

Bartolomé de las Casas and the Freedom of Faith:

How a Catholic Bishop Gave the World a Theory of Universal Human Rights

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Introduction

Bartolomé de las Casas was one of the first Europeans to own—and free—a Native American slave; he was also the first man to be ordained a Catholic priest in the New World.¹ These two facts frame Las Casas’s life and legacy. Bartolomé was born into a critical stage of history: the Old World was discovering the New World. The modern world is a product of this meeting of Old and New—a meeting profoundly impacted by the lifelong activism of a zealous Spanish bishop. Armed with a deep understanding of Scripture, patristics, canon law, and classical philosophy, Las Casas prolifically and persuasively argued against European oppression of the Amerindians, claiming that native peoples must remain free so that they might freely embrace the true Christian Faith and the holy Catholic religion. In doing so, he “la[id] the basis for the modern human rights movement.”²

Early Life

Bartolomé was born in Seville, Spain in 1484. His grandparents were likely *conversos*, Jews who were pressured by the Spanish government to become Catholic. His father was a struggling merchant, and his mother was a quiet, devout woman, firm in the management of her children and household. The Las Casas family rose from these humble origins through their association with Christopher Columbus. Bartolomé’s uncle accompanied Columbus on his initial voyage to the New World in 1492, and his father was on board when Columbus’s second voyage set sail the following year. While his father and uncle were exploring, Bartolomé studied canon

¹ Fred Stopsky, *Bartolome de las Casas: Champion of Indian Rights* (Lowell, MA: Discovery Enterprises, 1992), 8, 11.

² Lawrence A. Clayton and David M. Lantigua, ed., *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights: A Brief History with Documents* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2020), 8.

law at the prestigious University of Salamanca. When his father returned to Spain in December of 1496, he gave Bartolomé an Amerindian boy to be his slave. Bartolomé was uncomfortable with the idea of owning a slave, so after befriending the boy he freed him and arranged for him to return to the Indies. However, Bartolomé was enthralled by his father's tales of adventure and enticed by promises of the wealth to be gained in the New World, so he agreed to embark upon a journey that would prove to shape the trajectory not only of his own life, but also that of Western civilization itself.

Oppression and Repentance

Bartolomé first landed on the island of Hispaniola in 1502. Here he benefited from the *encomienda* system, a sort of new-world style feudalism in which—ideally—Spanish settlers were given land that was to be worked by Amerindian natives, who in turn the *encomenderos* were meant to reward with protection and a Christian education. In reality, *encomiendas* were typically indistinguishable from slave plantations, and the *encomenderos* were usually far more concerned with obtaining wealth than saving souls. Many thousands of over-worked, under-nourished natives died under the *encomienda* system, often as a result of the new diseases brought to their lands by the Spanish.

After completing his education, Las Casas was ordained a priest in 1507. Although increasingly convicted of the immoral nature of the Spanish oppression of the natives, Father Bartolomé never publicly rebuked his fellow countrymen. He was rewarded for his silence with “more land and more Indians.”³ The Dominicans, however, were not silent when they arrived a

³ Stopsky, *Bartolome de las Casas*, 11.

few years later. During the Advent season of 1511, Father Antonio de Montesinos preached the “most famous sermon in the history of the Americas.”⁴ Father Montesinos, channeling the spirit of St. John the Baptist, sternly called the Spaniards to repentance, warning them: “[Y]ou are all in mortal sin. You live in it; you die in it.”⁵ The congregation was livid. The lay Spanish colonialists demanded that Montesinos retract his condemnation of their behavior, but he refused—instead doubling down on his position by informing his critics that he and his fellow Dominicans would refuse to hear any of their confessions unless they repented of their mistreatment of the natives. Furious, the settlers wrote to the king, asking that the Dominicans be forced to leave the island. Father Las Casas was stirred but maintained his silence.

This silence was not to last forever. After years of watching the Amerindians languish under Spanish rule, the last straw for Las Casas took the form of the massacre he witnessed at Caonao, Cuba in 1514. The following Pentecost Sunday, Father Las Casas preached a fiery homily, proclaiming that the Spaniards would certainly be damned if they did not repent of—and make full restitution for—their sins against the natives. “Las Casas the *encomendero* had become Las Casas the prophet,” who from this moment on dedicated his life to defending Amerindian rights, ultimately proving “to be one of the most formidable legal advocates of the sixteenth century, and perhaps in modern history.”⁶ The following year, Las Casas returned to Spain to begin the work of seeking legal reform on behalf of the natives. In 1516, Las Casas received the official title of “Protector of the Indians.”⁷ He spent the rest of his life researching, writing, debating, and advocating for the rights of Native Americans in both secular and ecclesiastical

⁴ Clayton and Lantigua, *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, 9.

⁵ Bartolomé de las Casas, *History of the Indies*, in *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, ed. Clayton and Lantigua, 52.

⁶ Clayton and Lantigua, *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, 9.

⁷ Amber Ferris, “Bartolome de Las Casas Revisited” (B.A. thesis, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, 2009), 13, <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1106&context=his>.

courts. The fruits of these efforts, the beginnings of which Las Casas was fortunate to see even in his own lifetime, have reverberated throughout the centuries.

The Freedom of Faith

In working to secure native rights, “Las Casas subsumed everything under the spiritual mission to convert the peoples of the New World in a peaceful manner.”⁸ He argued that freedom was an inviolable human right precisely because it was a necessary prerequisite to the adoption of the saving Catholic Faith. Hence, in his *Twenty Reasons against the Encomienda*, he argued that in order for anyone “to accept our faith, he or she must have what faith calls for in a beginner, a clear liberty of choice.”⁹ Faith cannot be forced, so potential converts must be free. Thus, Las Casas argued, “[t]he one and only way of teaching all humanity the true religion was established by divine providence for the whole world and for all times—through rational persuasion of the intellect and the gentle attraction or incitement of the will.”¹⁰

Las Casas argued that depriving someone of their freedom was a fundamental violation of justice because it obstructed the ontological *telos* of man as a rational creature, since “all created things have received an imprint from God inclining them to desire the good, that is, their perfection. Hence the proper activity of each individual thing is its own end.”¹¹ True justice involves giving each his or her due. Las Casas argued that “each and every created thing is naturally owed that which is oriented toward its perfection and according to the order of divine

⁸ Clayton and Lantigua, *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, 59.

⁹ Bartolomé de las Casas, *Twenty Reasons against the Encomienda*, in *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, ed. Clayton and Lantigua, 61.

¹⁰ Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Way of Attracting All Peoples to the True Religion*, in *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, ed. Clayton and Lantigua, 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

providence.”¹² Since all men are ordered to God as to their perfection, and since freedom is necessary for faith, to deprive someone of the freedom to believe is a crime against humanity. To truly be a man, man must be free that he might seek man’s end: God. To interfere with man’s freedom is to impede his search for God, it is to obstruct his means of obtaining salvation—and to prevent another’s salvation is to secure one’s own damnation.

With these arguments, Las Casas appealed to the religious sensibilities of his audience, who, like Las Casas, believed that it was to the benefit of humanity and the glory of God that as many people as possible embrace Catholic Christianity. Yet, in order to do so, they must be free. However, as Las Casas also noted, depriving someone of freedom wasn’t the only way to prevent them from accepting the Faith.

The Problem of Scandal

Even if the natives were free, why would they *want* to become Catholic? As Las Casas pointed out, as far as the natives were concerned, the representatives of Catholicism were the very same people who were responsible for enslaving and oppressing them, who destroyed their civilizations with disease and war. In Las Casas’s words, “it would be sacrilegious and stupid to wage war on unbelievers in order that they may hear the gospel, because out of this would arise hatred of our religion instead of the advance of the faith.”¹³ The problem wasn’t merely that the natives were not free to accept the gospel, but that the sinful Spanish gave them no good reasons to desire to do so in the first place. “The most effective solution” to this problem, Las Casas

¹² Bartolomé de las Casas, *Certain Principles*, in *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, ed. Clayton and Lantigua, 101.

¹³ Bartolomé de las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, in *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights*, ed. Clayton and Lantigua, 79.

argued, “is for them to see the Christian life shine in our conduct.”¹⁴ Overall, Las Casas’s case was as simple as it was profound: the most important thing is for men to be saved—yet in order for this to happen, they must be free and we must be good examples. It was an argument that resonated with many, including those in the highest secular and ecclesial offices.

Successes and Legacy

Father (and later, Bishop) Bartolomé’s efforts were not made in vain, as his arguments reached the eyes and ears of his highest superiors: the pope and the king. Pope Paul III acted first, releasing in 1537 the bull *Sublimis Deus*, in which he proclaimed that

the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic Faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it. Desiring to provide ample remedy for these evils, We define and declare by these Our letters . . . [that] the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved; should the contrary happen, it shall be null and have no effect.¹⁵

In 1542, King Charles I of Spain followed suit by promulgating the New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians, “which included nearly every idea presented by Las Casas” to the royal advisory Council of the Indies.¹⁶ These laws forbade taking Indians as slaves, put an end to the *encomienda* system, and mandated that Native

¹⁴ Ibid, 80.

¹⁵ Paul III, *Sublimis Deus: On the Enslavement and Evangelization of Indians*, May 29, 1537, Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/paul03/p3subli.htm>.

¹⁶ Stopsky, *Bartolome de las Casas*, 27.

Americans be paid fairly for their work and treated decently in any attempts to convert them to the Christian religion.

For such successes as these, Las Casas is recognized as being a major figure in “the early development of international law.”¹⁷ The impact of his life’s work can be seen in later Latin American socio-political movements, such as those of José Martí and Simón Bolívar—as well as in the development of Catholic theology, such as in the Vatican II document on religious liberty, *Dignitatis humane*.

Conclusion

Bartolomé de las Casas is a shining model of the fruits of repentance. Although he was initially an active agent of oppression and complicit in the sins of others, Las Casas’s 1514 conversion proved to be a pivotal moment in the historical development of political philosophy and Catholic theology. He argued that since freedom is necessary for faith, the faithful must fight for freedom—that man must be free so that man can come to God. Through decades of intense travel, research, writing, and debate, he strove—to the extent that he could—to bring to fruition for the Native Americans those sublime words of the Lord Jesus: “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

¹⁷ Thomas E. Woods, Jr., *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2012), 149.

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