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Bartolomé de Las Casas

Jeannine Graham

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DE LAS CASAS, BARTOLOME

Amidst the checkered history of sixteenth-century Spanish colonization of Latin America stands a Dominican priest whose passion for safeguarding the human dignity of abused indigenous populations prompted the Spanish monarch King Ferdinand to bestow upon him the title "Protector of the Indians." His dogged pursuit to challenge the mistreatment of Indians earned him both admiration from some as well as scorn from others, the latter of whom regarded his efforts to improve the plight of their cheap labor force as meddling interference with their economic gain.

Born in Seville, Spain in 1474, Las Casas was imbued with aspirations to travel, largely through his father's travels aboard Columbus' second voyage to the New World. Eventually, his time came. In 1502, he arrived on the West Indies island of Santo Domingo with the goal of educating the natives in Christian doctrine. For his assistance in helping the authorities quell occasional outbreaks of rebellion among the natives, he was rewarded with an *encomienda*—the use of a tract of land along with the resident Indians who were "commended" to him to be "civilized," Christianized and protected. For such services, he as trustee, or *encomendero*, of the land was entitled to collect a tribute from the Indians. They, in turn, were expected to be loyal tenants working the land, for which they were to be paid as free men, not serfs.

Implemented by Queen Isabella in 1503 as an enticement to stimulate the flow of Spanish migrants into the New World, the *encomienda* system appeared on the surface to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. Yet it often devolved into domineering overlords whose sense of entitlement over "conquered peoples" led to mass enslavement of native populations to supply the cheap labor force upon which the local economy depended. In neighboring Cuba, the colonization process resulted in natives being tortured, women and children massacred, and Indian town being burned to the ground.

Significant Contributions to Christianity in the United States

In 1514, the combination of witnessing such shocking atrocities coupled with his own awakening to the injustices embedded in the *encomienda* system so outraged him that he gave back his own *encomienda* and launched into a lifelong mission of championing the rights and dignity of Indians. The English title of his widely read book (published in 1556) captures his sense of indignation at such barbarity masquerading as civilization: *Bartolome de Las Casas: The Tears of the Indians, being a true account of the cruel massacres and slaughter of about twenty million innocent people*. By the end of the sixteenth century, the native population—through European diseases or simply being killed off—was reduced to near extinction fifty years after the first colonists appeared.

Las Casas' impassioned efforts to improve the lot of the Indians succeeded in the passage of legislative reforms known as "New Laws of the Indies" in 1542. Even the Pope's

proclamation issued in 1537 that Indians were “people not subhuman beings” was fueled largely by the documentation of abuses made public through Las Casas’ writings. Though his legislative reforms proved hard to enforce and didn’t eradicate the encomienda system, he seriously undermined it. He died in 1566 at the age of 92, leaving behind a legacy both as a “thorn in the side” of colonial perpetrators of injustice while hailed by human rights advocates as “Apostle of the Indians.”

References and Resources

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—JEANNINE MICHELE GRAHAM