Bartolomé de Las Casas (and others)
(2 of 5)

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It was the year 1511, the last Sunday before Christmas, when the waiting time of Advent was almost over. The high society of Hispaniola was preparing to celebrate what for them would be one of the greatest feasts of the year. The preacher was a Dominican priest by the name of Antonio de Montesinos. He had long struggled with what he was to say that day. In fact, the sermon was not really his but the result of discussions and consultations among his Dominican brothers. They were convinced that there were some things that needed to be said in faithfulness to the gospel, and they had agreed that Father Montesinos would speak for them. The special sermon was announced far and wide, to make sure all would hear.

The gospel text for the day was the preaching of John the Baptist in preparation for the ministry of Jesus, when John quotes the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Years later a secular priest, who was probably present and deeply shocked by what he heard, quoted the gist of what Montesinos said:

> I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. It is in order to make your sins known to you that I have approached this pulpit. This voice declares that you are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery? By what right do you wage such detestable wars on these people who lived mildly and peacefully in their own lands, where you have consumed infinite numbers of them with unheard murderers and desolations? Why do you so greatly oppress and fatigue them,

> not giving them enough to eat or caring for them when they fall ill from excessive labors, so that they die or rather are slain by you, so that you may extract and acquire gold every day? Are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves?... Be sure that in your present state you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks who do not have and do not want the faith of Jesus Christ.

The audience was angry and shocked. These were not only harsh words; they were a serious insult.

> For centuries our ancestors have been working to free our homeland from the power of the Moors; and now you tell us that we are no better than Moors? We have come to this country to Christianize these heathens; and now you tell us that we are no better than the Turks that are menacing Christendom? We are faithful children of the church. We are here in church because we have been told that partaking of the holy sacrament is part of our way to heaven; and now you tell us that we are excluded from heaven?

Governor Diego Colón –the son of Cristóbal Colón– was furious. He sent his representatives to force Montesinos to recant. The superior of the Dominicans, Fray Pedro de Córdoba, told them that they had no reason for blaming Montesinos, for what he had said expressed the consensus of the entire Dominican community. By the following March, word had reached King Ferdinand, who ordered Governor Colón to inform the pesky friar that the Spanish were acting on the authority of the Pope's declaration. The Dominicans responded that they would accept the King's order, but they would absolve only those *encomenderos* who set their Indians free. The Franciscans on the island agreed with the Dominicans and joined forces with them. Ferdinand ordered the Dominican provincial to intervene –which he did, ordering his friars not to speak on the matter, under threat of excommunication.

The Dominicans obeyed the order and remained relatively quiet about it, but they continued denying absolution and communion to unrepentant *encomenderos*. No matter what the authorities said, the discussion would not die. New laws would eventually be issued by Ferdinand's grandson, King Charles I of Spain –generally known today as emperor Charles V–, ordering improvements in the treatment of the Indians, but this was to no avail, for the King's directions were not followed.

But let us return to that last Sunday in Advent, 1511. The name of the young secular priest who later quoted the words of Montesinos, and thus preserved them for us, was Bartolomé de Las Casas. He had been born in Seville 27 years earlier, in 1484, and had come to the "Indies" in 1502. He had been ordained a secular priest a few years later, in a visit to Rome.

(As I tried to explain earlier, the main difference between a "secular" and a "religious" priest was that a religious priest was also a member of a religious order and therefore had made a vow of poverty and was forbidden to own any property, while a secular priest was directly under the bishop and could own property. Many secular priests came to the New World hoping to become rich. In practical terms, this meant that most commonly the secular priests served as chaplains to the colonizers and served in towns and established parishes, while the work of evangelizing the native population –particularly those living beyond the reach of Spanish rule– was left to "religious" missionaries, mostly Dominicans, Franciscans, and slightly later also Jesuits.)

It is often said that the conversion of Las Casas took place as a result of the sermon he heard Montesinos preach. If so, it was still a long process. Las Casas himself declared that some of those who heard the sermon were furious and others profoundly touched, but as far as he knew no one was converted. At some point (unfortunately, the date is uncertain), Las Casas was shocked when Father Pedro de Córdoba, the head of the Dominicans in the area, denied him communion because he was an *encomendero* –denied him, an ordained priest, and a faithful servant of the church!

Shortly before Montesinos's sermon, an expedition had departed from Hispaniola to conquer and colonize the nearby island of Cuba. The Taíno Indians there had been forewarned by Hatuey, a Taíno chieftain who had fled from Hispaniola after an unsuccessful resistance to Spanish rule and now organized resistance in Cuba. Eventually Hatuey was captured and burned at the stake. Before his execution, he was offered the possibility of being baptized and thus going to heaven. Hatuey asked, "Do Christians go to heaven?" When told that this was indeed the case, he said: "Then I don't want to be there." This story –and others like it– stands behind an important treatise that Las Casas wrote later: "The only Way to Bring all Peoples to the True Religion." Hatuey's story was a clear indication that Christians were the main obstacle in the propagation of Christianity!

Las Casas himself –although deeply shaken by the preaching of Montesinos– had not done much about it. Perhaps in order to distance himself from the debates that were raging in

Hispaniola, and that touched him too deeply and directly, he joined the already ongoing military expedition to Cuba, serving as a sort of chaplain for a column that undertook the task of marching along most of the island "pacifying" the Indians with the support of two naval squadrons, one sailing along the north coast, and the other along the south.

There Las Casas witnessed almost unimaginable wanton cruelty and destruction. Later he would write about what happened in the town of Caonao:

> About ten leagues before reaching an important town, we were met by a welcoming delegation. When we arrived at the town, they fed us a large quantity of fish and cassava bread. Suddenly the devil took possession of the Christians and without any reason whatsoever and in my presence they slaughtered more than three thousand souls, people who were sitting before us, men, women, and children. I saw such cruelties as no one has ever seen or imagined.

He also reports that after these events the leader of this branch of the expedition, Pánfilo de Narváez, proudly asked him, "What do you think about what our Spaniards have just done?" To which Las Casas replied: "I commend both you and them to the devil."

Even then, Las Casas was not ready to break away from a system whose cruelty was becoming increasingly evident to him. He was deeply troubled by what he had seen: horrible massacres such as the one in Caonao, and also, in a less dramatic but equally cruel injustice, the everyday exploitation of the Indians. But he was not ready to carry his emerging convictions to their ultimate consequences. He was still an *encomendero*, becoming rich while trying to assuage his conscience by being a good master to those who were making him rich.

Then, preparing to preach on Pentecost, and to offer what he considered the holy sacrifice of communion, he came across a passage in the deuterocanonical book of Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Ben Sirach:

> If one sacrifices ill-gotten goods, the offering is blemished;
> the gifts of the lawless are not acceptable.
> The most high is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly,
> nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins.
> Like one who kills his son before his father's eye
> is the person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor.
> The bread of the needy is the life of the poor;
> whoever deprives them of it is a murderer.
> To take away a neighbor's living is to commit murder;
> to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.
> (*Wisdom of Ben Sirach*, 34.21-27)

These words persuaded Las Casas that he could no longer postpone action. He began by telling Diego Velázquez, the governor of Cuba, that he wished to resign his *encomienda*. Velázquez would not hear of such madness and unsuccessfully tried to dissuade him. Las Casas freed the Indians entrusted to him and began preaching against the *encomiendas*. In this he found significant support in the Dominicans who were then arriving from Hispaniola to evangelize the newly conquered lands. But he could not persuade the *encomenderos* of their sin and guilt. Having failed with Diego Velázquez, he would go to the king –even though his friends told him that there was no hope there. They were right. But Las Casas would not accept defeat. repeatedly he travelled to Spain, wrote petitions, offered alternatives… all to little or no avail.

Among many others, he wrote to Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, former confessor to the now deceased Queen Isabella, and twice regent of Castille. To him, Las Casas addressed a

Memorial de remedios –Memorandum of Remedies. In this document, he expresses deep concern for the eternal salvation of the Indians but also an equally deep concern for their freedom and physical wellbeing. His main premise is that these two are inseparable, and that the greatest obstacle for the salvation of the Indians is the manner in which they are being treated by Christians. Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros took him seriously and named two Hieronimites to visit the "Indies" and correct the ills that Las Casas had named. But the resistance among the colonizers was such that practically nothing changed.

(Unfortunately, among the possible "remedies" that Las Casas suggested in his *Memorial de remedios*, the eleventh is often cited as a blot in the life of Las Casas. This eleventh suggestion was that "black and white" slaves be brought from Spain to work in the mines. It is not true that he was the first to suggest such a thing, for when he wrote his *Memorial de remedios* there were already several hundred African slaves in the New World. In any case, this was an error that he soon abandoned, partly as the result of a visit to Lisbon where he learned more of the trade in African slaves. This experience led him to connect his struggle for justice for the Indians with the injustice of the slave trade and also with the earlier Spanish conquest of the Canary Islands and the way natives were treated there.)

Frustrated in his attempts at change emerging from the established authorities, he tried a different approach: He would show that a peaceful and just evangelization of the Indians, and an equally just and peaceful settlement by the Spanish, were possible. He would invite Spanish

peasants to settle and farm in new lands, far away from the power of the Spanish *conquistadores*, and to live there in harmony with the Indian population. Encouraged by King Charles, he went to Cumaná, in Venezuela, and began such a settlement. For a brief time, the settlement was peaceful and promised success. But then Spaniards from nearby pearl fisheries conducted incursions into the area in search of slaves. In retaliation, a group of Indians attacked a nearby Dominican convent, and the Spanish in turn retaliated by laying waste to the settlement in Cumaná –which apparently had nothing to do with the attack on the convent. The Spanish peasants Las Casas had invited to be part of his peaceful settlement fled. Las Casas tried to rebuild his community, with a measure of success. But then the Caribs –a much fiercer tribe than the local Indians– attacked the settlement and killed most of its people. What had seemed a shining promise had become a total failure.

The entire episode became a powerful argument for those who held that it was impossible to convert the Indians by peaceful means. They reported to Spain that Las Casas was a madman and that he was undermining the entire colonial enterprise.

Frustrated not only in his earlier appeals to the authorities, but now also in this more limited approach, Las Casas returned to Hispaniola, became a Dominican novice in 1522, and the next year became a Dominican friar by taking solemn and permanent vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. For some time, he devoted himself to prayer, meditation, and some writing. This was a time of thoughtful conversations with his fellow Dominicans, not only in Hispaniola, but

also elsewhere. One of these was the Dominican Francisco de Vitoria, a professor at Spain's most famous university, Salamanca, to whom we shall return.

By 1531, he was ready to reenter the fray. He began preaching, and soon complaints were sent to Spain that he was preaching that *encomenderos* were in mortal sin and barring them from communion. At the same time, Las Casas once again sought reformation from the established authorities. During the previous decade, things had changed drastically in the New World. In 1521, with the conquest of the Aztec empire, it had become clear to the Spanish authorities that the lands that Pope Alexander VI had granted to them were much richer and vaster than they or the pope had ever imagined; and that they merited much more attention. In 1524, King Charles I of Spain (Emperor Charles V) created a *Consejo de las Indias*, "Council of the Indies," to determine and apply all policies and actions having to do with the "Indies." The *Casa de Contratación* in Seville, which had been founded more than 20 years earlier and regulated all trade with the Indies, was placed under the authority of the Council of the Indies. In the New World, the richest colonies were distributed among two viceroyalties, one in New Spain (Mexico), and the other in Perú.

It was to this Council of the Indies, which had existed for only seven years, that Las Casas directed his next plea. His time of semiretirement, study, and reflection had made him a much more persuasive advocate, with sound grounding on the theological tradition resulting from the work of the great Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas, and represented in Bartolomé's time

by Francisco de Vitoria, with whom Las Casas had opened an ongoing dialogue. He would not be ignored. And he would not be silenced.

In 1533, when an Indian rebellion broke out in Hispaniola, the Spanish authorities wanted a peaceful settlement; but Enriquillo, the indigenous leader of the rebellion, did not trust any of them and would discuss a peaceful settlement only with Father Las Casas. It was thanks to his intervention that the rebels agreed to one of the earliest peace treaties between the aboriginal peoples and the European colonizers –which was also one of the many soon to be broken.

Shortly after this matter was settled, Las Casas in particular, and the Dominicans in general, found himself embroiled in an unexpected controversy with the Franciscans, who had long been their allies in the defense of the Indians. The Franciscans had taken the lead in the missionary enterprise in Mexico –an enterprise that began when Cortés requested and received twelve Franciscan friars to evangelize the newly conquered peoples. Faced by an enormous population, the Franciscans proceeded to baptize masses of people after a rather perfunctory explanation of the Christian faith. Las Casas had always insisted that true conversion required true catechetical instruction. To him this was both a matter of theology and a matter of respect for the Indians. Mass baptisms were often defended on the basis of the supposed inability of the Indians to understand Christian doctrine. Las Casas saw in this a dangerous opening for justifying disrespect and oppression. The debate eventually resulted in papal intervention, when Pope Paul III, one of the popes of the Catholic Reformation, declared that the Indians were

indeed rational human beings whose evangelization must take note of that condition. Las Casas and his Dominican brothers in the New World were able to achieve this thanks to the support of the respected theologian and professor in Salamanca that I have already mentioned, Francisco de Vitoria, and of his colleagues in that prestigious university.

Las Casas would not give up in his purpose to show that it was possible to evangelize the Indians respectfully and peacefully. He now decided to work with the Indians in an area of Guatemala, far away from any other Spanish presence. Forewarned by earlier experience, Las Casas secured a promise from the governor not to allow Spanish settlements near the area –which he named "Verapaz," –true peace. This experiment turned out to be quite successful, with many Indians converted and committed to carrying the faith to others.

Las Casas did not leave the area voluntarily. He left because his Bishop ordered him to go to Spain to recruit more Dominicans like himself who would travel to the New World in order to repeat the experiment of Verapaz. Others remained in charge there, and what was originally a debatable experiment continued for generations. While in Spain, Las Casas obtained a royal decree forbidding unauthorized Spaniards to meddle in Verapaz or any similar settlements. He also convinced Charles V to convene a discussion regarding Spanish policy in the Indies. It was for that "Debate of Valladolid," which took place in 1542, that Las Casas wrote *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, which would be published ten years later.

That discussion, and its results, were one of Las Casas's greatest triumphs. Before the end of that year, in November 1542, Charles V signed the *Nuevas leyes* –New Laws. These laws ordered the eventual abolition of the *encomienda* system, establishing a program for ending them: Upon the death of each *encomendero*, his Indians were to be liberated under the sponsorship of the crown. Meanwhile, enslaving the Indians was absolutely forbidden. Limits were set to the sort of labor that Indians still under an *encomienda* could be expected to do. These laws were mostly a result of the many years that Las Casas devoted to advocacy before the Council of the Indies.

Sadly, but as was to be expected, these laws were never fully obeyed. As before, the reaction among the Spanish in the New World was resistance and disobedience. Many *encomenderos* claimed the laws were faulty and presented requests for their clarification, thus avoiding obedience for years. The Viceroy of New Spain (Mexico) refused to comply. In Perú, the *encomenderos* revolted and ignored the New Laws. Still these laws of 1542 are credited with freeing thousands of Indians from what amounted to slavery, and they at least provided a weapon for those who sought better treatment for the Indians.

(It must also be added that King Charles also had other reasons for limiting the power of the *conquistadores* over the Indians. His grandparents, Ferdinand and Isabella, had survived a long and arduous struggle to centralize government and limit the powers of the great lords and magnates that competed with the crown. Charles now feared that, if the *conquistadores* were

given a free hand, they too might become too powerful and undermine his own authority. There is a story, probably not true, but still enlightening, that one day when Charles V was riding in his coach Hernán Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, stepped in front of it. The king said: "Who dares stop my carriage?" To which Cortés responded: "He who gave thee more lands than did thy father." Had this actually happened, it would have been galling to Charles.)

Meanwhile, Las Casas was appointed bishop of the new diocese of Chiapas. He was not well received by many of the bishops in the area. The archbishop refused to consecrate him and sent a nephew instead. His direct superior, the bishop of Guatemala, despised him openly. But he remained firm in his position. He refused absolution, and therefore also communion, to any still holding *encomiendas*. Those who on their deathbeds requested the last rites would be denied if they had not previously freed all their Indians.

The result was increasing hostility from the Spaniards under his jurisdiction, leading to death threats and attempts on his life, and eventually to his exile from his own diocese. Summoned to Mexico City in 1546, he was forced to moderate his views under threat of excommunication and being declared a heretic. Still, his last act before leaving the New World forever was to write a manual for confessors in which he insisted that *encomenderos* must not be given absolution.

Las Casas resigned as bishop of Chiapas and in 1547 returned to Spain, where he would spend the rest of his life (19 years) advocating for justice in the New World and facing fierce

opposition. His *Confessionary* was banned. Orders went out to destroy every possible copy. His opponents recruited a famous jurist and theologian, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, as their champion. The theologians in the two major universities of Spain, in Alcalá and Salamanca, declared Las Casas's teachings on the just war against the Indians to be unsound and therefore unsustainable.

It all led to a great debate in Valladolid that created great expectations and was an excellent opportunity for each side to express and defend its position. The King ordered that, until the debate was decided, all further conquests were forbidden. That order was never obeyed. Shortly after it was received by the viceroy of Perú, Valdivia set out from Perú to conquer Chile. After the end of the debates the judges took several months to come to a decision; and when they did, their verdict was so ambiguous that both sides claimed victory.

Las Casas remained in Spain for the rest of his life. During those last years, he continued fighting for laws to protect the Indians of the Americas. He wrote his most important work, *Historia de las Indias*, leaving instructions that it should not be published immediately, for he feared that what he said there would be turned against him and the Dominicans at large and also against the laws he had been supporting and promoting. He had to deal with accusations of treason and heresy. Clearly, the main reason behind such opposition was fear –fear that what he said was true, and that it would threaten the entire colonial enterprise as well as the riches and privileges of the colonizers.

Bartolomé de Las Casas died in 1566 at the age of 81. But even then, he would not be left at peace, for he continued being a subject of bitter discussion. Many sought to add his works to the Catholic *Index of Forbidden Books*. His *Historia de las Indias*, whose publication he had delayed, his enemies delayed much further, to such a point that it was first published more than three centuries after his death. (In their struggle for European supremacy, the British used his criticism of Spanish colonialism as an instrument to their own ends, arguing that Las Casas showed how evil the Spanish colonization of the New World had been.)

Thus, this man whose entire life was devoted to combatting injustice has been and still is the victim of an injustice that reaches beyond the grave. This man who should be the pride of Spain is rejected by many Spaniards to this day as the author of what they call “the black legend” of Spanish cruelty in their colonial enterprise.

The great injustice is that this man, who should have been Spain’s greatest glory, is still seen by many in Spain as the cause of their shame.

But there is also another injustice, often committed by us in our respect and admiration of Las Casas himself. The injustice is that we praise him as a lonely champion of justice and peace, when there were many others –and in a way this diminishes his own significance, for it makes him a solitary voice that very few heeded.

Las Casas was a valiant prophet, a persistent advocate, a brilliant debater, and a man of action like no other. He certainly was unique, but he was not alone. He was actually part of a company that supported him, encouraged him, on occasion also corrected him, and even in some cases were quicker in their decision to opt for justice.

This company included friends and supporters near and far. Foremost among his nearby supporters were his Dominican brothers and predecessors, many of them part of a network that extended far and wide: Antonio de Montesinos, whose preaching shocked the island of Hispaniola, and whose majestic statue now towers over the bay of Santo Domingo; Pedro de Córdoba, the superior of the Dominicans who denied communion to Las Casas and thus blessed him, and who later continued blessing him with his support and advice.

Far away across the ocean, there was his fellow Dominican, Francisco de Vitoria, often credited as being one of the founders of international law, and part of the same network. Actually, his community in Salamanca was the Convento Dominico de San Esteban, where a few years earlier both Antonio de Montesinos and Pedro de Córdoba were formed before leaving for the Indies. As part of that community, Vitoria was so moved by the news he received from the Indies that he was led to search for a code of laws based on what his forerunner, Thomas Aquinas, had said about “natural law” being applicable to all humankind. Vitoria, like Las Casas, took up the question of the right of Spain to the lands across the ocean. He determined that the pope had no right to grant Indian lands to anybody, that therefore the grant that Alexander VI had made to the crown of Castile was invalid; that the Indians were true and rightful owners of their lands

and properties; that unprovoked wars against the Indians were unjust and unjustified; and that the only right the Spanish had in the Indies was to trade and communicate with their inhabitants. Vitoria won the respect not only of other scholars and theologians, but also of Charles V, whose advisor he became. It is said –although not proven– that at one point, partly due to Vitoria's counsel and partly because of what he heard from Las Casas and others, Charles V considered abandoning the colonizing enterprise altogether.

In any case, by declaring that the natives of the New World were proper owners of their lands, and that the pope had no right or power to grant the crown of Spain lands owned by others, as Alexander VI had done, Vitoria was taking a serious risk. Twenty-one years before Vitoria delivered his lectures, *On the Indies*, an upstart monk and university professor by the name of Martin Luther had angered Charles V by refusing to retract his opinions, which included rejecting some of the claims of the papacy. And not quite two years before Vitoria took his stance, the German Lutheran princes had also defied the emperor to his face. Spain, in 1532, was not a safe place for anyone claiming that the pope did not have the rights he claimed. And yet Vitoria, with the support of his Dominican convent and of his fellow professors, did precisely that.

In the same company were many others throughout the Indies in later years. Late in the same sixteenth century, in Chile, Dominican Fray Gil González de San Nicolás refused to give communion to any holding Indians in *encomiendas* or holding riches unduly gained through the

exploitation of the Indians. As a result of this work, most of the Spanish population of Chile was excommunicated. Eventually, not being able to prove that he was wrong on that point, the ecclesiastical authorities had him silenced by declaring him a heretic on a totally unrelated count.

The same company would include, a century later, St. Peter Claver, whose defense of African slaves and freedmen paralleled what Las Casas had attempted to do for the Indians.

Among that vast company of champions of justice, peace, and dignity, Las Casas stands out in the breadth and depth of his ministry. He had the trust of rebel Indian chief Enriquillo, and he had the ear of Emperor Charles V. He was at home in Verapaz, living among Indians; and he was at home in Valladolid, debating with his detractors, or in Salamanca, in profound theological discussions with the most renowned theologians of his time.

A less-known member of the same company struggling for justice, peace, and dignity was the first missionary to Spanish America to be officially canonized, St. Luis Beltrán, another Dominican, who was inspired and supported by Las Casas and who worked mostly in Nueva Granada (now Colombia). After surprisingly productive missionary work, he, too, like Las Casas, returned to Spain in order to advocate for the population he had come to love in the Indies.

I close with him because when, in the official process of Beltrán's canonization, it was asked what miracles he had performed, a story emerged that is like a parable reflecting the vision and work of Las Casas and his vast company. According to that story, Luis Beltrán was at table in the home of an *encomendero* when his host heard him declare that the bread of the colonizers was kneaded with Indian blood. Deeply offended, the *encomendero* demanded that he retract those words. In response, San Luis took a tortilla from the table, and squeezed blood from it…

Bread kneaded in blood. That puts it all in stark terms: Las Casas and his companions are a clear reminder that we, who claim that our faith is nurtured by bread and wine, that Christ comes to us in a body broken as bread is broken, and in blood, poured as wine is poured, we have the obligation to make sure that bread is never kneaded in the blood of those for whom our Lord shed his own blood, nor that bodies are broken for which our Lord's body was broken. So help us God!