activity of Las Casas. Las Casas was a man ready to act upon his convictions. Unlike a somewhat like-minded academic, Vitoria (Pennington, 149), Las Casas was actively involved in testing his theories. He wrote not merely to express his ideas, and in no way out of personal ambition, for he was offered profitable positions which he never accepted (Gutiérrez, 7). Rather, he wrote out of concrete situations, as a missiologist in the best sense of the term, who combined theory and practice, anthropology and theology, in a holistic way, and out of a concern, not only for the salvation of the Indians, but also for the salvation of his countrymen, who, in his view, were destroying themselves just as much as the Indians. It has been a popular notion among certain philosophical and theological schools of thought that the

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<sup>19</sup>Borgos criticizes Las Casas for having left his bishopric in Chiapa after only three years. We remember, however, that he was already seventy-three years of age at the time.

greater the distance from the messy details and ambiguity of practice the higher the quality of serious reflection. Las Casas did not "do" his theology in this way, nor do the Holy Scriptures. Martin Luther was also one whose writing was driven by the reality of the circumstances and situation of his day.<sup>20</sup>

Las Casas certainly was idealistic, and even perhaps naive. Two traits that led him to embark upon missions that had no chance of success. Yet his influence remains. To this day, Guatemala and Chiapas, the places where his strategies were given a chance, are two of the few areas in the Americas where the Native American culture survives. As miserable as their situation is today, one cannot help but wonder what would have been the fate of those peoples had Las Casas, and like-minded missionaries, not been there to act as the conscience of Spain.

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<sup>20</sup>While it is difficult to make a case for a serious comparison between Luther and Las Casas, the following parallels have been discovered: Both visited Rome (Las Casas in 1507, Luther in 1510) and were scandalized; Both underwent conversion experiences which would leave long-lasting impressions upon them; Both sought the protection of political authorities; Both were idealistic; Both were brave and bold; Both were prolific writers, and used the printing press to their advantage; Both took part in historically important debates; Both were influenced by the humanist, Erasmus (Keen, 9); Both studied law; and, Both became monks as a result of traumatic experiences.

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